



Aga Khan Award for Architecture

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MASTER JURY STATEMENT

The 2007 Aga Khan Award Master Jury recognises how architecture and the built environment define the diverse and divergent paths that lead to the capacious lifeworlds of contemporary Muslim societies. Our challenge was to judge the complex negotiation that architecture represents between, on the one hand, the sense of satisfaction and belonging that a building - a home - provides and, on the other, worldly ambitions and affiliations that are unconstrained by the retaining wall, village boundary or national frontier. Of 343 nominations, we shortlisted 27 projects for on-site review, and from these selected nine projects for recognition. Rather than grouping these projects under a common theme, or attempting to weigh them against a strict measure of quality, we proposed a set of “curatorial principles” to inform and guide us. We saw ourselves as curators who, by placing these diverse projects next to one another, hoped to convey a sense of their specific attributes, their locality, while also giving them a collective meaning. Here are some of the curatorial principles with which we attempted to transform the expectations associated with the Award.

Muslim Societies/Muslim Realities: It was our privilege to be faced with architectural projects that raised important issues about an umma that is democratic and dialogical. Many of the projects occupied the problematic terrain between traditional homes and diasporic movements, recognising that Muslim realities have come to be rooted in historical and social circumstances beyond their usual “national” or traditional settings. This is not a repudiation of values and traditions but rather an opportunity for cultural revision and intercultural communication. Change and challenging circumstances are part of both worlds, but the composition of contemporaneity, the speed of transformation, the conflict of values and the contingencies of “identity” and solidarity may well be different. How, then, should we evaluate a new housing scheme whose disposition of spaces harmoniously and homogeneously accommodates a community that is governed by patriarchal power and authority? Does architectural excellence allow us to judge what may or may not be considered, among different communities, to be the “good life”? Such a dialogic inquiry, posed with a remarkable concreteness and visibility, might provide an alternative to the futile “clash of civilisation”.

Restoration, Conservation and Contemporaneity: In the past the Award has been associated with the conservation and restoration of great Muslim monuments. The actual performance of juries belies this perception. Our discussions asked: Are techniques of conservation and repair antithetical to claims of contemporaneity? How should we weigh architectural practice and performance? Conservation and restoration need not be part of the impulse to preserve the past in the vitrines of time and memory - antiquities set in aspic! The lifespan of the materials that constitute ancient monuments argues against “preservation”, because as materials decay they have to be recreated. Technological skills must be relearned and re-taught to new generations

of craftsmen, new chemicals and engineering techniques have to be invented *in relation to past techniques and technologies*. Restoration is a work in progress or, in the preferred words of the Jury, a work in process.

Scale and Variety: Contemporary Muslim “reality” is not merely diverse or transitional, as the clichés of globalisation have it. As a Jury we were challenged to adjust our critical and conceptual lenses as we moved across the landscape of the umma and its architectural artefacts and practices. *Scale* is not merely a problem internal to architectural knowledge or practice. The scale of the contemporary umma reveals profound differences in sites and localities - rural communities, small towns, industrial cities, private homes, public institutions - that demand imagination and material, practical interventions. *Scale* is an architectural *intervention* that responds to site-specificity while at the same time creating or constructing a sense of *locality*. In that sense, *scale* is an ethical issue.

Sustainability: Sustainability pits the grandiosity of our ambitions against the available and appropriate *scale* of natural resources. How high should we build? How suitable are our schemes for this particular landscape, climate, need or human interest? Sustainability, as a *scale* of aesthetic, ethical and political judgement, creates an architecture that is not just about building or *buildings*, but about creating an environment for survival and well-being, shared expression and solidarity, that is intolerant of authoritarian and exclusive claims to sovereignty.

Our sense of architectural ‘excellence’ demanded a scrutiny of the *singularity* of each project - its materials, its design solutions, its conceptual and physical realisation, its functional attributes - while creating a larger *aspectual* narrative that revealed different “faces” which related to and reflected off one another. As *curators* we chose projects to be placed beside each other, juxtaposed so as to convey specificity, locality and something more - a shared community of excellence.

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