Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on tradition and modernity in Islamic architecture - Of "bogus orientalism" & "alien models"

"I told our [hospital] architect ... 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....

"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....

"Throughout the Islamic world there is a thirst for the images of modernity, of material progress, the symbols of power.... 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."
"[T]he vast majority of cases the legislatures and courts and residences created in the Third World, both in colonial days and after political independence, have merely been copies from foreign images of political and commercial power. Anyone who visits former French West Africa or British East Africa must be struck by the impact of French and British design idioms in those areas, that is, of course, equally true for Portugal and southern India....

"At the higher, or monumental level, there have been attempts to reverse this dependence on alien models. People did ask why the Islamic world should accept them. But in nine out of ten cases the outcome was little more than mimicry of the Islamic glories of earlier periods without regard to crucial difference between those times and the present. Adding a dome and towers to a downtown office block does not make it either Islamic or appropriate."

"I have had recent practical experience with this problem in the development of a 700 bed teaching hospital in Karachi. One of my requirements was that the resulting design should reflect the spirit of Islam. By this I do not mean a soulless mimicry of past traditions of architecture, but a generation of new design, using the aesthetic and practical bases of these traditions. During the design process a dialogue started, both within the project organisation and among other bodies, and I began to comprehend the extent to which this subject had been so badly neglected in the past. Eventually a certain
design solution was approved, with full recognition that it was only one possible attempt at the problem."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1978 Welcome Address, First Seminar, The Aga Khan Award For Architecture (Aiglemont)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1852/

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**Times of India:** Architecture in the Muslim world is both enriched by the past and in some ways burdened by it. A bit like being the child of a famous parent.

**Aga Khan:** The past cannot be repeated. By copying it, it proves that one cannot do better. By repeating the past, by designing the same thing is not the solution. Modernity cannot be denied. How do we merge the two? That is continuity. We can’t ask people to live in mud houses. We have to come up with new solutions. The award tries to connect the two. The monuments of the past are important but the monuments of today are also important and they have to be recognised.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2004 Times of India Interview (New Delhi, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7094/

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"What the Muslim world needs today, I suggest, is more of those innovative architects that can navigate between the twin dangers of slavishly copying the architecture of the past and of foolishly ignoring its rich legacy. It needs those who can thoroughly internalise the collective wisdom of bygone generations, the eternal Message and ethic with which we live, and then reinforce them in the language of tomorrow."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1989 Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Cairo, Egypt)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4382/
"Our venues [for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture] were **not** meant to imply however that our goal was simply to reproduce the past. In fact, the projects we have honoured through the years -- over one hundred of them -- have invariably rejected simplistic, copy-machine approaches. The fact that we hold these current ceremonies in a contemporary setting -- one which has itself been a recipient of our Award, symbolises our faith that Architecture can not only link us to the past, but also propel us, creatively, into the future. The past is not something to stand on, but rather to build on. [Emphasis original]

"If ignoring the past was a problem on one side, then the opposite danger was an exaggerated submission to the past, so that some creations and creators became prisoners of dogma or nostalgia. There is a danger, in every area of life, everywhere in the world, that people will respond to the hastening pace of change with an irrational fear of modernism, and will want to embrace uncritically that which has gone before. The Islamic world has sometimes been vulnerable to this temptation -- and the rich potential for a new 'Islamic modernism' has sometimes been under-estimated.

"The Aga Khan Award was designed, in part, to address this situation, encouraging those who saw the past as a necessary prelude to the future and who saw the future as a fulfilling extension of the past. And, by and large through the years, this objective has been accomplished. In my view, a healthy life, for an individual or a community, means finding a way to relate the values of the past, the realities of the present, and the opportunities of the future. The built environment can play a central role in helping us to achieve that balance."

*His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 (10th) Aga Khan Award For Architecture Presentation Ceremony address (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)*
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8280/
“Great icons of the past must not be allowed to disappear, without an opportunity to come back to life and serve the future. At the same time, in looking at the places we have met and the projects we have honoured, we also see enormous diversity. Diversity, in fact, is part of the essence of Islam. The unity of the Ummah does not imply sameness. Working in an Islamic context need not confine us to constraining models. Nor does respecting the past mean copying the past. Indeed, if we hold too fast to what is past, we run the risk of crushing that inheritance. The best way to honour the past is to seize the future. In sum, an Islamic architectural agenda involves a dual obligation — a heightened respect for both the traditions of the past and the conditions of the future.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Aga Khan Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Doha, Qatar)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9616/

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"One of the factors leading to the [Aga Khan Award for Architecture] was what I would call the deconstruction of the cultural inheritance. This was part of the initial discussions of the Award. We were worried about the loss of cultural continuity in the physical environment.... The issue of modernity ... was an extremely complex issue for us and remains so. What we are talking about is forces in building that did not really exist at the time when the great buildings of the past were built. Airports, business complexes, housing estates, industries, office buildings, many phenomena of modern life clearly do not have a link with the past. How do you deal with that? ... We do not want to be seen as an institution that draws inspiration only from the past. The inspiration is part of society, it is part of design. Our interest is to generate new inspirations for modern architecture, and I think that that is happening....

"In Canada [for the design of the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto] the question was what issues the members of the community felt should be addressed. There was a sense that they wanted to be seen as
forward-looking, educated people who could remain true to their traditions but were not fearful of modernity or the future. They wanted in a sense to Islamicise modernity rather than to have modernity impact Islam.

"We did a survey to try to understand what the younger generations in Canada were thinking. If we were going to build a building that was going to be there for fifty years or whatever, what should that building be? They were talking about aspirations for the future; they were talking about integrating themselves with the environment in which they live, which is an environment of quality modern buildings. They were looking for modernity, but they were also looking for empathy with Islamic traditions. We have that empathy. We have not gone to an anti-cultural building, but rather a cultural building where the inspiration is modernity plus some of the value systems from the Islamic world. One of them is open space."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 Interview for the book ‘Under the Eaves of Architecture’ by Philip Jodidio (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8040/

"I ask you today to think about this: is it really impossible to adapt for our modern needs those magnificent finishes and building materials so widely used in our past? If our historic buildings used red stone, tile and marble, must we really now only use concrete and glass? ... Is it really beyond our powers to revive traditional concepts of landscaping?"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1970 University of Sind Convocation Ceremony address (Hyderabad, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1602/

"I interpret this view of the Jury to mean that during the life-time of the Award -- 18 years -- some of the approaches and solutions of the Muslim world, as judged from those premiated buildings of this
cycle, have reached the competence and sophistication to deserve world-wide recognition. It is a statement of cultural strength and quality in the built environment of Muslims, which must have immense importance for the Islamic world, its view of itself, and the way non-Muslims will view it today and in the future. It illustrates that by using its inherited cultural talents from its built environment, and those of other cultures appropriately harnessed and by using its own ethical vision, and its artistic, ethnic and geographic plurality, the Muslim world can reinvigorate its historical architectural and art forms, such that they once again represent a significant contribution to world culture. This could be a massively powerful message of hope to our Muslim world. It deepens the legitimacy of the Award’s attention to pluralism across that world. It validates our unflinching confidence in the creativity of Muslims and others, to design for that world in a way that will inspire the future without resorting to mimicry of the past. It deepens our conviction -- along with that of the Jury members -- that spirituality and architecture, together, become a force that can build bridges between people and communities, and empower them to build a more harmonious and humane future.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1995 address at the Sixth Aga Khan Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony (Solo, Indonesia)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5057/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the essentials of Islamic architecture

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on tradition and modernity -- Part 1/4: ‘Islam is for all places and all time’
http://www.facebook.com/notes/nanowisdoms-archive-of-imamat-speeches-
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See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on tradition and modernity -- Part 3/4: 'Progress does not mean occidentalisation'

See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on tradition and modernity -- Part 4/4: Innovate; 'Discover new knowledge'

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