

Translating Islamic Architecture: The Legacy of the Aga Khan Program

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The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has enriched the understanding of architecture in Islamic societies, most broadly through its Awards program, which honors projects that answer to the needs of a Muslim community. The awards very clearly illustrate the ideals of the donor: critical regionalism, social relevance, and a sensitivity to preserving historical architecture. In the publications that document these awards, contemporary architecture of the Islamic world is disseminated to a wide audience.

The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT and Harvard has also served, through its educational mandate, to initiate young scholars into a world which is to some familiar, and to others, quite foreign. The legacy is much more ambiguous, as there are no comparable 'awards' that would define the standards of the Program. In the absence of such objective criteria for analysis, one may turn to a more personal narrative. This paper will thus explore the dimension of architectural pedagogy from the point of view of a former student of the Aga Khan Program, as well as from the perspective of an educator introducing students to the art and architecture of the Islamic world.

The first stage in the young scholar's education may come through a change within, that is, translating one's own cultural background into a tangible, although politically active, document. Although unable to remove oneself from that context, the student may learn to value the necessity of an historically and socially contextual reading of the architecture under review. As a pedagogue one is entrusted with the role of translation again, this time as an informed source transmitting

knowledge to a primarily Western, Christian, and Jewish, audience that comes with its own preconceptions about the Islamic world. Both these types of communication provide a dynamic discourse, allowing for the possibility to situate oneself vis a vis one's own national or religious persona on the one hand, and on the other, facing an academic environment that makes broader intellectual demands on the scholar.

What is the role of an institution such as the Aga Khan Program in the development of that scholar, in what would seem to be a rather introspective evolution? This paper speculates on this question with an eye to the resources provided to the author as a student at MIT, such as travel grants, lecture series, workshops and colloquia in which she participated. Whether as a basis for a common language, be it as non-quantifiable as 'academic standard,' that calls for historically grounded academic research, or as an arena for the exchange of new ideas and investigations, the unique contribution of the Aga Khan Program at MIT and Harvard to the study of Islamic architecture is unchallenged. Where it stands to gain, however, may be in defining a more active role in disseminating its message to educators and practitioners of architecture in the Islamic world, especially through academic exchange programs that would expose both Western and Eastern scholars to new methodological and theoretical concerns upon which the study of Islamic art and architecture must necessarily hinge.