Contemporary Muslim communities live in contexts defined by large-scale movements and constantly negotiated notions of identity and homeland. These processes lead to an ongoing understanding of Self and Other, making for different combinations of volatility and creativity. The 2013 Jury was committed to identifying, acknowledging and awarding initiatives with the potential of helping communities negotiate challenges at multiple intersections, whether of historical time or space, or of the articulation of heritage with modernity. The dominant themes that define this cycle of awards are: restoration, as the revitalisation and adaptation of tradition; integration, as a way to unify fragmented environments, urban and rural; the pursuit of excellence in design in low-budget settings; and the embrace of the solemn dignity of death as a way to affirm life and the living.

Restoration often leads to the “museification” of spaces and artefacts as so many relics of a past gone by. The assumption is that tradition is something clinically separated from the present. The effect is, further, to ossify the past and disconnect it from the present. Where the immediate history of the peoples is concerned – in this case Muslim communities whose immediate past is anchored in colonised societies where the project of modernity was introduced as part of a foreign “civilising mission” – the damage is even greater. The Jury seeks to identify and acknowledge initiatives that highlight heritage as both alive and flexible, thereby affirming its potential as a resource that can invest the present with meaning. The objective is to make it possible for a people to take ownership of their history as a living tradition.

Restoration is never simply a return to the original. Among the projects the Jury awarded are those that highlight the potential of restoration to integrate a fragmented present. If in one instance the challenge is to let a community take ownership of its past, in another it is to unify a landscape fragmented by the confluence of multiple developments,
official and unofficial. Muslim communities live in diverse environments, urban and rural. When it comes to village-based populations, the challenge is to validate the rural environment. Here, restoration is more than just about design; it calls for a participatory process and holistic approach that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Architecture is a quintessentially urban activity that is identified with urbanism and urban life. In spite of their density, urban settlements often generate an experience of solitariness, a feeling of being cut off in a disintegrated world. In a context where big bridges tend to be destructive elements within the city structure and the landscape, a bridge that touches the ground lightly and seeks to create places for pedestrian activity stands out. The bridge connects society, both metaphorically and physically, and contributes to a threefold integration: of public design, infrastructure and landscape.

Is it possible for a low-budget project to combine functionality with design, utility with beauty, affordability with excellence? Can architecture, historically a human activity highly destructive of the environment, take a posture that combines a low profile with high innovation, one that enables low-energy use alongside a recycling of resources? Among the projects the Jury acknowledges is that of a construction that turns decommissioned containers, a consumer culture waste product, into an aesthetically pleasing, low-cost building material, able to be used to provide much-needed health facilities and a high level of care to patients.

Rapid movement makes for a changing composition of communities, ethnic and religious. Questions around definitions, of home and away, self and other, have the potential of unleashing divisive tendencies. When an architectural intervention turns this volatility into an occasion for a sober and focused reflection, on life rather than death, it has the potential of giving the living a second chance. The Jury honours the grace and beauty of one such intervention, and its inclusiveness and foresightedness.

The Jury followed a two-step process in making its selection. The first step, which led to a shortlist of 20 projects, was based on identification of themes and challenges faced by practitioners of the built environment today. The second step was based on a threefold consideration – a holistic participatory approach, the quality of design, and its socio-economic-environmental impact – which led to the final selection of five worthy projects for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture:

– Salam Centre for Cardiac Surgery, Khartoum, Sudan
– Revitalisation of Birzeit Historic Centre, Palestine
– Rehabilitation of Tabriz Bazaar, Iran
– Rabat-Salé Urban Infrastructure Project, Morocco
– Islamic Cemetery, Altach, Austria.

Mahmood Mamdani (Chair), David Adjaye, Howayda al-Harithy, Michel Desvigne, Kamil Merican, Toshiko Mori, Shahzia Sikander, Murat Tabanlioğlu, Wang Shu