

Multiple Layers: The Aga Khan Museum and Complex

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To appreciate North York's newly opened Aga Khan Museum (AKM), one must first understand its patron, as this undertaking is only the most recent in a long line of proactive institutions and projects initiated by the Aga Khan all over the world. The Aga Khan and members of his family have cultivated this collection for decades, and have given it a permanent home in North York. In fact, this striking building located within a complex of the Ismaili Center and gardens, is the first North American museum dedicated exclusively to Islamic arts and culture.

The Aga Khan and Proactive Institutions

His Highness the Aga Khan IV is the forty-ninth imam and leader of the global Ismaili community. Having succeeded his grandfather in 1957 at the age of twenty, he inherited the family's commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and collection of extraordinary artworks. The Aga Khan's foundation comprises several proactive institutions, each of which is ambitious in terms of its vision and legacy. The AKM, opened during September 2014, is the latest project.

In 1977 the Aga Khan established the world's largest architecture prize: the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), which awards \$1 million every cycle. This triennial award recognizes Muslim patrons and architects. The jury's comments and reflections on the award winners, not to mention the related studies by leading architects and academics, are published during each cycle. That same year, the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture was founded year at both Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute for Tech-

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nology (MIT). MIT also hosts the open Archnet.org website, which contains an extensive digital repository of images, drawings, and publications related to the Islamic world. It was founded in 1999 by the Aga Khan Network.

The Aga Khan Historic Cities Program was established in the early 1990s to promote conservation and the reuse of buildings and public spaces in historic Islamic cities. It has saved numerous monuments and empowered local communities to conserve their homes. This program enabled the seventy-four acre picturesque Azhar Park in Cairo's Darb al-Ahmar to be constructed in 2005 over a former garbage heap. In addition, Aleppo's citadel, the gardens around Humayun's Tomb in Delhi, and key portions of the Zanzibar stone town were all restored. Karachi's Aga Khan University, founded in 1983, now has eleven campuses in eight countries.

The Aga Khan's ties to Canada began with his intercession with then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to allow Uganda's Ismailis, who had been forcibly expelled by Idi Amin in 1972, to immigrate to Canada in 1977. The Aga Khan has since commissioned the Ismaili Center in Vancouver in 1985, which was designed by Canadian architect Bruno Freschi. In 2008 the Delegation of Ismail Imamat was built in Ottawa, designed by Pritzker prize-winning Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki and Toronto-based architects Moriyama and Teshima. This project was recognized with the Governor General's award in 2012. In addition to the recently completed AKM in North York, the Aga Khan has several projects in the works in Canada and other cities worldwide.

The Collection and Hub of Activities

The AKM's permanent collection has its roots in Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan's collection, which he began during the 1950s while studying at Harvard. His collection expanded to include 520 folios and manuscripts, including miniatures and a ceramic collection, that were bequeathed by himself and his wife to the museum. The Aga Khan has actively collected major artworks and masterpieces for the past two decades. His collection now comprises 350 key pieces, including works on paper, metal work, textiles, and artwork in wood, stone, glass, and lacquer from all over the historical Muslim world.

In an unusual but highly insightful move, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture organized a series of temporary exhibits that would travel throughout Europe prior to their permanent display in Toronto. In each city, certain curation concepts were tested by a variety of experts, designers, and academics. Portions of the collection were exhibited in Parma as the "Path of Princes," in London with the theme "Spirit and Life," and in the Louvre with the theme "Hybrids." Similar exhibitions were held at Lisbon's Gulbenkian Museum, Toledo's Fun-

dacion Real del Toledo, Madrid's La Caixa, Barcelona's CaixaForum, Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau, and Istanbul's Sakip Sabanci Museum with the theme "Arts of Book of Calligraphy." In total, 500,000 Europeans viewed the highlights of the AKM collection during its two-and-a-half year journey.

Following the European tour, the "Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum: Architecture in Islamic Arts" were then exhibited at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia; the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur; and the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore in 2012.

The goal was to explore possible curations of the collection, recognize successful approaches, and create critical dialogue and understanding through cultural exposure. Importantly, a key revelation of the temporary exhibitions was the need to design materials and approaches for general education and that would specifically engage children.

The AKM collection currently includes 1,000 objects spanning a millennium of Islamic history. Three objects are on display at any given time. Up to five exhibitions are planned per year, each of will be organized by the AKM or in collaboration with other leading institutions. The inaugural exhibitions included the "In Search of the Artist-Signed Drawings and Paintings from the AKM Collection" in the permanent gallery, "The Garden of Ideas Contemporary Art from Pakistan" in the travelling exhibits' gallery, and site-specific installations in the buildings and the garden area. During the winter of 2015, "The Lost Dhow" exhibition will showcase the discovery of an Arab dhow from the Silk Route found on the coast of China.

The AKM is also dedicated to the various arts of Muslim civilizations and celebrates all forms, for it refuses to be constricted by the typical understanding of what a "museum" is. The auditorium's space allows for various music, dance, theater, and film performances to be enjoyed. The fall 2014 program included over thirteen performances by artists from all over the world, in addition to film screenings and discussions. The education and scholarly programs include a public lecture series, museum lectures, conferences and symposia, highlight tours, artist talks in the galleries, courses and workshops, as well as school and family programs – all of which have proven to be very popular.

The Architecture and the Site

In 2002 the Aga Khan announced his intention to establish the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. The following year he opened communications with Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki. As can be seen in a portion of the detailed correspondence and discussions, the Aga Khan expressed a clear vision of spaces designed with light:

I hope that the building and the spaces around it will be seen as the celebration of Light, and the mysteries of Light, that nature and the human soul illustrate to us at every moment in our lives... I think Light would be an appropriate design direction for the new museum and this concept is of course particularly validated in Islamic texts and sciences: apart from the innumerable reference in the Qur'an to Light in all its forms, in nature and in the human soul, the light of the skies, their sources and their meaning have for centers been an area of intellectual inquiry and more specifically in the field of astronomy. Thus the architecture of the building should seek to express these multiple notions of light, both natural and man-made, through the most purposeful selection of internal and external construction materials, facets of elevations playing each other through the reflectivity of natural or electric light and to create light gain or light retention from external natural sources or man-made internal and external sources.¹



Figure 1. The Aga Khan Museum, North York, ON, Canada

Maki and the architect of record, Toronto-based Moriyama and Teshima, expressed this vision flawlessly in the subtle and considered spaces created within the overall structure. The white granite-faced building with the tilted facet along the roof line reflects the light, and the deep recess for the entrance highlights the building's entrance through shadows. The "Diwan" restaurant on one side and the gift shop/bookstore on the other flank the large double-height central hall.

As the visitor proceeds to the hall's center, the open ticketing area is on one side and the glassed-in courtyard reveals itself. The courtyard's tiled – nearly cubed – void is embellished on every surface: from the colorful stone geometric patterns on the ground to the delicate etched glass surrounding it,

the open sky becomes an extension of the already highly ethereal space. Surrounding the courtyard is the “Bellerive Room,” which houses the ceramic collection of the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan and Princess Catherine Aga Khan. This space was inspired by the “Salon Persian” in their Geneva residence Chateau de Bellerive. Also near the courtyard area is the family activities room and a small café.

All of these spaces are freely accessible to the public without entrance tickets to the museum itself. The courtyard also flanks the entrance to the AKM’s “jewel”: the auditorium. Here, the teak-finished interiors can hold up to 350 people and, with a highly faceted roofline peeking out from the building, is the location for the numerous often sold-out performances.

The entrance to the exhibitions is at the end of the central hall area. The selected objects from the permanent collection are shown here, on the ground floor, in a 1,000 ft² display area. The layout of the permanent exhibit, which benefitted from the experiences of the temporary exhibitions in Europe, is both spacious and considerate. Along with the architecture’s interior qualities (e.g., screen windows and indirect lighting), the collection’s masterpieces are highlighted and designed to be enjoyed.

The visitor is led through various galleries – from the large Mamluk marble basin from Cairo to the illuminated manuscript pages and on to hand-woven carpets from Persia and Ottoman tiles depicting Makkah from Turkey among the numerous masterpieces – in a multi-sensory experience. In addition to the objects, there are audio and video projections for further exploration.

On the second floor, the 800 ft² exhibit space is dedicated to temporary displays. Again, the subtle lighting and built-in elements allow for a slower contemplation of the exhibits that lead the visitors toward a mezzanine area where they can look down the two-story space into the permanent collection. This floor also contains the administration office and the members’ area room, along with an expansive view of the entire complex.

The building, given its apparent simplicity of form yet complete dedication to the quality of materials and finishes, is both the receptacle for highlighting the collections and activities and simultaneously the representation of what the Aga Khan projects envision: highly contemporary and highly relevant architecture that expresses the ideals of Islam. This is what makes the white granite prismatic building both striking and inviting. The 17-acre site is shared by the AKM, the landscaped gardens in the center designed by Beirut-based landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, and the Ismaili center designed by Charles Correa.

The Ismaili Center rising on the edge of the site is not accessible to the public; however, its presence is complementary and engaged with the gardens

and the museum. This is the sixth Ismaili center that the Aga Khan has commissioned and the second one in Canada. The other five are in London, Vancouver, Lisbon, Dubai, and Dushanbe. The two layers of its pyramidal roof includes a layer of double glazing and another layer of triple glazing of fritted glass constructed by Gartner Steel of Germany. This 21 meter span creates an interior prayer hall (*khana*) that is 20 meters high and surrounded by institutional offices of the Ismaili council.

The gardens include several shallow level pools that flawlessly mirror the museum in one direction and the Ismaili Center in the other. During the day the clouds, sky, and facades are perfectly replicated; in the evening, the internal glow emanating from the museum's façade and the center's glass pyramidal roof is amplified with subtle exterior lighting in the gardens and within the pools themselves.

The gardens, inspired by the traditional charbagh in its four-part layout, are framed by over 500 trees and over 5,000 shrubs, including honey locusts, red woods, magnolias, cedars, maples, and trembling aspens. All of this is then framed with ample built-in low-rise seating. The garden's tiles were the location for two of the site-specific installations created for the "Garden of Ideas" temporary exhibitions. They displayed painted vegetal forms by Imran Qureshi in order to create the illusion of a garden within a garden. A large-scale wood and metal printers stamp were used to create geometric-based ant and floral prints designed by Atif Khan. The garden space and the below-ground parking for 600 cars are also freely accessible in an attempt to encourage regular and repeated visits by locals and travellers.

In 2013, the Aga Khan was awarded the RAIC's highest honor: the RAIC Gold Medal. This is the first time that the award, which recognizes the patron's commitment to enabling design projects that promote openness and tolerance through cultural understanding, has been given to a non-architect in thirty years. It is no coincidence that the AKM's desire to communicate Islam's inherent and ancient plurality through artefacts is paralleled in the inherent plurality of the contemporary inclusiveness activated by the AKM. There is a line of connection that clearly allows the AKM to act as an influential cultural hub of activity and promoter of tolerance.

Endnote

1. Quoted in Benoit Junod, "The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto," *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. B. Junod et al. (London: Al Saqi Books, 2012.) [Book Review in *AJISS* 31, no. 2 (spring 2014)].