

On Advocacy

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Over the last thirty years, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has recognised excellence in interventions in the built environment. The Award has brought to light examples and best practices of projects that then served as inspiration for architects, designers, planners, engineers, decision makers, community organisers and most important, communities everywhere in the Muslim world. At the end of each cycle, the juries delivered not just a decision on winning projects but a benchmark for new trends and important issues facing Muslim communities. Inadvertently, the Award did more than recognize models of architecture; it contributed to a discourse on the way that societies are defined, their processes elaborated and their economic and social capitals evolved.

The Award has sought to use the winning projects as a platform for debate and for engagement of professionals and decision makers everywhere. The winning projects, cast as role models, were instrumental in generating technical know-how, insights for architectural education and deeper appreciation of community resources and needs. Despite the fact that each jury issued eloquent statements to explain its choices, the diversity of projects chosen inadvertently overwhelmed the reasons for their selection. At the heart of each cycle was the meticulous elaboration of a citation for the winning projects that identified innovative aspects; indirectly, the citations highlighted how each project can be viewed as a role model for others. The Award was communicating the value of individual projects, yet the overall value of the winning projects was conveyed as secondary. Nonetheless, that value accumulated cycle after cycle and evolved into a basic image of the Award as a promoter of local community identities and creative responses to limited resources, as well as excellence in design.

The juries' ethical stances in selecting the winning projects were often implied and not elucidated directly. Occasionally, the juries tried to interject their interpretations of the ethics behind each winning project, but were not very transparent about the ethics of the selection process itself. The

Award does not endorse particular ethical positions but aims to promote diversity. This proved to be one of the most prominent features of the Award as an open, inclusive system. Yet by refraining from foregrounding ethical concerns, the Award has not helped to promote an open debate on ethics in the built environment.

Winning projects were mostly discussed as inspirations and best practices. There was no focus on these projects becoming replicable or scalable, and for good reason. What distinguished these projects was the fact that they refused to accept standard solutions and developed special responses to their particular challenges. But there must be an intrinsic value in the winning projects serving as models, or otherwise there is little value in the Award. This is where the discussion on ethics must be brought to bear, not by adopting particular ethical positions but by expanding the ethical debates around architecture.

The ethical decisions of the jury must be placed in the open and debated at large. It is not sufficient to recognize a project that supports the reinvigoration of public space in the city. The whole value of public space must be debated. What does the category "public" mean? This was one example of our debate as a jury for this cycle. If we put private space to public use without having the public rights and freedoms, can we still be speaking of public space? The issue gets complicated if privatisation is the only way to secure funding for preserving public space. What are the guarantees of the public domain? Why have public institutions failed to develop the mechanisms for preserving public space?

Other questions could be: Why do we preserve the environment? What is the nature of our responsibility and custodianship over the environment? This cycle, the jury summarised that argument under the rubric of "treading lightly on earth", borrowing a metaphor from the Quran regarding how the faithful must be humble and accepting of the transience of the world. How do we transform these values into ethical questions in our building practices? The Award is certainly not responsible to provide answers but it should play a more proactive role in presenting these questions for discussion. This is what I would

like to designate as an advocacy role for the Award, a role not yet fully developed. The Award is neither an implementer of projects nor an educational or academic institution. It has a capacity to advocate for a deeper and more complex debate on the ethics of the built environment. Its main strength is that it has built over the years a very strong communications platform, a platform that speaks to laypeople, practitioners, academics and decision makers alike. Although this platform is important, it is not focused. One of the key aspects of communications strategy is to define focused messages for particular constituencies and around special issues. An advocacy role will require the Award to use its communications tools to focus on ethical debates and to leverage the impact of these debates.

Of course, communication is a two-way street. The leveraging of communications should not be just to disseminate the outcome of debates but to expand the inclusiveness of the debate and open up participation. The Steering Committee has so far provided the Award with global direction. Much of its esteemed role has been informed by the contributions of its experienced members—some bring fresh ideas, while others provide institutional memory. How much of the strategic direction of the Award's steering is informed by the community, academic and media activities developed in between Award cycles? Of course a great deal of influence is possible through the participation of Steering Committee and jury members in these activities. But how systemic is that influence? This is another area where an advocacy role for the Award would work on entrenching the outcomes of the communications platforms into the strategic direction of the Award.

The Award has typically emphasized the winning project as a model of excellence. Perhaps in the future, the Award should also be interested in recognising the excellence in solutions that feature innovation in replication, scalability, economies of scale and a realistic understanding of the magnitude of challenges that Muslim societies face. An advocacy role for the Award should move beyond the aesthetics of the winning project to the ethics of handling major challenges. One idea is to enhance

the jury with more expertise from fields such as economics and social services. A well-balanced jury would engage debates on issues such as feasibility, impact, opportunity costs, cost-benefit analysis and human resource development in addition to aesthetics, response to site, technical know-how, environmental sensibility and cultural relevance.

Thirty years ago, when the world was paying the price of the International Style's homogenising effects on local cultures, the Award set for itself the challenging task of identifying excellent local interventions that resisted hegemonic global trends. Today the world is threatened by relativist attitudes towards the local. The Award must respond by making local solutions relevant as answers to global challenges. An advocacy position would entail a shift from focusing on the winning project as a model to the winning project as a gateway for ethical solutions.