INNOVATION AND JUDGEMENT
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My participation as a Jury member of the 12th Cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture was unlike any of my other experiences. Through the lens of diverse activities of Muslim communities, one perceives the dynamic state of the world at large, presenting dilemmas, complexities, conflicts and resolutions.

Being on the Master Jury is a rigorous yet rewarding process. The criteria for the judgement must relate to the context, location, time, and both environmental and political climate. Unlike typical competitions or award juries where criteria parameters often lead to a clear direction or an identity of a jury, the projects kept us in constant flux by challenging our preconceptions. Through discussions and familiarisation with each of the submissions, a series of complex and thought-provoking questions emerged from the projects. Throughout the process, we maintained open-minded and discursive conversations, often departing from our personal comfort zones. This attitude was crucial for addressing the many projects that were sited in places of adversity and conflict, and often immersed in fluid circumstances. The members of the Jury came from a variety of backgrounds, arriving with a wide range of expertise, interests and cultural experiences, which contributed to a productive, energetic and healthy exchange of opinions.

The dominant themes in the projects were socially targeted, aiming to sustain, maintain or strengthen fragile communities in an ever-changing world. The solutions and innovations proposed in these projects addressed the importance of long-term, community survival, for a lasting impact on the global architectural context. The innovative ideas in these projects were a result of circumstances with scarce resources, encouraging creativity and inventive strategies. The innovations presented here were not necessarily something new in themselves, but, rather, involved clever re-contextualising or reconfiguration. Innovation took place as a lateral shift of context, instead of a vertical gear change, transforming familiar materials and methods into something pervasive and extraordinary.

A most fascinating aspect for this Jury was that the sites and programmes reflected the current state of the world at large, of locations ranging from the Middle East, Asia and Africa to Europe, allowing us to question the standards we often impose as the criteria for judging projects. The conventional notion that innovation must be an abrupt agent of change, often associated with social mobility, was put under scrutiny for projects that promoted small incremental steps to achieve a whole, a contingent strategy that can adjust more easily to a changing socio-political climate in volatile communities.

We have come to understand that in order for the innovation to stay robust, it must begin in small steps, at a personal level, thereby providing opportunities for a larger-scale expansion. This outlook embraced by some NGOs is an inventive method of social stability. I would like to introduce five innovative examples that inspired the Master Jury of the 12th Cycle of the Award.

PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE: THE COINCIDENCE OF PROCESS AND ARCHITECTURE
The historic architecture and urbanism of Tabriz Bazaar deserved recognition for its timeless and effective integration of structure and ornament, environmental responsiveness, and layout and circulation that promote urbanity and a balance between commercial and public activities. The rehabilitation was a grassroots-initiated process that embraced thoughtful and holistic principles of traditional ways of life in the Bazaar. The multidisciplinary nature of this process integrated economics with social structure and architecture, making this project a robust model for participatory practice of our time. While the structure of this society is traditional, contemporary society can learn a great deal from a bottom-up project, including initiation and long-term maintenance that involve a multitude of stakeholders that include 5000-plus merchants and government members.

The wonderful connection between architecture and this process is that both are interdependently organised in a rich and complex configuration. With the concept of inclusiveness, connectivity and engagement, both the Bazaar and the community became self-sustaining entities. The participatory process extended to the materials and technique of this project, as local materials and skills reflected the traditional quality of the place. Furthermore, it included interventions that allowed this historical place to adapt to future innovations and contemporary society, and demonstrated the notion of historic preservation as an act of social contract. Here, history becomes a dynamic vehicle for citizens’ everyday lives. The initiative created a collective sense of ownership and stewardship. It is a monumental project not only because of its scale, but also because of the effort of rehabilitation and its ongoing commitment to revitalise a fragile place.

INNOVATION THROUGH TYPOLOGICAL HYBRIDISATION
The Rabat-Salé Urban Infrastructure Project in Morocco uses a bridge as the primary building typology to address complex issues such as mobility, transportation, socio-economics and ecology. It includes an analysis of the properties of the Bridge’s function, its capacity to connect as well as to divide, extend as well as to fuse, and to differentiate the two sides of the Bridge.

The project takes advantage of the multidimensional aspects of infrastructure, maximising its responsiveness on all of the exposed and occupied surfaces.
The Hassan II Bridge was minimised where it spans the Bouregreg River, but maximised for a gradual transition into the neighbourhood on both sides. The space below the Bridge is over-scaled in height, anticipating future public functions, such as markets or public gathering spaces. The space enables two edges of divided land to connect and give access to the waterfront from the landside. The asymmetrical treatment of the land on both sides of the Bridge reflects the different sociologies of Rabat and Salé. Another interesting characteristic of this project is that although the proposed hybrid bridge has an iconic presence, it does not convey this through a monumental or sculptural gesture. Instead, it is deferential to landscape and other civic monuments. The Bridge carries different modes of transportation such as a motorway, tramway and pedestrian paths, and is divided into three decks. Instead of a larger and heavier structure, subdivided decks are thinner and more elegant, with a gap that also provides daylight into the space below the Bridge.

The Bridge is a progressive and responsive hybridised gradation of an arched main bridge to the viaduct on the Salé side, and a nautical bridge on the Rabat side. The structural language is altered to suit the programmes and geography on either embankment, creating a bridge that merges gracefully into the horizon. The Bridge is intentionally suppressed in height to avoid disrupting the flat and horizontal landscape of the site. This approach to bridge design, somewhat counter-intuitive for conventional bridge designs, reflects the different sociologies of Rabat and Salé. Another interesting characteristic of this project is that although the proposed hybrid bridge has an iconic presence, it does not convey this through a monumental or sculptural gesture. Instead, it is deferential to landscape and other civic monuments. The Bridge carries different modes of transportation such as a motorway, tramway and pedestrian paths, and is divided into three decks. Instead of a larger and heavier structure, subdivided decks are thinner and more elegant, with a gap that also provides daylight into the space below the Bridge.

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INCREMENTAL INTERVENTION STRATEGY
The Revitalisation of Birzeit Historic Centre is unique in that it recognises the importance of the “in between spaces” that define Palestinian statehood, as well as addresses the incremental creation of public spaces. Instead of restoring individual buildings, the project focuses on the rural vernacular architectural “connective tissues” and circulatory systems to create continuous and cumulative impact. Riwaq, which concentrates its efforts on upgrading infrastructure, street paving and rehabilitation, calls it a “preventive conservation”. There is also an emphasis on the rehabilitation of the historic urban fabric, and key buildings that are the generators of work and life of the community. The innovative idea presented here is the redefinition of preservation as an entire fabric, which goes beyond an artefact and its historical significance. It creates a larger-format precondition for a longer-term, incremental implementation.

The project recreates a powerful narrative of heritage for the community, empowering it with a new identity and viable future. These results can be applied elsewhere, as proposed by Riwaq’s “50 Villages” initiative to revitalise rural communities in Palestine, where 90% of the population lives. This concept can contribute to the solution to balance rural communities and rapidly growing urban centres throughout the world. Their process is focused, based on conceptual clarity.

REPURPOSE THROUGH NESTING AND LAYERING
The Salem Centre for Cardiac Surgery presents the clever appropriation technique of existing building systems for new use that allowed for fast and cost-effective responses. The innovation lies in the way in which these basic building models are repurposed with minimal and decisive design decisions. The hospital block consists of two standard building systems that nest one inside the other and create a service plenum, which also conceals an otherwise intimidating apparatus of hospital machinery. This cavity also helps to mitigate extreme heat from the clinical and ward areas. This simple strategy enabled the architects to build high-quality cardiac surgery units. The medical staff area is housed in out-of-commission containers, to which both external and internal panels were added as layers to achieve environmental comfort in response to the harsh climate of Khartoum.

The project utilises economical and accessible materials, but the design is focused on detailing the places critical to human experience and performance. This strategy is not only an innovative, universal approach to architecture, but is also astounding in that its world-class quality, standard of excellence, and beauty is achieved in such a difficult place. The project achieves poetic presence through a clear vision, without compromising excellence.

INNOVATION IN THE NUANCED USE OF ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE
In terms of the use and appropriation of architectural language, the Islamic Cemetery in Altau, Austria, is a thoughtful and careful invention, combining contemporary, local architectural language with an unusual function. The contemporary architecture of this location has a minimalist expression and disciplined severity. The horizontal and stretched siting technique contrasts with the dominant and picturesque mountainous landscape, allowing for a wilful, yet subtle intervention. In its articulation and ornamentation, the architecture combines Islamic motifs crafted in the local Voralberg tradition. This uncanny interweaving of cultures and references makes us question the larger meaning of “homeland”, and allowed the Jury to consider a new formation of architectural language in a world in which we are experiencing an increased rate of migration.

These are some examples of innovative practice observed during the Jury deliberation process. Innovation is often associated with disruption and acceleration, social mobility, productivity and economic gain. Yet these examples are brought about through careful and collaborative thought processes, which overcome obstacles and permeate vast layers of society, thereby contributing to stabilisation and cohesion. The lesson here is to consider innovation as an interwoven fabric of society that redefines the recipient from a selected few to a larger populace. Instead of productivity, innovation addresses empowerment and, in lieu of economic gain, innovation delivers benefits.