



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Speech to the Asia Society  
His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan  
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New York, USA**

Mr Talbot, ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests and members of the Asia Society,

By the Islamic calendar we will in just a few months enter the 1400<sup>th</sup> year of our faith. In the Christian accounting of time, we stand on the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seems fitting to reflect, to consider what Islam has been and what it is to become in this new age. It is a time to speak out about hazards and about visions.

An overwhelming array of questions face all of us both East and West in the challenging years that are upon us. Political, social, economic and spiritual problems surround us and must be addressed with all the compassion and commitment we can summon.

In my own commitment to the well being of the Ismaili community, I have come to be ever more concerned with the physical form that the Islamic world of the future will take. The houses we live in, our places of work, the institutions that serve us, the gardens and parks where we rest, the markets and, of course, the mosques.

As descendants of the magnificent builders of Islam's golden age, how will we build the Islamic world of the future? Indeed will the Islamic environment of tomorrow be identifiably ours?

These are not frivolous questions: all beings are affected positively or negatively by their surroundings but for Muslims it is a particularly critical matter.

Islam does not deal in dichotomies but in all encompassing unity. Spirit and body are one, man and nature are one. What is more, man is answerable to God for what man has created. Many of our greatest architectural achievements were designed to reflect the promises of life hereafter, to represent in this world what we are told of the next. Since all that we see and do resonates on the faith, the aesthetics of the environment we build and the quality of the social interactions that take place within those environments, reverberate on our spiritual life. The physical structure of Islam is therefore an important concern for me, charged as I am with the leadership of a Muslim community.

As Mr Talbot has told you, we have been involved in construction projects for some time. One of the largest of these undertakings is a 700-bed teaching hospital in

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Karachi with allied medical centres throughout Pakistan. We have found it easy to plan for excellence in this institution's services and teaching standards. But when we spoke of the best possible design for the buildings, excellence was not so easily found. I told our architect, who is American and who has specialized in hospital design, that his idiom should reflect the spirit of Islam. How was this to be done? I did not want him to succumb, through nostalgia, to mimicry of the past.

For the Karachi project, we elected to send our specialised hospital designer through many countries on an extended tour of important Islamic buildings. He was accompanied by a number of people connected with the project, including a fine Iranian architect. After much study, many discussions and several revisions, we have a design solution. But even after all this effort, I am not in a position to affirm that the solution is the right one. We have, on the other hand, identified and addressed ourselves to a fundamental problem for future generations of Muslims, and we have sought a solution. Nothing more.

Our difficulties in discovering what it means to build today in the Spirit of Islam have provoked me into what I expect will be a life-long commitment to identifying and spreading that spirit.

We have sent teams of architectural experts into many countries since the journey of our hospital designer and his group. These observers' reports on the built environment of Islam today are disheartening reading. They tell us that the wonderful distinctiveness of Islamic architecture is disappearing. There is such homogenised blandness, that one is left with few visual clues to know where one is or who the people of this place might be.

Can this be the world of the people who built the mosque of Cordoba? Of the people whose marvellous urban systems in Isfahan are still studied by city planners? The people who created the Mughal gardens of Kashmir? The people who have fashioned the remarkable town architecture of Yemen?

Changes are coming upon Islam faster now than in the age of our greatest territorial expansion. In much of the Islamic world, modern infrastructures are going into place almost overnight. Roads, schools, power plants, hospitals, housing and drainage are needed immediately. Government officials rush to deal with the tides of people swamping the cities. There simply is not time for thoughts of the social fabric, of the long-range effects on the minds and spirits of the people being housed. But to build is to affect the world for a long time. Buildings conceived in haste to meet pressing needs will be negative presences for years ahead.

The treasures of our past are being destroyed and an ever-quickenning construction boom is bringing us too many buildings that I think we will live to despise. Should we allow future generations of Muslims to live without the self-respect of our own cultural and spiritual symbols of power, to practise their faith without also being



reminded of that sense of scale in relation to the universe around us which is so particularly ours?

The field trips I have mentioned are but one part of our quest. A worldwide series of seminars on fundamental issues affecting modern Islamic architecture are assisting us to address the problems.

Eminent scholars of Islamic culture and distinguished architects and designers have met in Paris, Istanbul and Jakarta to discuss the issue and to share their knowledge. The fourth seminar will take place next month in Fez.

In all these journeys and meetings, we have been searching for a definition of Islamic architecture. One of our first conclusions has been that no single definition exists. Islamic architecture has reflected different climates, different times and materials, and thus today, in speaking about a revival, let me underline to you that I am far from referring to a new school! I do not believe it can exist, nor should it be encouraged, because this would stifle that strength which comes from the diversity of the Islamic world, and the creativity of those who will build around us in the years ahead. We have however sought the essentials that go beyond regional factors of climate and materials and the limitations of period technology. What have we found?

One of our major conclusions centred on the serenity of form. In Islamic design the basic forms are balanced and ruled by geometry. There is a sense of stability, tranquillity and equilibrium. And with serenity goes modesty. There is a lack of domination and pride. The superiority of man-made structures over natural environment is a concept alien to Islamic belief.

A second conclusion growing out of the first was the congruence of our traditions with natural forces. There is much Islamic spirit in the current effort in the West to respect and preserve ecological balance. As an example of this, Islamic builders have employed cooling systems in their houses for the last thousand years using only sun and wind for power. Such houses circulated cool air and produced chilled water and even ice.

We found too that the overwhelming unity of Islamic life which sees no division between body and spirit, between this world and the next, was a powerful influence on Islamic architecture. The desire to bring to this world some of the beauty of the hereafter acted as a constant barrier to the discordant or the haphazard in Islamic styles. The calligraphy which adorns so much of what we have built was a constant reminder of spiritual content through its common design, the endless expression of the name of God.

Finally we found that we were able to specify applications of style which expressed our attitudes and beliefs. There is the framing of space for instance. We define each area. We construct a physical context for each activity in daily life. There is always a definite delineation between privacy and community, light areas and areas in shadow,



small spaces and large spaces, interiors and exteriors, each is framed and set apart by itself usually with formality. There is further formality, it might even be called solemnity, in the passageways that connect all of these differing spaces.

And we were reminded that Islamic homes are sanctuaries, places of retreat and refreshment from the noise and movement of public life. Those aspects of our idiom that engender this sense of peace should come with us in our designs for the homes of the future. But here we come upon one of the many paradoxes that struck us in our research. How much of the privacy built into a Muslim house was necessitated by the sequestering of our women? When women step out of *purda*, no doubt the physical form of new households will reflect this change. On the other hand, perhaps the internal orientation of buildings can be most closely linked to the privacy and attitude to the family, the very base of Islam.

There is also a strong kinaesthetic experience in Islamic building. There is a play upon the physical senses — air currents touching the skin, the sound of moving water, the touch of varied surface textures, the richness of colour and the play of light and shade upon the vision, the scent of plants in the courtyards, are touches of the paradise to come.

These then are our findings. What will we do with them? We cannot offer any clear-cut solutions that correspond to the blueprint of the drawing board. Indeed, we do not seek them nor do we believe in them. But we can identify the paths that must be taken if such solutions are to be arrived at in the future. The signposts to these paths are already clearer.

We must begin with a new visual language for our future environment, one generated from within Islam, not devised abroad.

We must foster the growth of a new generation of architects knowledgeable about technology, sensitive to the cultural diversities, regional resources and separate national destinies of their countries and imbued with a renewed sense of pride in the value and dignity of Islamic culture.

We must instil that sense of respect in those who employ architects. The city planners, the government officials, the private clients who commission construction projects must be recognised as the powerful agents of change that they are. They must understand that to build is to exercise power and that their decisions resonate upon Islam.

We must encourage sensitivity to local needs. Labour-intensive construction and the teaching of building skills must be stressed, especially in the many regions where there is great unemployment. We must look for the use of local artisans and craftspeople and of local materials.

This is what we have learned about the problems we face and the ways in which they must be solved. Our assessments, our reflection, our meditation continue. Even so we



are acting. Our first steps along the path begin now. To encourage new creative approaches we have instituted the Award for achievements in Islamic architecture. The first of these will be made at the end of 1980. The awarding of prizes, the recognition of achievement is only a part of our objective. We seek at the same time to open communications between Islam and the West and among builders in the Muslim nations. At present the exchange is very limited, indeed, almost non-existent. An architect in Lahore has little access to news of what is being built in Rabat and if he himself devises a good solution to a design problem, there are no channels through which he can share that solution.

We must also make every effort to see that those who make the journey to study far from home return to their native lands to use their knowledge, to plant the seeds of this revival in the soil of Islam. I might note here that having schools of architecture within the borders of Islamic countries does not guarantee an Islamic architecture. Many architectural schools in the Muslim world have orientated their teaching towards modern Western idioms instead of seeking to revive their own culture.

I am often asked how better understanding can be developed between East and West, whether bridges can be built and what they should look like. There are as many answers as the number of times the question is asked, but it is my deep conviction that a singular step should be taken, a magnificent relationship developed on which so much could be built if the West will cease to look at the Islamic architectural heritage simply as a matter of scholastic interest and admiration. On the contrary, give to it recognition of a different dimension, a dimension of the future. Enhance it, enrich it and enliven it, put at its disposal your talents, your knowledge and your creativity.

I do not wish to imply that the West is solely responsible for what is happening to Islamic environments. I am saying that you could do much more, as you are already doing for your own architectural heritage, to help revive the culture of Islam. Creativity knows no frontiers: it is not of the East nor the West, of the North nor the South, but it sometimes needs awakening, to be set alight, to be shown a purpose. I believe such a time is now.

The recognition that teaching and communications are of the essence and that for years to come the West's contribution is fundamental to an Islamic architectural revival, led me to create the first major teaching and information programme incorporating all the points I have mentioned.

To fulfil the immediate need for an information base for all who require it, and to move into the action as effectively as possible, this first programme will build upon the existing resources of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. I would like to share with you my expectation of the clarity that will follow this time of confusion, this time of turning back to rediscover some of the foundations on which to build the future. Before the end of this century, before the 1420<sup>th</sup> year of our faith, I hope to see an Islamic civilization with a strong sense of purpose, that has become clear in its understanding of itself and of the world around



it. And with those gifts of strength and understanding, our builders, our governments and our private patrons should be able to create an environment that will personify the Spirit of modern Islam.

I hope that in the years ahead we shall see Islamic cities representing to the world all that the City of God and man can be. Cities of which all Muslims can be proud, where our magnificent heritage and our firm place in this new age, are manifest.

As we work towards that vision of the future we will remember the Sura of Light from the Qur'an. It tells us that the oil of the blessed olive tree lights the lamp of understanding, a light that belongs neither to the East nor West. We are to give this light to all. In that spirit, all that we learn will belong to the world — and that too is part of the vision I share with you.