

THE AWARD AND CHINA

Wang Shu

Some Chinese architects were already familiar with the Aga Khan Award for Architecture back in the early 1980s. At that time, China was just beginning to open up to the world after a long period of closure. Chinese architects had little knowledge about other architectural awards in the world. I think the reason why Chinese architects were interested in the Aga Khan Award was because the premiated projects presented an effort to combine modern Western architectural language with vernacular architectural concepts, which, at the time, interested many Chinese architects. From the perspective of today, these efforts were serious and sincere.

In the early 1980s, the Award collaborated with the Architectural Society of China to organise an academic gathering to discuss rural habitat. In the first decade of the 21st century, the large-scale urbanisation of China's countryside was approaching, and the discussion points of that seminar are still relevant today as they referred to the research for sustainable development. What is more important, the countryside building activities that the Award is concerned with are mostly bottom-up participatory efforts that consider the general community to be the main actor. Though the effort seems to be fragmentary, in the Internet era, attention to these projects represents a positive tendency of resistance to the hegemony of modernisation in urban and rural planning and the assertive way of construction.

ENDLESS INVENTIVENESS

Shahzia Sikander

As a visual artist, what inspired me most about being a member of the Master Jury for the 12th Cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture was the lack of any culturally specific lens throughout the process. There was no intent to champion a solely Islamic context or valorise an Islamic aesthetic. It was, in fact, an emphasis on originality that preceded all concerns: originality as located within the creative responses to a set of unique problems.

As values are discerned within the built environment, the need to reflect and question what can be improved and addressed differently becomes a necessary dialogue. The needs that dictate reinterpreting the existing norms are often a catalyst for new ways of arriving at a solution. Such active engagement is also necessary in defining the larger context of Islamic art and architecture. Muslim communities have varied histories and geographical locations that challenge singular definitions. Furthermore, in today's transnational ways of living and being, the older frameworks feel increasingly restrictive. Inherently nationalistic sentiments remain strong even in art history. The quest to define an Islamic identity in the contemporary visual context may be a paradox in itself. Though it has been laboured upon and often reduced to a cliché, its potential remains strong, since fundamental values of inclusiveness and plurality lie at its core.

Art, and especially architecture, interfere and interact with the social, political and economic changes in a society. At these cross roads lie artistic interventions that, when harnessed to unique visions, independent from their historical representations, encourage others to experiment, explore and expand upon the notion of an inherited form. In fact, there lies the challenge: to conceive and imagine an aesthetic that is inclusive and a reflection of a community's unique relationship to its local environment.