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BEHIND THE ISMAILI CENTRES
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Since the first Ismaili Centre was opened in London, in 1985, five new Centres have been opened in Vancouver (1985), Lisbon (1998), Dubai (2008), Dushanbe (2003) and Toronto (expected, September, 2014) and additional Centres are planned for "Houston, Los Angeles and Paris." [14]

In his 2008 interview with Gulf News, following the opening of the Ismaili Centre, Dubai, His Highness the Aga Khan was asked: "Why did you set up an Ismaili Centre in Dubai and what is your vision behind setting up such centres in other countries?" He replied:

"I think the creation of the Ismaili Centres is important because they represent the Ismaili community in the important countries in the world. I hope that the centre will bring a sense of institutional purpose. We call them ambassadorial buildings because they are representatives of the Ismaili community and all its aspirations.

"We first started building the centres in the West. Like the Ismaili Centres in London, Vancouver and Lisbon, the Ismaili Centre in Dubai will reflect a mood of humility, forward outlook, friendship and dialogue....

"The buildings have a two-fold purpose. First, they serve as institutions for the Ismaili community and, secondly, they reach out to groups of people, creating spaces for quality exhibitions, culture and musical representation. These centres allow us to build bridges for interaction among various communities, areas and cultures." [11]

Spaces for "spiritual enlightenment" and "intellectual discovery"

In particular, as institutions for the Ismaili community, the Aga Khan has noted in the past that

"above all, [the centres are places] for contemplation, upliftment, and the search for spiritual enlightenment" [8] "dedicated to the preservation of spiritual values, the promotion of social development and the enhancement of intellectual discovery." [5]

"[I]t would be appropriate to situate one of the functions of the Ismaili Centre in the tradition of Muslim piety. For many centuries, a prominent feature of the
Muslim religious landscape has been the variety of spaces of gathering co-existing harmoniously with the masjid, which in itself has accommodated a range of diverse institutional spaces for educational, social and reflective purposes. Historically serving communities of different interpretations and spiritual affiliations, these spaces have retained their cultural nomenclatures and characteristics, from ribat and zawiyya to khanqaha and jamatkhana. The congregational space incorporated within the Ismaili Centre belongs to the historic category of jamatkhana, an institutional category that also serves a number of sister Sunni and Shia communities, in their respective contexts, in many parts of the world. Here, it will be space reserved for traditions and practices specific to the Shia Ismaili tariqah of Islam." [9]

"It is my humble prayer that, when built, the [Dubai] Ismaili Centre ... will be a place for contemplation and search for enlightenment, where people come together to share knowledge and wisdom. It will be a place of peace, of order, of hope and of brotherhood, radiating those thoughts, attitudes and sentiments which unite, and which do not divide, and which uplift the mind and the spirit." [9]

"[The Dushanbe Centre] will be a place, as well, for peaceful contemplation of the spirit, and of the world, as we live our lives in the present moment. And it will be a place to think about the future and how this profound heritage can shape and inform tomorrow’s world. This Centre aspires to give physical form and spiritual space for pursuing all of these objectives." [13]

In his speeches at the foundation stone and opening ceremonies of the Ismaili Centres, the Aga Khan elaborated further on the second purpose behind the centres, as agents for cross-cultural friendship and understanding.

**Architecture and "physical representation of Islamic values"**

One dimension of the ambassadorial role of the centres is expressed in their very design. The Aga Khan explains:

"The Ismaili Centre [London] being designed for a Muslim Community must reflect, even if only discreetly, an Islamic mood whilst being sympathetic to the character of its surroundings ... [but] which, by its nature and location, must seek to bridge the cultures of East and West." [1]

"Islam does not deal in dichotomies but in all encompassing unity. Spirit and body are one, man and nature are one. What is more, man is answerable to God for what man has created. Since all that we see and do resonates on the faith, the
aesthetics of the environments we build and the quality of the interactions that take place within them reverberate on our spiritual lives. The physical representation of Islamic values is particularly important to me. It should reflect who we are in terms of our beliefs, our cultural heritage and our relation to the needs and contexts in which we live in today's world." [7]

Therefore, he explains that:

"In the tradition of Muslim spaces of gathering, the Ismaili Centre [Dubai] will be a symbol of the confluence between the spiritual and the secular in Islam ... Like its functions, the centre's architecture will reflect our perception of daily life whose rhythm weaves the body and the soul, man and nature into a seamless unity. Guided by the ethic of whatever we do, see and hear, and the quality of our social interactions, resonate on our faith and bear on our spiritual lives, the Centre will seek to create, Insh'allah, a sense of equilibrium, stability and tranquillity." [9]

"The [Ismaili Centre, Burnaby] will stand in strongly landscaped surroundings. It will face a courtyard with foundations and a garden. Its scale, its proportions and the use of water will serve to create a serene and contemplative environment. This will be a place of congregation, of order, of peace, of prayer, of hope, of humility, and of brotherhood. From it should come forth those thoughts, those sentiments, those attitudes, which bind men together and which unite. It has been conceived and will exist in a mood of friendship, courtesy, and harmony." [2]

"[The Burnaby Centre] expresses the Ismailis' desire to give of their best to the cultural and economic fabric of Canada. They are proud that it symbolizes their commitment both to this country's future and to their ancient heritage." [4]

While the building will be an important focus in the social and religious life of the local Ismaili Community in Burnaby. It is my hope, a very deep hope, that it will become a symbol of a growing understanding in the West of the real meaning of Islam." [2]

**Bridge Building**

The second dimension of the ambassadorial role of the centres stems from their engagement with their host societies:

"Through its design and functions, [the Dubai Centre], like its predecessors, will reflect a mood of humility, forward outlook, friendship and dialogue. Above all,
this Centre is being conceived in the ethic of respect for human dignity. It will, therefore, aim to empathise with, and to expand our intellectual, cultural and moral horizons." [9]

"A key aim of the Ismaili Centre in Dubai will be to enhance, facilitate and, indeed, encourage mutual exchanges and understanding, all of which are so critical to a country's sustained development." [9] "The continuing pluralism of human endeavour will be manifested in the life of this Centre." [13]

"Through lectures, presentations, conferences, recitals, and exhibits of art and architecture, alone, or joined by other national or international entities in the cultural field, these Centres have become ambassadorial buildings which today reflect and illustrate much of what the Shia Ismaili Community represents in terms of its attitude towards the Muslim faith, its organisation, its discipline, its social conscience, the effectiveness of its community organisations and, more generally, its attitude toward modern life and the society in which it exists." [5] "We will seek to demonstrate that spiritual insight and worldly knowledge are not separate or opposing realms, but that they must always nourish one another, and that the world of faith and the material world are the dual responsibilities of humankind." [13]

"It is our hope that through the quality and design of the buildings to be built here, through their programs to better this great city [Lisbon] for everyone, will stand a tangible and lasting symbol of our friendship and ... a token of our commitment to a long and fruitful relationship ..." [5]

"This ethic of connectivity with others has deep spiritual roots -- in Islam as for other faiths. It stems ultimately from humankind’s sense of humility in the presence of the Divine. In this light, human diversity itself is seen as a gift of Allah, cultural differences are embraced as a blessing, and different interpretations of faith are seen as a mercy, one that nourishes the Ummah’s vast identity, and its constructive interface with society at large. In this spirit, it is our prayer that the Centre[s] will always radiate an inviting mood of friendship to one and all, proclaiming Islam’s message of one humanity, and joining its voice with so many other voices in this city and this country in affirming our shared responsibility for advancing the common good." [13]
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