Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on the 'deconstruction of the cultural inheritance'

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Philip Jodidio: I understood that one of the reasons you created the Aga Khan Award for Architecture was because the modern architecture in certain areas was getting out of hand, perhaps giving far more importance to superficial style than to substance and quality. Has not a new variant of that trend come back today in an even stronger way in some cities in the Persian Gulf for example?

Aga Khan: One of the factors leading to the Award 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. Problems came from a number of areas such as education. There was no serious analysis of traditions and how they came into place, or how they could be revived and used in modern buildings. That involved us in restoration as well, because we needed to learn about these great buildings. The pedagogical aspects and the idea of continuity were very important for the Award.

The issue of modernity, which is the one you are addressing, 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?

You are stuck because you want these buildings to reflect the highest level of programmatic competence. I would be very unhappy if somebody were to put USD 50 million into a modern hospital without worrying about the quality of the medical care it was going to give. First and foremost an airport has to be functional. It can have a lovely
design, but if it is dysfunctional, you are in trouble. We ran into the problem of wanting to underwrite the full acceptance of the modern programme and the modern building. But then the question arises of how you make that culturally appropriate, or do you ignore that issue completely? That is what we are dealing with all the time in the Award today.

We do not want to be seen as an institution that draws its 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. One of the basic questions we have asked for which no Jury has given an answer is: 'Is there one building which is so exceptional from a global point of view that the Award might select just that one building?' That question has been on the table since the Award was founded, and the answer has been: 'No.' This is, in a sense, evidence that the processes of change are underway, but they have not created, in the view of the Juries, that exceptional building which is of global meaning. It is true that the Gulf has taken in a number of the forces that play on Western societies, economics in particular.

Philip Jodidio: You have just completed a new Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana in Dubai that calls on Fatimid tradition in the design conceived by Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid. In a way this building is at the opposite end of the scale from the towers presently rising in Dubai. Is it a deliberate gesture on your part to point out that there is another direction for architecture, or is that not the message?

Aga Khan: The great expansion in construction there has to do with buildings that do not have a religious function. Economics are causing this to happen. I certainly did not want to create anything other than a human-scale building. The Award has sometimes discussed the question of scale. The whole debate about the tallest building in the world concerns ambition, vanity, pride, or whatever you want to call it. These are not particularly strong forces in our value system. I wanted a building there that was historically correct, and, secondly, I wanted it to be on a human scale.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 Interview for the book 'Under the Eaves of Architecture' by Philip Jodidio (London, United Kingdom)

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