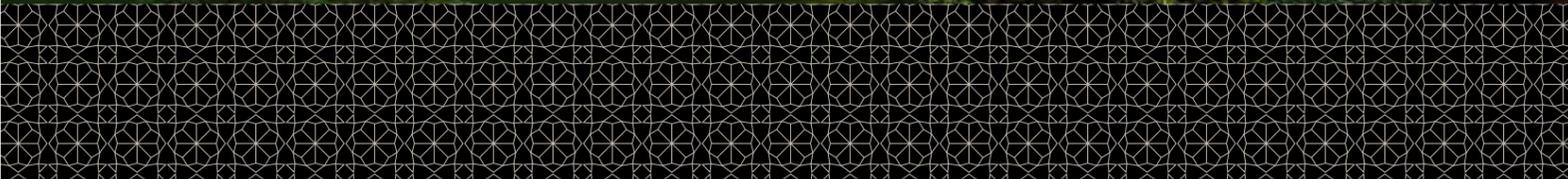




# The Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme

STRATEGIES FOR  
URBAN REGENERATION



# Protecting the Past, Inspiring the Future

HIS HIGHNESS THE AGA KHAN

More than fifty years ago, when I became the Imam of the Ismaili Muslim community, I discovered that ignorance or indifference about other cultures, the drive to standardize cultures through imposed external models, or sometimes open aggression, together with the desire to 'modernize' the built environment, had resulted in the irreparable loss of important cultural characteristics in developing countries, particularly those in the Muslim world. The highly distinctive cultural features of those societies and countries were being eroded and new environments created which were dysfunctional. The situation required a broad-based response that would find support amongst the communities and nations concerned. Culture, far from being a luxury, needed to be recognized as an essential factor for any society to prosper.

With so many social and economic needs still unmet around the world, why is culture so important? Conventional thinking suggests that there is a sequence that must be followed in every instance – first addressing humanitarian and social needs, then economic challenges and finally, perhaps, culture. We have found, however, that the equation is not so simple. Culture itself can be the catalyst for social and economic development.

The notion of cultural heritage as an asset rather than a drain on resources remains a new one in many parts of the world. The sad result is that many important buildings and monuments – the physical patrimony of mankind – have already succumbed or are in a precarious state. This is especially true in the Muslim world. A third of the world's heritage sites are in the Muslim world, and many of them are suffering from serious decay. Budgets for maintenance and repair of cultural heritage have declined or have been cut drastically. Traditional settlements have been abandoned in favour of modern construction, bringing its own economic and social problems.

## Improving the Quality of Life

When I created the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, I discovered that the cultural dimension of the Islamic world was an extraordinarily powerful trampoline for development. It became apparent that by developing patrimonial sites one could improve the quality of life of the people who live in and near them. The populations of these historic areas are often the poorest in the countries concerned. Here, by acting in the realm of culture, it was actually possible to improve the quality of life for the poorest of the poor. By giving its true value back to culture, new forms of productivity, a new form of socio-economic development, come into being.



His Highness the Aga Khan tours the rubbish-strewn site of the future Azhar Park in Cairo in the early 1990s, before the Historic Wall was uncovered and before monument restoration work was begun in the adjacent district of Darb al-Ahmar.

My effort to defend the value of culture, through the Aga Khan Development Network, and specifically through its dedicated agency, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, focuses its activities in four main areas: the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme; the Aga Khan Award for Architecture; the Aga Khan Music Initiative; and Museum Projects. These activities, which are themselves subdivided into a number of subsidiary programmes in many countries, obey four key principles. Firstly, they seek to increase the beneficiaries' independence, to involve local communities, and to secure the support of public and private partners. Secondly, they are carried out in poor environments where there are considerable centrifugal, sometimes even conflicting, forces at play. Thirdly, they are designed to have maximum beneficial impact on the economies of the populations involved and their quality of life in the broadest sense of the term. Finally, they are planned in the long term, over a period of up to twenty-five years, enabling them to become self-sufficient both financially as well as in terms of human resources.

The residents of historic cities and districts know a great deal about their own cultures, but in many ways these remain at the periphery of general knowledge elsewhere. Through initiatives such as the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the Historic Cities Programme, we have also sought to disseminate the knowledge that these cultures had developed their own traditions of architecture and that these were worthy of continuity. The fact that we have been able to rebuild pride in these cultures, which are not only cultures of the past, but of today and tomorrow as well, brings a totally different psychological attitude to the processes of change.

#### Developing Resources for Sustainability

One way that revitalized historic areas can become economically self-sustained is, of course, through the development of tourism. In places like Cairo, Aleppo and Lahore, tourists spend days viewing cultural monuments. Many such tourists would be attracted by the combination of a well-maintained cultural heritage and a natural environment that astounds even the most jaded traveller. These visitors are the kind most favoured by tourism development organizations around the world – engaged travellers who want to experience culture first hand rather than be aloof from it. They do not need a single world-famous monument like the Pyramids to attract them; they are equally delighted by the existence of a vibrant local culture. What is important is a density of well-maintained landmark buildings and the infrastructure to accommodate and transport visitors. In an era of mass tourism, these visitors are not searching for the package tour, but for a unique and authentic cultural experience. We must plan carefully for the reuse of restored or conserved buildings. A well-executed conservation plan transcends mere physical restoration to address long-term productive reuse and sustainability. We must get this equation right at the start.

A clear emphasis has been placed by our planners on sustainability. It has always been clear that a strong financial base must be created in order to maintain the accomplishments of today. A project must be compatible with the long-term welfare of its neighbourhood and community. For any important work of restoration to survive and to

thrive into the longer range future, it must contribute to the well-being of those who live in its presence – so that they in turn will have reason to safeguard its enduring viability. For this reason, the Historic Cities Programme is not only concerned with saving buildings or historic districts for future generations. It seeks to go beyond restoration and to create mechanisms that contribute to real, measurable improvement in the quality of life in rural and urban areas, also enabling their inhabitants thereby to look after their cultural assets. This is the goal of the multi-programme capacity-building strategies which the Aga Khan Development Network deploys to help the residents of historic cities or areas, whether this be the Silk Road, or Kabul and Herat in Afghanistan, Aleppo in Syria, Mopti in Mali, or Zanzibar, or Cairo, the city that my forefathers, the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs of Egypt, founded more than a thousand years ago. In all such places, rehabilitation of cultural heritage is supported by the work of the Aga Khan Development Network agencies specializing in micro-finance, health, education, water and sanitation, and promotion of economic enterprise.

Our experience in situations as diverse as remote parts of northern Pakistan, to Delhi, Zanzibar and Central Cairo, is that the restoration of historic communities and important cultural assets provides a catalyst for economic development. The restoration activity is a source of direct employment for workers and skilled craftsmen, many of whom live in adjacent neighbourhoods. The refurbished facilities themselves often become an attraction for tourists as well as fulfilling their role as community centres, generating more opportunity. And as the residents of surrounding areas find themselves with new sources of income, they spend some of it improving their own homes and neighbourhoods. These are the pragmatic reasons for revitalizing a nation's cultural assets. But equally, and perhaps more importantly, these activities restore and preserve the historic identity of Muslim societies, whose rich pluralist heritage has suffered extraordinary stresses in recent decades. It is also a heritage for the world to cherish.

The underpinning objective is to replace the risk of economic and social collapse with a new capacity, built on informed consent and knowledge capable of sustaining and guiding the transition from poverty to an improved quality of life based on choice and opportunity. Another important step in the process is to promote awareness and understanding of appropriate technologies and solutions. The Muslim world is multicultural, diverse in geography, terrain and climate and it exhibits extremes of wealth and poverty. This diversity requires us to be sensitive not only to local needs, but to local capacity and resources available to meet those needs.

### The Heritage of Respect

Contrary to the image sometimes given in the press, the Qur'anic ideal is one of a vibrant humanity, rich in pluralism, and yet constituting a single human community. This heritage of respect for differences attaches value to diversity, pluralism and positive and productive relationships between different segments of society. The Holy Qur'an teaches us that mankind holds Allah's creation of the world in trust, with the duty to leave the physical environment better than they found it.

In Islam, the Holy Qur'an offers explicit direction to share resources beyond one's requirements, and to care for the poor and those in need. The injunction to service is the ethical underpinning of the work of the Aga Khan Development



Network. It drives its efforts to build the intellectual capital and institutions needed to address the problems of our world today. Indeed, the Qur'an, the Hadith, the sayings of Hazrat Ali, and many scholarly sources also make references to the forms and purposes of philanthropy. Human dignity – restoring it, and sustaining it – is a central theme. Enabling individuals to recover and maintain their dignity as befitting their status as Allah's greatest creation is one of the main reasons for charitable action.

There is dignity in the individual's ability to manage his or her destiny. That being the case, the best of charity, in Islamic terms, can go beyond material support alone. It can take the form of human or professional support, such as the provision of education for those otherwise unable to obtain it, or the sharing of knowledge to help marginalized individuals build different and better futures for themselves. Thus conceived, charity is not limited to a one-time material gift, but can be seen as a continuum of support in a time-frame that can extend to years. This means that multi-year support for institutions that enable individuals to achieve dignity by becoming self-sustainable holds a special place amongst the many forms of charity in the eyes of Islam.

### A Vision of a Pluralistic Society

In the troubled times in which we live, it is important to remember, and honour, a vision of a pluralistic society. Tolerance, openness and understanding towards other peoples' cultures, social structures, values and faiths are now essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. Pluralism is no longer simply an asset or a prerequisite for progress and development, it is vital to our existence. Never perhaps more so than at the present time must we renew with vigour our creative engagement in revitalizing shared heritage through collaborative ventures.

The same view as the previous photograph. Now, in 2011, the Park has matured into one of Cairo's major attractions, the Historic Wall has undergone thorough conservation, monuments in Darb al-Ahmar have been restored and socio-economic programmes are in place.