Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on why he chose Japanese architects Fumihiko Maki and Arata Isozaki for signature projects

**Philip Jodidio:** Although not for a religious building, you are calling on the Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki to create two very contemporary structures in Canada, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat in Ottawa and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Might Dubai not have been a place for an extremely modern design?

**Aga Khan:** Absolutely. The fact is, however, that in the Middle East we are in a region that better justified such contextualisation. In Canada 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.
Philip Jodidio: You also wrote to Professor Maki, in the context of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat building in Ottawa, about the value of light.

Aga Khan: One of the issues in the Islamic world is the relationship between an ability to create and what we see of that creation. Nature is one of the evidences for a Muslim of God's creation. I am personally very sensitive to that. That is why, for example, in the Delegation building I gave Professor Maki the idea of rock crystal. Rock crystal is an extraordinary natural phenomenon. It plays with light, and in our world that is very important; it has a quasi-mystical component because, depending on the angle under which it is viewed, you see it differently. It has many facets both literally and figuratively that are fascinating.

Philip Jodidio: With Fumihiko Maki are you not calling on a different type of architect than the ones you have worked with in the past? Is he not more of an international 'star' than some others you have called on? For the University of Central Asia you have selected another well-known Japanese figure, the architect Arata Isozaki.

Aga Khan: If the mandate to the architect is to be as good as any in modern architecture, using modern materials and concepts but at the same time having the sensitivity to bring in external value systems, Maki was the obvious choice, because of the sensitivity of Japanese architects to their own cultural history. Linking cultural history to modernity is probably something that Japanese architects are as good at as anyone. They understand that. Maki seemed to be one to whom you could give a mandate and say, I am trying to bridge a number of different forces by building this modern building, and one of them is to take some of the value systems of the past, put them into this building, but not make it so esoteric that it overburdens you. It has to be inspirational and subtle. It is not a theological building, but if, within that building, there are spaces of spirituality, which we like to see as part of everyday life -- it is not the exception, it should be part of everyday life -- then you are bringing that into that building. His concept of the chahar-bagh and the roof of the Delegation building which plays with light and facets of glass, to me is very inspirational. I am the client. Most of the
people working in that building will be working for what I would call human purposes. They are not working for capitalist purposes. They will be there to serve people, and that is a different exercise. Even the staff of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) in that building will be trying to build economic change in societies that need it.

With Mr Isozaki the mandate is much less driven by architectural inheritance than it would have been in other places. The reason for that is the wish of local governments. The wish of the local governments, and I should think of society generally, has been to disconnect from the past. They are looking for the 'disconnect' that is inspirational for their future, drawn from creation as it is today in the architectural context, rather than the inherited past, because the inherited past represents a large number of symbols that they do not like.

The point with Isozaki was to come up with something that is specific to the future without a connection to the past. It has to be specific and desirable in three different countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). What we are trying to do is to create spaces and places that are disconnected from the past, but bring a value system for the future.

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/


See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the design inspiration for the
Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat, Ottawa

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