There is a prevalent view that the Aga Khan Award for Architecture is concerned with promoting a third debate in architecture. This debate, articulated, for instance, so clearly by Charles Jencks in 1995, argues that the Award is 'the third way – the veritable multi-laned highway' that is pluralistic and hence identifies architectural projects that span a wide range of typologies. By giving approbation to the modern Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris as well as the mud Great Mosque at Niono, the Award is seen to encompass ‘multi-laned’ contemporary architectural activities that could be relevant to the developing Islamic world. Since the Award recognizes conservation projects, social housing and innovative contemporary architecture as well as other types of work, it does seem to have become the symbol of a broad, pluralistic architectural patronage. The Award’s third position is defined in the context of the transatlantic debate about modernism, at one end, and the regional debates on authenticity, cultural continuity and craftsmanship, at the other. This so-called third position is supposed to occupy the middle ground between these two debates and also to promote debate and an exchange of ideas that try to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilable positions. Dubbing the Award ‘middle ground’, ‘third way’ and ‘pluralistic’ is therefore easy to understand. Over the last seven cycles, the Award has recognized more than seventy projects in different parts of the world. With every Jury Report that explains the reasons for choosing the projects, the message of the Award is broadened and diversified. The societies that form the constituency of the Award are themselves very diverse, thus the Award takes care to publish its juries’ deliberations and reasons in the form of debates on issues that can bring together diverse concerns for diverse societies.

The third way is one way of seeing the Award as part of the newly emerging, seemingly pluralistic direction in architecture that includes modernism, regionalism, housing, conservation of historical buildings, urban planning and landscaping. This image of the Award is a ‘comfortable’ or easily acceptable one that would please and make sense to the largest number of people. Since it is culturally and stylistically non-specific and represents more a basket of ideas than the sharp edge of a specific viewpoint about architecture in a global context, the Award’s position in the global debate can be interpreted as one that shifts.

The global debate is an important reference point because it presumes not only global participants but also participants who are engaged in a debate about core issues relevant to architects. The global debate is generated by the engines of private capital, which are geographically located in the West. They provide the essential ingredients of the debate, which are patronage, media coverage and engagements in a critical discourse. The media constitute a global network; thus architectural events such as the inauguration of the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain, become global events.
This dynamic partnership between the media and architecture is a recent phenomenon. Media as a whole has its own requirements, and for architecture to be important it must be iconic, a clearly identified product, the centrepiece of debate and, of course, politically significant.

The nature of the global debate about architecture has changed significantly in the last two decades. During the fifty years after the Russian Revolution, the central debate that concerned post-Bauhaus architecture was primarily about the ideology of modernism and its international significance. Until the early 1970s, even though postwar capitalism had restructured itself and Europe had significantly recovered from the damage of World War II, the ideological content of modernism was concerned with avant-garde positions and proposals based on the socialist ideas of reformulating societies. Municipal housing proposals, leisure activities and urban-scale projects were concerned with reformulating futures, which had always been an important concern of socialism. However, the socialist project could not recover from its internal contradiction. As the process of collapse began with the Soviet tanks entering Budapest, it gained momentum until perestroika and glasnost finally dismantled it completely. As the process of discrediting the socialist project gained strength, it became increasingly difficult to defend egalitarian futures as architectural ideas. While capitalism restructured itself and put an end to its internal rivalries — which had precipitated the war — and as the epoch of Pax Americana began to gain momentum, the social concerns of architects were dispersed in diverse directions. The New Left emerged as the symbol of resistance to the increasingly privatized West and tried to bundle together the dispersed pluralistic issues about regional identities, the environment and resistance movements that had broken away from the communist ideology in the 1960s. Successive conservative governments then began to tear down the social security nets and infrastructure and let them out to the private sector. The state was replaced by the private sector as the more significant patron, and the architectural profession lost its most important client. In the decades following the implementation of privatization all over Europe, the corporate clients emerged as the champions of modern architecture and architects had little option but to narrow their concerns and jettison the inconvenient ideological stance that promoted ideal egalitarian futures. In a sense, the architectural debate became detached from the central debates about culture, social and economic issues and futures in Western societies. Having lost contact with the New Left, modern architecture began to be deeply enmeshed in corporate architecture and the crafting of new building materials.

The new corporate clients of architecture stripped modern architecture of its social concerns but hailed and encouraged its great formal qualities and its potential...
International finance capital, faced with underlying unemployment and accompanied by sluggish growth rates in almost all advanced countries, turned to the untapped market of the millions of potential Asian consumers. International financial institutions rode out for opportunities in Asia and launched massive architectural projects in Southeast Asia and southern China, which are nearing completion. Modern architecture, now on a back burner in the social debate, became an inseparable partner in the economic development of Bangkok, Shanghai, Canton and a host of other coastal centres in Asia where capital arrived from the West in search of higher returns. The buildings that responded to the growing needs of the finance sector became major icons in the banking world. They exhibited a wide range of stylistic hues, but they also belonged securely to modernity.

These are the mega-projects of today. At one time, Tony Garnier and Le Corbusier had visualized the mega-projects of modernism as the ideal cities of the industrial workers. The Asiatic and particularly the coastal urban developments of Canton and Shanghai see these contemporary mega-projects as the new territorial conquests of international finance. They are international in their funding, design, construction and staffing, but their achievements do not seem to form any part of the global critique of architecture. Nowhere are the architectural programmes of these mega-projects linked to concerns about the people whom socialism championed.

It remains apparent that enormous poverty is still prevalent in the Asiatic world as well as in the Islamic world. Concerns about their condition and future cannot simply disappear or become charitable questions just because the socialist project has disappeared. Perhaps the Award represents the only, and rather lonely, articulated position that holds that architects still have broader responsibilities in developing societies. It is just possible that the Award is not trying to carve a ‘third way’ that spans from modernism to tradition. Instead, it is possible that the Award’s importance lies in clearly articulating an alternative debate about the relevance of architecture today. It seems apparent that the Award is questioning the narrowing of the debate in ‘modern’ architecture and is instead considering talking about a contemporary architecture that is more relevant to the problems of development. This would naturally influence the choice of geographical areas where such a debate could be relevant. By confining its search to the boundaries of the Islamic world, the Award is virtually signalling its own
constituency as being at least one contemporary world where the broader social issues of architecture can be practised and discussed.

These broad concerns are going to become crucial to the global condition in the next millennium. It is possible to argue that the social concerns that award-winning projects reflect are globally relevant. African economies have collapsed because the social food security system was devastated. The entire former socialist block is experiencing downward-spiralling economies that have reached a precarious situation, with unemployment as high as 30 per cent in places where ‘structural adjustments’ are being hammered into place. Millions of precast multistorey housing blocks, jerry-built in the 1960s and 1970s, are beginning to crack and flake. This enormous region, on the border of Europe, has had its national income reduced to a third of its former size; its enormous social infrastructure, built over the years, has all but collapsed; poverty is rampant; and mafia gangs control the economy. In the coming millennium, these are the places where societies have to be given new futures. These new futures cannot and will not emerge out of the patronage of international finance capital. It is possible, however, that these futures can be articulated by the broader concerns about architecture that give importance to community involvement: craft, rebuilding of old urban centres, social housing and self-help. The Award could be considered as a keeper of the conscience of architecture, documenting in its debates and published materials the relevance of architecture in developing societies.

In its announcements of winners over the last seven cycles, the Award has identified a wide range of projects, with each jury shifting its emphasis in different directions. However, common to all these directions is the concern about the past, present and future. By including conservation, social projects and innovative contemporary buildings within its terms of reference, the Award has defined a broader perspective of architecture that could be important to formulate now that the transatlantic architectural debates have become strongly influenced by the interests of global finance and media projection. The Award uses an elaborate system of identifying projects for its consideration. Nominations followed by Technical Reviews and a series of jury meetings for each cycle ensure that a project is not simply viewed as an abstract model of form. The context, function, social relevance and regional importance are all considered criteria for excellence. By a process of inclusion rather than exclusion, the Award has been able to identify a reforestation project in Turkey as well as a lepers’ hospital in India that used the minimum resources to create a structure for the benefit of the outcasts of society.

Despite the clear intentions of the Award to formulate its own message in the world of architecture, the impact of its significance in the global debate remains somewhat difficult to identify. Although successive juries have been concerned with trying to
measure the contribution of the Award’s message to the international architectural discourse, both the sixth- and seventh-cycle juries were concerned with ‘universal relevance and contribution to the architectural and the social discourse of the world’. The distinction between the architectural and social discourse is important. In the realm of the architecture of buildings, the models of the Western world continue to dominate the major issues of architecture in the developing world. Buildings designed by Western or, in some cases, Japanese architects continue to be iconic models for most architects in the rest of the world. On occasions when the Islamic world offers its territory for the creation of world-class architecture, an architect from the West has been commissioned to build for the benefit of Islamic or secular societies within the context of the Islamic world. This year the jury clearly took a position that world-class buildings responding to the problems of change in the Islamic world had yet to emerge. In considering architectural projects, therefore, the jury clearly intended to imply that the importance of the buildings, of which there are five, was regional. In other words, the jury was not attempting to place buildings of excellence in a regional context into a global context. It was not searching for pluralistic or ‘third way’ messages to tie together regional architectural activities. On the contrary, the citation of these five buildings implies that their significance was confined to their regional context, a context within which their excellence should be judged. The jury had split its search into two categories. One category had importance within the territories that form the constituency of the Award; the other with ‘recognizing projects that had a wider global context and meaning’.

The two projects ‘seen to have qualities that could be of relevance to a broader global context’ were essentially concerned with the reclamation of community space. These are projects of state patronage, removed from the world of international finance and essentially concerned with social issues. They have global significance because they are concerned with issues related to the reformulation of communities within the increasingly archaic nation-state.

In awarding these two projects for their broader universal values, the jury acknowledged the need for architecture to address the questions of community-based egalitarian futures. By recognizing the community as the accelerator of change in architecture, the Award is drawing attention to a contemporary architectural activity that the transatlantic architectural debates have long forgotten. Therefore, the message is not a pluralistic third way. It is a dualistic message that implies that the universal concerns of architecture are its social concerns, which must be clearly distinguished from regional architectural aspirations.

Both the Rehabilitation of Hebron Old Town and the Slum Networking of Indore City transcend their local contexts to generate solutions that have important symbolic
values. Where, for instance, a designer or institutional catalyst substantially involves a local community and transforms with its help a deteriorating slum environment into a beautiful space, the practice of architecture also becomes a social or ideological act. More importantly, such work begins to redefine a significant symbolic role for architects as critical components in the reconstruction of community futures. When one considers the enormous damage done to the urban communities of Europe, in the former Yugoslavia or Northern Ireland, or considers the growing demands for the recognition of community identities such as those of the Basques, one also realizes that there is no other way to reconstruct these communities without the intense involvement of professional people who act as accelerators in the process of revitalizing communities in conflict. It is difficult to visualize other significant ways in which the growing homeless and jobless populations can be given futures in both the developed and underdeveloped parts of the world. Projects with a predominantly social content and in which degraded environments are transformed for the benefit of the poor and the outcast are crucial architectural achievements. The heroic role of architects and voluntary agencies in improving environments through a collaborative design process needs acclamation and serves as a reminder of the broader role that architecture has to play in the development process of all societies.

In rewarding such projects as Khuda-ki-Basti in Hyderabad in 1995 and the Hebron and Indore projects in 1998, the Award continues to emphasize that the universal message is a symbolic one that relates to bringing communities together. Because community conflicts are increasing rather than decreasing in all parts of the globe, the symbolic significance of the social projects transcends regional and national contexts. The model of the Grameen Bank Housing Programme awarded in the fourth cycle is much more important as a global model than an individual building placed within a regional context and commended for its architectural merit. The universal message of the Award is therefore contained in the recognition of these social projects. These can be regarded as symbols of hope in a world in which the structures and boundaries of nation-states that are being reformulated around communities with narrower cultural identities will become the building blocks of regions in the coming millennium.