

Opening ceremony

Opening Remarks

Suha Özkan, Secretary General of The Aga Khan Award of Architecture



It was late 1970's, if I may take you to those days, you will remember that the modern movement was severely and probably unfairly criticized in the book called Form Follows Fiasco. The book accused the modern movement to allow people to build carelessly and wipe out our cities. At the same time, there was a movement, which had shallow ethics as far as architecture is concerned - post-modernism -, which basically said anything would go as long as there is a meaning and relevance to the context and the people. As these two movements were fighting in the field, His Highness the Aga Khan came up with an idea of developing an architectural exemplary process. He founded the biggest architectural prize; probably the biggest price on earth until now. Five hundred thousands US Dollars are offered for the exemplary works of contemporary architecture.

This initiative had its roots very well thought out. I am very happy to have two of the founding members here Nader Ardalan and Charles Correa who were in the first committee and who set the processes of evaluating architecture with some in-depth meaning. This organization basically attempted to look at the positive, look at the accomplishments, look at the achievements, and look at the world to find examples to show to the architect. The architectural community embraced it, almost immediately. Because the first set of awards given in Lahore in 1980 had an array of 15 solutions, covering 15 of various aspects of meaningful and cultural relevant architecture, His Highness was

encouraged to educate younger architects and established the program with the Harvard university and MIT. This joint program was the first in the history of these two gigantic universities. At the same time they launched a journal which has a wider scope than the Islamic world. It was called Architecture and Development. These activities grew and soon after the first cycle of the award I joined the award and worked there and it has been 18 years, which I have been working there with tremendous commitment and pride. But it was basically due to the people whom I worked with, the people in the committee, the people in the master jury, the people in the technical review and the wide selection range of nominators who carry the volunteers spirit of the award- 700 of them from all over the world. His Highness is interested in architecture because it is the most developed form of expression in art of the Muslim history. On top of it, architecture carries the potential of being a melting pot to all kinds of expression from painting to sculpture, from space configuration to construction. Furthermore, it has the potential of absorbing the social and cultural issues at the same time.

In 1988, His Highness established the interventionist institution that basically does exemplary works such as the history city support program. This program carries projects in northern Pakistan, Cairo, Mostar, Samarkand, and recently in Syria. The goal of this group of people is to show the economics and the viability of the cultural heritage to be restored and to be operated by the people themselves for

their own good use and benefit in order to reinforce their existence and their identity in their settlement. The program in Harvard and MIT has been launched since 1981-1982. It has grown in leaps and bounds. You just heard that the graduates are all over the place and Lebanon have a record number of PIA graduates, which is very encouraging and pleasing. This program carries centers in Karachi and Amman for years. Now, it is on the threshold of making its achievements and collections widely available to all schools of architecture and to all architects all over the world through a big project –the ARCHNET. Archnet will be operational soon. It will probably be launched towards the end of next year through the Internet. So whatever has been accomplished and collected and evaluated in the processes of Aga Khan transport culture and programs in Harvard and MIT would be available to everyone.

The Award itself has many aspects the most important of which is to evaluate and give the Award. This is done always through an independent jury. This independent jury is selected by the steering committee of the award that is chaired by His Highness himself. On top of it is the thinking process: how do we establish our links with the field? How do we think? And from the very beginning-even before the establishment of the award itself- there was a meeting in Paris, which discusses the tenants of architecture for the Muslim world. Then, there was a meeting in Istanbul on the cultural heritage and we had global international seminars. But since 1982, we started small meetings like this one bringing regional expertise to establish and form links among the people who work more or less in the same context. We had all these meetings to redefine themes but on top of it we encouraged any problem or any accomplishment to be voiced here and shared with the other.

In the Arab world, recently, we had a seminar of this sort in Amman and we had another one last year but with a limited context in Cairo. This year we had a meeting of this sort in Baker in Azerbaijan and this would be the last meeting of this sort. I am very much encouraged to see that this time all members of my current steering committee namely Charles Correa, Azim Nanji, Selma EL-Radi have volunteered to be here. We also have among us one of the first members to the committee Nader Ardalan who also is participating. Also we are much honored to have Mr. Rifat Chardigi to be with us. So I will not talk too much to let you know about this seminar, and I am asking Mr. Rifat Chardigi to come and take the chair and start the discussion right away.