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Ummah Cum Laude; Remapping The World

Through The Leadership Of The Aga Khan, An Ambitious 17-Acre Redevelopment In Suburban Toronto Will Bring Two Global Cultural Institutions To Canada Supporting Art And Culture In The Ummah, Or Muslim Diaspora.; As A Jury Member For The 2007 Aga Khan Award For Architecture, Architect And Professor Brigitte Shim Discusses The Importance Of This Unique Awards Program.

TEXT Ian Chodikoff

Atop a hill overlooking the Don Valley Parkway (DVP) in Toronto's Don Mills suburb, construction is about to begin on an important cultural precinct. Funded by His Highness the Aga Khan, two significant cultural institutions will stand on the former site of a late-Modernist office building. One will help support Toronto's 40,000 Ismaili Muslims, while the other will comprise a museum whose mission it is to improve cultural understanding of the Muslim world.

The Aga Khan had already owned the eastern portion of the site and was planning on building the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana (community prayer hall) when the late-Modern Parkindesigned Bata International Headquarters building came up for sale in 2002. This offered the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) an opportunity to expand their site for the purposes of building a museum housing an extensive collection of Islamic art, as well as a pluralistic educational centre to study Muslim culture. While it is unfortunate that the Bata building was unable to be saved from demolition, its replacement will undoubtedly be of far greater significance to both the cultural and architectural history of Toronto. Fifty years ago, very few Muslims lived in nearby communities like Flemingdon and Thorncliffe Park. Today, these communities represent one of most significant Muslim populations in Canada. Forsaking the chance to build exemplary contemporary architecture celebrating the ethnic and cultural diversity of Toronto for the sake of preserving the Bata building would have truly been a wasted opportunity in the architectural history of the city, and indeed the country.

The 17-acre site bounded by Wynford Drive, Eglinton Avenue, the DVP and Don Mills Road will be transformed by the addition of two significant projects: the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana designed by Mumbai-based Charles Correa Architects, and the Aga Khan Museum, designed by architect Fumihiko Maki of Maki & Associates in Tokyo. Inserted between each of these 10,000-square-metre projects will be a series of landscaped gardens designed by the Beirut-based landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, who received a 2007 Aga Khan Award for Architecture for his Samir Kassir Square project in Beirut. And overseeing construction of the site are Moriyama & Teshima Architects of Toronto, the architects of record. Collectively, the construction costs for the two buildings will exceed \$200 million. The Ismaili Centre will be completed by late 2010, with the Aga Khan Museum completed approximately one year later.

Including Eastern-influenced formal gardens and over two kilometres of walking trails open to the public, Wynford Park will contain five reflecting pools, enclosed gardens and waterfalls. Visitors will be shielded from the noisy DVP and Eglinton Avenue traffic with numerous places for contemplation. Along the southern edge of the site, the development group is in the process of discussing with the City of Toronto as to how best manage the City-owned property abutting the site. In return for relocating some of the existing fencing along the property line, the AKDN will maintain the adjacent City property, as well as upgrade its plantings and grading. Both the selection of plant material and safety concerns regarding public access to the site during non-daylight hours and the winter season are currently being discussed with the City to ensure that issues of maintenance and safety are properly addressed. Even a nearly inaccessible traffic island will be upgraded and maintained so that the impact of Wynford Park's landscape can extend as far into the community as possible.

Wynford Park crystallized the development process in 2004 through the creation of the Imara Development Group, a project management arm engaged to oversee the construction of both institutions in addition to the landscape architecture. Although the construction costs will be underwritten by the AKDN, Wynford Park will require distinct, ongoing financial commitments. Since the Ismaili Centre is a community facility, the Toronto Ismaili community will be responsible for fundraising its many ongoing activities. As the museum is a cultural enterprise, it will be seeking ongoing patronage to support its pursuits through the establishment of endowment funds, exhibition donations and membership revenue from the community at large--similar strategies to what most other public museums pursue in order to remain viable.

While the AKDN had developed their functional and programmatic requirements for the site, they hired Shamez Mohammed as their representative to coordinate the project, essentially a turnkey operation to be delivered over to the AKDN after its completion. Before working for the AKDN, Mohammed, a civil engineer with an MBA, had worked for Mercer Management Consulting in Toronto for several years. After the Gujarat earthquake in 2001, he took a paid sabbatical from his firm and moved to India for 14 months to establish the Mumbai operations of Focus Humanitarian Assistance, an international disaster management agency. After returning to Canada, Mohammed became a volunteer for the Aga Khan, eventually resigning from Mercer in 2004 to become the Project Coordinator for the Ismaili Centre and Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, in addition to coordinating two ongoing Ottawa projects supported by the AKDN--the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam and the Global Centre for Pluralism.

The significance of building a pluralist precinct devoted to education, culture, religion and community devoted to Ismailis and the Muslim world with the intent of engaging a dialogue with the general population cannot be overstated. His Highness the Aga Khan is not only a religious leader for the 15 million Ismailis around the world, but a leader concerned with strengthening the contemporary identity of Muslim culture in the Ummah, or the Muslim diaspora. Building such an ambitious project as Wynford Park, the Aga Khan has taken a clear position regarding the study and dissemination of contemporary Muslim culture in the global sphere, and not just for the benefit of the Toronto Ismaili community. In a speech delivered at a roundtable held at the Louvre in Paris last October, the Aga Khan noted the challenges associated with manoeuvring the identity of his Toronto Aga Khan Museum within a cultural framework that is difficult to generalize in a diverse, complex and pluralistic world. When it comes to generalizing the Islamic world, these sensitive challenges become overlaid with misunderstandings associated with issues such as religious wars, terrorism and regional strife--elements that are not representative of the vast majority of Muslims. Therefore, the Aga Khan's creation of a contemporary cultural and religious precinct in the suburbs of Toronto is incredibly challenging but also extremely vital, if both the Muslim and general Canadian populations are to learn about themselves and each other. **CA**

Photos



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File size: 41.5 KB (300px X 247px)

Caption: UMMAH CUM LAUDE An Axonometric Rendering Of Wynford Par...



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 40 KB (300px X 156px)

Caption: A View Of The Terraced Vladimir Djurovic-Designed Lands...



[Larger photo & full caption](#)

File size: 37.9 KB (300px X 156px)

Caption: A View Toward The New Ismaili Centre , Designed By Charl...



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File size: 39 KB (300px X 156px)

Caption: Holding Extensive Collections Of Muslim Art And Culture...