

The Double-Bind of Pluralism: Islamic Modernism and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

Salman Rashdi

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Reading Committee:
Dr. Vikramaditya Prakash, Chair
Dr. Brian McLaren
Dr. Cabeiri Robinson

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Salman Rashdi

University of Washington

Abstract

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Salman Rashdi

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Vikramaditya Prakash

College of Built Environment

This dissertation examines the Aga Khan Award for Architecture as a modern institution of architectural judgment shaped by a productive paradox or “double-bind”: its authority derives from an Islamic ethical horizon, while its pluralist commitments continually extend that horizon beyond fixed definitions of Islamic architecture. Founded in 1977 by Aga Khan IV – the forty-ninth Imam of the Isma’ili Muslims, the Award emerged from a concern that existing architectural discourse could not adequately address the socio-cultural, environmental, and ethical conditions under which architecture in Muslim societies was being made. Its significance lies in the way it has built a framework for evaluating architecture through questions of dignity, repair, continuity, and shared responsibility.

The dissertation argues that the Award translates an Islamically grounded philosophy of pluralism into a modern regime of recognition. The methods through which this translation is shown to occur include Award monographs, steering committee briefs, master jury statements, technical reviews, interviews, and analyses of awarded projects. Pluralism, in this account,

becomes an ethical and epistemological discipline rooted in religious and spiritual thought, then made operative through institutional procedures.

In four chapters, the dissertation traces this movement from ethical formation to architectural evaluation and historiographical consequence. It first situates the Aga Khan's pluralism within Islamic and Isma'ili traditions of knowledge, interpretation, and responsibility. It then examines awarded projects that treat repair, civic capacity, environmental care, and living heritage as architectural value. A third chapter analyzes the AKAA's internal procedures as the infrastructure through which pluralist judgment becomes credible. The final chapter turns to pressure cases such as Charles Correa's Vidhan Bhavan and Li Xiaodong's Bridge School to theorize the Award's central double-bind: the same Islamic pluralism that grounds the institution also authorizes its movement across religious, cultural, geographic, and typological boundaries.

The implications of this double-bind are architectural, institutional, and historiographical. The AKAA advances a form of Islamic modernism best understood as a disciplined practice of judgment. It also exerts a decanonizing pressure on architectural history by expanding the evidence through which architecture becomes exemplary, from form and authorship to use, care, repair, ecology, public consequence, and ethical life.

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Introduction

The Aga Khan Award and the Problem of Pluralist Judgment

In 1977, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the forty-ninth hereditary Imam of the Nizari Isma‘ili Muslims, established the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) as an institution dedicated to recognizing architectural and urban projects in Muslim societies. From its inception, however, the Award was never only a prize for buildings. It emerged from a larger concern about the condition of architecture in the Muslim world, the conceptual inadequacy of existing architectural discourse, and the difficulty of defining what Islamic architecture could mean under modern conditions. By the late twentieth century, architecture in many Muslim societies was caught between inherited aesthetic vocabularies, expanding development pressures, postcolonial nation-building, the prestige of Western modernism, and the material realities of poverty, urbanization, displacement, and environmental stress. The question that was at the heart of the Award’s conception was therefore not simply how to identify excellent buildings. It was how to construct a field of judgment adequate to the social, cultural, ethical, and historical conditions under which architecture in Muslim societies was being made.

The need for such a field was widely felt in the early years of the Award. Writing in 1979, the architectural critic Paul Goldberger described Islamic architecture as having been “severely buffeted” by the new wealth and construction pressures produced by Middle Eastern oil

economies.¹ His phrasing captured one visible dimension of the problem which was that the growing capacity to build had not necessarily produced a correspondingly serious discourse about what to build, how to build, or according to what values architectural quality should be assessed. The problem was broader than stylistic confusion or the importation of Western models. The Award's earliest formulations insisted that architectural excellence could not be separated from questions of community, survival, identity, dignity, and public life. In the editorial note to the AKA's first cycle's monograph, Renata Holod contrasted the popular image of Islamic architecture represented by monuments such as the Taj Mahal with the lived conditions of the majority of Muslims, many of whom, she observed, lived far from such grandeur and at the very margins of survival.² The Award's early ambition, then, was not merely to revive a glorious architectural inheritance, but to question how architecture could respond to contemporary human needs while remaining connected to the cultural and intellectual worlds of Islam.

This concern did not emerge in isolation. Six years before the founding of the Award, the Aga Khan had commissioned the Aga Khan University Hospital and Medical College in Karachi, Pakistan, a project that reveals how intensely this period in his institutional life was occupied with architecture as a modern cultural and ethical problem. The hospital was conceived as a modern medical and research institution that would also engage design traditions associated with Islamic societies. At the beginning of the design process, the Aga Khan sent Thomas Payette, Mozhan Khadem, and members of their design teams to study Islamic historic and vernacular

¹ Paul Goldberger, "Aga Khan Searches for Islamic Architecture's Roots," *New York Times*, October 10, 1979, sec. C, 21.

² Renata Holod, editorial note to *Architecture and Community: Building in the Islamic World Today*, ed. Renata Holod and Darl Rastorfer (New York: Aperture, 1983).

architecture across Spain, North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.³ The resulting project translated courtyards, water courts, axial arrangements, and climatic logics into the setting of a modern hospital and university. This event places the Award within a wider architectural project emerging around the Aga Khan in the 1970s – a project concerned with Islamic architectural inheritance being reinterpreted through modern programs, technologies, institutions, and social needs.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture became the most sustained and influential expression of that project. It was designed to identify and publicize exemplary works, but its larger ambition was discursive. It sought to create a forum in which architects, historians, planners, clients, engineers, scholars, and communities could rethink the built environment of Muslim societies in relation to contemporary questions. The Award's scope was capacious from the start. It recognized mosques and housing, conservation and urban renewal, schools and infrastructure, landscape projects and community initiatives. It addressed architecture as a practice embedded in social, environmental, economic, and ethical relations, rather than one based on formal and aesthetic qualities alone. In the preface to the first Award monograph, the Aga Khan wrote that “architectural excellence is not enough,” adding that to impose predetermined formal or even social criteria at the outset of the Award process would be “a profound moral wrong.”⁴ His statement is one of the earliest expressions of the Award's intellectual ambition, in the sense that it questioned whether excellence could be defined in advance by inherited disciplinary

³ Mildred F. Schmertz, “Indigenous High-Tech [Aga Khan University Hospital and Medical College, Karachi, Pakistan],” *Architectural Record* 175, no. 6 (May 1, 1987): 136.

⁴ Aga Khan IV, preface to *Architecture and Community: Building in the Islamic World Today*, ed. Renata Holod and Darl Rastorfer (New York: Aperture, 1983), 12.

categories, advocating instead for a more open, capacious, and widened remit for what constitutes architectural excellence.

The successes of this intentional broadening of the definition and scope of architecture has been evident through the discussions and recognitions of the Award in the last decades. From awarding works like the Rohingya Refugee camp in 2022, and bringing Muslim women architects to global stages such as Leila Araghian and Marina Tabassum, the award has addressed many of the socio-economic and political problems of our time through its platform and infrastructure. In fact, it has done so in a pioneering way to establish itself as an example of how conversations around architecture must engage the historical, social, cultural, and intellectual, beyond just the formal, spatial, and technological. For instance, the AKAA recognized non-Western architects such as Balkrishna Doshi and Francis Kere for their social engagement in architecture well before they were awarded for the same work by institutions such as the Pritzker prize.⁵

At the heart of this expansiveness lies the AKAA's deep commitment to pluralism – an ethos consistently inscribed into its discourse and institutional architecture, and one that, according to the writings and speeches of the Aga Khan (discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 4), stems from an Islamic ethical repertoire. The Award foregrounds pluralism and its cognates even in the titles of its monographs, from *Architecture and Community* and *Architecture and Polyphony* to more recent cycles, *Architecture and Plurality* (2016), *Architecture in Dialogue* (2019), and *Inclusive*

⁵ Kéré received the Aga Khan Award in 2004 and the Pritzker Prize in 2022. Doshi received the Aga Khan Award in 1995, was an active participant in the AKAA's seminars and publications, and received the Pritzker Prize in 2018.

Architecture (2022), signaling that its capacious definition of architecture rests on a deliberate embrace of multiplicity, dialogue, and difference.

This dissertation argues that the Aga Khan Award for Architecture translates an Islamically grounded philosophy of pluralism into a modern regime of architectural judgment. Through speeches, monographs, steering committee briefs, master jury statements, technical reviews, institutional procedures, interviews, and awarded projects, the AKAAs widens the evidentiary field of architecture beyond form, style, and authorship to include repair, public life, environmental stewardship, social consequence, and continuity in use. In doing so, it advances a form of Islamic modernism whose coherence lies not in stylistic unity or typological consistency, but in a productive double-bind: the Award remains anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon while remaining open to architectural forms, publics, and geographies that exceed any fixed definition of Islamic architecture. Its significance therefore lies not only in the projects it has recognized, but in the form of judgment it has institutionalized.

The term “double-bind” is used here in relation to Fredric Jameson’s account of cultural and ideological situations structured by conflicting demands. Jameson, who also served on the AKAAs Master Jury in 1998, uses the concept to highlight paradoxical situations where cultural forms or ideologies are compelled to negotiate conflicting demands.⁶ In this dissertation, the double-bind highlights the AKAAs’s simultaneous rootedness and openness: the Award draws authority from an Islamic ethical repertoire of pluralism, while that same repertoire authorizes its movement toward works whose relation to Islam may not be formal, typological, demographic,

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12100qm>.

or geographic. This paradox becomes most visible in limit-cases such as Charles Correa's Vidhan Bhavan and Li Xiaodong's Bridge School, which the final chapter treats as pressure tests for the Award's pluralism. Their significance lies not in their exceptionalism alone, but in the way they reveal a structure of judgment that also operates in the Award's more ordinary recognitions of repair, civic life, environmental care, and living heritage. The Islamic grounding of the Award is therefore activated by its pluralist extension, not weakened by it. This double-bind is the structure through which the AKAA both retains its specificity and expands the boundaries of architectural discourse.

The term "pluralism", as has been discussed above, is central to this argument. In the Aga Khan's speeches and institutional projects, pluralism does not refer merely to demographic diversity, liberal tolerance, or the peaceful coexistence of different groups. It refers instead to an ethical and epistemological orientation toward difference itself. In his 2017 address at the Global Centre for Pluralism (which was established by the Aga Khan and the Canadian government) in Ottawa, the Aga Khan described pluralism as the "embrace of difference" and as an "indispensable foundation for human peace and progress."⁷ Across his public discourse, he has repeatedly grounded this commitment in Qur'anic ideas, often citing two verses in particular: "Allah created all Humans from a single soul" (4:1), and "Among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors. In these are signs for humankind." (30:22) In this register, it is important to understand that pluralism is not merely a concession that Islam makes to modern multiculturalism. It is presented as an Islamic ethical imperative that

⁷ Aga Khan IV, "Opening Ceremony of the New Headquarters of the Global Centre for Pluralism," Ottawa, Canada, 16 May 2017.

requires humility before difference, responsibility toward others, and institutions capable of sustaining forms of shared life across social, religious, and cultural boundaries.

The AKAA gives this ethic architectural and institutional form. Its pluralism is visible not only in the diversity of projects it has recognized, but in the way it reframes architectural judgment. The Award does not define Islamic architecture primarily by domes, minarets, ornament, patronage, or geography, though all of these may matter in particular cases. Instead, it has repeatedly recognized projects whose value lies in how they repair damaged landscapes, sustain communities, enable public dignity, extend craft traditions, negotiate memory, or make plural civic life possible. This is why the Award has been able to honor projects as different as the Wadi Hanifa Wetlands in Riyadh, the Gando Primary School in Burkina Faso, the Bait ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, the rehabilitation of Shibam in Yemen, the Islamic cemetery in a small Austrian town, the Superkilen park in Copenhagen, the Arab World institute in Paris, and the community spaces built for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. These projects do not cohere through a single visual language. They cohere through an expanded understanding of what architecture is for and how its significance can be evidenced.

This expanded understanding produces the dissertation's central problem. If the Award is grounded in an Islamic ethical horizon, how can it recognize works whose relation to Islam is not immediately formal, demographic, or geographic? Conversely, if the Award's pluralism allows such wide recognition, how does it avoid dissolving into a generalized humanitarian prize without a distinctive intellectual or religious orientation? This tension has been noted by critics and by figures associated with the Award itself. Hasan-ud-din Khan, one of the institution's early directors, voiced it in the following words:

The Award should clearly define its audience as being for Muslims, Muslim societies, or using Islamic principles of design. Casting the net too widely leads to confusion. However, this is not to make the Award circumscribed but to discuss architecture to bring the concerns of Muslims into the global discourse of architecture.⁸

His words succinctly encapsulate the difficulty at the heart of the AKAA. The institution must be open enough to bring the concerns of Muslim societies into wider conversation, yet bounded enough that those concerns remain intelligible as something more than generic global benevolence.

The strongest pressure on this problem appears in projects such as Charles Correa's Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal, awarded in 1998, and Li Xiaodong's Bridge School in Xiashi, China, awarded in 2010. The first is a secular legislative building organized in part through a Hindu mandala-based geometry and iconographic references to the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi; the second is a rural school and pedestrian bridge in a Chinese village with no obvious connection to Muslim societies. Both have prompted versions of the question: how are these projects relevant to an award founded to address architecture in Muslim societies? This dissertation treats such cases as pressure tests, and discusses these two particular cases, as well as their criticisms, in more in detail in Chapter 4. They reveal that the AKAA's pluralism does not merely expand the list of acceptable architectural forms; it changes the grounds on which architectural meaning is authorized. A project may become legible to the Award not because it looks Islamic, but because

⁸ Hasan-ud-din Khan, unpublished report, obtained by author through personal correspondence, used with permission.

it materializes ethical concerns that the Award understands as central to its Islamic and pluralist horizon such as public dignity, civic participation, repair, reconciliation, care, or the creation of shared space.

Yet the double-bind is not present only in such limit-cases. It is already visible in the Award's ordinary evaluative practice. The AKAA's rootedness in an Islamic ethical horizon and its openness to heterogeneous architectural practices together expand what counts as both "Islamic" and "architecture." In ecological projects, the Award has treated environmental repair as a matter of architectural value. In schools and community buildings, it has treated capacity-building and everyday civic life as evidence of excellence. In heritage projects, it has treated continuity not as preservation in isolation, but as the ongoing ability of built environments to sustain social, economic, and ritual life. All of these are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. These judgments are rooted and open at once. They do not abandon Islamic ethical concerns; they extend them into contemporary questions of ecology, development, displacement, gender, craft, governance, and public life. The double-bind therefore refers not to a late contradiction that appears only when the Award reaches too far, but the structure through which the Award has learned to judge.

This structure also requires attention to institutionality. The AKAA is not simply a reflection of the Aga Khan's philosophy, nor simply a collection of exemplary buildings. It is a regime of recognition composed of steering committees, master juries, nominators, technical reviewers, site visits, monographs, public statements, shortlists, exhibitions, publications, and sister institutions. These procedures are the means through which pluralism acts as a form of credible judgment rather than just a rhetorical choice. The Award's long-serving director, Farrokh Derakhshani, used the language of "relevance" in my interview with him to describe how the institution has

continually adjusted itself across time.⁹ Relevance, in this dissertation, refers to the operational counterpart to pluralism. Pluralism identifies the ethical horizon, and relevance, in turn, marks the institutional work required to keep that horizon responsive to changing historical conditions. This work includes the rotation of juries, the verification of projects on site, the publication of jury statements, the public release of shortlists, and the circulation of lessons through monographs, exhibitions, and related institutions such as the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture and the journal *Mimar*.

The dissertation therefore approaches the AKAA as an institution in which Islamic ethics, modern procedures, and architectural historiography intersect. It questions how a religiously grounded discourse of pluralism is translated into evaluative criteria; how those criteria reshape what counts as architectural excellence; how the Award's institutional procedures sustain openness without abandoning authority; and how this form of judgment pressures the canonical habits of architectural history. The focus here is not only on what the AKAA has awarded, but how it has made certain forms of architecture visible, valuable, and historically significant.

The stakes of this argument are historiographical as well as institutional. The AKAA has often been described as broadening the representation of architecture from the Muslim world, the developing world, or the Global South. That description is accurate, but insufficient. The Award does not merely add neglected works to an existing canon. It asks architectural history to consider different forms of evidence: maintenance regimes, environmental repair, public use, craft knowledge, community participation, institutional procedure, and ethical consequence. In

⁹ Farrokh Derakhshani, interview by Author, Aga Khan Award for Architecture offices, Geneva, Switzerland, March 28, 2024.

doing so, it raises a larger question about how architectural value is produced and authorized. If architecture can be judged through the worlds it sustains rather than only through the forms it displays, then the discipline's inherited criteria of significance are themselves open to revision.

This dissertation refers to that that pressure, cautiously, as decanonizing. By decanonization, I do not mean the replacement of one canon by another, nor the simple inclusion of Islamic or non-Western examples within a preexisting disciplinary frame. I mean a disturbance in the criteria through which architecture becomes historically legible as exemplary. The AKA's pluralism has such force because it does not only diversify architectural history's objects; it widens the methods by which those objects are judged. Its double-bind, anchored yet open, Islamic yet extensible, institutional yet revisable, allows it to participate in global architectural culture while challenging the assumptions through which that culture has often defined architectural seriousness.

The chapters of this dissertation trace this argument across ethical, architectural, institutional, and historiographical registers. The dissertation begins by grounding the Aga Khan's pluralism in Qur'anic and Isma'ili ethical traditions, then shows how that pluralism becomes an evaluative frame for architecture through repair, public-making, and living heritage. It then turns to the institutional procedures through which the Award sustains relevance across changing conditions, before returning to the paradoxes generated by its pluralist openness. Across these chapters, the AKA appears as an institution that has made the question of 'Islamic Architecture' more demanding. Its importance lies in showing that Islamic modernism can operate not only as a style, or ideology, or reformist discourse, but as a disciplined practice of judgment.

Key Terms: Pluralism, Islamic Modernism, Repair, and the Double-Bind

Several terms recur throughout the dissertation, so a brief note on their boundaries is warranted. The first and most important term is ‘pluralism’. In ordinary political language, pluralism often refers to the coexistence of different groups within a shared civic order. It can refer to diversity, tolerance, or multicultural inclusion. In the Aga Khan’s discourse however, as has been discussed, pluralism has a more active and demanding meaning. It is not simply the presence of difference, but the ethical and institutional work required to recognize, sustain, and learn from difference. The Aga Khan’s repeated distinction between diversity as a social fact and pluralism as a cultivated response is important here. A society may be diverse without being genuinely pluralist; pluralism requires habits, institutions, and forms of public life that allow difference to become a source of strength rather than fracture.

The Aga Khan often frames this idea through Qur’anic language, especially the creation of humanity from a single soul and the diversity of languages and colors as signs of God. In this sense, pluralism is not treated in his thought as a liberal value added to Islam from the outside. It is presented as an Islamic ethical imperative that speaks directly to modern conditions of migration, inequality, conflict, and interdependence.¹⁰ For this dissertation, that framing is significant because the Aga Khan Award for Architecture does not merely celebrate diversity in its selection of projects. It uses pluralism as a way of widening architectural judgment by asking how architecture sustains dignity, enables shared life, repairs damaged environments, and makes difference inhabitable.

¹⁰ Aga Khan IV, *The Cosmopolitan Ethic in a Fragmented World*, Jodidi Lecture, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, Memorial Church, November 12, 2015.

The second term is Islamic modernism. This term refers to the effort to articulate modern forms of judgment, public life, and institutional practice through Islamic moral and interpretive resources. In the case of the AKAAs, this modernism is not expressed primarily through domes, minarets, calligraphy, or other recognizable markers of Islamic form, although such elements may matter in particular projects. It appears instead in the Award's attempt to bring Islamic ethical concerns such as pluralism, dignity, stewardship, knowledge, care, and responsibility, into the procedures of a modern architectural prize that include juries, technical reviews, monographs, public statements, and international debate.¹¹

This definition helps avoid two misleading readings. The AKAAs are not a traditionalist institution trying to preserve a fixed architectural language of Islam. It is also definitely not simply a secular global prize with Muslim patronage. It is a modern institution that uses Islamic ethical and intellectual resources to rethink architectural value. Its Islamic modernism lies precisely in this negotiation because it works through modern institutional forms while refusing to let architecture be judged only by the inherited criteria of Euro-American modernism, such as formal innovation, technological progress, authorial originality, or stylistic rupture.

This also requires a brief distinction between Islamic architecture and Muslim architecture. The terms overlap, but they are not identical. In this dissertation, "Islamic" usually marks ethical, intellectual, theological, philosophical, or institutional claims. It refers to the horizon of values and interpretive traditions through which architecture may be connected to Islam. "Muslim," by contrast, more often marks social, historical, geographic, or demographic contexts such as

¹¹ This usage is in conversation with scholarship on plural/alternative modernities, including work that foregrounds "Muslim modernities" to resist singular civilizational accounts of modernity (see Ayn B. Sajoo, ed., *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination*).

Muslim patrons, Muslim users, Muslim-majority societies, Muslim minorities, or built environments shaped by the lives of Muslim communities.¹² The distinction is useful because the AKAAs often operate between these meanings. A mosque in Dhaka, a wetland project in Riyadh, or a conservation project in Yemen may be Islamic and Muslim in different ways. Other projects may have no obvious Islamic form or Muslim demographic context, yet become legible to the Award through ethical concerns that the institution understands as part of its Islamic horizon.

The fourth term is repair. In this dissertation, repair is both an ethical concept and an architectural criterion. At the ethical level, it refers to the Aga Khan's pluralism as a response to fractured modern conditions such as colonial violence, displacement, nationalism, ecological crisis, sectarian conflict, and the weakening of inherited frameworks of authority.¹³ Pluralism is therefore not treated as an abstract celebration of difference, but as a discipline for rebuilding shared life when consensus is unavailable.

At the architectural level, repair refers to the ways projects mend or sustain relations. It includes ecological restoration, refugee dignity, civic capacity, craft continuity, public access, heritage as living practice, and the reanimation of damaged or neglected spaces. Repair does not mean restoration alone. It points to a broader evaluative shift which highlights the fact that architecture matters not only because of what it looks like, but because of what it enables, protects, restores, or keeps in motion. This is one of the main bridges between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. The first chapter develops pluralism as an ethical discipline of repair; the second shows how the AKAAs make repair visible as architectural value.

¹² This usage also follows from the conversations that inform the previous term and its discussions (see Ameen B. Sajoo, ed., *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination*).

¹³ Aga Khan IV, "The Cosmopolitan Ethic in a Fragmented World."

The final term is double-bind. I use this concept to describe the productive contradiction at the center of the AKAA. The Award must remain anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon in order to retain its intellectual and moral specificity. At the same time, that horizon requires openness to architectural forms, publics, and geographies that cannot be secured in advance by Islamic style, Muslim demography, or territorial boundary. If the Award defines Islam too rigidly, it risks reducing Islamic architecture to typology or iconography. If it opens too broadly, it risks losing the specificity that distinguishes its pluralism from generic humanitarian universalism.

The double-bind is most visible in the dissertation's final chapter, especially in the discussion of Vidhan Bhavan and the Bridge School. Yet it is not limited to those exceptional cases. It is also present in the Award's ordinary evaluative practice whenever Islamic ethical grounding expands what counts as architecture, especially when ecological restoration, school-building, refugee space, civic participation, or living heritage become evidence of architectural excellence. The double-bind therefore refers to the Award's central method of judgment. It is rooted enough to remain ethically grounded, and open enough to allow that grounding to travel into new forms of architectural significance.

These terms establish the dissertation's basic conceptual foundation. Pluralism refers to the ethical horizon; Islamic modernism marks the institutional form that horizon takes under modern conditions; the distinction between Islamic and Muslim architecture clarifies the different registers in which the Award operates; repair points to the ethical and architectural labor through which pluralism becomes active; and the double-bind names the contradiction that makes the Award both difficult and intellectually consequential.

Theoretical and Historiographical Framework: The Intellectual Stakes of a Paradoxical Pluralism

The theoretical problem at the center of this dissertation begins with a difficulty the Aga Khan Award for Architecture itself creates. The AKAA was founded on an Islamic ethical horizon and directed toward the built environments of Muslim societies, yet its procedures, publications, and winning projects repeatedly exceed any narrow definition of Islamic architecture as style, typology, geography, patronage, or demographic affiliation. Its pluralism gives the Award coherence, but it also unsettles the boundaries through which that coherence might be easily defined. To understand the Award, then, one must account for a paradox: the same Islamic ethical commitments that ground the institution also authorize its movement beyond fixed markers of Islamic identity. This paradox is the very intellectual condition that makes the AKAA historically and theoretically significant.

That condition cannot be addressed by a single field of scholarship. Where the Award unsettles the boundaries of Islamic architecture, it also raises questions about the meaning of modernity, the public life of Islam, the institutional form of Ismaʿili pluralism, and the criteria through which architecture becomes historically valuable. The framework that follows, therefore, brings together several bodies of literature concerning global modernisms, Islamic modernism, Ismaʿili studies, architectural historiography, and canon formation, as fields that the AKAA's paradox forces into contact with each other.

The Award makes visible the inadequacy of a singular account of modernity, the limits of essentialist definitions of Islam, the institutional character of contemporary Ismaʿili pluralism, and the canonical habits through which architectural history has often determined what counts as

exemplary. To understand the AKAA, then, is also to rethink how modernity, Islam, and architecture are made legible as categories of historical judgment.

The Intellectual Stakes of the AKAA's Paradoxical Pluralism

The paradox of pluralism within the AKAA, where the Award simultaneously depends on and exceeds its Islamic origins, should not be understood as a mere institutional dilemma. It is, I posit, an intellectual position. The Award's expansive definition of architecture, and its equally expansive understanding of what may be significant to Muslim societies, do not signal an absence of ideological coherence. Rather, they represent a strategic intervention into dominant accounts of modernity and architectural history. The AKAA's pluralism is ethical and institutional, but it is also epistemological. It challenges the assumption that Islam must be understood through fixed civilizational boundaries, and it resists the equally powerful assumption that modernity must be measured by a European historical template.

This dissertation therefore reads the AKAA's pluralism as a form of Islamic modernism. By this, I do not mean that the Award produces an Islamic style of modern architecture, or that it offers a simple alternative to Western modernism. Rather, the AKAA makes visible an Islamic modernism of judgment by practicing a way of evaluating architecture through Islamic ethical concerns while participating in modern institutional procedures of recognition, publication, expertise, and public debate. This mode of judgment depends on the Award's ability to remain rooted and open at once. It is rooted in the Aga Khan's articulation of pluralism as an Islamic ethical imperative. Yet it remains open to projects, publics, and geographies that cannot be secured in advance by Islamic form or Muslim demography.

Mohammed Arkoun's critique of essentialism in Islamic Modernity is crucial in understanding how the AKAA's pluralism aligns with a critical rethinking of Islamic modernity. Arkoun repeatedly warned against reducing Islam to a monolithic entity, whether through Orientalist representations that freeze Islam as a civilizational other or through reformist and fundamentalist responses that seek to recover a purified essence. His insistence on the multiplicity of Islamic experience is especially important for this dissertation. As he writes:

Islam has meant many things to many people at different epochs, and no logic permits dismissal of any of these views – not the superstitious worship of saint figures in a rural Algerian village, nor the philosophical inquiries of an Avicenna, nor the mysticism of cult groups – as un-Islamic.¹⁴

Arkoun's formulation refuses the logic by which Islam becomes intellectually manageable only when reduced to a single doctrinal, legal, or cultural form. The AKAA's pluralism operates in a comparable register. It does not define Islamic architecture by a single visual language or by the recovery of an authentic origin. It constructs a field of judgment in which multiple ways of inhabiting Islamic ethical and cultural worlds can become architecturally meaningful. The Award's breadth, so often the source of criticism, can therefore be read as a refusal of premature closure.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne's work on open modernity extends this argument from Islam to modernity itself. Diagne resists both the idea that modernity is a singular European project and the notion that Islam must produce an alternative modernity sealed off from Europe. Through his

¹⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, foreword to *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. Robert D. Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), x.

reading of the Indian poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Diagne emphasizes movement, renewal, and transformation as central to Islamic thought. His work sheds light on the question of how Islam can preserve itself by refusing change, and how fidelity itself might require transformation. In this reading, the only true faithfulness is to the “movement of life.”¹⁵ Diagne’s position also refuses the temptation to “oppose to European modernity an alternative Islamic modernity,” just as it refuses the idea that there is only “a modernity” that eventually arrives everywhere.¹⁶

This is precisely the terrain on which the AKAAs operate since it does not position itself as an Islamic alternative to modern architecture in the sense of an opposing civilizational style. It creates a space in which Islamic ethical reasoning participates in a shared but uneven global conversation about architecture’s public, social, environmental, and spiritual responsibilities. The Award’s pluralism acknowledges that Islamic modernity is always in conversation with other traditions: not subordinate to them, but also not sealed off from them.

The language of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, offers a useful way to describe the movement of architectural meaning within the AKAAs. The Award deterritorializes Islamic architecture by refusing to fix it within a single aesthetic, geographic, or doctrinal territory. It then reterritorializes architectural meaning onto new terrains such as ecological restoration, civic dignity, public participation, displacement, heritage as living practice, gendered access, community life, and environmental stewardship.¹⁷

¹⁵ Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition*, trans. Jonathan Adjemian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

This movement is not a loss of Islamic meaning. It is one way that Islamic ethical concerns become active under modern conditions.

The intellectual stakes of the AKAA's paradoxical pluralism therefore lie in its capacity to hold together continuity and transformation. The Award's Islamic grounding does not function as a closed classificatory system. It functions as an ethical horizon that can be translated into diverse architectural conditions. Its openness does not dissolve that grounding, but extends it. The AKAA's pluralism, therefore, is a modern Islamic practice of judgment, one that challenges both essentialist accounts of Islam and Eurocentric accounts of modernity.

The Award's paradoxical pluralism requires a framework capacious enough to address plural modernities, Islamic modernism, Isma'ili institutional ethics, and the historiographical production of architectural value – scholarly fields whose pertinence to the dissertation is discussed in detail below.

Plural Modernities and the Decentering of Architectural Modernism

The first debate concerns modernity itself. The AKAA emerged in a period when architectural modernism was still frequently narrated through European and North American frameworks of industrialization, technological progress, functional abstraction, avant-garde rupture, and heroic authorship. Within such narratives, architecture in the Muslim world, the developing world, or the Global South often appeared as derivative, belated, regional, vernacular, or resistant. The Award's archive unsettles that interpretive hierarchy. It treats architectural work in Muslim and postcolonial contexts as sites where modern architectural value is actively produced, rather than as secondary evidence of modernism's diffusion.

Susan Stanford Friedman's work on planetary modernisms offers one way to conceptualize this shift. Rather than treating modernism as the cultural expression of a singular European modernity, Friedman presents modernity as something that has appeared across multiple geographies and temporalities, produced by distinct but overlapping conditions of rupture, exchange, and encounter.¹⁸ Her formulation is especially helpful: "modernity involves a powerful vortex of geohistorical conditions that coalesce to produce sharp ruptures from the past," often intensified by "intercultural contact zones" formed through conquest, migration, commerce, technological exchange, and cultural circulation.¹⁹ This account shifts attention away from modernity as European possession and toward modernity as a condition generated through movement and transformation.

The AKAA's archive bears directly on this point. The projects recognized by the Award are not simply local responses to a global modern condition. They are themselves modern articulations of social change, environmental pressure, cultural negotiation, and institutional experimentation. A school built through local labor and climatic intelligence, a restored urban quarter sustained through governance mechanisms, a wetland that turns ecological repair into public infrastructure, or a refugee space that makes dignity possible under emergency conditions: these are not peripheral to modern architecture. They are modern architecture understood through different criteria of value.

In a complementary but distinct move, Dipesh Chakrabarty's work provides a historiographical critique that further grounds the AKAA's intervention. He critiques the historicist assumption

¹⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, introduction to *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

that all societies move along a singular temporal arc toward a European model of modernity. His notion of “hyperreal Europe” identifies how Europe functions not merely as a place, but as an imagined standard against which other societies are measured.^{20 21} Architectural history has often reproduced this logic when it narrates modern architecture through a sequence of European and North American movements while treating other geographies as adaptations or supplements. The AKAA resists this teleology by affirming architectural practices in Muslim and postcolonial contexts that do not need to “catch up” to Western design principles in order to count as modern.

The Award’s engagement with globalization likewise complicates any simple opposition between local tradition and global modernity. Arjun Appadurai’s work is useful here because he moves away from presenting globalization as a process of homogenization and instead, discusses it as a form of negotiations through flows of people, media, technologies, capital, and ideas. His language of scapes – ethnoscapas, technoscapas, mediascapas, financescapas, ideoscapas – helps describe a modernity that is mobile, uneven, and constantly rearticulated.²² The AKAA does not treat Muslim societies as sealed cultural units, nor does it treat global modernity as a force that simply erases local difference. Its awarded projects often emerge through transnational expertise, development institutions, diasporic publics, local materials, changing technologies, and situated social needs. They show modernity as mediation rather than mimicry.

²⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27–34.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “In Defense of ‘Provincializing Europe’: A Response to Carola Dietze,” *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 47, no. 1 (2008): 85–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2008.00438.x>

²² Arjun Appadurai, “Here and Now,” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1–23.

Jyoti Hosagrahar's work on indigenous modernities brings this argument more directly into the built environment by claiming that "alternative versions of modernity that unfolded in specific places and cultures must necessarily have different trajectories and outcomes in the built environment."²³ This is central to this dissertation's reading of the AKA. Modern architecture need not be identified only with industrial production, formal abstraction, or technological spectacle. It can appear in local materials, craft systems, community-based construction, adaptive heritage practice, ecological repair, and civic spaces formed under conditions of scarcity. The AKA makes such practices visible as transformations of what modern architecture can mean, rather than as exceptions to it.

This argument can also be extended and located in Islamic architectural historiography. Prof. Katharine Bartsch's 2005 doctoral dissertation on the AKA does it through the paradigm of encounter. She argues that the Award disrupts Eurocentric representations of Islamic architecture as "other" by promoting Muslim agency and the global diffusion of Islam. Yet she also cautions that the Award "does not replace representations of Islamic architecture as 'other' with projections of a uniform 'self' image."^{24 25} This is crucial. The AKA does not simply reverse the hierarchy between West and Islam, modernity and tradition, center and periphery. It creates a more difficult field of encounter in which architecture from Muslim societies participates in modern architectural thought without being assimilated into Western categories or isolated as civilizational difference. The transformative and impactful power of the AKA lies in the very

²³ Jyoti Hosagrahar, introduction to *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 5.

²⁴ Katharine Bartsch, *Re-Thinking Islamic Architecture: A Critique of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture through the Paradigm of Encounter* (PhD diss., University of Adelaide, School of Architecture and the Built Environment, 2005), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

fact that it is “not exclusively European or Muslim, it targets disparate audiences, its primary medium of representation is English, and it plays a leading role in the contemporary discourse on Islamic architecture *and* a focus on Muslim communities is sustained.”²⁶

The theoretical significance of this point is that the AKAA helps redefine what modern architectural value can be. It treats architecture in Muslim societies as a site where modernity is judged, debated, and institutionalized. That position prepares the next question: how does Islam participate in this modernity without being reduced either to secular assimilation or to a defensive claim of authenticity?

Islamic Modernism beyond Secular Assimilation and Essentialist Authenticity

The AKAA’s Islamic modernism must be distinguished from two common misreadings. The first assumes that Islam becomes modern only when translated into secular terms, with religion privatized or reduced to cultural identity. The second assumes that Islamic architecture becomes modern by recovering an authentic tradition against Western modernity. The Award does not fit either model. It is a modern institution that uses Islamic ethical resources to reshape architectural judgment under contemporary conditions.

Talal Asad’s critique of secularism provides an important starting point. He critiques secularism as a Western epistemic construct rather than a universal historical development and argues that secularism is not a neutral framework but a political and ideological formation that has reshaped religious traditions to fit within the modern state. He distinguishes between a secularity (a condition where religious considerations are absent) and secularism (a structures system of

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

governance that regulates religious expression in public life).²⁷ Asad's critique is particularly relevant to the AKAA, which operates within a global secular framework (as an architectural prize) while maintaining an Islamic epistemological foundation. His argument that secularism is a historically contingent, European derived concept challenges the notion that modernity necessarily entails the privatization of religion. He forces scholars to rethink modernity's relationship with religion, showing that the secular itself is historically produced rather than an inevitable endpoint of progress. This insight is crucial to understanding the AKAA's paradoxical position – it exists within the global architectural community, which largely operates within a secular framework, yet it draws from Islamic thought and pluralist ethics in shaping its discourse on architecture. This mirrors the argument that Islamic modernism is not simply a response to Western secularism but a historically situated mode of engaging with modernity on its own terms.

Wael Hallaq's critique of modernity's moral predicament is significant in understanding this tension, even though this dissertation does not adopt his argument in full. Hallaq argues that the modern state, as a European creation, is fundamentally at odds with Islamic political and legal traditions because it relies on centralized bureaucratic control, sovereignty, and positivist law – none of which align with premodern Islamic governance, which was decentralized and operated through moral and communal self-regulation.²⁸ His account has been criticized, including by scholars such as Ira Lapidus, for idealizing premodern Islamic governance and underestimating its historical complexity. That critique is important and I consider it to be fully valid. Yet Hallaq's

²⁷ Talal Asad, "Introduction: Thinking about Secularism," in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–21.

²⁸ Wael Hallaq, introduction to *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), ix–xiv.

ideas are significant here because he insists that Islamic engagements with modern institutions involve moral and epistemic negotiation. For the AKAA, the relevant institution is not the modern state but the modern regime of recognition. Awards, juries, expert evaluation, and global visibility are forms that the AKAA inhabits while attempting to redirect them toward a broader ethical understanding of architectural value. This is one dimension of its double-bind.

On the other hand, Mahmood Mamdani's critique of "culture talk" helps resist the opposite danger: treating Islam as a fixed cultural essence. Mamdani focuses on how Islam itself has been framed in essentialist terms, often as a fixed, unchanging tradition at odds with progress and reason, and critiques this essentialist construction. He shows for instance how jihad re-emerged in the middle of the 20th century in its militant form not through Islamic tradition itself but through modern geopolitical entanglements, especially the Cold War and the U.S. support for the Afghan Mujahideen²⁹. Islamic architecture has been subject to similar expectations. It is frequently asked to declare itself through inherited typologies, visible symbols, or civilizational continuity. The AKAA resists that reduction. It recognizes that Muslim societies and Islamic institutions are shaped by migration, urbanization, environmental crisis, displacement, global capitalism, media, development, and political conflict. Its Islamic modernism lies in engaging these conditions through ethical judgment.

Edward Said's critique of the simplification of Islam into binaries of tradition and modernity remains relevant for the same reason.³⁰ The AKAA interrupts the assumptions by which Islamic architecture is framed as either archaic, derivative, or resistant to progress. Its pluralism shows

²⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 770.

³⁰ Edward Said, "Impossible Histories: Why the Many Islams Cannot Be Simplified," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2002, 69–74.

that Islamic architectural modernism can be rooted without being essentialist, open without being secularized into neutrality, and global without becoming universalist in the old modernist sense. The Award is not an “Islamic alternative” to modernism as a separate civilizational program. It reveals modernism itself to be a field of negotiation across Islamic, postcolonial, and global contexts.

This is why Islamic modernism in this dissertation is defined as a practice of judgment rather than as a style. The AKAAs Islamic modernism appears in the way it uses Islamic ethical resources to revise the criteria of architectural value under modern conditions. It frames how architecture can be modern because it responds intelligently and ethically to the conditions of its time.

Isma‘ili Pluralism as Institutional Form

The AKAAs pluralism is also specifically shaped by the institutional world of the Nizari Isma‘ili Imamate. The Award is not simply a Muslim institution in a broad sense. It was founded and is chaired by the Aga Khan, the Imam of the Isma‘ili Muslims, and it belongs to a wider network of institutions through which the Imamate engages questions of development, culture, education, heritage, and public life. This is not to say that the Award represents Isma‘ilism in a narrow sectarian way. On the contrary, one of its defining features is that it serves publics far beyond the Isma‘ili community. But the form of its pluralism cannot be understood without attending to the Aga Khan’s role as Imam, the Isma‘ili emphasis on interpretation and knowledge, and the community’s position as a minority within the broader Muslim ummah.

The Aga Khan’s speeches repeatedly present pluralism as both an Islamic and institutional responsibility. He does not frame it only as a private virtue or interfaith sentiment. He describes

it as something that must be cultivated through education, civil society, cultural programs, public institutions, and forms of governance. The Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa makes this institutional logic explicit by showing that pluralism becomes a field of policy, pedagogy, public reasoning, and civic action. The AKAA operates in the same register. It is one institution within a wider ecology that includes the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP), the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard and MIT, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), and other initiatives through which religious ethics are translated into worldly institutional forms.

Jonah Steinberg's account of the "Isma'ili modern" describes Aga Khan institutions as taking "many forms at once: a polity, a religion, a corporate structure, a bureaucratic network." The formulation is valuable because it resists easy classification. The AKAA is not a state agency, mosque, professional association, or conventional philanthropic foundation, even though it shares features with each. It belongs to a transnational institutional world in which religious authority, development practice, cultural production, and public ethics are intertwined.

Steinberg's account of AKTC and AKAA initiatives as producing "alternative historical counterdiscourses" is especially relevant because it suggests that the Award does not only recognize buildings; it also participates in remaking the historical narratives through which Islamic architecture is understood.³¹

There is also a deeper epistemological basis of this institutional project, and professor Khalil Andani's work presents that in a succinct way. He shows how modern Isma'ilism is rooted in a

³¹ Jonah Steinberg, *Isma'ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 72.

tradition that integrates reason, revelation, interpretation, and ethics. From the Fatimid investment in institutions of knowledge to the philosophical contributions of thinkers such as Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Ismaʿili thought has consistently placed knowledge within a moral and spiritual frame.^{32 33} Knowledge, in this reading, is oriented toward the betterment of the individual and society. The ACAA reflects this epistemology when it recognizes architecture that uplifts marginalized communities, responds to climate challenges, sustains local traditions, or creates conditions for public dignity. Such recognition is not only an aesthetic gesture. It is an ethical claim about what knowledge and architecture are for.

The figure of the Imam is central here. In Ismaʿili thought, the Imam is a guide for the present time, an interpreter of divine guidance under changing historical conditions. This allows the Aga Khan to engage modernity not as a fixed condition to be opposed or replicated, but as a context that must be ethically interpreted and navigated. The ACAA can therefore be understood as one architectural expression of this interpretive responsibility. It translates an Ismaʿili ethic of knowledge, pluralism, and public care into the modern practice of architectural evaluation.

Sahir Dewji's concept of applied pluralism further clarifies the institutional character of the Aga Khan's project. Dewji shows that the Aga Khan's pluralism is oriented toward public partnership, civil society, and the infrastructures of coexistence.³⁴ Andani similarly frames the Aga Khan's vision as more than "the mere tolerance of difference," emphasizing the balance between

³² Khalil Andani, "A Survey of Ismaili Studies Part 1: Early Ismailism and Fatimid Ismailism," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 8 (2016): 191–206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12205>.

³³ Khalil Andani, "A Survey of Ismaili Studies Part 2: Post-Fatimid and Modern Ismailism," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 11 (2016): 269–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12222>

³⁴ Sahir Dewji, "The Aga Khan's Discourse of Applied Pluralism," *Studies in Religion* 47, no. 1 (2018): 78–106, doi:10.1177/0008429817713738.

universal human commonality and distinctive particularity.³⁵ These accounts help explain why the AKAA's pluralism must be studied as an organized practice. It appears in nominations, deliberations, reviews, publications, exhibitions, and the public recognition of projects that model forms of shared life.

The minority position of the Ismaʿili community gives this institutional pluralism an additional significance. The Aga Khan's institutions cannot claim authority within the Muslim world through numerical dominance or majoritarian representation. They claim it through service, competence, ethical universalism, and a language of pluralist responsibility that addresses Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This produces both possibility and tension. The AKAA can bring the concerns of Muslim societies into global architectural discourse without claiming to speak for all Muslims in a simplistic or totalizing way. Its pluralism is therefore not only theological or philosophical. It is also representational and institutional because it represents a way of acting from a specific Ismaʿili location while addressing broader publics.

The Award is thus one architectural expression of a wider Ismaʿili modernity. It makes pluralism public through buildings, landscapes, jury procedures, monographs, and institutional networks. Its significance lies in the fact that pluralism becomes a method for deciding what architecture matters and why.

Recognition, Canon Formation, and Architectural Judgment

The final problem is historiographical. The AKAA translates Islamic pluralism into architectural judgment, but it also reshapes how architecture becomes historically significant. Its importance

³⁵ Khalil Andani, "Divine Diversity: The Aga Khan's Vision of Pluralism," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jims.4.1.01>.

cannot be reduced to the recognition of neglected buildings, architects, geographies, or communities. Its deeper significance lies in the way it reorganizes the grounds of recognition itself. It asks, through its processes, what counts as architectural evidence, what counts as excellence, who is authorized to judge, and how buildings enter architectural history as exemplary.

Sibel Bozdoğan's early account of the AKAA as "a philosophy of reconciliation" remains an important starting point. She recognized in 1992 that the Award's pluralism created space for multiple, and sometimes competing, voices within its seminars, publications, and jury processes. For Bozdoğan, the Award's refusal to be exclusive or doctrinaire was part of how it installed itself within architectural culture at large.³⁶ That observation is still crucial, but this dissertation pushes the claim further. The AKAA's pluralism is an evaluative structure. It changes what kinds of architecture can become legible as exemplary: not only monuments or masterworks, but schools, wetlands, conservation programs, refugee spaces, riverfronts, workshops, public spaces, and civic infrastructures.

Ashraf Salama's recent study of architectural excellence in Islamic societies through the Aga Khan Award presents the procedural side of this transformation. The AKAA, as part of its final recognitions of buildings, relies on nominations, dossiers, site visits, technical reviews, jury deliberations, and published reasons for selection.³⁷ These procedures turn architectural judgment into an evidentiary practice. They also explain why the Award's expanded definition of architecture does not collapse into relativism. A project's social, environmental, civic, or ethical

³⁶ Sibel Bozdoğan, "The Aga Khan Award for Architecture: A Philosophy of Reconciliation," *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 3 (1992): 183.

³⁷ Ashraf M. Salama, *Architectural Excellence in Islamic Societies: Distinction through the Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 8.

value must be argued, documented, reviewed, and justified. The Award's pluralism is therefore tied to a discipline of proof.

At the same time, the AKAA's widened criteria pressure the canonical habits of architectural history. Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism remains an important point of comparison because it challenged the homogenizing universalism of modern architecture and insisted on the mediating role of place, climate, tectonics, and culture. Yet Frampton's framework still presumes a relation to an identifiable universal civilization, even as it resists its flattening effects.³⁸ The AKAA's archive complicates this structure. It does not only mediate between global modernism and local culture. It often shifts the evaluative center toward repair, public consequence, social infrastructure, institutional procedure, and continuity in use. This is not simply critical regionalism under Islamic or Global South conditions. It is a broader revision of what architecture is judged to do.

Griselda Pollock's work on canon formation provides a vocabulary for understanding the stakes of this revision. Pollock argues that canons are not neutral repositories of greatness. They are discursive formations produced by authority, repetition, exclusion, and institutional validation. "Canonicity," she writes, "refers to both the assumed quality of an included text and to the status a text acquires because it belongs within an authoritative collection."³⁹ This insight shows how the AKAA itself produces such an authoritative collection. It participates in making architectural value public, durable, and transmissible. By selecting, documenting, publishing, and circulating projects, it changes their status within architectural discourse. Yet because the projects it

³⁸ Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *OASE* 103 (2019): 11–22, <https://www.oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/103/TowardsaCriticalRegionalism>.

³⁹ Griselda Pollock, "About Canons and Culture Wars," in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

recognizes often exceed conventional categories of monumentality, authorship, formal innovation, or stylistic unity, the Award also reveals how contingent those categories are.

James Elkins offers a complementary critique of global art history. He argues that even when non-Western art is included within global academic discourse, it is often interpreted through Western methods, categories, and argumentative forms. His claim that “there is no non-Western tradition of art history,” if by that one means a tradition with fully independent interpretive strategies and forms of argument, is deliberately provocative, but it highlights an important problem: inclusion does not necessarily transform method.⁴⁰ A field can add more objects while preserving the same conceptual center. The AKAAs’ significance is that it does not merely provide more Islamic or non-Western objects for an unchanged architectural history. It helps produce different criteria for interpretation.

The definitional instability of Islamic architecture itself also belongs to this historiographical problem. Scholars such as Nasser Rabbat and Gülru Necipoğlu have shown that the field has long moved between formal, geographic, patronal, historical, and civilizational definitions.^{41 42} The Award institutionalizes the difficulty. It refuses to define Islamic architecture solely through style or territory, but it does not thereby abandon the category. It relocates its meaning onto ethical orientation, public consequence, institutional procedure, and historical context. Islamic

⁴⁰ James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 19.

⁴¹ Nasser Rabbat, “What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?” *Journal of Art Historiography* (Glasgow) 6, no. 6 (2012): 1.

⁴² Gülru Necipoğlu, “‘The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches’, in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, Eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*, London: Saqi, 2012.” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6, no. 6 (2012).

architectural significance becomes something argued through evidence rather than secured in advance by visual recognition.

The AKAA's pluralism therefore prepares a historiographical claim that the later chapters develop more fully. The Award does not simply diversify architectural history's archive. It pressures the discipline's methods of valuation. It questions whether architecture can be historically significant because it repairs an ecology, sustains a community, protects dignity in displacement, reanimates craft, creates a public, or develops a model of continuity under changing conditions. It asks whether the evidence for architectural value might include maintenance regimes, construction processes, institutional partnerships, user practices, and forms of collective authorship.

This is why the Award's pluralism is historiographically consequential. It revises the conditions under which excellence is recognized. In doing so, it opens architectural history to forms of value that canonical narratives have often treated as secondary, marginal, or merely contextual. The AKAA's expansiveness allows it to critique the rigid, monolithic nature of canonical architectural history. While Western modernist architectural movements – from the Bauhaus to Le Corbusier – were deeply exclusionary in their universalist claims,⁴³ the AKAA's pluralistic framework foregrounds alternative genealogies of architecture that do not conform to modernism's established narratives. The chapters of this dissertation narrate how that revision

⁴³ For this claim, I draw reference from critics such as Reyner Banham and Kenneth Frampton, whose work on critical regionalism pointed out that the universality claimed by modernist movements was a construct that erased cultural specificity. More recent scholars such as Kathleen James-Chakraborty, in *Modernism as Memory: Building Identity in the Federal Republic of Germany*, and Mark Crinson, in *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, have further demonstrated how modernist architectural movements were embedded within colonial and postcolonial power structures, shaping the built environment through the hegemonic imposition of Western architectural ideals.

occurs: first through Islamic and Ismaʿili ethics, then through architectural evaluation, then through institutional procedure, and finally through the double-bind that makes the Award both difficult to define and powerful as a critical lens.

Method, Archive, and the Translation from Ethics to Evaluation

This dissertation studies the Aga Khan Award for Architecture as a regime of recognition, and not just as a collection of winning projects. By this I mean an institutional apparatus through which architectural value is produced, tested, justified, and circulated. The Award certainly recognizes buildings, landscapes, conservation projects, schools, housing, civic infrastructures, and urban interventions. Yet its significance cannot be grasped by treating those projects as isolated objects of analysis. They become exemplary through a dense process of nomination, documentation, technical review, jury deliberation, publication, exhibition, and institutional circulation. The archive of the AKAA is therefore not limited to built works. It includes the speeches, reports, briefs, reviews, monographs, and procedures through which those works are made legible as architectures of consequence.

The method of this dissertation follows from that premise. Rather than focusing solely what the AKAA has awarded, I focus on how the Award has taught architecture to be judged. This requires a reading across several kinds of evidence. The dissertation draws on the Aga Khan's public speeches and institutional addresses, especially those in which pluralism, Islam, public responsibility, and development are articulated as ethical commitments. It reads AKAA monographs from multiple cycles as published archives of the Award's evolving discourse. It analyzes Master Jury statements, Steering Committee briefs, technical review summaries, on-site

review reports, project descriptions, and critical essays associated with particular cycles. It also considers published criticism, scholarly accounts of the AKAAs, and interviews, most importantly my March 2024 interview with Farrokh Derakhshani, the Award's long-serving director, at the AKAAs offices in Geneva.

These sources are treated as evidence of judgment as well as the internal and public facing practices of the Award. A Master Jury statement, for instance, does not merely explain why a project won; it reveals what architectural value was made to mean in a particular cycle. A technical review, similarly, does not merely verify facts; it translates use, performance, social consequence, material intelligence, and public reception into forms that can enter deliberation. A monograph does not merely record the outcome of a prize; it frames a cycle's conceptual stakes and circulates them into architectural discourse, drawing on scholarly contributions from several individuals of diverse backgrounds. A Steering Committee brief does not simply guide an administrative process; it defines the horizon of values and problems through which a jury is asked to think. The Award's documents are, therefore, part of the process by which architecture becomes historically and institutionally significant.

This is especially important because the central argument of the dissertation concerns translation. The AKAAs does not apply Islamic ethics to architecture in a direct or formulaic way. It does not begin with a checklist of Islamic forms, symbols, or principles and then identify projects that conform to them. Instead, it converts a broad ethical horizon into evaluative practice through institutional procedure. The Aga Khan's discourse of pluralism, with its emphasis on difference, dignity, knowledge, care, and responsibility, provides one level of that horizon. The Steering Committee gives it cycle-specific form by identifying contemporary conditions, concerns, and

priorities. The Master Jury then encounters actual projects through documents, reviews, site visits, and deliberation, allowing evidence to reshape the meaning of those values in practice.

This translation mechanism is central to the dissertation's reading of the Award. The Islamic ethical horizon of the AKAA is mediated through evidence. Projects become significant because they make ethical claims architecturally verifiable. A wetland, for instance, cleans water and restores habitat; a school generates civic capacity; a mosque produces equality through light, shade, and spatial restraint; a heritage project sustains living communities rather than preserving inert monuments; a refugee space protects dignity and communal life under conditions of displacement. In each case, value must be argued through consequence, not merely asserted through identity. The Award's procedures therefore make pluralism accountable. They allow an expansive definition of architecture without surrendering judgment to vagueness.

The dissertation's method combines close reading, institutional analysis, and case-study interpretation. Close reading is necessary because much of the Award's intellectual work occurs in language that is prevalent in prefaces, jury statements, project citations, review reports, and monographic essays. These texts repeatedly define and redefine the terms through which architecture is made valuable such as community, continuity, adequacy, pluralism, relevance, repair, sustainability, dignity, public life, and participation. Institutional analysis is necessary because these terms are produced within a structured process involving the Aga Khan, the Steering Committee, Master Juries, nominators, technical reviewers, editors, project authors, and publics. Case-study interpretation is necessary because the Award's claims can only be tested through the projects themselves and through their sites, programs, materials, users, processes of construction, and afterlives.

The chapters therefore move between discourse and project evidence rather than treating one as subordinate to the other. Chapter 1 reads the Aga Khan's pluralism through Qur'anic ethics, Isma'ili thought, and institutional discourse in order to establish the ethical field from which the Award emerges. Chapter 2 turns to awarded projects to show how that ethical field becomes architectural judgment through repair, public-making, and living heritage. Chapter 3 shifts to institutional procedure, using the Derakhshani interview alongside monographs and public records to show how the Award sustains relevance through self-updating forms of judgment. Chapter 4 then returns to the most difficult edge of the archive, examining limit-cases in which the Award's Islamic grounding and pluralist openness become most visible as a double-bind.

The interview with Farrokh Derakhshani is especially important because it gives this dissertation access to the Award's own institutional vocabulary. When I approached the AKAA through the analytic language of 'pluralism', Derakhshani repeatedly returned to the language of 'relevance'. That difference is methodologically significant. It shows that the Award's self-understanding is not always expressed in the same terms used by this dissertation, even when the concerns overlap. Pluralism refers to the ethical and epistemological horizon I trace across the project, while relevance marks the institutional work of keeping that horizon responsive to changing historical conditions. Derakhshani's reflections on jury composition, shortlist procedures, public dissemination, documentation practices, and the Award's capacity for self-correction provide crucial evidence for understanding how the AKAA understands its own evolution.

The dissertation therefore treats interviews as situated primary sources. Derakhshani's account is invaluable precisely because it reveals the Award's internal vocabulary, memories, and self-descriptions. At the same time, it is read alongside published materials, archival documents, jury statements, and case studies rather than substituted for them. The aim is not to reproduce the

institution's self-narration uncritically, but to understand how that self-narration interacts with the evidence of projects, procedures, and public discourse.

This methodological approach also explains why the dissertation gives sustained attention to procedures that might otherwise seem administrative. The rotation of juries, the role of nominators, the independence of the Master Jury, the use of technical reviewers, the publication of shortlists, the expansion of monographs, and the creation of related institutions such as Mimar and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture are part of the machinery through which pluralist judgment becomes possible. If the AKAA's pluralism is to remain more than a moral claim, it must be organized through structures capable of holding disagreement, testing evidence, revising assumptions, and making decisions credible across diverse publics.

The archive of the Award must therefore be read as both textual and procedural. Its texts state values, but its procedures show how values are made operative. Its projects embody consequences, but its documents explain how those consequences become recognizable as architectural value. Its monographs preserve a record, but they also actively shape the discourse into which that record enters. This is why the AKAA is best approached not only as a prize, but as a modern institution of architectural knowledge. It produces a public archive of judgment.

In studying that archive, this dissertation is also attentive to limits. The AKAA's documents are curated; its monographs are carefully framed; its jury statements are retrospective justifications; its reviews are shaped by institutional expectations; and its interviews offer situated recollections rather than neutral facts. The Award's archive is therefore not a transparent window onto architectural value. It is itself one of the places where value is constructed. That is precisely why it is analytically useful. The dissertation does not seek to bypass institutional mediation in order

to discover pure architectural significance. It studies mediation as the process through which significance is made.

This approach allows the dissertation to track the central movement from ethics to evaluation.

The Aga Khan's pluralism provides an ethical horizon. The AKAA's procedures translate that horizon into criteria of judgment. Awarded projects test those criteria through material, social, environmental, and civic consequences. Publications and dissemination then return those judgments to the field of architectural history. The result is a cycle in which Islamic ethical commitments become architectural values, architectural values become institutional judgments, and institutional judgments become historiographical evidence.

Structure, Governance, and Historical Development of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

One of the most significant aspects of the AKAA is the institutional structure that enables its practices of recognition. Its pluralism, as an ethos is present in its monographs and other public-facing media, but more than that, it is also embedded in a system of nomination, review, deliberation, publication, and dissemination that allows architectural value to be argued across a number of different geographies, scales, publics, and professional cultures. The Award's history is therefore the history of an institution learning how to sustain a broad and revisable field of judgment while remaining anchored in its founding concern with the built environments of Muslim societies.

Structure, Operations, and Governance

The AKAAs were established by His Highness the Aga Khan IV in 1977 and are organized around a triennial cycle. From the beginning, its structure was designed to avoid a narrow or centralized definition of architectural excellence. Rather than relying on a permanent jury or a fixed set of criteria, the Award works through a constellation of actors: the Aga Khan, the Steering Committee, nominators, the Master Jury, technical reviewers, on-site reviewers, editors, scholars, architects, clients, and users. This distributed structure is essential to the Award's intellectual identity since that feature is what gives institutional form to the pluralism the Award claims as one of its central values.

The Steering Committee plays an important role in shaping the broad direction of each cycle. Chaired by the Aga Khan, it identifies major concerns, frames the intellectual and ethical horizon of the Award, and appoints the Master Jury. More than simply administering the prize, it helps set the terms of the conversation by identifying the contemporary pressures through which architecture in Muslim societies, and increasingly beyond them, must be understood. These concerns have included community, continuity, development, social transformation, pluralism, environmental responsibility, public space, cultural heritage, and resilience. The Steering Committee's role is therefore both institutional and conceptual, as it frames the values and questions that will guide the cycle.⁴⁴

The Master Jury then carries out the work of selection. Reconstituted for each cycle, it brings together architects, scholars, planners, artists, critics, and public figures from different disciplinary and geographic backgrounds. The changing composition of the jury is significant because the Award's judgment depends on the encounter among multiple forms of expertise. This

⁴⁴ "Aga Khan Award for Architecture," in Cynthia C. Davidson, ed., *Legacies for the Future: Contemporary Architecture in Islamic Societies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 6.

is one of the ways the AKAAs protect itself from becoming doctrinaire. No single discipline, geography, profession, or intellectual tradition can permanently own the meaning of architectural excellence. The jury must deliberate across differences of training, experience, and value, producing decisions that are authoritative but not fixed in perpetuity.⁴⁵

Apart from the Steering Committee and Master Jury, the Award relies on another group of people - the nominators. Projects are identified through networks of these nominators and then documented through submissions, reports, images, drawings, and descriptions. Shortlisted projects are subject to technical and on-site review which are crucial because they test the claims made on behalf of a project against built reality. They examine use, performance, material condition, social impact, construction process, environmental setting, and public reception.⁴⁶ The Award's expanded definition of architecture therefore depends on a discipline of evidence.

Apart from the three aforementioned groups of individuals, publication is also central to the Award's structure. Each cycle produces a monograph that does more than commemorate winning projects. These volumes frame the intellectual stakes of the cycle by publishing jury statements, situating projects through essays and documentation, and circulating the Award's values into the wider field of architectural discourse. The monographs are therefore part of the Award's institutional work, because they transform jury decisions into historical evidence and pedagogical material. They also shed light on the Award's evolving vocabulary which continues

⁴⁵ 'Aga Khan Award for Architecture' in *"Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World."* Pp. 6, Baker, Philippa, editor. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Legacies for the Future*, 6.

⁴⁶ Baker, *Modernity and Community*, 6.

to rely on terms such as community, continuity, development, transformation, plurality, dialogue, inclusion, resilience, and relevance.

A Brief Historical Arc of the Award

There is, in my opinion, no way to write a comprehensive history of the AKAA that will not be a full book-length study of its own. For this brief section on the Awards history, for the purpose of this dissertation, I will discuss the gradual institutionalization of pluralism as a mode of architectural judgment, as a brief historical account. This history should not be reduced to a simple narrative in which the Award begins with Islamic architecture and then gradually becomes global. From its earliest moments, the Award was already concerned with the difficulty of defining Islamic architecture under modern conditions. What changed over time was the institutional vocabulary and evidentiary apparatus through which that difficulty was addressed.

The founding years, from 1977 to the first cycle in 1980, established the basic problem. The Award emerged at a moment when rapid construction, oil wealth, postcolonial development, and the prestige of international modernism were reshaping many Muslim societies. The Aga Khan and the Award's early organizers recognized that the issue was not simply a lack of good buildings, but a lack of adequate frameworks for judging what good architecture might mean in these contexts. The first monograph's title, *Architecture and Community*, signals the Award's refusal to isolate architectural excellence from social and cultural life. The Aga Khan's statement that "architectural excellence is not enough" expressed a founding suspicion toward purely formal criteria.⁴⁷ Excellence had to be understood in relation to human needs, community, history, culture, and responsibility.

⁴⁷ Aga Khan IV, preface to *Architecture and Community*, 12.

The early cycles of the 1980s and 1990s developed this concern through themes of continuity, community, and cultural pluralism. Projects such as the Hafsia Quarter in Tunis, the Great Mosque of Niono in Mali, and other early recognitions showed that the Award was interested in living urban fabrics, craft knowledge, local materials, and forms of social continuity rather than monumental architecture alone.⁴⁸ The language of continuity, however, did not mean the preservation of an unchanging past. It meant reconsidering how inherited forms of building and urban life could remain active under modern conditions. During these decades, the Award also became a forum for debating the meaning of Islamic architecture (and “architecture”) itself. Seminars, publications, and jury statements continued to highlight questions of identity, modernization, regional specificity, and the dangers of stylistic imitation. As James Steele observed in his essay in the 1992 AKAAs monograph, these cycles represented “a breakthrough in the broadening of the boundaries of architecture”⁴⁹, bringing themes of contextualism, traditional building methods, and technological experimentation to the forefront. The institution’s pluralism was already taking shape as a refusal to define Islamic architecture by one formal vocabulary.

By the 1990s, the Award’s scope had become increasingly explicit in its concern with social transformation and cultural plurality. The 1995 cycle, framed through *Architecture beyond Architecture*, captured this widening well. Architecture was no longer being treated only as the design of discrete buildings, but as a field implicated in social, economic, and cultural processes.⁵⁰ The 1998 cycle, which recognized Charles Correa’s Vidhan Bhavan, made the

⁴⁸ “Statement of the Master Jury,” in Sherban Cantacuzino, ed., *Architecture in Continuity* (New York: Aperture, 1985), 79–81.

⁴⁹ Suha Özkan, “Quality in the Built Environment and the Third World Reality,” in James Steele, ed., *Architecture for a Changing World* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), 9.

⁵⁰ “Critical Discourse for Creative Transformations: Report of the 1995 Award Master Jury,” in Cynthia C. Davidson and Ismail Serageldin, eds., *Architecture beyond Architecture: Creativity and Social*

implications of this widening more visible and more controversial. The project's layered references to Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic histories, as well as its secular civic program, raised questions about how far the Award's remit could extend.⁵¹ Yet that very difficulty revealed the Award's evolving logic, in the sense that architecture could become relevant to Muslim societies not only through direct religious identity, but through civic values, plural histories, and public responsibility.

The 2000s and early 2010s marked a further maturation of the Award's evaluative and institutional apparatus. The Award increasingly foregrounded process, transformation, and the social life of architecture. Projects such as the Gando Primary School, the rehabilitation of Shibam, Wadi Hanifa Wetlands, and Bridge School made clear that architectural significance could be argued through education, repair, ecology, infrastructure, and public life.^{52 53 54 55} The 2010 cycle was especially important because the shortlist was publicly released for the first time, reflecting a desire for greater transparency and broader discourse. This changed the publicness of the Award's evaluation. The shortlist became part of the Award's message, allowing non-winning projects also to shape architectural debate.

This period also sharpened the Award's concern with relevance. The term, which Farrokh Derakhshani repeatedly emphasized in my interview with him, captures the institution's effort to

Transformations in Islamic Cultures: The 1995 Aga Khan Award for Architecture (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 20.

⁵¹ Davidson, *Legacies for the Future*, 131.

⁵² "Gando Primary School," in Phillipa Baker, ed., *Architecture and Polyphony: Building in the Islamic World Today* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 34–35.

⁵³ "Rehabilitation of the City of Shibam: Wadi Hadhramaut, Yemen," in Pamela Johnston, ed., *Intervention Architecture: Building for Change* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2007), 34–40.

⁵⁴ "Wadi Hanifa Wetlands: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia," in Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2011), 32.

⁵⁵ "Bridge School: Xiashi, China," in Mostafavi, *Implicate & Explicate*, 72–89.

remain responsive to changing historical conditions without abandoning its founding concerns. Relevance here, in my opinion, means the capacity to ask what architecture must address in a given moment including environmental degradation, migration, urban growth, heritage loss, displacement, public space, gendered access, education, or the dignity of everyday life. The Award's institutional procedures became the means through which this responsiveness was sustained.

The cycles from 2016 to 2022 consolidated many of these developments. The very titles of the recent monographs – *Architecture and Plurality*, *Architecture in Dialogue*, and *Inclusive Architecture*, make explicit the values that had been building across earlier decades. The 2016 cycle foregrounded plurality as a way of reading architecture through multiple publics, programs, and scales, shown through projects such as the Superkilen park in Copenhagen, and the Bait ur Rouf mosque in Dhaka.^{56 57} The 2019 cycle organized its winners around themes such as living heritage, ecological resiliency and recovery, and thriving and inclusive commons, most evident in projects such as the Wasit Wetland Centre in Sharjah, and the revitalization of Muharraq, Bahrain.^{58 59} The 2022 cycle further expanded the relation between architecture and humanitarian practice, insisting that the "architectural and the humanitarian need not be mutually exclusive".⁶⁰ Projects such as the Rohingya community spaces in Cox's Bazar made visible the Award's willingness to treat emergency, displacement, and dignity as architectural concerns.

⁵⁶ "Superkilen: Copenhagen, Denmark," in Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Architecture and Plurality* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 176.

⁵⁷ "Bait ur Rouf Mosque," in Mostafavi, *Architecture and Plurality*, 102.

⁵⁸ "Wasit Wetland Centre: Sharjah, United Arab Emirates," in Andres Lepik, ed., *Architecture in Dialogue: Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (Berlin: ArchiTangle, 2019), 209.

⁵⁹ "Revitalisation of Muharraq: Muharraq, Bahrain," in Lepik, *Architecture in Dialogue*, 285.

⁶⁰ "Exemplary Practices: Master Jury Report," in Sarah M. Whiting, ed., *Inclusive Architecture: Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (Berlin: ArchiTangle, 2022), 36.

Across this historical arc, the Award did not simply broaden its geographic reach or diversify its typologies. It gradually developed a more expansive and more precise understanding of architectural value. The early concern with community and continuity became a sustained attention to social consequence, environmental repair, public life, institutional process, and living heritage. The Award's Islamic ethical horizon did not disappear as its scope widened. Rather, it became operative through a pluralist method of judgment that could recognize architecture wherever questions of dignity, stewardship, care, and shared life became materially significant.

This history also highlights how the AKAA's cycles have created an archive of projects, but more than that, also an archive of debates. Its juries have selected winners, but they have also generated evaluative vocabularies. Its monographs have documented buildings, but they have also shaped architectural discourse. Its institutional development has produced not only recognition, but a public record of changing, and more aptly - evolving, criteria. The AKAA's historical significance therefore lies in the way it has made pluralism durable as a repeatable, revisable, and institutionally supported practice of architectural judgment.

Outline of the Dissertation

The chapters of this dissertation are arranged to show how the Aga Khan Award for Architecture transforms an Islamic ethic of pluralism into a modern practice of architectural judgment. The dissertation starts first, with the ethical and theological grounding of pluralism; then moves on to the translation of that ethic into architectural evaluation; which is then followed by the institutional procedures that sustain such evaluation; and then it includes a discussion of the paradoxes generated by the Award's rooted yet open form of judgment; and finally, it touches

upon the historiographical consequences of this pluralist regime of recognition. The movement of the dissertation therefore follows a conceptual arc from ethic to evaluation, from evaluation to procedure, from procedure to paradox, and from paradox to architectural historiography.

Chapter 1, “The Discipline of Repair: Pluralism and Ethical Formation in Isma‘ili Thought,” establishes the ethical and intellectual foundations of the dissertation. It argues that the Aga Khan’s pluralism should not be understood merely as a language of tolerance, interfaith dialogue, or multicultural coexistence. Instead, it should be read as a post-catastrophic ethic of repair: a way of rebuilding shared life in the aftermath of modernity’s ruptures, including colonial violence, nationalism, displacement, sectarian conflict, ecological crisis, and the weakening of inherited moral authorities. The chapter begins by situating pluralism within Qur’anic ethics, especially verses that frame human difference as divinely willed rather than accidental or deficient. It then turns to Isma‘ili cosmology and epistemology, where knowledge, interpretation, and ethical formation are linked to the guidance of the Imam and to the unfolding of truth across time.

The chapter then brings this theological and philosophical genealogy into conversation with the Aga Khan’s public discourse and institutional practice. Drawing on Qur’anic ideas of human unity and diversity, Isma‘ili traditions of knowledge, and modern theories of ethics and subject formation, it argues that the Aga Khan’s pluralism is a practice of humility, care, and responsibility oriented toward the repair of fractured social worlds. The chapter’s final movement shows how this ethic becomes institutional through the Aga Khan Development Network, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and the AKAA itself. These institutions are treated as ethical architectures through which pluralism is made public,

material, and durable. Chapter 1 therefore provides the dissertation's ethical ground. It shows why pluralism is significant before turning to how architecture is judged through it.

Chapter 2, "Widening the Evaluative Frame: Repair, Civics, and Living Heritage," shifts from ethical genealogy to architectural evaluation. Building on Chapter 1's discussion of what kind of pluralism the Aga Khan's institutions advance, Chapter 2 discusses how that pluralism changes the criteria by which architecture becomes valuable. The chapter argues that the AKA's rootedness in an Islamic ethical horizon and its openness to diverse architectural practices together expand what counts as both "Islamic" and "architecture." The Award does not define architectural significance primarily through style, typology, or iconography. Instead, it evaluates projects through the relations they sustain, focusing on their ecological, civic, social, material, and historical qualities.

The chapter develops this claim through three clusters of awarded projects. The first cluster examines repair as architectural value, focusing on projects such as Wadi Hanifa Wetlands, Wasit Wetland Centre, Urban River Spaces in Jhenaidah, and the Rohingya community spaces in Cox's Bazar. These cases show how the Award treats environmental restoration, public access, flood mediation, refugee dignity, and emergency infrastructure as properly architectural concerns. The second cluster turns to everyday civics and public-making through projects such as Gando Primary School, Bait ur Rouf Mosque, and CEM Kamanar. These examples demonstrate how schools, mosques, workshops, and modest building systems can generate civic capacity, shared authorship, and public dignity. The third cluster examines heritage as contemporary practice through Hafsia Quarter, the Great Mosque of Niono, and Shibam. Here, the chapter argues that the Award understands heritage as something more than just preservation; it treats it as the ongoing capacity of built environments to sustain social, economic, ritual, and craft life.

Across these clusters, Chapter 2 shows that the AKAA's pluralism becomes an evaluative method. It shifts architectural value from object to relation, from monumentality to maintenance, from singular authorship to distributed intelligence, and from stylistic fidelity to continuity in use. The chapter is therefore central to the dissertation's argument about the double-bind. The Award's rootedness and openness are not visible only in extreme or controversial cases. They are also present in the ordinary work of judging wetlands, schools, mosques, heritage projects, and refugee spaces as architecture. Chapter 2 demonstrates that pluralism widens architecture's evidentiary field.

Chapter 3, "Relevance by Design: Pluralism as the Infrastructure of Judgment in the Aga Khan Award for Architecture," turns from what the Award recognizes to how such recognition is institutionally sustained. The chapter is anchored in my March 2024 interview with Farrokh Derakhshani, the long-serving director of the AKAA, whose reflections provide a crucial emic vocabulary for understanding the Award's self-conception. While this dissertation uses "pluralism" to describe the Award's ethical and epistemological horizon, Derakhshani repeatedly emphasizes "relevance." Chapter 3 treats relevance as the Award's operational vocabulary for remaining responsive to changing historical conditions.

The chapter argues that the AKAA sustains pluralism by designing an infrastructure of judgment that is distributed, revisable, and evidentiary. It examines the roles of the Steering Committee, Master Jury, nominators, technical reviewers, and on-site reviewers, showing how authority is dispersed rather than concentrated in a single permanent body. It then analyzes moments of institutional self-correction, including the shift in the early 1980s that gave the Master Jury greater authority over the shortlist, the public release of the shortlist beginning in 2010, and changes in documentation formats intended to make projects more comparable across unequal

representational contexts. These procedural shifts reveal the Award as a self-updating institution, one that revises the conditions of judgment in order to keep pluralism operative.

The chapter also follows the Award beyond the moment of selection. It examines dissemination, prize money, publications, exhibitions, and sister institutions such as Mimar and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture. These platforms show that the AKAA is not only a prize, but part of a larger ecology for producing architectural discourse. Chapter 3 therefore establishes that pluralism is not merely what the Award values; it is how the Award organizes judgment.

Relevance, therefore, points to the institutional capacity to keep that judgment open, credible, and historically responsive.

Chapter 4, “Pluralism as a Critical Lens,” brings the dissertation’s central paradox into its sharpest focus. Having shown that pluralism is an ethic, an evaluative frame, and an institutional procedure, this chapter discusses what happens when that pluralism strains the boundaries of the Award’s Islamic orientation. It begins by examining critiques of the AKAA’s breadth, including concerns that the Award’s field may become too nebulous if it is not anchored by clearer definitions of Muslim societies, Islamic principles, or architectural identity. Rather than dismissing such critiques, the chapter treats them as evidence of an actual tension built into the institution.

The chapter then turns to two limit-cases: Charles Correa’s Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal, awarded in 1998, and Li Xiaodong’s Bridge School in Xiashi, China, awarded in 2010. These projects are not presented as representative of the Award as a whole. They are pressure tests. Vidhan Bhavan is a secular legislative building whose mandala-based geometry prompted Michael Sorkin to question whether calling it Muslim was “a stretch.” Bridge School has no clear demographic, geographic, or formal connection to Islam or the Muslim world, yet was recognized by the

AKAA as an architecture of social repair and public connection. In both cases, the Award's Islamic grounding becomes visible not through conventional markers of Islamic architecture, but through ethical analogy, including civic dignity, plural histories, social repair, public access, and the creation of shared space.

The chapter theorizes this condition through Fredric Jameson's concept of the double-bind. Jameson is important not only because his work helps describe contradiction as a productive structure within modern cultural systems, but also because he served on the AKAA Master Jury in 1998, the same cycle in which Vidhan Bhavan was awarded. The chapter argues that the AKAA's pluralism is both its method and its paradox. The Islamic ethical horizon that grounds the Award is precisely what allows it to move beyond fixed Islamic forms. Yet that movement also unsettles the boundaries of the institution's coherence. Chapter 4 therefore shows that the Award's contradiction is not a failure of definition. It is the structure through which the AKAA judges.

The chapter concludes by turning to canon formation and architectural historiography. Drawing on Griselda Pollock, James Elkins, and debates within the historiography of Islamic architecture, it argues that the AKAA's pluralism has decanonizing force. It does not simply add Muslim or non-Western examples to architectural history. It pressures the criteria by which architecture becomes historically significant. By widening evidence, redistributing authority, and refusing fixed definitions of Islamic architecture, the Award asks architectural history to judge differently.

The conclusion gathers these arguments and clarifies their broader implications. It returns to the dissertation's central claim that the AKAA translates an Islamically grounded philosophy of pluralism into a modern architectural regime of judgment. It then draws out the consequences of that claim for architectural history, architectural practice, and future research.

Chapter 1

The Discipline of Repair: Pluralism and Ethical Formation in Isma‘ili Thought

Pluralism after Catastrophe: Rethinking Ethics, Institutions, and Islamic Modernity

In May 2017, His Highness the late Aga Khan IV, the forty-ninth hereditary Imam of the Isma‘ili Muslims, jointly with the government of Canada, established the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP) in Ottawa. At the opening ceremony, he remarked:

Pluralism does not mean the elimination of difference, but the embrace of difference. Genuine pluralism understands that diversity does not weaken a society, it strengthens it. In an ever-shrinking, ever more diverse world, a genuine sense of pluralism is the indispensable foundation for human peace and progress.⁶¹

This statement, alongside the founding of the GCP, exemplifies the Aga Khan’s longstanding commitment to pluralism as a central ethos for navigating the fractures of contemporary life. Across speeches and institutional initiatives, he has called pluralism a crucial “bridge-building”

⁶¹ Aga Khan IV, “Opening Ceremony of the New Headquarters of the Global Center for Pluralism,” Ottawa, Canada, 16 May 2017.

project, “a challenge as old as human civilization,” and “a process ... a kaleidoscope that history shakes every day.”^{62 63} His enduring invocation of pluralism, inscribed across both discourse and institution, marks a metaphysical and ethical commitment rooted in divine unity and shaped in response to the moral, cultural, and civilizational ruptures of modernity.

This chapter treats the Aga Khan’s pluralist discourse and institutional legacy as a critical intervention into the ethical problem of pluralism itself. Its central claim is that the Aga Khan’s vision synthesizes Qur’anic ethics, Isma‘ili metaphysics, and postcolonial critique into what I call a post-catastrophic discipline of repair: a historically situated way of inhabiting fractured modern conditions through humility, responsibility, care, and institution-building. By the term “post-catastrophic,” I mean an ethical condition produced by repeated ruptures such as colonial violence, global war, partition, displacement, nationalism, sectarian fragmentation, ecological crisis, and the weakening of inherited frameworks of authority. By “discipline,” I mean a cultivated practice consisting of forms of attention, ethical obligations, and institutional arrangements through which difference is sustained without being erased.

The Aga Khan consistently roots his pluralism in the Qur’an, frequently citing verses such as 4:1 “Be mindful of your Lord who created all humans from a single soul”, and 30:22 – “Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and colors.” In this vision, pluralism is framed as the realization of Islamic metaphysical and ethical foundations, especially the principle of *tawhīd*, (divine unity), which affirms the irreducibility and dignity of difference. This theology of pluralism is deeply embedded in a genealogy of Islamic, and particularly Isma‘ili, thought, from the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ to Nāṣir-i Khusraw and later

⁶² Aga Khan IV, “10th Annual LaFontaine Baldwin Lecture,” Toronto, Canada, 15 October 2010.

⁶³ Aga Khan IV, “GCP Annual Pluralism Lecture,” Lisbon, Portugal, 11 June 2019.

traditions of philosophical and ethical reflection. It underpins an epistemology of humility and an ethics of care, both of which are central to the argument of this chapter.

In developing this argument, it is important to distinguish between two learned discourses that often overlap but should not be collapsed. First, modern academic scholarship about Islam, and second, Islamic intellectual traditions of interpretation, argument, and ethical reasoning. The chapter moves between them. It reads modern scholarship on Islamic pluralism while also taking seriously Islamic scholarly, philosophical, and theological traditions as sites where difference, knowledge, and moral responsibility have long been theorized. Within modern scholarship on Islamic pluralism, two lenses have been especially prominent: the *longue durée* of Islamic religious history and the sociopolitical conditions of Muslim minorities in diaspora. The first traces pluralism through Qur'anic ethics, legal toleration, juridical diversity, and interreligious coexistence, emphasizing Islam's historical capacity to accommodate difference.⁶⁴ The second focuses on the experiences of Muslims in Europe and North America, highlighting how communities navigate pluralism under conditions of migration, marginality, and multicultural governance.⁶⁵ These approaches have provided valuable insights, but they often treat pluralism either as an inheritance from tradition or as an adaptation to diasporic necessity. This chapter does not reject either approach. It focuses instead, on what becomes visible when pluralism is read as an ethical response to rupture and as an institutional practice of repair.

⁶⁴ See Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012); Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, 1994); Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁵ See Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339–54; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004); Jonathan Laurence, *The Emancipation of Europe's Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

This framing gains particular urgency today, as we confront what may be called a crisis of modernity itself. From the uneven afterlives of postcolonial national projects across the global South⁶⁶ to the rise of authoritarian regimes, ecological disasters, sectarian violence, and the erosion of institutional trust, political and ethical landscapes appear increasingly fractured. Scholars such as Talal Asad and Dipesh Chakrabarty have emphasized the need for ethical imaginaries that neither presume universality nor seek closure.^{67 68} The post-catastrophic lens foregrounds pluralism as an ethical response to collective vulnerability. In this view, pluralism is an inherently Islamic ethic of care and reconstruction, forged in the shadow of civilizational collapse and oriented toward the rebuilding of shared life where inherited frameworks no longer hold securely.

This chapter advances that argument by examining the pluralist philosophy of the Aga Khan IV. Since ascending to the Imamate in 1957, the Aga Khan articulated a distinctive vision of pluralism that draws on Isma‘ili cosmology, Qur’anic ethics, and contemporary global politics. More than a rhetorical commitment, this pluralism is enacted through a far-reaching institutional infrastructure. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) which includes hospitals, universities, urban renewal initiatives, and cultural heritage projects across more than thirty

⁶⁶ I use “global South” here in the critical rather than strictly territorial or developmental sense. Arzoo Osanloo and Cabeiri deBergh Robinson distinguish this usage from “Global South” as a replacement for “Third World” or as a category of low- and middle-income countries. For them, “global South” refers to an analytic orientation toward ongoing global structures of inequality and subjugation produced by colonial legacies and neo-imperial geopolitical relations; it is not exclusively territorial, since there are “Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South.” See Arzoo Osanloo and Cabeiri deBergh Robinson, “Introduction: Care in a Time of Humanitarianism: Stories of Refuge, Aid, and Repair in the Global South,” in *Care in a Time of Humanitarianism: Stories of Refuge, Aid, and Repair in the Global South*, ed. Arzoo Osanloo and Cabeiri deBergh Robinson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2024), 4–6.

⁶⁷ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁸ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Crises of Civilization: Exploring Global and Planetary Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

countries, is among the most extensive philanthropic and development networks in the Muslim world today. Alongside it, the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) promote pluralist values in civic, educational, and cultural domains. These institutions do not serve Muslims alone, nor do they frame pluralism narrowly in terms of religious tolerance. Rather, they express an ethic of public responsibility grounded in a theology that affirms diversity as both divine sign and civilizational necessity.

What makes the Aga Khan's vision particularly compelling is its synthesis of Qur'anic ethics, Isma'ili metaphysics, and postcolonial critique. Crucially, this vision is not presented as a mere abstract virtue; it is framed as a historical and political necessity. "The inability of human society to recognise pluralism as a fundamental value," The Aga Khan has said, "constitutes a real handicap for its development and a serious danger for our future."⁶⁹ The failure to recognize pluralism, he continues, has been "a common and significant ingredient... of many of the conflicts we have witnessed" since the end of the Cold War.⁷⁰ In this sense, pluralism is a political imperative in the sense that it becomes a response to the violent standardization of life under both secular nationalism and religious extremism.

Building on this premise, the chapter argues that the Aga Khan's pluralism constitutes a form of Islamic modernism grounded not so much in juridical reform, but more so in ethical practice, epistemological humility, and institutional care. It reimagines the role of religion, knowledge, and public action in a world where both secular and traditional orders have fractured. In Isma'ili theology, the Imam is the *Imam-e-Zamana*, or the interpreter of truth for a given historical

⁶⁹ Malik Merchant, ed., *The Aga Khan on Pluralism in an Interdependent World* (Barakah.com, 14 May 2017), <https://barakah.com/2017/05/14/the-aga-khan-on-pluralism-in-an-interdependent-world/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

moment. The Aga Khan, therefore, enacts a form of ethical hermeneutics that mirrors, but does not simply replicate, the role often attributed to the secular *zeitgeist* in European theories of modernity. His reading of pluralism is temporally attuned, becoming a spiritual and institutional response to modernity's crises, grounded in Islamic metaphysics and worldly responsibility alike.

The chapter proceeds by first distinguishing this account from approaches that treat pluralism primarily as a feature of Islamic legal-theological history or as a condition of Muslim minority life in modern diaspora. It then turns to the Qur'an, where difference appears as a divine sign and condition of moral encounter. From there, it reads Isma'ili traditions of knowledge and interpretation as a framework in which truth is singular in essence yet unfolded through ethical discipline, historical guidance, and interpretive humility. The chapter then turns to the Aga Khan's modern discourse, arguing that his pluralism responds to the fractures of colonialism, nationalism, sectarian violence, displacement, and secular developmental failure. Finally, it examines the institutional forms through which this ethic is made public, especially the AKDN, GCP, and AKAA. The aim is to show that pluralism becomes a discipline of repair when it is translated into institutions capable of sustaining difference without either resolving or abandoning it.

For the dissertation as a whole, this chapter establishes the ethical grammar through which the Aga Khan Award for Architecture becomes legible. The later chapters will show how this ethic of repair enters architectural judgment, institutional procedure, and historiographical debate. Before pluralism can be understood as an evaluative practice in the AKAA, however, it must first be understood as an ethical formation – a disciplined way of responding to difference, fracture, and responsibility.

Pluralism in Islamic and Isma‘ili thought: A critical genealogy

Across the landscape of Islamic intellectual history, pluralism has been variously imagined, debated, and institutionalized – as a juridical tolerance of difference, a cosmological recognition of multiplicity, a mode of governance, and more recently, a marker of ethical modernity. Here, “ethical modernity” is not another conceptual frame on top of the others discussed so far, but a way of naming modernity’s moral and institutional reorientation away from technological progress or state sovereignty alone and toward responsibility, care, and the management of difference.⁷¹ Rather than viewing modernity as a universal endpoint, it foregrounds plural, context-specific efforts to address crises such as fragmentation, inequality, and ecological breakdown through moral and spiritual frameworks. In the *Isma‘ili* case, it emerges through institutions and discourses that prioritize justice, compassion, and the ethical management of difference.

In both *Sunni* and *Shi‘i* traditions, pluralism has often been framed as an affirmation of legitimate diversity within divine law. These formulations, though important, tend to approach pluralism through either jurisprudential diversity (*ikhtilāf*) or sociological accounts of Muslim minorities, particularly in diaspora. What follows is a critical genealogy of these approaches, one that affirms their value while pointing to their limits. It lays the foundation for this chapter’s broader argument: that pluralism, especially in contemporary *Isma‘ili* thought and institutions, should be

⁷¹ The term “ethical modernity” has appeared in contemporary scholarship to describe moral orientations that do not take modernity as a singular, secular, or civilizational endpoint. Instead, it emphasizes historically situated efforts to reimagine ethical life through institutional and conceptual critique. See W. Clark Wolfe, “The Authority of Conceptual Analysis in Hegelian Ethical Life,” in *An Ethical Modernity? Hegel’s Concept of Ethical Life Today*, ed. Jiří Chotaš and Tereza Matějčková, vol. 25 (Boston: Brill, 2020), 15–35.

approached as an ethic of repair – a response to civilizational rupture rather than a mere theological accommodation of difference.

Legal diversity has long been a foundational site of Islamic pluralist thought. As John R. Bowen notes, by the eighth century Muslim jurists had recognized multiple valid methods for interpreting divine law. Differences in hermeneutics, legal reasoning, and social custom led to the development of distinct *madhhabs* (legal schools), each internally coherent and institutionally legitimated. While this juridical pluralism did not eliminate conflict, it institutionalized difference without necessarily collapsing into sectarianism. However, this model was largely intra-Islamic, rarely engaging non-Muslim thought systems or the broader scope of cultural pluralism demanded by contemporary ethical frameworks.⁷²

Even so, the *madhhab* system offers a precedent for structured accommodation of difference by a recognition of multiplicity. It thereby serves as a root, if not a direct analogue, to modern pluralist ethics. Bowen's study of Southeast Asian legal thought illustrates how this model has been reactivated in modern contexts. In Indonesia, scholars such as Hazairin advanced an "Indonesian *madhhab*" grounded in bilateral inheritance, *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (the higher objectives of the law), and local cultural norms.⁷³ This was not just a technical legal reform but an attempt to separate Islamic law from Arab patriarchy, emphasizing ethical universality over inherited legal forms. In such contexts, pluralism becomes both a juridical and cultural mode of self-assertion.

⁷² John R. Bowen, "Justifying Islamic Pluralism: Reflections from Indonesia and France," in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Amongst Muslims*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 165.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 167.

This flexibility, however, often encounters resistance in diaspora. Reformulations of Islamic law in Europe or North America, justified under the doctrine of *darūra* (necessity), are criticized by those who regard the *shariʿa* as universally and trans-historically binding.⁷⁴ The tension between contextual adaptability and legal absolutism reflects deeper anxieties about the limits of pluralism: can it be anchored in both principle and context? This challenge is amplified when moving from legal to sectarian difference. While *madhhab*-based pluralism has some classical legitimacy, doctrinal plurality, especially across *Sunni-Shiʿi* lines, has historically been more fraught.

Roy Mottahedeh locates this anxiety within the tradition of heresiography, particularly the *hadith al-tafriqa*, which predicts the ummah's division into seventy-three sects, only one of which will be saved.⁷⁵ Deployed by *Sunnis* and *Shiʿis* alike to assert orthodoxy, this hadith has shaped Islamic sectarian discourse for centuries. However, Mottahedeh shows the tradition was never universally accepted. Even al-Ghazālī, often cited for exclusivist theology, acknowledged interpretive sincerity as a potential basis for salvation. In some versions of the hadith, all but the wicked (*zindīqs*) are saved.⁷⁶ Such nuance reveals that doctrinal pluralism, while contested, has been historically negotiated rather than categorically rejected.

This ambiguity is instructive. Rather than seeing sectarian division as the antithesis of pluralism, we might understand it as a historical struggle over legitimacy and the ethics of disagreement.

For contemporary Ismaʿilism, especially under the Aga Khan, this ambiguity becomes a resource. Rather than resolving sectarian tensions through hierarchy or erasure, Ismaʿilism

⁷⁴ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁵ Roy Mottahedeh, "Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions," in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Amongst Muslims*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 32.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33–34.

emphasizes ethical comportment, intellectual humility, and the partiality of all knowledge. This ethic also goes beyond texts. James W. Allan introduces a visual and architectural dimension to pluralism often overlooked in legal or theological discourse. Through his survey of Islamic art and architecture, Allan shows how sectarian and doctrinal difference shaped aesthetic practice, from the *Shi'i takiyas* of Iran and Iraq to the esoteric inscriptions of the Fatimids in Cairo. He cautions against deterministic readings of doctrine in form, emphasizing that architecture is shaped by geography, materials, patronage, and artistic norms.⁷⁷ Even so, Islamic visual culture suggests that difference was not only tolerated, but often aestheticized. In calligraphy, tilework, spatial layouts, and shrine design, we find a material vocabulary of multiplicity. In *Isma'ili* contexts, especially, architecture becomes a mode of cosmological storytelling, where esoteric meaning, public ritual, and civic ethics converge.⁷⁸ These environments show how pluralism was embodied, an insight echoed in the Aga Khan's own architectural investments today.

Zulfikar Hirji helps pivot from historical models to the contemporary stakes of pluralism.

Drawing on Clifford Geertz and Amartya Sen, Hirji critiques the “solitarist” impulse to reduce Islam to a singular doctrinal or political identity.⁷⁹ Against this pluralism can be treated not merely as a sociological description of diversity but as an ethical imperative, “learning to grasp that which we do not necessarily embrace.”⁸⁰ This reframing underscores the core of this chapter. While Islamic history offers rich models for managing difference including legal,

⁷⁷ James W. Allan, “Islamic Art and Doctrinal Pluralism: Seeking Out the Visual Boundaries,” in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Amongst Muslims*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 85.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁹ Zulfikar Hirji, “Debating Islam from Within: Muslim Constructions of the Internal Other,” in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Amongst Muslims*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 1–5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

doctrinal, aesthetic models, what distinguishes contemporary Ismaʿilism, particularly under the Aga Khan, is the transformation of these precedents into an institutional ethic. Pluralism here is a structure for organizing social life around the moral and epistemic demands of difference.

Pluralism, therefore, is neither relativism nor assimilation. It is a reparative discipline, by which I mean a way of living through difference with care, humility, and moral imagination. As the chapter will argue further, it is best understood not as a condition to be explained, but as a post-catastrophic ethic: forged in the shadow of rupture, and sustained through institutional and ethical labor.

Qurʾanic foundations: Difference as a Divine Sign

Before pluralism can be approached as a civilizational and institutional response to modern trauma, it must be grounded in the ethical and theological resources of Islamic thought. This is not to suggest that the concept of a post-catastrophic ethic originates within Islamic tradition, but rather that pluralism, as an ethical commitment and spiritual discipline, resonates deeply with the Qurʾanic worldview. Since this chapter argues that pluralism in Ismaʿilism offers a form of Islamic modernism rooted in care and epistemic humility, it is essential to establish that pluralism is an articulation of Islam's metaphysical and ethical foundations from within. This section does so by engaging Qurʾanic texts through the interpretive lenses of Toshihiko Izutsu and Abdulaziz Sachedina. Their work reveals a pluralism that is theologically deliberate and ethically charged.

A foundational verse in this Qurʾanic conception is Q. 49:13: “O humankind! We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may come to know

one another (*li-ta'ārafū*). Truly, the most noble among you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious (*atqākum*).” Difference here is framed as the divinely willed condition of human life. Social and cultural multiplicity is not accidental, but willed. What matters is not identity but *taqwā* – ethical orientation toward God. This becomes the basis for a Qur’anic anthropology in which difference is a site of moral encounter.

This framing of difference as divinely ordained offers a striking contrast to one influential reading of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9. There, the diversification of languages is portrayed as a divine punishment for human pride represented by an act of architectural hubris that sought parity with God. As architectural historian Vikramaditya Prakash writes, the Old Testament’s etiological logic sets up a narrative in which “the creation of different languages... set up the conditions of misunderstanding amongst peoples and made history the history of many tongues, and as a consequence, the narrative of persistent war.”⁸¹ The Qur’anic narrative, by contrast, reframes multiplicity as a necessary precondition for ethical engagement. In Quran 30:22, for example, diversity in “languages and colors” is explicitly described as one of God’s “wonders” and a “sign for humankind.” Where the Babel story interprets difference as fragmentation and loss, the Qur’an sanctifies it as an epistemological opportunity via an invitation to recognize, engage, and ultimately be transformed by the other. This subtle but profound theological distinction is foundational to the ethical pluralism developed in Islamic thought and becomes central to the *Isma‘ili* tradition’s cosmological and institutional vision.

Toshihiko Izutsu’s semantic analysis of Q. 49:13 emphasizes the Qur’an’s ethical transformation of pre-Islamic concepts. In his book ‘Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an’, he shows how

⁸¹ Vikramaditya Prakash, *Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh Revisited: Preservation as Future Modernism*, 1st ed. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023), 107.

terms like *karīm* (noble) are redefined from tribal prestige to moral seriousness: “The real *karīm* is he who lives with great moral earnestness, being ever conscious of the approaching Day of horrible catastrophe.”⁸² This shift marks a semantic revolution in human value. *Taqwā*, in his reading, “means a clear consciousness of the tremendous seriousness of life,” an awareness that calls the believer into accountability in relation to others.⁸³ As Q. 30:22 affirms, difference is foundational to human life as a moral project. Diversity in language and appearance is a divine sign (*āyah*) to be recognized and engaged.

While Izutsu focuses on the moral reconfiguration of virtue, Abdulaziz Sachedina develops the theological grounding of pluralism. In his book ‘The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism’, he challenges supersessionist interpretations that reduce the Qur’an to an abrogation of prior revelations. A key verse here is Q. 5:48: “To each of you We have prescribed a law and a way. Had God willed, He would have made you one community... So compete in good works.” Though Sachedina does not engage this verse in extended *tafsīr*, his broader thesis resonates with its message. For him, the Qur’an confirms the validity of other revelations and emphasizes shared moral responsibility. “There is no statement in the Koran,” he writes, “direct or indirect, to suggest that the Koran saw itself as the abrogator of previous Scriptures”.⁸⁴ This claim forms the basis for Sachedina’s critique of *naskh* (abrogation), which he sees as a historical mechanism used to sideline the Qur’an’s pluralistic commitments.⁸⁵ He argues that classical exegetes often declared inclusive verses such as Q. 2:62, which promises salvation to Jews, Christians, and

⁸² Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, 1st ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 53–54.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁴ Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

Sabaeans, to be abrogated, not on theological grounds but for reasons of political expediency and communal consolidation. Central to Sachedina's argument is the concept of *fiṭra*, or the primordial nature with which all humans are created. This disposition, he argues, underwrites a "universal human religiosity," an ethical sensibility shared across communities.⁸⁶ This theology entails a deep ethic of restraint. The Qur'an consistently rejects coercion: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q. 2:256); "Had your Lord willed, all people would have believed" (Q. 10:99). Sachedina interprets these through the lens of Ash'arite theology, where divine will and human responsibility cohere in a vision of moral agency. Ethical responsibility is a trust, not to be violated by force.⁸⁷

Pluralism, then, is not a concession to modernity or a product of liberalism. It is a Qur'anic ethic grounded in the affirmation of diversity, freedom of conscience, and moral seriousness. Through Izutsu, we see how tribal notions of honor are replaced with spiritual accountability. Through Sachedina, we encounter a Qur'an that affirms multiple revelations and refuses theological exclusivism. Together, they reveal pluralism as an internal imperative of Islamic thought.

This theological grounding is critical to the broader argument of this chapter. If pluralism is to function as a post-catastrophic ethic, that is, a way to reconstruct moral life after colonial violence, displacement, and epistemic rupture, then it must be rooted in the very tradition it seeks to revitalize. The Qur'an, read through Izutsu and Sachedina, offers that foundation. It presents a spiritual vision in which difference is integral to the human task. It is this vision that the Aga Khan's pluralism seeks to institutionalize as a response to the ethical demands of the present. In this light, pluralism is woven into the Qur'an's ethical architecture by framing it as a call to

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 16–35.

humility, interpretive generosity, and moral imagination. That is why we begin here: with scripture, with meaning, and with the theological anthropology that underwrites the ethical vision developed throughout this chapter.

Isma‘ili cosmology and the ethics of knowledge

The ethical vision of pluralism rooted in the Qur’an finds one of its most sophisticated elaborations in *Isma‘ili* thought, where difference is cosmologically structured. Within this tradition, pluralism is embedded in the fabric of reality and the very architecture of knowledge. The *Isma‘ili* worldview situates knowledge (*‘ilm*) within a metaphysical system defined by gradation, multiplicity, and the unfolding of truth over time. Difference, therefore, is framed as a reflection of divine order manifest in the stratified layers of being and the soul’s gradual ascent from obscurity to illumination.

In *Isma‘ili* thought, knowledge is not merely rational or empirical; it is also eschatological and ethical. To know rightly is to be transformed. Consequently, pluralism is not only the recognition of others but a metaphysical necessity for encountering truth. Central to this worldview is the hermeneutical distinction between *ẓāhir* (exoteric) and *bāṭin* (esoteric).⁸⁸ This distinction, which runs through both scriptural exegesis and metaphysical thought, asserts that every phenomenon, be it a verse of revelation, a ritual act, or a natural event, possesses multiple levels of significance, accessible only through appropriate ethical and intellectual cultivation.

⁸⁸ Ramy Mahmoud, “The Origin of Esotericism: An Analysis of the Ismaili Esoteric Approach to Qur’anic Interpretation,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu al-Qur’an dan Hadis* 25, no. 1 (2024): 105.

Khalil Andani, in his reading of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, explains that *ta'wīl* – the *Isma'ili* method of esoteric interpretation, is a structured method of returning things to their metaphysical origins. It unfolds within a cosmology where all planes of existence, spiritual, material, linguistic, are interconnected in graded harmony.⁸⁹ This is further reinforced by Nāṣir-i Khusraw's insistence that certain individuals such as prophets, *imams*, and their deputies (*hujjats*), possess the capacity to perform *ta'wīl* as a divinely inspired and socially necessary function.⁹⁰ These figures are embodied exegetes, providing guidance in accordance with both cosmic order and historical contingency. As Andani explains, in *Isma'ili* theology this role makes the Imam the axis of hermeneutic meaning in an ever-unfolding universe.

This perspective challenges static or absolutist notions of knowledge. Truth is singular in essence but manifold in form. It is revealed gradually, in accordance with the spiritual maturity of individuals and communities. Such a worldview affirms pluralism as recognition of an ontologically structured diversity. The tenth-century Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', a group often associated with early *Shi'i* and *Isma'ili* intellectual milieus, though not reducible to doctrinaire Isma'ilism, offer one of the earliest and richest expressions of this idea. Their *Rasā'il* (Epistles) synthesize Greek philosophy, Islamic theology, Persian metaphysics, Indian cosmology, and Sufi ethics into an encyclopedic account of the universe.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Khalil Andani, "Reconciling Religion and Philosophy: Nāṣir-i Khusraw's (d. 1088) *Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatayn*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke and Khaled El-Rouayheb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 172.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ While scholarly consensus has increasingly moved away from classifying the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' as doctrinaire Ismā'ilīs, many historians continue to note significant affinities between the *Rasā'il* and Ismā'ilī cosmology, epistemology, and ethical frameworks. Early Ismā'ilī thinkers such as Nāṣir-i Khusraw cited or reflected the Ikhwān's ideas, and several scholars have argued that the *Epistles* emerged within the intellectual milieu of tenth-century Basran Ismā'ilī circles. See Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), especially chapter 6, "The Ikhwān al-Safā' and the Ismā'ilīs," 113–23; Carmela Baffioni,

As Ian Richard Netton observes, the *Ikhwān* envisioned truth as a unified essence refracted through diverse traditions. Their pluralistic ideal was a metaphysical one: all knowledge traditions were seen as branches from a single tree of wisdom. They envisioned themselves as a fraternity of learning and knowledge-seeking in which all disciplines and civilizations could be reconciled through ethical and spiritual integration.⁹² In their cosmology, the universe is ordered in ascending levels from God, to the Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul, the celestial spheres, and finally the material world. The human soul, situated midway, is tasked with ascending this hierarchy through virtue and contemplation.⁹³ Diversity, for the *Ikhwān*, is a condition of unity, not its opposite. Knowledge, in this system, is about aligning the soul with the structure of the cosmos. To study diverse disciplines is a recognition of a shared metaphysical origin. Their approach to pluralism is thus ontological: all seekers, regardless of background, possess the potential to ascend toward truth through ethics and reason.

Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, writing in the thirteenth century under the *Nizārī Ismaʿīlī* state of Alamut, carries this logic further. In his *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (Nasirean Ethics), Ṭūsī frames philosophy as a spiritual discipline aimed at the perfection of the soul. He writes: “Practice is the exercise of movements and the perseverance in disciplines, to bring what is in the area of potency out to the limit of the act, so long as it leads from defect to perfection, according to human ability.”⁹⁴

Knowledge, in this schema, is only valuable if it leads to moral and spiritual transformation. The

“Ismaili Onto-Cosmological Doctrines in the Manuscript Tradition of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*,” *Shii Studies Review* 3, nos. 1–2 (2019): 37–62; Nader El-Bizri, ed., *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwan al-Safaʾ and Their Rasaʾil: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239–47.

⁹² Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 22.

⁹³ Muhammad Abdullah Darras, “Islamic Eco-Cosmology in *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*’s View,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 142.

⁹⁴ Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *The Nasirean Ethics*, trans. G. M. Wickens (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 31.

perfect philosopher is one in whom knowledge and action are harmonized: “In whomsoever these two concepts are realized, such is a perfect philosopher and a man of excellence.”⁹⁵

Ṭūsī uses the metaphor of the household to express the integration of difference into unity. Just as the human body is composed of diverse organs that must function in coordination, society and the cosmos require differentiated roles oriented toward shared purpose. “Although each member has its own particular equilibrium and act,” he writes, “nevertheless the act of all members in association and collaboration is the end of all acts.”⁹⁶ This metaphor reinforces the principle that diversity is not an obstacle to unity, but rather its condition. The cosmos itself, in Ṭūsī’s account, is a system of graduated beings moving toward divine perfection.

What emerges from these thinkers is an epistemology founded not on certainty but on humility, responsibility, and disciplined interpretation. Since knowledge is always mediated by one’s moral state and position in the cosmic hierarchy, it must be approached with care. *Ta’wīl* is thus not only a method of interpretation but a spiritual ethic because it requires moral purification more than just intellectual rigor. Pluralism thereby becomes a condition of truth. The diversity of philosophical systems, languages, and civilizations is a testament to the manifold paths through which the divine can be approached.

In this context, the Imam plays a critical role as a guide attuned to the needs of time and the capacities of seekers. Khalil Andani frames how, for the *Isma‘īlīs*, the *Imam* is the living exegesis – a figure through whom divine wisdom is adapted, clarified, and made actionable in a plural and changing world. This idea will gain even greater relevance in a subsequent section, where we turn to the Aga Khan’s modern institutional ethics. The *Isma‘ili* tradition, as articulated through

⁹⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*, Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, and contemporary thinkers like Andani, offers a pluralism that is cosmological, ethical, and epistemological. It is a pluralism that begins with the premise that truth is singular in essence but multiple in form, and that the soul's journey toward that truth is necessarily conditioned by difference – difference of capacity, context, and insight. Such a worldview reframes the contemporary discourse on pluralism. It suggests that the challenge is not how to tolerate difference, but how to interpret it rightly, live within it responsibly, and recognize in it the traces of the divine. In *Isma'ili* cosmology, pluralism is the very condition for the realization of truth.

Pluralism as post-catastrophic ethics: Rethinking the modern Muslim subject

In various addresses over the past two decades, His Highness the Aga Khan has consistently framed pluralism as an ethical response to the profound fractures of the modern world. “Whether we are looking at a more fragile European Union, a more polarized United States, a more fervid Sunni-Shia conflict, intensified tribal rivalries in much of Africa and Asia,” he observed in a 2015 lecture, “the word ‘fragmentation’ seems to define our times.”⁹⁷ Evidently then, pluralism, for the Aga Khan, arises from an acute awareness of this fragmentation, which he links to structural forces such as the failure of secular nationalism, the reawakening of tribal and sectarian passions, and the inequities of global capitalism. “Since the end of the Cold War,” he explained in another address, “a number of factors appear to have been common and significant ingredients, if not the primary cause, of many of the conflicts we have witnessed. Perhaps the

⁹⁷ Aga Khan IV, *The Cosmopolitan Ethic in a Fragmented World*, Jodidi Lecture, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, Memorial Church, November 12, 2015.

most common... has been the failure... to recognise the fact that human society is essentially pluralist.”⁹⁸

These reflections underscore a crucial feature of the Aga Khan’s pluralist vision: it is not reactive, but reparative. It does not presume the inevitability of cultural harmony, but insists on the ethical labor of sustaining diversity as a condition for peace. This pluralism is embodied in the educational, architectural, and development institutions the Aga Khan has built over the decades, from the Aga Khan Development Network to the Global Centre for Pluralism itself. It is a vision forged in response to civilizational trauma, political rupture, and historical violence. In this sense, pluralism is a post-catastrophic ethic. It is both a theological inheritance and a civilizational strategy, grounded in the belief that a more plural world is not simply desirable, but necessary for human survival.

The Aga Khan’s institutional commitment to pluralism can now be understood more fully through this post-catastrophic ethic: a moral framework that arises in the aftermath of collapse – of colonial domination, sectarian fragmentation, epistemic rupture, and political disillusionment. Where other discourses might approach pluralism through the idioms of religious tolerance, minority rights, or transnational identity, this chapter focuses instead on catastrophe. Following thinkers like Talal Asad, Faisal Devji, and Shiben Banerji, as well as *Isma‘ili* ethical tradition, I suggest that pluralism as articulated in the Aga Khan’s projects is a response to the loss of ethical continuity in the modern Muslim world. It seeks to reassemble moral life through non-sovereign, institutionally grounded practices that prioritize care, recognition, and epistemic humility.

⁹⁸ Merchant, *The Aga Khan on Pluralism in an Interdependent World*.

Talal Asad's critique of secular modernity offers a foundational point of departure. Asad describes modernity not merely as a shift in governance or epistemology, but as a condition of ethical dislocation. In 'Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity', he writes that modern liberal governance does not simply exclude religion but rather it reconfigures the ethical subject by compelling religion to become private, voluntary, and politically inert. Secularism, he argues, is an enactment as it produces new subjectivities by displacing traditional moral orders and introducing ambivalent legal categories that redefine what counts as public, rational, or ethical.⁹⁹ In this context, pluralism, especially as practiced in the liberal West, tends to operate as a form of procedural management: a way to absorb difference without engaging its moral depth. Asad's framework helps us see that the real crisis is the loss of ethical mechanisms that once made difference meaningful.

Faisal Devji pushes this diagnosis further by showing how the modern Muslim subject, especially in the wake of decolonization and the Cold War, comes to inhabit a post-sovereign condition. In 'Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity', Devji argues that militant Islamic actors like Al-Qaeda do not appeal to traditional forms of legal or political authority, but to ethical fragments, moral outrage, and personal responsibility. Their actions are not grounded in a state, a party, or a system, but in the moral logic of witness (*shahāda*), martyrdom, and responsibility in a world where institutions have lost credibility.¹⁰⁰ Devji's account, while focused on violent militancy, is useful here not by analogy of action or aim, but because it diagnoses a post-sovereign condition in which Muslim ethical agency seeks forms

⁹⁹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*. See particularly chapter 1, "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?" and chapter 6, "Secularism, Nation-State, Religion."

¹⁰⁰ Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 14–37.

outside inherited institutions. Inverting that diagnosis, the Aga Khan's pluralism can be read as a constructive response to the same vacuum. If martyrdom is one way to act ethically in a post-authorial world, then the AKDN and AKAAs represent another: to create institutional forms that re-ground ethics not in sovereignty, but in service, design, care, and the cultivation of knowledge.

Devji's 'Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea' deepens this argument by tracing the paradox of Muslim nationalism, especially in the founding of Pakistan, where the state is imagined not as the culmination of Islamic tradition but as a blank abstraction – a homeland without history, a nation defined by its detachment from territorial roots. Here, Devji notes, Islam becomes a “proper name”, denoting a floating signifier that claims moral unity without institutional coherence. This condition, of Islam as a name without content, a totality without consensus, is what makes pluralism both necessary and difficult.¹⁰¹ It is against this backdrop that the Aga Khan's pluralism intervenes: not by recovering some lost Islamic authenticity, but by offering a way to live ethically within fragmentation. As Devji shows through his discussion of *Shi'i* dissimulation (*taqiyya*) and ecumenism, pluralism can be a mode of sustaining difference, while maintaining the ethical integrity of the self.¹⁰²

Shiben Banerji's 'Lineages of the Global City: Occult Modernism and the Spiritualization of Democracy' offers a critical framework for understanding how ethical subjectivity and public life can be reimagined outside the confines of state sovereignty and liberal autonomy. Banerji traces how designers and thinkers in the orbit of 'occult modernism', for example figures like Annie

¹⁰¹ Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 201–40.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 212–13.

Besant and Patrick Geddes, responded to the disintegration of empire, the failures of nationalism, and the collapse of liberal governance. Crucially, the ‘occult’ in his analysis is not esoteric retreat but a “political project”: an effort to recalibrate subjectivity, ethics, and social life around the recognition of unseen forces, whether cosmological, spiritual, or affective, that exceed the procedural logic of modern law and markets.¹⁰³ Drawing on Ritu Birla’s critique of how colonial legal forms produced subjects “precisely not citizens”¹⁰⁴, Banerji shows how these occult movements enacted a “transvaluation of politics into ethics”¹⁰⁵, displacing the liberal figure of the autonomous rights-bearing subject with one defined by obligation, embeddedness, and moral interdependence. In this framework, service to the public is framed as liberal as an aesthetic and spiritual discipline, a means of sustaining collective life in the absence of stable political or institutional guarantees. This reframing resonates closely with the Aga Khan’s pluralism as an ethical labor of repair, enacted through institutions, architecture, and education that cultivate relational forms of subjecthood beyond the state.

Birla’s ‘Stages of Capital’ traces how the colonial state in India transformed indigenous commercial ethics and endowments into modern legal fictions like the public charitable trust. These forms, while seemingly progressive, served to depoliticize and contain vernacular expressions of economic morality by coding them as “cultural” rather than political or economic.¹⁰⁶ Birla’s work thus reveals how pluralism in colonial contexts was often managed through bureaucratic abstraction, an abstraction the Aga Khan’s projects actively resist. Rather

¹⁰³ Shiben Banerji, *Lineages of the Global City: Occult Modernism and the Spiritualization of Democracy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2025), 29.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁶ Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 1–30.

than institutionalizing pluralism through legal neutrality or bureaucratic containment, the Aga Khan institutions frame pluralism as ethical publicness by representing a commitment to serve diverse publics without erasing their difference, and without reverting to the paternalism of sovereign trusteeship.

The Aga Khan's pluralism, therefore, must be read not as a 'moderate' Islam, nor as an interfaith initiative, nor as a reaction to the West. It is an Islamic ethical practice grounded in *Isma'ili* theology, cosmology, and epistemology, but shaped by the demands of a world that no longer permits unified authority. It is post-catastrophic not because it commemorates loss, but because it seeks to act after loss, to make life possible where tradition, state, and law have failed to hold moral meaning. This pluralism signifies a careful and continuous moral effort: to design a park in Kabul, to restore a citadel in Aleppo, to build a university in East Africa, to recognize a village architect in Burkina Faso. In the next section, I turn to these institutions, including AKDN, AKTC, GCP, and the AKAA, as examples of what I call ethical architectures. They are the material and institutional crystallizations of a pluralism that seeks repair rather than agreement. And that, I argue, is precisely what makes it Islamic, not in its symbolism or patronage, but in its moral ambition to remake the world from within its ruins.

The ethical inheritance of institutional form: Pluralism beyond the state

The moral imperative of pluralism, forged in the crucible of historical rupture, does not remain an abstract ethic in contemporary *Isma'ili* thought. It is made tangible, indeed, architectural, through a dense network of institutions that give form to its values. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the Aga Khan Award for

Architecture (AKAA), and the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP) together constitute more than philanthropic or cultural initiatives; they are transnational infrastructures of care and conviction. These institutions are ethical architectures in the sense that they produce spaces, publics, and subjects through which pluralism becomes a lived, practiced reality.

To describe them as NGOs would be inadequate. To see them as extensions of religious authority misses their deeper complexity. Rather, these institutions operate as what Saskia Sassen and Jonah Steinberg both describe as assemblages and as hybrid formations that blur the boundaries between state, community, bureaucracy, and spirituality. As Steinberg writes in his conclusion to *‘Isma‘ili Modern’*, “many forms at once: a polity, a religion, a corporate structure, a bureaucratic network.”¹⁰⁷ They serve publics that are not bound by geography, nationality, or even religious confession, and in so doing, they recast the very notion of a “public.”

This recasting must be understood in light of its historical genealogy. As Ritu Birla’s *‘Stages of Capital’* demonstrates, colonial India served as a laboratory for inventing new legal instruments that governed the public through moralized economic forms, most notably the charitable trust. “By the turn of the twentieth century,” Birla writes, “participation in the sovereign responsibility of social welfare was reconstituted as a philanthropic investment in an abstract public.”¹⁰⁸ The public charitable trust, regulated through “official trustees assigned to local governments,” functioned as a legal fiction that moralized governance by framing colonial subjects as beneficiaries of fiduciary care, rather than political agents. In her reading, such structures depoliticized indigenous ethical traditions by coding them as culture: “As vernacular capitalists

¹⁰⁷ Jonah Steinberg, *Isma‘ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 207.

¹⁰⁸ Birla, *Stages of Capital*, 104.

were governed as cultural actors, they were rendered illegitimate as economic agents.”¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the Aga Khan’s institutions reclaim and reconfigure these juridical forms. The AKDN is a postcolonial fiduciary institution rooted in Islamic ethical vocabularies such as *khidma* (service), *‘adl* (justice), and *ta ‘āruf* (mutual recognition), offering a model of pluralist governance that does not separate ethics from economy or culture from care.

Banerji’s reading of Birla in ‘Lineages of the Global City’ provides a vital bridge here. He shows how the ethics of serving a “general public” in South Asia developed through ambiguous negotiations between colonial law, elite philanthropy, and Sufi-influenced spiritual ethics. Rabindranath Tagore’s *ashram*, as Banerji notes, was not simply an educational experiment, it was an effort to produce affective publics through aesthetic, sensory, and moral discipline.¹¹⁰ The Aga Khan’s institutions continue this project: they build worlds in which moral sensibilities are shaped through architecture, landscape, and pedagogy. This is particularly evident in the AKDN’s presence in fragile postcolonial contexts such as Afghanistan, Syria, Zanzibar, Gilgit-Baltistan, where the state either does not function or is not trusted. As Steinberg notes, “AKDN is neither a state nor a government, but in structure and process on the local level it sometimes plays an analogous role.”¹¹¹ This is a form of non-sovereign governance which exhibits ethical authority without any sign of political domination. Roads, parks, and public health projects become forms of moral stewardship, offering what the state no longer can, not just infrastructure, but recognition.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁰ Banerji, *Lineages of the Global City*, 116–53.

¹¹¹ Steinberg, *Isma’ili Modern*, 63–64 .

However, institutions do more than provide, they also produce. They create subjects, ways of seeing and being, affective bonds, and cultural literacies. As Khalil Andani and Nasir al-Din Tusi argue, knowledge (*ilm*) in the *Ismaʿili* tradition is a process of ethical self-transformation. The AKDN and its affiliates extend this epistemology through institutional practice. At the *Ismaʿili Tariqa* and Religious Education Board (ITREB), youth camps, and the Institute of *Ismaʿili* Studies (IIS), education is not merely about literacy but also about forming the ethical self through service, dialogue, and interpretive humility. Steinberg’s ethnography of ITREB and IIS reveals the microphysics of this formation.^{112 113} *Didār* (beholding the imam), *Farmān* (the words of the imam), and curricular materials all function as technologies of ethical calibration. Through them, the *Imam*’s voice becomes a distributed presence in the form of an everyday ethical horizon. Young *Ismaʿilis* learn religious doctrine but more importantly, also a posture of cosmopolitan humility. They are trained to encounter difference with care, and to see knowledge as relational.

Architecture and cultural heritage programs carry this ethic into the built environment. The AKAA, for instance, is often seen as a design prize. But it is more accurately a moral-political project: it recognizes forms of building that reflect not only technical excellence but social cohesion, ecological humility, and aesthetic care. For the dissertation as a whole, the AKAA is especially important because it is one place where this cultivation takes evaluative form. It translates pluralism from a discourse of ethical responsibility into a practice of judgment, asking how architecture can sustain dignity, repair damaged worlds, and make shared life possible across difference. As Steinberg notes, the AKTC and AKAA create “alternative historical

¹¹² Ibid., 87–106 .

¹¹³ Ibid., 143–92.

counterdiscourses.”¹¹⁴ They challenge dominant narratives of Islamic architecture as either classical heritage or radical rupture. In their place, they offer a pluralist canon where rural schools, refugee camps, and climate-sensitive housing can stand beside mosques and monuments.

This canon is not without its tensions. The pluralism it embodies is aspirational, but also curated. The institutional project is shaped by the Khoja elite and their epistemic norms, as Steinberg documents. Local practices, from Pamiri rituals to South Asian devotional forms, are sometimes standardized or even erased in the name of unity. This is not simply a managerial decision; it reflects a deeper double-bind. To enact pluralism, one must also delimit it. To make it legible across contexts, one must often fix its terms. The result is a form of pluralism that is always also a site of contestation. This double-bind does not invalidate the institutional project. Rather, it reveals the constitutive difficulty of pluralism itself. As I have argued throughout this chapter, pluralism is not a resolution of difference but an ethical mode of staying with it, and of building institutions that can hold contradiction without collapsing into relativism or authoritarianism. The AKDN, AKTC, GCP, and AKAA are not perfect. But they are attempts to institutionalize care, to ritualize humility, to build spaces where diversity is not merely endured but sustained as a moral good.

In this light, pluralism is not the opposite of power, it is a mode of power, one that operates not through coercion, but through education, design, narrative, and service. It is what Foucault might call “pastoral”: a form of moral governance that seeks to guide without domination.¹¹⁵ The Aga Khan’s institutions enact this pastoral power in a postcolonial register. They offer what states

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

often cannot: ethical continuity, aesthetic vision, and infrastructural dignity, but perhaps most importantly, they offer a wager. In a world where both liberal democracy and religious traditionalism have faltered, these institutions ask whether it is still possible to build ethical communities without consensus. Whether, after catastrophe, we might still have the courage to design spaces not of agreement, but of repair. Whether pluralism might not be an endpoint, but a beginning. In the final conclusive section of this chapter, we return to that wager, and consider its implications for architectural history, Islamic modernity, and the writing of global pluralism itself.

Writing pluralism after catastrophe

What, then, does it mean to write pluralism from within the ruins of consensus? This chapter has argued that pluralism, as conceptualized and enacted in the Aga Khan's institutions, is a post-catastrophic discipline of repair – a way of inhabiting the fractured conditions of modernity through humility, care, institutional responsibility, and the ethical management of difference. It arises in the wake of empire, amidst the failures of secular nationalism and the weakening of inherited frameworks of authority, but it does not offer resolution in the form of a restored consensus. Instead, it seeks to hold contradiction ethically, to build from fracture, and to institutionalize care where agreement cannot be presumed. It is, as this chapter has suggested, a wager that architecture, education, governance, and ritual can be remade to sustain the dignity of difference.

The chapter has therefore rethought Islamic modernity not as a religious accommodation to modern forms, nor as an abstract reformism, but as an ethical formation grounded in Islamic conceptions of divine difference, cosmological unity, and interpretive responsibility. The

Qur'anic account of difference as divine sign, the Isma'ili emphasis on interpretation and ethical knowledge, and the Aga Khan's modern institutional discourse together show why pluralism cannot be reduced to liberal tolerance. It is an ethical formation that requires cultivation.

Drawing on Isma'ili philosophy, particularly Ṭūsī and contemporary voices such as Andani, the chapter has shown that Islamic knowledge can be understood as a pluralistic mode of self-transformation, one that resists both scripturalist rigidity and Western liberal secularity. The Aga Khan's institutions translate this epistemology into infrastructures of care such as schools, parks, housing projects, archives, heritage programs, and spaces of public dialogue. They make Islamic modernity livable through a dispersed ethics of service, aesthetics, responsibility, and humility.

This also calls for a rethinking of how pluralism itself is written. Much of the literature on pluralism, especially in liberal theory and diaspora studies, frames it as a response to demographic complexity, a politics of toleration, or a model of multicultural coexistence. What this chapter has argued instead is that pluralism, in the Aga Khan's vision, is not only a response to diversity; it is also a response to loss. It emerges where moral frameworks have broken down, where neither the state nor the *umma* can fully command ethical coherence, and where inherited forms of belonging must be reassembled under conditions of fracture. It is a moral labor performed in institutions, buildings, communities, and everyday life, not seeking final resolution, but sustaining continuity amid instability.

This is why pluralism in this account cannot be reduced to representation or inclusion. It is not only about making space for different voices within existing systems, but about crafting new systems, publics, aesthetics, and rituals premised on fragility rather than totality. Across the AKDN, AKTC, GCP, and AKAA, pluralism becomes public through institutions that build, educate, restore, evaluate, and convene. The AKDN's bridge-building in Badakhshan, the

AKTC's restoration of historic centers, the GCP's work on pluralist civic culture, and the AKAA's recognition of built environments across Muslim societies and beyond are acts of ethical reconstruction. Yet for this dissertation, the AKAA is especially significant because it turns this ethic into a regime of architectural recognition.

At points this reconstruction is also riven with paradox. Institutions that aim to enable pluralism also necessarily regulate it. The very act of standardizing ritual, organizing civic pedagogy, curating history, or granting recognition through an architectural award imposes forms of selection, exclusion, and hierarchy. This is not simply a failure of the project; it is one of its conditions. The Aga Khan's institutions are not utopian. They are partial, compromised, and often elite-driven. Yet in acknowledging these contradictions and proceeding anyway, they perform the pluralism they preach. They show that the measure of pluralism is not perfect coherence, but the capacity to live with and through ambivalence. This paradox will return later in Chapters 2 and 4 as the dissertation's account of the AKAA's double-bind – the condition in which pluralism must remain anchored enough to retain ethical force, yet open enough to avoid hardening into doctrinal, demographic, or stylistic closure.

The AKAA is one place where this cultivation takes evaluative form. It translates pluralism from a discourse of ethical responsibility into a practice of architectural judgment, asking how built environments can sustain dignity, repair damaged worlds, and make shared life possible across difference. This translation does not mean that architecture becomes an illustration of theology, or that Islamic ethics can be applied to buildings in a direct or formulaic way. Rather, it means that the ethical grammar traced in this chapter becomes consequential when it is organized through institutions, procedures, and criteria capable of recognizing what architecture does in the

world: what it repairs, whom it enables, which publics it assembles, and what forms of continuity it sustains.

For the dissertation as a whole, this account of pluralism establishes the ethical grammar through which the Aga Khan Award for Architecture becomes legible. If pluralism is a discipline of repair, then its institutional forms must be judged by the worlds they make possible: the differences they sustain, the publics they assemble, the forms of care they render durable, and the damaged relations they seek to mend. The next chapter turns to the AKAA's awarded projects to show how this ethical grammar becomes architectural value, and how repair, public-making, and living heritage enter the Award's widened field of judgment. In this sense, pluralism is not a doctrine but a discipline – a way of staying with the world, and of rebuilding within it, even when its coherence is gone.

Chapter 2

Widening the Evaluative Frame: Repair, Civics, and Living Heritage

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon and yet its awarding practices span across heterogeneous geographies, publics, and practices. This constitutive double-bind allows the Award to recalibrate its evaluative center of gravity away from stylistic tokens and toward relations – ecological repair, everyday civics, and heritage as contemporary practice. Across cycles, the Award’s own frames license this widened judgment. The 2004 cycle emphasizes adequacy as a critical perspective with social, cultural, and environmental consequences and explicitly warns against cultural normativity;¹¹⁶ the 2007 cycle refuses preservation “set in aspic,” naming restoration a “work in process”;¹¹⁷ the 2019 cycle organizes winners around “living heritage,” “ecological resiliency and recovery,” and “thriving and inclusive commons”;¹¹⁸ and 2022 reminds us “that the ‘architectural’ and the ‘humanitarian’

¹¹⁶ Master Jury report in Phillipa Baker, ed. *Architecture and Polyphony: Building in the Islamic World Today*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 11.

¹¹⁷ Master Jury report in Pamela Johnston, ed. *Intervention Architecture: Building for Change*. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 2007), 12.

¹¹⁸ Master Jury report in Andres Lepik, ed. *Architecture in Dialogue: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*. (Berlin: ArchiTangle, 2019), 35.

need not be mutually exclusive,” while foregrounding environmental impact, contextual engagement, use value, and prototypical value.¹¹⁹

From its earliest cycles, the Award curated across the geographical range of Muslim societies while admitting that relevance is a continuing search and that projects can be exemplary and imperfect as indices to this search.¹²⁰ Read externally, this stance is legible as a cultural statement that legitimizes plurality rather than policing a style.¹²¹ It’s significance also lies in the critique of inherited modernist criteria of judgment because rather than treating technological mastery, formal abstraction, developmental acceleration, or the domination of nature as neutral signs of architectural progress, the Award’s pluralist frame makes ecological care, social consequence, and ethical accountability part of architectural value.¹²² In practice, the Award’s question is less “Is this Islamic architecture?” than “What does this project repair? Whom does it enable? Which publics does it assemble? What forms of continuity does it sustain?” That pivot – from icon and auteur to relations – shows up in how juries talk about 1) adequacy and process, 2) the refusal to freeze heritage, and 3) the elevation of the common and the everyday.

¹¹⁹ Master Jury report in Sarah M. Whiting, ed. *Inclusive Architecture: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*. (Berlin: ArchiTangle, 2022), 36.

¹²⁰ Sherban Cantacuzino, ed. *Architecture in Continuity*. (New York: Aperture, 1985), 10 – 29.

¹²¹ Hugh Pope, “Designs That Prize the Diversity of Muslims; Architecture: Projects Honored by the \$500,000 Aga Khan Award Celebrate the Pluralism in the Islamic Culture,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1996.

¹²² Wael Hallaq is useful here for framing modernity not simply as a chronological condition but as an epistemic formation. In *Restating Orientalism*, he argues that “a true political critique of Orientalism” must address the foundations that produced “a particular conception of nature, liberalism, secularism, secular humanism, anthropocentrism, capitalism, the modern state, and much else that modernity developed as central to its project.” Without adopting Hallaq’s critique wholesale, I use this point to clarify why the AKAA’s emphasis on repair, stewardship, and ecological consequence challenges inherited modernist criteria of architectural judgment rather than merely diversifying style. Wael B. Hallaq, introduction to *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4.

This chapter therefore sets out to demonstrate how that pivot operates in practice. It does so by reading a set of award dossiers and jury reports supplemented by external criticism and relevant scholarship on Islamic ethics and ecology. The analysis unfolds in three clusters that test distinct facets of this widened judgment: first, repair as an architectural value where ecologies and infrastructures are made civic; second, everyday civics and public-making where ordinary building types such as mosques and schools generate capacity, participation, and replication; and third, heritage as contemporary practice where design is coupled with policy, craft, and governance in the present tense. Throughout, form remains evidence, but it is assessed by the relations it mediates.

The first cluster focuses on repair as architectural value. Territorial wetlands and waters are re-made into public ecologies – Riyadh’s Wadi Hanifa “reverses the tide of rapid urban development,” offering an “alternative ecological way of urban development,” while cleaning water, mediating flood, restoring habitat, and creating everyday spaces along a 120-kilometre corridor;¹²³ Sharjah’s Wasit Wetland Centre pursues excellence by blending into habitat, turning a dump into “natural capital” and public pedagogy.¹²⁴ In Bangladesh, the Jhenaidah riverfront is a community-driven catalyst that transforms a dumpsite into multifunctional space, “reclaiming the commons” and reconnecting ritual and civic life.¹²⁵ In conversation with these ecological repair examples is a project focused on a major refugee crisis of contemporary times – the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Even under displacement, the Rohingya community spaces awarded by the AKAAs enact dignity through inclusive processes and

¹²³ Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2011), 30; 32.

¹²⁴ Lepik, *Architecture in Dialogue*, 209.

¹²⁵ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 128.

“dismantlable and reusable” architectures, becoming a transferable model for emergency urbanism.¹²⁶

The second cluster highlights the importance of everyday civics and public-making. The Award repeatedly canonizes the ordinary – schools, mosques – when they enlarge civic capacity. In Burkina Faso, the Gando Primary School pairs “elegant architectonic clarity” with transformative social value¹²⁷ and a building process that trained villagers, enabled future work, and catalyzed extensions as demand surged – £16,500 raised over three years for a 526 m² hand-built school designed for 120 pupils in a village where children are 65% of residents; more than 300 sought admission soon after.¹²⁸ In Dhaka, the Bait ur Rouf Mosque renders a community room from light, air, and terracotta, explicitly eschewing domes and minarets – an “architecture of the essential” where space is “devoid of ritualistic and symbolic attributes” and represents “all as equals”.¹²⁹ In southern Senegal, Kamanar Secondary School addresses multiple scales (urbanism, landscape, tectonics) through catenary vaults in site-made clay blocks and, crucially, by building the civic economy around it with a carpentry workshop which now employs seven carpenters (four apprentices), who produced all school furniture with a published manual for replication, and is pushing the method toward earth construction as legal/ ecological timber constraints tighten.^{130 131}

¹²⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹²⁷ Baker, *Architecture and Polyphony*, 35.

¹²⁸ Building design. “BURKINA: Faso Gando Primary School.” (Tonbridge: CMP Information Ltd, 2005).

¹²⁹ Nondita Correa Mehrotra, “Architecture of the Essential”, in Mostafavi, Mohsen, ed., *Architecture and Plurality*. (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2016), 122.

¹³⁰ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 13; 265 – 275.

¹³¹ Alyssa K. Barry “Woodwork Ethic.” *The Architectural Review*, 2025, 100–106.

The third and final cluster discusses the question of heritage as contemporary practice. Tunis's Hafsia Quarter exemplifies how continuity is judged by what it enables in the present with elements such as a medina-scale infill and a connective suq which were praised even as early shortcomings were acknowledged; subsequent phases added tenancy programs, rehab incentives, public-private partnership, and resettlement mechanisms.¹³² In Mali, the Great Mosque of Niono treats craft lineage as a modern resource as the Jury commends the will "to continue the traditional" while attending to ongoing change.¹³³ In Yemen's Shibam, conservation becomes a living urban platform – repair of fabric coupled with women's literacy, irrigation governance, and mud-craft associations – "a living community rather than a historical artefact frozen in time" "a platform for the reinvention of the vernacular high-rise in twenty-first century conditions".¹³⁴

What links these strands is a judgment practice that broadens the evaluative frame. Across repair, civics, and living heritage, value moves from object to relations (ecologies, commons, governance, ritual use), from singular authorship to distributed intelligence (communities, crafts, agencies, institutions), and from period fetish to present-tense continuity. In that sense, the chapter questions the canon without iconoclasm as it shows how an anchored yet outward-facing award shifts architectural criteria toward repair, publics, and continuity. This underscores the dissertation's larger argument about the AKAA's double-bind – what I have called its paradoxical pluralism – because it demonstrates how holding both anchors (Islamic ethical horizons) and openness (planetary practices and publics) *produces* a wider, more adequate form of judgment rather than collapsing into relativism.

¹³² Peter Davey, "Aga Khan Awards." *The Architectural Review* (London). (London: EMAP Architecture, 1995).

¹³³ Cantacuzino, *Architecture in Continuity*, 149.

¹³⁴ Johnston, *Intervention Architecture*, 36.

Cluster 1: An Ethic of Repair as Architectural Value:

Repair, in the Award's practice, I argue, is a way of making architecture answerable to damaged ecologies, strained infrastructures, and frayed publics. By damaged ecologies, I mean not only degraded natural settings, but social, biological, infrastructural, and economic relations altered by extraction, development, displacement, neglect, or abandonment.¹³⁵ When juries praise projects for cleaning water, mediating floods, restoring habitats, or re-opening ritual access to rivers, they are not stepping outside architecture so much as widening what counts as its work. This widened frame treats infrastructure as civic space, environmental remediation as a social good, and technical intelligence as inseparable from ethical care. It is also where the Award's double-bind – anchored in Islamic ethical horizons yet open to planetary practices – does its most generative work by showing how environmental stewardship terms and civic aspirations are held together without collapsing into style.

The intellectual ground for this widening is, in my view, legible in a long theological–philosophical conversation about creation, balance, and responsibility. One strand articulated by Tarik M. Quadir, drawing from the ideas of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ibn 'Arabī, insists that the cosmos is a theophany, the “Cosmic Qur'ān,” a field of signs (āyāt) in which beings have their

¹³⁵ Anna Tsing's work is useful for clarifying this sense of damaged ecology. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, she asks, “What emerges in damaged landscapes, beyond the call of industrial promise and ruin?” and argues for attention to forms of life that persist in landscapes shaped by disturbance, abandonment, and capitalist extraction. Her work helps frame repair not as a return to untouched nature, but as the reworking of compromised environments into more livable relations. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18.

due (ḥaqq).¹³⁶ A second strand – Ibrahim Özdemir’s Qur’anic environmental ethic – names balance (mīzān) and anti-waste (anti-isrāf) as universal norms by highlighting that “Justice and balance are a universal law,” and one must preserve that balance even “on the bank of a rushing river”.¹³⁷ A third strand – Tazim Kassam’s account of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) – translates those convictions into institutions by pointing out that development is “about people,” enacted through decentralized, sustainable programs, not “white-elephant” schemes.¹³⁸ These sources converge with the AKAA’s own frames in 2019 and 2022 – “ecological resiliency and recovery,” “thriving and inclusive commons,”¹³⁹ and the reminder that the architectural and humanitarian “need not be mutually exclusive”, to justify why repair belongs at the center of architectural judgment.¹⁴⁰

The first project in this cluster, The Wadi Hanifa Wetlands project, awarded in 2010, reads this ethic at a territorial scale [FIG 2.1 and FIG 2.2]. Over decades, the valley serving Greater Riyadh became a sink for spoil and construction waste, its hydrology compromised by channelization, flood risk, and public estrangement. The winning plan confronts this long violence through a suite of landscape and infrastructural operations starting with the removal of nearly 1.25 million cubic metres of dumped material; re-profiling the channel to perform for design floods; and installing a bio-remediation facility – riffles, pools, aeration basins, riparian planting – that

¹³⁶ Tarik M. Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism : The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013), 206-238.

¹³⁷ Ibrahim Özdemir, “Towards an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective”, in Foltz, Richard C, Frederick Mathewson Denny, and Azizan Haji Baharuddin. *Islam and Ecology : A Bestowed Trust*. (Cambridge, Mass: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2003), 9.

¹³⁸ Tazim R. Kassam “Aga Khan development Network : An Ethic of Sustainable Development and Social Conscience”, in Foltz, Richard C, Frederick Mathewson Denny, and Azizan Haji Baharuddin. *Islam and Ecology : A Bestowed Trust*. (Cambridge, Mass: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2003), 479; 485.

¹³⁹ Lepik, *Architecture in Dialogue*, 35.

¹⁴⁰ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 36.

“assimilate[s] contaminants” while making the watercourse legible to everyday users [FIG 2.3 and FIG 2.4].¹⁴¹ The Master Jury’s citation points out that “This project reverses the tide of rapid urban development” and “eloquently demonstrates an alternative ecological way of urban development,” restoring and enhancing the valley’s capacity to clean water, mediate floods, provide habitat, and “create opportunities for recreational, educational and aesthetic experiences”.¹⁴² In Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s terms, one could say the project makes dimmed signs readable again with care for water and land is an act of attention to theophany (tajallī) rather than an exercise in technocratic control.¹⁴³ In Qur’anic terms, the work restores mīzān in a landscape where isrāf – excess dumping, excess speed of urbanization – had undone it. AKAA’s language even admits a specifically Islamic lexicon – Emārat al-Arḍ (building/planting the earth) – to name a duty that is at once architectural and ecological.¹⁴⁴



FIG 2.1. Aerial view of Wadi Hanifa, showing the territorial scale at which the AKAA reads ecological repair as architectural work. The valley is treated as an infrastructural and civic landscape whose restored hydrology, habitat, and public access become evidence of architectural value.

¹⁴¹ Mostafavi, *Implicate Explicate*, 30-31.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴³ Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism*.

¹⁴⁴ Mostafavi, *Implicate Explicate*, 31.



FIG 2.2. Interpretive trails through Wadi Hanifa, where environmental remediation is translated into everyday public experience. The paths make the repaired landscape legible to users, turning ecological recovery into civic pedagogy.



FIG 2.3. Re-establishing the natural landscape in the desert tablelands and rangelands above the Wadi bed. The image shows how the project's architectural intelligence extends beyond discrete buildings to the restoration of ecological systems at a regional scale.



FIG 2.4. Bio-remediation facilities in Wadi Hanifa, where water treatment, flood mediation, and public landscape design are integrated. The project makes technical infrastructure visible as part of an ethic of stewardship and repair.

That duty is inseparable from publics. The valley is a series of reachable places including paths, overlooks, planted banks, and low-weir crossings, where citizens learn to inhabit repaired ground. Rather than treating a discrete building as the primary unit of judgment, this project argues its architectural value through a web of relations that are observable in the dossier and jury text such as hydrologic performance, the return of species, the coordination of municipal and regional agencies with maintenance regimes, and the everyday patterns of access and use that make the valley public. The Award's praise is explicitly grounded in the system's performance and its co-produced public life. That emphasis anticipates the Award's later cycle language that reads excellence in terms of ecological recovery and inclusive commons, i.e.,

relations that can be stewarded and shared rather than forms standing alone. The Award's criteria recognize a choreography of institutions (municipal and regional agencies), maintenance regimes, and user practices as part of the architecture. This is the paradox at work where a modern metropolis is addressed with state-of-the-art landscape urbanism while being read through an Islamic stewardship horizon.

The second project in this cluster, the Wasit Wetland project, awarded in 2019, makes the argument in a different register, by highlighting a building that intends to disappear so habitat can reappear [FIG 2.5]. The long, sunken gallery brings visitors below grade so birds are shielded from glare and reflection; six bird hides ring a rehabilitated lake; recycled materials and carefully modulated surfaces keep the visual field quiet so ecological recovery can come to the fore.¹⁴⁵ The jury sharpened the criterion by highlighting that architectural merit “resides... on a structure's capacity to blend into an environment rather than challenge it,” and the project's major contribution lies in reclaiming close to twenty acres of former wasteland and “valorising it as a form of natural capital”.¹⁴⁶ The use of the phrase “Natural capital” must not be seen as the Award's capitulation to a market metaphor; it is the recognition that restored wetlands produce multiple services and values – habitat, water filtration, education, recreation – that are public. Kassam's earlier AKDN language – development as enabling people to participate fully – fits here rather appropriately. Wasit is a pedagogy of making more-than-human publics visible, and therefore worth protecting.¹⁴⁷ Quadir, in his work, highlights through engagements with Nasr, that to “deny the unity and the hierarchy of reality” is to make the world inhuman; Wasit resists

¹⁴⁵ Lepik, *Architecture in Dialogue*, 205 – 217.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 209.

¹⁴⁷ Kassam, *Aga Khan Development Network*.

that by choreographing a precise way of seeing – quiet light, controlled glare – so visitors perceive lives beyond their own [FIG 2.6 and FIG 2.7].¹⁴⁸



FIG 2.5. Aerial view of the Wasit Wetlands Centre, where the building's low profile allows the restored habitat to become the primary architectural presence. Its self-effacing form shifts attention from object-making to ecological recovery.

¹⁴⁸ Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism*, 24.



FIG 2.6. Children observing birds in the aviary at Wasit Wetlands Centre. The image captures how the project turns habitat restoration into environmental pedagogy, making more-than-human life visible as a public concern.



FIG 2.7. The Wasit Wetlands Centre blending into its surrounding habitat. Rather than asserting itself as an architectural object, the building's restraint makes ecological continuity and non-human inhabitation central to its aesthetic and ethical value.

The third project in this cluster, the Urban River Spaces project in Jhenaidah, Bangladesh, awarded in 2022, demonstrates that repair is not only territorial; it is municipal and proximate [FIG 2.8]. In Jhenaidah, a derelict riverside and informal dumpsite, cut off from daily life, was transformed through a community-driven process into an accessible sequence of ‘ghats’ and shaded platforms. The regraded banks and new retaining walls do the hydraulic work; the steps, niches, and trees do the social work [FIG 2.9 and FIG 2.10]. The jury calls it a “catalyst to drive change,” “transforming a derelict informal dumpsite into an attractive and accessible multifunctional space,” explicitly naming the project as “reclaiming the commons” and “regaining connection with the river”.¹⁴⁹ The smaller “community ghat” caters to bathing, washing, and religious rituals, while the upper retaining wall creates semi-enclosed, shaded areas for everyday use; local craftspeople built it, and more than fifty municipalities have visited to learn from the engagement programme.¹⁵⁰ Here, Özdemir’s earlier conceptualization of the ‘more-than-human publics’ helps clarify what is at stake. The Qur’an lays out the importance of these more-than-human inhabitants in the verses “He laid out the earth for all beings” (Quran 55:10) and “All living beings roaming the earth and winged birds soaring in the sky are communities like yourselves” (Quran 6:38); the “commons” then can be understood to not just refer to shared public resources between humans, but also the more-than-human habitats that can thrive alongside human ritual and recreation. The design intelligence here is modest and exacting – sections that hold both water and people safely, shade that cools bodies and surfaces,

¹⁴⁹ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 128.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

thresholds that welcome mixed uses without friction – and it is precisely that modesty the Award reads as architectural value.



FIG 2.8. Aerial view of the large public ghat along the Nabaganga River in Jhenaidah. The riverfront demonstrates how modest spatial interventions can reclaim a degraded edge as civic commons.



FIG 2.9. Smaller ghats along the Nabaganga River accommodate bathing, washing, fishing, and other daily practices. The project's value lies in restoring ordinary forms of river access as part of public life.



FIG 2.10. Docking facilities at the larger ghat in Jhenaidah, connecting the river directly to the town's civic infrastructure. The image shows how repair operates through both hydraulic management and everyday mobility.

Community Spaces in the Rohingya Refugee Response, Cox's Bazar, awarded in 2022, form the last project in this cluster [FIG 2.11]. The ethic of repair, apart from addressing issues of ecological healing, also includes an emphasis on dignity under precarity, particularly for a people fleeing persecution. In this project, the conditions are emergency, displacement, and trauma caused by one of the most significant refugee crises of our time; the palette is bamboo, local timber, thatch, and block; and the method is participatory programming attentive to gender and safety.

Six small buildings – Including women-friendly and protection spaces, community centers, and a display/production centre – organize everyday solidarities rather than monumentalize crisis [FIG

2.12 and FIG 2.13].¹⁵¹ The jury’s language calls it a “dignified, sensitive and innovative response to emergency needs... via inclusive processes,” using “locally available” materials, “dismantlable and reusable,” already a “transferable model” beyond the camp.¹⁵² The project treats these people as bearers of meaning and memory, inscribing Burmese text, planting recognizable species, and composing women-safe spaces where trust can grow.¹⁵³ Kassam’s earlier insistence on enabling participation is literalized in that refugees and local communities co-author programme and form, producing an architecture that teaches its own making and unmaking.

Across these places such as wadis and wetlands, ghats and camp compounds, the same recalibration is at work. Repair is treated as a primary design brief. In each case, excellence is argued in terms of relations: water quality and flood performance hinged to access and shade; bird habitat interlaced with viewing galleries and school visits; river steps returned to ritual and daily use; emergency shelters keyed to gendered safety and co-production. The Award’s double-bind is visible in the vocabulary that carries these judgments. Islamic terms of stewardship (mizān, khilāfa; even Emārat al-Arḍ) sit alongside the technical language of hydraulics, ecology, and public administration.¹⁵⁴ Rather than reduce architecture to ethics, or ethics to aesthetics, the cases ask for a harder synthesis – institutions and communities that can make repair durable, legible, and shareable. As Özdemir puts it, “any sincere follower of the

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 44 – 57.

¹⁵² Ibid., 45.

¹⁵³ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 45.

¹⁵⁴ Tsing’s concept of “friction” can help make sense of this kind of translation across ethical, technical, and institutional registers. She defines friction as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.” In the AKAA’s repair projects, architectural value emerges precisely through such encounters where Islamic ethical language, environmental engineering, local use, municipal governance, and global architectural recognition do not merge smoothly, but become productive through situated negotiation. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.

Qur'an... must respect and preserve this balance in his or her relations with nature";¹⁵⁵ the Award's wager is that well-made architectures can help stage and sustain that balance. This synthesis also requires a more precise account of aesthetics. The point is not that beauty disappears behind social or ecological usefulness; rather, aesthetic judgment is redistributed across relations. In these projects, beauty inheres in the sensible experience of repair with aspects such as the cooling shade and restored watercourse of Wadi Hanifa, the self-effacing bird hides and quiet galleries of Wasit, the steps and platforms that return Jhenaidah's river to ritual and everyday use, and the courtyards and material tactility that make dignity perceptible in Cox's Bazar. Aesthetics, in this sense, is not the opposite of ethics or performance. It is one way that repair becomes visible, inhabitable, and worth sustaining.¹⁵⁶



FIG 2.11. Aerial view of the community spaces in the Rohingya Refugee Response, Cox's Bazar. The project demonstrates how architecture can protect dignity and communal life under conditions of emergency and displacement.

¹⁵⁵ Özdemir, "Towards an Understanding of Environmental Ethics", 9.

¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth K. Meyer's argument for "sustaining beauty" points out how aesthetics is often treated as superfluous in sustainability discourse, then argues that sustainable design must include landscapes that "provoke those who experience them to become more aware of how their actions affect the environment, and to care enough to make changes." Drawing on Catherine Howett and Anne Whiston Spirn, Meyer frames beauty as a poly-sensual and temporal experience through which ecological processes become culturally and ethically meaningful. My use of aesthetics here follows this sense: beauty is not added to repair as ornament, but emerges through the perceptible relations among ecological performance, public use, and ethical care. Elizabeth K. Meyer, "Sustaining Beauty: The Performance of Appearance," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 3, no. 1 (2008): 6–23.



FIG 2.12. Courtyard of the Safe Space for Women and Girls in Cox's Bazar, connecting the surrounding rooms through a protected shared interior. The courtyard makes safety, gathering, sanitation, and social care spatially concrete.

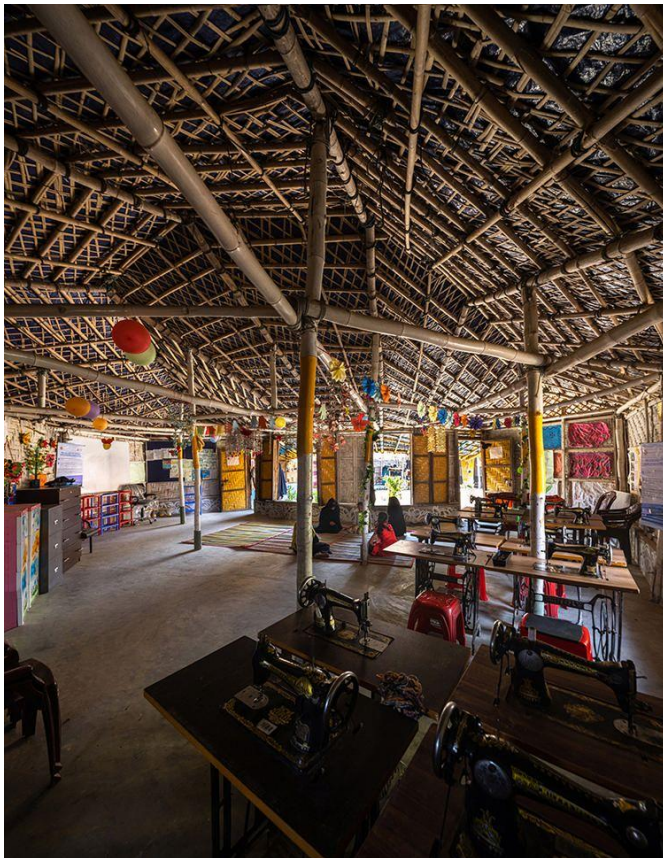


FIG 2.13. Safe Space for Rohingya Women and Girls, constructed from bamboo, thatch, tarpaulin, and other readily available materials. Its dismantlable and reusable construction turns material modesty into a strategy of resilience under cyclone-prone and temporary conditions.

To call this an ethic is not to moralize the field but to recognize the design intelligence it takes to materialize care. The jury's 2019 triad mentioned early in this chapter – living heritage, ecological resiliency and recovery, thriving and inclusive commons – offers a concise name for those decisions as criteria. The 2022 jury's earlier reminder that the architectural and the humanitarian “need not be mutually exclusive” protects the widened frame from a false choice. And the theological–philosophical sources keep the frame anchored without turning it into style whereby a cosmos is read as theophany with Nasr, a law of balance and restraint is conceptualized by Özdemir, and an institutional habit of enabling participation over spectacle is demonstrated by Kassam in the AKDN's case. In this light, repair is not an add-on to architecture; it is what allows architecture to act proportionately in damaged worlds, and to assemble publics capable of keeping that proportion.

Cluster 2: Everyday Civics and Public-Making

Following from the Repair cluster argument that environmental and infrastructural remediation can be architectural work, the present cluster shows that seemingly ordinary building types such as schools and mosques can be engines of civic life. The Award's practice does celebrate formal ingenuity in modest projects, but more than that, it also takes seriously the proposition that the means – budget, craft, climate intelligence, and process – shape publics. When juries praise the three following projects in this cluster for their “elegant architectonic clarity,”¹⁵⁷ “robust

¹⁵⁷ Baker, *Architecture and Polyphony*, 35.

simplicity,”¹⁵⁸ or an “architecture of the essential,”¹⁵⁹ they are re-centering architectural judgment on capacity-building, replication, and shared authorship. What critics might see as a romance of austerity is, in fact, a recognition by the Award that the spatial and procedural decisions which make ordinary programs hospitable – how a roof shades and ventilates; how materials are sourced and taught; how a threshold makes room for mixed publics – are the decisions by which civic cultures are built.

The first case in this section is the Gando Primary School designed by Fancise Kéré in Burkina Faso, awarded in 2004 [FIG 2.14]. The Gando vignette is by now well known: a primary school designed by a village son studying in Europe, funded on a shoestring, built by hand using compressed earth blocks with minimal steel, and so loved that demand quickly outstripped capacity. But the case bears slow reading because its architectural intelligence lies as much in process as in tectonics. On the design side, the school organizes rectangular classrooms with covered outdoor spaces and uses a thin clay-tile ceiling below a ventilated corrugated metal roof to create a plenum of moving air. Overhangs shade facades; shutters run the length of walls to bring “ample natural light and ventilation,” and the mass of earthen blocks tamps diurnal swings [FIG 2.15].¹⁶⁰ On the making side, the project introduced a simple brick-press and an on-site pedagogy. As Kéré recalls, “building the school was a true community effort,” and the training meant “many of the workers... have since found work as skilled labourers” beyond Gando [FIG 2.16 and FIG 2.17]; later commissions – a school extension, teachers’ housing, women’s center, library, and a secondary school – consolidated what the first project seeded.¹⁶¹ The facts are even

¹⁵⁸ Mostafavi, *Architecture and Plurality*, 102.

¹⁵⁹ Mehrotra, *Architecture of the Essential*, 122.

¹⁶⁰ Baker, *Architecture and Polyphony*, 36.

more inspiring. It took “three years to gather the £16,500 necessary,” completed in 2001 for 120 pupils in a village where “children make up 65% of Gando’s 3,000 residents”; within a short time “more than 300 children” wanted to attend, so “extensions [were] in the pipeline”.¹⁶²



FIG. 2.14. Southern façade of Gando Primary School, where shaded thresholds, earthen walls, and simple assemblies make climate intelligence legible as civic capacity. The school’s architectural value lies not only in form but in its ability to be built, maintained, and extended by the community.

¹⁶¹ Diebedo Francis Kéré. “School in Gando, Burkina Faso.” *Architectural Design* 82, no. 6 (2012): 66–71, at 69. doi:10.1002/ad.1496.

¹⁶² Building design. “*BURKINA: Faso Gando Primary School*.” (Tonbridge: CMP Information Ltd, 2005).



FIG 2.15. Interior of Gando Primary School, showing long shutters that provide natural light and ventilation. The classroom's comfort is produced through low-cost environmental design rather than mechanical systems, linking pedagogy to climatic adaptation.



FIG 2.16 Workers assembling roof trusses during construction of Gando Primary School. The image foregrounds construction as civic training, showing how the project's process produced transferable skills alongside a school building.



FIG 2.17. Construction view of Gando Primary School, emphasizing the community labor and technical experimentation behind the project. The image complicates any romantic reading of vernacular simplicity by showing the school as a hybrid of local labor, modern education, and careful material technique.

The 2004 Master Jury's citations – "elegant architectonic clarity... [with] transformative value for the community" – can sound decorous until one understands what "clarity" names here.¹⁶³ It is definitely not minimalism as an aesthetic. It is lucidity of assembly in the service of climate, use, and teaching. The school reads as a catalogue of replicable moves such as east-west orientation; shaded, ventilated roof cavity; clay-tile ceiling for thermal lag; long shutters for light and air; covered outdoor rooms as social condensers. To call such moves "elegant" is to register their economy, but the Award's emphasis is elsewhere – the clarity makes the building legible to its makers, which is why skills travel, and why the object reorganizes a village's sense of its own capacity. "Once the school was done... we all cried," Kéré notes – a line that might sound

¹⁶³ Baker, *Architecture and Polyphony*, 35.

sentimental until one hears it as a civic diagnosis. The project gave Gando a proof that collective effort could alter its material and social horizon.¹⁶⁴ Gando lets us see how the Award's criteria shift from heroic author and singular object toward collective authorship and the social afterlife of a project.

Two objections usually surface and deserve answers. First, is this simply vernacular romanticism? By this I mean the tendency to treat local materials, craft labor, poverty, or community participation as morally authentic in themselves, as though non-industrial or low-cost construction automatically escapes the contradictions of development, inequality, or global architectural authorship.¹⁶⁵ The concern is important because projects such as Gando can easily be received through a sentimental narrative of scarcity, ingenuity, and village authenticity. The evidence, however, suggests something more technically and institutionally complex. The project is full of technical hybridities such as steel for doors, shutters, and trusses; corrugated roofing precisely spaced above clay tile to create a ventilated cavity; a brick-press adapted to local labor rhythms. Second, is the real value extra-architectural and to be found in things like jobs, pride, and/or enrollment? Here the Award's own language helps because it prizes works that shape the emerging public sphere, which is to say, it reads spatial and procedural design decisions as levers for enlarging civic life.¹⁶⁶ In Gando, the relation between tectonics and public

¹⁶⁴ Building design. "BURKINA: Faso Gando Primary School."

¹⁶⁵ By "vernacular romanticism," I mean an uncritical mode of reception that treats local materials, craft, community labor, or rural poverty as signs of authenticity in themselves. Nezar AlSayyad's discussion of tradition warns against treating tradition as "the static legacy of the past," proposing instead that it be understood as "a model for the dynamic reinterpretation of the present." AlSayyad also draws on Dell Upton's critique of authenticity in vernacular studies, especially Upton's call to move away from "a search for the authentic, the characteristic, the enduring, and the pure." My point is that Gando's importance lies not in the recovery of a pure vernacular, but in the project's hybrid technical and civic intelligence. Nezar AlSayyad, "The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings?," in *The End of Tradition?*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (London: Routledge, 2004), 7, 9.

is very tight whereby comfort and durability make classrooms usable; shaded interstices host exchanges; locally intelligible assemblies invite maintenance and extension.

The Bait ur Rouf Mosque, designed by Marina Tabassum in Dhaka and awarded in 2016, offers an interesting comparison [FIG 2.18]. If Gando clarifies how a school can produce publics, Bait ur Rouf clarifies how a mosque can serve as one. The design refuses the canonical signifiers of mosque architecture – “gone are the dome and the ever-prevalent minarets” – and instead composes an interior “rich with light and shadow,” where “robust simplicity” allows “deep reflection and contemplation in prayer” [FIG 2.19].¹⁶⁷ The building’s straightforwardness is not bare; it is exact. Terracotta brick, a deep plinth that separates the room from street-level turbulence while acting as a communal platform, and a roof-light system that makes daylight the principal ornament. Marina Tabassum highlights the importance of these design decisions by pointing out that “Light is everything... How you deal with light can actually change the atmosphere of a space,” and the wells let light descend “from above,” creating “a very spiritual ... feeling” [FIG 2.20 and FIG 2.21].¹⁶⁸ She also names the social intention by stating that it was a “conscious decision not to incorporate the symbolic elements” because symbols “create difference between people,” and “anybody should be able to come in”.¹⁶⁹

The mosque’s universality is not an erasure of Islamic specificity; it is a judgment about what elements carry that specificity forward without policing it. In other words, the design invokes what the first chapter named an ethic of repair – care for climate, light, and shared presence –

¹⁶⁶ Baker, *Architecture and Polyphony*, 10; 150.

¹⁶⁷ Mostafavi, *Architecture and Plurality*, 102.

¹⁶⁸ Priya Khanchandani, “Marina Tabassum’s Architecture of Resistance.” *Icon*. (Epping: Media 10 Ltd, 2018).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

rather than an iconography of identity. The civic consequences are plain on every Friday when the plinth overflows; they are also plain on ordinary afternoons when the same platform holds quiet conversation, shade, and play. Moving beyond simplistic iconographic representations through minarets and domes, Bait ur Rouf teaches us to recognize a mosque by the publics it solicits, the porosity of its thresholds, and the dignity of its shade.



FIG 2.18. Exterior view of Bait ur Rouf Mosque, whose restrained brick volume rejects iconic mosque signifiers while preserving the mosque as a porous neighborhood institution. The project shifts Islamic architectural expression from dome and minaret to light, material, threshold, and shared use.



FIG 2.19. Interior of Bait ur Rouf Mosque, where the interplay of light and shadow creates a contemplative atmosphere without relying on overt symbolic ornament. The image shows how spiritual experience is generated through elemental architectural means.

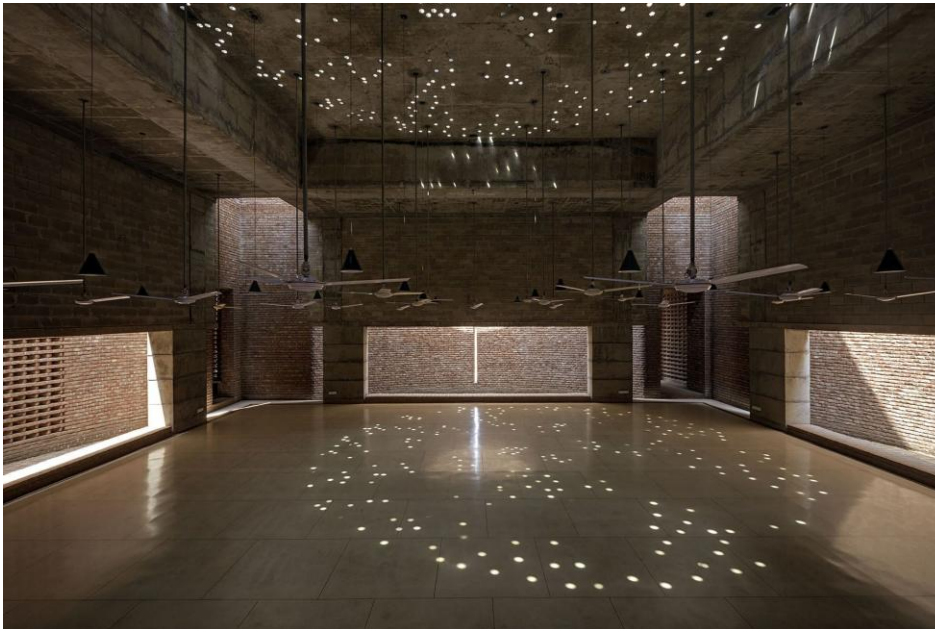


FIG 2.20. Interior of Bait ur Rouf Mosque, showing daylight entering from above. Light becomes both aesthetic medium and theological atmosphere, giving the prayer space its sense of equality, stillness, and inwardness.



FIG 2.21. Light entering the niches of Bait ur Rouf Mosque. The image shows how the mosque's pared-back language produces sacred presence through section, shadow, and material restraint rather than iconographic display.

Potential objections here also deserve answers. Is this “de-symbolization” a concession to secular taste? The Award’s documents argue otherwise. In their language, the space is more, not less, Islamic because it exercises the tradition’s elemental resources – light, air, material, proportion – to create conditions of presence and equality. And by refusing a narrow repertoire of signs, the building aligns with the Award’s pluralist method in that it is open to anyone who needs shade, conversation, or prayer, and it marks Islam’s civic presence in Dhaka without hardening boundaries. The point goes beyond mere iconoclasm; it is to show how symbolic restraint can intensify spiritual and civic life.

The last case in this cluster is the CEM Kamanar, in Thionck Essyl, Senegal, awarded in 2022 [FIG 2.22 and FIG 2.23]. Kamanar’s contribution to everyday civics emerges from two linked sites – the school proper and a carpentry workshop built to support it. The Jury praised the project’s address to “multiple scales of urbanism, landscape, architecture and building technologies,” the climate-attuned grid that weaves around existing tree canopies, and the catenary-vault system formed from site-made clay blocks [FIG 2.24 ad FIG 2.25].¹⁷⁰ The description details a whole ecology of making whereby mud is “excavated on site,” clay is chosen to work in compression, carpentry is set up to fabricate roofs and furniture as a self-sustaining business; rainwater terracing directed to a cistern for irrigation, and citrus trees planted as a small income stream.¹⁷¹ But the project’s most consequential move – when read through the Award’s civic lens – is to embed capacity alongside classrooms. A non-profit organization called Foundawtion, set up by the architects of this project – Dawoffice, financed, designed, and built Lamine Sambou’s 177 m² carpentry workshop with compressed-earth base walls; “all of the CEM’s furniture was made in Sambou’s workshop,” and the team published a manual—“*Guide pour construire facilement le mobilier d’une école au Sud du Sénégal*”—so the models could be reproduced for other clients.¹⁷² Today, “seven carpenters, including four apprentices, now work for him,” and the workshop supplies furniture beyond the school.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 268.

¹⁷¹ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 265.

¹⁷² Barry, “Woodwork Ethic”, 103.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 102.



FIG 2.22. Exterior view of the classrooms at CEM Kamanar in Thionck Essyl, Senegal. The school's architecture links education to landscape, shade, local materials, and the civic economy of making.



FIG 2.23. Classroom exterior at CEM Kamanar, showing how the school's repeated forms create a coherent educational environment while remaining climatically and materially responsive. Its value lies in the integration of pedagogy, craft, and environmental adaptation.



FIG 2.24. Clay construction, latticework, and vaulting at CEM Kamanar act together as a passive cooling system. The image shows how material form becomes environmental performance and architectural evidence.



FIG 2.25. Existing trees integrated into the landscape design at CEM Kamanar. The project's civic and ecological intelligence appears in its refusal to clear the site, instead allowing the school to form around existing shade and vegetation.

The material ethics are not naïve. The same documents that give the aforementioned detail, also highlight timber scarcity and illegality – Casamance lost more than 10,000 hectares to illegal logging; African mahogany is IUCN-listed as vulnerable – and local procurement rules that force builders to navigate between official mills and black-market risk.¹⁷⁴ Instead of treating this as a footnote, the team evolves method: their next project is slated to shift toward rammed earth and to perhaps “forgo timber in future”.¹⁷⁵ Kamanar therefore reads as a test of the Award’s widened criteria where excellence is not just in vaults and courtyards, but in the choreography of legal sourcing, manuals, training, and adaptation under scarcity. The school does carpentry for its region; the workshop does pedagogy for its trade. Together they make a small town’s public life more resilient by seeding skills, standards, and income.

A short comparative note helps clarify what is being argued across these cases. The Award helps expand the definitions of “public building” beyond typologies such as city halls and courthouses and “public space” beyond plazas and parks. These cases ask us to see public-making as a function that can ride on any program, be it a school that trains its builders, a mosque that stages equality by light, a workshop that publishes manuals. The resulting publics are summoned by habits rather than spectacle such as daily cooling breezes, thresholds for gathering, shared maintenance. The language of the cycles reinforces this. For instance the 2016 “Architecture of the Essential” treats budget as a design intelligence, while 2022’s evaluative lens scopes “use value,” “contextual engagement,” and “prototypical value,” the very qualities that make ordinary buildings reproducible and civic.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Whiting, *Inclusive Architecture*, 35.

Two further threads underline the cluster's argument. First, authorship. These projects are authored by many – villagers, imams and neighbors, carpenters and students, municipalities and NGOs. The Award's documents increasingly acknowledge this polyphony, which Chapter 3 will detail institutionally. In civic terms, shared authorship does not dilute architectural value; it grounds it. When makers understand assemblies, they can repair them; when users own thresholds, they tend them. Second, replication. Gando's extensions, Kamanar's manuals, Bait ur Rouf's legible section and plinth are more than just local successes. They are templates. The Award's attention to "prototypical value" signals that architecture's impact is multiplied when it can be learned and carried.¹⁷⁷

Another return to the double-bind is in order. The cluster's projects read as both anchored and open – anchored, in that they mobilize elemental resources (light, shade, clay, wood, air) and civic virtues (hospitality, equality) that sit comfortably in an Islamic ethical horizon; open, in that they translate those resources into forms approachable by anyone. If there is a canon being quietly questioned here, it is the canon that confuses monumentality with importance. The Award advances another measure by questioning whether the work enlarges the space of the common. The answer in these schools and mosques is yes – not because they represent the public but because they make it.

Cluster 3: Heritage As Contemporary Practice

The previous clusters have argued that the Award widens architectural judgment by elevating repair and by canonizing everyday civics. The following heritage cases show how the same move works across time whereby continuity is judged by what a fabric, a craft, or an urban

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

quarter enables in the present. The Award resists two familiar traps. On the one hand, conservation as vitrining – freezing places into museum display. On the other, modernization as erasure – treating inherited forms as impediments to present life. Instead, the heritage projects exemplify a third path the Award has cultivated across cycles, framing heritage as a contemporary practice in which design, policy, finance, and craft are coordinated to keep places livable, equitable, and meaningful. The 2007 Master Jury named this stance: treat restoration as “a work in process,” not “set in aspic”.¹⁷⁸ The 2019 cycle then made the evaluative criteria explicit by folding “living heritage” into its triad alongside ecological recovery and inclusive commons.¹⁷⁹

The first case in this category is the Hafsia Quarter project in Tunis, two phases of which were recognized in two separate cycles of the Award – 1983 and 1985 [FIG 2.26, FIG 2.27, and FIG 2.28]. Hafsia is a long conversation in two acts. The first act (Phase I, awarded 1983) inserted medina-scale infill into the historic urban tissue, reworked the suq spine, and restored continuity of streets and public spaces with a sensitivity that the jury praised as “humane” and attentive to the “scale of the old medina”.¹⁸⁰ Yet the same jury admitted limitations – access for the poorest, the pressures of commercialization – setting the stage for institutional learning. The second act (Phase II, awarded 1995) addresses those critiques through governance and finance instruments such as landlord-tenant programs, targeted incentives for rehabilitation, and a public-private partnership that could underwrite work at scale. As Peter Davey summarizes, “the Hafsia district is once more a vibrant locus... Institutional success, community involvement, financial and

¹⁷⁸ Johnston, *Intervention Architecture*, 12.

¹⁷⁹ Lepik, *Architecture in Dialogue*, 35.

¹⁸⁰ Cantacuzino, *Architecture in Continuity*, 87.

economic viability, excellent public-private partnership and a sensitive resettlement programme for the displaced make Hafsia a success worthy of widespread study”.¹⁸¹ The Los Angeles Times pressed the point in non-specialist terms stating that “redevelopers not only physically upgraded the district, they set up landlord-tenant programs and established financial incentives encouraging rehabilitation of old structures”.¹⁸²

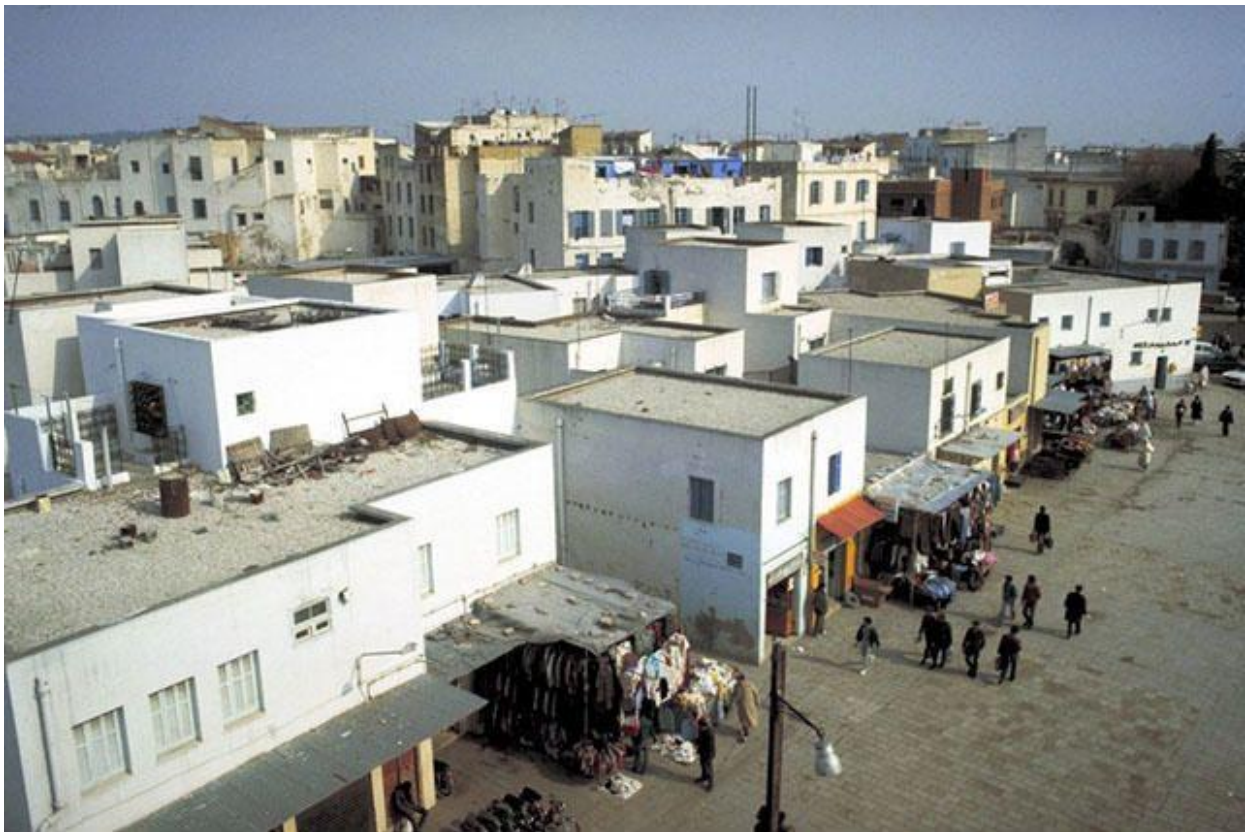


FIG 2.26. New infill housing within the Medina of Tunis at Hafsia Quarter. The project demonstrates how heritage can be extended through contemporary urban repair rather than preserved as a frozen image of the past.

¹⁸¹ Davey, “Aga Khan Awards”.

¹⁸² Pope, “Designs That Prize the Diversity of Muslims”.



FIG 2.27. Individual housing units with courtyard entryways in Hafsia Quarter. The courtyard typology sustains domestic continuity while adapting medina fabric to contemporary housing needs.



FIG 2.28. Outdoor market spaces in Hafsia Quarter, where urban infill, commerce, and pedestrian life reconnect the district to the wider medina. The image shows heritage operating as a living civic and economic system.

What makes Hafsia exemplary for this cluster is not only the elegance of the infill or the suq as an urban condenser, but the policy architecture that allows continuity to function in the present tense. The project broadens the unit of design beyond the parcel to include leasing regimes, resettlement protocols, and incentive structures. It asks us to evaluate how design couples with institutions. The very success conditions the Architectural Review lists – local labor systems, incremental rehab, better financing models – are the means by which heritage lives rather than curdles.¹⁸³ The frictions it notes – traffic, developers converting residential structures to commercial use – are not disqualifications; they are the real phenomena through which continuity must be governed.¹⁸⁴ In this sense, Hafsia puts the Award’s double-bind into urban policy because it is anchored in medina fabric and social life, and open to contemporary governance tools.

In comparison to Hafsia which scales heritage through policy, The Great Mosque of Niono project in Niono, Mali, awarded in 1983, scales it through craft authority and iterative change [FIG 2.29, FIG 2.30 and FIG 2.31]. The Jury’s 1983 citation for this project is direct about the stakes of modernity:

Islamic culture has only recently begun to emerge from a past whose aesthetic values were based on craft, toward a future whose aesthetic values will surely be based on machine production. The continuing existence of traditional forms – both sophisticated and primitive – is one of our strongest allies in retaining architectural character and cultural identity as large-scale modern industry and worldwide building models assert

¹⁸³ Davey, “Aga Khan Awards”.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

their presence. Hence the will and the conscious intention to continue the traditional should be commended and encouraged. The Great Mosque of Niono is an example of such efforts. Lassiné Minta, the master mason of the mosque... has reflected the deep and powerful tradition of vernacular architecture.¹⁸⁵

The praise is conditioned by the recognition that continuity involves ongoing change – repairing collapse, thickening buttresses, altering drainage, and re-plastering surfaces in seasonal cycles under the direction of a master mason and community.¹⁸⁶ What the Award identifies as meritorious is a living method, evident through authority residing in craft knowledge; temporal cycles of maintenance as design; and adaptation under climatic constraints.



FIG 2.29. Exterior view of the Great Mosque of Niono, Mali. The mosque demonstrates how craft continuity can be read as modern architectural value when tradition is sustained through ongoing maintenance, adaptation, and communal labor.

¹⁸⁵ Cantacuzino, *Architecture in Continuity*, 149.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.



FIG 2.30. Exterior of the Great Mosque of Niono with master mason Lassiné Minta. The image foregrounds craft authority as an architectural institution, showing how knowledge is carried through persons, practices, and seasonal repair.



FIG 2.31. Exterior of the Great Mosque of Niono with the mosque's craft community. The building's continuity depends on collective maintenance and material knowledge rather than on preservation as a static monument.

The Shibam Rehabilitation project in Yemen, awarded in 2007, makes a case for the city as a living platform [FIG 2.32 and FIG 2.33]. The 2007 Jury highlighted how this rehabilitation project treated Shibam as “a living community rather than a historical artefact” and as “a platform for the reinvention of the vernacular high-rise in twenty-first century conditions”.¹⁸⁷ That platform is not only wall repair and structural consolidation, but the coordination of social and economic measures such as support for women’s literacy, irrigation governance, and associations that keep mud-craft viable in a changing economy [FIG 2.34 and FIG 2.35].¹⁸⁸ The project therefore reads as a choreography with elements such as stabilizing towers against flood and rain; training guilds in material cycles; re-establishing agricultural water routines that feed the town’s economy; and opening the decision-making to residents’ associations so that conservation is not a technocratic imposition. The shift in criteria is subtle but real. Here excellence registers in whether the project re-enables the conditions that made Shibam a city rather than in whether it reproduces a certain kind of image. Shibam also helps clarify why the Award resists vitrining. A conserved skyline without guilds to maintain it, without women’s education to widen participation, without irrigation to stabilize livelihoods, would be a stage set. The platform metaphor invites a different temporality by framing conservation as the maintenance of enabling conditions. In that sense, Shibam is continuous with the Repair cluster because it shows how waters and soils are infrastructures of continuity; so are schools and associations. The Award’s pluralist method appears here as a refusal to isolate “architecture” from the systems that keep it alive.

¹⁸⁷ Johnston, *Intervention Architecture*, 36.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.



FIG 2.32. Aerial view of Shibam, where the AKAAs reads conservation not as the preservation of an image but as the maintenance of a living urban platform. The city's value lies in the systems that allow its dense mud-brick fabric to remain inhabited.



FIG 2.33. Haroun Rashid Mosque Square in Shibam, showing public space embedded within the city's historic high-rise fabric. The image emphasizes Shibam as a lived urban environment rather than an architectural artifact.



FIG 2.34. Construction of the Spate Irrigation System in Shibam. The image shows that conservation extends beyond walls and towers to the water infrastructures that sustain the city's economy, agriculture, and settlement life.



FIG 2.35. Women's sewing classes associated with the Shibam rehabilitation project. The image expands the meaning of architectural conservation to include social capacity, gendered participation, and the everyday institutions that keep heritage alive.

Collectively, Hafsia, Niono, and Shibam show how the Award evaluates heritage in the present tense by widening the unit of design beyond form to the systems that keep places alive. In Hafsia, continuity is secured through design coupled with governance tools such as tenancy regimes, incentives, resettlement, and public–private instruments, while in Shibam it extends to guilds and water associations, and in Niono to seasonal labor rituals. In this frame, craft is an institution as seen in Niono where craft authority carries protocols, hierarchies, and feedback loops that organize repair as an ongoing method. Living heritage functions as a commons, where suq corridors, mosque forecourts, shaded lanes, and tower roofs anchor practices that must be re-enabled – markets that include the poor, prayer spaces kept porous, passageways made safe for women and children. And the frictions, rather than being denied, are named such as traffic and commercialization in Hafsia, flood risk in Shibam, and climatic fragility in Niono are treated as the very conditions under which heritage must be governed. These cases recast heritage as a present-tense platform where design, policy, and craft are braided to sustain collective life.

In the Award’s practice, continuity is evaluated as capability – whether an urban tissue or a craft system, can keep producing publics without excluding the poor or exhausting the land. This is why 2019’s “living heritage” sits alongside ecological resiliency and inclusive commons – the three are co-implicated criteria. It is also why the Award’s documents keep returning to modest means as design intelligence with techniques such as low-tech construction with local labor in Hafsia; seasonal re-plastering in Niono; mud-craft associations and irrigation routines in Shibam.

A brief note on limits is worth discussing here. None of the cases is without tension. Hafsia’s market pressure toward commercialization requires persistent policy calibration. Niono’s dependence on master masons and communal labor can fray under migration and wage

pressures. Shibam's vulnerability to extreme weather is increasing. The Award does not pretend otherwise; as in 1983, it commends exemplary work while acknowledging flaws, and it reads those frictions as part of what must be designed – procedurally and institutionally – into heritage practice.¹⁸⁹

What this cluster contributes to the chapter is a re-phrasing of architectural value across time by showing how heritage counts when it enables publics, economies, and rituals to persist and change together. The chapter's larger argument about paradoxical pluralism is visible here in urban and craft terms. One can be anchored (in mud-craft, in mosque ritual etc.) and open (to tenancy law, to guild re-training, to women's literacy) at once. It is how the Award keeps the evaluative frame broad without abandoning discipline.

Recalibrating Judgment: What the Cases Show, and Why It Matters

Across the three clusters, a steady recalibration of architectural judgment becomes clear. The Award's own cycles underwrite the shift. In 2004, adequacy is framed as a critical stance attentive to social, cultural, and environmental consequences, coupled with a caution against reverting to prescriptive cultural norms; in 2007, restoration is approached as an ongoing, processual practice rather than as static preservation; in 2019, the laureates are interpreted through rubrics of living heritage, ecological resilience and recovery, and inclusive commons; and in 2022, the Steering Committee's evaluative spectrum (pluralism and mutual respect, environmental impact, contextual engagement, risk/resilience, use value, prototypical value) is aligned with the Master Jury's insistence that architectural and humanitarian aims operate in

¹⁸⁹ Cantacuzino, *Architecture in Continuity*, 87.

concert rather than in tension. Together these moves widen the remit of architectural work while tightening the discipline around context, use, and the public good.

One consequence is a shift from objects to relations. In the Repair cluster, value gathers around choreographies of water, soil, species, and publics: in Riyadh, Wadi Hanifa is read as countering metropolitan acceleration by proposing an ecological urbanism that cleans water and mediates flood across a 120-kilometre corridor; in Sharjah, Wasit is assessed for its self-effacing siting and for reframing reclaimed wasteland as ecological asset, thereby convening more-than-human publics as subjects of care. In Jhenaidah and in the Rohingya settlements, the same logic is localized, whereby the common is reconstituted and dignity under displacement is materialized through dismantlable, reusable structures. The through-line is that excellence resides in repaired relations and assembled publics rather than in a singular object abstracted from its milieu.

In the Everyday Civics cluster, ordinariness becomes consequential. In Gando, the legibility of assemblies enables villagers to build, maintain, and replicate; budget discipline and the brick-press function as design instruments that generate publics (surging enrollment and planned extensions). In Dhaka, Bait ur Rouf deploys an essential, pared-back discipline that decouples sacred use from iconographic obligation so that light, air, and terracotta carry an ethic of equality. In Thionck Essyl, Kamanar works across multiple scales such as vaults, trees, cisterns, and workshop so that impact is measured as capacity through practices such as a published manual facilitates reproduction of furniture, and methods adapted under timber scarcity toward earthen construction. Here the 2022 evaluative lens consisting of use value and prototypical value takes concrete form.

The heritage cluster shifts evaluation from stylistic fidelity to capability. In Tunis, Hafsia's later phase attributes success to tenancy regimes, incentives, and resettlement mechanisms – design explicitly coupled to governance – while frictions such as traffic growth and commercialization are treated as designable conditions rather than as failures. In Niono, authority in craft and seasonal maintenance makes continuity a method, treating selected traditional forms as allies against homogenization precisely because they accommodate change. In Shibam, the city is positioned as a platform for renewing the vernacular high-rise under contemporary conditions, linking wall repair with women's literacy, irrigation governance, and mud-craft associations so that the settlement remains a living community rather than a museum piece.

This recalibration does not depend on Award texts alone. The philosophical and scriptural sources threaded through the chapter lend coherence without reducing judgment to stylistic preference. Nasr's Sufi-inflected metaphysics discussed by Quadir construes the cosmos as divine self-disclosure and warns that a purely quantitative outlook dissolves unity and hierarchy in reality, producing an inhuman view of the world. Özdemir's Qur'anic ethic of balance (*mīzān*) and restraint grounds frugal, climate-attuned design in principles of balance and in norms against waste (*isrāf*) even where resources appear abundant. Kassam's account of the AKDN shows how such convictions become institutional habitus – people-centered development pursued through enabling environments rather than showcase schemes. Collectively, these sources anchor the Award's widened frame while avoiding a collapse into theological prescription.

Through these cases, this chapter traces how the Award's constitutive double-bind – anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon, open to heterogeneous practices – produces a broader, more adequate

judgment. “Pluralism... inscribed in the spirit and protocols of the Award”¹⁹⁰ turns out not to be a curatorial discipline that asks of every case: What does this project repair? Whom does it enable? Which publics does it assemble? What forms of continuity does it sustain? In that sense, the chapter shows a shift of center of gravity from image to relations, from auteur to distributed intelligence, from monumentality to maintenance.

A few implications follow for how we write and teach architecture. First, the category of “project” expands to include not only the designed object but the institutions, maintenance regimes, and publics that make it durable. Second, budgets, procurement, and pedagogy become part of the design brief. The Gando brick-press, the Kamanar workshop and manual, the Rohingya participation protocols are architectural instruments, rather than extras. Third, success is temporal as it is registered in whether a work can be learned, extended, and adapted – whether it invites a public to keep making it.

The story to this point has been curatorial and case-based. Chapter 3 shifts the lens to the infrastructure of decision-making that allows such recalibration to happen cycle after cycle. Drawing on my conversations with the AKAAs’ longtime director Farrokh Derakhshani in Geneva, the next chapter argues that “relevance,” as he conceives it, is not a fixed end-state but an institutional practice – an ongoing adjustment to history and context made possible by the multiplicity of voices within the Award. Concretely, this means three things. First, it establishes the concept of Polyphony by design. Master Jury primacy has coexisted with the work of technical reviewers and local experts; over time, the Award intentionally widened the shortlist discourse, recognizing that non-winning projects could still shape the field’s questions.

¹⁹⁰ Luis Fernández-Galiano “Spaces for Diversity: A Plea for Pluralism”, in Mostafavi, *Architecture and Plurality*, 27.

This procedural pluralism mirrors the evaluative pluralism traced in this chapter. Second, it highlights operational pivots for impact. The Award increased its monetary prize and added dissemination initiatives as part of the process, aiming to turn judgment into uptake – amplifying precisely those qualities this chapter has foregrounded such as use value, prototypical value, contextual engagement. Third, it establishes sister endeavors as force multipliers. The conversations within the AKAAs seeded or strengthened other institutions – the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard/MIT, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP), and the *Mimar* journal – through which research, conservation practice, and discourse circulate into pedagogy, policy, and professional norms.

Chapter 3 will therefore narrate how the process that I call “evolving to stay relevant” is operationalized as an ethic of responsiveness built into the Award’s procedures and partnerships. This Chapter has shown how the evaluative frame broadens in practice – toward repair, public-making, and living heritage – Chapter 3 shows how the Award continually rebuilds the very machinery that makes that broadening possible. In Derakhshani’s terms, the aim was never to lock a canon but to maintain a capability for relevance in order to keep asking better questions, with more – and more diverse – voices at the table.

Chapter 3

Relevance by Design: Pluralism as the Infrastructure of Judgment in the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

Across its cycles, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture's discourse repeatedly stretches evaluation beyond form and stylistic genealogy toward a wider ethical and political horizon that includes repair and maintenance, environmental stewardship, everyday publics, and the institutional conditions through which buildings and landscapes come to matter. From this framing in the previous chapter which traced this expanded evaluative grammar as a historiographic intervention, this chapter highlights a related but distinct question: how is such a grammar kept operative over time?

The problem is not simply that values change over time. The deeper problem is that any regime of judgment, especially one that claims transregional relevance and repeatedly resists canonization, risks hardening into doctrine, routine, or mere rhetoric. In other words, if the AKAA's pluralism is more than an aspirational ethos, then it must also have an infrastructure capable of producing, renewing, and legitimating plural evaluation under shifting historical conditions. This chapter therefore shifts the dissertation's focus from the content of recognition

to the procedures of recognition – the institutional design through which the Award makes decisions, revises itself, and extends its effects beyond the ceremony.

Methodologically, this chapter is anchored in my primary research interview with Farrokh Derakhshani – the long-serving director of the AKAA, in March 2024. That conversation offers an invaluable emic vocabulary for understanding the Award’s self-description and self-governance. Where my analytic framework has relied on the language of ‘pluralism’, Derakhshani, in our conversation, repeatedly returns to the term ‘relevance’ (and ‘relevant’).¹⁹¹ His use of this term, as will be discussed throughout this chapter, is much more nuanced than simply being a branding claim or a vague marker of contemporaneity. He treats it as an institutional problem, one that must be solved repeatedly by the composition and rotation of decision-making bodies, by the protocols of nomination and verification, by the shifting publicness of the shortlist, and by the mechanisms through which the Award circulates “lessons” beyond its winners.

Taking Derakhshani’s term seriously is not a matter of substituting his vocabulary for mine. It is a way of specifying how pluralism becomes operational. In the pages that follow, I read “relevance” as the Award’s own name for a capacity that my dissertation has tracked as paradoxical pluralism: a commitment to openness, heterogeneity, and ethical breadth that must nonetheless be stabilized through credible decision-making. This tension, between authority and revisability, is seen here as the condition under which the Award can act as a regime of recognition without becoming merely an archive of taste.

¹⁹¹ Farrokh Derakhshani, interview by Salman Rashdi, Aga Khan Award for Architecture offices, Geneva, Switzerland, March 28, 2024 (audio recording and author’s transcript).

To keep the interview at the center of the chapter, the argument proceeds by using Derakhshani's account as the primary spine and bringing other sources in as corroboration and amplification. ACAA monographs (notably the 2010 and 2016 cycles) provide published evidence for key procedural shifts such as the public release of the shortlist and the explicit framing of the Award's work as a response to processes of change. Essays by one of the founding ACAA members – Hasan-uddin Khan help situate the Award within a wider ecology of initiatives which include the journal *Mimar*, the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard and MIT, and other platforms through which the ACAA's commitments migrate into publishing and pedagogy. These texts, alongside the interview, allow this chapter to treat the Award as more than just a set of winners, highlighting it as an evolving apparatus that produces architectural knowledge and shapes the horizons within which architectural value becomes significant, all in an effort to stay 'relevant'.

The chapter's claim is therefore twofold. First, the ACAA sustains relevance by institutionalizing pluralism as a procedure: a polyphonic infrastructure of judgment that distributes authority across multiple bodies, builds verification into evaluation, and maintains renewal through rotation and recalibration. Second, this infrastructure does not end at selection. It extends outward through publications, dissemination practices, and sister initiatives that address what the Award itself cannot do without compromising its legitimacy. These mechanisms constitute the Award as a vehicle of change – one that repeatedly updates not only what architecture is recognized for, but how recognition itself is made plausible.

In making this turn from value to procedure, this chapter also prepares the ground for the next one – Chapter 4. If the Award's relevance depends on maintaining plural evaluation without finalizing it into a canon, then the ACAA's achievements cannot be understood apart from the

contradictions it must inhabit. The next chapter develops this tension as a double-bind at the level of historiography and architectural value. Here, however, the focus remains firmly on the institutional machinery through which that tension is managed, renewed, and made productive – the Award’s changing infrastructure of decision-making.

Relevance as Institutional Capacity

In our conversation, Derakhshani repeatedly returned to the idea of ‘relevance’. Here, “relevance” is an idea that is inherently connected a problem of institutional life - that an award can continue to speak across changing political, economic, and cultural conditions without becoming an archive of past solutions. As he puts it, “this concept of time is very important”, the question is “how you can make something relevant to your time, because that’s where the message goes.”¹⁹² Relevance, in other words, is an orientation to temporality and address, raising questions as to whom does architectural judgment speak, when, and by what means can an institution keep its judgments intelligible and persuasive as time changes?

This is the point at which Derakhshani’s vocabulary clarifies what this dissertation has tracked as the Award’s paradoxical pluralism. Chapter 2 discussed how the AKAA’s evaluative language widens architectural value beyond form toward an ethical and social horizon. But such widening is not self-sustaining. An institution that repeatedly expands what counts as architecture, and who counts as its public, must also sustain the capacity to revise itself, otherwise pluralism risks becoming either an empty rhetoric or a frozen canon of “inclusive” examples. Derakhshani describes the AKAA’s solution in organizational terms clarifying that it is not a single principle

¹⁹² Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

or doctrine, but a structure. “A lot of people,” he notes, look across cycles “trying to find trends.”¹⁹³ Yet for him the more consequential question is how the Award is built as a decision-making apparatus. It is the structure that, in his words, allowed the Award to become “a self-correcting” and “self-updating” body.¹⁹⁴

For me, there were two implications from this claim. First, “relevance” cannot merely be seen as a property of projects (such as what a building responds to, or what a settlement needs). It is a property of the institution’s capacity to remain responsive, to keep its criteria, procedures, and publics from hardening into routine. Second, the “self-updating” characteristic points to certain existing mechanisms in the Award: the rotation of nominators and juries, the recalibration of the relationship between steering committee and master jury, the evolution of what gets published and made public, and the redesign of how projects are rendered legible to evaluators. In this sense, relevance is best understood as the Award’s mode of governance whereby it continues the effort to keep architectural recognition answerable to changing conditions without forfeiting legitimacy.

One way to understand this capacity is to borrow a minimal distinction from organizational learning scholarship. Chris Argyris distinguishes between learning that corrects errors within an existing frame and learning that revises the governing frame itself.¹⁹⁵ What Derakhshani calls “self-updating” often resembles the latter in the sense that the Award does not only refine its choices, it periodically reworks the rules and arrangements through which choices become possible (some examples, like its 2010 decision to start publishing shortlists alongside winners,

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ See Chris Argyris, *Reasons and Rationalizations: The Limits to Organizational Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

are discussed in detail later in this chapter). Likewise, James March's account of exploration and exploitation offers a useful shorthand for why institutions drift toward repetition. Organizations tend to exploit what they have learned, often at the expense of exploring what they have not yet learned.¹⁹⁶ Derakhshani articulates this institutional intuition from within – if relevance is to be sustained across time, the Award must preserve the conditions for exploration by being open consistently to fresh inputs, renewed deliberations, and procedures that do not permit a single evaluative logic to become final.

Derakhshani's emphasis on structure also reframes how we should read the Award's public record. In the 2016 monograph, for instance, he describes the AKAA as focusing on "processes of change" in contexts where the built environment undergoes rapid transformation, sometimes with dire consequences, and he frames the Award's mission as not only recognizing exemplary projects but also sharing the lessons they offer with a wide range of actors.¹⁹⁷ These formulations foreground the Award's repeated effort to link recognition to ongoing transformation.

Yet the published forewords and institutional statements only partially disclose how that capacity is maintained. The interview is crucial precisely because it shows relevance as a problem that must be solved procedurally, and because it makes visible the Award's own self-understanding as a body that learns. Derakhshani's narrative is filled with small but telling moments where the Award revises itself in response to internal critique, logistical constraints, and changing expectations. These anecdotes are the empirical texture of "self-updating" because they point to the Award's willingness to change the terms of selection, the visibility of the shortlist, the

¹⁹⁶ James G. March, "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning," *Studi Organizzativi*, no. 2 (2009), doi:10.3280/SO2008-002006.

¹⁹⁷ Farrokh Dearakhshani, "Preface", in Mohsen Mostafavi, ed *Architecture and Plurality*. (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2016), 6.

formats by which projects are submitted, and the strategies by which outcomes circulate. The result is an institution that governs relevance by establishing an apparatus that can repeatedly renegotiate architectural worth under constantly changing conditions.

If relevance is therefore the Award's name for this institutional capacity, then pluralism appears here as an operational requirement. A system designed to remain relevant cannot permit a single voice, discipline, or worldview to finalize judgment. It must create conditions in which multiple evaluative languages can be brought into relation without being collapsed into one metric. This is why, in Derakhshani's account, the composition of the jury and the renewal of nominators are central mechanisms through which the Award keeps its "message" tethered to "its time."¹⁹⁸ Relevance, in this sense, is produced by a kind of procedural polyphony, resulting in a structure that invites contestation and disagreement and nonetheless arrives at decisions that can command legitimacy.¹⁹⁹

The sections that follow develop this argument in four steps. First, I describe the Award's polyphony by design – the distributed bodies and deliberative rules through which its judgment is made credible. Second, I trace moments of explicit self-correction pointing to procedural pivots that show the Award revising itself as it encounters the limits of earlier arrangements. Third, I turn to the Award's efforts to extend judgment into uptake through publications and dissemination, and fourth, I discuss the ecology of sister initiatives including the journal *Mimar*, the Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard and MIT, and other

¹⁹⁸ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

¹⁹⁹ See for instance, the 1986 Master Jury Statement where dissenting Jury members – Hans Hollein and Mehmet Doruk Pamir were given their own space to write their dissenting views from the majority decision of that years Master Jury.

initiatives, showing how “relevance” comes to involve not only selection but the infrastructures through which architectural value extends beyond just the Award.

Polyphony by Design: The Infrastructure of Judgment

The AKAA’s durability comes significantly from its design of a decision-making apparatus that can repeatedly re-encounter new conditions without allowing a single evaluative logic to dominate. In Derakhshani’s account, the Award is pluralist not only because it recognizes diverse projects, but because it is structured to keep multiple kinds of expertise, experience, and judgment in play. That is why, when discussing how one might trace “trends” across cycles, he points toward the Award’s internal composition and renewal: it is the arrangement of voices and the procedures that organize them that makes the institution “self-correcting” and “self-updating.”²⁰⁰

A first feature of this infrastructure is distributed authority. The AKAA’s governance does not collapse into a single authorial voice or permanent panel and that is in large part because it is organized as a set of interlocking bodies whose relative powers, as we will see, have themselves been revised over time. At its core are three functions: the articulation of long-term approaches and policies, the selection of winners, and the verification of claims made on behalf of projects.²⁰¹

The published record is consistent on this point as well. A 2012 announcement about changes to the prize notes that selections are made by an “independent master jury,” which is reconstituted

²⁰⁰ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

for every cycle, and that the process is overseen by a steering committee.²⁰² A recent account by Hasan-uddin Khan similarly describes how approaches and agendas are articulated by the steering committee while an independent master jury selects the winners, and how a review team visits shortlisted projects to verify qualities on site.²⁰³ These descriptions indicate that the Award's authority is not located solely in an act of selection, it is staged through a chain of roles consisting of agenda-setting, deliberation, and verification, that together produce the legitimacy of the outcome.

Derakhshani's interview places special emphasis on renewal as a design principle. He repeatedly returns to the point that the Award does not simply assemble a diverse set of evaluators once; it continuously refreshes who can speak and who can nominate.²⁰⁴ If, as organizational learning scholars have suggested, institutions drift toward exploitation of what they already know,²⁰⁵ the AKAA's periodic reconstitution of bodies, in contrast, functions as a formal mechanism for keeping exploratory judgment alive.

The point of this design, evidently, is to build a deliberative structure capable of holding multiple evaluative languages together. Derakhshani describes this as a matter of composition and balance where different people "balance each other," and the composition of the jury is "very

²⁰² *Canadian Architect*, "Aga Khan Award for Architecture Prize Doubled to US\$1 Million," April 26, 2012, archived June 28, 2013 at archive.ph, accessed January 19, 2026, <https://archive.ph/20130628202706/http://www.canadianarchitect.com/news/aga-khan-award-for-architecture-prize-doubled-to-us-1-million/1001116410/>

²⁰³ Hasan-Uddin Khan, "A Man for All Seasons: Reflections on the Life and Work of His Highness the Aga Khan IV," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 15, no. 1 (2026): 5–25, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijia_00192_7, 8

²⁰⁴ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²⁰⁵ See, Argyris, *Reasons and Rationalizations*; March, "Exploration and Exploitation".

important.”²⁰⁶ Such balancing becomes an integral characteristic of the institutional form of pluralism in the Award.

A useful name for this arrangement is ‘polyphony’, not in the literal sense of a literary genre, but as a structural description of how multiple voices are organized within a single decision-making form. Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation is particularly portable here as he frames how polyphony consists of “a plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights,” voices that “combine but are not merged,” each retaining “its own world.”²⁰⁷ The usefulness of the term becomes clearer when the changing composition of the juries is treated historically. The 1986 Master Jury, for instance, brought together figures as different as Soedjatmoko, Mahdi Elmandjra, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, Hans Hollein, Ronald Lewcock, Fumihiko Maki, Mehmet Doruk Pamir, and Robert Venturi, producing a cycle in which debates over popular architecture, postmodern signs, regionalism, and modernity became especially visible. Bozdoğan later suggested that Venturi’s presence may help explain the cycle’s apparent flirtation with postmodernist criteria, especially around the Bhong Mosque which she described as an “overdecorated exuberant expression of popular culture bordering on kitsch” and one that showed “an endorsement of the populist version of postmodernism.”²⁰⁸ The 1989 jury was differently configured with Esin Atıl, Rasem Badran, Geoffrey Bawa, Charles Correa, Kamran Diba, Oleg Grabar, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Hasan Poerbo, and William Porter, who all brought art history, sociology, planning, architectural practice, Islamic art history, and regional modernisms into a new alignment. The shift shows how the jury’s composition helped determine which tensions became salient, for instance in 1986, the

²⁰⁶ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²⁰⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, 1st ed., vol. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

²⁰⁸ Sibel Bozdoğan, “The Aga Khan Award for Architecture: A Philosophy of Reconciliation,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 3 (1992): 186.

controversy centered on postmodernism, popular taste, and the perceived exclusion of architectural modernism – a discussion that is elaborated on in the next few pages with the example of the Dhaka National Assembly Building designed by Louis Khan; in 1989, the Award rebalanced that debate through a jury able to recognize both Kahn’s monumental modernism and projects of housing, urban improvement, and cultural exchange.²⁰⁹ The AKA’s infrastructure is designed so that different “worlds”, in this case, disciplinary standards, ethical priorities, and situated knowledges, can be brought into relation without being forced into premature synthesis.

Such examples highlight how the Award can function across contexts where doctrinal claims about what architecture must be are often asserted as self-evident. Derakhshani recalls moments when participants insisted on fixed prohibitions, such as the claim that a high-rise building could never be compatible with an Islamic context.²¹⁰ His response is not to replace one rule with another. It is to insist that “nothing is fixed like that”, that such claims must remain contestable within the space of evaluation.²¹¹ Polyphony, in this sense, does not eliminate judgment. Rather, it protects judgment from finalization.

Polyphony becomes effective only when it is accompanied by norms of deliberation, particularly practices that allow a heterogeneous group to arrive at decisions while preserving the legitimacy of disagreement. Here a limited engagement with Michèle Lamont’s study of peer review is clarifying. Lamont argues that evaluation is constrained by mechanics and disciplinary “evaluative cultures,” yet panelists nonetheless develop shared rules of deliberation that enable

²⁰⁹ See Ismail Serageldin, *Space for Freedom: The Search for Architectural Excellence in Muslim Societies* (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989), 36; James Steele, ed., *Architecture for Islamic Societies Today* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 152; Sibel Bozdoğan, “The Aga Khan Award for Architecture: A Philosophy of Reconciliation,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 3 (May 1992): 186.

²¹⁰ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

consensus across difference by deferring to expertise, respecting disciplinary sovereignty, and practicing what she calls methodological pluralism and contextualization.²¹² What matters for the ACAA is not the analogy to academia per se, but the insight that collective judgment is a practice with norms.

Derakhshani's account repeatedly treats these deliberative norms as central. When he describes the Award as "self-correcting," the mechanism points to the capacity of participants to check one another, to contest claims, and to arrive at decisions that remain credible because they were made through organized disagreement. A concrete example appears across the 1986 and 1989 cycles in the treatment of Louis Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar/National Assembly Building in Dhaka. In 1986, the Master Jury did not simply ignore the building; it identified the project as a "conspicuous absence" and explained that the time was "not ripe" for assessment because the complex had not yet been used fully enough to be tested socially and functionally.²¹³ The exclusion was sharply contested. Hans Hollein's dissenting report objected that a project of "unquestionable superior architectural merit and quality" had been voted out because of what he saw as a bias in the majority of the jury, and he predicted that "in the light of history this judgement will be reversed."²¹⁴ Three years later, the 1989 Master Jury did award the building, but not merely as a reversal of taste or a concession to Kahn's canonical status. It justified the decision through precisely the kind of social and functional evidence the earlier jury had found insufficient, as review of the building's history, on-site studies, surveys, and discussions with people from different groups in Bangladeshi society showed that the building had come to enjoy

²¹² See Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²¹³ Ismail Serageldin, ed., *Space for Freedom : The Search for Architectural Excellence in Muslim Societies*. (Geneva, Switzerland: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1989), 44; 74.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

“overwhelming approval,” stood as “a symbol of democracy in Bangladesh,” and had influenced the country in beneficial ways.²¹⁵ The case shows a form of self-correction as an example of institutional learning across cycles whereby dissent was preserved in the official record, a deferred judgment was reopened, and new evidence transformed the project’s evaluative status.

At this juncture it is also worth pointing out that the Award’s pluralism is not relativism. The ACAA does not treat all claims as equally valid; it subjects them to deliberation, comparison, and verification. What polyphony does is prevent one evaluative culture from establishing itself as the transcendent arbiter. The most concrete expression of this posture is the Award’s insistence on verification. In the 2010 cycle monograph, Derakhshani describes a process in which hundreds of projects are nominated, a shortlist is assembled for in-depth review, and on-site review teams evaluate shortlisted projects before the jury selects the final recipients. Khan’s recent account reiterates the point, whereby a review team travels to each shortlisted project and “verifies its qualities on site.”²¹⁶ Those teams, composed of architectural specialists and photographers, spend several days at each shortlisted project conducting interviews, gathering visual documentation, and preparing detailed technical dossiers that include users and other relevant actors.²¹⁷ This verification is a form of evidentiary procedure through which claims about a project’s architectural, social, material, and contextual significance are tested against built reality.

Such verification practices are crucial for two reasons. First, they transform evaluation from a purely discursive exercise into a practice anchored in observation and documentation. Second,

²¹⁵ James Steele, *Architecture for Islamic Societies Today*. (London, England: Academy Edition, 1989), 37.

²¹⁶ Khan, “A Man for All Seasons”, 8.

²¹⁷ Steele, *Architecture for Islamic Societies Today*, 34.

they allow the Award to stage what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot call “tests” of worth – moments when competing orders of value are forced to confront a world of objects, use, and consequence.²¹⁸ The AKAA’s authority does not derive only from who sits on the jury; it derives from the procedures through which claims about buildings become contestable and verifiable.

Verification is also one of the sites where “relevance” is made. A project becomes relevant not only because it addresses a pressing issue, but because its claims can be tested in a situated world through material performance, public life, maintenance, and lived experience. On-site review therefore functions as a hinge between the Award’s plural evaluative language and the world in which that language must hold.

These elements, distributed authority, renewed bodies, deliberative norms, and verification practices constitute what I mean by the AKAA’s polyphony by design. The Award is not simply plural in what it recognizes; it is plural in how it knows. In Sheila Jasanoff’s terms, the ways an institution represents the built environment are inseparable from the ways it organizes expertise and public legitimacy.²¹⁹ The AKAA’s structure therefore does epistemic work because it produces architectural knowledge by staging how competing standards can be made commensurable without erasing their difference.

This infrastructure also clarifies why “relevance” appears in Derakhshani’s account as an ongoing task rather than a finished accomplishment. A polyphonic system is built to resist finalization as it prevents the Award from settling into a single canon of acceptable forms or values, but it also requires periodic recalibration to keep deliberation credible. In the next

²¹⁸ See Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)

²¹⁹ Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2004)

section, I trace such recalibration as explicit self-correction, with procedural pivots through which the Award adjusts the distribution of authority, the publicness of evaluation, and the formats through which projects become legible.

Self-Correction in Action: Procedural Pivots

The Award's capacity to remain "relevant to its time" depends on its willingness to revise itself not only in what it recognizes, but in how it allocates authority, manages publicity, and formats evidence. Derakhshani describes the AKAA as "self-correcting" and "self-updating," but what is significant is that these terms point to concrete institutional moments – points where the Award encounters the limits of an earlier arrangement and responds by changing the arrangement itself. The purpose of tracing such pivots is to show how relevance is produced as an institutional practice through periodic recalibration of the very machinery of judgment.

1983: redistributing authority over the shortlist

One of the clearest instances of such recalibration is Derakhshani's account of the early 1980s, when the Award confronted an internal legitimacy problem concerning the authority to decide the shortlist. In the Award's first years, he explains, the steering committee, responsible for approaches and policies, held substantial power over the selection process. At that time, the steering committee was selecting the shortlist.²²⁰ Yet the master jury challenged this arrangement. In a moment Derakhshani treats as foundational, a Master jury objected that it was the Master jury, not the steering committee, that should be able to decide what projects deserved

²²⁰ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

in-depth review. The result was an institutional correction whereby starting from 1983 it was the Master Jury that started making that decision.²²¹

This episode highlights how the Award protects its authority without becoming doctrinal. Rather than insulating the steering committee's power, the AKAAs redistributed decision-making authority in response to critique. In organizational learning terms, this is not simply a correction within a stable frame, it is a revision of the frame itself. The governing arrangement was altered to preserve the credibility of the process. Derakhshani's narrative thus casts the Award's legitimacy as something maintained through contestation. The "self" that is corrected is not a single person or office, it is the institutional relationship between policy-setting and evaluative judgment.

This pivot also helps clarify the procedural meaning of pluralism. In order for polyphony to function, the different bodies in the Award must not merely coexist, they must have clear and credible jurisdictions. The 1983 revision installs the jury's independence as a condition for polyphonic judgment: the process remains plural, but selection authority is organized so that evaluative deliberation can do its work without being overridden by a standing committee.

2010: making the shortlist public – transparency as relevance

A second pivot concerns the publicness of evaluation. Derakhshani recalls that a major shift occurred in 2010, when the Award began announcing the shortlist.²²² This change is corroborated in the published record. In his foreword to the 2010 cycle monograph, he notes that the steering committee emphasized a desire for "greater transparency" in the selection process and that

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

“consequently the shortlist was released to the public for the first time.”²²³ He immediately frames the effect of this decision in discursive terms stating that the public release “created dialogue and discussion in both professional and public circles.”²²⁴

The monograph also contains a second statement that contributes to the interpretive stakes. An essay in the same volume describes the change as “a new policy” where the shortlist would be made public and, by doing so, would “contribute to a fuller enunciation of the Award’s overall message.”²²⁵ These accounts clarify that transparency was not merely administrative openness. It was a recalibration of how the Award addresses its publics. The shortlist became a communicative object – an intermediate articulation of value, through which the Award could generate discussion beyond the final winners.

This pivot shows the Award updating its relationship to time and audience. A shortlist is, by definition, provisional: it marks what is under consideration, not what is canonized. By making the shortlist public, the AKAA externalized evaluation as discourse-in-progress. The move effectively widened the circle of those who could encounter the Award’s criteria, questions, and emphases in the present tense of a cycle rather than retroactively through a list of winners. The 2010 shortlist did not necessarily make the jury answerable to public opinion in any direct or documented way; rather, it changed the temporality and publicness of evaluation by allowing non-winning and not-yet-winning projects to enter professional discussion as part of the Award’s evolving field of questions.

²²³ Farrokh Derakhshani, “Foreword”, in Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2011), 4.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, “The Shortlist”, in Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2011), 264.

At the same time, the pivot illustrates why the Award's self-updating must be understood as boundary management. Publicness increases relevance because it invites wider discussion and accountability but it also introduces new pressures like reputational stakes, interpretive contestation, and the risk of misreading an evolving shortlist as a final judgment. The AKAA's solution was not to abandon transparency, but to incorporate it as part of the institution's communicative infrastructure. Relevance here is co-produced whereby the Award's claims become persuasive through a revised arrangement of expertise, publicity, and discourse.

Evidence formats: making projects legible across contexts

Derakhshani's interview reveals another, more granular site of self-correction: the formats through which projects were presented to evaluators. He recounts early cycles in which material constraints in different contexts shaped how nominations could even be assembled. In Karachi, for example, he recalls that a nominator could not easily photocopy materials because "there were no photocopy machines,"²²⁶ so nomination packets arrived unevenly and with limited documentation. On the other hand, if they "would receive a project from SOM [Skidmore Owings and Merrill in Chicago]", it had the luxury of having machines like those and being able to present their project better. The Award responded by asking offices to send in their materials and they would recompose it for them.²²⁷

Derakhshani describes a later moment when the Award introduced a standardized A3 presentation format, because some offices objected to the way that AKAA was presenting their projects.²²⁸ The episode is emblematic of self-correction at the level of epistemic infrastructure

²²⁶ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

whereby the institution revises the instruments through which it “knows” architecture so that the evaluation process does not inadvertently privilege one representational culture.

This pivot shows relevance as being produced at the level of evidence. An award cannot remain relevant if it cannot perceive what it claims to judge. The AKAA’s procedures therefore include ongoing work on legibility and how to render heterogeneous projects comparable without forcing them into a single visual or documentary idiom. In Jasanoff’s terms, the Award’s knowledge is embedded in its instruments and institutions. Derakhshani’s anecdotes reveal that these instruments are sites where pluralism is either undermined or upheld.

These three pivots, authority, publicity, and evidence show that “self-updating” is a mode of institutional life for the Award. Each pivot responds to a specific limit: an imbalance of authority that threatened the credibility of deliberation; an evaluative process that remained too internal to generate contemporary discourse; and evidentiary formats that risked privileging certain representational worlds. In each case, the Award’s correction is a revision of the conditions under which plural judgment can remain credible.

Relevance here, therefore, is a practice of keeping pluralism operational. It requires redistributing power, revising visibility, and redesigning evidentiary instruments so that evaluation can continue to accommodate heterogeneity. The next section extends this argument outward. If self-correction refines how the Award makes decisions, the question remains: how are decisions translated into broader impact? How do resources, publications, and dissemination practices become part of the institution’s relevance-making capacity?

From Judgment to Uptake: Dissemination, Resources, Impact

The AKAA's self-updating infrastructure goes beyond how it selects winners. In Derakhshani's account, the Award's relevance increasingly depends on what happens after selection. The Award's procedures are outward-facing: they are designed not only to make decisions credible, but also to make decisions consequential.

A recent overview by Hasan-uddin Khan offers a concise public description of this broader scope. The AKAA's activities, he writes, include not only monetary awards but also "conferences, publications, exhibitions, films, documentation projects, and educational programmes" held around the world, bringing together architects, clients, planners, scholars, and educators.²²⁹ Such a description reinforces a point already implicit in Derakhshani's language: the Award is not simply a periodic prize. It is an apparatus for producing and circulating architectural knowledge in multiple media and institutional registers.

The most visible material dimension of this apparatus is the prize itself. In 2012, the AKAA publicly announced that it had doubled the prize amount to US\$1 million.²³⁰ The announcement framed this change as a form of support as many recipients, it noted, are neither well-known nor well-funded, and the increased amount would help them "reposition their future" professionally and institutionally.²³¹ The language positions the prize not only as a reward for past achievement but as a lever for future capacity – an intervention in the life-world of practice.

This change is corroborated within the Award's own publications. In the 2016 cycle monograph, Derakhshani states that the projects selected by the master jury share "the prize money of 1,000,000 USD."²³² He also frames the Award as focusing on "processes of change" in contexts

²²⁹ Khan, "A Man for All Seasons", 8.

²³⁰ *Canadian Architect*, "Aga Khan Award for Architecture Prize Doubled to US\$1 Million."

²³¹ *Ibid.*

of rapid transformation and as recognizing exemplary projects while sharing the lessons they offer with architects, planners, government agencies, clients, and final users.²³³ This formulation positions dissemination as a core institutional purpose. Derakhshani's interview adds a crucial procedural layer to this ethos. He recounts that the increased prize money was paired with a decision to reserve part of the amount as a dissemination grant – an explicit mechanism meant to support publications, exhibitions, or other forms of knowledge transfer that the winners would choose themselves.²³⁴ The point was to prevent the Award from being reduced to a symbolic act and ensuring that the prize was redesigned so that recognition could generate broader uptake.

This move also clarifies why relevance is an institutional problem. Dissemination is time-sensitive. Derakhshani remarks elsewhere in the interview that delays in publication can render outputs irrelevant; the medium and tempo of circulation shape whether the Award's "message" reaches "its time."²³⁵ In this sense, dissemination is part of how decisions acquire public and professional meaning.

Most importantly for the present argument, Derakhshani describes dissemination as another site of self-correction. The initial decision to allocate a portion of the prize as a dissemination grant was meant to empower winners to circulate work in ways appropriate to their contexts. Yet he notes that the outcomes were uneven; in some cases, dissemination "wasn't really... well done."²³⁶ The institution then revised its posture, deciding that it needed "more say" over how such funds were used.²³⁷

²³² Mostafavi, *Architecture and Plurality*, 6.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

This is a small narrative detail with large conceptual consequences. It demonstrates that the Award's self-updating does not end at the moment of evaluation. The AKAA learns from how recognition performs in the world and adjusts its mechanisms accordingly. Organizational learning here becomes a concrete orientation to follow-through. The Award's "relevance" depends on whether recognition produces effects beyond acclaim and whether it generates knowledge, replication, and institutional uptake.

The AKAA increasingly treats recognition as a chain rather than an event: nomination and deliberation lead to selection, selection leads to circulation, circulation is assessed through its effects, and those effects feed back into procedural redesign. This feedback loop prepares the ground for the next part, which situates the Award within a wider ecology of sister initiatives. The AKAA's relevance depends on producing and circulating architectural knowledge, and therefore the Award cannot be understood in isolation from the institutional platforms which include journals, programs, and research infrastructures, through which its commitments are amplified, contested, and sustained over time.

Vehicle of Change: Ecosystem Logic and Sister Endeavors

Throughout the interview, Derakhshani frames the AKAA as more than a prize: it is a "vehicle" through which architectural value can be recalibrated and made pertinent across contexts.²³⁸ Yet one of the most important implications of the preceding sections is that the Award cannot accomplish this recalibration alone. Its legitimacy depends on a careful balance, between expertise and openness, neutrality and judgment, selection and discourse. This balance creates structural limits. Precisely because the AKAA must remain credible as a regime of recognition, it

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

cannot always speak with a single “point of view,” nor can it continuously sustain the kinds of ongoing research, pedagogy, and publication that longer-term field-making requires. The Award therefore operates within, and helps generate, an ecology of sister initiatives that extend its relevance-making work into adjacent institutional forms.

Hasan-uddin Khan’s retrospective essays are especially valuable here because they articulate this ecosystem logic from within the Award’s intellectual history. In his account, the AKAAs’ contributions cannot be reduced to the distribution of prize money. The Award’s activities include conferences, publications, exhibitions, films, documentation projects, and educational programmes, forms of convening and circulation that bring together architects, clients, planners, scholars, and educators across regions.²³⁹ More pointedly, Khan argues that one of the AKAAs’ greatest contributions has been to change “the very way architectural discourse now occurs” in much of the world.²⁴⁰ The claim is bold, but it is also rather accurate since the Award’s value lies in institutionalizing platforms through which architectural questions travel, accumulate, and become discussable. Khan is specific about what this transformation of discourse entailed, with examples such as the journal *Mimar*, and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT – both of which are discussed in detail in Khan’s account below.

A key insight in Khan’s genealogy is that the Award’s neutrality is, in fact, constitutive of its authority. The AKAAs can showcase nominated and winning projects, but as a prize it is constrained in how it can editorialize without risking the appearance of partisan doctrine. This is why, in Khan’s account, a journal was conceived from the beginning as a necessary complement. *Mimar*, he writes, was imagined as a vehicle that would “complement the Award”. Where the

²³⁹ Khan, “A Man for All Seasons”, 8.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

AKAA “remained neutral” and could only share some of its nominated work, an independent journal could “have a point of view.”²⁴¹

This distinction reveals a recurring pattern in the Award’s ecology whereby a legitimacy constraint generates an adjacent institutional form. The AKAA’s authority depends on procedural neutrality and the visible work of deliberation; the ecosystem compensates by building platforms for continuous discourse, critique, and pedagogy. Relevance, in this sense, is distributed across institutions. The Award does not simply select projects and then hope that meaning follows; it helps to construct the media and programs through which meaning can be sustained.

Khan’s account of *Mimar* makes clear that the journal was an infrastructural response to a perceived global deficit. There was, he recalls, “no vehicle for the regular dissemination of ideas about architecture internationally from Asia and Africa.”²⁴² Architectural images and narratives circulated primarily from the United Kingdom and the United States, and much of the built environment in the Muslim and postcolonial world remained visible either through developmentalist framings or through orientalist expectations.²⁴³

Mimar was conceived to change this condition. Sponsored by the Aga Khan and launched as a quarterly in 1981, the journal’s mission was to bring contemporary architecture in Asia and Africa to international attention and to begin the discourse in places where there had been “very little until then.”²⁴⁴ Over time, Khan argues, the journal helped foster discussion “across

²⁴¹ Hasan-Uddin Khan, “Developing Discourses on Architecture: The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the Journal *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, and Other Adventures,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 63, no. 2 (2010): 82–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1531-314X.2010.01068.x>, 82.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

boundaries that had been missing until then,” and it did so not only by showcasing buildings but by engaging issues that people felt were “important at the time.”²⁴⁵

For this dissertation’s purposes, these formulations offer a direct bridge between Derakhshani’s “relevance” and my analytic of pluralism. *Mimar* was designed to make architectural discourse more polycentric and more responsive to context because it did not only circulate objects, it circulated questions, narratives, discourses and ideas. The journal thus stands as an early example of relevance-making as institutional design – one that operates in parallel to the Award’s cycles and helps ensure that the AKAA’s pluralist evaluative grammar can persist in the world between ceremonies.

Where *Mimar* represents a discourse platform, the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA), housed at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), represents a more formalized knowledge institution. Khan’s recent editorial recounts the scale of the AKPIA’s institutional investment which included endowed chairs and funds, specialized libraries, visiting scholars, and support for research and travel at Harvard and MIT.²⁴⁶ The point is not simply that the Aga Khan supported scholarship. It is that the ecosystem built durable sites for the production and transmission of architectural knowledge – sites that could maintain depth, continuity, and critical inquiry in ways that a rotating jury process cannot.

The archival record of personnel reinforces the braided relationship between AKPIA and the AKAA. An institutional profile of William L. Porter, the former dean of MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning, notes that Porter founded the AKPIA with Oleg Grabar and served as its co-director, and that he also served on the AKAA’s jury and on its steering committee during

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 84.

²⁴⁶ Khan, “A Man for All Seasons”, 13.

the Award's first nine years.²⁴⁷ Such overlap underscores that “ecosystem” is not a loose metaphor in this discussion. The same actors, networks, and intellectual commitments moved across programs, journals, and the Award itself, helping to stabilize a pluralist agenda across institutional forms.

These sister endeavors clarify how the AKAA operates as a “vehicle of change.”²⁴⁸ The Award's procedures sustain relevance by keeping evaluation plural, verifiable, and periodically revisable. But relevance is also sustained by constructing the infrastructures through which evaluation becomes knowledge and through which knowledge becomes durable discourse. *Mimar*'s editorial capacity and “point of view” complement the Award's neutrality; AKPIA's scholarly infrastructure complements the cyclical and time-bound nature of jury selection; and the broader array of conferences, exhibitions, and documentation projects expands the publics through which architectural value becomes legible.

This ecosystem perspective also illuminates why Derakhshani's term “relevance” is so productive for this dissertation. It is an institutional achievement distributed across procedures, media, and organizations. The AKAA's pluralism, then, is not only a moral commitment to inclusion; it is a way of building and maintaining a field. If the Award's relevance depends on an infrastructure designed to resist doctrinal closure and maintain revisability, then its effects cannot be understood solely in terms of winners and losers. The AKAA reconfigures the horizons of architectural value by making judgment itself mobile, plural, and infrastructurally supported.

This prepares the ground for the double-bind explored in the subsequent Chapter 4: the Award's

²⁴⁷ MIT School of Architecture and Planning, “Former Dean Bill Porter Retires,” archived August 29, 2019 at the Internet Archive, accessed January 19, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190829040729/https://sap.mit.edu/article/standard/former-dean-bill-porter-retires>

²⁴⁸ Derakhshani, interview, March 28, 2024.

authority depends on procedures that must be stable enough to convince and open enough to renew – a tension that becomes, in the next chapter, the generative structure through which the AKAAs pluralism acquires its decanonizing force.

Relevance as Pluralism Operationalized

This chapter began with Derakhshani’s insistence that the key to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture is not a stable trend line across winning projects, but an institutional capacity: the ability to remain relevant to its time by continually updating the structures through which architectural value is recognized and made persuasive. Read through the interview as a primary archive, “relevance” emerges as an institutional task – one that must be solved repeatedly through governance, procedure, publicity, and circulation.

All of the mechanisms, so central to the Award’s operationalization of pluralism showed here, allow a more precise description of what “relevance” accomplishes. Relevance becomes a mode of institutional historicity, and a way of repeatedly re-situating judgment within changing conditions without pretending that architectural value can be finalized once and for all. The Award’s pluralism, therefore, is expansive as well as procedural. It keeps the terms of recognition revisable. It resists the temptation, so common to regimes of recognition, to turn accumulated precedent into doctrine.

This is also where the chapter’s stakes begin to touch the theoretical concerns that animate Chapter 4. A pluralist infrastructure of judgment can only remain relevant if it refuses “finalizing definitions” of what architecture must be, for whom, and by what measure. Yet an institution that refuses finalization must still produce authoritative decisions. It must still persuade publics and professionals that its selections are credible. The AKAAs therefore inhabits a tension between

stability and revisability, between authority and openness. The evidence traced here suggests that this tension is not accidental. It is built into the Award's procedural form. The AKAA's authority is produced through procedures robust enough to convince such as verification practices, deliberative norms, rotating expertise, while its relevance is sustained through a commitment to keeping those procedures updateable.

Chapter 4 refers to this tension more explicitly as a double-bind, and discusses what I argue to be its decanonizing potential. Here it is sufficient to note how the institutional machinery of relevance prepares that conceptual move. As I argue in the next chapter, the Award's pluralism becomes a method of decanonization. It does not merely expand the canon's content; it contests its logic. In other words, the AKAA's procedures are not only selecting different objects; they are reshaping the authority, evidence, and narrational forms through which architectural value is made.

The path from relevance to decanonization can now be stated with clarity. By designing a system that must remain self-updating in order to stay relevant, one that continually redistributes authority, recalibrates publicity, revises instruments of legibility, and extends judgment through discourse infrastructures, the AKAA produces a regime of recognition that cannot easily settle into a single canon without betraying the very conditions of its legitimacy. The Award's pluralism therefore operates as a discipline of revisability: it keeps the space of judgment open enough to renew, and stable enough to persuade. Chapter 4 takes up the paradox this produces and follows it into the archive of projects where the Award's commitments become most intense, where contradiction is not resolved but made productive, and where the decanonizing implications of the AKAA's pluralism become unmistakable.

Chapter 4

Pluralism as a Critical Lens

By this point, pluralism has emerged in the dissertation as something far denser than just a descriptive language of inclusivity. It has taken shape as an ethical discipline grounded in Qur'anic and Isma'ili thought, as a way of judging architecture through repair, public-making, and living continuity, and as an institutional practice sustained through revisable procedures of evaluation. What the Aga Khan Award, in the words of its longstanding director, highlights as “relevance” is therefore the mechanism through which an Islamic ethical horizon remains active, and through which judgment stays open to forms of architectural significance that cannot be secured in advance by typology, style, geography, or demographic identity. The Award's pluralism, therefore, is neither purely philosophical nor merely procedural. It is a mode of judgment whose authority depends on its ability to remain anchored while continuing to move.

Yet that very success produces a tension. An institution committed to pluralism in this sense cannot remain relevant by stabilizing its criteria too rigidly, because such rigidity would betray the openness through which pluralism operates as an ethical and evaluative practice. But neither can it dissolve into an unlimited humanitarian universalism without risking the loss of the specific Islamic horizon that gives the Award its distinctive intellectual and moral force. The Aga

Khan Award, in other words, is required to inhabit a difficult condition. It must remain anchored enough to be more than a generic global architecture prize, while also remaining open enough to avoid reducing Islam to typology, iconography, geography, or demographic affiliation.

This tension should not be mistaken for a flaw unrelated to the Award's mission, nor as evidence that the institution has failed to define itself with sufficient clarity. On the contrary, it is better understood as the structure of the Award's coherence. The same pluralism that, in the discourse of the Aga Khan and in the institutional life of the Award, emerges from an Islamic ethical horizon is also what enables the Award to recognize projects that may possess little or no direct Islamic formal, geographic, or demographic legibility. Two such projects, the Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal, India, designed by Charles Correa and awarded in 1998, and the Bridge School in Xiashi, China, designed by Li Xiaodong, and awarded in 2010, form the analytical heart of this chapter.

This chapter argues that the contradiction at the center of the Aga Khan Award is best understood as a productive double-bind. Earlier in chapter 2, that double-bind appeared in relation to the Award's capacity to remain simultaneously anchored and open: anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon, yet open to architectural forms and social conditions that exceed any fixed definition of Islamic architecture. Here, however, the bind comes into view at a more consequential register. It is no longer only a question of balancing fidelity and openness within the Award's evaluative practice. It shows that pluralism is itself both the Award's method and its paradox: the very principle that gives the institution its coherence is also what continually unsettles the boundaries of that coherence.

The discussion that follows is structured in three stages. It begins by discussing the recurrent criticism that the Award is too broad, or too weakly bounded in its understanding of what counts

as relevant to Muslim societies. I present these critiques as instances registering a tension that lies at the heart of the institution. I then discuss two limit-cases – Charles Correa’s Vidhan Bhavan (awarded in 1998) and Li Xiaodong’s Bridge School (awarded in 2010), because they make that tension especially visible. These projects are not representative in a statistical sense; they are pressure tests for the Award’s logic, moments at which the relation between Islamic ethical grounding and pluralist openness becomes very stark. Finally, I argue that this double-bind has consequences beyond the Award itself. It helps illuminate how architectural value is authorized, and in doing so, opens a path toward thinking not merely about the expansion of the canon, but about the decanonizing force of a judgment practice that widens criteria, redistributes authority, and resists finalizing closure.

Critique, Breadth, and the Problem of “Nebulousness”

Since the Aga Khan Award for Architecture claims an Islamic ethical horizon while refusing to define its field through a narrow typology of explicitly religious buildings, a fixed geographic boundary, or a stable visual language, it repeatedly places pressure on the question of what, precisely, binds its selections together. The result is that the Award can appear, especially to critics trained to expect sharper categorical demarcations, to be nebulous: committed to an intelligible moral and civilizational claim, yet unwilling to stabilize that claim in advance through rigid formal, demographic, or territorial criteria.

Hasan-ud-din Khan, one of the Award’s early directors, stated this tension in an unpublished 2013 report:

The Award should clearly define its audience as being for Muslims, Muslim societies, or using Islamic principles of design. Casting the net too widely leads to

confusion. However, this is not to make the Award circumscribed but to discuss architecture to bring the concerns of Muslims into the global discourse of architecture.²⁴⁹

What is striking in Khan's formulation is not only the call for definitional clarity, but the hesitation that immediately qualifies it. He does not ask that the Award become closed or aesthetically prescriptive. Indeed, he explicitly resists circumscription. Yet he also recognizes that expansion without some discernible frame risks dissolving the Award's distinctiveness. The Award must remain open enough to allow architecture to register the heterogeneous historical, political, and spatial conditions in which Muslims live, but bounded enough that this openness does not become indistinguishable from the broad moral universalism through which many global prizes already justify themselves.

This tension appears elsewhere within the Award's own archival self-reflection as well. In the 2010 monograph of the Award, the Steering Committee described the Award as marked by a "pluralistic and generous perspective" and asked whether its relevance to Muslim societies might extend to "a broader significance for diverse communities" in the emerging world.²⁵⁰ Yet that same reflection also acknowledged the risk: "In the absence of such criteria, the Award risks losing its primary aim."²⁵¹ The force of this statement lies in its refusal of easy resolution. It makes clear that the expansion of scope and the preservation of purpose are inseparable and potentially antagonistic demands.

²⁴⁹ Hasan-ud-din Khan, unpublished report, obtained by author through personal correspondence, used with permission.

²⁵⁰ Mohsen Mostafavi, ed., *Implicate & Explicate: Aga Khan Award for Architecture*. (Baden: Lars-Müller Publishers, 2011), 18.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

The 2010 cycle is particularly significant here because it stages this problem as an internal institutional question. The Steering Committee Statement that opened the cycle had already framed the Award as an institution with a “pluralistic and generous perspective,” committed to projects that transform the quality of life for Muslim communities “whether urban or rural, national or diasporic.”²⁵² Yet the same statement immediately turned this generosity into a problem of criteria. It states that one of the “challenging issues” presented to the jury, it observed, was whether the “specific relevance” of nominated projects to Muslim societies might extend to “a broader significance for diverse communities in countries with emerging economies.”²⁵³ The committee then added to this question by further asking how one might define the features of a project that “directly bear on the lives of Muslim peoples” who may be present within multicultural communities without forming a majority, warning that “In the absence of such criteria, the Award risks losing its primary aim,” namely the establishment of standards and practices of architectural excellence that contribute to the well-being and advancement of Muslim societies.²⁵⁴

The 2010 Master Jury Report should be read as a response to precisely this charge. Its opening formulation is worth quoting at greater length:

The intersection of identity and pluralism in a globalised world, where memory, heritage and belonging are threatened, emerged as central concerns during the jury debates. Since its inception, the Award has striven to explore new frontiers while maintaining a generous and pluralistic perspective, engaging projects that

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

contribute to the transformation and improvement of the quality of the built environment. It has considered projects of significance both to the Islamic world and to multicultural societies in which Muslims represent a minority or an expansion of new or historic diasporas.²⁵⁵

This passage is important because it does not treat pluralism as a vague expansion of the Award's scope. It defines pluralism as a historically situated problem of identity under globalization, where memory, heritage, and belonging have become unstable categories. The jury's concern is not simply whether a project is located in a Muslim-majority country or whether it displays recognizable Islamic forms. Rather, it asks how architecture becomes significant in a world where Muslims may be majorities, minorities, diasporic communities, or participants in multicultural societies whose built environments cannot be reduced to a single civilizational identity. The report therefore relocates the Award's coherence from fixed boundaries to conditions of relevance which encompass environmental stress, rural neglect, rapid industrialization, deteriorating infrastructure, heritage, memory, and the quality of collective life.

This is why the jury's later insistence that it "did not prejudice" its selection "by any prior definition of an agenda" should not be read as an absence of criteria.²⁵⁶ It is better understood as a refusal to allow criteria to be settled before the encounter with projects themselves. The jury states that it remained attentive to priorities "brought to the surface" by the work of practitioners and stakeholders, thereby broadening its scope "both in and outside the Islamic world."²⁵⁷ This reveals an evaluative procedure consistent with the Award's pluralist method whereby the

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

archive of submitted projects becomes the site where the meaning of relevance is tested, rather than merely the material to which an already fixed definition of Islamic architecture is applied.

The subsequent thematic discussion in the report confirms this reading. The jury identifies ecological projects, recent heritage associated with colonial modernity, safe and efficient workplaces under rapid industrialization, institutions for cultural heritage, and small-scale interventions in traditional and rural settings as the major themes through which the cycle came to understand the Award's scope.²⁵⁸ These themes make up the concrete registers through which identity and pluralism are translated into architectural judgment. In the same report, the jury eventually names three larger concerns that had emerged from its review: "defining the boundaries of Muslim culture in a globalising world," "treading lightly on earth," and "conviviality."²⁵⁹ The sequence reveals how the question of Muslim culture's boundaries is placed alongside environmental restraint and social coexistence. In other words, the Award's Islamic horizon is not secured by form alone; it is articulated through the ethical and spatial problems by which communities live together, remember, build, work, and inhabit the earth.

This broader 2010 discussion therefore deepens, rather than resolves, the problem of nebulousness. The Award's breadth is real, and the Steering Committee itself recognizes the risk that breadth may weaken the institution's primary aim. Yet the Master Jury's response shows that the solution is not to narrow the Award back into typology, geography, or style. It is to make pluralism itself an evaluative discipline. The 2010 cycle thus becomes an important precedent for the argument of this chapter because it shows that the AKAA's coherence lies not in a fixed

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 22–24.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 24

definition of Islamic architecture, but in a structured process through which the relevance of architecture to Muslim societies, diasporas, and plural publics is continually reexamined.

Limit-Cases as Pressure Tests: Vidhan Bhavan and Bridge School

The aforementioned tension becomes most visible at those points where its criteria appear to stretch furthest from conventional expectations. For that reason, Charles Correa's Vidhan Bhavan, recognized in 1998, and Li Xiaodong's Bridge School, recognized in 2010, are significant to the discussion not as representative samples of the Award in any statistical sense, but as limit-cases. They are especially revealing because each brings into focus a different edge of the same problem: how an institution grounded in an Islamic ethical horizon can authorize projects whose relevance cannot be secured in advance by obvious formal, geographic, or demographic markers.

The first case, Vidhan Bhavan [Figure 4.1], is the state legislative assembly complex for Madhya Pradesh, designed by Charles Correa (completed 1996) and sited on the crest of Arera Hill overlooking Bhopal [Figure 4.2]. The technical review describes it as "a complete set of integrated facilities," replacing an earlier colonial-era assembly building nearby, and emphasizes its location within an elite governmental district, proximate to significant public buildings and former palaces associated with Muslim rulers of the region.²⁶⁰ The complex is organized through a circular figure [FIG 4.3 and FIG 4.4], distributing program through courts, halls, offices, and circulation systems that differentiate public access from legislative and administrative functions.

²⁶⁰ Budi Sukada, *Aga Khan Award for Architecture 1998 Technical Review Summary: Vidhan Bhavan, Bhopal, India*. (1998), 2.



FIG 4.1. Exterior Façade of the Vidhan Bhavan designed by Charles Correa

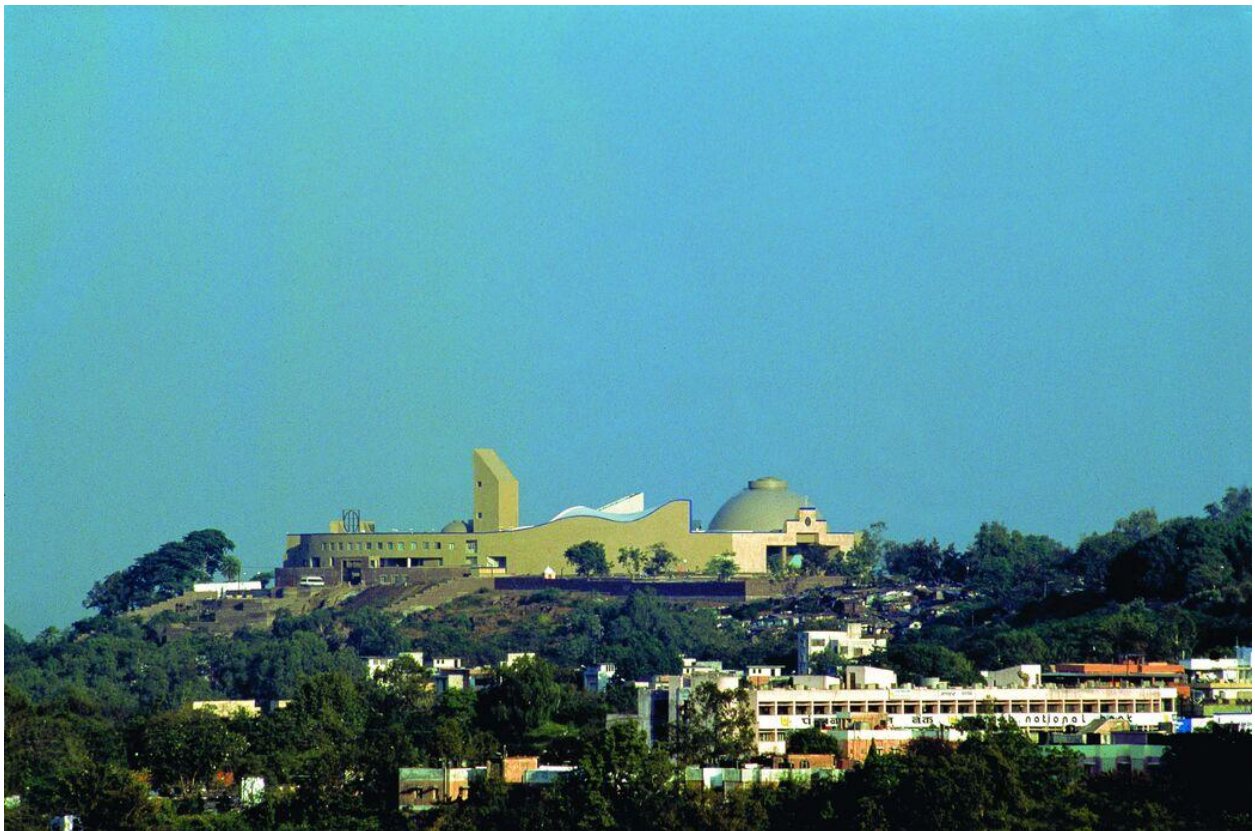


FIG 4.2. The Vidhan Bhavan in its context, occupying a prominent position on Arera Hill in the city of Bhopal.

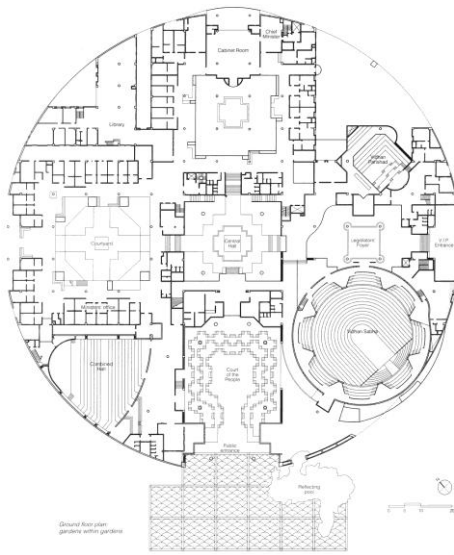


FIG 4.3. The circular plan of Vidhan Bhavan

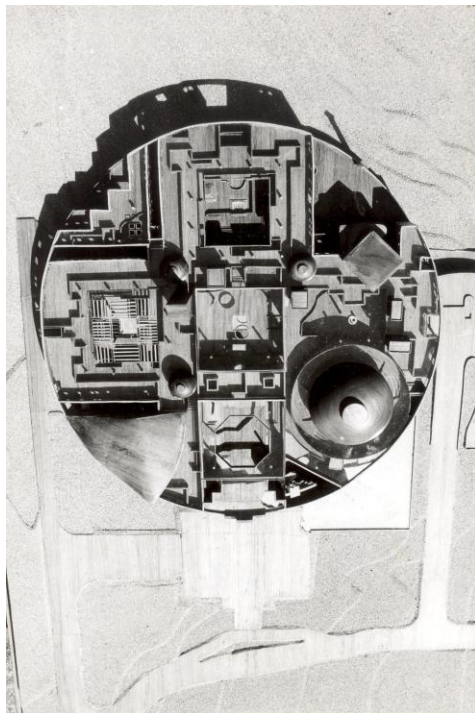


FIG 4.4. Physical model of the Vidhan Bhavan showing its circular plan

Michael Sorkin, writing about the 1998 cycle, acknowledged Correa's sensitivity in this design but questioned the project's inclusion in a prize concerned with Muslim societies:

...Correa's design for a new assembly building in Bhopal for the state of Madhya Pradesh is the curiosity [in this Award cycle]... What's unusual is that Correa uses the form of a Hindu mandala to organize the plan. Calling this building Muslim is surely a stretch.²⁶¹

Sorkin's objection condenses the default legibility test, suggesting that if the plan draws from a mandala and the building is a secular civic institution, then "Islamic" appears to be a category error. Yet the AKAAs monograph reframes precisely this ambiguity as the condition of the project's value. The 1998 monograph notes that the circular form "reflects architect Charles Correa's concern for humanist values in the seat of governmental authority," and that, rather than designing "a monument to political power," Correa organized the facility through "a series of courtyards and pathways" [FIG 4.5 and FIG 4.6] which, while meeting administrative and legislative requirements, "break down what could have been a monolithic whole into a series of urban spaces that welcome public participation".²⁶² The building, therefore, becomes legible through its civic consequences rather than through a formal genealogy.

²⁶¹ Michael Sorkin, "Ever More Inclusive," *Metropolis* 18, no. 4 (Dec 1998), 33–5.

²⁶² Cynthia C. Davidson, ed., *Legacies for the Future: Contemporary Architecture in Islamic Societies*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 131.

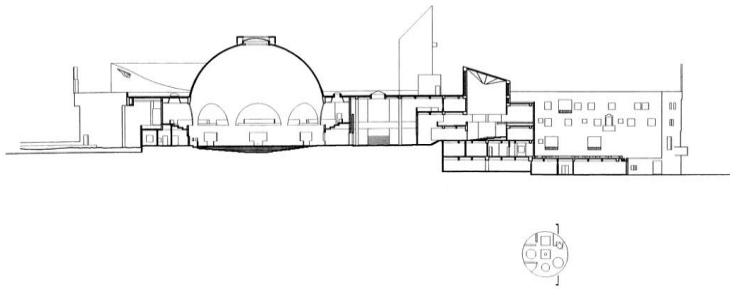


FIG 4.5: A section of *Vidhan Bhavan* showing courtyards on either side of the dome, and the right entrance.

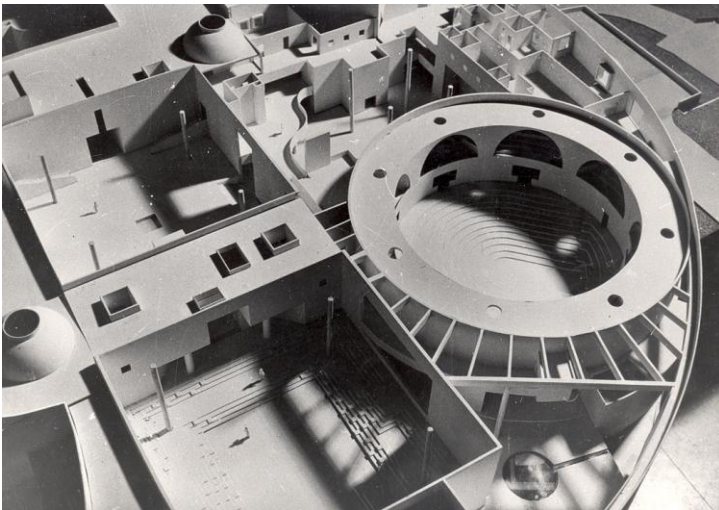


FIG 4.6: A physical model of the *Vidhan Bhavan* showing open courtyards in a number of spaces.

Suha Özkan's later framing of the project in the 1998 monograph also responds, if indirectly, to the kind of objection Sorkin raises by treating hybridity as the building's achievement rather than as a problem. Özkan writes that by using the circle as the generative form of the complex, Correa "emphasized unity and continuity" while creating "architectural variety to express harmony and diversity" adding that the plan "draws on various layers of Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu architectures and histories, and masterfully combines them, introducing mythological patterns and symbolism along with the architect's own free expression."²⁶³ The content of these layers

²⁶³ Suha Özkan, "Legacies of the Future," in Cynthia C. Davidson, ed., *Legacies for the Future: Contemporary Architecture in Islamic Societies* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 162.

becomes clearer when read alongside the project description. The Buddhist layer appears most explicitly in the relationship between the circular plan, the domed assembly chamber, and the ancient stupa at nearby Sanchi. The monograph notes that the circular form recalls not only Correa's interest in the mandala, but also the Parliament Building in New Delhi and the Buddhist stupa in Sanchi; elsewhere, the movement through bridges and ramps is compared to the ritual circumambulation, or *pradakshina*, around a stupa.²⁶⁴ The Hindu layer is registered through the mandala as an ordering diagram and through the mythological and cosmological patterns embedded in the plan and floor. The Islamic layer is less a matter of a single borrowed motif than of urban and architectural atmosphere, because the project is situated on Arera Hill overlooking Bhopal and its historic Muslim monuments, and its gateways, enclosures, courts, small domes, shaded passages, water elements, and city-like interior organization resonate with Indo-Islamic and broader South Asian traditions of spatial enclosure and public passage.²⁶⁵

Its relevance to the ACAA lies in the fact that the building can be assigned cleanly to any one of these traditions. It is that Correa abstracts and recomposes them into a civic architecture of plural belonging. The circle does not operate simply as a Hindu mandala, nor the dome simply as a Buddhist stupa, nor the courts and gateways simply as Islamic quotations. They are translated into a modern legislative complex in which different symbolic and spatial inheritances become part of the public language of democratic institutionality. This is why the monograph's description of the project as "not a monument but as a city within the city" is so important.²⁶⁶

Vidhan Bhavan's pluralism is not only iconographic, it is spatial and civic. The building breaks down governmental authority into courtyards, pathways, halls, and thresholds, allowing the state

²⁶⁴ "Vidhan Bhavan, Bhopal, India," in Davidson, *Legacies for the Future*, 131, 137.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 131, 137.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

assembly to appear not as a closed monument to power, but as a layered public environment in which Madhya Pradesh's religious, artistic, and regional histories can be gathered without being reduced to a single identity.

Vidhan Bhavan's relevance to the AKAA, then, cannot be reduced to the question of whether the building is "Muslim" in any direct formal or demographic sense. Its relevance lies in the way it tests the Award's own expanded understanding of architecture in Muslim societies as a field shaped by plural histories, civic responsibility, and contemporary public life. This point is important because the 1998 jury did not describe the cycle as a search for Islamic form. It described its task as a search for projects responding to "new crisis situations" in the world, including globalization, standardization, ethnic tensions, the crisis of the nation-state, democracy, and human rights.²⁶⁷ Within that framework, Vidhan Bhavan was grouped with Tuwaiq Palace and Alhamra Arts Council as one of three large-scale public buildings whose "form and context" were significant in the continuing evolution of a contemporary architectural vocabulary, and whose public functions made them "social catalysts" within their societies.²⁶⁸

Correa's own relationship to the Award is significant to this narrative as well. He had been a part of the Award's intellectual and institutional ecology from its early years, serving on several Steering Committees (1980, 1983, 1986 and 2001) and on the 1989 Master Jury. His presence reminds us that the Award's pluralism was never produced only by Muslim architects, nor by architects working within immediately recognizable Islamic traditions. It was shaped through a deliberately heterogeneous network of architects, historians, theorists, planners, and critics, many of whom approached Islamic societies through broader questions of postcolonial modernity,

²⁶⁷ Davidson, *Legacies for the Future*, 10.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 11

climate, public space, regional meaning, and social responsibility. Correa's own work had long been committed to precisely such questions that asked how modern architecture in India could avoid both internationalist abstraction emptied of place and revivalist quotation emptied of contemporary force.

The building's formal abstraction therefore is central to this reading as well. Correa does not simply quote the mandala or the stupa. He reannotates them as spatial and civic devices. The mandala gives the plan an ordering cosmological diagram, but its use is not sectarian, but rather a means for organizing a plural governmental complex. The stupa, whose iconic precedent at Sanchi lies near Bhopal, is similarly abstracted. The dome and circular movement do not make the assembly Buddhist in any literal/pastiche sense; rather, they translate the stupa's associations with collective memory, circumambulation, and monumental presence into the modern institution of democratic assembly. The Charles Correa Foundation describes Vidhan Bhavan as repurposing the domed Buddhist stupa at Sanchi, while also noting that local artists contributed works such as Yogesh Raval's "Gate of Democracy," symbolizing the Sanchi stupa gate, and Gulammohammed Sheikh's "Tree of Life."²⁶⁹ The resulting building therefore does not gesture towards a return to ancient form, it shows an abstraction of inherited typologies into a contemporary civic language.

This abstraction is what allows the building to answer Sorkin's objection without simply denying it. If one asks whether Vidhan Bhavan is "Muslim" because it looks Islamic, the answer remains difficult. But if one asks whether it belongs to the AKAA's pluralist field of judgment, the answer

²⁶⁹ Charles Correa Foundation, "Charles Correa: Working with Artists," September 5, 2024. <https://charlescorreafoundation.org/2024/09/05/copy/#:~:text=The%20Vidhan%20Bhavan%20design%20repurposes,impressive%20addition%20to%20the%20cityscape>. Accessed May 2, 2026.

becomes clearer. The building stands in Bhopal, a city marked by layered Muslim princely histories and overlooked by historic Muslim monuments, yet it also draws on Buddhist and Hindu spatial-symbolic references to produce a public institution for a secular democratic state. Its pluralism is therefore not a decorative plurality of motifs. It is an architectural staging of India's civilizational and political heterogeneity. This is why the project becomes both a limit-case and a benchmark for the AKA. It is a limit-case because its relation to Islam cannot be secured through the usual markers of Islamic architecture. But it is also a benchmark because it demonstrates how the Award's pluralist judgment can recognize a building whose ethical and architectural significance lies in the negotiation of plurality itself. Vidhan Bhavan materializes public dignity, institutional responsibility, and civic participation through a language of abstraction that gathers Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, regional, and democratic references without reducing them to a single identity. In doing so, it shows how a project may become relevant to the AKA because it gives architectural form to the plural civic conditions within which Muslim histories, publics, and ethical concerns are also embedded.

The other case, The Bridge School [FIG 4.7], is a two-classroom primary school (completed 2008) in Xiashi, a small mountain village in Fujian Province, China, designed by Li Xiaodong Atelier. The on-site review explains the name literally whereby the school bridges the two halves of the village separated by a creek below [FIG 4.8]. Suspended beneath the structure is a pedestrian bridge used by villagers which the review frames as a targeted intervention into social stagnation.²⁷⁰ The review situates the project within a local history of two abandoned tulous – fortress-like earthen collective housing typologies, associated with extended families and

²⁷⁰ Fuad Mallick, *Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2010 On Site Review Report: Vidhan Bhavan, Xiashi, China*. (1998), 1.

longstanding rivalries. Those rivalries, the on-site review notes, are “long gone,” but the tulous remain as charged remnants; the Bridge School is described “like a symbol of a truce”.²⁷¹ The architect likens the strategy to “acupuncture,” whose aim is not only treating a “local medical problem” but “healing the body as a whole”; architecturally, this meant selecting a site and form that would not only solve the problem of not having a school, but also unite and rejuvenate the entire community by its presence.²⁷² The monograph notes that the village “had not designated a site,” that Li Xiaodong “saw an opportunity” in the creek and a history of division, and that “the idea of a bridge emerged” to “physically and symbolically unify the community,” creating a public space for the village and giving new meaning to the tulous by opening up views towards them.²⁷³



FIG 4.7: Exterior façade of the Bridge School designed by Li Xiaodong.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Mostafavi, *Implicate & Explicate*, 72.

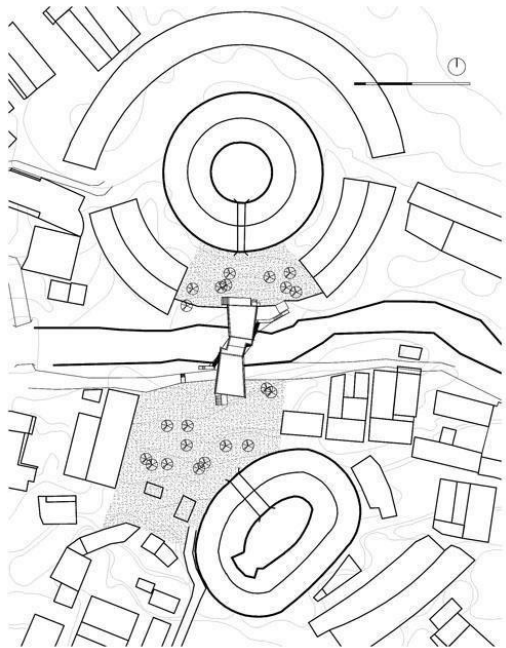


FIG 4.8. Plan of the Bridge School showing how the 'bridge' connects two parts of the village.

The Bridge School therefore begins as a formal-functional proposition, as an educational facility [FIG 4.9] that doubles as connective infrastructure and public space for learning, play, and gathering [FIG 4.10]. But it becomes a limit-case for the AKAAs because it has no clear geographic, demographic, or cultural ties to Islam or the Muslim world. Taufiq Rahim captured the resulting tension succinctly:

[With this cycle of the Award] there was the continued recognition of projects that contribute in multi-faceted ways to the societies in which Muslims live. Yet, the Award in a very stark manner recognized a project ... that was wholly unrelated to the Muslim world, except for the fact that it was an initiative (the Award) inspired by the ethics of Islam that was conferring the recognition.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Taufiq Rahim, "A Call Beyond Islam: The Aga Khan Award for Architecture Makes its Mark," *HuffPost*, November 27, 2010. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-call-beyond-islam-the-a_b_788405 , Accessed February 19, 2026.

Rahim's formulation here distinguishes two levels of the Award's expanded relevance. The first is still contextual whereby projects may contribute in "multi-faceted ways" to societies in which Muslims live by addressing education, infrastructure, public space, ecology, heritage, gendered access, rural neglect, or social repair, even when they do not announce themselves through Islamic form. This is the widened frame already traced in this chapter and previous ones. The project may not look Islamic, but it remains connected to Muslim societies through the social worlds it serves and the conditions it transforms. The second level is more difficult, and Bridge School makes it unavoidable. Here, relevance no longer inheres primarily in the project's geography, users, patronage, or cultural setting. It inheres in the act of recognition itself: an award "inspired by the ethics of Islam" identifies in a non-Muslim context a form of architecture that answers to ethical concerns it regards as central – dignity, repair, community formation, and the making of shared space. Rahim's phrase therefore shifts the question from whether the project possesses Islamic identity to whether the Award's Islamic ethical horizon can recognize analogous forms of care beyond the boundaries of Muslim society.

Rahim also highlights how this marked the Award's entrance into a "post-cultural" and "post-Islamic" mode – one where recognition is extended not through religious or geographic ties, but through shared conditions. The Bridge School is not 'Islamic' or 'Muslim', but it becomes legible to the AKAA through a metaphor of shared struggle – a proxy through which the Award expresses solidarity with a wider set of global conditions – of rural marginalization, infrastructural precarity, and the need for dignified, inclusive public space. This reveals a radical dimension of the AKAA's pluralism: its willingness to displace the centrality of a narrowly classificatory reading of Islamic identity in favor of ethical analogy. Islam is not abandoned here; rather, it is relocated from the identity of the object to the ethical horizon of judgment. The

project becomes relevant because the Award recognizes in it a form of repair, care, and public-making that its Islamic pluralist framework authorizes as architecturally significant.



FIG 4.9: During the day the Bridge School acts as a learning center.



FIG 4.10. The Bridge School acts as a place of learning, playing, and gathering for the village community.

The 2010 Master Jury report makes clear that this displacement is, in fact, an articulated scope. The jury identifies “the intersection of identity and pluralism in a globalised world” as central to its deliberations, emphasizing that the Award has “since its inception” sought to explore “new

frontiers” while maintaining a “generous and pluralistic perspective,” including multicultural contexts where Muslims are minorities and sites shaped by diaspora.²⁷⁵ It also stresses that the jury “did not prejudice [its] selection by any prior definition of an agenda,” and that the geographic and thematic scope broadened “both in and outside the Islamic world”.²⁷⁶ These statements show the institutional self-description that makes the Bridge School legible as a permissible, if provocative, outcome of the Award’s pluralist remit.

These two examples do not prove that the ACAA always rewards boundary-straining projects. Rather, they expose the Award’s operative logic. In Vidhan Bhavan, architectural meaning is authorized through civic pluralism where a mandala-like geometry and layered historical reference are reframed as a public ethic of participation and shared governance, evidenced through courts, circulation, climatic performance, and the managed balance between openness and privacy. In the Bridge School, architectural meaning is authorized through social repair where a school becomes a public space and symbol of truce, with excellence argued through performance.

These projects are also where the Award’s double-bind becomes most evident whereby its pluralism is seen as both its method, and its paradox. In other words, the very ideals of pluralism which, according to the speeches and writings of the Aga Khan, stem from an Islamic ethical horizon and form a central foundation for the Award, are the very same ideals that create the capacity for the Award to recognize and acknowledge concepts that, at face-value, have little or nothing to do with Islam or a Muslim identity.

²⁷⁵ Master Jury Statement, in Mostafavi, *Implicate & Explicate*, 22.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

The Double-Bind: Contradiction as Method

The two limit-cases highlight a pattern that the AKAA's procedures had already prepared – that the Award is repeatedly compelled to hold together imperatives that cannot be cleanly reconciled. It must remain answerable to an Islamic ethical horizon while refusing to reduce Islam to stylistic markers or demographic boundaries. It must speak in the idiom of modern institutional evaluation while also pressing against the exclusions built into dominant regimes of architectural value. The AKAA's pluralism attempts to work through this structured tension rather than solving it.

That tension requires a theoretical vocabulary because the archive itself now points to a recurrent form of contradiction as the institution's operating condition. At this juncture, Fredric Jameson becomes especially useful, first as a critic of modern and postmodern cultural systems whose work repeatedly asks how contradiction functions inside institutions, discourses, and regimes of value rather than outside them; and second, because he also served on the AKAA Master Jury in 1998 – the same cycle in which Vidhan Bhavan was awarded. The turn to Jameson is therefore both conceptual and archival since his writing helps give a name to the structure already traced in the AKAA, and his presence within the Award's own deliberative history makes that naming more than an external imposition.

This is the point at which Jameson's framing of the double-bind becomes analytically useful, though it requires some translation from his context to the AKAA's. The relevant source is *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, especially the opening essay, first published in 1984 as "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." There, Jameson does not treat postmodernism simply as an aesthetic style. He presents it as a cultural dominant produced within a new phase of capitalism, a condition in which architecture, media,

theory, markets, and everyday life are increasingly folded into a single historical field. The difficulty for critique, in this account, is that it no longer occupies a secure position outside the system it analyzes. Culture has become a commodity in its own right; theory becomes part of the very postmodern field it seeks to diagnose; and even oppositional gestures risk being absorbed into the system's capacity for renewal.²⁷⁷ It is in this context that Jameson, following Baudrillard, notes that "conscious ideologies of revolt, revolution, and even negative critique are . . . an integral and functional part of the system's own internal strategies."²⁷⁸

This is the sense in which Jameson's double-bind is useful for the AKAA, even though the register is different. Jameson is describing a condition internal to late capitalism, in which critique can no longer imagine itself as exterior to the cultural and economic system it opposes. The AKAA is also lodged within that broad world because it operates through prize culture, expert juries, international publications, development discourse, architectural media, and the global circulation of prestige. It cannot critique dominant architectural value from some untouched outside. Yet the Award's own double-bind operates in a more specific institutional and ethical register. It uses the very forms of global recognition such as jury deliberation, technical review, publication, exhibition, prize money, and international attention, to redirect architectural judgment toward repair, public life, ecological stewardship, social consequence, and plural histories. Through an analysis of Jameson's ideas, the AKAA then shows how an institution situated within late-capitalist systems of cultural recognition can work through their

²⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), especially xx–xxi, 1–54,

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 203–18.

contradictions in a distinct register, converting the double-bind from a condition of entrapment alone into a disciplined mode of ethical and historiographical negotiation.

The AKAA's pluralism then appears less as a deviation from coherence than as the structure of its coherence. The Award must affirm an Islamic ethical horizon while resisting essentialist definitions of Islam. It must engage global architectural discourse while challenging the Eurocentric assumptions that often regulate what counts as serious architecture, public value, or historical significance. It must remain legible as an institution associated with Muslim societies even when it recognizes projects that do not present obvious Islamic formal, geographic, or demographic markers.

Jameson's framework shows how contradiction becomes structural under postmodernity. His claim that "critical distance has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism" is a diagnosis of the difficulty of critique when culture, theory, architecture, media, and market systems become mutually enfolded.²⁷⁹ For Jameson, this loss of distance marks the danger of postmodern cultural production suggesting that even oppositional gestures may be absorbed into the system they seek to oppose. My use of Jameson therefore necessarily adapts and partly inverts his logic. I take from him the insight that contradiction is not external to cultural institutions but internal to their operation. Yet in the case of the AKAA, the double-bind is not only a sign of capture or paralysis. It becomes a constructive institutional condition because the Award develops procedures through which contradiction can be staged, tested, and made answerable through plural juries, technical reviews, on-site verification, public reports, and a recurring refusal to define Islamic architecture in advance.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 48.

This inversion does not remove the AKAA from Jameson's world of late capitalism. The Award remains embedded in global systems of expertise, publication, prize culture, philanthropic capital, and architectural prestige. But it shows that institutions lodged within those systems may operate through their contradictions in different registers. The AKAA's double-bind is essentially reflective of the difficulty of sustaining critique without an exterior position. Its pluralism works by remaining inside global architectural discourse while redirecting the grounds of judgment toward repair, civic life, environmental responsibility, and ethical relevance. The Award then does not overcome the postmodern condition Jameson describes. It turns one of its central dilemmas – the impossibility of pure critical distance, into a disciplined practice of situated judgment.

This is also why the earlier discussion of procedure (Chapter 3) is significant for the Jameson turn. The double-bind is observable practically in how the AKAA organizes judgment where Steering Committee briefs articulate a value horizon tied to contemporary conditions and to the concerns of Muslim communities and the plural Umma; master juries are then asked to let evidence reshape and specify those values; technical reviews and site visits make consequences verifiable; published jury statements stabilize those judgments. The institution's authority depends on both sides of the bind. Without anchoring, pluralism risks dissolving into generic humanitarianism. Without openness, Islamic grounding risks hardening into formalism or civilizational essentialism.

Jameson's relevance to this argument is more significant because of his participation in the 1998 AKAA Master Jury. In the jury discussions, as preserved in the transcript, he urged jurors to think of projects as "projections of problems" rather than simply as solutions, and he proposed evaluative language such as "metaphors of resistance" to capture the complexities and uneven

realities of architectural production in postcolonial contexts.²⁸⁰ The phrase is worth pausing over. To describe a project as a “projection of problems” is not to diminish its architectural accomplishment. It is to recognize that the most significant works do not side-step the pressures that shape them which include globalization, ethnic conflict, rural poverty, environmental damage, the crisis of the nation-state, or the unevenness of modernization, but give those pressures spatial and public form. This is precisely how the 1998 Master Jury framed its search – as a response to “new crisis situations” in the world and in the Muslim world in particular, including demographic pressure, environmental degradation, globalization, standardization, ethnic tensions, democracy, and human rights.²⁸¹ The AKAA’s task, in this sense, is not merely to identify buildings that solve problems efficiently, but to recognize architectures that render problems intelligible, inhabitable, and open to collective response.

The term “double-bind,” identifies the AKAA’s method of critical participation in global architectural discourse. The Award neither abandons Islamic grounding nor secures it through fixed formal criteria. Instead, it repeatedly converts that grounding into a pluralist practice of evaluation while remaining answerable to an ethical lineage. This is what allows the AKAA to be, at once, Islamic and post-Islamic in orientation, rooted and extensible in judgment, institutionally modern and yet not reducible to the epistemic assumptions of modern secular value regimes.

Canon Formation and the Historiographical Stakes of Pluralism

The double-bind that structures the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has implications for how architecture is historicized, categorized, and legitimized. Its pluralism, which refuses to fix

²⁸⁰ Davidson, *Legacies for the Future*, 147–51.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Islamic identity or architectural modernity within stable definitions, operates as a deliberate intervention into the mechanisms of canon formation. Rather than simply expanding the canon to include “Islamic” or “non-Western” works, the AKAAs unsettles the epistemic foundations that underwrite canonicity itself. It introduces ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity into a disciplinary system historically organized around coherence, hierarchy, and exclusion.²⁸²

British Art Historian Griselda Pollock, reminds us that canons emerge as discursive formations shaped by cultural authority, institutional repetition, and political omission. “Canonicity,” she writes, “refers to both the assumed quality of an included text and to the status a text acquires because it belongs within an authoritative collection.”²⁸³ Pollock’s feminist critique demonstrates that canon formation relies not only on inclusion and exclusion, but on the naturalization of those processes – on the illusion that greatness is innate rather than produced. She reveals how the canon is mythologized as a lineage of autonomous genius, erasing the institutional and ideological frameworks that enable it. Pollock’s critique is especially valuable because it resists the easy opposition between inside and outside. The problem, she insists, is not resolved simply by bringing previously excluded material into an unchanged canonical structure. Such gestures can leave the newly included as marked others, or produce separate subfields that function less as transformations of the discipline than as forms of ghettoization within it.

²⁸² For this claim, I draw reference from critics such as Reyner Banham and Kenneth Frampton’s *Critical Regionalism* that have pointed out that the universality claimed by modernist movements was a construct that erased cultural specificity. More recent scholars like Mark Crinson (‘*Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*’), have further demonstrated how modernist architectural movements were embedded within colonial and postcolonial power structures, shaping the built environment through the hegemonic imposition of Western architectural ideals.

²⁸³ Griselda Pollock, “About Canons and Culture Wars,” in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

For that reason, Pollock proposes not merely the replacement or expansion of the canon, but its “differencing.” As she puts it, “The ‘discourse of the Other’ must of necessity ‘difference the canon.’”²⁸⁴ In the preface, she clarifies that her project is not simply one of “displacing the canon” but of “‘differencing’ the canon,” exposing its investment in sexual difference while allowing that very problem to alter how art’s histories are read.²⁸⁵ This is the crucial point for my purposes because differencing is not additive correction. It is a critical disturbance of the structures through which authority and value are made to appear natural. This language is especially apt for the Aga Khan Award. To say that the Award has decanonizing force is not to claim that it erects a rival canon of Islamic masterpieces, nor that it replaces one stable lineage with another. Its significance lies rather in the way it differences the canon from within, exposing the contingency of those categories through which architecture has conventionally been made legible as serious, exemplary, or historically central.

Professor of Art History and Theory James Elkins offers a complementary critique. He argues that despite the increasing inclusion of non-Western art in global discourse, art history remains structurally Eurocentric. “There is no non-Western tradition of art history,” Elkins writes, “if by that is meant a tradition with its own interpretive strategies and forms of argument.”²⁸⁶ Even when texts about Islamic, African, or Asian art circulate in academic institutions, they tend to adopt the frameworks of Western formalism, iconography, or style analysis. The inclusion is thus shallow, leaving intact the underlying assumptions of what counts as art, theory, and method.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁸⁵ Griselda Pollock, Preface to *Differencing the Canon*, xiv.

²⁸⁶ James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins, (London: Routledge, 2007), 19.

The AKAA's intervention offers an alternative. It constructs a historiography in which Islamic architecture does not enter global discourse by conforming to inherited modernist standards, but by recentring its own epistemologies: ethical accountability, plural belonging, environmental stewardship, repair, public consequence, and the inseparability of form from social use. These become ways of knowing architecture. This enables what Elkins calls "worldwide reading"²⁸⁷ – a mode of comparative engagement that does not rely on universalizing methodologies, but allows regional and religious frameworks to shape how we understand form, space, and value.

Moreover, by embracing what some critics might call its "nebulousness", the AKAA refuses the institutional desire for legibility. Its pluralism performs what Deleuze and Guattari describe as 'deterritorialization': a refusal to let Islamic architecture be fixed within a closed historical or aesthetic tradition. Instead, through what they call 'reterritorialization'²⁸⁸, it remaps architectural meaning onto new ethical and political terrains – climate, gender, community, and marginality.

In this sense, the Award's pluralism becomes a method of decanonization. It does not merely expand the canon's content; it contests its logic. It opens architectural historiography to non-linear, hybrid, and contingent histories. It unsettles binaries between the sacred and the secular, the monumental and the vernacular, the regional and the global. It foregrounds the entanglement of theology, politics, and form, insisting that architectural modernism is not a European export, but a field of ongoing negotiation across cultures. The AKAA's archive therefore repeatedly shows modernism taking shape through local and ethical translations: through Correa's abstraction of mandala, stupa, and civic assembly at Vidhan Bhavan; through Li Xiaodong's conversion of a rural bridge into educational and communal infrastructure; through Wadi

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Hanifa's fusion of ecological engineering, public landscape, and Islamic stewardship (discussed in detail in Chapter 2); and through projects such as Gando or Bait ur Rouf, where modern architectural intelligence emerges through climate, craft, light, economy, and collective use rather than through the repetition of an international style (also discussed in detail in Chapter 2). The significance of these cases lies in the fact that they represent neither a rejection of modernism, nor an uncritical acceptance of it as a universal language whose origin and authority remain European. Modernism here is reworked through the pressures of postcolonial governance, religious and ethical inheritance, ecological crisis, rural precarity, and public-making. The AKAA's decanonizing force lies precisely in making those negotiations visible as modern architectural thought rather than as regional adaptation, cultural supplement, or belated response. The AKAA's pluralism and structural paradox – the double-bind that demands both fidelity and openness – offers, therefore, a historiographical critique of canonicity itself. Through all of this, the Award does not only diversify the field's objects, rather, it destabilizes the methods by which those objects are sorted into center-and-margin, and canon-and-supplement.

Perhaps the most consequential way the Award exerts decanonizing force is by shifting authority away from singular form and authorship toward civic, ethical, ecological, and procedural relations. This dissertation has repeatedly shown that the AKAA's most significant recognitions emerge when architecture is treated not simply as the embodiment of a coherent identity or the achievement of a sovereign designer, but as a site in which fractured worlds are repaired, public life is reorganized, environmental damage is addressed, and historical plurality is negotiated. In the awards definition then, exemplary work is no longer self-evidently the one that most clearly embodies formal mastery or stylistic originality. It may instead be the one that most effectively redistributes access, reconstitutes collective life, or makes difficult forms of coexistence

sustainable. The canonizing implications of such a shift are substantial, because they challenge not only what is valued, but the anthropologies of authorship, mastery, and cultural pedigree through which value has so often been narrated.

This is why the decanonizing force of the Aga Khan Award should not be understood as a regional supplement to an otherwise intact discipline. Pollock's warning against ghettoization is instructive here. To treat the Award simply as a specialized institution for Muslim societies, operating alongside the real center of architectural history, would be to miss the force of its intervention. The point is not that the AKAAs provides a useful archive of neglected cases that can be added to existing surveys. The point is that its mode of judgment exposes how narrow those surveys' underlying criteria have often been. Elkins's account of the persistence of a dominant narrative despite proliferating local canons sharpens the same issue. The Award does not simply pluralize the field at its margins. It pressures the very story the field tells about what architecture is, how it matters, and what counts as evidence of significance.

Decanonization, then, marks a transformation less of inventory than of method. It describes a disturbance in the criteria through which architecture becomes visible as worthy of attention, preservation, narration, and study. The Aga Khan Award's double-bind is central to this process because it compels the institution to keep judgment open to projects that cannot be secured by settled categories while still making those judgments publicly and authoritatively. In this sense, pluralism is not merely one theme among others in the Award's discourse. It is the mechanism through which the discipline's canonical habits are pressured from within. The Award works immanently, through prizes, juries, archives, publications, and case selection, to make another order of judgment thinkable.

To say that the Aga Khan Award decanonizes is therefore not to claim that it has escaped institutionality, nor that it has replaced one settled canon with a better one. It is instead to recognize that the institution makes visible the contingency of architectural history's own evaluative foundations. By refusing fixed criteria of Islamicity, widening what counts as excellence and evidence, organizing authority as revisable, and shifting attention toward ethical, civic, ecological, and procedural relations, the Award compels the discipline to confront the limits of its inherited categories. Its importance lies not only in the projects it has recognized, but in the fact that those recognitions ask architectural history to judge differently.

Conclusion

Founded in 1977 in response to the marginalization of architectural discourse in Muslim societies and to the inadequacy of prevailing frameworks for understanding architecture in the developing world, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has often been described as a platform for recognizing exemplary projects across the Muslim world. This dissertation has argued for a fuller and more exacting account. The AKAA is not only a prize that broadens the geographical range of recognized architecture, nor simply an archive of buildings that have been neglected by dominant histories. It is an institutional site in which an Islamically grounded philosophy of pluralism has been translated into a distinct mode of architectural judgment. Through that translation, the Award has helped reorganize how architectural value and significance is defined and evidenced, and how histories of modern architecture can be narrated beyond the assumptions of Eurocentric canonicity.

At the center of this dissertation has been the claim that pluralism, in the Aga Khan's discourse and in the institutional life of the Award, is far denser than a language of tolerance or inclusion. In Chapter 1, this pluralism has emerged as an ethical formation grounded in Qur'anic conceptions of human difference and in Isma'ili traditions of knowledge, humility, and care. This ethical genealogy has shown how the Aga Khan's pluralism took shape as a post-catastrophic

discipline of repair, exhibiting a way of inhabiting the fractured conditions of modernity without retreating into civilizational nostalgia or yielding fully to the secular terms through which modern institutions often define public value. Chapter 2 then traced how that ethical horizon enters architecture as a widened evaluative frame. Across projects concerned with ecological restoration, public-making, vernacular continuity, refugee dignity, and civic capacity, the Award has highlighted how architectural value can become legible through relations rather than image and appearance alone. Chapter 3 has shown that such evaluative breadth does not sustain itself automatically. It depends on an infrastructure of judgment that includes rotating juries, distributed authority, on-site verification, shifting modes of publicity, and dissemination practices that allow the Award to remain, in Farrokh Derakhshani's recurring term, "relevant" to its time. Chapter 4, finally, points out how the pluralism in the Award becomes both its method and its paradox whereby projects that have no explicit connection to a Muslim or Islamic identity are recognized by the Award. It shows the Award's willingness to displace the centrality of Islamic identity in favor of ethical analogy, arguing that the consequences of this pluralist regime of judgment extend beyond the Award itself. By widening criteria, redistributing authority, and resisting final definitions of what architecture must be in order to count as meaningful within Muslim societies, the AKAA pressures the historiographical habits through which architectural history has conventionally stabilized value.

These chapters have shown that the significance of the AKAA lies in more than the recognition of worthy projects. Its deeper importance lies in the fact that it models another regime of judgment. It brings theological and ethical commitments into relation with modern institutional procedure. It treats architecture as answerable to repair, public life, environmental stewardship,

and continuity in use. It organizes authority as revisable rather than fixed. And in doing so, it asks architectural history to confront the contingency of its own evaluative foundations.

The central conceptual claim of this dissertation has been that the Aga Khan Award's coherence lies in a productive contradiction. The institution remains intelligible because it is anchored in an Islamic ethical horizon, yet that horizon does not function as a closed classificatory system. It does not secure architectural meaning in advance through typology, iconography, territorial bounds, or demographic certainty. At the same time, the Award does not relinquish the specificity of its moral and historical grounding in favor of an indistinct humanitarian universalism. The AKAAs therefore inhabits a demanding position. It must remain close enough to an Islamic genealogy of pluralism to retain its distinctive intellectual force, while open enough to recognize architectural significance wherever forms of repair, civic dignity, public responsibility, and historical continuity become newly legible. This tension runs through the entire dissertation, particularly forcefully in Chapters 2 and 4, because it is the condition under which the Award can continue to speak both from within and beyond the worlds with which it is most explicitly associated.

It is for this reason that the Aga Khan Award is best understood through the language of a double-bind, best understood in its cultural and aesthetic aspects through the work of Fredric Jameson. The contradiction at stake here is not incidental to the institution, nor is it evidence of conceptual looseness. It is the structure through which the Award maintains both authority and movement. If the Islamic horizon were stabilized too rigidly, the institution would risk reducing architecture to inherited signs of identity and confining judgment to a recognizably bounded field of objects. If openness were allowed to expand without any ethical anchoring, the Award would lose the very lineage that gives its pluralism depth, seriousness, and resistance to the thin moral

vocabularies of generic global recognition. The force of the double-bind lies in the fact that neither side can be abandoned. The Award sustains itself by inhabiting this pressure, allowing Islamic ethical commitments to remain active precisely by refusing to let them harden into a fixed stylistic or demographic program. In this sense, pluralism is both the institution's method and its paradox, in the sense that the principle that gives the Award its internal coherence is also the one that continually unsettles the boundaries of that coherence.

The double-bind, therefore, is what makes the Aga Khan Award intellectually consequential. It authorizes a mode of judgment that can treat architecture as meaningful through the consequences it produces and the worlds it helps sustain, rather than through prior certainty about what category it belongs to. This is why the Award is able to recognize projects whose relation to Islam is not secured by immediate formal legibility, yet whose significance becomes clear when judged through civic, ethical, and procedural criteria. The point is not that contradiction has been overcome, but rather it has become the Award's method. The AKAA works through a form of critical participation in global architectural culture, inhabiting the languages of modern institutional evaluation, jury procedure, technical review, and public recognition while redirecting them toward a broader and more demanding conception of architectural worth. Its Islamic grounding is therefore neither ornamental nor exclusionary. It operates as an ethical orientation that remains extensible without becoming formless, and historically grounded without becoming doctrinal. The Award's distinctiveness lies here, in showing that fidelity and openness need not be resolved into a single stable formula in order to generate durable judgments. They can instead remain in productive tension, and it is from that tension that the Award derives its peculiar capacity to judge differently.

Potential Counterarguments:

A potentially strong objection nevertheless could follow from the very expansiveness this dissertation has treated as constitutive of the Award's pluralism. One might argue that once architectural significance is detached from recognizable formal, territorial, or demographic markers of Muslim identity, the category of Islamic architecture risks becoming so elastic that it ceases to offer any disciplinary purchase at all. From this perspective, the AKAAs's willingness to honor projects such as Vidhan Bhavan or the Bridge School would appear to confirm not the productive extensibility of an Islamic ethical horizon, but the dilution of that horizon into a diffuse language of social virtue. Michael Sorkin's response to the Vidhan Bhavan remains one of the clearest formulations of this anxiety when he remarks that "calling this building Muslim is surely a stretch."²⁸⁹ That objection deserves to be taken seriously, not only because it names a recurring discomfort within the reception of the Award, but because it echoes a longer methodological problem within the field itself. The study of Islamic architecture has long been shaped by uncertainty over whether its coherence lies in intrinsic formal qualities, historical-geographic association, patronage and use, or broader civilizational and intellectual conditions. As Nasser Rabbat notes, one of the field's earliest and most persistent controversies concerns whether Islamic architecture should be defined through intrinsic formal qualities, historical-geographic association, or more operational criteria tied to Muslim patrons, users, and contexts.²⁹⁰ Gülru Necipoğlu similarly shows that the field's movement from an older search for artistic unity toward a recognition of variety and plurality has generated methodological anxieties, even as such multivocality may also be a sign of disciplinary maturation.²⁹¹ The

²⁸⁹ Michael Sorkin, "Ever More Inclusive," *Metropolis* 18, no. 4 (Dec 1998), 33–5.

²⁹⁰ Nasser Rabbat, "What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?" *Journal of Art Historiography* (Glasgow) 6, no. 6 (2012): 1.

pressure registered by critics of the AKAA therefore belongs to a deeper historiographic problem, asking how to sustain rigor once the object of study can no longer be secured by a single stable criterion.

The response developed in this dissertation has been to take that pressure as a demand for greater precision rather than as a reason to retreat to typological closure. The claim here is not that boundaries no longer matter, nor that anything can be subsumed under the sign of Islamic architecture by virtue of ethical good intentions alone. It is that the AKAA makes visible, and institutionalizes, another mode of rigor. In that mode, Islamicity is neither presumed through stylistic citation nor dissolved into abstract benevolence. It is argued through an ethical orientation, a procedural form of judgment, and an evidentiary account of consequence. What matters is whether a project becomes legible within a field of concerns historically and intellectually shaped by Muslim societies and by the Aga Khan's own articulation of pluralism as a civilizational ethic – concerns involving public dignity, environmental stewardship, repair, continuity, and the management of difference. The Award's significance lies in testing such claims through procedures of deliberation, technical review, and public justification rather than securing them in advance through fixed iconographic or demographic thresholds. What may appear nebulous from the standpoint of categorical certainty can therefore be understood differently – as the refusal of premature closure in order to preserve a more demanding relation between judgment and historical reality. The AKAA does not abolish the problem of boundaries;

²⁹¹ Gülru Necipoglu, "'The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches', in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, Eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*, London: Saqi, 2012." *Journal of Art Historiography* 6, no. 6 (2012).

it relocates the grounds on which boundaries are argued, making coherence a matter of ethical and procedural demonstration rather than typological self-evidence.

Historiographical Stakes:

The stakes of this dissertation extend beyond the Aga Khan Award as an institutional case. What the preceding chapters have traced through ethics, evaluation, and procedure bears directly on the writing of architectural history itself. If the AKAA's pluralism allows projects to become significant through repair, public life, environmental consequence, procedural intelligence, and continuity in use, then it also places pressure on the assumptions through which architectural history has conventionally stabilized value. The issue being highlighted here is not only that certain buildings, landscapes, settlements, or infrastructures have remained peripheral to dominant narratives. It is that the terms by which centrality has been conferred have themselves often depended on a narrow repertoire of evidentiary and interpretive habits which have included formal innovation, monumental visibility, authorial singularity, typological legibility, and the easy alignment of cultural identity with stable visual languages. The Aga Khan Award's historiographic significance lies in its ability to expose the contingency of those habits. Its archive shows that architectural significance may also be argued through maintenance regimes, environmental repair, resettlement mechanisms, workshops, manuals, forms of public use, and institutional procedures of verification and deliberation. Once these become legible as part of architecture's historical evidence, the discipline is pressed to ask different questions of its objects and of the criteria through which those objects become narratable.

One important implication of this dissertation is what may best be described as a decanonizing pressure within architectural history. I use that phrase deliberately and with some caution. By decanonization I do not mean the simple expansion of the canon through the inclusion of

previously neglected examples, nor a diversification of content within otherwise unchanged standards of judgment. Such gestures may enlarge the archive while leaving intact the criteria that continue to define the center. What the AKAA makes visible is a more procedural disturbance. It recalibrates authority, evidence, and narration in the judgment of architecture. It shifts attention away from the self-evidence of formal mastery and toward the ethical, civic, ecological, and procedural relations through which architecture becomes consequential. It redistributes the grounds on which excellence can be argued, while also redistributing the institutional authority that makes such arguments plausible in the first place. In this respect, Pollock's distinction between simple inclusion and the "differencing" of the canon remains especially useful.²⁹² The Award does not offer a parallel canon of Islamic exemplars that would leave the dominant discipline fundamentally undisturbed. It instead pressures the assumptions through which architecture is made to appear serious, exemplary, or central. Its pluralism therefore acts less as supplementation than as a disturbance internal to the discipline's own habits of valuation.

At the same time, a fuller theorization of decanonization extends beyond the present dissertation's scope. My aim here has not been to offer a comprehensive comparative theory of canon formation across prizes, archives, and institutions, but to show that the AKAA makes such a line of inquiry newly necessary. The dissertation has established that the Award widens criteria, redistributes authority, and expands what counts as evidence of architectural significance. Those findings already carry clear historiographical consequences. They suggest that architectural history may be understood less as a field ordered by a settled hierarchy of objects and more as a

²⁹² Griselda Pollock, "About Canons and Culture Wars," in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. (London: Routledge, 1999).

field of judgments whose criteria are historically contingent, politically structured, and open to rearticulation. The larger comparative implications of that claim, especially for a more sustained account of decanonization as a disciplinary process, belong to future work. What can be said here with confidence is that the Aga Khan Award does more than widen the discipline's inventory. It asks architectural history to judge differently, and in doing so it makes the limits of inherited canonical habits newly visible.

Implications for Architectural Practice:

The implications of this dissertation are not confined to the writing of architectural history. They also bear on architectural practice, especially in contexts where design must work within conditions of contested identity, uneven development, environmental stress, and fractured public life. One of the most consequential lessons of the Aga Khan Award's archive is that it offers a way of judging architecture under such conditions without reducing value either to symbolic recognizability or to technocratic performance alone. Across the cases discussed in this dissertation, architecture becomes significant through the ways it mediates difficult relations between memory and present use, ecological damage and collective repair, religious inheritance and civic openness, scarcity and dignity, local building knowledge and broader institutional structures. In this sense, the AKAA's significance lies not only in its recognition of a distinctive set of projects, but also in its articulation of a mode of architectural judgment in which ethical consequence and architectural performance remain bound together.

For architectural practice, this has several implications. The first is that architecture cannot be exhausted by formal innovation, aesthetic refinement, or technical competence understood in isolation. These remain important, but within the AKAA's strongest moments they are judged in relation to broader questions such as: What forms of public life does a project enable or

foreclose? What kinds of environmental care does it sustain? How does it mediate histories of damage, displacement, or exclusion? What capacities for maintenance, adaptation, and shared use does it create? The Award's archive repeatedly suggests that architecture acquires significance through its ability to organize durable relations among people, institutions, materials, and environments. This shifts professional attention away from the singular object and toward the worlds a project helps assemble and keep in motion. Such a shift is particularly consequential for architects working in or with Muslim societies, but it is not limited to them. It speaks more broadly to practices operating anywhere that architecture must answer to plural publics and unequal conditions without surrendering its disciplinary seriousness.

The AKAAs also offers a demanding precedent for architects working across contexts in which questions of identity remain politically charged and formally overdetermined. Its archive suggests that architects need not choose between identity as pastiche and neutrality as abstraction. In the Award's most compelling examples, ethical and historical grounding do not become legible primarily through the repetition of inherited visual signs, nor through a denial of situated difference in the name of universal technique. They become legible through performance by highlighting how a building gathers people, supports dignity, redistributes access, responds to climate, sustains continuity in use, or creates the conditions for coexistence. This is one of the dissertation's practical stakes. The AKAAs models a form of judgment in which architecture is asked to do more than represent belonging. It is asked to make shared life more durable under difficult conditions. That standard is more exacting than either symbolic citation or procedural neutrality on its own, and it is precisely this more exacting standard that gives the Award continuing relevance for architectural practice today.

Future Directions:

One of the clearest directions for future research lies in developing a fuller account of the decanonizing pressures identified here. In the context of the AKAAs demonstrating that architectural value can be authorized through widened criteria, redistributed authority, and expanded forms of evidence, a larger comparative study becomes both possible and necessary. Such a study might place the Award in relation to other prizes, archives, pedagogical programs, exhibitions, or transnational regimes of recognition in order to ask how canons are unsettled procedurally as well as aesthetically. It would also make it possible to clarify more fully how judgments travel between institutions, publications, and professional cultures, and how alternative ethical or regional frameworks reshape what counts as architectural seriousness in the first place.

More broadly, this dissertation suggests that architectural history may be approached not only as a field of objects, styles, and periods, but as a field of judgments. Those judgments are never innocent. They are historically contingent, institutionally organized, and politically charged, even when they present themselves as self-evident. What the Aga Khan Award makes newly visible is that such judgments can be reoriented in the sense that their criteria can shift, their evidentiary grounds can widen, and their authority can be redistributed without forfeiting rigor. A fuller comparative exploration of that proposition remains to be undertaken. What this dissertation has established is the importance of the problem. The AKAAs do not simply add to the archive of modern architecture; it helps show that the terms by which architecture becomes legible, valuable, and historically central are themselves open to transformation. It is in that recognition that the broader significance of this project lies.

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