

## The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*Ronald Lewcock*

The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture was established in 1979 at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology through generous gifts by His Highness the Aga Khan. Its goals are to improve education, encourage research, and develop information resources for historians of architecture and for architects and urbanists currently planning for and building in Islamic countries. The gift from the Aga Khan provided both endowed funds to support faculty, student aid and library development in perpetuity, and special-activity funds for a five-year term. His Highness chose to make a joint gift not only because of the richness of facilities and resources that Harvard and M.I.T. can collectively offer, but because they complement each other in the kinds of intellectual and practical services they can provide. Through the endowment, the gift enhanced those resources in Islamic studies by supporting library collections, by funding faculty through the Aga Khan professorships and its visiting-professor programs, and by allocating fellowship funds to ensure that doctoral students in both institutions would continue to be trained in Islamic art and architecture.

Activities supported by short-term funds included programs of academic and scholarly research, seminars, public lectures and colloquia, publications, and student travel grants. Their objective was to further achievements in architecture and urban design for Islamic societies, and in the world beyond, to promote the exchange of information and ideas among institutions, and to foster an atmosphere of concern for understanding, appreciating, and for preserving and restoring the Islamic architectural heritage.

In March 1985 His Highness the Aga Khan agreed to extend his sponsorship of the Aga Khan Program at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a further ten years to ensure the continuation of the Program. While it is intended to maintain or expand already established activities, new aspects are being introduced into the program in the second cycle. These include a new master's degree in architec-



*S M Arch. S. Studio, M I T*

*Photo AKP*

ture (S.M. Arch. S.) specialisation, Design for Islamic Societies, at M I T., and the expansion of course offerings that provide comparable training at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. In addition, a program is being initiated to develop special links with a selected number of institutions in the Islamic world.

Anticipating the expansion in professional studies that the new ten-year grant would support, in July 1984 I was appointed as Aga Khan Professor for Design in Islamic Societies in the Department of Architecture of M.I.T., and assumed the post in the spring semester of 1985

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### The Graduate School of Design at Harvard University

Collaboration of the Graduate School of Design in the Aga Khan Program activities started in 1983-84 when funds from the Fine Arts visiting professor endowment were made available to the GSD to develop teaching materials. Documentation of a series of planning and urban design studies was started by François Vigier and Mona Serageldin with the view that they would be taught elsewhere. Two sites have been documented to date through the preparation of a monograph and extensive photographic coverage tied to base maps. The first, "Housing in Tunis", was taught at the GSD (spring 1985) and at McGill University (fall 1985). The second, "Upgrading and Revitalisation in Cairo", began to be taught in spring 1986. The Tunis monograph is being readied for publication, and The Cairo monograph has been finalised. It is expected that both monographs will be widely distributed to schools overseas.

The studios are based on sites that allow students to deal with a range of urban problems. In the spring of 1984 the seminar studied the problems involved in revitalising a traditional urban centre, using as the case study the old city of Cairo; in 1985 the studio developed a comprehensive housing programme for two contrasting, but typical sites

in Tunis. The problem the students were given was to define and enforce minimum housing standards and at the same time provide sufficient housing for the target group within a price range that both the group and government could afford. Students created urban revitalisation and infill designs for Hafsia, a low-income quarter in the medina, and housing designs to be built and paid for by the inhabitants in Ettadhamen, the fastest growing "informal" fringe settlement in the Tunis area.

Starting with the new Aga Khan Program funding cycle, the GSD has become a formal participant in both pedagogical and outreach activities. Its role should be viewed as complementary to the professional studies program at M.I.T. The GSD's activities thus focus on urban and regional development issues in Islamic countries, with a particular interest in their ecological aspects.

A longer-term commitment is being made to the preparation of teaching material as part of the GSD's Professional Studies activities. Additional studio problems will be documented and prepared for publication at the rate of one every other year. A new series of four modular courses (a module equals half a semester) addressing the relationships between development and environmental quality in Cairo and moderate-income countries is being prepared under the supervision of Professor Forman (Ecology). The first module on the hierarchy of natural systems in arid and tropical environments will be taught in 1986-87. A short textbook will be written for each module, thereby increasing the availability of teaching material that the Aga Khan Program can provide to institutions in the Islamic and developing countries.

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### Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The two-year Design for Islamic Societies course at M.I.T. follows the pattern of the existing Advanced Studies in Architecture program, which combines the study and practice of the shaping of the built environ-

ment with research into the forces that mould it and into the design process itself. Other specialisations previously offered in the program, which the new one will now join, are: Design and Housing; Building Systems Design; Environmental Design and History, Theory, and Criticism.

The Design for Islamic Societies course is intended for post-professional architectural students who wish to deal philosophically, theoretically and practically with the problems that architecture and urban design face today in Islamic and other non-Western societies.

A brief summary of some of the subjects the course work deals with follows:

- Islamic and other non-Western philosophical and cultural values and their determinants, social customs, social organisation, and beliefs about the relationship of man to his environment with special emphasis on attitudes that differ markedly from Western views and on differences in attitudes and beliefs between Muslim and other non-Western societies.
- The history of monumental and vernacular architecture, urban forms, and rural patterns in Asia and Africa, with particular attention to those of Islamic cultures.
- Climate control and environment control of extreme temperatures and humidities, with emphasis on passive systems.
- The appropriate use of local building materials and the development of upgraded indigenous building technologies (incorporating recent scientific research) which may differ markedly from systems and processes known and used in other countries. This course includes practical workshops.
- New architectural and urban vocabularies and attitudes to design that take account of (1) regional and cultural identities, (2) differing social customs and types of organisation, and (3) practical, regional, economic and construction problems, and their possible solutions.
- Visitors are a necessary part of any professional training that involves problems of foreign cultures. The use of specialists

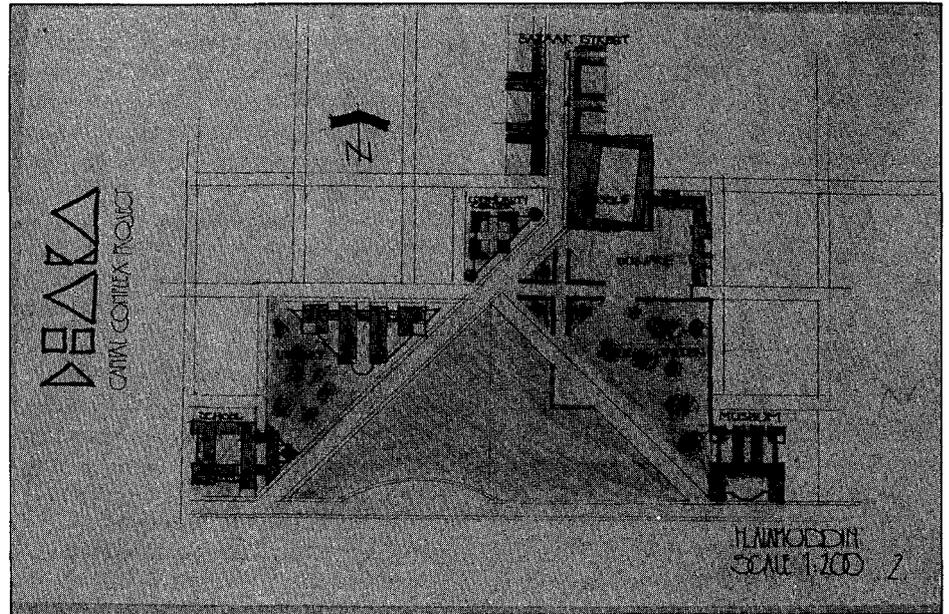
invited for brief visits to teach studios, provide input on particular subjects related to studios and workshops, take part in juries and seminars, and give public lectures is therefore particularly important for the Advanced Studies in Architecture (S.M. Arch. S.) program

The Advanced Study Course as presently envisaged will include:

1) In common with other Advanced Studies courses, the first semester is devoted to orientation. Design for Islamic Societies students have three required courses: Methods of Inquiry (which is required of all S.M. Arch. S. students); an introductory lecture course on Design for Islamic Societies; and a workshop on the same topic. For those with a weak background in Islamic architectural history, a general survey course designed to make up the deficiency is strongly recommended. The few students who have had much prior training in that field are encouraged to begin more advanced courses, including historical courses offered at Harvard. Courses also exist in East and South Asian architectural history. Optional courses in other aspects of their training are also available at M.I.T. and Harvard.

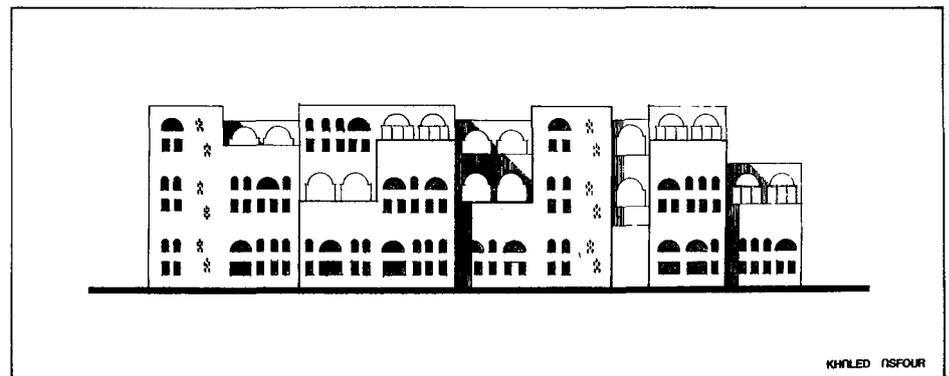
2) In the second semester, the student has only two required courses. The major one is a studio in Design for Islamic Societies. It absorbs 12 hours a week (4 hours on 3 afternoons) of the students' time. The other course, in Economics, is required of all S.M. Arch.S. students. In the second semester the students are therefore free to take one or more optional courses from those available at M.I.T. and in the Department of Fine Arts and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard.

3) In the third semester, the student has only one required course, thesis preparation. In addition, students will be encouraged to take a special workshop in the design for Islamic cultures course, or, starting in 1987, the studio offered by the GSD at Harvard. They also must take a number of additional courses which they can choose from an array of options at M.I.T. and Harvard.



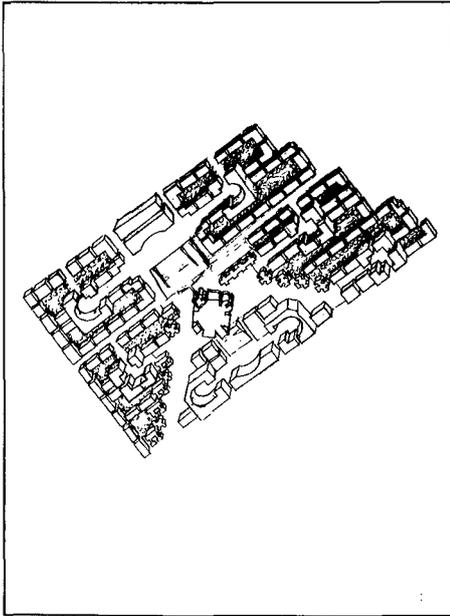
Student work, AKP, MIT

Courtesy: H. Alamuddin

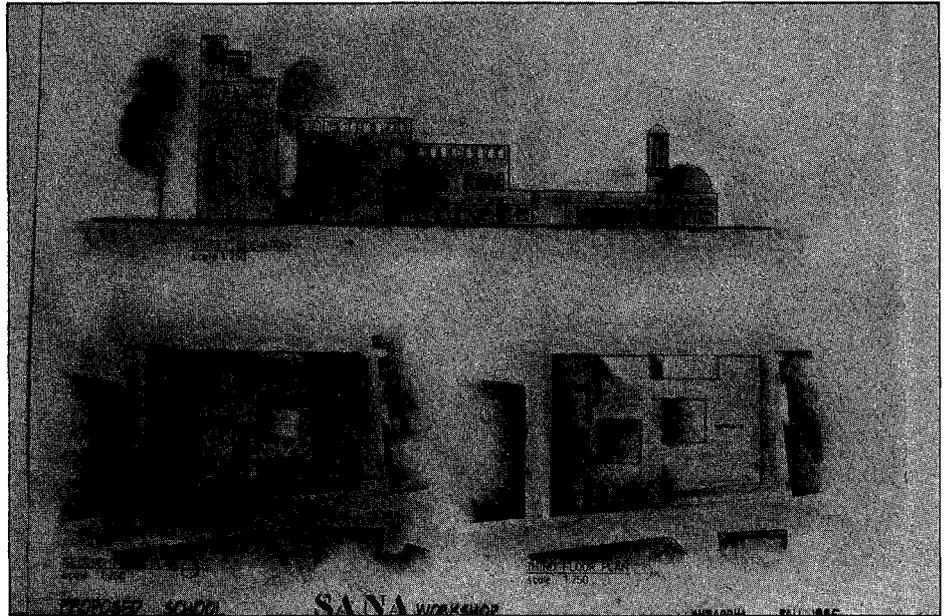


Student work, AKP, MIT

Courtesy K. Asfour.



Student work, AKP, MIT  
Courtesy: H al-Harithy.



Student work, AKP, MIT  
Courtesy: S. Sejpal

4) The fourth semester will be devoted entirely to completing research and the writing of a thesis. Some students may in addition wish to take optional courses during this semester.

#### The Work of the Fall Semester 1985 and the Spring Semester 1986

The three workshops of the Fall Semester were conceived, firstly, to familiarise the participants with Islamic urban and social fabrics, their ordering and organisation. Secondly, the relationship between traditional societies and cities and those cities or parts of cities which developed in Asia and Africa due to predominantly Western influence was considered. Parallel with this came the concerns of the future of old central areas in rapidly expanding cities; conservation and rehabilitation; accommodating modernisation (motor traffic, parking, new dominant building types); factors of social,

regional and national identity; and the provision of housing and facilities for the urban poor. The old city of San'a' served as a focus for many of these concerns.

The appropriate design of public buildings and spaces in the Asian and African city was discussed together with the relevance of monumentality. For this purpose the Capitol Complex (Sher-e-Banglanagar) in Bangladesh was used as a case study. Here the problems of the relationship of the new Kahn design to the familiar environments of the region or country, the provision of traditional amenities, acculturation and alienation, and housing were studied.

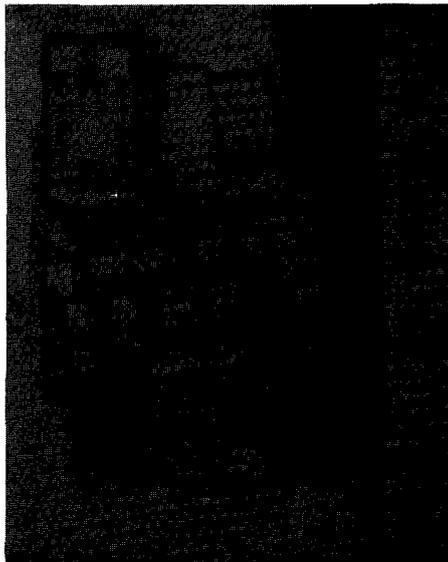
The design of the Capitol Complex was analysed with the above issues in mind. The students then developed a schematic design proposal to complete part or the whole of the Capitol Complex project and relate it to the adjacent areas and the city.

The workshop concluded with studies of differing attitudes to infill design in the context of existing environments. Staff and students

worked closely together to pursue this programme breaking up for short periods of time to individually explore certain ideas. The workshop was therefore essentially issue-oriented and not solution-oriented.

The introductory lecture course in Design for Islamic Societies was concerned with appropriate architectural design for passive control of a variety of climates and the upgrading of traditional building materials and technology in a range of developing countries. This course was paralleled by a seminar series debating contemporary attitudes to architectural design in the West and in non-Western countries.

The studio of the spring semester 1986 is concerned with the design of a characteristic complex of buildings in an Islamic country which touches on all the architectural and urban issues confronting architects in traditional societies today. The project selected is the real one of the nucleus of the new Gulf University in Bahrain. To bring this problem more directly into the context of the contro-



*Student work, AKP, MIT*

*Courtesy M El-Husseiny*

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versies facing the designers today the site chosen includes a portion of one of the oldest towns of Bahrain, which is urgently in need of a catalyst for revitalisation and which contains some fine old Bahraini architecture

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### **Graduate Study in Art and Architectural History**

A Ph.D. program in Islamic art and architecture has long been offered in the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard, but Program activities have enriched it in a number of ways.

The Program supports a comparable Ph.D. program in the history of Islamic architecture and urbanism at MIT, under the auspices of the History, Theory and Criticism Program of the Department of Architecture.

The Program also sponsors a history of Islamic architecture and urbanism component in the professional program of the architecture school at MIT