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An international competition was held in 2006 to select the landscape architect who would be given the task of uniting the Aga Khan Museum designed by Fumihiko Maki and the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana by Charles Correa on the seven-hectare site selected in Toronto for both institutions. The young Lebanese landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic was chosen over far better known people. Djurovic, a cosmopolitan figure who owes his name to his Montenegrin father, states the goals of his scheme in direct terms: “The competition covered the entire Wynford Drive site and was an ideal exploration platform in search of the most appropriate solutions that could address the complex challenges of the site and the brief. In the midst of highly charged surroundings, we sought to unify and integrate the architectural volumes and provide open, welcoming spaces for all while maintaining privacy. We also sought to create a platform for education that inspires and unifies without alienating or segregating, and a serene environment where contemplation finds spirituality.”¹ Though he is clearly inspired by modern landscape design and architecture as much as he is by the past, Vladimir Djurovic continues: “Our vision for the project is one that captures the essence of the Islamic garden and translates it into an expression that reflects its context and contemporary age. Embracing the five senses as the means to reach the soul, every space and every garden is imbued with the delicate sensations that we seem to have lost in this fast-paced era. The ephemeral and the eternal are both essential to our composition of spaces. Shadows, light, petals, leaves and water in motion are complemented by the solidity and purity of created forms. All is not at once apparent; the garden reveals itself slowly to the visitor, who experiences hidden aspects with serendipity.” Being the designer who has to navigate the space between two such well-known architects as Maki and Correa could not have



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[1|2|3] Water mirrors define the Formal Garden, transforming it with their reflections as the day goes by.

been simple, but Djurovic has succeeded in creating “a unique, harmonious and welcoming garden with two landmark buildings in it. The garden,” he says, “could be viewed as fluctuating between formal spaces around the buildings and informal spaces as one moves away.” Djurovic continues: “One of the main roles of the landscape scheme was to merge and complement the architectural direction set forth by the two buildings. Their programme, interior spaces and architectural spirit had to be seamlessly extended into the outdoors, while striving to come up with one unified environment for the enjoyment of the public. The reading of two structures embedded in a memorable park was always a main aspiration of His Highness the Aga Khan for this project. The Museum’s architecture, and its evolution since inception, has been a major source of inspiration for our gardens. Its resounding presence, yet simplicity and delicacy, had to be reflected and complemented in our outdoor spaces. The surrounding gardens nestle the Museum into its site, and further amplify its experience through its arrival sequence and formal layout.”²

A Taste for Minimal Architecture

Vladimir Djurovic was born in Lebanon in 1967. He received a degree in Horticulture from Reading University in England in 1989 and his Master’s in Landscape Architecture from the University of Georgia in 1992 (Athens, GA), after having worked with the large landscape firm EDAW in Atlanta. Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture (VDLA) was created in 1995 in Beirut, and has practiced an intriguing mixture of minimalist architecture and landscape design since then, in particular for a number of prestigious private clients. Djurovic admits to being attracted to the craftsmanship of the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, or the ways in which another Pritzker Prize winner, the Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, integrates his work into its natural settings. His Samir Kassir Square (Beirut, Lebanon, 2004) was a winner of a 2007 Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Located in the recently reconstructed Beirut Central District, the 815-square-metre park was conceived around two existing ficus trees that had somehow managed to survive the violence that wracked Beirut for years. “The challenge of this project,”

says Djurovic, “was to create a quiet refuge on a limited piece of land surrounded by buildings, while addressing the prominent street frontage that it occupies. In essence, to become a small escape dedicated to the city and its people.” A raised ‘water mirror’ is a central feature of the Square, faced by a twenty-metre-long solid stone bench. The jury citation for the 2007 Award reads: “The Samir Kassir Square is a restrained and serene urban public space that skilfully handles the conditions and infrastructure of its location in a city that has undergone rapid redevelopment. The Award will go to Vladimir Djurovic, the pre-eminent landscape architect working in Lebanon today.”

A Magical Mughal Garden

“After our design was selected as the winning scheme,” explains Vladimir Djurovic, “His Highness asked me to take an extensive trip around the world to visit remarkable places that he has selected for me. I remember vividly him telling me, ‘After your visit, you can resubmit your scheme *as is* and we’ll build it, or present any changes that you imagine as a result of your trip’. I was not told anything about the reasons or motives behind the trip, and was left wondering as I travelled from continent to continent. I went from the truly timeless Alhambra in Grenada to the Cordoba Mosque, and on to some sublime monuments and gardens across Egypt and India, where I encountered the enchanting Fatehpur Sikri in Agra. Towards the end of this journey, while I was at Humayun’s Tomb in Delhi, a magical Mughal garden, it all became clear to me. The goal of His Highness is not only anchored in meaningful projects for the present. He thinks also about the generations to come... I realized there and then, in that captivating Mughal garden, that anything in our

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approach that strayed from such noble goals, any detail that we had designed that could not stand the test of time, at all levels, had to be changed or omitted, and we presented a new scheme. I must admit that since that time, these values and aspirations have remained with us in each and every project that we take on..."³

Built in honour of Sufi saint Salim Chishti in 1571 by the Mughal emperor Akbar, Fatehpur Sikri might be considered a revealing choice in the context of the itinerary of Djurovic. Unlike other Mughal cities, it demonstrates a certain informality and improvisation, and blends influences from Hindu and Jain sources as well as Islamic elements. Further, Fatehpur Sikri is known to have influenced such modern figures as Charles and Ray Eames, and Balkrishna Doshi. After visiting India, Djurovic finished his whirlwind tour in Azhar Park in Cairo, but retained above all the lessons of Humayun's Tomb. "Humayun's Tomb-Garden," states Djurovic, "has become one of my favourite gardens in the world... Its proportions, its purity and simplicity, indeed its presence, still intrigue me. For me, this garden expresses the ability of a place to somehow make time stand

still. The visitor is present only there, at that moment, and nowhere else... I believe that this sense of captivation was one of the underlying threads in the conception of the formal garden in Toronto."

The tomb of the second Mughal emperor Humayun, who ruled modern Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of northern India from 1530–40 and again from 1555–56, is one of the twenty-three World Heritage Sites in India. The *chahar-bagh*, or four-part paradise garden, is the earliest existing example of the Mughal garden-tomb. Humayun's Tomb and Gardens in Delhi are considered one of the precursors of the Taj Mahal. The first privately funded restoration of a World Heritage Site in India was completed in March 2003 through the joint efforts of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), under the aegis of the National Culture Fund. The objective of the project was to revitalize the gardens, pathways, fountains and water channels of the garden surrounding Humayun's Tomb, according to the original plans. The landscape architect's reference to these gardens as one of his sources of inspiration for the Aga Khan Park is also revealing in that they

[4] The lighting of the park has been closely coordinated with that of the architecture in order to achieve a sense of continuity.

[5] The Formal Garden was conceived as an extension of the Museum. In this photo, a temporary floor painting by a Pakistani artist covers its central paved area.







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are striking above all for their simplicity – a kind of minimalism 450 years before Vladimir Djurovic began to practice his own modern art.

Nor are the thoughts of His Highness the Aga Khan far from Djurovic's interest in the gardens of Humayun's Tomb, or its better known successor, the Taj Mahal. The Aga Khan states: "You cannot go to a place like the Taj Mahal without being acutely aware of the site use and that is true of most of these great historic buildings. The use of gardens and water is a very strong part of Islam, that is, the references in the theological context to the quality of the environment."⁶ The landscape architect's concern for the inclusiveness of the gardens in Toronto can also be related to the Aga Khan's often-repeated commitment to pluralism within a generous and open interpretation of Islam.

As he makes clear, the interests of Djurovic, even after the visits requested of him by His Highness the Aga Khan, were not limited to Mughal gardens but extended also to other creations of Islam. He states: "Islamic gardens across the world were our main sources of inspiration. Our design attempts to capture the essence of these gardens and translate it into an expression that reflects this new context and contemporary age. Following the example of many of the great Islamic gardens, the involvement of all the senses in order to create a complete sensual experience became a guiding principle in the conception of this project. Our formal garden has a strong geometric layout that is based on a traditional *chahar-bagh* (four-quadrant garden). Water, in the form of reflecting mirrors, is the main component of this composition. The reflective qualities of these raised water

[6] Preceding pages: an aerial view of the Aga Khan Park and its context.

[7] Solid granite benches with carved-out planters filled with aromatic herbs in the orchard.

[8] A view of the Ismaili Centre's prayer hall from the orchard.

mirrors somehow dematerialize the surrounding buildings and landscape, providing a tantalizing experience.”⁵

Reinterpreting the Spirit of the Islamic Garden

The designs of Vladimir Djurovic for the 79,300-square-metre Toronto gardens are an intentional attempt to render contemporary the very spirit of the Islamic garden. “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 – it is more about what you feel and smell and hear in an Islamic garden. What it is that I love about Alhambra is the sound of water and the smell of jasmine. I wanted to use a very contemporary language. The architecture of the buildings is very contemporary. The garden must reflect its context as well – a place covered with snow. I like this challenge: how to reinterpret the Islamic garden.”⁶ Indeed, for an architect who has worked more in Lebanon and

the Middle East than in North America, the climate of Toronto posed new challenges. “Our intent is always to produce lasting environments,” he says, “both physical and aesthetic. Hence durability was a major parameter for us to focus on in this new climate, starting from choice of materials, thicknesses, details and construction techniques, as well as the appropriate selection of plant species. Our close collaboration with Moriyama & Teshima,⁷ with their extensive experience in such climates and major involvement with the project, was more than instrumental in guiding, fine-tuning and resolving all the technical issues for the project to achieve its ultimate goals.”⁸

One area of particular attention and concern in the frigid winter climate of Toronto was the use of water in the gardens. “In one preliminary scheme we created translucent cast acrylic elements with water flowing over the edges. Covered with snow, they would appear like lit ice cubes. The edges would have been angled out so that freezing ice would fall off the edge of the basins,” explains the designer. This idea was abandoned in favour of solid granite basin walls because Djurovic could not vouch for the long-term reliability of acrylic slabs, which tend to turn yellow with time. The newly designed granite basins still have their edges angled out to allow expanding ice to fall out and reduce ice pressure on the walls. A small rose garden is part of a ‘green room’ (multipurpose area for temporary events) that is located behind the formal garden which is between the Museum and the Ismaili Centre. A ‘stone carpet’ is set at the entrance to the Museum.

A Haven of Pluralism

All of the elements imagined by Vladimir Djurovic for the Aga Khan Park share a simplicity and regularity bordering on minimalism, though there are frequent surprises and changes of mood, progressing from a more formal configuration near the buildings and becoming less apparently ordered further from the heart of the site. “The Park is first and foremost a giant buffer zone protecting the sanctum of the project and creating a setting for the architectural volume. It also acts as a generous gesture to the city from the Ismaili community to the people who embraced them, providing a green public environment and

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linking two previously disconnected parts of the city. The Park is a sanctuary for wildlife and a place for people to immerse themselves in a natural environment. All plants have been selected to entice an array of birds and butterflies and a pond created to help them breed and flourish.”⁹ It is this essential modesty, expressed by a younger creator in the context of work with two very accomplished architects, that has allowed Vladimir Djurovic to conceive of a garden that responds to numerous requirements while retaining its own identity. Through his seductive but quite realistic computer perspectives, Djurovic conquered the enthusiasm of those involved in the Toronto projects, giving a sense of unity to what could have become a disparate whole, especially given the decidedly urban context of the site, with major traffic arteries located just beyond this green vision of paradise. Through sight, but also sound and smell, this Lebanese designer with a Montenegrin name recreates an Islamic garden in a land of snow, a garden of pluralism. “What is unique about this Park,” he says, “as is the case in

most projects, is its specificity; the site, programme and most importantly in this case, the client and his vision. Inspired by the ‘garden of paradise’, the Park intends to offer the visitor a contemplative and sensual experience that reaches its peak in the serenity and tranquillity of the formal garden (the heart of the project) embraced by the Aga Khan Museum and the Ismaili Centre. Having the presence of these two unique institutions embedded within the Park makes this place a special destination. We envision these gardens perpetually changing, with different happenings and activities, becoming true extensions of the life and programmes of both the Ismaili Centre and the Aga Khan Museum.”¹⁰

Indeed, the particular climate of Toronto, unlike that of the locations of the most celebrated Islamic gardens, has led the designer to adapt his creativity to the circumstances of the site. He says: “Time is what makes gardens develop their own souls. No doubt as the Park ages the planting will further belong to and ultimately possess the place. The plants were selected to go

[9] Water reflections seem to dematerialize the garden and the architecture.

through dramatic transformations, capturing and highlighting the beauty of each passing season.”¹¹ Vladimir Djurovic selected the plants used in the garden according to their presence, but of course also in relation to their capacity to thrive in the climatic extremes of Toronto. He explains: “The main trees in the formal garden are native serviceberries (*Amelanchier*) that make up the *bustan* (orchard). Cedar hedges enclose the garden, endowing it with the characteristic containment and privacy of Islamic gardens. On its southern edge there are black locust trees, while large redwood trees anchor the garden’s western corner. We tried to get trees as mature as we possibly could to properly anchor the project and provide the right feeling for experiencing the gardens. The serviceberry trees at full maturity and uniformity were crucial to find in order to make the formal garden’s scale work. The dawn redwoods are quite mature, but the *Magnolia x soulangeana* are the oldest specimens at approximately fifty years of age.”¹²

Evidence of God’s Creation

Though the avowed and assumed modernity of the designs of the entire Aga Khan Park place it very firmly in the present, there is a deep current that runs below the gardens of Vladimir Djurovic, and that is the current of belief. It is clear that His Highness the Aga Khan has followed the work of the landscape architect with particular attention. Djurovic states: “His Highness’s passion for gardens is intoxicating. His ideas for creating appropriate and memorable outdoor spaces became our main source of inspiration and motivation to truly excel in this project. His insights, recommendations and unwavering involvement throughout the design process has shaped and effectively resulted in the gardens that we have developed for this project.”¹³ His Highness the Aga Khan has long been interested in landscape design, and as he makes clear there are good reasons for this: “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 of God’s creation. I am very sensitive to that personally.”¹⁴ In the case of the Aga Khan Museum, His Highness wrote to Fumihiko Maki about two kinds of light – the light of God’s creation and the light of man’s work –

imagined as the sun changing the colour of the white stone of the Museum and the glow of the building from within at night. The gardens of Vladimir Djurovic will also share a fundamental duality – that of nature “as evidence of God’s creation” within an ordered plan imagined by men.

Unto those who do right shall be given an excellent reward in this world; but the dwelling of the next life shall be better; and happy shall be the dwelling of the pious! Namely, gardens of eternal abode, into which they shall enter; rivers shall flow beneath the same; therein shall they enjoy whatever they wish. Thus will God recompense the pious (Qur’an, Sura 9:72).

Endnotes

- 1 Vladimir Djurovic, written interview by the author, 3 June 2008.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Vladimir Djurovic, e-mail to the author, 19 June 2014.
- 4 His Highness the Aga Khan in conversation with the author, London, UK, 6 March 2007.
- 5 Vladimir Djurovic, e-mail interview with D. Fairchild Ruggles, 14 May 2014, published in H. S. Kim, R. Kana’an, P. Jodidio and D. Fairchild Ruggles, *The Aga Khan Museum Guide*, The Aga Khan Museum for Islamic Art, Toronto, 2014.
- 6 Vladimir Djurovic in conversation with the author, Paris, France, 31 January 2007.
- 7 Moriyama & Teshima were Architects of Record for both the Ismaili Centre and the Aga Khan Museum.
- 8 Vladimir Djurovic, written interview by the author, 3 June 2008.
- 9 Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture, “The Ismaili Centre and Aga Khan Museum, Toronto”, pamphlet for internal use, 2007.
- 10 Vladimir Djurovic, e-mail interview with D. Fairchild Ruggles in *The Aga Khan Museum Guide* op.cit.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Vladimir Djurovic, written interview by the author, 3 June 2008.
- 14 His Highness the Aga Khan in conversation with the author, London, UK, 6 March 2007.