

The Mission and its People

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Each day, over a period of three days, an unusual constellation of people emerged out of the planes arriving at the new, cavernous, international airport in Cairo. They came from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Tunisia, Morocco, Tanzania, France, Germany, Denmark, Great Britain, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Russia and the United States. There were historians of the arts, of the professorial as well as the curatorial variety, from celebrated institutions of higher learning and museums as well as from more modest institutions with relatively smaller prestige. There were also anthropologists, sociologists and scholars in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences; from Europe, North America and Western Asia. There were British critics living in southern France, German ones from the United States, Egyptian ones from Arabia, and many from the Indian subcontinent. There were newspaper and magazine reporters from everywhere and ministers and high level administrators from France, Tanzania, Morocco and Uzbekistan. There was an interior decorator from Bahrain and an Iraqi medical doctor from New York. There were officials from many public and private international organisations. There were quite a few mere students of art, architecture and the social sciences and there were representatives of most of the major Ismaili communities from all over the world. And there was a bevy of the necessary recorders of such events: translators, photographers, secretaries, audio and visual experts who can tape and transmit what is being said and show images on a dozen screens at the same time. Accountants and financial controllers were there, ready to add up bills and expenses and to check them against budgets. There was an assortment of public relations specialists, ready to explain what was being said or what was about to happen to those in attendance and those who were not. Many of these people came with their spouses and some even brought their children. Most were relatively young for such international gatherings, as individuals under fifty clearly predominated. Women, while not in the majority, were also surprisingly prominent in the crowds waiting patiently for the appropriate checks of passports and visas at Cairo airport.

Buses brought the visitors to their hotel, a striking, tall and altogether efficient contemporary beehive around the

remains of an elegant nineteenth-century palace built in connection with the opening of the Suez Canal and the first performance of Verdi's *Aida*. The new arrivals were met there by a similarly varied array of Egyptian architects, professors, critics and helpers of all sorts. There followed a series of learned and social events, whose high point was the presentation of the fourth Aga Khan Awards for Architecture in the spectacular setting of Cairo's Citadel, suitably smartened up for the occasion.

Most of these people knew each other before meeting in Cairo, or, at the very least, they had heard of each other. Many had met before and most will, God willing, meet again. But few of them had imagined, when they embarked on individual professional careers in so many different lands, that they would eventually belong to a totally unique group, a sort of club without uniforms but with a logo, without rules of membership, practice, or behaviour but with a mission and a commitment. If it had to have a name, the club would probably be called, quite awkwardly, the 'Network concerned with the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in the lands where Muslims live and work'. But it should not have a name, just as it can never have membership cards.

For, even if it is a tangible reality every three years, when the Awards are given, and even if smaller groups from the club meet occasionally, it is less a club than a self-generated network. It arose out of a vision formulated by the Aga Khan because of his concern about the quality of the environment in Muslim lands during the early seventies. It grew, then, out of its own activities, at times for bureaucratic reasons, at other times because of the questions it was raising. The main reason for its achievement, however it is to be judged from the outside, is that its mission is unique, but, even more so, because the range and qualities of its activities and especially of the people who have devoted themselves to its continuing operation are of an order hitherto unknown in this century. I shall first turn to the character of the mission and then of the people committed to it.

There are two ways to define that mission. One is to return to the speeches and other public statements which accompanied the first Awards in 1980 and to the many papers which can be found in the proceedings of the

seminars sponsored by the Aga Khan Award, in the earlier books dedicated to cycles of Awards, or in the interviews with His Highness Karim Aga Khan published over the past sixteen years or so.

From all these documents the sense of a mission does indeed emerge: to incorporate and understand the astounding wealth of fourteen hundred years of an Islamic architecture built, mostly by Muslims, for their Muslim brothers and sisters and for all of those who lived in lands ruled by Muslims; to escape from the constricting blandness of external, and mostly western, imports; to look with care, intelligence and affection at the traditional structures of the environments in which Muslims live now and have lived in the past; to find ways to adapt these structures to the contemporary world, while forming new generations of men and women ready to meet on their own the challenges of the present and, by extension, of the future and to respond to the aesthetic, if not the technological, presence of the West.

Today these words and the thoughts they imply as well as the emotions which led to them are no longer as original as they were fifteen or sixteen years ago. Partly through the efforts and activities of the Aga Khan Award, notions of architectural identity, of reliance on native rather than imported practices and talents, of an ideologically significant rather than merely antiquarian past, of technologies appropriate to each task, of new partnerships between decision making and execution, of pride in the accomplishments of the past of the lands on which one builds, of locally inspired rather than imported educational objectives in professional schools, have become standard statements in political and educational discourses everywhere.

Results may not have always coincided with expectations, but it takes time for habits to change. Yet, in theory and often in practice, considerable progress has been achieved in establishing local or regional norms for architecture, in developing critical thinking at nearly every level of planning and construction, in training young professionals to have a greater sensitivity to their past than they had previously, and in planning or designing successful works of architecture, or environmental projects in all forty-four of the world's countries with predominantly Muslim inhabitants. In a very practical sense, *the mission* or *a mission* has been accomplished. All that may be needed is to continue and to refine these new habits as new challenges and new needs creep up.

Yet, there is another way of defining that mission than by listing organisational, educational, or even creative objectives and then measuring them against accomplishments. For the cultural and political phenomena which created the

original problems and which incited the Aga Khan to design the Awards that bear his name are not simple events which can be erased and replaced by new and better ones. They have deeper implications whose full understanding may well lead to a less mechanistic and more fundamental, ultimately more imaginative, definition of a mission. For, to consider change as a new revetment on the same body is to miss the depth of a problem and of an ailment whose sources lie in the history of the Muslim world.

The enormous world of Muslims in Asia, Europe and Africa and now, by the contemporary extension of these three old continents in the Americas and in Australia as well, was created by four major historical and cultural explosions, different from each other in character and by the ethnic and cultural allegiances of those involved in each one of them. These were the Arab expansion, a new faith in the seventh and eighth centuries taking over many lands with a rich past which were almost always related to classical antiquity: a primarily Turco-Mongol explosion in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which enlarged the earlier expansion into Europe, the northern plains, and India; in the fifteenth through to the seventeenth century, a generally slower but very effective cultural, military and missionary expansion involving Arabs, Berbers, Turks of many different stripes, Iranians and Mongols primarily into Africa, Southeast Asia and the Far East; and finally the transfer, *in toto* or, more frequently, in segments, of any one existing Muslim group to almost every other part of the globe in the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, Los Angeles or Amsterdam harbour a sampling of every possible ethnic group and sectarian faction of Islam.

The last of these expansions is, for the most part, a very recent one. It was generated by political and economic troubles in certain parts of the Muslim world and its impact on cultural matters is difficult to establish at this time. It is fair to say that it will become an important component of Muslim culture at large as well as of European and American cultures a generation from now, because its members will enter the ranks of cultural, economic and even political power everywhere perhaps except in Japan.

The first three of these expansions were almost entirely generated by internal Muslim forces and needs. They created, in different lands, a culture unified by comparison to the worlds that surrounded it, yet immensely varied in its own composition. Some of these variations derived from the earlier history of the lands involved, with continuing memories of the art of the Pharaohs, of the Roman empire, of the Achaemenids and Sassanids, or of the Guptas in Egypt, the Mediterranean area, Iran, or India, respectively; others came out of inner tensions and clashes within

Muslim culture itself (the competition between Sunni and Shi'ia allegiances, the domination of many lands by the Ottomans or the Mughals and the varying power of mystical and esoteric values). These are the centuries, roughly from the eighth to the seventeenth, of nearly all the masterpieces of Islamic architecture, from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to the Taj Mahal in Agra, of all the cities, from Baghdad to Fatehpur-Sikri, which were created by Muslims. All of the cities, from Damascus to Samarqand and Istanbul, in spite of their long pre-Islamic history and often spectacular non-Islamic qualities, were radically modified by the new faith and the society engendered by that faith. And, most particularly, it was the time of the creation of several languages of architecture which all shared some features, yet were not all the same, but which, in the aggregate, created a formally recognised architectural family of its own. To some contemporary thinkers and critics the history of this lineage became independent of the history of current traditions elsewhere and grew or changed exclusively according to internal rhythms. To others, its history was always intimately connected to what happened around it, for Islamic culture alone shared frontiers with all the discrete cultures established before the discovery of the American continent, and participated, sometimes unwittingly, in the political or cultural events and the psychological or emotional make-up of western and northern Europe, Africa, and, to a smaller degree, the Sinitic world.

The contrast between these two interpretations of the history of an architecture, and culture, is not merely an academic debate for it raises the first of the deeper issues whose elaboration has become part of the mission taken on by the Aga Khan Award. That issue is whether the originality and the integrity of the great centuries of Islamic creativity derived from the maintenance, even if occasionally flawed, of a purity of single minded purpose and of an internally generated process for making decisions about the arts and the environment, or whether these very qualities are the product of remarkable powers of cultural assimilation. The will to adapt and the ability to do so creatively derive from a deep-seated certainty about one's destiny and about one's identity.

Two factors led to the disruption of these traditions which had survived so many centuries. One, which is only now beginning to attract the attention of scholars, is an internal sclerosis, the apparent inability to face up to challenges and to find solutions to internal or external problems. The other factor is European expansion which began in the sixteenth century and ended by controlling the whole planet after World War I. It includes various and

at times unexpected, if only temporarily successful, offshoots such as Marxism and the Russian revolution. This expansion was politically and economically exploitative, but it was also, and for our purposes most importantly so, cultural in that it provided a ready made and pre-packaged model for living, learning and social behaviour and interaction. These models came with several doctrines, from hedonism to communism, which, on the one hand, justified these models morally and philosophically and, on the other, claimed universal values for them. Quite a bit has been written recently about these models and about the ways in which they were packaged in nineteenth-century international exhibitions in Europe and America. They still are represented in current advertisements for automobiles or electronic equipment. Beyond the packaging, the fact remains that European models in everything from clothes and cooking to buildings and art became the operative norm for Muslims all over the world.

The character and the rhythms of these factors of rupture have varied enormously from place to place and it is almost impossible to establish a unified chronology in the formation or development of either one. Nor is it important for my purposes in this essay to argue for or against any relationship between them. What matters is the apparent result: a Muslim world which has been reproducing alien forms for nearly all purposes and which did not develop intellectual and aesthetic mechanisms for making choices capable of giving authenticity to the continuing changes to the modern built environment.

Put in these terms, as it so often is, this result is indeed depressing. Something assumed to be good, a set of moral and aesthetic traditions, is replaced by something which may not always be bad but which is certainly alien. But does it have to be put in these terms? The argument could be made that all the technological advances of the past two hundred years should not be considered nor defined by the names of the lands from which they came. Microbes may have been discovered by a Frenchman, chemical tables by a Russian and X-rays by a German, but biology, chemistry, or radiology are not identified by national or even ideological labels and we all are aware of the scientific disaster which befell biological sciences in the Soviet Union when an attempt was made to do so. These changes and inventions were accidentally Western and should rather be seen as appropriate means, whatever their origin, for resolving problems of health, shelter, education and communication. Change became radical and irretrievable since that fateful moment, sometime in the early nineteenth century, when a machine moved faster than a horse, and since a more nebulous time, in the eighteenth century, when humanity

overcame the religious or ethnic identification of one person. To be more accurate, neither these universally humanistic thoughts and ideologies nor the capacity to build were always used wisely and ethically. But the point has clearly been made, by ecologists in recent years, that the world cannot escape its oneness and that global solutions must be sought for human issues, just as they are for natural ones. The mission, then becomes no longer to bemoan a past which is gone, but to herald a future of common aspirations in which differences can be accommodated, but not allowed to dominate.

One can argue that this discussion should have taken place three generations ago and that it is no longer relevant to anything but a particular sub-tribe of historians who enjoy speculating on what might have happened. For in reality, since World War II, the dominant phenomenon among Muslims, as among many other cultures of Asia, America and Africa, has been the growth of the nation state and the development of allegiances to geographical entities which are very often arbitrary and whose systems of rule, varied though they are, all claim a unique quality to what they are, different from the qualities of their neighbours. At a time when electronic technology transforms almost all the mechanisms for every type of human activity into sets of formulae in a computerised expression and when almost no major enterprise can be initiated without the participation of an international financial and legal order, political and psychological allegiance is formulated and enforced, often with horrible consequences, by the ill-educated apparatus of rulers in arbitrary nation-states.

Every day the news provides examples of the deep contradictions between, on the one hand, the parochial dramas of individual cities, families and minority groups in a large city or remote area, and, on the other, the tantalising dreams and expectations transmitted by media and made possible by multi-national companies. Therein lies the third element in the mission which has, it seems to me, evolved from the activities of the Aga Khan Award: to explain and develop the practical *and* psychological or intellectual options facing humanity in the twenty-first century. Whether they are in their ancestral lands or in the anonymous quarters of enormous and varied metropolises, should Muslims seek to maintain in a new skin what their grandparents had been or should they proclaim their new identity? And what intermediary positions can be imagined?

It is thus through three directions that I can outline the deeper mission of the Award: to understand coherently and to explain in-depth the mechanisms which made a rich and very varied past appear so brilliant and successful today; to identify the ruptures which occurred in terms which would

make their experience creative in meeting the challenges of today; and, finally, to ask forcefully and openly whether the narrow-minded political and ideological framework of nations should not be superseded by a generous and humane universalism.

Universal power is present whenever truly important issues or considerable sums of money are involved. It is even possible that multi-national interests, such as the arms industry, find maintaining local allegiances advantageous to their wealth. With all these issues the challenge to the Award is not simply to continue doing practically what it has done so well for more than fifteen years, which is to reward accomplishments generated outside of it, simply hoping that such rewards will become an incentive for others to continue in the same creative way. The Award should also provide intellectual and ethical direction for the century to come and to make these directions and the information and debates which led to them available to all seekers. It is particularly important to stress the notion of 'debate', since the Award has tried, on the whole successfully, to avoid doctrinaire positions on architecture and the environment and to allow for a free discussion of the issues. Yet these debates have not been well publicised, and it is easy enough to interpret the cycle of awards in terms of preferences for certain types of activities and certain formal directions over others. The Award can move to the new and challenging direction of in-depth debates because it already has access to a fascinating array of personalities.

Who are the 'people' of the Award? They can be divided into three groups which, like the organisation of ants and of bees, function with the same purpose in mind but often without encountering each other, except every three years for the presentation of awards. I shall call these groups the antennae, the 'general staff' and the heroes. There are occasionally movements between the first two categories; the last one, however, consists mostly of memories, but its importance is, as I shall try to indicate, crucial.

The antennae are the most original feature of the Award. They consist of four to five hundred individuals who are asked every three years to nominate architectural or environmental projects which have been completed and in use for at least three years. Although it is assumed, usually correctly, that most of them will nominate relatively recently completed ensembles, they are not restricted to new ones and can go back almost a generation. The Award, in this respect, differs from most prizes in that it allows for the passage of time and for the recognition that immediacy of awareness does not always mean continuity in impact. In fact, quite frequently it takes time for the true

value of a work of visual art, music, or literature to be understood. Nominators are restricted to physical entities. Books, laws, policy decisions, events and teachings, which can all have enormous impact on the building of the environment, are not, at this stage, covered. But they could be and the important point is that a fellowship of people exists who, anonymously and without any personal reward (other than the right to nominate themselves), scan what is happening around them and, like so many antennae, they send out information, to those who are what I call the 'general staff'.

Theirs is a process of learning and of judgement. Individuals among them can probably be criticised for failure on both counts and it is only by experience that their errors may be found and corrected. In the meantime, the information they have provided by nominating more than a thousand projects is a unique document on the character of the building enterprise anywhere in the world and a demonstration of how the contemporary architecture of a specific cultural area has been judged by those who live in and with it. These archives are also major resources for historians, economists and sociologists, as they contain a mass of information on all the processes of building.

Another original aspect of the antennae lies in the creation and the task of a Master Jury. The Master Jury is an antenna not because it gathers information, but because it broadcasts it. It consists of seven to nine individuals chosen according to a well-established equilibrium between architects and humanists or social scientists, Muslims and non-Muslims, young and old, celebrated figures and obscure actors, men and women. Its discussions are secret and its decisions final. Unlike the nominators, members of the jury are remunerated, as it takes a great deal of time away from busy professional lives to evaluate between a hundred and fifty and two hundred submitted projects. But, even when chosen from among individuals who had been associated with the Award, they are only limited in their evaluation by their own prejudices and knowledge and by their commitment to quality in the built environment. Just as, at the beginning of the process of the Award, anonymous nominators guarantee a randomly appropriate selection, so, at the very end, an independent jury proclaims and justifies decisions about those projects which had seemed to the jury best to meet the complex and varied needs of Muslim societies.

Between the nominators and the final jury lies the 'general staff'. It consists of four separate elements. Two of them operate permanently and define the continuity of the Award. There is His Highness The Aga Khan, whose vision about the future of Muslim peoples initiated the Award,

and who, with the help of his personal advisers, evaluates various possible directions for the Award, advises on its relationships with governments and non-governmental organisations, and controls its revenues. The other element is the Secretariat of the Award which is the nerve centre of the whole operation, the practical organiser of all of its activities, the keeper of its archives and the source through which information, publications, images, discussions and ideas are preserved and can be made available anywhere in the world. The other two elements are not continuous. One of these is the Steering Committee, a relatively small group of people with very different individual skills, although there too architects predominate, but with the presumed ability to see and understand the wider implications of things, with the imagination to invent new directions and with the wisdom to judge whatever is proposed. The committee's major functions are to evaluate ideas and proposals put to it by the Secretariat or by any other organisation, to initiate programmes and activities, to consider views about the future of the Award, to speculate occasionally about the feasibility of long range projects, and generally to serve as an intellectual and practical springboard for everything involving the Award. The originality of the Steering Committee lies in the fact that, since all of its members are otherwise employed and are chosen *because* of their achievements elsewhere, it can be, and often has been, the true creator of the Award's activities without being pressurised by anything other than concern for the avowed aims of the institution.

The fourth aspect of the 'general staff' is implemented during the deliberations of the Master Jury and consists of the technical review teams that investigate projects for which the jury would like additional information. Technical reviewers are usually young, they come from dozens of countries, and their reports are, for the most part, models of intelligent critical research and observation. Their data become part of the secretariat's archives, but their most important function is that they are involved in a critical root of the Award's concern, the actual operation of recently built works of architecture and the impact it is making on those who use them.

Taken together, the antennae and the general staff, past and present, as well as all those who have been singled out to receive some sort of recognition through the Award, amount to nearly a thousand men and women around the globe who have contributed to the functioning of the Award and who have learned from their participation something of the objectives and expectations of this new endeavour. There are, no doubt, disgruntled individuals, but the vast majority of them have been fully cognisant of

their involvement in a novel and imaginative enterprise whose ambition is to acquire a sense of the present that is deep enough to shape the environment of the future. The dedication of all these people makes them and others like them the obvious pool from which to choose those who will ponder the questions raised by the mission of the Award and those for whom the answers to these questions will become essential as they face the twenty-first century.

But these active people from many countries and different backgrounds are not the only ones involved. The voice of those who have gone before must also be heard, since they have left their stamp on the environment and on the taste of all of us today, both in the Muslim world and elsewhere. Sometimes, as with the sixteenth-century Ottoman architect Sinan or with Hassan Fathy, the architectural prophet from twentieth-century Egypt, we know their names and a great deal about how they worked and why they accomplished what they did. At other times, as with Qavvam al-Din Shirazi, responsible for some of the most spectacular architecture in fifteenth-century Iran, we know names and can only guess about the lives behind the names. Most of them are the anonymous masters responsible for the humble constructions of small villages or of private houses, for designing whole cities, and for supervising the building of grandiose mosques, secluded fortresses, public baths, schools and wonderful palaces. We cannot ask them questions, but we can learn about their buildings in ways which almost compel a reconstruction, or at worst an evocation, of their presence and of the reasons for their decisions, as scholars and critics try to explain some unexpected detail or some forceful statement. We will not always be right in imagining the motivations behind their decisions, but we can penetrate into their creations and become satisfied that whatever it is that we understand about them is a reasonable approximation to what actually happened. Slowly and often with considerable effort, we can transform these obscure masters into the heroes of our mission. Just like the heroes of classical legends and myths, they will be present in contemporary thinking through their works rather than in person. They will not necessarily be models whose creations should be copied as exemplary individuals who knew how to solve the problems of their time, and it would not be proper to limit this category of heroes to those responsible for the traditions and masterpieces of Islamic architecture in the past. Great past masters of western architecture, such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Louis Kahn, designed, built and taught in and for the Muslim world. They too are part of that heroic past, architects whom I have mentioned, but political and cultural leaders should be included as well, who have

shaped the intellectual and the emotional make up of all who are involved in the Award. They also suggest by their involvement in the new projects of emerging nations what is also implied by the presence of so many Muslim professionals and intellectuals in the non-Muslim world which is that the oneness of the world is far more real than the differences between us and that knowledge and quality transcend boundaries.

These considerations seem far removed from the nostalgic recollection of Cairo and yet, as the images of the lines of passengers at the airport come back to me, the real conclusion to emerge is that nothing is impossible for the variety of talents, knowledge and competencies that appeared then. The institution that made it possible for all of them to gather possesses within itself the means and the structures to meet all the informational, intellectual and ethical challenges involved in understanding the built environment throughout the world and in improving the setting of life. Its proclaimed responsibility is limited to the world of Muslims, but anything that improves the environment for one fifth of mankind is bound to affect the rest. Thus we return to what I see as the fundamental question of our time: how can one preserve, in dignity and with success, separate identities, when technology, ecology, economics and the media all tend to homogenise their impact and their control? Should one even try? Few forums are more able to think about these issues than the real but invisible one that constitutes the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture.

The courtyard of the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo

