



Aga Khan Award for Architecture

**Report of the Master Jury**  
2019 Cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

**Living in Dignity**

More than ever, the conventional practice of architecture faces a crisis of relevance. Recognition in the profession remains globally centered, based on a handful of lavish commissions that produce aesthetically pleasing objects. Yet these projects sit uncomfortably amidst the conditions in which the majority of the planet's population lives today.

These conditions include the violence that results from climate change, rising economic and digital inequalities, epidemics, greater restrictions on liberties, growing polarization, raging wars, large waves of population displacements and – amidst all of those – the daunting task of living in dignity.

For architecture to maintain its relevance in relation to today's challenges, it is imperative that the profession repositions itself in relation to today's human, societal and environmental challenges. Reflecting that need for repositioning, the 2019 Aga Khan Award for Architecture Master Jury sought to select projects that question the conventional practice of the profession and, more importantly, set in place inspirational and ingenious pathways through which architects can take on societal problems and engage with them seriously.

These pathways require a shift of emphasis from project to design processes. They require recognizing architects for both their design skills and their role as facilitators who work closely with communities. In this way, architects can help people and agencies turn their aspirations into material form – despite local challenges, limited resources and stringent political conditions.

To this end, the Master Jury strived to emphasize process without overlooking architectural excellence. In fact, they considered the design quality of a winning project to be a given. They also considered each project's environmental footprint as a given, but challenged themselves to acknowledge projects that were able to extend their relevance further – to exemplify learning and embody a credible promise that could trigger long-term ripples beyond the moment of the physical intervention.

The Master Jury also paid close attention to leadership, collaborations, open-endedness, good governance. These characteristics led it to focus on the institutional arrangements that produced the



architecture, the modes of government through which they were organised, the collaborative teamwork that supported their inception and realisation, and their ability to incorporate community voices and wider societal challenges.

Given its own demographics, the Master Jury also found it important to scrutinize how the projects affected younger generations in at least two ways: [1] the opportunities the projects opened for emerging architects and designers to be involved in building processes and interventions that had an impact on natural and built environments, and [2] the programmatic and architectural organisation of the buildings and how they could foster inclusive multi-generational learning.

These criteria can be applied equally to the 20 short-listed projects that were selected during the Master Jury's first meeting in January. At that meeting, the Master Jury selected, for inclusion on the shortlist, several interventions by first-time designers who had ambitiously assigned themselves the task of conceiving, fundraising, and designing communal interventions such as a public library amidst a *kampung* and a temporary school in a refugee camp. It also selected more experienced architects who recognised the centrality of their mentorship within their local professional communities.

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The final selection may have tilted understandably towards more experienced designers, but throughout the process a strong commitment to inclusive design processes and architectural interventions that emphasized cultural plurality and intergenerational responsibility was maintained.

The dominant themes that emerged, and which define the winners of the 2019 Aga Khan Awards for Architecture Cycle, are three-fold: [1] living heritage, [2] ecological resiliency and recovery, and [3] thriving and inclusive commons.

These themes are integrated across six projects that span three continents. They include an urban heritage intervention, a national museum, a floating school, a university's classrooms and halls, an ecological center, and an ambitious programme to introduce public spaces across hundreds of localities.

The themes are reflected in the vocabulary of the Master Jury's deliberations, which consistently came back to notions of anchorage, cultural identity, adaptability, low-impact design, environment, collaboration, community purpose, empowerment, leadership, dignity, hybridity, and public good.



The Master Jury will come back to these notions when it reads the citations for each of the winning projects.

In conclusions, the Master Jury would like to recognise the valuable effort that went into the selection of its members, which brought together a rich, multidisciplinary set of voices. Working over two sessions, each of which extended for almost a week, members of the Jury found the experience incredibly enriching and stimulating, especially when listening to reactions that built on the group's respective disciplines and experiences. It would also like to acknowledge the remarkable effort of the reviewers whose field visits allowed a thorough screening of all 20 projects and helped eliminate projects that would have otherwise sailed smoothly through the process in this age of virtual reality and fake news. Members of the Master Jury are thankful for this effort and enormously appreciative of the thoroughness and care with which this award selection process is organised.

The six recipients of the 2019 Aga Khan Award for Architecture are:

Revitalisation of Muharraq, *Bahrain*

Palestinian Museum, *Birzeit, Palestine*

Arcadia Education Project, *South Kanarchor, Bangladesh*

Alioune Diop University Teaching and Research Unit, *Bambey, Senegal*

Wasit Wetland Center, *Sharjah, United Arab Emirates*

Public Spaces Development Programme, *Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation*

Elizabet Diller (chair), Anthony Kwamé Appiah, Meisa Batayneh, Sir David Chipperfield, Nondita Correa Mehrotra, Edhem Eldem, Mona Fawaz, Kareem Ibrahim, Ali M. Malkawi

*Geneva, 6 June 2019*



## **Revitalisation of Muharraq**

Muharraq, Bahrain

The **Revitalisation of Muharraq** responds creatively to the challenges of neglected urban cultural heritage and social life. Drawing on Bahrain's heritage of a pearl economy, it has reawakened a local sense of pride while infusing new cultural life in a deteriorated urban area

It is important to note that the revitalisation is based on an audacious array of public and private interventions using a contemporary and dynamic – yet discrete – architectural language.

The restoration of existing buildings and the introduction of well-designed contemporary ones provide a vessel for curated cultural activities. Using an elegant way-finding lighting network, the “Pearl Route” guides visitors through the area's heritage in a socially sensitive manner.

The excellent, yet affordable, upgrading of public spaces provides the local community with opportunities for social interaction. The project successfully establishes an open platform where citizens can actively engage. Professionals of different backgrounds can interact and collaborate. Public-private partnerships and local businesses can thrive.

The Programme thereby achieves an urban revitalisation process that strikes a balance between improving the residents' quality of life and enhancing visitor experience.

These integrated, incremental, evolving, open-ended and process-based interventions – extending over almost two decades – demonstrate the perseverance and long-term vision of the project's instigators. They are a reminder that institutionalisation, the building of local capacities, and *seeking the best possible rather than the perfect* – are all keys to achieving sustainable impact.

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## **Palestinian Museum**

Birzeit, Palestine

**The Palestinian Museum** stands as the powerful embodiment of a cultural identity under duress at the intersection of land and architecture, nature and people. By placing the traditional agricultural terracing of the region at the centre of its conception, the project locates land at the core of its curatorial mission.

This concept is carried throughout the design of the building, which stands on top of a hill overlooking a rich botanical garden of indigenous species, and faces the inaccessible distant sea and cities of historic Palestine.

In its integration into the natural topography, the building adopts the age-old architectural language of the region, but does so using a modern geometric language. It balances a reliance on local materials with the introduction of innovative detailing techniques.

Programmatically, the building displays regular exhibitions that document the history, cultures and ambitions of the peoples of Palestine. Its activities are intertwined with the vibrant educational environment of the nearby Birzeit University.

The building's very existence, its level of detailing and the perfection of its design and specifications – built despite a condition of occupation and siege – can be understood as nothing less than an act of hope for current and future generations.

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**Arcadia Education Project,**  
South Kanarchor, Bangladesh

At a time of rising sea levels, this modest bamboo school illustrates how to build an affordable and viable solution with locally available materials.

The approach to building the three-classroom preschool was to design a structure that rises with the river's water level and adapts to the surroundings – without altering the natural condition of the site and allowing for uninterrupted, year-long use of the building. Here the paradigm of the architect using his professional knowledge – yet thinking outside the box by adapting traditional methods – is remarkable, especially as the construction is modest and direct, without fetishizing craft.

Site-specific in its technological approach yet global in its solution, this low-cost, low-impact project was the outcome of teamwork between architect, client and builder, each of whom displayed resilience and innovation as they approached the social responsibility of building the school.

The modesty of the programme, the use of materials and the construction method are all successful parts of building this amphibious school through experimental and collaborative teamwork. Though simple and compact, the project resolves complex issues – of buoyancy, anchoring against the river current and waste management.

The Project strives to elevate people's lives, contributes to social and economic development, and provides a pathway to solutions for the global issues of rising water levels and access to education in rural communities.

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## **Alioune Diop University Teaching and Research Unit**

Bambey, Senegal

As buildings have a direct impact on climate change and the environment, the **Alioune Diop University Lecture Building** represents a commendable example of how fundamental principles of sustainability and energy efficiency are translated into a well-integrated and elegant design that also has a low impact on its surroundings.

These principles, which were utilized early in the concept's development, were guided by information about specific climate data needed to optimize the skin of the building. They also included energy use, material depletion and water pollution. Layering, water management and the use of construction technology and materials were also incorporated in the design.

The organization of the building is structured around a generous shaded space on the north side of the building, allowing for social interaction and a well-organized linear circulation. Building elements have multiple functions. For example, the breezeblocks allow ventilation and reflect direct sunlight.

Comfort, energy use and the building's overall environmental legacy are well represented in this project. The building demonstrated how good design that integrates environmental principles can result in quality spaces that allow a building to be bound by local environmental and site-specific conditions.

The construction technology also allowed for repetition and possible use in other buildings. The sustainability principles and processes utilized have the potential to serve as model for implementing environmentally conscious design.

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## **Wasit Wetland Centre**

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

The **Wasit Wetland Centre** stands out as a remarkable, indeed unique, collaborative project combining architectural excellence with a deep commitment to ecological imperatives.

It also achieves highly commendable educational and recreational purposes. Less than four years after its completion, a large number of local visitors, especially schoolchildren, attests to the project's overall success and its positive impact in a broader social context.

Perhaps some of the most striking and exemplary aspects of the project are to be found in its most unconventional virtues. Architecturally speaking, it is intent on disappearing from sight. It merges into the natural environment in ways that respect the site's integrity – a wonderful way of reminding us that architectural merit resides more and more on a structure's capacity to blend into an environment rather than challenge it.

Likewise, the project's major contribution to its urban environment is in its reclamation of close to 20 acres of former wasteland by diverting it from the temptations of real estate development and valorising it as a form of natural capital.

In doing so, the Project sets a powerful precedent that encourages low-impact and environmentally conscious development in a region known for its propensity to go in the opposite direction.

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## **Public Spaces Development Programme**

Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation

Impressive in its ambition to improve the quality of public space throughout the Republic of Tatarstan, the Programme's success lies in its inclusive approach to the implementation process. The projects, which are purposefully located in many communities, attempt to elevate the importance of communal space.

It is important to understand the role of the public in such projects – in reinforcing the sense of community, the identity of the villages, towns and cities, and the role it plays in the development of civil society and the quality of life.

The Programme is also designed to compensate for the badly conceived and often inappropriately scaled spaces wrought by central planning during the Soviet period. The initiative also promotes the importance of nature, even in locations defined by their industrial character, while working to protect the public good from the tendencies and interests of private ownership.

The scale and diversity of the 185 projects completed by the end of 2017 have required different types of responses and ideas. It is evident that the long-term success and sustainability of the project lies not only in its larger vision and political leadership, but also in the realisation process, which has emphasised engagement and dialogue, the involvement and encouragement of young architects and designers, and the participation of users and the community.

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