Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on the essentials of Islamic architecture

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS

"[W]e have been searching for a definition of Islamic architecture. One of our first conclusions has been that no single definition exists. Islamic architecture has reflected different peoples, different climates, different times and materials ... We have, however, sought the essentials that go beyond regional factors of climate and materials and the limitations of period technology. What have we found?

"One of our major conclusions centred on the serenity of form. In Islamic design the basic forms are balanced and ruled by geometry. There is a sense of stability, tranquillity and equilibrium. And with serenity goes modesty. There is a lack of domination and pride. The superiority of man-made structures over natural environment is a concept alien to Islamic belief.

"A second conclusion growing out of the first was the congruence of our traditions with natural forces. There is much Islamic spirit in the current effort in the West to respect and preserve ecological balance. As an example of this, Islamic builders have employed cooling systems in their houses for the last thousand years using only sun and wind for power. Such houses circulated cool air and produced chilled water and even ice.

"We found too that the overwhelming unity of Islamic life which sees no division between body and spirit, between this world and the next, was a powerful influence on Islamic architecture. The desire to bring to this world some of the beauty of the hereafter acted as a constant barrier to the discordant or the haphazard in Islamic styles. The calligraphy which adorns so much of what we have built was a constant reminder of spiritual content through its common design, the endless expression of the name of God.

"Finally we found that we were able to specify applications of style which expressed our attitudes and beliefs. There is the framing of space for instance. We define each area. We construct a
physical context for each activity in daily life. There is always a definite delineation between privacy and community, light areas and areas in shadow, small spaces and large spaces, interiors and exteriors, each is framed and set apart by itself usually with formality. There is further formality, it might even be called solemnity, in the passageways that connect all of these differing spaces.

"And we were reminded that Islamic homes are sanctuaries, places of retreat and refreshment from the noise and movement of public life. Those aspects of our idiom that engender this sense of peace should come with us in our designs for the homes of the future. But here we come upon one of the many paradoxes that struck us in our research. How much of the privacy built into a Muslim house was necessitated by the sequestering of our women? When women step out of purdah, no doubt the physical form of new households will reflect this change. On the other hand, perhaps the internal orientation of buildings can be most closely linked to the privacy and attitude to the family, the very base of Islam.

"There is also a strong kinaesthetic experience in Islamic building. There is a play upon the physical senses — air currents touching the skin, the sound of moving water, the touch of varied surface textures, the richness of colour and the play of light and shade upon the vision, the scent of plants in the courtyards, are touches of the paradise to come.

"These then are our findings. What will we do with them?"

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

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