

Research Paper for Final Project

By: Iram S Khan and Shafaat Khowaja

Ismaili Architecture as the modern form of Islamic Architecture

Introduction:

The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims are culturally diverse community, led by a living Imam who is a direct descendent of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). They live in over 25 different countries mainly in Central and South Asia, Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia, thus, being a transnational community.

In the light of Islam's teaching about maintaining a balance between spiritual and physical world, the present 49th Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan focuses on creating a balance between spiritual and physical world, and articulates his guidance in such manner. In the modern period, the imam of the time gives guidance according to the needs of the time while conforming to the Islamic concepts of Unity, brotherhood, pluralism and for the well- being of community.

Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is an institutional framework, and an extension of His Highness's vision of betterment of human life; both worldly and spiritual, working for the well-being of an individual and to improve quality life in terms of education, health, social welfare, youth and sports development, and rural development etc., in several parts of the world. While the Imam of the time interprets faith in the contemporary world, AKDN has pioneered various development projects encountering the needs of human being and improving the quality life as

an important part of the faith in Islam. The projects are inclined towards promoting aspects of pluralism and brotherhood around the world, and upliftment of mind and spiritual of every individual.

The aforementioned goals have been variedly fulfilled by the art and architectural features of buildings constructed by AKDN around the world. The architecture of buildings such as Ismaili centers, Jamat Khanna and museums represent a modern form of traditional Islamic arts while beautifying the overall infrastructure. At the same time, the art and architecture also add to its purpose of spiritual upliftment and attainment of global goals of pluralistic and knowledge society. In this paper, we attempt to explore two areas of Ismaili architecture;

- a. We will look at the form and function of Ismaili architectural pieces like Aga Khan Museum, Jamat Khanna and Ismaili centers around the world, in the light of its broader goals of promoting cultural, knowledge exchange and community interactions as well as spiritual upliftment.
- b. we look at Ismaili architecture to analyze how use of historic decorative details such as; Geometric shapes, calligraphy, use of light and shadows, arches, and water revoke the sense of traditional Islamic architecture, combined with the modern art and techniques, give it a unique appearance. The overall blend of traditional art in a modern style also represents a symbol of co-existence of past and present, while inclusion of nature like water, gardens and landscapes give divine essence to the place where one can recognize the creation of God. The Ismaili architecture in this modern era sets an example of how art can help one to contemplate things in a divine manner, and experience joy, peace of mind and oneness of God.

Historic decorative details:

Interplay of Light:

Light has remained an important tool in the Islamic architecture. Due to its Quranic significance light (*Nur*) is common in all architectural forms. In Islam, light represents divinity of God. Light is used not only for illuminating buildings, but also as a decorative medium that helps people achieve the moral and spiritual vision of Islam (Omer, 2011). The Aga Khan Centre, Toronto was designed on the concept of light. His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, on the foundation ceremony of the center said:

“The new Toronto museum will take as its theme the concept of light . . . this use of light speaks to us of the Divine Light of the creator, reflected in the glow of individual human aspiration and vibrant, transparent community. As the poet Rumi has written: ‘the light that lights the eye is also the light the heart . . . but the light that lights the hearts is the Light of God’”.

The Aga Khan on another occasion have said that “the great architecture, like great art, captures esoteric thought in physical form’. Thus the use of light in the Ismaili architecture represent the values of the community to the world. Light is the joy of the soul and correct functioning of the intellect. Light is the truth and felicity (Nasr, 1997). The Aga Khan Museum, park, and Ismailia center in Toronto communicated the message of Divine God through the celebration of light and the mysteries of light. HH said “I hope that the building and the space around it will



Figure 1: Ismaili center and museum Toronto

be seen as the celebration of Light, and the mysteries of Light, that nature and the human soul illustrates to us at every moment in our lives”. Glass dome on the top of the building of Aga Khan Museum is to illuminate the prayer hall. The significance of light in Islamic architecture is prevalent in all architectural pieces. Similarly in Ismaili architecture, whether that is a private space (jammat khana) or a public spaces (museum).

In opposition to dark, the light is shine and guides towards the reality so all the Islamic buildings are always lit and they have a good play of colors and shadows. In the Arabian architecture the mix of light and shadow represent life and death, good and evil, God and human, while the colors represent the



Figure 2: Outside view of Ismaili center, Aga Khan Park and Museum Toronto

ethnic integrity and cultural transformation (Houssin, 2015). Both of which are crucial to the Islamic way of life and the message of diversity and pluralism is well communicated through this.

Geometry and geometrical patterns:

Geometrical orientation and ornamentation has remained an important aspect of Islamic architecture since the earlier times. Islamic artists, mathematicians and philosophers have inclined their interest towards geometry. “There is within Islamic Spirituality a special link with qualitative mathematics in the Pythagorean sense, a link which results from emphasis upon unity and the Intellect (al-aql) on the one hand and the primordial nature of the Islamic spirituality on

the other” (Nasr, p. 47). Thus geometry is essential as a symbolic representation Islamic principles such as unity, intellect and spirituality. For example; the circle is a symbol of a religion that emphasizes One God and the role of Mecca, which is the center of Islam toward which all Moslems face in prayer. It represents the unity of God (Abdullahi, 2013). Other geometrical patterns also point at the principles of Cosmic Laws and Islamic astrological values.

The geometric patterns in Ismaili architecture draw tools that are steeped in the tradition of the faith and at the same time co-existing with the requirements of modern-day society. Ismaili buildings are particular about the geometry and geometrical patterns, while giving modern touch to buildings. The Burnaby Jamat Khanna and center was built on the concepts of a pursuit of geometry, enclosure, symmetry, mass and layering of symbolic decorations. Similarly, keeping the Islamic nature of architecture alive, they have open gardens and a display of running water as seen in buildings like Aga



Figure 4: Prayer Hall in Burnaby Jamat Khana



Figure 3: Aga Khan Hospital Karachi

Khan University Hospital
Karachi. The gardens and water
symbolize the paradise and
nature, while pointing to the
creator. The park situated along
with Aga Khan Museum and
Ismaili center in Toronto is an
open area with defined



Figure 5: Aga Khan Museum, Park and Ismaili center Toronto

geometrical shapes and modern architectural structures. This particular structure shows the blend of tradition with contemporary.

Calligraphy and other forms of Islamic arts:

Calligraphy is the most reliable and universally accepted art of Islam. It is a distinctive feature of Islamic architecture and very common in all kinds of buildings. Quranic calligraphy is sacred art and aims to reflect the real message of Islam and the Divine Presence. Calligraphy plays a central role in traditional Islamic buildings. It is a dominant element in the decoration.

Decorative words not only adds beauty but also transfers knowledge and religious teachings from one generation to another.

Ismailia Architecture contains a lot of calligraphy. The calligraphic work on the buildings in Ismaili Architecture guides one towards the inner dimension of Islam, instead of reducing the origin of art to its exterior forms. The calligraphy give modern buildings a serene, majestic and

differentiated appearance. Figure 7 shows the interior of Jamat Khanna prayer hall in Dushanbe. The wall with calligraphy shows the traditional beauty blended with modern



Figure 7: Interior of Jamat Khana in Dushanbe



Figure 6: Aga Khan Museum Toronto

architectural styles, keeping the sense of spirituality and interiority alive. Buildings like Hospitals and Schools under Aga Khan Development Network also portray an example of traditional art, combined with modern beauty through calligraphy and Islamic paintings etc. This pattern of inducing traditional art in modern styles of architecture shows the modern form of Islamic art and architecture. For example, Figure 8 and 9 show the inner view of prayer hall and Ismaili center in Dushanbe.

“Inspired by some of the region’s most distinctive monuments, the architecture of the Ismaili Centre,

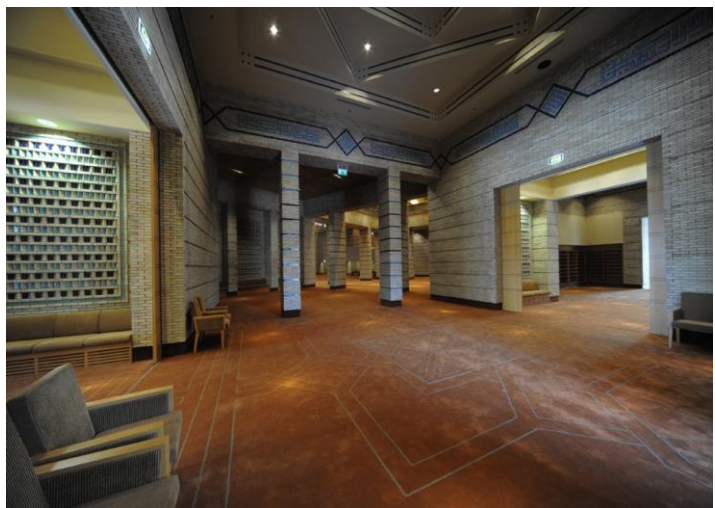


Figure 8: Prayer hall in Dushanbe Jamat Khana

Dushanbe blends many different craft and artisanal traditions of Central Asia. Built in sandstone baked brick and glazed blue and turquoise tiles, it acknowledges the vernaculars of the 10th century mausoleum of the Samanids as well as the grand courtyards of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva”¹ Hence, the historical and traditional patterns of art are prominent in modern settings of art and architecture.

Other than that, traditional artistic pieces of calligraphy and performing arts are also preserved in Aga Khan Museums and Ismaili centers around the world. This preservation and display of performing arts, music and paintings in museums, Ismaili centers and even in community activities show a more adjustable face of Islamic arts in the modern era. The stories from classic and traditional Islamic thought such as story of Kalila wa Dimna, Mathnawi of Jallaludin Rumi and Farid udin Attar are taught as part of Ismaili Religious education curriculum from the early childhood. The teachings of these classical stories and traditional Islamic thought, art and civilizations keep the sense of historical and traditional art alive even in today’s modern world.



Figure 9: Ismaili center Dushanbe

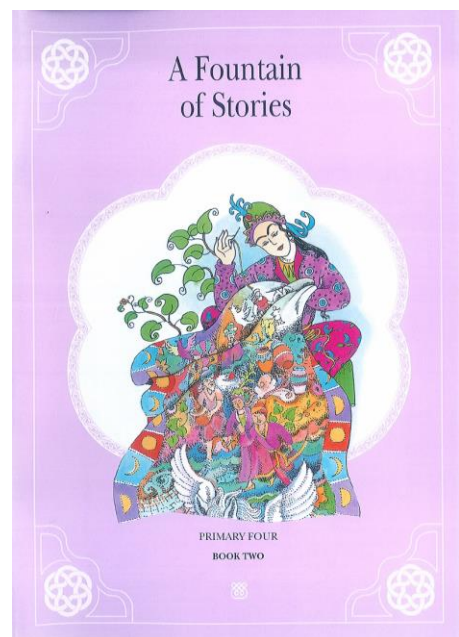


Figure 10: Class 4 book for Religious Education Center in Ismaili community

¹ <https://the.ismaili/ismailicentres/dushanbe/gallery-architecture-dushanbe>

This new face of Islamic arts in Ismaili practices give us a more progressive, tolerant and flexible picture of Islam as religion unlike the contemporary orthodox and radical views about Islam.

Ismaili Art as a Modern form of Islamic Architecture – Concluding Note:

According to Roger Scruton in his documentary “Why beauty matters?” the modern art has moved away from concepts of beauty and solely focuses upon utilitarian values of the architecture. The focus has shifted from form to function. However, In the Ismaili architecture, worldly aspects and sacred are not separate; for example, the Ismaili centers present humility, space for wisdom exchange, pluralism and dialogue. People of all faith gather for educational and cultural events; Programs that stimulate intellect, diversity and dialogue between various communities around the world. They promote effectiveness of community, and positive attitude towards modern life in the society in which they live. It is a place of peace, hope, brotherhood, unity, community interaction, yet, a place for prayers and contemplation of divine realities at the same time. The art is the symbolic representation of Islamic principles and traditions yet, it fulfils the modern desires of architecture. Ismaili centers through their design, comprising of symbolic patterns and modern techniques, function as a place of beauty, forward outlook, friendship, and spiritual search. As stated about Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili center in Toronto, “Its design draws upon the traditions of Islamic architecture and incorporates these in a contemporary Canadian context, reflecting the Ismaili community’s permanent presence in Canada as well as its desire to welcome others in an exchange of cultures and ideas. The Centre’s exterior and the surrounding Park reflect these notions in their terraces, gardens and reflecting pools, presenting a serene space that is both modern and timeless.”²

² <https://the.ismaili/ismailicentres/toronto/architecture-toronto>

Hence, Ismaili arts and architecture present a modern form of Islamic arts and way of life; art where tradition unites with modernity and give it a beautiful appearance. Architecture blended in its unique cultural surroundings remind us about the historic traditions of Islam and tell about the cultural context of Ismailis wherever they have lived. It pertains the potential for spiritual upliftment through sacred geometry and other forms of traditional art. Ismaili art adheres to continuous relevance of the contemporary expressions of Islam as a religion, culture and civilization with broader conceptions regarding Islam. Through art and architecture, the Aga Khan's vision is not only to bridge East and West but also to bring back the uniqueness and beauty of the Islamic art in parallel with the notions of modernity.

Bibliography:

1. Nasr, S. H. (1997). *Islamic art and spirituality*. State University of New York Press.
2. Yahya Abdullahi, Mohamed Rashid Bin Embi, Evolution of Islamic geometric patterns, In *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, Volume 2, Issue 2, 2013, Pages 243