



# BUILDING FOR A BETTER LIFE

## Aga Khan Award for Architecture

“Architecture is Life” is the title of the most recent book on the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. It is an appropriate one: the Award, and its sister programmes within the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), have been working to improve the life of people throughout the world for over a century.

The first is a dedication to self-sustaining development that can contribute to long-term economic advancement and social harmony. The second is a commitment to the vigorous participation of local communities in all development efforts. Finally, all Network institutions seek shared responsibility for positive change. They actively work to facilitate collaborative ventures, seeking potential partners – from universities and governments, to foundations and international development agencies, to individual and corporate donors or investors – on the basis of shared objectives and the complementarity of resources. In Africa, the first school under the auspices of the Aga Khan was built in Zanzibar in 1905, and hospitals built over half a century ago are now among the leading health facilities on the continent. AKDN’s development activities now range from an early childhood education programme in Kenya to a large-scale hydroelectric plant in Uganda that provides half the country’s electricity.

AKDN’s cultural projects are part and parcel of this broad objective. In 1977, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture was launched (along with the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT), and is given every three years to projects that set new standards of excellence in architecture, planning practices, historic preservation and landscape architecture. The selection process emphasizes architecture that not only provides for people’s physical, social and economic needs, but that also stimulates and responds to their cultural expectations. Through its activities, the Award has had a sustained influence in turning the world architectural debate towards these issues. AKDN’s cultural projects also work to revitalise historic cities. Through the creation of parks, restoration and conservation projects, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and its sister agencies have been working to improve the quality of life in many African cities.

In Cairo, for example, the creation of al-Azhar Park by AKTC’s Historic Cities Programme has provided a green lung for a city with one of the lowest proportions of green space per inhabitant in the world. The transformation of the derelict Darassa site, a 30-hectare (74-acre) mound of rubble adjacent to the Historic City, required a monumental task of excavation, grading and replacement

with appropriate fill. The US\$ 30 million project, which has evolved well beyond the Park to include socio economic initiatives in the neighbouring Darb al-Ahmar district, now attracts nearly two million people per year.

In Zanzibar's Stone Town, it rehabilitated two major public spaces: Forodhani Park and Kelele Square and rehabilitated eleven buildings in Stone Town – many of them on the point of collapse – as part of a programme to demonstrate the building and restoration techniques needed to preserve this World Heritage Site.

In 2004, the Programme began restoring the Great Mosque in Mopti, Mali. The project expanded to include sanitation, street paving, healthcare and other measures in the neighbouring Komoguel district. In 2006, AKTC extended its work to Timbuktu, where it has restored the Djingarey Ber mosque, and to Djenné, where it restored the Great Mosque. The Programme also worked with the government to create the National Park of Mali on a 103-hectare site in Bamako, the nation's capital.

AKTC's work is not limited to the developing world. In Toronto, for example, the Fumihiko Maki – designed Aga Khan Museum (due to open in autumn of 2014) shares a site with the Ismaili Centre Toronto, which was designed by Chares Correa, and the Aga Khan Park, which lies between them and was designed by Vladimir Djurovic. The point, in Toronto and elsewhere, is that a good built environment is critical to the quality of life. Good buildings not only shelter people, but they provide inspiration and hope. Good public spaces provide room for dialogue and invite the exchange of ideas. A proper home, His Highness the Aga Khan has said, is the bridge between poverty and a better life. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture would therefore argue that builders, municipalities, architects and clients – all those involved in constructing the built environment – have a responsibility to work towards fundamentally improving the lives of the people who live among their projects.

[www.akdn.org/culture](http://www.akdn.org/culture)  
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