Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on Archnet and its rationale

"I will offer two rather different case studies of efforts by agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network to make more effective use of the Internet for educational purposes.

"The first is a project to develop a World Wide Web based resource to enrich the information available for architectural students, teachers, scholars and professionals interested in architecture in the Islamic world. It builds on twenty-five years of cultural research, education and revitalisation by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT, and the programmes of what is now the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva.

"These initiatives were launched following a series of consultations with architectural scholars and professionals of all faiths and from different parts of the world who were brought together to address a black hole in Islamic societies with respect to one of the most important dimensions of their identity and heritage -- their built environment. At that time there was a real vacuum; there was little scholarship, no centres for study and professional training, and no collections of visual and textual resources on one of history's greatest traditions of architecture. The dominant perspective was that improvements in the quality of life demanded the adoption of the symbolism and style of countries and societies that were considered 'advanced'. Twenty-five years later a complete turn-around has been achieved. Not only have patrons and professionals come to understand and embrace this important form of cultural expression, the inventories of buildings found in different countries have revealed and legitimated a diversity of expression of which even the Islamic world itself was unaware."
"The emergence of the World Wide Web as a vehicle allows these efforts in public and professional education of the last twenty-five years to take on an entirely new scale. The project, called ArchNet, is being developed at MIT and is scheduled for launch in September. It will bring together and make available the visual and textual information amassed in collections in Cambridge and Geneva. Though microscopic in comparison, it is an example of just the kind of digitalisation of inaccessible material for which Grossman and Minow are arguing.

"But the example does not stop here. It is not enough to simply 'dump' information into communities around the world, even if, as in this case, they are communities of trained professionals. As an integral part of the ArchNet project, space on the Website has been provided for users to exhibit their own work, to communicate with other ArchNet members, and participate in informal discussions of topics of their choice that are relevant to the overall purpose of the project, and to participate in organised discussions, including collaborative design studios. Equally important, schools and departments of architecture with interests in the Islamic world can establish sections on the Website to present their programmes, activities, and collections of visual and textual materials. In ArchNet’s development phase institutions from Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan were invited to help establish this dimension of the Website. Once it is officially open, other institutions may join as well. A special effort will be made to bring in schools of architecture in Central Asia and Sub Saharan Africa."

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"Recent developments in information and communication technology, and the rich array of talent at MIT now make it possible to bring the resources developed through these initiatives to students, teachers, scholars, and practitioners throughout the Islamic world. A project team at MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning is establishing an on-line community of professionals interested in Islamic architecture. It is being developed in close co-operation with the Graduate School of Design and
the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard, and with the support of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva. Called ArchNet, it is an ambitious Internet-based network that is intended to serve students, teachers, scholars, and design and planning professionals. Its goal is to provide an extensive, high-quality, globally accessible intellectual resource focused on topics of architecture, urban design, urban development, and related issues such as restoration, conservation, housing, landscape design, and construction in seismic sensitive zones with special reference to the Islamic world. It will be achieved by providing historical and contemporary images and drawings, an extensive bibliography on the art and architecture of the Islamic world, G.I.S. and CAD databases, and a searchable text library. MIT Press, a leader in electronic publishing, will maintain the Website on an accessible server.

"ArchNet’s structure is being designed to offer each user with a personal workspace tailored to his or her individual needs. From this space, the user will be able to contribute his or her own findings and research to the larger site. The Website will aim to foster close ties between institutions and between users. Through the use of on-line fora, chat rooms, and debates, it is hoped that the site can promote and enrich discussions among participants by providing effective support for research, teaching, and practice in architecture, and related fields for the benefit of all who live within the Islamic world, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It will be a bottom-up system, in which information will eventually flow directly from the user to a continually expanding resource base that can be shared by all. The lessons learned will be accessible globally, and of interest to those who are addressing similar problems of the built environment in other parts of the world.

"Another feature of the project’s design involves the selection of partner schools of architecture on a regional basis around the Muslim world, to participate directly and actively in shaping this initiative. Each partner institution will be provided, as needed, with the hardware, software, training, and infrastructure support necessary for active participation in ArchNet. The partner institutions will not only benefit by assured access to the contents of the Website, they will contribute to the expanding base of knowledge and information on it, and will also be invited to shape its scope and direction. Each school will coordinate with the other departments of architecture and planning in their respective regions to
gather resources for which they have a particular expertise.

"I believe that ArchNet will demonstrate the enormous potential of the global information system for supporting communication and collaboration among architectural and planning students, faculty, scholars, and practitioners throughout the world. It is particularly important that this can occur across countries in regions that share cultures, economic circumstances, and climatic and geographic characteristics. I anticipate that once ArchNet is up and running, it may prove to be an important model for other subjects and professional groups....

"The ArchNet Website will directly address the vitality and understanding of architecture in the Islamic world and its contribution to the quality of life, subjects that are central to the identity of a billion people and their cultures."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1999 Address to the World Bank InfoDev Conference (Washington D.C., USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5644/

"Equally important as the rediscovery and worldwide circulation of traditional music, is that young architects should be able to draw inspiration freely from all traditions, starting with their own, and this is my second example. Architects in the East should have access to the best sources in the West and vice versa. It was with this aim in view that the Aga Khan Trust for Culture created ARCHNET, basing it at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to ensure its future growth as technology progresses. Once again this is an intellectual work -- an on-line forum, and an electronic encyclopaedia of the built environment.

"This tool allows architects from developing countries in particular to gain access to knowledge and techniques so that they can construct buildings for which there is no precedent in their history, such as airports, hospitals or modern office blocks, without precluding the integration of elements from their own culture. In other words, although there is no question of dismissing the technical contributions of modernity, they must be
assimilated into their intended socio-cultural context.

"Our objective, when we created ARCHNET, which has now been achieved, was to create a global community of architects, town planners, teachers and students sharing their knowledge on-line, in the field of the built environment. According to the most recent figures, this community now has over 60,000 members. By October [2008], the number of 'hits' on the website and web pages visited was 30% up on last year [2007]."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Address to the Avignon Forum 'The value and importance of cultural diversity and its role in promoting peace and development' (Avignon, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9065/

Aga Khan: Right from the first days of the Award, it was exciting that there was intellectual acceptance by non-Muslims of the cultural questions that were being asked. And, I have to tell you, I am enormously grateful to the men and women who worked with me from outside the Islamic societies, who said 'we will bring our knowledge and our judgement and our competencies to sustain these, to develop answers to the questions you've been asking, because we consider that they're very important.' I remember the people from Harvard and MIT saying: 'This is a format that can be asked of other cultures of our world. You have started within the Islamic world, but it could very well apply to the Hispanic world, it could apply to other parts of the world.' There was no sense of 'normatising' the programme towards the Islamic world. The questions and the concepts were far outside the Islamic world.

Robert Ivy: In that regard, now you've established a new website -- ArchNet.org -- which makes the full range of information so much more accessible to a larger group of people. What is its purpose?

Aga Khan: Because one of the questions that I asked Harvard and MIT when I founded the programme was that I didn't want it to be an ivory tower, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It had to articulate its worth towards the Islamic world. First, I had a publication called Mimar.

Robert Ivy: Which I knew well ...
**Aga Khan:** It was good, but the question was 'what is the best way to articulate this information, outside MIT, to the Islamic world?' And of course, the Internet just broke down those barriers; it became an extraordinary opportunity. Because it is so qualified in these areas of communication, MIT was the right resource to use for this activity. And MIT has gone out of its way to make it work. I'm hopeful that when ArchNet.org is officially launched, it will become a global resource to people working for change in the physical environment in Islamic societies. The fact that it is a global resource will mean that there is communication from these societies to one place, but also from this one place to these societies. It has a dual function.

**Robert Ivy:** The Islamic connection literally gives it a context. It grounds it in some real dialogue.

**Aga Khan:** People from outside the Islamic world also said that they felt there was a lot to be learned from Islamic cultures -- and I use the plural -- in addressing problems of cultural continuity and also new problems. The fact is that rural environments can be Islamic or non-Islamic -- they are still rural environments. There is also the problem of mega-cities, and so on. This was not something that was so specific that the lessons learnt couldn't be used in other environments.

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

**Philip Jodidio:** Is it possible for fundamentally modest architectural projects to make a real difference in the life of those concerned? Can architecture truly improve the quality of life in areas that are disfavoured?

**Aga Khan:** One of the most important things we have to do is to make these projects available to the largest spectrum possible of organisations that are impacting the processes of change in the rural environment. I hope that Archnet (http://archnet.org, is an on-line community, electronic resource and archive established as a collaborative venture between the
Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a focus on the built environment of Islamic societies) will be one of the vehicles to carry this to the widest public possible. A healthy process of change in rural environments will be one of the factors that will impact the stability of these populations versus the pressures toward urbanisation.

If the physical environment in the rural context has at least a minimum level of quality, I think people will be less tempted to enter the instability, the poverty and the insecurity of the peripheral areas of the mega-cities.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2002 Connaissance des Arts interview with Philip Jodidio (1st) (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9692/

"We sought examples of best practice for vastly different local situations - from the ultra-poor in rural environments to the ultra-rich cities and towns of oil producing states. The solutions we found ranged from restoration of historic buildings to the new high-tech buildings of modern societies.

"The criteria for best practice varied to reflect conditions. Poor communities, for example, do not have the resources to replace buildings every few decades. So we looked to best practice that emphasised efficient and creative refurbishing or to new construction designed for a much longer economic service life than industrialised countries.

"As the inquiry process became more widely known in the communities where we were focused, they responded to us with two basic requests: first, teach us how to do things differently and second, show us examples of best practices in real world situations. In response, a number of parallel programmes were spawned to teach these best practices, such as the Programme for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT and the online ArchNet resource which supports global dialogue and research.

"We were challenged with finding ways of making these best practices available to broad segments of the population in order to have a
continuous and positive effect."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 address at the National Building Museum’s Scully Seminar/Symposium (Washington D.C., USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7179/

"Not only is ArchNet a means by which we share information on architecture and design, it is also a very real attempt to build an architecture of understanding between those regions of the world that might benefit from a better understanding of each other. I think there is a consensus that we need that now more than ever. ArchNet’s particular importance lies in the way it informs the debate on what sort of world we seek to build....'

"The Aga Khan also underlined the importance of locating it at ‘an institution whose technological competencies would underwrite its capacity to serve decades into the future.’

"Noting that about 70% of ArchNet’s users were under the age of 35, the Aga Khan described it as:

"'an extraordinarily powerful resource at a global scale which will be an ongoing living encyclopaedia of knowledge for the younger generations in the Islamic world....'

"'As trustees of God’s creation, we are instructed to seek to leave the world a better place than it was when we came into it. If ArchNet can help bring values into environments, buildings, and contexts that make the quality of life better for future generations than it is today, it will have served its purpose.'

"'Historically, the Islamic world has stood out in the area of design, but if you look at higher education in the Islamic world [there are problems]. This is a historically powerful tool usable on a global scale, a living encyclopedia of knowledge and ideas, of peoples and cultures.'"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2002 remarks on the launch of ArchNet.org at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, USA)