The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Speech at the 2001 Award Presentation Ceremony of The Aga Khan Award For Architecture
His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan
November 6, 2001
The Citadel, Aleppo, Syria

Your Excellency Prime Minister Miro, Honourable Ministers, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

It is with great joy that I open the 2001 Presentation Ceremony of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. To do so in Syria and in this great city of Aleppo is exhilarating. For me, it is moving in a very personal way, for it takes place in a land of shared history and common heritage.

I express my sincere gratitude to His Excellency Bashar Al-Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic, for making it possible for the ceremony to be held here and for extending his patronage to it. I also thank His Excellency, Prime Minister Dr Mohammad Mustafa Miro for his personal attention to the many arrangements that an occasion like this requires and for his presence and presentation among us this evening.

I am sure you will all join me in thanking Yo-Yo Ma and the members of the Silk Road Ensemble for taking time out of their performance schedule to participate in the Award Ceremony today. Last year the Aga Khan Trust for Culture joined the Silk Road Project created by Yo-Yo Ma to support a variety of projects aimed at broadening the understanding and appreciation of the musical and artistic cultures of the Silk Road that linked the West with Asia and the Middle East — including Syria — for over a thousand years. This collaboration is taking many forms, one of which we have been privileged to experience today. It also includes a series of activities led by the Trust for Culture designed to stimulate interest in traditional music within and between countries in Central Asia and the Middle East. This work owes a great deal to Yo-Yo Ma's vision, creativity, boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm and most of all to his genuine interest and respect for the creative expression of peoples embodied in the rich diversity of their cultures.

Syria has been at the crossroads of civilisations for over 2500 years — an ancient witness to the fruitful interaction of different peoples and cultures. Today that tradition remains a cornerstone in the national psyche; an objective for all future generations of Syrians. It is also an example of which many societies around the world should take note.

Damascus and Aleppo are among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. They functioned as major seats of commerce and learning for over 1000 years and as a central stage in the critical first century of Islam. Since that time, Syria has demonstrated the power of Islam as a crucible for the spirit and the intellect, transcending boundaries of geography and culture. It has demonstrated the Muslim eagerness to learn and adapt, and to share and bequeath an enhanced understanding of man and the universe.

It is also a testimony to the Qur'anic ideal of a vibrant humanity, rich in pluralism, and yet constituting a single human community. This heritage of respect for difference is admirably sustained in Syria today in the value it attaches to diversity, pluralism and positive and productive relationships between different segments of society.

Syria boasts numerous examples of individuals and rulers responding to another precept of the Qur'an: the injunction that mankind holds Allah's creation of the world in trust, with the duty to leave the physical environment better than they found it. The country is rich with illustrations of the special role that architecture plays in expressing the values and creativity of Islamic cultures. From the time of the first cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore, Pakistan in 1980, the Presentation Ceremony has always taken place in a setting of special architectural beauty and significance. I am sure that you will all agree that Aleppo continues that tradition with great distinction.

From our perspective it is also a most appropriate venue to take note of two important milestones for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Next year, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture will complete a quarter of a century of activities dedicated to identifying and premiating works of architecture for Muslim communities that enrich the wide variety of social and cultural contexts in which they have been built. As of next year the Trust’s Historic Cities Support Programme, a product of some of the earliest findings of the Award, will also celebrate an important anniversary. At that point it will have been working for a decade on self-initiated projects to demonstrate that historic buildings and complexes of buildings in the great cities and countrysides of the Islamic world can be restored for sustainable reuse. The most dramatic example so far is a complex of projects in Cairo involving the construction of a 30 hectare park in the centre of the historic city, the excavation and restoration of the Ayyubid wall which defines one of its boundaries and the physical and economic revitalisation of the adjoining neighbourhood, which contains many important mosques and other historic buildings but has deteriorated badly over the last century. Here in Syria, in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities and the Ministry of Culture, the Historic Cities Programme started work more than two years ago. While this beginning maybe modest, our plans are substantial and I am sure that they will grow over time. Syria has so much to offer to its own peoples and to the world.

An international seminar is being planned for early 2003 to critique in detail the work of the Award for Architecture over its first twenty-five years. But I would like to focus this evening on a few of the lessons derived from its experience over that period, because I think they are particularly relevant in the global context at this moment of history.

People interested in the Award for Architecture and why I established it in 1977, often ask me which of the buildings that have been premiated over the years are my favourites. That question, frankly speaking, misses the most important considerations that contributed to the founding of the Award. It also distracts from the understanding of its most important lessons. I say this not to take anything away from the wonderful assemblage of clients and professionals here on the stage who have been selected by the Master Jury to receive recognition for their work on winning projects this year. Each of their projects is very important, and each of them carries important messages and lessons as you will hear and see briefly this evening and in greater detail in tomorrow's seminar. Individually and collectively, the projects that have been recognised over the years convey the meaning of the Award as interpreted by the succession of independent Master Juries.

Thirty years ago, as the eye ranged across most of the developing world, it was difficult to find new construction that reflected in its design a concern, much less an understanding, of the social, cultural, or in some cases, even the climatic context in which it was built. I was particularly disturbed to find this in the Islamic world, given its historical record of architectural achievement and the special place that architecture has played in the aesthetics and spiritual expression of its cultures. The gap between past accomplishment and current practice was massive. This recognition led to the establishment of the Award. And since the problems the Award addresses are global in nature and significance, it was also the basis for the practice of involving professionals from fields other than architecture and from all religious backgrounds.

The processes that define the work of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture reflect this early analysis. The Steering Committee would be composed of distinguished scholars and professionals in different fields and of diverse faiths and would deliberate afresh in each cycle of the Award to define a brief for the Master Jury and select its members. A similarly diverse Master Jury would be free to interpret the brief and refine its own definitions as it conducted its deliberations about the hundreds of projects that had been nominated anonymously by designated professionals throughout the Islamic world.

What was behind all this attention to structure and process? The goal was to create an intellectual space — something we might think of as a beautiful *bustan*:

- in which there would be no possibility of suffocation from the dying weeds of dogma, whether professional or ideological;
- where the flowers of articulation and challenging ideas could grow without restraint;
- where the new plants of creativity and risk-taking could blossom in the full light of day;
- where beauty would be seen in the articulation of difference and for seeking diverse solutions in the form of plants of different sizes, shapes, textures and colours, presented in new configurations and arrangements;
- a *bustan* whose glory would stem from the value and legitimacy of the pluralism of the infinite manifestations of culture in the human community.

The immediate goal was to find the ways in which the profound humanistic tradition of Islam could inform the conception and construction of buildings and public spaces and to do so in ways that were appropriate in scale yet inspiring in impact. At its core is a message of opportunity, of potential, of hope. The larger goal was to test a model, that if successful might be followed in some form or another to address the many issues and pressures facing Islamic countries and communities. The question today is whether individuals and groups of individuals can find the opportunity and the will to take such an approach to the problems of which we are all so acutely aware.

Culture is currently finding more space in the general media and the public consciousness than at any time in the past that I can recall. The debate is still in its infancy and has several dimensions. With respect to relations between the Western and Islamic worlds, are we not seeing a conflict of stereotypes and prejudices, exacerbated by a good measure of ignorance about Islam? There are, of course, some differences, but if superficiality and trivialisation can

be set aside and be replaced by the will to go deeper to seek a solid foundation for mutual understanding and respect, it can be found in the common heritage of the Abrahamic faiths and the ethical principles that they share.

Persistent confusion about the existence and legitimacy of different communities of interpretation within Islam is another source of misunderstanding. No one in the West sees Christianity as an undifferentiated monolith and yet this is the commonly held perception of the peoples of Islam, while the reality is quite different. Pluralism in the practice of Islam and its expression in the cultures of Islamic civilisations have been validated by nearly 1400 years of history, including the history of its art and architecture. Indeed it is precisely this pluralism in architectural greatness that has led many authorities to consider the Islamic architectural heritage superior virtually to all others. It is essential that we respect and value that plurality; that we do all in our power to have it strengthen us in our determination, to build unity in diversity, rather than conflict within constraints.

There is a dimension of the 'civilisation' debate that has not received as much attention to date, about which I would like to make a few remarks. It has less to do with interactions between world cultures; rather it requires careful thought and discussion within the *Ummah*, the community of Muslims around the world.

Many Muslims today, of which I am one, carry with them a memory of the historical achievements of Islamic civilisations. What is the significance of this historical memory for the *Ummah* in the contemporary world with its many and varied challenges? How can we look back and reinvigorate aspects of it and what level of significance should be accorded to it? Since there is this general feeling that something has been lost, it is critical to look back in order to look forward. This is the debate that must occur, in which there must be broad participation on a basis that, like that used in the Award, provides freedom for full exchange. The goal should be to turn this great resource into an intellectual trampoline to generate ideas for building the future productively and constructively in terms that will be meaningful and beneficial for Muslims generally.

Some progress was made at an Award seminar on understanding the specifics of such a process with respect to expressions of Islam in contemporary architecture which I offer as an example, because it illustrates the level at which the process of questioning and deliberations must take place. Two lessons emerged from the discussion. One is that the technical issues of the built environment cannot be considered in isolation from the cultural and spiritual values of a society. The second is that these values have to be related at one and the same time to the historical traditions of Islam, in all their diversity, and to the fresh challenges posed by the opportunities and needs for living in the modern world.

Can these directions of search and enquiry be focussed on the critical the dimensions of Islamic societies today? If we find pride in our sense of the past, but are troubled by how it relates to the present and the future, what are our ways forward? We need to achieve a better understanding of how dynamic cultures have and do lose their vitality, and to identify the potential new linkages between technical issues in relation to cultural and spiritual values on the one hand, and the historical traditions of Islam and the fresh challenges of the world in which we now live. Such discussions will be complex and will be difficult. They will be most productive if they can take place in the environment of a *bustan* such as the one that has proved so valuable in the experience of the Award for Architecture.

In closing, I would like to shift the focus to the clients and professionals assembled on the stage. I congratulate you for the projects that are being recognised this evening. Each of them carries important messages and lessons and collectively they document the continuing evolution of the Award in its search for architecture that has meaning in local contexts and as examples for consideration by those responsible for building more generally. I was particularly pleased to see this year a number of projects related to the needs and aspirations of rural communities because too frequently the fact that the majority of the population in many parts of the Islamic world lives in rural environments is overlooked. I was also delighted to see two projects involving the construction of public spaces, in one case in a building within an institutional complex and in the other in the form of a public park in a major city. I thank the members of the Master Jury and the Steering Committee for the many hours of deliberation that they contributed to bringing this work to public attention and advancing the Award's thinking on critical issues.

Summarising two and half decades of the Award's existence leads me to conclude that the Islamic world, by mobilizing the best of its talents in association with those from other religious backgrounds, has succeeded in reversing what thirty years ago was one of the greatest losses of Islam's cultures and civilisations, namely the quality of its physical expressions in buildings, public spaces, and gardens. Today that situation has been reversed and has been replaced with a sense of pride as the Islamic world builds for the future, knowing that its buildings and spaces are once again of world standing. Where there was once a lack of direction, there is now a clear sense of promise. The essence of this adventure may prove to be valuable as we address other issues of great importance in the Islamic world.

Thank you.