

Architecture and Plurality

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This cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, like its predecessors, considered a large and diverse group of built projects from across the globe. One caveat for this Award is that the nominated projects be open to the possibility of use by Muslim communities – a very broad and consequently generous criterion. It is of course also understood that the nominated projects must exhibit a degree of excellence, and in so doing make a contribution to the discipline of architecture and to the field of design more generally.

The first criterion – that of possible use by Muslim communities – decouples the projects from the limits of any specific geography, such as the Middle East. Rather, nominations are sought not only from countries whose population is primarily Muslim but also from other locations where the community of Muslims might be in the minority. The Award's embrace of a wide geography is a recognition of both the reality and the diversity of the types of Muslim communities that exist around the world today.

The second and no less crucial assumption by the Award – that of excellence – acknowledges the value of buildings, landscapes and all manner of civic structures intended to improve the built environment and the quality of people's lives, culturally, socially, aesthetically. In that sense the selected projects are viewed as gifts for their respective users and societies. And in the case of projects from non-Muslim countries this definition extends to the broader community, and not just to Muslims.

The ethos of the Award has always relied on the connections between architecture and pluralism. Architects design buildings that in the best cases are exemplars of a particular type, but ideally they also transcend their formal and typological limits through their engagement with specific programmatic and situational conditions. This tension suggests that the premiated projects, rather than being simply building types imported onto a site, are much more the outcome of a set of negotiations which oscillate between needs/programme, location/geography, conditions/themes and architecture/construction.

The fluid nature of these negotiations suggests that architectural projects increasingly have to respond to situations that require alternative creative solutions. Among other things, this has led to the production of hybrid designs. In this cycle, for example, the Tabiat Pedestrian Bridge in Iran serves both as a bridge – a link between two places – and as a public space of recreation. Similarly, Ceuta Public Library is a place of learning as well as the container of an important archaeological site. In addition to responding to needs and contingencies in a multitude of ways, where possible, the projects also cater for a plurality

of users. Through this process, architecture gains the capacity to instigate plurality both as a typological and as a social act.

This is not to claim that all the shortlisted works or Award recipients are concerned with pluralism, but inasmuch as the Award recognises the value of societal engagement through design it also acknowledges the capacity of certain projects to promote plurality. The Micro Yuan'er, one of this cycle's Award recipients, demonstrates this point. The project is located in a central part of Beijing, adjacent to a number of buildings, including a mosque, which serve the Muslim community. Here the traditional courtyard residence, with its mostly elderly inhabitants, has been the subject of conservation and adaptive reuse. A series of carefully designed small structures primarily intended for use by children has been constructed with the aim of enhancing the social life of the building.

This project demonstrates architecture's capacity to juxtapose multiple functions – sometimes known as cross-programming – to provide a setting for bringing together a diversity of unexpected users. In the case of the Micro Yuan'er, this means not just the interaction of both old and young users of the building but also, more implicitly, its use by the neighbourhood's Muslim community.

Just as relevant as the project's social and cultural potentials are its architectural implications. The sensitive additions and modifications to the courtyard suggest how the relationship of architecture to its past could be reimagined in different ways. Instead of turning the original building into a reconstructed museum or a pristine example of preservation, the designers have invested it with new life by considering a scenario that has made it more relevant to the local community – both young and old.

The intimacy of the interior courtyard of the Micro Yuan'er, as a place for the activities of a diversity of people, can be considered alongside the scale of another of this cycle's Award recipients, the Superkilen, a public space project in Denmark. The issue of pluralism has different dimensions here. Whereas in Beijing the contrast between the users is more noticeably acute in terms of age, the Superkilen is located in a part of Copenhagen where many migrants have settled. Consequently, by embracing cultural difference, even if on a modest scale, the public space of the project becomes a site that welcomes people of many ethnicities and national origins. In this case, it is specifically the diversity of the types of exterior space and their treatment which creates a place that can be enjoyed and shared by all.

The design of the Superkilen, by imbuing the space with a sense of delight, provides a setting in which cultural differences can be 'acted out' and yet shared by diverse communities. The particular characteristics of the space have helped also to attract a younger generation of inhabitants to the neighbourhood. Of course the popularity of such projects brings potential benefits – such as reducing the possibility of these areas becoming primarily immigrant neighbourhoods – but it can also lead to gentrification, creating the risk of driving out the very people for whom these public spaces are seen to be a healing environment.

It is by now recognised that the spaces of pluralism also need to encompass potential spaces of conflict or disagreement. Pluralism, or plurality, is not limited to envisioning democracy as a condition of equilibrium amongst the different sectors of society. In the Micro Yuan'er project it is possible to imagine a space of pure happiness between the older occupants of the building and the young users of the library inserted into the middle of the courtyard. But the library is on one level as much an imposition – a change in the practised norms of the courtyard – as it is a reminder of one's own youth and the simple pleasures of play.

Similarly, the Superkilen project brings into stark contrast the juxtaposition of people of different backgrounds, habits and looks, and 'stages' their difference as a means of seeking commonality and friendship. But we should not be naïve, nor overly optimistic, about the outcome of this encounter.

In an unusual and perhaps unexpected turn of events, this cycle of the Award includes two projects from Bangladesh: one a mosque for a community on the outskirts of Dhaka, the other a friendship centre in rural Gaibandha. Both these projects appear to be exemplary responses to their respective programmes. And while appearing to be very different in character, both also use the concept of interiority as the major organising concept and condition of their programme.

In the case of the Bait ur Rouf Mosque it is the interior that provides the atmosphere – the interplay of light and shade – most conducive to prayer and reflection. Similarly, in the Friendship Centre, it is the sunken spaces that provide the spaces of collective gathering that exemplify the aspirations of the building – though here the affect of interiority is in reality produced by the outdoor spaces that are defined by the walls of the adjacent enclosed rooms. This affect is further enhanced by the sunken datum of the building in relation to the landscape of the surrounding agricultural territory. In both

these projects it is the sense of interiority that provides the welcoming atmosphere which is a necessary precondition of spaces of plurality. The mosque is the place where a diversity of individuals can come together for prayer.

There is of course an irony to all this, since under the current customs of this mosque women are not allowed to pray within the same building, and therefore even the architect herself is excluded from participation. Nevertheless the architecture of the mosque possesses the capacity for her and others like her to attend. And hopefully this will happen in the near future.

There is another aspect of these two projects that demonstrates their connections to pluralism, and that is the lineage of their architecture. It is clear that the brick architecture of these buildings pays homage to the work in Dhaka of the American architect Louis Kahn. Kahn's architecture, in its simplicity and its focus on the use of a single material, was able to construct a form of order and monumentality that still resonates with the local community. Part of its success is perhaps due to its resistance to image-making and its reliance on the tactile and affective qualities of architecture.

Both Le Corbusier and Kahn, building in India and Bangladesh respectively, tried to reduce the need for highly skilled labour by minimising the complexities of construction. This condition is in contrast to another Award recipient – the Issam Fares Institute of the American University in Beirut, by Zaha Hadid Architects – which explores highly sophisticated means of engineering and construction to produce a building that would be seen as a construction challenge in any part of the globe. At once singular and yet contextual, the institute fits within the overall structure of the campus and helps frame one side of an open public space. The cantilevered upper floors of the tilted building establish a visual link with the landscape beyond the courtyard. In turn this connection with the landscape is accentuated by the sinuous ramp that provides access to the upper-level entrance, creating along the way a dramatic viewing platform for the visitor. The ramp also further enhances the liminal character of the building, in terms of its siting.

The elegance and sophistication of this building and the quality of its construction are not common features in contemporary architecture. Such an aspirational project clearly also required an inspiring client who was willing to take a risk. This and other Award recipients and shortlisted projects demonstrate the mission of the Aga Khan Award in pursuit of excellence in architecture, regardless of scale and budget – as evidenced by the modest budget of some of the projects shown in this publication.

To help us grasp their primary thematic references and contributions, the Award recipients and shortlisted projects have been placed under a variety of different headings, such as Community, Conservation and Construction. While these headings only partially define the character of a work, and many of the projects obviously share multiple themes, it remains important for the reader to consider small clusters of topical affiliations amongst the projects, as a way of understanding and witnessing the state of architectural investigation within a specific area.

The selection of the projects presented in this book has been the subject of a rigorous process established by His Highness the Aga Khan and overseen by the Award secretariat. This process includes the roles of the Steering Committee and the Jury as well as the On-Site Reviewers, who ensure that Award recipients have also been subject to expert post-occupancy investigation.

The commitment to design as an agent of change and as a direct means of improving the quality of life of the users of buildings and landscapes is the significant mandate of the Award. It is true, therefore, that the Award has a social and cultural perspective, but it is equally true that the Award sees architecture as the primary means of achieving its social and plural aspirations.











