

Sustainability

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is unique. No other architectural award in the world comes anywhere near its depth and breadth. Its strength, and that which distinguishes it from other awards, is that it is given to a work of built architecture, often defined in the widest sense of the word, rather than to a particular individual or group.

At the outset, a pool of around one thousand nominators propose hundreds of projects from around the world. From these the jury selects a shortlist of projects, which are thoroughly researched and photographed and then reviewed in depth by a third party, who in turn presents these projects back to the jury. This is what further differentiates the Aga Khan Award – the jury does not just review the submitted material. Following the presentations by the reviewers, the jury further deliberates about the criteria for judging and the message that will be implicitly conveyed to the world's community of architects by the winning projects. In any award cycle, the set of premiated projects and the role of the jury are crucial. The jury's message is seen as indicative of the pressing architectural and environmental issues of the day, defining the *Zeitgeist* of the architectural world to practitioners and others in the Muslim world and elsewhere.

If there is a weakness in this awards process, it is that the list of projects for review has already been assembled by the award office by the time the jury convenes. When the jury first meets, it is like a chef who has not gone to the market to see the catch of the day; it has to work with whatever is available in the larder. The jury becomes responsible for viewing vital contemporary issues through the lens of projects that may have been designed up to a decade ago, since only completed projects are eligible. Thus the critical architectural and environmental issues of the day may well be obscured or not evident, at least until the next awards cycle.

In assessing this current cycle, it became clear that there were insufficient projects that address sustainability. Al Gore's now well-known film of his Powerpoint presentation about climate change, 'An Inconvenient Truth', has increased global concern about the direct impact of the human built environment on the climate, and made evident the critical nature of the ecological agenda. Evidence of worldwide environmental devastation and climate change is ubiquitous, with the conspicuously diminishing polar ice caps, the loss of snowfall on Mount Kilimanjaro, the rise in sea levels and a whole host of other issues. Many designers and political leaders now recognise that they must confront the issue of saving the natural environment; the master jury, too, recognises that the Aga Khan Award must address this issue with urgency. The question presented to us in our role as jurors was: How do we design for a sustainable future in the Muslim world?

We first run the risk of 'greenwash' – the belief that if an architect and his MEP engineers stuff a building with enough eco-technology systems and gadgets (such as photovoltaic modules or solar collectors, rainwater harvesting and recycling systems, etc.) they will have an instant green building. Of course nothing is further from the truth. Green design is much more than that. It is an attempt to integrate our human built environment seamlessly and benignly with the natural environment, which calls for an understanding of the processes that take place in local ecosystems and in the biosphere before the insertion of any new built system.

However, sustainability is not only the concern of architects and designers. Companies and businesses (who ultimately commission architects and designers to make built works) must seek to understand the environmental consequences of industry, engage with environmentally benign processes and seek new ecologically responsive solutions, strategies, business models and production systems. If we create a built environment that is truly ecologically responsive, it will alter the way we work and our current ecologically profligate lifestyle, and of course the way we plan, design, build, use and eventually recycle our built environment, which includes not just our buildings but also infrastructures and everything that we make (such as refrigerators, clothes, toys, etc.), as well as those human activities that impinge on the natural environment. The nominators and jury of the next Aga Khan Award should vitally address this.

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