Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on the rationale behind the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

Mildred F. Schmertz: You founded the Award twenty years ago, and have sustained it without interruption right up to now. In today's architectural world, new ideas and agendas often have a very short life. At the beginning some observers thought that at best, your architectural award programme would last about six years. Instead, in two decades it has become and remained the most outstanding in the world, and continues to hold that leadership. What were the goals that led you to establish the Award?

Aga Khan: I was primarily an architectural client at that time -- building schools, hospitals, community centres, and commercial buildings in Muslim countries, or parts of the world with substantial Muslim minorities. As a student of history, I had been aware of the quality of architecture in Islamic societies historically, and I felt that I didn't know what terms of reference to give to architects for the buildings I was planning. Yes I could get a good architect who knew how build a hospital or school simply to accommodate the programme. I was not confident, however, about finding an architect who could design in the cultural language of the societies in which these buildings were to be constructed.

Seeking help, I invited a small group of architects and historians to join me in the study of this issue. From whatever standpoint each of us began, we all came to the conclusion that none of us had a sense of confidence in the way the physical environment was being changed in Islamic societies. It was clear that Islamic communities had lost some of their extraordinary inheritance of competence and knowledge in the realm of architecture. The next question was what to do about it. We decided to study and question what was actually being built in Islamic societies --
was it appropriate, were its art forms as powerful and creative as they
had been historically.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1998 interview with Mildred Schmertz on the Aga
Khan Award for Architecture (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5380/

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