[The Aga Khan Award for Architecture] can help to cause the changes in rural and physical environments to be appropriate to those environments. As an example, a large part of the Islamic world is located in a seismic belt...Yet, seismic construction in rural environments is unheard of. People who build for themselves do not know about seismically-sound construction. Most of the construction in rural environments is self-built, it is not architect-built. The question is, how do you get that knowledge into the rural environment? How do you teach people how to build in a safe manner? [1] *

I am also concerned there is still too little attention being paid to design for communities to protect residents from the effects of earthquakes, many of them in remote rural areas. Two million people died as a result of earthquakes in the last century and 100 million were severely affected. There are vast populations that live in seismic-sensitive high-mountain areas where we must focus attention. [3]

Everything that characterises high mountains and the people residing in them exists in its most extreme form. The physical bulk of these mountains is enormous, ... climatic variation is extreme, and natural hazards earthquakes, avalanches, rock-slides, and mudslides - are frequent, endangering human lives ... as well as houses, schools, hospitals, and all of the built environment. The lives of the impoverished are, by definition, precarious, a precariousness that is even worse in high mountain regions. [4]

In the developing countries the vast majority of rural homes constructed in the foreseeable future will be self-built, as is the case now... One way to improve the village housing situation [is] to provide the basic services and technical advice for village housing schemes, the labour and much of the materials being supplied by the people themselves. The "site and service" idea is not new, although perhaps in the rural context it would be more appropriate to refer to "technology and service" ... [T]he concept is rightly attracting attention today, because, when re-thought in a modern context, it can provide a low cost solution to rural housing needs.... Obviously no kind of "technology and service" or co-operative scheme can be carried out economically on a single unit basis [but rather] in accordance with an overall plan drawn up by technical advisers, who might offer a small number of basic house designs and give instruction to the villagers in the elements of structure, sanitation, ventilation, and the more effective use of local materials. [2] *

[1] Architectural Record Interview, Robert Ivy (New York, USA) 19 February 2002
[2] Association of Builders and Developers Seminar on ‘Shelter for the Homeless’ (Karachi, Pakistan) 16 March 1983

* Auroville Earth Institute (presently the representative for Asia of the UNESCO Chair “Earthen Architecture, Constructive Cultures and Sustainable Development”) is a non-profit research organisation which has developed low-cost technology for self-built seismic resistant homes and community buildings. For more information visit: http://www.earth-auroville.com/