Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the vision and rationale behind his passion for parks, gardens and urban green spaces

Vladimir Djurovic: His Highness’s passion for gardens is intoxicating…. I think that His Highness is happiest when he is working and discussing the gardens. He really wants us to reinterpret the Islamic garden in a contemporary way. We did not copy any garden [for Toronto] -- it is more about what you feel and smell and hear in an Islamic garden.

Vladimir Djurovic, designer of the park adjacent to the Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre in Toronto, quoted in The Aga Khan Museum, Philip Jodidio, Prestel (Toronto, Munich), 2008, pp 82-101
http://archnet.org/publications/5217

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John Stackhouse: You’ve been promoting the creation of parks around the world, from Cairo to Kabul to Delhi, and now Toronto. Why do parks matter to you?

Aga Khan: When a public space is in a historic area or even in an ordinary area, the population from all backgrounds comes together. People from all ages, from different backgrounds, come together. It’s a space of immense social gathering. That’s part of civil society. It’s getting people to talk to other people informally in these environments.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2014 Globe and Mail interview, with John Stackhouse (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10734/
Philip Jodidio: Your own interest in landscape design has been expressed on many occasions. Does that interest also come from Sardinia?

Aga Khan: No. 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. Then there was the question of taking that land and adapting it to the use of sick people who were ambulant for the first time and needed to be able to walk around in an appropriate space, or children who were playing outdoors and not just locked into buildings.

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/

"The exceptional density of the city of Cairo makes it obvious that there is an urgent need for new green spaces. Often overlooked, public open spaces have a great role to play in historic cities. Besides offering inhabitants relief from the pollution and pace of their everyday lives, a park can enhance a sense of civic responsibility and conceivably act as a catalyst for private initiatives in urban rehabilitation. Since I first evoked the idea of creating a new park in Cairo, almost twenty years ago, the needs of the city in this area have become even more pressing."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s Preface to the 2004 book ‘Cairo, Revitalising a Historic Metropolis’ by Stefano Bianca and Philip Jodidio (Aiglemont)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6912/
"The importance of green spaces in fast-growing mega-cities cannot be underestimated, and here I would like to pay homage to the vision of President Amadou Toumani Toure and to the remarkable initiative taken by the Government of Mali.

"Like Mali itself, this Park has the mission of upholding the country's tradition of encounters and dialogue, while preserving the natural heritage and ecosystems of which man has stewardship, as the Holy Qur'an instructs us....

"Creating green spaces in urban areas constitutes a significant improvement in the quality of the environment and people's living conditions. They are leisure spaces and meeting places for all ages and all social categories, encouraging different sectors of the population to mix and integrate. And they have proved to be catalysts for economic activity and a source of employment, both directly and indirectly, particularly through the services provided for visitors....

"The National Park of Mali is also an institution with an educational mission, aiming to raise awareness among the public as a whole, and among children above all, on the judicious use of environmental resources....

"Sport has always been popular with the people of Mali and remains one of the Park's strong points with the building of a huge sports centre, along with fitness trails featuring specialist equipment for gymnastics, running, cycling and climbing.

"Today, parks meet the needs of many city-dwellers wanting to relax in a natural environment. This explains the success among local communities of parks already created by AKTC. Experience shows that these urban parks are a vital public facility, frequented by city-dwellers in their hundreds of thousands. The Cairo park, for example, now receives more than 2 million visitors a year.

"Our goal was not just to build a major environmental infrastructure and a central attraction for Bamako's inhabitants and visitors, but also to create a cultural space contributing to the city's economic and social development. Creating the park was in itself a means of injecting
resources into the local economy. It generated thousands of days of work and 130 permanent professional posts. Moreover, most of the construction materials were of local origin, as were the skilled workers. A stone-carving workshop and a nursery have been set up to train specialists in these fields. The Park therefore represents not just an economic and technical investment, but also a commitment to training and employment."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 ‘His Royal Highness the Aga Khan National Park’ Opening Ceremony address (Bamako, Mali)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9462/

"The development of Khorog City Park has been a cooperative response in many respects. Access to green spaces is clearly an important value for the residents of Khorog. Our vision for the Park is that visitors will truly think of the time they spend here as ‘quality time’ -- in the fullest sense of that word -- moments in their lives during which their spirits will be deeply enriched, hours filled with experiences that they will both enjoy and remember as times of blessing.

"That will happen in part because of the music and dance and other cultural events that will be presented here -- especially in the new open-air theatre. It will happen in part because of the group discussions and lively conversations that will take place here and the children who will play here -- swimming in the summer, for example, and skating in the winter. It will happen in part because of the great celebrations that will take place here, including holiday ceremonies and festivals. And it will also happen because this will be a wonderful setting for individual reflection and contemplation, inspired by the beauty of this place -- including the sounds and the sight of running water, in itself a mysterious, ever-changing and always-inspiring natural force. We see Khorog Park as a place of continuity -- playing an intimate role from the earliest weeks of a child's life until that child grows to become a grown-up with his or her own family. And we also see it as a place of change -- a park for all seasons of the annual calendar -- transforming itself to capture the particular beauty of each particular time of the year."
"The Park is not only a place of beauty to be enjoyed by many generations of future citizens and visitors to Khorog, it is also one of the earliest symbols of the processes of change for which I hope and pray in this region....

"Throughout this part of the world, one reflection of how the natural environment is revered and hallowed has been the importance accorded to Green Spaces, like the one we celebrate today. This quality has been a central part of Tajik and Central Asian culture -- down through the centuries. I recall, for example, how the poet Saeb Tabrizi, wrote about beautiful gardens, in any season and in every season, saying that they are places where even 'the morning dew awaits with expectant eyes and heart.'

"It is indeed with 'expectant eyes and heart' that all of us gather here today to inaugurate on an official basis, the Khorog City Park. It is in that spirit that I join with you in celebrating the contribution which the Park will make to the quality of life in this community -- for many years and many decades to come."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2009 Khorog City Park Opening Ceremony address (Khorog, Tajikistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9326/

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"I want you to know how happy and proud I am that, in a few months time, we will open a new Ismaili Centre here in Toronto and a new museum. What’s important to me, however, is not only what those two buildings represent for Toronto, but funnily enough, it’s the park around those buildings. I’m not a particularly vigorous green, but I do believe that parks have an enormous importance.

"We have built parks in post-conflict situations. We rehabilitated the Bagh-i Babur in Kabul, [Afghanistan]. We have worked, in Bamako, [Mali], in Delhi, [India], in Cairo, [Egypt], in Khorog in eastern Tajikistan. And what have we learnt from that experience? We have learnt that civil society is built around the cement of different peoples who come together in places of peace and joy. And I hope today that all the people of Toronto
will feel that the park that will be around these buildings is their park! (Emphasis original)"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2014 Massey Hall remarks (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10727

"The [Aga Khan Museum] Park will comprise some 75,000 square metres -- and what an impressive site it will be! It was designed by Vladimir Djurovic, a Lebanon-based artist, who was selected for this role following an international competition. His design draws upon the concept of the traditional Islamic garden, and especially the gardens of the Alhambra, which flourished during the great era of Spanish history when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in creative harmony.

"The Park will combine quiet spaces with lively ones, open areas with more defined shapes, formality with informality, the traditional with the contemporary. It will be part of a series of parks developed through the Aga Khan Trust for Culture -- ranging from al-Azhar Park in Cairo, to the Khorog Park in Tajikistan, from the restoration of Babur's Gardens in Kabul and the gardens of Humayan's Tomb in Delhi, to the Forodhani Park in Zanzibar and new parks now under development in Bamako, Nairobi, Vancouver and Edmonton."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Ismaili Centre, Toronto, the Aga Khan Museum and their Park Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9425/

Waddah Abed Rabbo: What can you tell us about the Park project [for Aleppo]?

Aga Khan: We are exploring with the Governorate of Aleppo the scope for creating a major urban park on the edge of the old city (adjacent to the historic gateway of Bab Qinnesrine). A park project would focus on an improvement in the quality of life of the Old City's residents and on the creation of high quality facilities for its visitors. Such a project would be
part of an urban regeneration project in the nearby Qalat al-Sharif neighbourhood. A park could lead to the revitalisation of the area, much as similar programmes have already improved the quality of life in parts of Kabul and Cairo. Such projects are also under development in India, Zanzibar and Mali.

The Park builds on a programme that began in 2000, when the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, in cooperation with the Syrian General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, began work on the Citadels of Aleppo and Masyaf, and the Castle of Salah ad-Din. We are here to mark the completion of that work as well.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Al Watan interview with Waddah Abed Rabbo (Damascus, Syria)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8976/

"In my own commitment to the well-being of the Ismaili Community, I have come to be ever more concerned with the physical form that the Islamic world of the future will take. The houses we live in, our places of work, the institutions that serve us, the garden and parks where we rest, the markets and, of course the mosques.

"How will they look? And how will they affect our perceptions of the world and of ourselves? Indeed, will the Islamic environment of tomorrow be identifiable ours?"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1980 address to the United Nations Development Programme (New York, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2143/

"For five centuries, Muslim architecture led the world in concept, in design, in finish and even in structural ingenuity. Millions of non-Muslims every year visit Islamic monuments in the Middle East, in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, and in North Africa. And yet what is being done today to develop our own Islamic architecture of the twenty-first century?
Practically nothing. Our office buildings, our schools, our hospitals, our banks and insurance companies -- nearly all are copies, monkeyed and mimicked from styles and designs which have been imported. 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? Must we abandon the remarkable wooden and stone carved trellis work that is so typical of our artistic heritage? And what of the fountains that have been so intimately connected with Muslim architecture at all times and in all parts of the world? Are we powerless to build a fountain as a decoration to our most imposing buildings? Is it really beyond our powers to revive traditional concepts of landscaping? Must the gardens of Shalimar remain just a beautiful historic curiosity?"

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

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Aga Khan: The urban environment is one where more work is being done. There has been massive demographic pressure on urban space. This is a very difficult issue to deal with because it involves the livelihoods of people. So, protecting and improving open space is something of an issue. Oddly enough, it used to be one of the characteristics of Islamic architecture that the great buildings always had remarkably landscaped spaces within or around them. Often they were internalised spaces, sometimes they were peripheral. Either way, they were given the greatest design attention. That aspect of building has in many ways disappeared.

Robert Ivy: How are you addressing the urban question?

Aga Khan: One of the things that the Aga Khan Trust for Culture is now working on in Cairo, in Zanzibar, and in the northern areas of Pakistan, is to try to encourage people to recognise the value of open space. And one of the past Awards was for a reforestation programme for a university in Turkey, an enormous undertaking. But, I think one has to be respectful of the fact that the demographic pressure is so great, that these
open spaces are going to have to be protected tooth and nail. They’ll go, otherwise.

I would say that we have lost some of the competencies in landscape architecture which were intrinsic to the Islamic world. Landscape architecture is not part of architectural education in a lot of the schools, and this brings me to the Aga Khan Program at Harvard and MIT. Now, Harvard’s Graduate School of Design is part of the AKPIA programme; the Graduate School of Design was, from the beginning of the programme, a target school in my thinking.

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

"I think we are, generally speaking, in the Islamic world still very weak on landscape architecture and planning. We will need to do a lot more there. A number of architectural schools actually are linked to schools of engineering. And that, in itself, tends to bring a form of architecture which may not necessarily be what we would be looking for. I’m not criticising that, but I’m saying what used to be a great strength in Islamic design seems to have disappeared. And one of the issues that we’re trying to develop now is to restore value to these traditional forms, and keep in mind that these materials in these forms are not without meaning."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 remarks in the National Building Museum Panel Discussion at the Scully Seminar/Symposium (Washington D.C., USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9765/

Mildred Schmertz: Of the building types and processes that you believe the Award has yet to fully address, are there any in particular that you would like to see paid more attention to in the next few cycles?

Aga Khan: Yes, there are a number of them. I would start with the categories of landscape architecture, public spaces, parks, the use of the
natural environment. In Islam, concern for the natural world derives from the Faith, which in itself speaks extensively of God's gift to man of the environment, and of the responsibility we have toward it. I believe that this is an area that needs a lot more work today than has been done in the past. I am hoping that The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, of which the Aga Khan Award for Architecture is a part, will be able to harness a number of new resources to educate in this field.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1998 interview with Mildred Schmertz on the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5380/

"Historically, the design of open spaces was a very strong part of the physical environment in the Islamic world -- think of Shalimar, of Spain - - but in modern times, landscape architecture has been a very weak area in their schools of architecture; they have tended to be engineering-driven rather than architecture-driven, which is why I have been working with them to try to reintroduce these skills.... The experience [in Cairo] led to my endowing a professorship in the Islamic School of Design programme at Harvard and MIT, specifically to look at landscape architecture and environmental issues."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Round Table Discussion with the Press at al-Azhar Park’s opening (USA, United Kingdom, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7284/

"In all [of our centres in Canada], we continue, of course, to honour our Islamic architectural inheritance. That inheritance has been shaped by many forces: climate, accessible building materials, available technologies and others. But I believe that the Islamic faith has played a particular role in the development of Islamic architectural expression. For our faith constantly reminds us to observe and be thankful for the beauty of the world and the universe around us, and our responsibility and obligation, as good stewards of God's creation, to leave the world in a better
condition than we found it.

"The garden is, in this context, a particularly important space in Islamic cultures, the Moghul garden in urban environments, or the Bustan in rural environments. Bringing such beautiful spaces to Canada is one of our intended contributions to Canadian landscape. An example is the new park in Toronto which will surround the Aga Khan Museum and the Ismaili Centre, as well as new projects in Edmonton and Burnaby, and our endeavour to link area development to our rebuilding of Ottawa’s War Museum for the Global Centre for Pluralism."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2013 acceptance address for the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s Gold Medal (Ottawa, Canada) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10672/

"Because of our traditional concern with our environment, and the impact it has on us and on others, we have sought that [the Burnaby Ismaili Centre] should enhance the aesthetic quality of life in the neighbourhood. The new building will stand in strongly landscaped surroundings. It will face a courtyard with foundations and a garden. Its scale, its proportions and the use of water will serve to create a serene and contemplative environment. This will be a place of congregation, of order, of peace, of prayer, of hope, of humility, and of brotherhood. From it should come forth those thoughts, those sentiments, those attitudes, which bind men together and which unite. It has been conceived and will exist in a mood of friendship, courtesy, and harmony."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1982 Ismaili Centre Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Burnaby, Canada) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2391/

"In Islam the divine is reflected in Nature's creation. The [Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat] will rest on a solid linear granite podium. Above it will be a glass dome through which light will illuminate, from multiple directions, two symbolic spaces: an interior atrium and an exterior
courtyard landscaped in four quarters, recalling the traditional Persian -- Islamic garden, the Chahr-bagh. Nature, through the greenery of trees and flowers, will be on the site, but also in the building, just as we are sometimes able to see leaves and petals captured in rock crystal, but still visible through its unique translucency. The building will be a metaphor for humanism and enlightenment and for the humility that comes from the constant search for answers that leads inevitably to more questions."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Ottawa, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7314/

"Even as the University of Alberta was celebrating its 100th anniversary last year, I was marking my own golden jubilee. To mark both anniversaries, to express my profound thanks, and to celebrate our growing partnership, I am presenting a gift today which reflects both my Islamic heritage and your University traditions. I have just visited a parcel of land within the Devonian Gardens of the University, where we plan to create a traditional Islamic Garden. We hope this space will be of educational and aesthetic value, a setting for learning more about Muslim culture and design, as well as a place for public reflection."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2009 University of Alberta Graduation Ceremony address (Edmonton, Alberta)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9281/

"Like its functions, the [Dubai] Centre’s architecture will reflect our perception of daily life whose rhythm weaves the body and the soul, man and nature into a seamless unity. Guided by the ethic of whatever we do, see and hear, and the quality of our social interactions, resonate on our faith and bear on our spiritual lives, the Centre will seek to create, In’sha’Allah, a sense of equilibrium, stability and tranquillity. This sense of balance and serenity will find its continuum in the wealth of colours and scents in the adjacent Islamic garden which the Aga Khan Trust for
Culture will help to develop as a public park.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Ismaili Centre Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Dubai, United Arab Emirates)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6840/

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"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....

"The use of gardens and water is a very strong part of Islam, in its references in the theological context to the quality of the environment. This is true in literature, poetry and art as well. That, in a sense, was a part of the inheritance, it was not anything particularly new....

"In much of Islamic architecture you find a sense of spirituality. You find that spirituality not only in religious buildings. If you think of the history of landscape architecture and you relate that to references to heaven in the Quran, you find very strong statements about the value of the environment, the response to the senses, to scent, to noise, music or water.

"I think that in a number of spaces in the Islamic world, which are not religious buildings, there is a heightened sense of spirituality. You do not treat these spaces as theological spaces, you treat them as spaces that aim to give you a sense of spiritual happiness, of spiritual enjoyment. In a funny way, Azhar Park has some of that. We have carried out surveys on visitor reactions and a large percentage of visitors to this park in Cairo talk about spirituality. These are everyday visitors....

"I think spirituality is not necessarily experienced only in a societal context, it can be very much an individual thing. There are certain times when you need to create space where spirituality can be experienced individually. I think of parks as places where the individual is very powerful.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 Interview for the book 'Under the Eaves of Architecture' by Philip Jodidio (London, United Kingdom)
"Whatever be the true Christian attitude -- and you must pardon an outsider if he judges it from the general teaching of your Churches and the general practice of your people -- whatever the true Christian attitude may be, it must be admitted, I think, that the sort of religion I speak of is dormant in England today, that religion does not permeate all the thoughts and acts of English men and women, and that for them God is afar off in an inaccessible heaven.

"Let me give you an example. On a fine Sunday a bus-driver will take the air on a common, where he can banish from his mind the sense of petrol, or the apprehensive clutch on the steering-wheel, and the unwavering watch on the traffic, and where he can enjoy the beauty of the world in tranquillity.

"Good! He could not do better. He needs the holiday. But he does not feel religious on the common and he would be embarrassed if you suggested that he should. He does not realise that he might profitably thank God for the glory of the earth and the all-surrounding heaven. His religion, if he is ever conscious of it, is a quite separate thing.

"Now, if I were on a golf-course, let us say, and it was the due occasion, I should pray to God. I should not make a show of it, but I should go apart to pray, and I should turn myself towards the South-East, towards Mecca. There would be no feeling that I was passing from one mood, much less from one world to another. My delight in God’s world, my delight in the free movement of my body as I swung my club would culminate naturally in a prayer of thanksgiving to God who gives and sustains."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III’s Daily Sketch Interview answer to the question ‘Is Religion Something Special?’ (London, United Kingdom) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10121/

"[H]ow can we best transform sprawling, impoverished human
encampments into city neighbourhoods that enhance the quality of human life?

"Interestingly, we have had and we have seen in our own urban restoration programmes, the potential for bridging the urban-rural divide, for reintroducing something of the rural into the heart of the city. Parks and other open spaces, new and restored, can revive something of the balance between human construction and natural space. And they are astonishingly popular, with people of all economic backgrounds, and with people of all ages.

"In these, as in so many other cases, it is amazing, and deeply humbling to see what a difference the built environment can make, in enhancing the everyday moments of everyday life."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2013 Aga Khan Award for Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Lisbon, Portugal) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10603/

"Quality housing remains the most essential need for societies everywhere, both in rural and urban environments. Industrial facilities and workplaces are not at a level of excellence that makes them exceptional. Rapidly-expanding urban centres throughout the world lack public parks and open urban spaces. Problems of transport, congestion and pollution have too few solutions emerging. The growth of slums, the consequence of the relentless forces of urbanisation, has not been stopped or even slowed down."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2004 address at the Ninth Aga Khan Award for Architecture Prize Ceremony (New Delhi, India) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7082/

"The first lesson we learnt, is that these spaces -- historic cities, open spaces -- these are the spaces where the poorest people of society congregate when they become urbanised. It is the easiest means for poor
people from the rural environment to enter the urban context. And therefore every time you touch an area such as a historic city or an open space, you're in effect touching some of the poorest people in the country....

"I would like to add one final thought. Our experience in these initiatives has been that whereas you can maybe schedule an investment in an electrification plant or in an industry, it is very difficult to predict the outcomes of an initiative such as this. And developers will criticise me for saying 'you want to engage us in the unknown.' Yes, I do. But I want to engage them intelligently. I want them to understand that one of the characteristics of this activity is that you discover more opportunity as you move forwards from year to year. And therefore stopping a productive initiative simply because it might go on another six months or it might require additional financing, is extremely short sighted. What is important, is to complete it, to complete it well, and to make sure that the benefits are measurable for the communities that you wish to serve."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2012 remarks at the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Government of Kenya Agreement to Rehabilitate Nairobi City Park Signing Ceremony (Nairobi, Kenya)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10330/

"For Forodhani Park, as for all of our Historic City efforts, the watchword is sustainability. Each project must generate enough income not only to balance the books each year but also to reinvest in maintenance and further development. Our mandate is that no such project should require future support from government or any other institution, but should stand on its own, as an entirely independent engine of community progress."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2009 address at the Restored Forodhani Park Opening Ceremony (Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9318/

"In this respect, I want to return to the example of Cairo because I think it
is very illustrative of what can be achieved. There, Al Azhar Park not only provides important employment for the community, both directly and indirectly, but it also attracts over two million visitors a year. And with these visitors comes a stream of revenues; fees and charges for entrance and for special events, licenses, parking fees, retail sales and so on. The result is that the project now produces a surplus of some 800 thousand US dollars a year. That surplus is then reinvested in the same area, helping to ensure long term sustainability.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2013 UNESCO Conference on Culture and Development Keynote Address (Hangzhou, China)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10503/

Question: Was there an historic inspiration for the design of the al-Azhar Park?

Aga Khan: Historically, the design of open spaces was a very strong part of the physical environment in the Islamic world -- think of Shalimar, of Spain -- but in modern times, landscape architecture has been a very weak area in their schools of architecture; they have tended to be engineering-driven rather than architecture-driven, which is why I have been working with them to try to reintroduce these skills. Here in Cairo, sadly, we had no precedent from which to work, so we had to think what would be appropriate to the site. We thought water was important; scale, sound, perambulation. We designed to these ideas. The experience led to my endowing a professorship in the Islamic School of Design programme at Harvard and MIT, specifically to look at landscape architecture and environmental issues....

Question: How will the park be maintained?

Aga Khan: This initiative, and all our similar ones, are structured in such a way as to create a cash surplus every year from ticket sales and the restaurants, which is not distributed as dividend but is used for maintenance and occasional upgrades -- for example, here, we would like to improve the children’s’ area -- so that the notion is one of self-sustainability. It is a public/private partnership and as such has to be
predicated on a sound economic basis. This is important, because in the past many such projects have been seen as indefinite consumers of resources. We want to show that if this is put together with care, it ceases to be charity or philanthropy but actually creates economic resources based on cultural assets.

To give you two other examples we are working on -- the rehabilitation of the Old Stone Town on the waterfront of Zanzibar, which I am convinced can change the economy of the whole island; and Bagh-i Babur in Afghanistan, which will change the lives of 200,000 people. Most of these historic neighbourhoods have been taken over by the newly urbanised population, the poorest of the poor, so by working in these areas and upgrading them you are giving them economic hope. Here in Cairo, change in Darb al-Ahmar will not end with the restoration of the city wall; it will be a continuing process.

You can look after the future of the park in other ways, for example, with an endowment. This brings you back to working with government, because fiscal privileges need to be offered to the private sector if they are to give to cultural activities -- to fund a professorship at a university or endow a micro-credit programme, for example. The notion of an endowment is one that I look to with increasing eagerness, for the simple reason that as these economies are liberalising, more and more of the resources will be in the private sector and there has to be some sort of social responsibility in the creative re-utilisation of wealth. We are seeing small rural communities in Pakistan that have their own endowment, which they look after themselves so you have wealth management rather than poverty alleviation, which is a totally different concept.

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s remarks at the 2005 Round Table Discussion with the Press at al-Azhar Park’s opening (USA, United Kingdom, Canada)*
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7284/

"The history of this multi-faceted project, reaching back over a decade, has been an exhilarating process of discovery and opportunity. While at the beginning the idea was to provide the metropolis with a much-needed green space at the heart of its historic agglomeration, the progressive
uncovering of 1.3 kilometres of historic wall led to another major task --
giving a new 'face' to the historic city as seen from the Park. Eventually,
the conservation project for the wall itself, being inseparable from the
abutting historic city fabric, led AKTC to consider a third, equally
important priority, i.e., launching a combined physical and social
rehabilitation process in the neighbouring area of the Park, the Darb al-
Ahmar district. In keeping with the general strategy for HCSP projects, it
was clear that the Park construction, as well as the Historic Wall
conservation, could and should also act as stimuli for the rehabilitation of
Darb al-Ahmar. Accordingly, the Trust has initiated a range of
community-based urban upgrading projects that contribute to the
improvement of living conditions in the vicinity of the Park by providing
cultural, social, economic and institutional support...

"It is my wish that the new Azhar Park, with its central location, will
become a major new resource for visitors to and residents of the city of
Cairo, opening up new views onto the surrounding historic monuments of
this unique area of this unique city. Moreover, I would like to express the
hope that the citizens of Cairo, and in particular the residents of the old
city, will take pride in the Park and, stimulated by the construction of the
Park and the restoration of the historic Ayyubid wall, will participate in
the ongoing rehabilitation process of Darb al-Ahmar and its historic
monuments and spaces."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s Preface to the 2001 book ‘The Azhar Park Project
in Cairo and the Conservation and Revitalisation of Darb al-Ahmar’ (Aiglemont)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9410/

"How can this project serve a wider purpose? Because of its scale, and its
multiple ramifications, Azhar Park represents a case study situation that
should be used for the broadest possible pedagogical purposes. The
information thus gathered will be consolidated with the lessons that the
AKTC is drawing from other similar projects such as that being
undertaken in Zanzibar. Some of the information that will come out of
this analytical process will be formatted and targeted to other countries
and cities, such as those already on the UNESCO World Heritage List, so
that decision makers such as government or local officials in these
environments can learn from the experience we have had in Cairo, Zanzibar and elsewhere.

"There is an often quoted ayat [of the Qur'an] which says that you should leave the world in a better environment than you found it. You have a responsibility of legacy of God's creation of the world, to improve that legacy from generation to generation. So there's an ethical premise to it."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 PBS/E2 programme interview for 'A Garden in Cairo'
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10364/

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