Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the impact and influence of housing on a family

"We are here to discuss one of the most vital development issues of our time -- housing. I speak to you on this subject with a sense of urgency, for I am deeply persuaded that the lack, and deterioration of human habitations, as economies grow, urbanisation accelerates and demographies explode, pose some of the greatest practical and ethical problems that developing countries face.

"As the Imam of a widespread Muslim community, I have long been actively concerned about housing. Members of the Ismaili community are a cross-section of the world ... My concern for the quality of their habitation, and the housing of the wider communities around them, had much to do with my establishment of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture a decade ago ...

"In the seamless web we call national development, housing is only one factor influencing the quality of human life. But how vital it is to health and human safety, still more fundamentally, the state of a person’s home touches deep chords in the human spirit.

"It can make him proud or ashamed; give him light and a sense of hope or deepen his despair. It is his statement to his children and to the world about his control over his life, and his aspirations for the future. It is not too much to say that to the extent a man is a householder, he is also a citizen, with a permanent interest in the stability and progress of his country. Still more important, housing has historically been created by families. The African or Asian village, like most other traditional settlements, is not an abstraction, but an architectural expression of a social reality, the way people
relate one to another -- often as an extended family. These settlements reflect human bondings and community spirit. They can foster families and their ties to other human beings; or they can express human alienation as the extended family disaggregates."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1988 Opening Remarks, Eleventh Seminar, 'Architecture of Housing', The Aga Khan Award For Architecture (Zanzibar, Tanzania)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3549/

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endeavour.

"If a man is enabled to buy or rent a reasonable roof over his head - - it does not have to be a palace -- he will have been provided with the first vital ingredient of his self-respect. If he is married, he will soon be inspired to make his home more comfortable -- or perhaps his wife will encourage him to work a little harder with the same objective. If he has children, he will be more inclined to educate them well and to take proper care of their health. One improvement leads to another: he seeks better paid employment which in turn enables him to spend a little more on necessary food and clothing. One day he will sell his home, certainly at a profit, and buy a better one. And perhaps, most important of all, his children will grow up unwilling to accept standards of living lower than those they experienced during their childhood.

"This human progress may be the ideal and of course not everyone will match this idea; but in building new homes, I am sure we can lay the social foundation of man's betterment more certainly than with any other welfare activity."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1978 Aga Khan Baug Foundation Stone Ceremony address, 'Impacts of a decent home' (Versova, Mumbai, India) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1850/

"One of my earlier concerns in social welfare in India was with housing. As I said at the inauguration ceremony five years ago, the visual, physical and emotional impact of a decent home can light the spirit of human endeavour. A proper home can provide the bridge across that terrible gulf between utter poverty and the possibility of a better future.

"If a man is enabled to buy or rent a reasonable roof over his head he will have been provided with the first vital ingredient of his self respect. He will feel it worth working harder to have a little more to spend on food and clothing. If he has children he will be more inclined to educate them and take proper care of their health."
Perhaps more important than anything, his children will grow up against a secure background, with all that implies. By building new homes we lay the social foundation of man’s betterment....

"It is my belief, and a very strongly held one, that where the climate degrades the fabric of buildings more rapidly than elsewhere and land is at a premium, new housing must be conceived and executed in such a way that it will provide permanent, valid, homes for many successive generations. This is especially so in view of the near certainty that net disposable incomes in India will not grow fast enough to outpace constructional costs and so eventually enable the present owners of apartments or their children to sell and purchase substantially better accommodation. Their families are likely to remain in the Baug. Tomorrow’s children will demand higher standards. So far as is practicable, we must build for the future as well as the present....

"[H]ousing is the most difficult area of social development to appraise in terms of human, as opposed to architectural, results. It is far easier to quantify the effects of providing better education or health care facilities against their costs. How do you measure the benefits of a family having a decent home, of the father’s dignity, of the mother’s pride, or the children’s sense of security, of better family and better work potential? Nonetheless the beneficial impact can be tremendous.

"I am deeply convinced that improved housing has a substantial multiplying effect from generation to generation and I intend to encourage our institutions to make even greater efforts in the housing field in the years ahead."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 Aga Khan Baug Opening Ceremony address (Versova, Mumbai, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2765/

"I have attached enormous importance to right from the beginning is the notion that people’s attitudes towards their homes change if they
have an acceptable physical environment. If they live in a slum, whenever they have a little excess money, what do they do with it? One of the first things is to change the physical environment they live in. They put a metal shade roof on a hut or they move to a place where fresh water is available. The physical environment is part of people's psyche and yet is very rarely articulated. It is a driving force in the way people look at their environment. So I think that in terms of encouraging development, one of the most important aspects is to help people live in better environments."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 Architectural Record interview with Robert Ivy (New York, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6147/

"In our faith, a religious leader is not separated from the life of the people everyday. The everyday life, the material life, of people is as important as the spiritual life. Because of this, I have built many schools and hospitals and housing estates and industries all through the third world. Any every time I have had to build I have asked myself what is the consequence of building? Not only on providing a service, which could be education or health, but what is the consequence on the family, what is the consequence on the culture, what is the consequence on the style of life, what is the consequence on the earning conditions, in other words the net disposable income. When you change somebody's habitation, you change their whole style of life."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1981 Xinhua News Agency and Xinkiang Gizetti Interview (Urumchi, Xinjiang, China)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2363/

"One of the things we have seen over the years is of families in rural areas and urban areas starting to have disposable surplus. And you ask yourself, how do they use that disposable surplus? The first thing
they will do is improve their habitation. They will put a metal roof over their house, instead of putting a bamboo roof. They hopefully will separately the water flows so that the cattle will no longer sully the water that they use in the house. They will improve the chimney so that they get smoke out of the hut, and later on, wealthier people still go on doing this, they keep trying to improve their habitat. So our sense is that there is a natural instinct in people to try to improve their living environment. So obviously, we would like to see more. Much of the Muslim world is in the seismic world. From China to the Mediterranean, there is a high concentration of seismic areas and we’re losing many communities due to earthquakes. That’s the sort of thing that is cause for worry. During the crisis in Kashmir [the 2005 earthquake], for instance, we tried to assist the people not only during the crisis, but also how they could build better structures, in safer places. That sort of technology is simply not available. So that’s the nature of what we’re trying to do.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2013 India Today Interview with Sandeep Unnithan (Delhi, India) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10653/

"Architecture has been often expressions of faith, it has been expressions of ambition, it has been expressions of power, it has been expressions of hope. It’s very interesting in the sense that it’s the only art form that affects quality of life. It is the only one. There’s no other one. And people when they have a beginning of improvement of quality of life the first thing, or one of the first things they do, is to improve their housing. So that sort of momentum towards improving the physical environment is part of human society."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Syrian TV Interview with Reem Haddad (Aleppo, Syria) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9004/
"Landscape design really came to me first as an interest in the appropriate use of land. It came first from the notion of land planning. It affected the size of a site that you negotiated with a government for a school or a housing estate. It affected the way people live. The ability to move out of buildings and the ability to move in a pleasant environment was seen very early on as a necessity in our housing estates. I used to fight quite hard to make sure that we had enough land so that a housing estate would have enough land for people to be able to go out and get together."

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]n 1988, the Award sponsored another seminar in Zanzibar. It considered the problem of housing, and the strategies that communities and governments could adopt to address what I believe will be one of the world's greatest problems in the 21st century: refurbishment and expansion of the world's stock of human dwellings."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1989 Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Cairo, Egypt)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4382/

"At present many millions of unfortunate people enter the world in such poverty that they are deprived of both the means and the motivation to improve their lot. Not only are they miserable, the social and economic cost of their plight is incalculable. Adequate accommodation is a principal factor in human health and well-being. It can bridge that terrible gulf between utter poverty and the possibility of a better future.

"To talk of 'adequate accommodation' when the international community has been forced to lower its aspirations and speak only
of shelter, not housing, may seem out of context, even absurdly optimistic. But practicality must be fired by hope and I would draw your attention to an element in the situation which is often ignored, although to its credit, the Commission on Human Settlements of the United Nations has recognised its existence.

“That factor is individual enterprise, the determination of ordinary people to improve their own circumstances by whatever means possible. The Executive Director of the Commission has referred to the ‘inherent ingenuity and capacity for survival’ of the poor, and he is right. God has given even the least privileged among us the blessing of his spirit and that is a more important resource than any other available to man. The question is, how can we bring it to bear on the problem of shelter?”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 address at the Association of Builders and Developers Seminar on ‘Shelter for the Homeless’, ‘Rural Housing’ (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2810/

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