"I told our [Karachi hospital] architect, who is American and who has specialised in hospital design, that his idiom should reflect the spirit of Islam. How was this to be done? I did not want him to succumb, through nostalgia, to mimicry of the past, adding minarets and domes to his renderings -- the sort of bogus orientalism that has produced Alhambra hotels and Taj Mahal bars around the world. Surely, we, as Muslims, must do better than that....

"Our difficulties in discovering what it means to build today in the spirit of Islam have provoked me into what I expect will be a life-long commitment to identifying and spreading that spirit. We have sent teams of architectural experts into many countries since the journey of our hospital designer and his group. These observers’ reports on the built environment of Islam today are disheartening reading. They tell us that the wonderful distinctiveness of Islamic architecture is disappearing, that much of it today looks like Frankfurt, Bogota or Dallas. There is such homogenised blandness that one is left with few visual clues to know where one is or who the people of this place might be. Our reports tell us that the new structural symbols of power in our world have not sprung from our spirit, from our understanding of who we are, or what we believe, but have been merely copied from foreign images of political and commercial power.

"Can this be the world of the people who built the mosque of Cordoba? Of the people whose marvellous urban systems in Isfahan are still studied by city planners? The people who created the Mughal gardens of Kashmir? The people who have fashioned the remarkable town architecture of Yemen? ...

"Throughout the Islamic world there is a thirst for the images of modernity, of material progress, the symbols of power. The colonial rulers are gone, the structures they left behind, the courts and residences and legislatures they built and from which the rulers governed, have long been occupied by our own leaders. Now the need is for new symbols and they are
being imported complete and intact without adaptation, without filtering out the inappropriate, without perhaps even asking the question whether they could, or should, be different. There is little time.

"The treasures of our past are being destroyed and an ever quickening construction boom is bringing us too many buildings that I think we will live to despise. Should we allow future generations of Muslims to live without the self-respect of our own cultural and spiritual symbols of power, to practise their faith without also being reminded of that sense of scale in relation to the universe around us which is so particularly ours?"

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1979 address to the Asia Society: 'The Physical Structure of Islam' (New York, USA)

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