Housing Development and Culture

His Highness, The Aga Khan

It is many years since I last visited the historic island of Zanzibar, whose name alights all that is romantic in the imagination. It is with eagerness and gratitude that we will enter, even if only for a few days, into the culture and the historic buildings of Tanzania and Zanzibar to learn from them and to equip ourselves for our debate.

We are here to discuss one of the most vital development issues of our time — housing. I speak to you on this subject with a sense of urgency, for I am deeply persuaded that the lack, and deterioration of human habitations, as economies grow, urbanisation accelerates and demographies explode, pose some of the greatest practical and ethical problems that developing countries face.

As the *Imam* of a widespread Muslim community, I have long been actively concerned about housing. Members of the Ismailli community are a cross-section of the world: they make their homes in the stone and chalk houses of mountain villages, the housing societies of some of the world's fastest growing cities, and the most modern dwellings of the west. My concern for the quality of their habitation, and the housing of the wider communities around them, had much to do with my establishment of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture a decade ago — a decade of tumultuous change in the shifting and the sheltering of populations.

In the seamless web we call national development, housing is only one factor influencing the quality of human life. But how vital it is to health and human safety, still more fundamentally, the state of a person's home touches deep chords in the human spirit.

It can make him proud or ashamed; give him light and a sense of hope or deepen his despair. It is his statement to his children and to the world about his control over his life, and his aspirations for the future. It is not too much to say that to the extent a man is a householder, he is also a citizen, with a permanent interest in the stability and progress of his country. Still more important, housing has historically been created by families. The African or Asian village, like most other traditional settlements, is not an abstraction, but an architectural expression of a social reality, the way people relate one to another — often as an extended family. These settlements reflect human bondings and community spirit. They can foster families and their ties to other human beings; or they can express human alienation as the extended family dissagregates.

It is into this deeply personal relationship between a human being, his family and neighbours, and his environment, that the state, with the best of intentions, has entered. Often it has had little choice. The sheer magnitude of homeless thousands, has required large scale responses. Limitations of available capital, materials, management, and technical know-how seemed to dictate that governments adopt quick, low-cost solutions in the form of mass housing for low-income groups. No wonder, given the size of the problem, governments have concentrated on bricks and mortar. But even when conceived by geniuses, these solutions have rarely proven successful. Europe, North America, and the developing world all abound in failures, slum clearances and mass housing schemes that have not worked as human settlements, and have become instant slums and centres of despondency and crime.

What can be done? The sheer immensity of the problem, and — even where there has been a political will to solve it — the proliferation of overlapping agencies dealing with housing, can confound both policy maker and beneficiary. What frames of thought can be of assistance to those leaders who earnestly feel the responsibility to build more and better housing for their citizens?

It is fashionable to say that individual initiative will provide the solution. Optimists can point to the *Gececondus* of Turkey, the *Favelas* of Peru, the *Kampungs* of Indonesia, and the *Bastees* of India as evidence of the inventiveness and vitality of private enterprise. And so they are — the poor tend to know how to build their houses more economically than public authorities. Their success in approaching housing incrementally, improving their homes as family resources permit, reflects a degree of flexibility not found in the large scale formal sector. But, for the squatters in cities and on the urban fringe, these ad hoc, private solutions are of desperation not of choice, and they frequently incur high social costs in disease and crime. Even the self-help process needs encouragement if it is to flourish.

I deeply believe that the developing world is entering a new phase, in which the limits of centralised direction and control are now accepted, and the opportunities for alliances between the public sector and non-governmental entities have never been brighter. The state must still see things "in the round", overseeing the interlocking parts of the national economy and the social system. But governments and leaders of thought, both inside and outside the apparatus of national and local governments, must continue to grow in sophistication about the nature of what I have often called the "enabling environment". Governments are indispensable to the creation of this environment as "enablers", through their judicious action — to empower others, as well as themselves, to mobilise capital, establish legal entities to channel it to qualified borrowers, and supervise cost recovery. But, the critical institutions in the design of truly effective housing solutions are surely those that have an interface with the community — with the people whose housing needs are to be solved.

What should be the form of their community structures? What powers should they have, and what capacities must they develop if they are to be responsible and effective bodies?

Organisations with which I am associated have experience with this community link. The Aga Khan Housing Boards have erected numerous housing colonies. They have discovered that identifying a needy population, building sanitary, well-designed housing units, and transferring families into a promising new environment are very far from being enough. Everything about the architectural design may be right, but unless there is a sense of continuing responsibility by the community of occupiers, there will be no maintenance of the buildings, sanitation, or discipline in the payment of rents. A project will fail both economically and socially. Job training, education opportunities, health services, and social workers must buttress the community organisation of people who have been demoralised and atomised and who need to recreate or transplant their family and community ties.

Our health services in Asia and Africa have taught us other lessons — a given population suffering from illness and high mortality frequently thinks its greatest health need is for a hospital. In fact, invariably the greatest need of such a population is not for a building, but for assistance in identifying its health problems and in designing solutions to them. In becoming part of the quest for answers to its health problems the community becomes part of the solution. Villagers learn, they are willing to pay health workers and to change their behaviour and to adopt better health practices.

The goal, I am persuaded, also in the field of housing, is not to teach people answers, but to teach them to ask the right questions. Price, comfort, durability, the long-term value of a house — even aesthetic merit: People of little formal education can grasp these vital concepts and pose questions about them.

Our question is tough and practical. What systems of organisation, technical back-up and most important of all, formal or informal education, can be designed to empower individual human beings or communities to grasp and use these ideas? What are the architectural inputs that must be harnessed in the creation of space, climate control, structure, appropriate materials, land use, and others? The answers to all these questions will, underlie successful interventions in the field of housing.

The broad point I wish to emphasise, is that, confronted by the appalling magnitude of the problem of inadequate housing — estimates that one-fifth of the human race is without decent housing, of whom one hundred million do not even have a roof over their heads — one must avoid the trap of the mass solution. Government resources and political commitment to a solution are indispensable: but they will be effective only to the extent that they mobilise as part of the solution the people for whom housing will not be merely shelter but a source of community and of a better life. This will take infinite care and powerful imagination, for the institutional models will vary with regions and cultures, but I deeply believe there is no substitute for them.

How does the Aga Khan Award for Architecture fit into this perspective? It focuses on design solutions to challenges of the built environment. This seminar therefore is on the Architecture of Housing. But the Award, from its beginnings a decade ago, has consciously avoided the "ivory tower" of plans and pure ideas.

Every structure or project that has been honoured must have been in existence, and used by people, for at least two years. Solutions must involve an effective unity among several factors. design, appropriate materials, suitability to the environment, and sensitivity to the culture of the user. In short, the Award recognises architecture that "works" for human beings and their communities, as well as exemplifying first class design.

This practical orientation determines the character of our seminars. When the Award first looked seriously at the subject of housing, professionals working in the Islamic world and in Third World countries were hampered by a lack of communication among scholars, historians, social scientists, design professionals, and decision-makers. All of these professionals, with their particular skills and visions of the truth, are needed. I strongly hope that this seminar on housing will refine the questions we must ask and suggest some courses of action, to help free human energies to solve problems of human shelter.

Within this context the question of cultural identity has become a major issue addressed by the Award.

From it, we have learnt that with the immense diversity of Muslim and other populations today, there can be no single cultural identity. Housing, like other building forms, should express the plurality of the world's peoples. There are regional models, however, and serious tested approaches to housing, which can be learned from and generalised upon. This is why we expect the seminar's deliberations to profit powerfully from its presence in East Africa. This is why the seminar is being held in Zanzibar.

The East African coast provides a rich cultural background against which we may examine housing solutions. Three civilisations — the African, the Asian-Indian and the Arab — have given this region its culture. The architecture, be it of

Madagascar, the Comores, Mombasa, Lamu or Zanzibar itself provides a rich tapestry into which solutions of human habitation have been woven over the centuries.

Tanzania, notably, is a country in which Muslims and non-Muslims live and express their ideas, and this diversity has also provided a number of lessons on the mixing of peoples and the building of the physical environment.

Finally, it is my strong belief that East Africa, the cradle of civilisation, has the possibility to apply a sensitive humanistic approach to housing that may give an example to other countries that must mobilise different peoples and cultures in devising solutions to their housing challenges.

The Award Steering Committee and I believe that the sheer attractiveness and fascination of East Africa, and the welcome we knew we would find here, made this the perfect location for listening and learning regarding the subject of housing.