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BEHIND THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, TORONTO
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On October 8, 2002 His Highness the Aga Khan announced his intention to establish the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada. Now, after 14 long years of planning and construction, the museum is expected to officially open in September 2014. However, during this time, the museum has been active holding 9 thematic exhibitions in 12 cities across Europe and the Near and Far East. For each, a lavish catalogue was produced and in the Aga Khan's introduction to Path of Princes: Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum, published for the exhibition held in Lisbon, the Aga Khan wrote:

In 1983, I had the pleasure of visiting the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and was very impressed with its activities and vision. When the first president of the Foundation, José de Azeredo Perdigão, showed me a model of the buildings and the proposed Centre for Contemporary Art, which was due to be opened a few months later, it was perhaps the first time I gauged the extraordinary potential of a museum institution from an outreach and educational perspective. [1]

And thus, in a sense, the primary objective of the museum could be summarised with just one word: education.

[The museum's] fundamental aim will be an educational one ... [4]

But why and to what ends? The Aga Khan explains:

Throughout history, and sadly even today, fear of "the other" has torn apart communities along racial, religious, linguistic and ethnic lines. Understanding "the other" requires a level of dialogue and knowledge which institutions such as museums can foster. Museums have a strong educational impact: they present evidence of material cultures, without intermediaries, in a direct way that appeals to people both on emotional and intellectual levels. The need to bridge the growing divide of misunderstanding between East and West is pressing and, therefore, I have chosen to establish a museum of Islamic art, the Aga Khan Museum, in Toronto, Canada. [2]

A unique mandate dictated by location

Driven by its location, the Aga Khan Museum has been assigned a unique mandate, unfulfilled by any other institution:
This museum, which is being designed by the renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, is conceived as a primarily educational institution in the field of Islamic art and culture, a specific mandate that is not fulfilled so far by other North American museums. [3]

While some North American museums have significant collections of Muslim art, there is no institution devoted to Islamic art. In building the [Aga Khan Museum] in Toronto, we intend to introduce a new actor to the North American art scene. Its fundamental aim will be an educational one, to actively promote knowledge of Islamic arts and culture. What happens on that continent, culturally, economically and politically, cannot fail to have world-wide repercussions -- which is why we thought it important that an institution capable of promoting understanding and tolerance should exist there.[4]

In situating [The Aga Khan Museum and Global Centre for Pluralism] in Canada, we acknowledge both a tradition of tolerance and inclusiveness as well as an environment that has permitted diversity to flourish, enriching civic life of each individual and community that has sought to make this country its home. It is to this commitment to pluralism that we will turn in seeking to make these institutions both a repository of heritage and a source of inspiration for societies the world over in the future. [5]

What might be the role of museums in promoting understanding between East and West? It is a very important question to which I shall not try to give a comprehensive response, but I should nevertheless point out that the Muslim world, with its history and cultures, and indeed its different interpretations of Islam, is still little known in the West. This lack of knowledge manifests itself in a particularly serious way in Western democracies, where the public is often ill-informed about the Muslim world -- an ignorance which then impacts the formulation of national and international policy vis-a-vis the Muslim world. Be that as it may, Muslim and non-Muslim societies must, as a matter of urgency, make a real effort to get to know one another, for I fear that what we have is not a clash of civilisations, but a clash of ignorance on both sides. Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching an understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures and traditions and in ensuring that whole populations are given fresh opportunities to make contact with each other, using new, modern methods imaginatively and intelligently to bring about truly global communication. [2]
The responsibility to improve the West's understanding of Islam rests with the Muslim world itself

The Aga Khan stresses that it is up to us in the Muslim world to drive the effort to not only help educate the West about Islam, but to also reassert Islam's rightful place in the global society:

*It is especially at times when ignorance, conflict and apprehension are so rife that institutions, in the Muslim world and in the West, have a greater obligation to promote intellectual openness and tolerance and to create increased cultural understanding. The Aga Khan Museum will have a unique responsibility to engender this understanding, based on a refreshed, enlightened appreciation of the scientific, linguistic, artistic and religious traditions that underpin and give such global value to Muslim civilisations.* [2]  

*We have to illustrate the fact that [the Muslim] world is a very diverse world, but it is a very beautiful world in its diversity. It goes from high mountains to deserts. It crosses oceans. It covers populations with different backgrounds, different histories, and yet it is one brotherhood.* [7]  

*It seems to me therefore, that it is important that we illustrate this beauty in a way which the global community can understand. Today, hamdulillah, we see more and more museums coming up in the Islamic world illustrating the diversity, the history, the great traditions of our world and we are re-entering the knowledge of global humanities, from which we have been absent for too long.* [7]  

*We don't do enough to illustrate to the peoples of our world the greatness of the Islamic civilisations, of the cultures of the past. And because they don't know, they don't know our history, they don't know our literature, they don't know our philosophy, they don't know the physical environment in which our countries have lived. They view the Ummah in terminology which is completely wrong. And I personally feel that this is a matter of the greatest importance.* [15]  

*And my interest ... is to take the various lead countries of the Ummah and say, let's start, let's move together, let's revive our cultures so that modernity is not only seen in the terminology of the West, but modernity is seen in the intelligent use of our past, re-giving to our cultures the vivacity, the role in society which they should have.* [15]
Outreach: A core element of the Aga Khan Museum's strategy

Besides just being a destination, sitting idle and waiting for North Americans to come to it and learn about Islam, the Aga Khan Museum will be pro-active and take its message to the people through collaborations with other Museums. Also, AKM will engage North Americans intellectually through seminars and research:

In a world in which some speak of a growing clash of civilisations, we believe the Museum will help address what is not so much a clash of civilisations, as it is a clash of ignorances. The new Museum will have a strong educational vocation: it will be a place for active inquiry, for discussion and research, for lectures and seminars, and for an array of collaborative programs with educational institutions and with other museums. [6]

A major part of the gallery space will be dedicated to visiting and temporary exhibitions -- building on exhibitions of our collection that have taken place in London, Paris, Lisbon, [Parma, Toledo, Madrid, Barcelona, Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore] and Berlin ... A state-of-the-art auditorium will also host programs featuring the performing arts and cinema. [6]

As our plans began to take shape, we came to realise that the Museum's focus on the arts of Islam will make it a unique institution in North America, contributing to a better understanding of Islamic civilisations -- and especially of the plurality within Islam and of Islam's relationship to other traditions. [6]

Inspiring convivencia, the Spanish word for living together harmoniously

Besides allowing the world to appreciate the beauty, creations and values of Islam, the end objective is to help foster harmonious, respectful relations among all people, a spirit captured by the Spanish word convivencia:

The aim of the Aga Khan Museum will be to offer unique insights and new perspectives into Islamic civilisations and the cultural threads that weave through history binding us all together. My hope is that the Museum will also be a centre of education and of learning, and that it will act as a catalyst for mutual understanding and tolerance. [8]

At times, the Muslim and Western worlds opposed each other in antagonism and conflict; at others, they cooperated constructively and in harmony. [8] There was a period in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in harmony and shared a glorious intellectual and spiritual adventure. In Spain, Toledo was the main
centre of this plural and prosperous civilisation, which promoted scientific progress, philosophical knowledge and artistic creativity. [9] It was during [such times] that the greatest scientific, social and economic developments occurred, to the benefit of all. It is my deepest wish that this be the path of the future. [8] But time has eroded the traces of mutual understanding which was the basis of reciprocal respect. [9]

This is why the works of art which express the values of tolerance and pluralism, specific to the Muslim world and related to its ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity throughout its history, are important witnesses today. I think that the periods and the societies which have considered pluralism as a value can be useful examples to develop a cosmopolitan ethics, a concept which could give birth to a civil society based on the principle of merit and capable of integrating the best values of the different units of which it is composed. This would be, in my opinion, the only way to understand pluralism and to build upon it, in any place in the world, a real democracy. [9]

It is in Spain that the term "convivencia" [the Spanish word for living together harmoniously [10]] was coined and its concept took form, as a way of life based on mutual respect and understanding, which allowed peaceful and productive relations between different communities. [9] "Convivencia" ... is not a simple concept. It is, of course, the term used to describe the co-existence of different faiths in medieval Spain. The code of "convivencia" was about tolerance and much more. In Toledo, Córdoba and Granada it implied mutual respect as well as an appreciation of science and scholarship, and of different traditions. The acquisition of knowledge was not an end in itself, but rather a way to understand the beauty of God's creation. [10]

Doubtless, during this long period, religious tolerance ebbed and flowed between opposing poles of admiration and hostility. But "convivencia" implied norms of behaviour which had to be constantly reaffirmed through education and mutual understanding. It is encouraging to observe how the mix of peoples, cultures and faiths built an advanced society which was a beacon to the civilised world. [10]

I am convinced that the future Aga Khan Museum's central task will be both educational and humanistic: to actively promote, internationally, the spirit of "convivencia" [9] There cannot be any doubt that with more "convivencia" the world today would be a better place, for us and for our children. I believe strongly that the arts have a special and privileged role in fostering dialogue and knowledge. [10]
[The Aga Khan Museum] will be a place for sharing a story, through art and artefacts, of highly diverse achievements -- going back over 1,400 years. It will honour the central place within Islam of the search for knowledge and beauty. And it will illuminate the inspiration which Muslim artists have drawn from faith, and from a diverse array of epics, from human stories of separation and loss, of love and joy -- themes which we know reverberate eloquently across the diverse cultures of humanity. [6]

It is important, today, that the peoples of the Muslim world, their pluralism, the diversity of their interpretations of the Qur’anic faith, the chronological and geographical extent of their history and culture, as well as their ethnic, linguistic and social diversity be better understood. Without words and without proselytising, art works from "other" cultures bring discovery and understanding of the commonalities of our universal heritage. With this knowledge comes tolerance, hence "convivencia". The main aim and function of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto will be to offer a space for learning and tolerance, and I hope it will have a seed of Toledo in its foundations. [10]

Certainly one of the lessons we have learned in recent years is that the world of Islam and the Western world need to work together much more effectively at building mutual understanding -- especially as these cultures interact and intermingle more actively. We hope that [the Aga Khan Museum] will contribute to a better Western understanding of the peoples of Islam: in all of their religious, ethnic, linguistic and social diversity. [3]

The Aga Khan Museum building itself: an expression and agent of the vision

For a museum whose mandate is "[to increase cultural] understanding, based on a refreshed, enlightened appreciation of the scientific, linguistic, artistic and religious traditions that underpin and give such global value to Muslim civilisations," it is only fitting, if not a necessary expectation, that such a museum's building itself carry that message and be an expression of this mandate.

Historically, architecture was one of the most powerful expressions of our cultures. And yet 35 years ago, in my view, we had disappeared from the world’s architecture. Our buildings had become books on coffee tables. Our schools of architecture had no architects trained in Islamic architecture. Our historic buildings were not being maintained. Historic cities were allowed to disappear, out of ignorance, or lack of interest. [7]
Over the past twenty five years, I have been seeking to develop physical spaces in major cities in the Western world that can contribute towards an improved understanding of the many cultures and civilisations of the Islamic world. The high-profile Ismaili Centres in London, Vancouver and Lisbon, each designed by an architect of international repute, each reflecting an interplay of civilisational influences from across the East and the West, and each looking to contribute to civic life in their respective countries, have been a first step towards this objective. [5]

For too long, there has been little public debate about the art and architecture of Muslim societies. The consequences for the Muslim world have been a one-way flow of scholarship and popular culture from the West, which, in turn, receives all too little that is creative and interpretative, scholarly and artistic, from the Muslim world. The cultures of Islamic civilisations have more than 1400 years of intellectual and artistic history; sadly today, this history and its contributions to our shared global heritage are still little known. [12]

To address this condition, the Aga Khan Museum is being established in Canada’s great multicultural city of Toronto, and it will open its doors in 2013. The Museum has a range of objects and miniature paintings in its collection that will allow it to establish a highly creative intellectual contest for the research and presentation of the arts of Islamic civilisations and therefore make a major contribution to this relatively unexplored subject. As the collection grows and develops, it will focus further on the complementary nature of architecture and other visual arts. The Museum's building itself, designed by Fumihiko Maki -- one of the great architects of our time -- will be an architecturally inspiring setting for the collection. [12]

In the Aga Khan's 2007 interview [13] for Philip Jodidio's book *Under the Eaves of Architecture*, Jodidio discussed the museum's building with the Aga Khan:

**Philip Jodidio**: Although not for a religious building, you are calling on the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki to create two very contemporary structures in Canada, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat in Ottawa and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Might Dubai not have been a place for an extremely modern design?

**Aga Khan**: Absolutely. The fact is, however, that in the Middle East we are in a region that better justified such contextualisation. In Canada the question was what issues the members of the community felt should be addressed. There was a sense that they wanted to be seen as forward-looking, educated people who could remain true to their traditions but were not fearful of modernity or the future.
They wanted in a sense to Islamicise modernity rather than to have modernity impact Islam.

We did a survey to try to understand what the younger generations in Canada were thinking. If we were going to build a building that was going to be there for fifty years or whatever, what should that building be? They were talking about aspirations for the future; they were talking about integrating themselves with the environment in which they live, which is an environment of quality modern buildings. They were looking for modernity, but they were also looking for empathy with Islamic traditions. We have that empathy. We have not gone to an anti-cultural building, but rather a cultural building where the inspiration is modernity plus some of the value systems from the Islamic world. One of them is open space....

Philip Jodidio: With Fumihiko Maki are you not calling on a different type of architect than the ones you have worked with in the past? Is he not more of an international "star" than some others you have called on? For the University of Central Asia you have selected another well-known Japanese figure, the architect Arata Isozaki.

Aga Khan: If the mandate to the architect is to be as good as any in modern architecture, using modern materials and concepts but at the same time having the sensitivity to bring in external value systems, Maki was the obvious choice, because of the sensitivity of Japanese architects to their own cultural history. Linking cultural history to modernity is probably something that Japanese architects are as good at as anyone. They understand that. Maki seemed to be one to whom you could give a mandate and say, I am trying to bridge a number of different forces by building this modern building, and one of them is to take some of the value systems of the past, put them into this building, but not make it so esoteric that it overburdens you. It has to be inspirational and subtle. It is not a theological building, but if, within that building, there are spaces of spirituality, which we like to see as part of everyday life -- it is not the exception, it should be part of everyday life -- then you are bringing that into that building.

[13]

Indeed the Aga Khan's commission to Maki set out his vision, inspiration and direction to take for the museum's design:

For the Aga Khan Museum, I thought that 'light' might be a concept around which you could design an outstanding museum. The notion of light has transversed nearly all of human history, and has been an inspiration for numerous faiths, going as far back of course to the Zoroastrians and their
reverence for the Sun, to the Sura in the Holy Qur’an titled al-Nur. Decades of Western history are referred to as the ‘enlightenment’ for good reason. [14]

I hope that the building and the spaces around it will be seen as the celebration of Light, and the mysteries of Light, that nature and the human soul illustrate to us at every moment in our lives. I have explained at the beginning of this letter why I think Light would be an appropriate design direction for the new museum and this concept is of course particularly validated in Islamic texts and sciences: apart from the innumerable references in the Qur’an to Light in all its forms, in nature and in the human soul, the light of the skies, their sources and their meaning have for centuries been an area of intellectual inquiry and more specifically in the field of astronomy. Thus the architecture of the building would seek to express these multiple notions of Light, both natural and man-made, through the most purposeful selection of internal and external construction materials, facets of elevations playing with each other through the reflectivity of natural or electric light, and to create light gain or light retention from external natural sources or man-made internal and external sources. [14]

**Source of pride for Muslims in Canada and the USA**

The museum will also belong to the large Muslim population living in Canada and the USA. It will be a source of pride and identity for all these people, showing the inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also of cultural and ethnic variety. Furthermore, the museum will show, beyond the notoriously politicised form of Islam which now tends to make headlines, Islam is in reality an open-minded, tolerant faith capable of adopting other people’s cultures and languages and making them its own. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Muslims of North America will play an important role in the development of states and populations within the Ummah. [4]

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture ... aims to position properly the greatness of the cultures of the Muslim world in our global cultural heritage. These societies are experiencing dramatic periods of transition, processes of change, and homogenising forces of popular culture, often from far away lands which they view as threatening the significant contributions Muslim civilisations have made to the common heritage of humanity and radically altering the value systems of their future generations. In Muslim societies culture matters a great deal, for it is intimately intertwined with matters of faith. Authentic symbols of pride and identity seem to be disappearing leading to a sense of exclusion, alienation or even challenge to inherited identity. [11] I am convinced that our ability to honour authentic symbols of pride and identity -- and to share their beauty and
their power with one another -- can be a tremendous force for good. This is indeed my hope. [2]

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