

Building the Bridges, Defining the Audience: The Nature of the Critical Discourse within the Aga Khan Program at MIT and Harvard

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The paper focuses on the history and theory components within the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture established both at the Fine Arts Department at Harvard University and the Department of Architecture at MIT. The issues of concern are: the trials and tribulations, the successes and implications of basing an area specialized program within a larger department (Fine Arts and Architecture), the nature of the dialogue between the two, and finally the contribution to the field of Islamic art and architectural history in particular and to the field of art history and theory in general.

Having been a student at the Aga Khan Program both at MIT and Harvard and having taught in both, I came to witness an important shift in the orientation of the program in particular and the field of Islamic art and architecture in general. The model of studying art and architectural products as objects with the emphases on their formal and stylistic issues gave way to the interdisciplinary model in which these

artifacts are studied as cultural products with emphases on social, economic and political issues. Another important shift occurred slightly later. It is the shift towards a more theory and history based studies and less design oriented investigations especially within the context of the Department of Architecture at MIT.

The paper analyzes such shifts and argues that in order for the program to further grow in an interdisciplinary orientation there is a need to pursue theoretical models of investigation, which will require a greater exposure to theory and a bridging into related disciplines such as social and literary studies. It is also necessary to place a greater emphasis on contemporary issues in art and architectural production in order to establish a platform for the critical discourse on the current cultural production.