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Gift from the Aga Khan

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The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of Shia Ismaili Muslims, will put a shovel in the ground Friday, marking the start of construction of a \$300-million development in the Don Mills Rd.-Eglinton Ave. area.

Plans call for the building of a museum named after the Aga Khan, an Ismaili Centre and the creation of a park. The massive project is slated for completion by 2013.

"These projects represent a major investment by His Highness in this country's cultural fabric and are a reflection of the Aga Khan's commitment to Canada, which serves as a beacon to the rest of the world for its commitment to pluralism and its support for the multicultural richness and diversity of its peoples," said Farid Damji, of the Ismaili Council for Canada.

The Aga Khan Museum — announced in 2002 — will be built on a 7-hectare site on Wynford Dr. and is the first of its kind in the English speaking world. The 10,000-square-metre structure will house collections of Islamic art, including ceramics, metal work and paintings covering a 1,000-year period of Islamic history. The design was done by Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki.

The second part of the project is the Ismaili Centre — a community centre that includes a place of prayer, library, youth lounge and public spaces for cultural activities. It will be located on the same spot as the museum and is designed by Indian architect Charles Correa.

The park on Wynford Dr. has been designed by award-winning Lebanese landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic. It will surround the museum and project a sense of a traditional Islamic garden.

"I'm excited this is happening because (the Aga Khan) is one of the few Muslim leaders who have reconciled with modernity," said Tarek Fatah, author and founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress. "He offers a very clear alternative to the Islamism that is being spread by Jihadis. (People in the GTA) will get a view of Muslims and Islam without looking through the prism of Saudi or Iranian-tainted politics."

The Ismaili Centre Toronto is the second in Canada — the other was built in 1985 in Burnaby, B.C. and opened by prime minister Brian Mulroney in the presence of the Aga Khan. Other Ismaili Centres have been built in London, Lisbon, Dubai, United Arab Emirates and Dushanbe.

Toronto was picked as the site of the museum because of the city's cultural diversity.

Nearly 100,000 Ismailis are settled throughout Canada — more than 30,000 of them live in Toronto.

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