



Shaking Up Architecture

Written by Lee Adair Lawrence

Photographs courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Photographs and diagrams of architectural projects in mind-spinning variety cover the walls of Howard University's Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. There is a luxurious, wood-crafted private home in Malaysia, a rehabilitated slum in Indonesia, restorations at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and a new, vibrantly colorful arts center in Senegal. There is a leper hospital in India, a reforestation project in Turkey and a skyscraper in Malaysia. It is quickly apparent that the show's title, "Architecture for a Changing World," tells only half the story, for this survey of the 71 projects that have won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) since its inception in 1980 shows that architecture is changing at least as much as the world, and that the AKAA has become a well-established, activist voice for a broader architectural vision.

The award has its roots in the Aga Khan's sadness at the state of architecture in the Islamic world of the 1970's, where infatuation with the steel-and-glass "international style" resulted in buildings that took little notice of—and often intentionally disregarded—local materials and technologies. The condition of "the built environment"—buildings in their broader physical, social and cultural contexts—was no better. "It was clear," the Aga Khan told architectural journalist Mildred Schmertz in 1998, "that Islamic communities had lost some of their extraordinary inheritance of competence and knowledge in the realm of architecture."

To help restore "architectural excellence," he established an award that from the outset defined things differently. More conventional architectural awards, such as the Pritzker Architectural Prize or the Gold Medal Awards of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), largely laud the accomplishments of individual architects. The AKAA, on the other hand, recognizes projects. While other prizes stress design, the AKAA from the start adopted criteria that include, for example, the traditional craftsmanship that restores a mosque, the environmental creativity that devises sustainable solutions to problems of sewerage, a project's promotion of social harmony, or its revitalizing effect on a village or urban area. Design is not ignored, of course, but it is understood to be an idea that, at its best, integrates local, traditional and vernacular crafts and styles with the needs of contemporary life.

What also sets the AKAA apart is that all of these matters and many more are discussed in book-length triennial catalogues that not only showcase the cycle's winners but also carry essays in which members of the master jury and the steering committee address broad and challenging theoretical questions: What is culture? What is architecture, and what is its role in society? Is there such a thing as "Islamic architecture" or is there only "architecture in Islamic societies"? Can we speak of cultural expression or identity in architecture at all? None of this makes for a typical, laudatory awards catalogue: It's more like a lively academic conference.

This distinctive approach made the AKAA the first major architectural award to consider historical-preservation and restoration projects, a move that the AIA followed in 1993. The AKAA furthermore requires nominated projects to have been in use for at least a year, so they can be judged not only on esthetic grounds but also according to how well they suit their users. In 1995 the founders of the Kenneth F. Brown Asia Pacific Culture and Architecture Design Award adopted the same criterion.

Still, as forward-looking as the AKAA may be, it is nevertheless very much a product of its time. By the 1970's, many architects had grown frustrated with 20th century modernism's lack of concern for history and its unblinking focus on function. A study of AIA Gold Medal recipients showed that, as Richard Guy Wilson wrote, the AIA was beginning to honor "recognition of the surrounding environment and history," granting awards to such architects as Louis Kahn and Pietro Belluschi. Discussion of theory and history began to reappear in journals that had for decades published practical articles on technique, design and structural articulation. Regionally, movements around the globe were beginning to advocate styles and solutions rooted in local traditions that challenged what Kenneth Frampton, Columbia University professor and member of the AKAA'S 2001 steering committee, calls "the Manhattanization of the world."

Thus when the AKAA was established in 1976, it did not so much raise new questions as disseminate and legitimize what were (and often still are) emerging ideas. Until 1990, the AKAA published a magazine called *Mimar*, which was devoted to new constructions and restorations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Between 1978 and 1990 the AKAA

also organized some 15 seminars, each in a different city of the Islamic world, where architects and other professionals could explore a "middle way" between the embrace of Western modernism and its complete rejection.

Yet for all its noble purposes, the AKAA'S most attention-getting move was to set the amount of its cash prize at \$500,000. Even though this total is distributed, on average, among seven to 10 projects that often name four or more principals each, it nonetheless qualifies as the largest architectural award in the world. (The Pritzker Prize awards \$100,000 and the less well-known Carlsberg Award is worth \$225,000.)

This sum alone is more than enough to influence architects. "Some renowned architects in Turkey," says Federattin Onur, chairman of the architecture department at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, "have been in the expectation of getting the AKAA, so their approach either implicitly or explicitly incorporates the values of the award." As a result, Turkey counts 11 AKAA winners to date, the most of any single country. The Mosque of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara, for example, gives new life to a traditional element, the mosque's *qibla* wall that shows the direction of prayer: It is oriented toward Makkah, but it is of glass, and it overlooks a landscaped garden, which brings worshipers closer to the natural world. Istanbul's Social Security Complex, which was completed in 1970 and won the award in 1986, is a large structure that could have been monumentally vertical; instead, its cascading, layered and highly horizontal design keeps it from overpowering the nearby historic neighborhood and its landmarks.

In India, AKAA winners have been primarily hospitals and housing projects. There, says architect Balakrishna Doshi, the award has affected architecture at the level of colleges and governmental agencies. Since the 1970's, Doshi has espoused low-cost housing using inexpensive, low-maintenance technology; he has also advocated the integration of varied income groups into neighborhoods and argued for the inclusion of ample communal space.

Although Doshi says he gained some admirers in the architectural community over the years, it was not until the 1995 AKAA jury heralded his Aranya Community Housing Project that he reached a wider audience. "Many government officials visited the project who had never come before," he says, and the pride the award engendered helped ensure government funding to maintain the housing project. "It used to be that, in India as elsewhere, the field of architecture did not consider housing for the poor to be significant," he adds. Today, however, architectural schools such as the one in Allahabad treat public housing and environmental, energy and social issues as well in an effort to create harmonious living environments. Since his award, Doshi has served on the AKAA'S steering committee. The AKAA, he says, is unique in that "it goes beyond architecture and speaks of grassroots developments."

From his position at Columbia in New York, Frampton sees the AKAA as a counterflow in a field in which Western ideas and techniques dominate. Despite the common provincial tendency to "ignore an otherwise great production that does not occur in what they see as a center of the world," he believes architects in the developed world will in time come to recognize that they are as much in need of cost-effective, sustainable solutions to urban problems as their counterparts in the Islamic world. When that time comes, they will find the AKAA a rich source of theory and practical ideas. "The kind of paradigm that is sustained by the Aga Khan Award," Frampton says, is "continuity." And that, he believes, is "a positive model that could be used by the developed world."

William Chapin, president of the Washington, D.C. American Architectural Foundation, largely agrees, and he is looking into collaborating with the AKAA on a public television series in the United States. "What many of the awardees demonstrate," he explains, "is that in their own context people can act in rather imaginative ways to leverage energy and bring about positive outcomes. The more often you tell the story and the more variations on that story you present, the more likely people are to grasp the concept and use it."

This applies no less to the story of the AKAA itself. In its coverage of the 1998 awards ceremony, *The New York Times* went so far as to call the Aga Khan "the most important figure in the world of architecture today." The professional press has been no less admiring of the AKAA'S selection processes: *Progressive Architecture* called them "the most conscientious procedures of any award program in the world." In April 2000 the AIA conferred on the AKAA its Honors for Collaborative Achievement award because, as committee chair Thompson Penney explains, "we found the idea of promoting a culture through architecture very compelling. We saw the Aga Khan Award as a program that truly embodies a great idea and executes it well."

At the beginning of each three-year cycle, a steering committee chaired by the Aga Khan convenes at the AKAA headquarters in Geneva to select the nine-member master jury as well as the network of nearly 500 nominators. The latter are men and women living in Muslim societies, and they remain anonymous throughout the process. In addition to the candidates they identify, the AKAA also accepts independent nominations, as all of its guidelines and procedures are publicly available on the Web at www.akdn.org/agency/aktc_akka.html. The list of nominations often totals anywhere

from 300 to 500, and the first meeting of the master jury winnows that number down to a manageable 25 to 30 projects.

Then, technical reviewers visit the shortlisted sites. They study the design and research how architects and builders involved relevant communities in construction, how they secured financing and how they navigated local and national regulations. They inspect the materials to ascertain whether they were locally available and at what cost, and they ask about the decision-making process of the building from start to finish. And always, whether the project is a private home, a historical monument or a factory, the reviewers pay close attention to how users relate to it. They then present their findings to the master jury, which spends a week examining and debating the relative merits of each project.

From the start, the master juries, as well as the steering committees, have been studied with luminati, including the late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, often considered the father of the "sustainability" movement; Princeton historian of Islamic art Oleg Grabar; Tokyo architect Arata Isozaki; Canadian architect Frank Gehry; US architects Charles Moore and Robert Venturi and theorist Frederic Jameson. Although the roster has in recent cycles included a growing proportion of professionals from across the Islamic world—from ultra-modernist architect Zaha Hadid to the Bangladeshi founder of the Grameen Bank, Muhammad Yunus, and architects from New Delhi, Karachi, Riyadh and Jakarta—the committees are nonetheless heavily weighted in favor of Western-trained and Western-based academics and architects. All the members of the 1998 master jury, for example, earned graduate and often undergraduate degrees in Western or Western-style institutions; on the eight-member 2001 steering committee, five are currently based in the West and seven were trained there.

This imbalance is mostly a product of history, for although architecture has always played a very significant role in Islamic cultures, the field has been defined and developed in Europe and North America for the last 500 years, and the most influential institutions are in those parts of the world. Thus, since its inception, the AKAA has been dogged by the question of the extent to which it may be perpetuating a colonial relationship between East and West.

This has led to powerful opinions. Samer Akkach, director of the Centre for Asian and Middle Eastern Architecture at the University of Adelaide in Australia, who has studied the AKAA as a cultural phenomenon, points out that the very notion of "Islamic culture" is itself a Western construct defined in contraposition to "Western culture." Akkach made the AKAA the subject of his 1997 paper "Expatriating Excellence: The Aga Khan's Search for Muslim Identity," in which he questioned whether Muslim expatriates and Western-trained architects, steeped as they are in this Western notion, are qualified to judge what does or does not constitute successful Islamic architecture. "On the one hand," he argued, "they assume their native identity to confer authenticity, while on the other, they identify with Western authority to acquire legitimacy. Through this double act, they become empowered representatives of the Muslim communities and disguised agents of [Western] cultural dissemination." In short, he worried that the AKAA was perpetuating an orientalist perspective that naturalizes the dominance of Western ideas and fails to consider the existence, let alone the legitimacy, of others.

Since then, Akkach says, he has softened his stance, which he admits was "more critical a few years back." He recognizes that modernity today is ever more likely to emerge from Asia rather than from Europe or North America. More importantly, he says he has now seen first-hand how, despite its apparent Western stance, the AKAA does indeed "mobilize local forces" to improve living conditions and "contribute to Islamic people in different societies."

Moreover, there seems little point today in merely bemoaning the historical fact that architecture is replete with Western categories and assumptions. The AKAA'S approach has been to question and challenge these assumptions and in doing so, inject new perspectives in the field. One way it does this is through discussions centered on a non-Western context, and it is just such discussions that the steering committee and master jury hold every three years. "They have to think about social and other issues while they're sitting around the table in Geneva," says Cynthia Davidson, founder of Architecture New York and editor of two AKAA catalogues. For some of the Western committee members, this may only be of academic or esoteric interest. "When they return home," Davidson adds, "they have their own practices, which are so different and very removed from the concerns prevalent in Islamic societies."

But for others, working with the AKAA has altered their daily business. Renata Holod, a professor of Islamic art and architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, was part of the group of advisors that worked with the Aga Khan and his team to develop the award. She has subsequently served on the master jury and the steering committee, and the work, she says, "substantially changed the way in which, as a professor, I look at material and understand it." Outside the classroom, she adds, the AKAA has influenced her thinking about her current archeological and ethno-historical survey of Jerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia. "Because I was engaged with the Award, the project has a conservation aspect and a cultural-tourism aspect to it. If I had stayed within my profession," Holod says, "I would have just done the archeology and not felt the need to

engage in a structured way with contemporary society."

Writings by and about the AKAA also change the way some professors not associated with the award conduct their business. Akkach, for example, sets up mock deliberations or "model Aga Khan Awards" sessions with his students in which each takes on the role of a jury member.

For AKAA-winning Saudi architect and urban planner AH Shuaibi, the AKAA has done nothing less than redefine his view of the field. He had cofounded Riyadh-based Beech Planners, Architects and Engineers and was well established by the time the first AKAA winners were announced in 1980. Writing in the AKAA'S sixth-cycle catalogue in 1995, he recalled how at that time "I, among many others, was disappointed to see that elevated water tanks and a *kampong* [an Indonesian low-income housing area] improvement program were not only called architecture, but were also honored as excellent examples of architecture." Twelve years later, while sitting on a master jury, "I watched the same initial disappointment of other leading international figures turn into admiration and commitment to the pursuit of good architecture."

Pursuit is the key word here. Jury and steering committee members make it clear that, by their selections, they do not so much define what constitutes good architecture as they search for projects that might-or might not-fit a new, broader notion that architecture is not always, or solely, about buildings. As the winning projects attest, architecture can be about enhancing the human environment, whether by erecting new sheltered spaces, repairing old ones or even planting trees. (In the 1995 roster of winners, "architecture" included a reforestation program in Ankara, Turkey, and the landscaping design that integrated elements of Soekarno-Hatta airport in Cengkareng, Indonesia.)

Likewise, the requirement that projects have been in use for at least one year—many winning projects have been in use longer than that—can also be seen as putting contemporary theory into practice. Since the 1960's, postmodern theorists have increasingly discounted the value of the creator's intent and given more weight to the response of the user, no less in architecture than in literature and the performing and visual arts.

The AKAA's recognition of building teams, as opposed to individual architects, is consistent with this approach. When the master jury emerges, it presents a list of winning projects with the names of all the individuals it deems to have been key to the projects' success, and not all of these are architects. In 1980, the jury honored Egyptian master mason Aladdin Moustafa, a move that so delighted—and shocked—the architectural community that the highly respected magazine *Domus* devoted its front cover and editorial to him. Most recently, the 1998 jury gave equal credit to architect Jimmy Lim and master carpenter Ibrahim bin Adam for the success of the Salinger Residence in Malaysia. And in 1995, the prize-winning sewerage system in Indore, India was the work of Himanshu Parikh, a civil engineer.

The image of Moustafa, Adam or Parikh standing alongside architects at the awards ceremony might be dismissed as a mere liberal quirk were it not for the fact that architects worldwide are struggling to redefine their roles. Gone are the days of modernism, when they were revered as gurus of social engineering. Since the 1980's, environmentalists, sociologists, engineers, psychologists and others have all encroached on architects' territory, devising ways to improve built environments. As Akkach points out bluntly, "The environment everywhere in the world is deteriorating. I think we've been arrogant for a long period of time. It's about time that architects become part of the community rather than trying to play the elitist role." In this regard, the AKAA sets an important precedent of humility.

However, it is not clear that the AKAA actually ever intended to help redefine the role of the architect; its influence in that debate may be a by-product of what some consider one of the award's weaknesses. Indeed, the AKAA is sometimes privately criticized for being too scatter-shot, for attempting to deal with world-quality design and at the same time stress broad themes of social responsibility.

Paradoxically, this overextension is also the root of another strength. In their attempts to reconcile the AKAA's mission with a selection of built projects, the jury and steering committee at each cycle find themselves wandering deep into theoretical territory. The resulting debates are what prompt Akkach to say that "the value of the AKAA is unfolding in the discourse"—a discourse he would like to see question the assumption that the expression of "culture" or "identity" should be a function of architecture at all. These terms, he maintains, are far from neutral. "Can we not," he asks, "take a pre-modern view and look at beauty and excellence without these being extended to the identity of the maker? Not imbue it with ideological content?"

To some extent, the AKAA already does this, for although an award-winning project must serve a Muslim community of some kind, the identity of a project's author is not an issue. For example, the Indian Leper Hospital which won an award in 1998 was designed by Swedes, and the low-income housing development project in Ismailiyya, Egypt, that won in 1986 was the work of a British firm. Yet pervading the AKAA'S

deliberations remains the notion that winners must incorporate, reflect or fit in with the Islamic culture and identity as those terms are defined by the users of the project. Indeed, the AKAA'S stated mission is "to enhance the understanding and appreciation of Islamic culture as expressed through architecture," and it is in its questing within those boundaries that the AKAA has seen its intellectual "unfolding." In the early years, the juries seemed to favor a notion of Islamic culture that was closely aligned with a particular region, and jury members hailed the way the winning projects married regional heritages with modernity.

Later, the emphases shifted. In the 1998 catalogue, *Legacies for the Future*, Mohamad Arkhoun of the Academie Francaise argued for a definition of "Islamic" as being based on "values which are almost eternal and are opposed to pressures exercised by globalization," the movement toward world cultural homogenization. This has kept the AKAA'S debates within the paradigm that seeks reconciliation between Islamic and Western values. Although in the same 1998 jury deliberations at least one other member, Indian architect Romi Khosla, argued for the dismantling of this duality in favor of "an alternative debate about the relevance of architecture today," he nonetheless maintained that, in practical terms, the AKAA'S focus on Islamic societies offers "at least one contemporary world where the broader social issues of architecture can be...discussed."

Indeed, the Islamic world is so vast and varied that it provides architects and scholars with concerns that their colleagues practicing in the West are often spared. Although architects in cities like Dubai, Mumbai (Bombay) and Jakarta have to meet the same demands for efficient office space, modern plant facilities and technologically sophisticated infrastructure that exist in the West, they must also frequently factor in severe climactic conditions, limited availability of materials and maintenance skills, and local customs. Moreover, they also often have to seek extremely low-cost, socially oriented strategies for densely populated environments in which buildings and infrastructure are all compromised by severe poverty. As Khosla suggests, the AKAA then can contribute greatly to worldwide discussions in architecture by concentrating on what it defines, by the slings and arrows of its own debates, as the Islamic world.

Not that Khosla will have anything like the last word. When the 2001 jury adjourns in June, the issue of Islamic culture will no doubt have been one of many discussions. And the next round of award announcements will not only turn the AKAA'S spotlight on projects that have enhanced the environments of Muslims; it will also, if it follows what is now AKAA tradition, enhance the intellectual environment in which we all think about the meaning and goals of architecture.

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Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, 63 years old, is the 49th hereditary leader of the Ismaili Shi'ite Muslims living in some 25 countries around the world. He succeeded his grandfather, Sultan Sir Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, who was known internationally for his service as president of the League of Nations. More recently, other members of the Aga Khan's family have also served in leadership positions in the United Nations.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is now under the umbrella of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Geneva, whose mission, beyond the administration of the awards, is the improvement of built environments in societies where Muslims have a significant presence. Conservation projects, the creative reuse of historic buildings and public spaces, international exchanges that strengthen architectural practice, and planning and conservation education are all part of its activities through its Historic Cities Support Program and its Education and Culture Program. The AKAA'S leading educational project in the United States is the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which is a specialized program of professional and graduate studies and research established in 1977.

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