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**Lingering Orientalism in Global Practice**

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# AGA KHAN MUSEUM

## Lingering Orientalism in Global Practice<sup>1</sup>

AMIN ALSADEN is a scholar, curator, and educator whose work focuses on transnational solidarities and exchanges across cultural boundaries. His curatorial practice is committed to advancing social justice through the arts, and to disseminating inclusive narratives that expand existing canons and challenge hegemonic epistemological and power structures. His research explores modern and contemporary art and architecture globally, and often involves documenting endangered heritage and examining how precarious archives and scarce resources shape lopsided global narratives. Alsadén holds graduate degrees from Harvard and Princeton, and has published and lectured widely.

> AMIN ALSADEN

From a distance, it revealed itself as a broad, white plateau, emerging from the snow-covered ground. It came into sharper focus as I approached the site for the first time, on one of those hazy winter days. The building's refined silhouette, monolithic mass, and pristinely chiseled planes contrasted with the lackluster background of that suburban business district. The Aga Khan Museum (AKM) in Toronto is certainly the exception in that landscape, standing in aloof isolation from the noisy highways that frame the sprawling site, and the quieter street through which one enters its grounds. Against that uniform light grey sky, the building presented itself as an improbable rock formation, a foreboding iceberg caught in a frozen sea. On subsequent visits, particularly on bright spring days, the building's hulking white mass glistened in the sunlight, sitting there within a green landscape, like a glacier that proudly refuses to melt.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of this building cannot be overstated. It houses North America's first purposely built museum dedicated to displaying the arts of the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the building has been erected where Muslims are not in the majority means the institution bears great responsibility: representing the diverse cultures associated with Islam, and informing those who are unfamiliar with complexity of this faith. The building houses a permanent collection, the core of which covers ten centuries of history and vast geographies (from China to Spain), and includes manuscripts; decorative objects in ceramic, metal, glass, and other materials; arms and armor; jewelry;



FIG. 1. VIEW OF THE SOUTH CORNER OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM (AKM), DESIGNED BY FUMIHIKO MAKI, WITH ITS PUBLIC ENTRANCE MARKED WITH A THIN METALLIC CANOPY, FACING THE PLAZA LINKING IT TO THE ISMAILI CENTRE DESIGNED BY CHARLES CORREA (NOT VISIBLE IN THIS IMAGE). | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER TOM ARBAN.

garments and fabrics; rugs; paintings; writing tools; navigation and musical instruments; and architectural fragments. While the collection and a desire for showing it publicly existed for a long time, the AKM—with all the lofty ambitions behind its creation, for example to instill tolerance, understanding, and peace across cultures—only came to life when construction was completed. The building gave shape to the manner in which the collection could be displayed and appreciated by the public, and it continues to play a central but perhaps laconic role in how more ephemeral performances and programs are presented.

The building is also particularly important because of its patrons. The AKM is overseen by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which is one of the many programs run by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a large group of agencies founded by the Ismaili Imam, which in turn is headed by its spiritual leader Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, simply known as the Aga Khan.<sup>4</sup> The AKM is named after the Aga Khan, who was personally invested in realizing this project and whose family gifted the core of the collection, including some artifacts that have been amassed over generations.<sup>5</sup> The Bellerive Room, installed in the museum's ground floor, is a replica of an eponymous space at the house of the Aga Khan's uncle, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who built the better part of the AKM's collection since the 1950s; this domestic interior is a constant reminder to visitors that the whole institution is very much a private endeavour made public.<sup>6</sup>

The building has been realized by a figure, the Aga Khan, who has helped transform global understanding and expectations of contemporary architecture conceived by and for Muslim societies. The AKDN engages in projects that

improve housing, infrastructure, and planning for various communities, but it is perhaps best known for its sensitive restoration projects, regenerating important monuments and landscapes in historic Muslim cities, thus serving local communities, boosting tourism, and preserving these urban structures for generations to come. The AKDN has likewise established the influential Aga Khan Award for Architecture, one of the most prestigious architectural prizes globally, focused on improving the built environment for Muslim societies everywhere, by celebrating excellence and innovation especially in relation to questions concerning sustainability, adaptation to local contexts, and the importance of community relations.<sup>7</sup> The AKDN operates educational programs around the world, and supports the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) based at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which explores historic and contemporary architecture with an emphasis on projects that serve Muslim societies. The Imam and the AKDN also serve the Ismaili community around the world by building Ismaili Centres, some of which are remarkable buildings in their own right.

Therefore, high expectations regarding sensitivity to the communities it serves, and its role and situatedness within specific contexts—cultural, geographical, and economic—already precede the AKM building. Indeed, the AKM is a lot more than an exhibitionary apparatus: it showcases the patrons' aspirations, captures the architect's vision and the nature of cross-cultural global practice today, and negotiates complex codes of signification. It is a particularly elusive building to analyze partly because of its abstract form, but mostly because of the confluence of an ideal set of circumstances, which seem

to place its architecture beyond reproach: a museum dedicated to displaying arts from the Muslim world, within an edifice realized by a Muslim community, championed by a figure—the Aga Khan—known for his devotion, over the course of several decades, to redefining how architecture of Muslim societies is appreciated. However, paradoxes emerge upon a closer examination of the building's design, which are difficult to assess because many of the formal choices were made with an ostensibly sincere wish to produce a culturally appropriate response to the commission. Some of these contradictions manifest themselves in subtle, and even overt, Orientalist tropes, speaking to what might be characterized as the Orientalist underbelly of modern architecture, which continues to linger in contemporary global practice.<sup>8</sup>

### GIVING SHAPE TO THE PATRONS' VISION

The AKM is located at the intersection of two major highways, the Don Valley Parkway and Eglinton Avenue East, a site a few kilometres north of downtown Toronto. The building was designed by Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, who has had a long engagement with the patrons, contributing to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture as well as designing other buildings for the AKDN.<sup>9</sup> The AKM is one of two anchors on this site, the other being the Ismaili Centre designed by Indian architect Charles Correa, both buildings resting within the approximately 6.8 hectare (68,000 square metre) formal garden, the Aga Khan Park, designed by Lebanon-based landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic.<sup>10</sup> Canada was chosen as the site for the museum for several reasons: Toronto is a culturally diverse and relatively tolerant city, and is easy to reach from major urban centres in North America; the city is also home

to a sizeable Ismaili community, comprised of people who moved to Canada a few decades ago and prospered, after escaping turmoil in Africa.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the patrons were encouraged to locate the museum in Toronto when additional space became available adjacent to the Ismaili Centre, originally the only building planned for this site.<sup>12</sup> It was in late 2002 when the AKDN announced that it would be establishing a museum in Toronto, and that proposals were to be solicited shortly thereafter (Maki was not engaged around that time).<sup>13</sup> The architectural design was formally commissioned around 2004, when Maki made preliminary sketches.<sup>14</sup> In 2006, the Aga Khan articulated his vision for the building by sending a long letter to Maki that spelled out his wishes.<sup>15</sup> The design process was concluded in 2008, and in 2014 the AKM officially opened to the public.<sup>16</sup>

The total floor area of the building is 11,600 square metres, spread across two levels above ground, as well as a basement. Programmatically, the AKM's volume is comprised of galleries, educational spaces, a restaurant, and an auditorium. The oblong building is rectangular in form, eighty-one by fifty-four metres, oriented forty-five degrees to the north, with a fully glazed, square courtyard in its centre. The various public programs, as well as staff offices on the upper level, are arranged around the wide corridors that encircle the courtyard: the galleries form an L-shaped block that occupies the east corner (permanent exhibitions on the ground floor, temporary exhibitions above); the educational spaces (and the Bellerive Room) are to the north; the restaurant is to the south, next to the public entrance; and the auditorium is in the west corner, its roof soaring just above the height of the building. The basement accommodates storage for the collection, a conservation lab, and

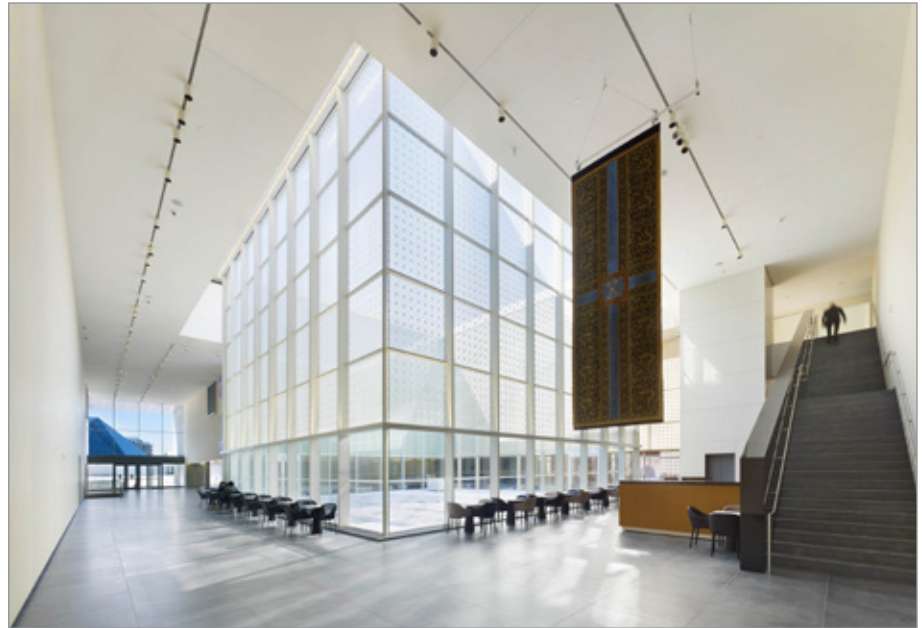


FIG. 2. VIEW OF THE CUBOID GLAZED COURTYARD OF THE AKM, WITH THE PUBLIC ENTRANCE SEEN IN THE BACKGROUND TO THE LEFT, AND THE STAIRCASE ACCESSING TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS SEEN TO THE RIGHT. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER TOM ARBAN.

other back-of-house spaces; it also provides access to the underground parking (shared with the Ismaili Centre). With only a few fenestrations connecting the interior spaces to the outside, all these programs have been compacted into the horizontal monolithic volume that defines the exterior of the building; windows and other openings are usually recessed deeply into the volume, which accentuates the reading of its white mass. The uniform white colour is achieved by cladding the exterior with light-coloured granite, across planes that flare outward from a horizontal datum line in the middle of the facade—a distinctive detail making the building appear to cave in at its centre. The roofline is broken at the two east-facing sides, to introduce six hexagonal apertures that bring indirect natural light into the exhibition spaces, three from the north-east, and three from the south-east; the roof is also cleaved to express the auditorium's faceted roof, seen from to the south-west side as

pedestrians approach the entrance. The public entrance is marked with a thin metallic canopy that juts out to signal an exception to the otherwise rigorous set of formal rules set up by the architect, generally conveying the inward-oriented compactness of the overall composition.

The architect responded to the client's brief, particularly the idea that light should be the main guiding principle driving the design. The Aga Khan has stated: "The new Toronto Museum will take as its theme the concept of light—suffusing the building from a central courtyard . . . From the outside, it will glow by day and by night, lit by the sun and the moon." In terms of the symbolism of light, he added: "This use of light speaks to us of the Divine Light of the Creator, reflected in the glow of individual human inspiration and vibrant, transparent community."<sup>17</sup> Light appears to also have been taken by the museum's patrons as a metaphor for "enlightenment," meaning

here specifically the process of learning about other cultures, with the intent of cultivating better understanding and solidarity across cultural and geographic divides.<sup>18</sup> This is not surprising, given the fact that the creation of this institution was motivated by a two-pronged educational goal. The Aga Khan has expressed hope that for Muslims living in North America, the AKM would be “a source of pride and identity, showing the inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also in terms of culture and ethnicity.”<sup>19</sup> As for its specific location, the AKM is meant to place a special emphasis on raising awareness within North America. The Aga Khan has underlined: “It will be dedicated to presenting Islamic arts and culture in their historic, cultural and geographical diversity, with the aim of fostering knowledge and understanding both within Muslim societies and between these societies and other cultures,” noting that “what happens in North America, culturally, economically and politically, cannot fail to have worldwide repercussions.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, even though it may sound like a poetic or allegorical gesture, there was (and is) a lot riding on the decision to place emphasis on the concept of light.

Maki has acknowledged his patrons’ wishes, confirming that the design brief was conveyed in a five-page letter from the Aga Khan, which asked the architect to “make a very light sensitive building,” and that the Aga Khan had explained how architecture in Islam tends to be quite sensitive to natural light.<sup>21</sup> The choice of material used for the cladding, the light-coloured stone, was therefore a direct fulfilment of that desire—Maki’s team embarked on a search for the whitest granite in the world, which lasted a year and a half, and eventually found it in Brazil; the stone was applied to the building’s slanted surfaces to achieve

different light reflections throughout the day.<sup>22</sup> Responding to his patrons’ directive, Maki has asserted: “The Museum has been designed as a celebration of light and the mysteries of its various qualities and effects . . . [T]he building will act as an ever-changing canvas for the display and accentuation of light.”<sup>23</sup> The design of the interior has been equally inflected by the concept of light, most evidently the courtyard, which is entirely glazed to bring natural light into the building’s core, and to make it appear like a glowing object thanks to the double-layered frosted glass. In the gallery spaces, diffused natural light is introduced through six skylights, in addition to windows with frosted glass at ground level.

The client had another overarching desire: the building should be designed in the modern idiom, without the conventional and recognizable tropes that would identify it with the Muslim world. In that sense, Maki seems to have been a particularly apt choice: the architect’s work is refined, well-detailed, and usually restrained formally; it does not necessarily evince an aesthetic consistency, aside from following in the footsteps of the modernist tradition (he was trained by iconic figures of late modernism, from Kenzo Tange in Japan to Jose Luis Sert in the United States). When the design process was concluded, Maki confessed: “His Highness [the Aga Khan] didn’t want this particular building to use overtly Islamic forms or references. He wanted to have a modern building appropriate to its context.”<sup>24</sup> But the notion of modernism went beyond the building’s aesthetics—the patrons also believed that much of the art of Muslim geographies has a fundamentally modern sensibility, which by extension implies, to them, the essential modernity of Muslim thought.<sup>25</sup> It is suggested, therefore, that the multivalent modernism, of both the design and the

AKM’s contents, helps the building fit into its context (since modernism, despite decades of post-colonial criticism, is still associated primarily with the West).

Contrary to the patrons’ professed desires and the architect’s assertions, however, the latter has introduced a series of features that can be more directly associated with the historic arts and architecture of Muslim geographies. Most of these features manifest themselves on the inside, embedded throughout the building. The most explicit of these is the pervasive use of repetitive geometric patterns. Most conspicuously, the surface of the glazing envelope surrounding the courtyard captures light through an intricate geometric pattern—the light it casts across the interior produces the inverse figure, the constituent lines of that familiar pattern, when rays of sunlight pass through the glass panes. The courtyard floor features a larger geometric pattern made with multi-coloured stone, paving the very heart of the building. Some of the windows overlooking the corridors that encircle the courtyard are covered with metallic screens comprised of more geometric patterns. The frosted glass windows of the exhibition spaces have patterns etched into them, while the light coming in from the six roof apertures also passes through dense patterns. The wood panels flanking the auditorium are filled with latticework of different geometric patterns; the auditorium’s ceiling forms yet another kind of symmetrical geometric composition. The restaurant walls and ceiling are adorned with more patterns, inscribed into decorative panels salvaged from an eighteenth-century Syrian house.<sup>26</sup> Maki credited the Aga Khan with having encouraged a modern design on the outside, but expressing a wish for an ambience evoking the Muslim world on the inside—so in response, the architect decided to use “Islamic patterns” across the interior surfaces.<sup>27</sup>

But the use of these patterns, and their role in terms of how light interacts with the building, was also meant to evoke specific architectural precedents. In this regard, Maki and his firm have outlined a number of intentions for the building. The patterned glass surrounding the AKM's courtyard is designed to cast checkered shadows that recall those produced by the Mughal *jali* screens in India.<sup>28</sup> Interior windows overlooking the corridors surrounding the courtyard are clad with metal screens that conjure the *mashrabiyyah* windows common in vernacular houses in Cairo, Egypt.<sup>29</sup> The skylights above the gallery spaces, bringing in dappled light, are reminiscent of those found in many historic mosques, especially the Shaikh Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran.<sup>30</sup> According to Maki, the AKM's exterior was inspired by the Taj Mahal in India, particularly in terms of how it would interact with natural light: "The cladding of the building, in white marble or white granite, will assume different colours according to the light conditions," thus glowing bright white at midday, while assuming warmer tones at sunset.<sup>31</sup>

But there is a lot more taking place within the design than the mere use of patterns. The allusion to historical precedents permeates the building, and has impacted the ways in which the spaces are laid out and various architectural elements are deployed. Apparently, Maki had a say in designing the entire site: an "Islamic" formal garden was to serve as a centrepiece of a master plan that organizes the site, inspired by the Timurid-era Registan Square in Samarkand (modern day Uzbekistan), thus establishing a specific relationship between the AKM and the Ismaili Centre buildings—even though the scale of the referenced urban constellation was quite different.<sup>32</sup> (Curiously, it has been reported that the

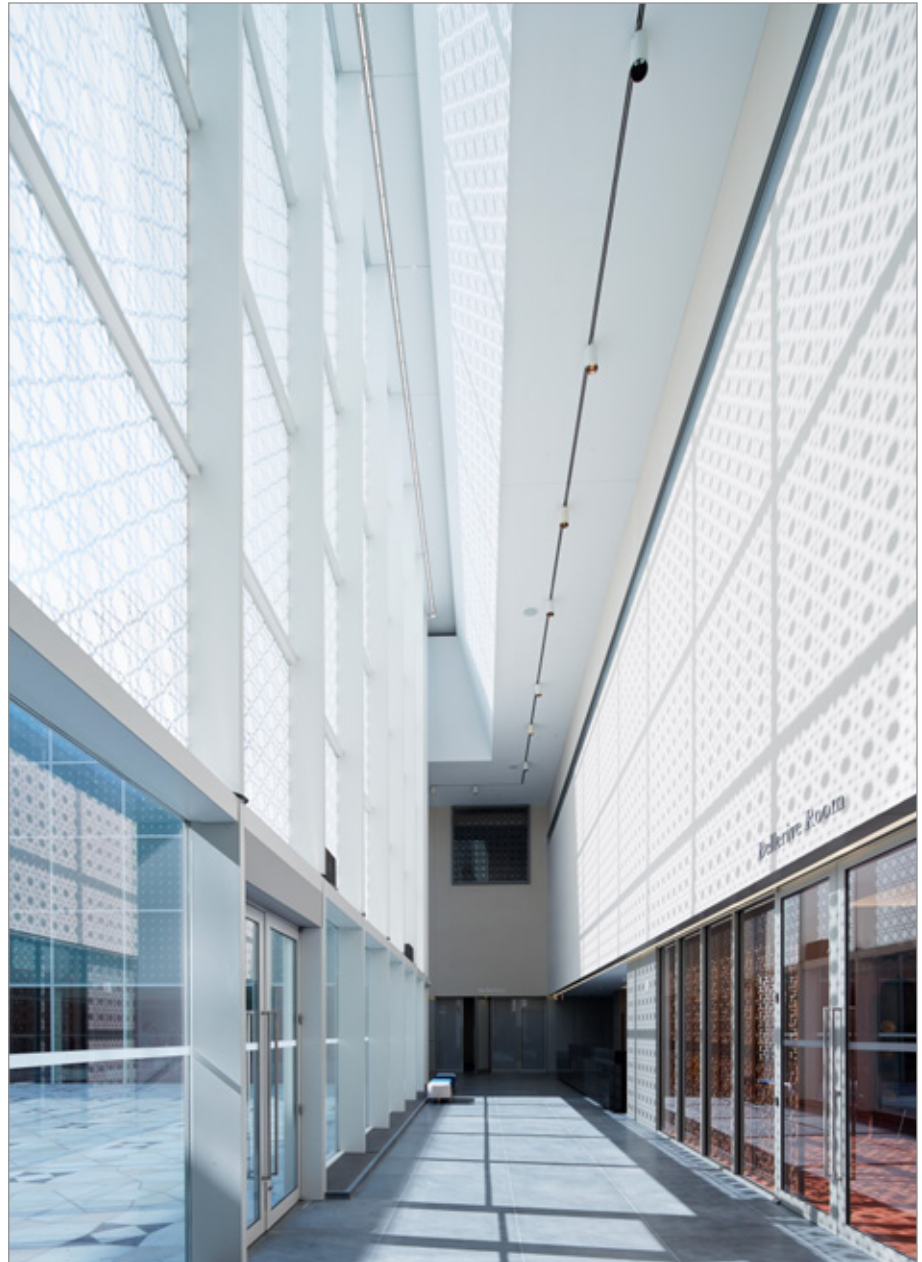


FIG. 3. VIEW OF A CORRIDOR ADJACENT TO THE COURTYARD, SHOWING PATTERNS CAST BY NATURAL LIGHT ON THE WHITE WALL SURFACES, AS WELL AS THE PATTERNS ON THE GLAZED SURFACES OF THE COURTYARD. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER JANET KIMBER.

architect also intended the master plan to relate to a precedent in Istanbul, Turkey, and another in Isfahan, Iran.<sup>33</sup>) Maki has stated that aside from responding to the client's request for a design centred on the concept of light, it was

his decision to base the AKM's layout on houses found in "Greek old cities," with activities oriented toward a courtyard (the conflation of historic Mediterranean and Muslim cities is not uncommon).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Maki suggested that "Islam

loves seven as a lucky number,” so he designed a seven-sided dome for the auditorium (a heptagon delineates the glass cupola above the isomorphic staircase adjacent to the auditorium, the main space of which actually features hexagonal patterns).<sup>35</sup> Apparently, the dome above the auditorium was also inspired by the faceted ceilings of the Bazaar of Kashan, Iran.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the most relevant and most recent precedent, with strikingly instructive similarities to the AKM, is Maki’s design for the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam in Ottawa, Canada (2008). In this case, the architect was quite explicit about his intentions. There, a similarly elongated rectangular form was organized around two voids: a courtyard open to the sky; and an atrium topped with a faceted glass roof (akin to Correa’s roof on the Ismaili Centre in Toronto). In the Delegation’s courtyard, Persian-inspired landscaping recalls the classic quadrilateral *charbagh* gardens. (Maki also made an explicit reference to the *charbagh* in the AKM, particularly in relation to the Aga Khan Park, which links the museum to the Ismaili Centre; the realized design was slightly different at the end, attributed to landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, but still maintaining the essence of Maki’s expressed desire.<sup>37</sup>) The atrium’s glazed roof is meant to evoke a rock crystal, with varying opacities creating numerous reflections and refractions, an effect complemented by glittering cladding panels on the northern and southern facades; the roof is also intended to be reminiscent of historic domes, with their complex geometric faceted surfaces. The Ottawa building introduced metal lattice screens, whose geometry recalls conventional patterns associated with architecture of the Muslim world; these screens surround the atrium, filtering light between this space and the rest of the building.<sup>38</sup>

The equivalent of the “crystal” in the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam is found in the reference to the AKM’s overall form as a “gemstone.” Justifying the volumetric treatment, Maki writes that “the [AKM] building has been envisioned as a kind of precious stone, which can exhibit reflectivity, color variations, translucency, and a visual mystery.”<sup>39</sup> This also explains the faceting of the form, and the fact that what is essentially an orthogonal plan with extruded rectangular volume is broken down—on the exterior—to evoke the image of a gemstone.<sup>40</sup> Nowhere is this clearer than in the auditorium, partially faceted on the outside, but more intensely broken down on the inside—the architect delighted himself in chiselling away at this volume, producing a void that a giant round-cut diamond might leave behind. Apparently, Maki also read the glass dome of Correa’s Ismaili Centre as another kind of precious stone encrusting the site; Maki used metal cladding for the AKM’s auditorium to establish a formal dialogue with Correa’s glass design, and to “further accentuate the shape and materiality of a precious stone,” that the AKM was intended to evoke.<sup>41</sup>

I would argue that rather than a gemstone, jewelry is a more apt analogy for the AKM design. Early sketches by Maki seem to confirm this reading: while a solid orthogonal volume constitutes the base for the building as a whole, not unlike how a precious metal is used to create a base in a piece of jewelry, this volume is encrusted with several volumes, or gems, that stand out against the base. These smaller volumes are the courtyard, auditorium, main entrance, lounge, and gallery skylights. Indeed, this is articulated on the exterior in the case of the auditorium, lounge, skylights, and entrance (the latter through the inserted canopy). The courtyard is articulated as a gemstone on the inside, where its enclosing volume

comes across as an object made luminous thanks to the glass surface treatment and white mullions.

## RECEPTION AND APPRAISAL

The building’s features, and the formal and conceptual references outlined by the architect, have coloured public reception. The AKM has received favourable reviews, almost unanimously. Reviewers have applauded the theme of light and how it manifests itself inside and outside of the building; they also commented on the excellent finishes and superb attention to detail; speculated on the manner in which the AKM, along with the Ismaili Centre and the park, would help transform that nondescript suburban neighbourhood; and they celebrated the substantial addition that this institution makes to Toronto and North America, with its extraordinary collection of artifacts. A number of reviews picked up on the analogy employed by the architect, and used metaphors that described the building as a gem, jewel (including crown jewel of the site, or a jewel in Toronto’s crown), or a chest of treasures.<sup>42</sup> Some suggested the architect was inspired by Japanese references, likening the auditorium’s faceted dome to origami, or the whole building to a *bento* box; this image of a box has also been deployed a number of times, with reviewers calling the building a packing box, a torqued box, or a canted box.<sup>43</sup> Many spoke of how the AKM encompasses a host of motifs and architectural references from Islam. These reviews discussed religious symbolism (for example, how the hexagonal shapes are supposedly meant to denote heaven); linked the building to faith, or described it as spiritual or even sacred; and some suggested how the building fuses traditions, crosses cultural boundaries, or brings together East and West.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps overlapping with the religious



FIG. 4. VIEW THROUGH ONE OF THE INTERIOR WINDOWS OVERLOOKING THE CORRIDORS SURROUNDING THE COURTYARD, CLAD WITH PATTERNED METAL SCREENS. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER TOM ARBAN.

interpretation is the notion that the AKM, along with its grounds (labelled an “oasis” by one reviewer), are places for contemplation; adjectives such as quiet, tranquil, and serene are used to describe what a visitor might expect from an encounter with the building.<sup>45</sup>

Several reviewers spoke of how the building’s overall form comes across as restrained, conveying a gravity and permanence, and some believed that its monolithic, monumental volume resembles a forbidding fortress.<sup>46</sup> One writer specifically suggested that the museum presents itself as a fortress, “as if its most important job were to protect the treasures within,” but without elaborating on why or what the treasures need to be protected from.<sup>47</sup> This reading is possibly implied by the objecthood of the design, how the external form lacks differentiation and dynamism, not to mention

the way the building meets the ground. The interpretation also rings true when considering the fact that fortresses are exceptions in the historic architecture of the Muslim world, much of which, at least in the major historical metropolises, is experienced on the inside rather than the outside: the urban grain is tight, many buildings are contiguous, and facades are devised to protect privacy (there are a few exceptions, of freestanding buildings such as some later funerary monuments, like the Mughal Humayun’s Tomb in India, or religious buildings, such as the Ottoman Blue Mosque in Turkey). Perhaps desert fortresses, such as the Abbasid Al-Ukhaidir Fortress in Iraq, could be precedents to Maki’s proposal—a connection suggested by the predominantly solid volume punctured by a limited number of substantially smaller openings. Maki makes an evident effort to maintain the reading of a carved object throughout,

especially the exterior; the impression is only occasionally betrayed when one observes thin walls through which windows are introduced into the gallery spaces (though Maki made sure frosted glass was used to soften the light, and to also obfuscate the thinness of the walls).

However, more pointed criticism has been occasionally levelled against specific aspects of the building. Some reviewers brought up the architecture that the new building has supplanted, mourning the loss of the Bata Shoes Head Office, a post-war building by John B. Parkin considered an important example of modernist architecture in Toronto, demolished to make room for the new complex—though these reviews suggested that the new buildings made up for that loss.<sup>48</sup> At a macro scale, some critics have found the site lacking coherence, especially in terms of how the AKM relates to the Ismaili Centre.<sup>49</sup> The AKM’s interior has been appraised as weaker than the building’s bold exterior expression, particularly in regards to how the public spaces are laid out relative to circulation, apparently developed without much careful consideration.<sup>50</sup> Other aspects of the interior were also questioned: namely, the generous spaces that evoke a sense of emptiness at times, as opposed to the restaurant which appears to be chock-full of original Syrian decorative panels displayed without reverence for their historical value.<sup>51</sup>

But questions can also be raised about other aspects of the AKM building, probing the ways in which the architect’s intentions have been realized. The courtyard, for example, is by far the most critical space, a nod to historic architecture from the Muslim world, the core around which the entire building has been organized.<sup>52</sup> This was also the only space in the early design proposal that contained geometric patterns—which appears to be



the architect's attempt to emphasize an "Islamic-ness" that may otherwise be missed.<sup>53</sup> From the first encounter, however, this courtyard reveals itself as an architectural device predominantly meant to consolidate the concept of light: to flood the centre of the building with natural light, and to create a luminous core; the whole envelope is meant to glow, thanks to the double glazing on both sides of which are imprinted parts of the geometric pattern (therefore, as much as these patterns cast shadows on nearby surfaces, they also retain a film of light that brightens their surface).<sup>54</sup> Otherwise, the courtyard space is large, stark, and uninviting. The light it introduces is of a specific quality: the materials Maki used are more typical of his practice than the precedents that ostensibly inspired his design; the materials evoke a colder, high-tech, corporate architecture, perhaps the more austere light of Gothic cloisters, rather than the warmth usually created by the natural materials and extreme contrasts of light and shadow found in many courtyards in the Muslim world.<sup>55</sup> In terms of scale, Maki's design conflates the intimacy, compactness, and liveliness of courtyards found in private dwellings with those in public edifices; the former tend to be the centre of a household's life, extending the life of the interior outdoors, and in the latter, as in historical mosques for instance, the courtyard is rarely considered a central space, but a transversal or spill-out space that only expands enclosed ones.<sup>56</sup> While Maki's glass enables visual access to the courtyard, it is also a barrier, a reminder that this courtyard is more about being there as a ghost of a purported original—that is, more about being seen as a space, rather than being inhabited (it is also perhaps meant to conjure the image of the Kaaba in Mecca, conceived here as a radiant void around which visitors circumambulate).<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, for the architect to liken the

openings overlooking the AKM courtyard to *mashrabiya* windows is to speak of an urban scale, as though the corridors are streets in a historic city; this is another conflation of scale and typologies, placing the courtyard in an ambivalent zone between domestic residences, public architecture, and urbanism, while not quite achieving the distinctive qualities of any of these realms.<sup>58</sup> The reference to the *mashrabiya* itself is misconstrued, as Maki's patterned metal screens bear little resemblance to the original bay window, which protects the privacy of a domestic interior while allowing for ventilation (the disconnect was further exacerbated by several reviewers who understood that the word *mashrabiya* simply means geometric patterns).<sup>59</sup> This is not to mention the obvious, which is the fact that in Canada's frigid winters, the courtyard also does not serve its original climatic function, and there are long stretches of time during which this space cannot be used (even though the AKM's courtyard floor is heated to prevent the buildup of snow).<sup>60</sup>

The second most important set of spaces in Maki's design are arguably the exhibitions. Arriving from the corridor adjacent to the courtyard, with its intense luminosity, the visitor's eyes take a while to adjust to the low lighting, which is intentionally dimmed to protect light-sensitive artifacts. The perfectly shaped and centred courtyard has also forced the galleries to bend into odd L-shapes, which makes it challenging to organize exhibitions, especially without subdividing the space to obscure the overall architectural configuration.<sup>61</sup> The glazing at ground level, etched with faint geometric patterns, is more reminiscent of Japanese rice paper screens, emitting a somber light, rather than the architecture of the Muslim world (for these specific windows, Maki apparently intended to reference to a modern precedent by introducing veneers of stone

in lieu of glass, but this was abandoned in favour of more recognizable tropes).<sup>62</sup> As for the skylights with their dense honeycomb pattern, seen from outside as apertures that punctuate the building's roof line, these have little to do with the original inspiration.<sup>63</sup> Windows in the Shaikh Lutfallah Mosque are an integral part of the overall experience, creating an immersive affect in the round, with their latticework accentuating a graceful flow of graphic patterns, which adorn the glazed ceramic tiles that wallpaper the whole interior; the luminosity these windows emit works in wondrous ways, glistening across surfaces and multiplying the subtle sources of light.<sup>64</sup> Maki's windows can perhaps be related more accurately to those found in vernacular hammams, but even there, the holes that form spots of light are distributed across a surface that produces relatively even lighting. The windows at the AKM, however, are poorly integrated geometrically into the interior; they hardly bring in any natural light, and they are encountered as decorative and awkward elements, not necessarily serving a function beyond performing visually as abstractions of a putative reference to the Muslim world.

Perhaps the third most important space is the auditorium. There is an implicit claim that the ceiling, undoubtedly the principal feature of the space, is a unique form (inflecting the referent from Iran); however, this is not the first time that Maki employed a faceted ceiling for an auditorium or theater space, and the only difference here is that the AKM ceiling is more symmetrical and compact in comparison to previous projects (the intensions may have been different, but the ceiling also brings to mind I.M. Pei's dome, capping the atrium of the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha).<sup>65</sup> The premise of the reference—to conjure the *muqarnas* of some of the ceilings in the Bazaar of Kashan—falls apart



FIG. 5. VIEW OF THE GROUND LEVEL PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS SPACE, WITH THE HEXAGONAL APERTURES THAT BRING INDIRECT LIGHT SEEN ABOVE. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER JANET KIMBER.

on so many levels. Programmatically, there might be a relation, in that even though the spaces are used for different purposes, they are both spaces for congregating. But here the original faceted ceiling, refined and delicate in scale, has been exaggerated for the sake of creating a geometry a lot more striking visually. The form

seems to also be imposed at the expense of acoustics, given that this relatively small space for an audience of three hundred and fifty people requires the elaborate sound system installed above the stage. This is partly due to the hexagonal plan (it is unclear whether the shape of the dome or that of the plan came first). This

shape has been pursued in various guises, including the hexagonal patterns that fill the wooden wall panels, to also suggest symbolism that evokes the Muslim world. Picking teak, a tropical wood, to line the auditorium—an inexplicable choice, considering the fact that there is an outstanding variety of wood readily available in Canada—is possibly another reference to southern geographies, probably associated in the architect’s mind with Muslims. As for the hints of the deep blue colour, these were apparently picked to appease the patrons (it is reportedly the Aga Khan’s favourite colour), and possibly constituting, to Maki’s mind, another nod to Muslim taste.<sup>66</sup>

### CRUSHED BY ORIENTALIST TROPES

The drawbacks one can identify in the AKM’s design reveal more than a discrepancy between the patrons’ vision and the architect’s interpretation, or between the claims of the latter and how his intentions manifested themselves in built form. Between the architect’s approach and the numerous reviews written, one could detect Orientalist undertones that pervade the conception and reception of the AKM building, primarily because it is affiliated with the Muslim world.<sup>67</sup> A particularly revealing example is a term that both the architect and some reviewers have used, evoking an idea that has nothing to do with the AKM and its mission, or the reality of the geographies the institution is meant to represent—but instead points to the unconscious associations that many project onto the building. Maki has expressed how the building is designed to celebrate the “mysteries” of light, or to convey the “mystery” of a gemstone; but he went further to suggest that the dim lighting in the gallery spaces is designed specifically to amplify an appreciation of the “mystery” of

artifacts from the Muslim world.<sup>68</sup> In addition to those reviews that suggested how the design conjures religious connotations, or how the building is serene and contemplative, several also proposed that the AKM's architecture is mysterious, that it has transported the site into another galaxy, creating an enigmatically cosmic and unearthly, yet timeless space.<sup>69</sup>

These terms are far from accidental. The notions that the Muslim world is mysterious, serene, and timeless are central tropes of Orientalism, portraying the "Orient" as a distant geography, the cultures of which are exotic, impenetrable, and difficult to comprehend, eternally mired in its mesmerizing traditions. It seems unnecessary to underline that it is unlikely that the architect would describe anything related to a building associated with European, or even Japanese, material culture as mysterious—rather, the emphasis would be on mastery, craftsmanship, provenance, thematic strengths, or contemporary resonance. It would equally be unlikely for the architect to take an object from a European or Japanese collection, such as a gemstone, and employ it as a metaphor to suggest quintessential qualities of that culture. Likewise, the historical architecture of Europe—perhaps with the exception of religious buildings—would not be romanticized within a contemporary building by an architect like Maki; instead, the conversation would revolve around typological relevance, construction methods, materiality, climatic responsiveness, or conceptual underpinnings. To simply borrow patterns from a historical precedent, or to displace a spatial feature like a cloister, would be a farcical, or an excessively nostalgic or sentimental proposition. But when it comes to the Muslim world, it appears that exceptions are made without much reflection on why its cultures warrant a different approach.

This is particularly perplexing considering the fact that Edward Said's critique of Orientalism warned against these pitfalls decades ago. For Said, Orientalism is a construct, a body of theory and practice based on singling out the so-called "Orient" and establishing fundamental distinctions between this geography—for him the locus of the Muslim and Arab worlds—and the Occident. Orientalism involves mapping out a series of binaries: the West is validated as dynamic, progressive, rational, scientific, active, whereas the Muslim world is portrayed as stagnant, regressive, spiritual, emotional, and passive. Said defines Orientalism succinctly as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it," simply a way of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>70</sup> He has highlighted how the Orient has for centuries been represented, managed, and produced as the "Other" for a world in which Eurocentric viewpoints and ways of engaging with the world—scientific, political, and military—have been hegemonic (dominated by the British and the French until World War II, then the United States as the incumbent superpower). The Orient is not merely an imaginary or ideological construct for Said, because it has always been a discourse that is integral to material and physical exchanges across constructed cultural boundaries, fuelling scholarship, institutional policies, and colonial exploits—past and present. The dangers of Orientalism stem not only from the fact that it has been coloured by imperialist and racist views that proposed the Muslim world as essentially inferior to the West, but also because its insidious discourse is often imperceptible, passed under the benevolent guise of a fascination with the presumably exotic and timeless qualities of the geographies in

question, and mobilized in geopolitical attempts to dominate its lands, control its resources, and ultimately transform it (by "civilizing" its peoples, for example, or bringing Western democracy to its political structures).

Orientalism in modern and contemporary architecture, however, has been overlooked for several reasons. First, buildings in the modernist tradition characteristically featured simple volumes, often composed of monochromatic planes, strictly without ornament; therefore, these forms lack the usual aesthetic markers—replication, pastiche, and recycling of recognizable historical motifs—which makes it difficult to establish evidence of appropriation from specific sources, such as the Orient. Another reason is that Said, whose text has been immensely influential within humanities and social sciences, has not demonstrated how his theoretical framework might apply to buildings. Within architectural culture, the lessons of Said's seminal critique have not necessarily been applied outside of conspicuously Orientalist architecture (for instance, the facsimiles of buildings from the Muslim world built in Europe, or Oriental ornament that became popular during the nineteenth century), or more recent buildings labelled as "post-modern," featuring an overt integration of historical motifs.<sup>71</sup> Said's influence is said to be indirect, helping transform the way so-called "Islamic architecture" has been studied, or expanding the interests of the discipline to cover world cultures more equitably; it has also helped make architectural history less Eurocentric and more interdisciplinary, being more critical of political and economic structures, and paying closer attention to previously overlooked cultures and places.<sup>72</sup> In addition to its elusive formal features, modernist architecture has also escaped the scrutiny of scholars because of an unspoken

claim that if a modern architect were to look at precedents, then the elements of interest would be abstracted—through processes of simplification, reinterpretation, and transformation—to create a novel, innovative, and original entity in its own right (this is actually Maki’s implicit claim, but what is important to note is the performative and didactic aspect of the architect’s enunciations about how the AKM’s design borrows extensively from various Muslim sources).<sup>73</sup> This must be seen against the fact that the AKM is a particularly challenging commission: there is an expectation to represent the cultural specificity of the patrons and the museum’s collection, while the building is realized in a context that has little to do—architecturally, culturally, and environmentally—with Muslim-majority geographies; it is also conceived at a moment when globalization has further problematized notions of identity and belonging, and presented veritable challenges to how cultural differences may be articulated, specifically in places with such intense and constantly evolving demographic diversity.<sup>74</sup>

What is surprising here is the fact that the architect hails from a culture that has experienced its fair share of fetishization, so one would expect more sensitivity to how other non-Western cultures are represented. Furthermore, Maki was trained by a generation of modern Japanese architects who became renowned for absorbing lessons from vernacular Japanese architecture, reinterpreting and transforming it radically to convey certain spatial moods, light qualities, or material sensibilities in modern and abstract ways (but perhaps it is one thing to be immersed in and re-channel one’s own culture, and another to translate someone else’s, especially a culture that has been Orientalized for centuries).<sup>75</sup> Even the features of the AKM building

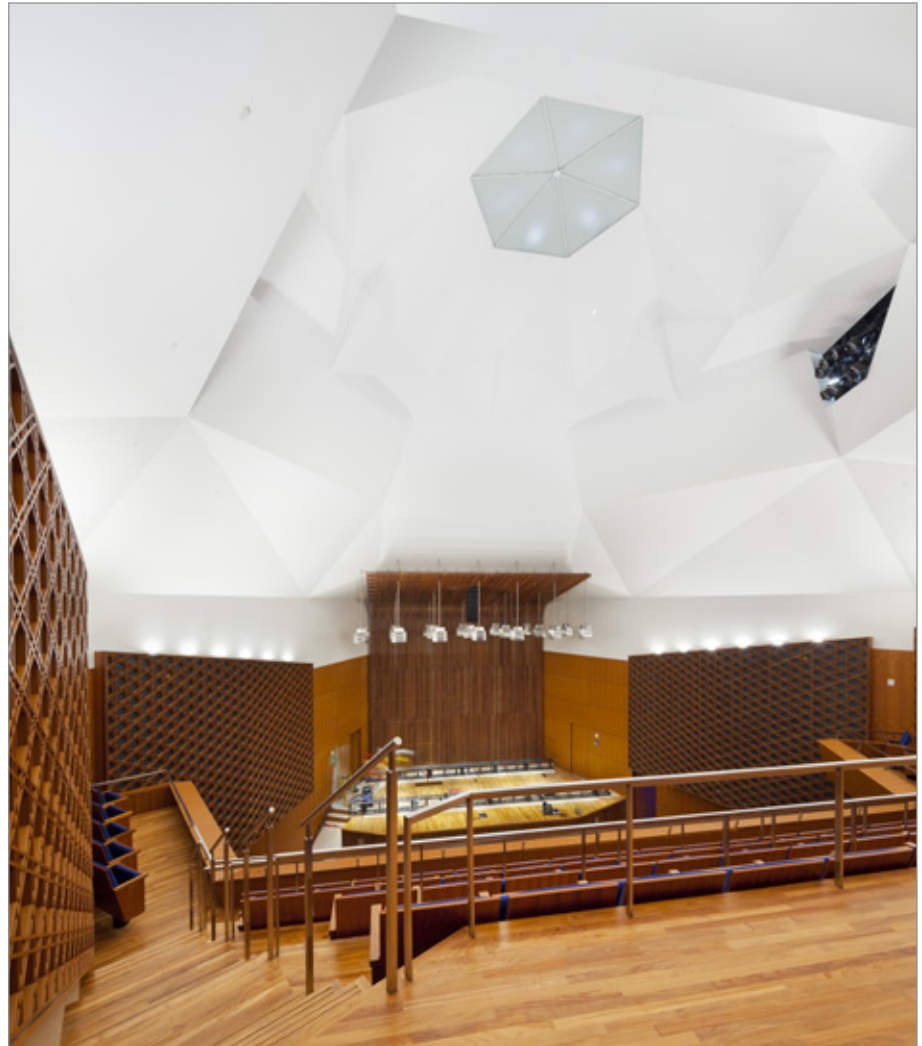


FIG. 6. VIEW OF THE AUDITORIUM WITH ITS DOMED, FACETED CEILING, AND TEAK-LINED SURFACES, PHOTOGRAPHED FROM THE BALCONY. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER TOM ARBAN.

where one might discern what could be described as echoes of Japanese architecture need to be scrutinized carefully. For example, for the AKM and the site to be designed with tranquility in mind seems innocuous enough, even favourable; one could imagine many modern and contemporary Japanese buildings, with their stripped down, minimalist aesthetics to be described no differently. However, one should pause at not only the choices made by the architect for this specific project (anomalous in comparison to his

extensive portfolio), but also the fact that many reviews highlighted the museum’s tranquility. The AKM is not necessarily any more peaceful, spatially or experientially, than other museums in Toronto, such as the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) or the Gardiner Museum, or others around the world. Tranquility and serenity remain some of the stereotypes about the Orient, seen as the sources of timeless—read stagnant and fixed—wisdom and spirituality. Such stereotypes strip this vast geography from the dazzling diversity, vigour, and

agency of its cultures, reducing it to a caricature of its complex reality. Tranquility and serenity are also particularly inappropriate stereotypes for Muslim-majority geographies, embroiled as they are in constant turmoil. Yet again, these terms do not necessarily refer to a real Muslim world, but to a phantasmagoric version of it, lodged deep into the psyche of the West, expressing itself in such colourful terms whenever an observer encounters a trigger.

Indeed, it is bewildering how the conversation around this building has overlooked the realities of the Muslim world today. And I am not just referring to the architect here: rarely have reviewers, for instance, discussed the relationship between the AKM and conditions in the geographies where Muslim-majority societies dwell, and where many of the institution's artifacts originated.<sup>76</sup> These geographies continue to experience foreign intervention on a regular basis, often through organized violence motivated by a desire to control their natural resources or to re-engineer local political systems, which only further destabilizes local economic and social structures; many Muslims live under the oppression of callous military regimes, often brought about in the wake of decades of colonial exploitation; these societies have experienced vast displacement due to chronic unrest, creating an unprecedented refugee crisis; and within the ensuing chaos, terrorist groups, not to mention countless militias, have been empowered to engage in all forms of warfare, wreaking havoc across already afflicted landscapes. With the Muslim world perceived as an existential threat (ideologically or even militarily, the latter confronted with the "global war on terrorism" as though terrorism is synonymous with Islam), Muslims in the West are not any safer, despite the fact that many immigrate in

hope of better prospects. Longstanding Orientalist stereotypes are now joined by intractable Islamophobia coupled with the rise of far-right and xenophobic political parties, which feed on popular resentment toward an influx of immigrants of Muslim heritage. This toxic set of conditions makes the lives of many Muslims, the world over, an ongoing struggle.<sup>77</sup>

While the architect's statements and public reception have shied away from addressing these realities, the patrons alluded to current global tensions and to the antagonism that Muslims face, emphasizing the educational role of the AKM.<sup>78</sup> The Aga Khan has stated: "In a world in which some speak of a growing clash of civilisations, we believe the Museum will help address what is not so much a clash of civilisations, as it is a clash of ignorances."<sup>79</sup> The Aga Khan also affirmed that the way in which Muslims are portrayed must be challenged: "Understanding 'the other' requires a level of dialogue and knowledge which institutions such as museums can foster," adding that closing "the growing divide of misunderstanding between East and West is pressing," and one of the main reasons this institution was established.<sup>80</sup> The stakes are indeed quite high, for the AKM does not limit itself to presenting artifacts only; an integral part of its mandate is shedding light on various facets of diverse Muslim cultures and histories, through the arts.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the building is not merely a conduit for appreciating a highly specialized discipline—instead, it has been intended as a capsule through which the Muslim world is presented to its "Other" (as well as members of its own community). Acknowledging these facts is not about expecting an architect to go for a more startling or chaotic expression that aesthetically portrays the turmoil of these geographies; but it is equally important that an architect not settle for historical

references that point to essentializing tropes—of a quaint, exotic, or passive culture—when many parts of the Muslim world are enduring dire conditions.

The AKM itself has attempted to frame the design choices made by the architect as a deliberate effort to address the institution's vision: "Within an unmistakably contemporary design, Maki incorporates historical elements originating in Islamic cultures, building bridges between eras as well as civilizations."<sup>82</sup> Carefully crafted public statements, however, do not address the odd decisions made by the architect. For example, the Aga Khan may have referred to the "mysteries" of light in his brief, describing phenomenological and symbolic qualities of luminosity, and how this concept has been of value to several world religions; but it was the architect who inexplicably extracted the notion of mystery and turned it into a representation of Muslim cultures. Maki also came up with the metaphor of the gemstone; while he connects his metaphor to light, implying that he conceived the building to act like a light-refracting object, the gemstone is evoked here also for its connotations, conjuring stereotypical images of the historic arts of the Muslim world, bringing to mind ostentatious jewelry, magnificent rulers and palaces, and the overall decadent atmosphere seen in Western depictions of the *Arabian Nights*, for instance. As for the geometric patterns, there is obviously nothing inherently "Islamic" about these: emulating historic patterns not only displaces them from their original contexts and situates them in a new one where they mean little, but also reiterates the reductive perception of architecture from the Muslim world as being concerned primarily with visual ornament, the artisanal—without authorship, thus without intellectual rigour—and obviously, given the label, perennially concerned with



FIG. 7. VIEW OF THE AKM IN CONTEXT, PHOTOGRAPHED FROM THE ISMAILI CENTRE, WITH THE PLAZA SHARED BY THE TWO BUILDINGS SEEN IN THE FOREGROUND. | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER JANET KIMBER.

spirituality (rather than sophisticated philosophical, social, or political concepts reserved for Western architecture).<sup>83</sup>

Even the resulting fortress-like form on which several reviewers have commented appears to be another conventional trope: the most immediate architectural reference is that of an ancient or medieval structure, closed off, inscrutable, and enigmatic. To be fair, it is improbable that Maki intended this reading: even his choice of cladding materials neither references the immediate context nor a distant precedent, but is only meant to fulfill the architect's vision for a gemstone-like form that reflects and refracts light.<sup>84</sup> And yet, this unconscious image is perhaps a particularly apt one for this commission. At a time when Muslims are periodically subjected to harassment and even violence, conceiving of a museum that houses artifacts from the Muslim world as a fortress is rather pragmatic. In fact, the AKM could very well have been deliberately designed so that most of its perimeter is solid and

impenetrable, in order to protect its contents from potential attacks (which periodically target mosques in North America, for example). Because as much as Muslims would like to be open today, and as much as they would wish to represent the transparency of their faith through the architecture that houses them, it would simply be unwise—possibly even reckless—when their safety cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, this is one of the most fundamental questions that must have been asked during the development of this project: namely, how a building dedicated to the arts and cultures of the Muslim world can be designed in order to make itself welcoming and accessible, while simultaneously immune to real risks.

Whether consciously conceived or not, Maki's numerous cultural and geographic references in the AKM design open up an important debate about the purpose, efficacy, and plausibility of his architectural approach. One can ask whether the integration of all these references

is evident to visitors; the fact that many of these references remain gestural and didactic, shared by the architect in publications and lectures, seems to only serve the purpose of demonstrating that the architect was somehow culturally sensitive, producing a building that has ostensibly incorporated some aspects of that presumably different culture. One can also ask what advantages these references to myriad time periods and places from around the Muslim world present. Maki surely had good intentions, and may have meant to acknowledge the diversity and richness of that world, while providing a sense of its spatial and visual characteristics. But the architect did not seem to think that by appropriating and abstracting so many examples from such a vast geography, to create such an eclectic and composite object, he ran the risk of diluting the strength and pertinence of each, producing a design where the sum of the parts does not amount to the potential impact of one carefully considered precedent. Maki also did not seem to question whether these references are appropriate or relevant for their new context, and whether the approach might come across as whimsical, perhaps even absurd.<sup>85</sup> While the architect has suggested that his angled facade, which appears to cinch the whole building at its waist, was his way of increasing light reflections and evoking the idea of a faceted gemstone, I read that detail as a metaphor for a building being crushed laterally, and imploding under the weight of problematic and competing representational expectations, claims, and interpretations.

## STARTING CONVERSATIONS

Therefore, the main criticism that can be levelled against the AKM building—or more precisely, its architect's approach—is that by dissociating these numerous

references from their immediate spatial, social, and historical contexts, and turning them into purely didactic and representational devices meant to legitimize the design as culturally sensitive, the strategy reduces the immense complexity of the Muslim world to the visible and representable, which is at the heart of the crude schematizations of Orientalism. For what is at play in Orientalism is the way Muslim cultures are perceived and imagined, and then reconstructed and re-presented in a way that undermines their richness and layers, distorts their reality, and ultimately projects the prejudices of the beholder (including an architect) rather than any facts about their circumstances or needs. And Orientalism is as prevalent today as it was when Said first coined the term, and is as present within global architectural culture as it is within disciplines that thrive on discourse (from literature to history), so vigilance is crucial.<sup>86</sup> This is one of the reasons that this approach to architecture must be analyzed carefully; architects—and anyone else who is assigned with the daunting task of representing “Other” cultures—need to question their preconceived assumptions and set aside any potential biases, if they are genuinely invested in creating sensitive, nuanced, and culturally-inflected buildings.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the stereotypes perpetuated by the AKM design (intentionally or not), and the inherent contradictions that it embodies, the building possesses qualities that must be celebrated. Seeing the building in the Canadian winter, rising out of a pristinely white landscape, contrasting with everything around it thanks to its crisp geometry, and yet blending into the snow with the light hues of its surfaces, one cannot but think that Maki managed, perhaps inadvertently, to create an object elegantly situated within its immediate context.<sup>88</sup> For the passerby the building is surprisingly appropriate for

its site—indeed a finer addition to the city than many contemporary buildings being constructed in Toronto.<sup>89</sup> And while it engages its site in the striking image of a glacial mass that has broken above the ground, the building also undoubtedly comes across as dignified: the exquisite detailing and construction are outstanding, and the building’s exterior and interior convey a sense of deep passion and commitment. Even on the inside, and with the exception of the geometric patterns, Maki’s attempt at abstracting and integrating some historical references into his design leaves room for some ambiguity, which allows the visitor who is unaware of the architect’s verbal statements to experience these as formal and spatial elements that are unique in their own right (and not gratuitous representations of some far away geographies).<sup>90</sup> Moreover, on the outside, the AKM building is not only free of the customary tropes it attempts to elicit on the inside, but it is also refreshingly devoid of the iconographic sensationalism that plagues much architecture of this kind, especially the garish museums being built around the globe today.

The AKM building has created an important centre for displaying and studying the arts of the Muslim world in North America—starting much needed conversations, and perhaps eventually contributing, through the activities that unfold within its walls, to challenging reductive and essentializing discourses about Muslim geographies. The number of artifacts the building houses may not be as large as that of other museums in the West, but this is an exceptional collection, under the stewardship of exceptionally well-informed patrons, presented in a distinguished, purpose-built institution that has taken on the admirable and onerous responsibility of representing the Muslim world, and underlining our common humanity at a

time of unprecedented cultural confrontation, polarization, and conflict.<sup>91</sup> The AKM makes it possible to have meaningful discussions about issues of vital significance for Muslim communities, and indeed the world at large—including a lively debate around its design, which I am sure will continue well beyond this paper. If the AKM succeeds in providing the conditions for stimulating and critical encounters across cultural divides, then its rewards far exceed any shortcomings.

## NOTES

1. In the spirit of full disclosure, I had the honour of being an Aga Khan Fellow while pursuing my doctoral degree at Harvard University. I am eternally thankful for the support I received, and it is in gratitude to that intellectual journey that I approach this topic critically. I would like to thank a number of individuals who have been helpful, in various degrees, during the research phase, including Ulrike Al-Khamis, Sarah Beam-Borg, Shermeen Beg, Kelly Frances, Gary Kamemoto, Ruba Kana’an, Diarmuid Nash, Sarah Pirani, and Bita Pourvash. I am grateful to Professor Jamie S. Scott, York University, for inviting me twice—first to participate in the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, and second to contribute to a special issue of the *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*—and thus encouraging me to write this paper on a topic I have been thinking about for a few years. I am also grateful to JSSAC for its review, and the suggestions made to improve and clarify the paper. Needless to say, none of these individuals are responsible for the content: the arguments, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this paper are entirely my own.
2. Although this is my own reading of the building’s form, shaped by a visit on a winter day, I found two metaphors used by reviewers, and it is only fair to acknowledge these here. The first writer mentioned how the “glacial museum speaks of institutional weight,” but does not elaborate on that analogy. See: Wainwright, Oliver, 2014, “Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art,” *The Guardian*, September 16, n.p., [https://www.theguardian.com/artand-design/2014/sep/16/aga-khan-museum-ismaili-centre-review-toronto], accessed February 18, 2019.

The second writer compares the form to a carved rock, and states that the “structure seems as much geological as architectural.” Hume, Christopher, 2014, “A Gift to Toronto: The Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre Hold out Hope for an Unlikely and Uninteresting Neighborhood,” *Metropolis*, vol. 34, no. 4, November, p. 96-98.

3. There is of course the Shangri La Museum of Islamic Art, Culture & Design, converted from the former residence of collector Doris Duke in Hawaii. There are also several museums whose collections include sizeable holdings of artworks from the Muslim world, including the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, or museums in the United States, such as the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The AKM prides itself on being the only one in this part of the world dedicated to the arts of the Muslim world: “For this Museum will be one of the very few institutions in the Western world, and indeed the only one in the Western hemisphere, that will be entirely devoted to the acquisition, preservation, study and display of the arts of Muslim civilisations.” See: Aga Khan, Prince Ayn, 2014, “Speech: Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto,” Aga Khan Development Network, September 12, [https://www.akdn.org/speech/prince-amyn-aga-khan/opening-aga-khan-museum-toronto], accessed September 13, 2020.
4. An organizational chart showing the relationship between the Imam and the AKM can be found in the AKDN’s current fact sheet. See: Aga Khan Development Network, 2016, “Overview of the Aga Khan Development Network,” AKDN, June, [https://d1zah1n-kiby91r.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/factsheets/AKDN-factsheet.pdf], accessed December 12, 2020.
5. Several sources have conveyed how the Aga Khan has been directly involved in realizing the AKM building. The following quotation from a review of the building speaks to the degree of his engagement: “Daniel Teramura, a partner at Moriyama & Teshima who is overseeing the Ismaili Centre, recalls the Aga Khan, on a winter visit to the site, standing in the cold to study samples of limestone in the Don Mills daylight. ‘I don’t remember another client who has taken that kind of interest in the details,’ Teramura says.” See: Bozikovic, Alex, 2014, “Building on Faith: Inside Toronto’s New Aga Khan Museum, Designed by the World’s Leading Architects,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 1, n.p., [https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/home-and-garden/architecture/building-on-faith-inside-torontos-new-aga-khan-museum-designed-by-the-worlds-leading-architects/article19887289/], accessed February 21, 2019.
6. According to the AKM’s website, the private collections of the Aga Khan and his brother Prince Ayn have been combined with their uncle’s collection. See: “Collections: About,” Aga Khan Museum, [https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/index.html], accessed September 13, 2020.
7. Less than a decade after the publication of Said’s *Orientalism* (the central interpretive framework for assessing the AKM building in this paper), Bozdoğan praised the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture, and proposed that its significance lies in the serious attempt it made to circumvent the reductive narratives of the Orientalist discourse, to explore cultural exchanges and boundaries in their full complexities. See: Bozdoğan, Sibel, 1986, “Orientalism and Architectural Culture,” *Social Scientist*, vol. 14, no. 7, July, p. 46-58.
8. While some scholars would like to think that we have moved beyond the discourse of Orientalism, this building, as I will argue, not only proves the continued relevance and prescience of Edward Said’s formulations, but also the fact that the phenomenon manifests itself in contemporary architectural practice, without much scrutiny by historians or critics. I have personally encountered scholars who denigrate the ideas of Said, and who would prefer to historicize Orientalism itself and leave it behind in the era during which it was produced and became widely influential, as though it could not possibly continue to be helpful as a theoretical framework. Academia is understandably thirsty for novelty, and intellectual trends may come and go; however, I am constantly perplexed by the fact that while Said is readily dismissed today, many would not even bat an eye at the hundreds, if not thousands of scholars who insist on the continued relevance of Karl Marx, for example. But this is a larger discussion, certainly beyond the scope of this paper.
9. It appears that the Aga Khan selected Maki due to both admiration and a long relationship the two have developed over the years. As early as 1986, Maki was invited by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture to serve as a member of its Master Jury, which was when he first met the Aga Khan. See: Jodidio, Philip, 2014, “A Conversation with Fumihiko Maki, Architect of the Aga Khan Museum,” in *Pattern and Light: Aga Khan Museum*, Toronto / New York, Skira Rizzoli, p. 22-31.
10. The Canadian firm Moriyama & Teshima was the architect of record for the AKM building. For basic information about the building and site, as described by the architect, see: “Aga Khan Museum,” Maki and Associates: Architecture and Planning, [http://www.maki-and-associates.co.jp/details/index.html?pcd=119], accessed February 17, 2019.
11. One of the reasons implied by the Aga Khan for choosing Toronto to host this institution is his perception of Canada as a country committed to pluralism, crucial for his constituency: “The Ismaili community, after all, is itself a global family, spanning many geographies, cultures, languages and ethnicities—and sharing its life with people of many faiths.” He added that his efforts have put him in contact with “highly diverse societies in the developing world, often suffering from poverty, violence, and despair, “thus making a commitment to pluralism a prerequisite for addressing many of the ills he observed globally. Furthermore, he has had an engagement with this context since the 1970s when large numbers of Ismailis immigrated to Canada. See: Aga Khan, Karim, 2006, “Speech: Signing of the Funding Agreement for the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa,” Aga Khan Development Network, October 25, [https://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/signing-funding-agreement-global-centre-pluralism-ottawa], accessed December 10, 2020.
12. The Aga Khan conveyed that the plans for Toronto only involved an Ismaili centre initially, but when more space became available, the project expanded. See: Aga Khan, Karim, 2010, “Speech: Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, the Aga Khan Museum and their Park,” Aga Khan Development Network, May 28, n.p., [https://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/foundation-ceremony-ismaili-centre-aga-khan-museum-and-their-park], accessed September 18, 2020.

Although the location is often presented as an advantageous one in terms of accessibility, the Aga Khan Foundation settled on Toronto after failing to secure properties in London, evidently the site preferred originally. See: Renzetti, Elizabeth, 2007, “A Stunning Debut for Toronto-bound Treasures of Islam,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 11, [https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/a-stunning-debut-for-toronto-bound-treasures-of-islam/article724058/], accessed September 13, 2020.

13. Aga Khan Development Network, 2002, “Press Release: Aga Khan to Establish Major Academic and Cultural Center and Museum in Canada,” Aga Khan Development Network,



- October 8, [https://www.akdn.org/press-release/aga-khan-establish-major-academic-and-cultural-center-and-museum-canada], accessed February 22, 2019.
- This announcement came out only days after it was revealed that the bid for the London site was failing. See: Revill, Jo, 2002, "Aga Khan's Dream of Art Palace Fading," *The Guardian*, October 6, [https://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/oct/06/1], accessed December 14, 2020.
14. According to Maki, he was first contacted to work on the design for Toronto in 2004, when work on the building for the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat in Ottawa was nearing completion; he was provided with a rather precise program that early in the process, and Maki made initial sketches the essence of which remained in the final design. Jodidio, "A Conversation with Fumihiko Maki," *op cit*.
  15. Parts of this letter have been cited in various sources. Requests sent to Maki's office and the AKDN asking for a copy of the original letter were declined.
  16. Early coverage of the building stated that the design process spanned 2006-2008, and that construction was expected to be completed by 2011. See for example: "Fumihiko Maki: Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada," *GA document*, June 2007, no. 97, p. 114-117.
  17. Aga Khan, Karim, "Speech: Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre," *op. cit*.
  18. The meaning is conveyed in the following lines: "I would hope that this Museum will contribute to a new period of enlightenment, helping visitors from around the world to rediscover the common symbols that unite us all across the globe, across all civilisations, across time." Aga Khan, Ayn, "Speech: Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto," *op. cit*.
  19. He added that he had "no doubt whatsoever that the Muslims of North America will play an important role in their own societies and . . . within the *umma* [the larger Muslim community worldwide]." Aga Khan, Karim, 2008, "Preface," in Philip Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, Munich, Prestel, p. 6-10, at p. 9-10.
  20. He added: "The developing political crises of recent years, and the considerable lack of knowledge of the Muslim world in many Western societies, are surely related." Aga Khan, Karim, "Preface," *id.*, at p. 7-8.
  21. Maki, Fumihiko, 2018, "Fumihiko Maki Lecture at CUHK School of Architecture," in CUHK School of Architecture, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong, YouTube video*, 1:13:16, April 3, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gdEK0fip\_U&feature=emb\_logo], accessed December 6, 2020.
  22. Maki, *ibid*.  
Initially, Norwegian marble was considered, because the intention was for the "building to glow." Junor, Benoit, quoted in Renzetti, "A Stunning Debut for Toronto-bound Treasures of Islam," *op. cit*.
  23. "Aga Khan Museum," Maki and Associates: Architecture and Planning, *op. cit*.
  24. Maki, Fumihiko, quoted in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
  25. Prince Ayn Aga Khan has stated: "I believe that a number of young people will be amazed by the so-called modernity of these objects [at the AKM]. Much of the art of Islam is . . . very simple and very linear, and in that sense these objects tie in well with much of the Western modern aesthetic." Aga Khan, Ayn, quoted in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
  26. The AKM describes the "sumptuous décor" of their Diwan restaurant as part of the museum's permanent collection, produced in 1799 for a Damascus residence. "Diwan: About Us," Aga Khan Museum, [https://diwan.agakhanmuseum.org/about\_us.html], accessed December 13, 2020.
  27. Maki, "Fumihiko Maki lecture at CUHK School of Architecture," *op. cit*.
  28. Kamemoto, Gary, 2020, "Pluralism in Architecture—a Partnership between Maki and Associates and the AKDN," in Aga Khan Foundation UK, YouTube video, 1:22:00, September 22, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4wowLHLP4w&feature=emb\_logo], accessed December 6, 2020.
  29. *Ibid*. In an early rendering of the interior of the AKM building, looking down a corridor from the main entrance, the *mashrabiyyah* appears to have been originally conceived as more abstract, with no direct use of patterned screens; however, it was also a lot more prominent as a bay window, projecting considerably out of its wall (unlike the realized version), emphasizing its reading as an exterior element. See illustration in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
  30. Kamemoto, "Pluralism in Architecture," *op. cit*.
  31. Maki, Fumihiko, quoted in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
  32. Kamemoto, "Pluralism in Architecture," *op. cit*.
  33. An article quoted Gary Kamemoto from Maki's office: "The master plan was inspired by the vast urban dimensions of the plaza in Istanbul that links the Blue Mosque to the Hagia Sofia, said Gary Kamemoto, a director at Maki and Associates, during the museum's opening." Rochon, Lisa, 2014, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *Architectural Record*, September 19, [https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/3233-makis-aga-khan-museum-makes-its-debut], accessed December 13, 2020.  
Another article asserts that the plaza is "scaled to the 100-metre-width of the Great Mosque of Isfahan," which is presumably a piece of information obtained from the architect or museum personnel. Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit*.
  34. Maki "Fumihiko Maki lecture at CUHK School of Architecture," *op. cit*.
  35. *Ibid*.
  36. Kamemoto, "Pluralism in Architecture," *op. cit*. In an early publication, prior to the realization of the building, Maki is credited with having made the links to the Bazaar in Kashan in relation to the auditorium ceiling, or the Shaikh Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan. Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
  37. This is conveyed in the architect's publication, released prior to the realization of the AKM building. Maki, Fumihiko, 2009, "Aga Khan Museum," in *Fumihiko Maki*, London / New York, Phaidon, p. 288-291 (quotations p. 288).
  38. All of these features were spelled out by Maki prior to the realization of the building; a photograph of a natural crystal is also reproduced, to emphasize the inspiration. See: Maki, Fumihiko, 2009, "The Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat," in *Fumihiko Maki*, London / New York, Phaidon, p. 274-277.
  39. "Aga Khan Museum," Maki and Associates: Architecture and Planning, *op. cit*.
  40. Maki has stated that the exterior of the AKM is meant to evoke "the forms and shapes of precious stones," and that its geometry and surfaces are meant to enhance this metaphor through the multidirectional reflection of light. Maki, quoted in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
  41. Maki, *ibid*, quotation p. 55. While Maki meant for the metallic dome to establish a dialogue with Correa's glass counterpart, the architect

- was apparently asked by the patrons to ensure that his remains lower in height than that of the Ismaili Centre (in reverence to the latter's religious function). Jodidio, "A Conversation with Fumihiko Maki," *op. cit.*, p. 22-31.
42. Al-Issa, Nadia, 2014, "Report: Aga Khan Museum," *ArtAsiaPacific*, November 11, [<http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/ReportAgaKhanMuseum>], accessed December 13, 2020; Jenkins, Susan, 2014, "A Cradle of Learning," *Apollo*, vol. 180, no. 625, November, p. 70-74; Himelfarb, Ellen, 2014, "Fumihiko Maki Creates a Minimalist, Angular Home for the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto," *Wallpaper*, September 12, [<https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/fumihiko-maki-creates-a-minimalist-angular-home-for-the-aga-khan-museum-in-toronto>], accessed December 13, 2020; and Hume, Christopher, 2015, "Aga Khan Museum: A Gleaming Crown," *Nuvo*, January 16, [<https://nuvomagazine.com/magazine/winter-2014/aga-khan-museum>], accessed February 20, 2019.
  43. Himelfarb, "Fumihiko Maki Creates a Minimalist, Angular Home," *op. cit.*; Lam, Elsa, 2013, "Toronto Trio," *Canadian Architect*, November 2, [<https://www.canadianarchitect.com/toronto-trio/>], accessed February 18, 2019; Hague, Matthew, 2015, "The Spectacular Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre," *Azure*, June 5, [<https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/aga-khan-museum-ismaili-centre-toronto/>], accessed February 20, 2019; "In Search of Harmony: Pretty Parts Don't Quite Make a Winning Whole at the Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre in Toronto," *RIBA Journal*, September 17, 2014, [<https://www.ribaj.com/buildings/in-search-of-harmony>], accessed September 8, 2020; Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*; Bozickovic, "Building on Faith," *op. cit.*; and Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*
  44. "In Search of Harmony," *op. cit.*; Hume, Christopher, 2014, "Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre: A Dramatic Intrusion of Elegance," *The Toronto Star*, March 24, [[https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/03/24/aga\\_khan\\_museum\\_and\\_ismaili\\_centre\\_a\\_dramatic\\_intrusion\\_of\\_elegance\\_hume.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/03/24/aga_khan_museum_and_ismaili_centre_a_dramatic_intrusion_of_elegance_hume.html)], accessed February 18, 2019; Hume, "A Gift to Toronto," *op. cit.*; Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; Frearson, Amy, 2014, "Fumihiko Maki Completes White Granite Museum for the Aga Khan Foundation," *Dezeen*, September 15, [<https://www.dezeen.com/2014/09/15/aga-khan-museum-toronto-fumihiko-maki/>], accessed February 18, 2019; Fredrickson, Trent, 2014, "Aga Khan Museum by Fumihiko Maki Showcases Muslim Heritage in Toronto," *Designboom*, September 15, [<https://www.designboom.com/architecture/aga-khan-museum-fumihiko-maki-toronto-09-15-2014/>], accessed February 18, 2019; Bozickovic, "Building on Faith," *op. cit.*; Himelfarb, "Fumihiko Maki Creates a Minimalist, Angular Home," *op. cit.*; Hume, "Aga Khan Museum: A Gleaming Crown," *op. cit.*; Hague, "The Spectacular Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre," *op. cit.*; Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*; Whyte, Murray, 2014, "Toronto's Aga Khan Museum Aims to Build Cultural Bridges," *The Toronto Star*, September 12, [[https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2014/09/12/torontos\\_aga\\_khan\\_museum\\_aims\\_to\\_build\\_cultural\\_bridges.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2014/09/12/torontos_aga_khan_museum_aims_to_build_cultural_bridges.html)], accessed February 20, 2019; and Baird, George, 2014, "Stoic Splendor," *Blueprint*, no. 337, November, p. 194-210.
  45. Chodikoff, Ian, 2008, "Ummah Cum Laude," *Canadian Architect*, vol. 53, no. 3, March, p. 31-32; Hume, Christopher, 2014, "Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre: A Dramatic Intrusion of Elegance," *The Toronto Star*, March 24, [[https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/03/24/aga\\_khan\\_museum\\_and\\_ismaili\\_centre\\_a\\_dramatic\\_intrusion\\_of\\_elegance\\_hume.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/03/24/aga_khan_museum_and_ismaili_centre_a_dramatic_intrusion_of_elegance_hume.html)], accessed February 18, 2019; Hume, "Aga Khan Museum: A Gleaming Crown," *op. cit.*; Jenkins, "A Cradle of Learning," *op. cit.*; "In Search of Harmony," *op. cit.*; Hume, "A Gift to Toronto," *op. cit.*; Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; Al-Issa, "Report: Aga Khan Museum," *op. cit.*
  46. Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; "In Search of Harmony," *op. cit.*; Hague, "The Spectacular Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre," *op. cit.*; Baird, "Stoic Splendor," *op. cit.*; Hume, "A Gift to Toronto," *op. cit.*; Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*; and Hume, "Aga Khan Museum: A Gleaming Crown," *op. cit.*
  47. Hume, "Aga Khan Museum: A Gleaming Crown," *ibid.*
  48. For example: Chodikoff, "Ummah Cum Laude," *op. cit.*; Bozickovic, "Building on Faith," *op. cit.*; Hume, "Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre: A Dramatic Intrusion of Elegance," *op. cit.*; and Lam, "Toronto Trio," *op. cit.*
  49. One review spoke of a "pervasive sense of strangeness," without elaborating. See: "In Search of Harmony," *op. cit.* Another review wrote: "The project's piecemeal evolution is evident: designed almost a decade apart, the two buildings sit uncomfortably in each other's presence." See: Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*
  50. A review criticized how access to the upper galleries seems awkward and only visible once one arrives at that corner, and how doors to the ground galleries were too small in relation to the corridors around the courtyard. The review adds: "For now, then, the building reads as a very powerful and expressive volumetric shell which houses a public interior of a somewhat more tentative character." Baird, "Stoic Splendor," *op. cit.*
  51. The author adds that the panels are "uncomfortably jammed into suspended ceilings in a way that feels more Starbucks than priceless museological collection." Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*
  52. The courtyard, according to Maki, constitutes the programmatic and spatial core, "the heart of the building," that brings together its "differing functions into a cohesive whole" (he identifies the galleries, educational spaces, auditorium, and restaurant as the four main functions tied together by the courtyard). See: "Aga Khan Museum," Maki and Associates: Architecture and Planning, *op. cit.* Maki has rarely employed the courtyard layout in other projects; patios have been introduced in some buildings of a spiritual or communal nature, such as the Kaze-No-Oka Crematorium, Nakatsu, Oita, Japan (1997), and Republic Polytechnic Campus, Woodlands, Singapore (2007). Kenneth Frampton has observed how Maki occasionally departs from his usual aesthetic tendencies, particularly in response to a specific natural context, or to content deemed spiritual, as in religious or funerary buildings, including the aesthetic Maki pursued in the building of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada. See: Frampton, Kenneth, "The Work of Fumihiko Maki," in Maki, *Fumihiko Maki*, *op. cit.* p. 48-55.
  53. In early drawings and renderings, the initial version of the pattern was a lot more subtle than the realized one: there was less graphic differentiation within the flooring material, with a green hedge enclosing a seating area (apparently conceiving of the courtyard as a garden where visitors can take a break). In writing about the proposed design, Jodidio observed: "The current proposal for the courtyard, including an elaborate geometric

- pattern in the stonework, may in fact be the clearest reference to Islamic decorative traditions in the Museum." Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto, op. cit.*, p. 47.
54. This reading is very much in line with Maki's practice, and his long involvement with materializing light: "He uses light in a masterful way, making it as tangible a part of every design as are the walls and roof . . . [H]e searches for a way to make transparency, translucency and opacity exist in total harmony." See: "Jury Citation," The Pritzker Architecture Prize, 1993, [<https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/1993>], accessed December 15, 2020.
  55. The architect has used the "cloister" analogy himself: "Inside the building, a fully glazed courtyard is surrounded by free-flowing public space in the form of a grand cloister, establishing the nucleus of the Museum." Text attributed to Maki's office. See: "Fumihiko Maki + Maki and Associates: Aga Khan Museum, Toronto," *Domus*, 2015, no. 990, April, p. 64-75, quotation p. 70.
  56. Again, the architect confirms his particular conception of this courtyard, not as a busy or functional space, but as a sort of respite: "The courtyard is intended as a permanent peaceful sanctuary with its own internal world, secluded from the outside environment." "Fumihiko Maki + Maki and Associates," *ibid.*, quotation p. 70.
  57. This reading is suggested in light of a few factors. First, the dimensions of Maki's courtyard are not much larger—the Kaaba's base would almost fill the footprint. Second, the ceiling adjacent to the glass enclosure has been carved out to gain more height, even though this does not necessarily produce additional luminosity (precisely because the alcove created intercepts the light), a detail clearly meant to achieve a desired height and cuboid proportions. And third, given all the references to iconic historical precedents from around the Muslim world, it is not a stretch to imagine that the architect wished to reference Islam's holiest site at the core of his building (but perhaps shying away from declaring this specific reference in order to avoid controversy).
  58. It is no wonder that a review read the corridors around the promenade as "a grand central promenade," clearly comparing it to an urban scale. Bozikovic, "Building on Faith," *op. cit.*
  59. While some reviews understood the term *mashrabiyyah* to mean the geometric patterns applied to various surfaces at the AKM, a few referred to the pattern applied to the glazing around the courtyard specifically as a "*mashrabiyyah* pattern" (it seems that several writers attended tours prior to the opening, but they might have confused the courtyard enclosure with the nearby upper level windows). Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; Himelfarb, "Fumihiko Maki Creates a Minimalist, Angular Home," *op. cit.*; Jenkins, "A Cradle of Learning," *op. cit.*; Baird, "Stoic Splendor" *op. cit.*; Lam, "Toronto Trio," *op. cit.*
  60. The argument presented here is not meant to suggest that there is an essential or standard model of Muslim architecture or urbanism, or that it is desirable for that matter to replicate historical spatial and planning patterns. Janet L. Abu-Lughod's seminal critique of Orientalist perceptions of the ideal Muslim city has dismantled such assumptions, and challenged the tendency of imitating the historical urban grain. See: Abu-Lughod, Janet L., 1987, "The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, May, p. 155-176.
  61. This is my own assessment, based on a series of exhibitions I saw at the AKM, particularly the temporary ones organized in the upper level.
  62. These windows were initially meant to be fitted with translucent marble, in order to "allow for a certain translucency from the inside, perhaps a bit like the marble used in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale designed by Gordon Bunshaft," a classic postwar modernist building. Maki, quoted in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum: Toronto, op. cit.*, p. 59.
  63. Maki has addressed these windows specifically, describing them as abstractions of original references, which perhaps partially explains their shortcomings: "I feel that references to Islamic architecture should be abstract in this instance, and the screens we have developed respond to this approach." Maki, quoted in Jodidio, *ibid.*, p. 59.
  64. A visit to the mosque is instructive, because even on cloudy days or when rays of sunlight do not penetrate the space, the surfaces reflect the illuminated openings, allowing the two—the windows and tiles—to work in an ineffable unison. This is not to mention the fact that the windows are the main or only sources of light in that space, not merely a decorative element.
  65. Maki has used similarly faceted ceilings in some of his other projects, such as, in Japan, the Kirishima International Concert Hall, Makizono, Kagoshima (1994) and the Mihara Performing Arts Centre, Mihara, Hiroshima (2007).
  66. Blue is used in the cladding of a wall, as well as in the upholstered seats, because it is the Aga Khan's preferred colour. Hague, "The Spectacular Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre," *op. cit.*
  67. Even though architectural historians have increasingly been producing critical scholarship over the past few decades, Orientalism within architectural culture—particularly in the modern and contemporary periods—remains barely explored. In terms of where the discipline stands on Orientalism, I am reminded of Linda Nochlin's pioneering work and willingness to not only engage Said's ideas, but to also go beyond them. A decade after the release of Said's book, she wrote: "Orientalism—or rather its deconstruction—offers a challenge to art historians, as do many other similarly obfuscated areas of our discipline." She wrote this at a time when art historians were known primarily for celebratory scholarship, rather than engaging in a deep critique of the political implications of the work they examine. Nochlin, Linda, 1989, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-century Art and Society*, New York, Harper & Row, p. 33-59, quotation p. 57.
  68. It appears that the interiors of the exhibition spaces, even though these require strict lighting conditions, have been designed to be deliberately dark and moody, to capture the putatively "mysterious" qualities associated with the architecture and cultures of the Muslim world. This was suggested by an early editorial about the design: "In contrast to many white box museum galleries, the exhibition rooms of the Aga Khan Museum have been designed for the correct viewing and appreciation of the visual mystery of Islamic art and artifacts." See: "Aga Khan Museum," May 2008, *Shinkenchiku*, in Akihiko Omori and Yutaro Tomii (eds.), vol. 83, no. 6, special issue "In Progress: Fumihiko Maki Overseas," p. 42-49, quotation p. 48.
  69. These ideas emerged most strongly in the following reviews: Bozikovic, "Building on Faith," *op. cit.*; Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; and Wainwright, "Aga Khan Museum: North America Finally Gets a Home for Islamic Art," *op. cit.*
  70. Said, Edward W., 1979, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, p. 3.

71. Sibel Bozdoğan has studied the relevance of Said's *Orientalism* to architectural culture. A few decades ago, she observed a trend of Western architects proposing buildings for the Muslim world, which may be relevant for the AKM building: "[T]he interest in Islamic architecture also represents the possibility of further imagery at the disposal of an architectural culture of pluralism and consumerism—an imagery which is particularly marketable for rich Islamic clients." Bozdoğan added: "The products often end up as western 'commodities' with Eastern 'wrapping' to be sold to the East." (In the case of the AKM, the proposal was sold to a Muslim client, but ended up in the West.) Bozdoğan, "Orientalism and Architectural Culture," *op. cit.*, p. 46.
72. In examining the impact of Said's work on architectural history, pedagogy, and practice, Rabbat proposed the former, while Çelik the latter. Rabbat, Nasser, 2018, "The Hidden Hand: Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Architectural History," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 77, no. 4, December, p. 388-396; and Çelik, Zeynep, 2018, "Reflections on Architectural History Forty Years after Edward Said's *Orientalism*," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 77, no. 4, December, p. 381-387.
73. Perhaps because of his modernist training and inclinations, Maki might have been initially reluctant to integrate all these Muslim references. Indeed, the architect's early intentions for the AKM building come across as subtle and abstract: he made no direct allusion to any specific source material for his inspiration for the building design. It seems that he also did not envision geometric patterns in the glass around the courtyard or exhibitions spaces, or in the walls surrounding the auditorium (without these immediately recognizable visual cues, the building, at least in early renderings, and aside from the form of the auditorium roof and perforated skylights above the exhibitions spaces, veers closer to the majority of Maki's work, with its simpler, slick, and abstract forms). The source here is the architect's publication, released prior to the realization of the AKM building. See: Maki, *Aga Khan Museum*, *op. cit.*, p. 288. The only exception can be seen in some early renderings, which show from a distance what appears like a lattice of a geometric pattern, introduced in the centre of a staircase (but which has not been realized in the constructed design). See: "Aga Khan Museum," *Shinkenchiu*, *op. cit.*, p. 42-49.
- By 2012, when construction of the building had started, the design was fully updated to reflect the realized features (including all the geometric patterns across the AKM). See "Aga Khan Museum," 2012, *a+u*, special issue "Power of Space: Fumihiko Maki's Recent Works, 2007-2015," July, p. 29-35.
74. In fact, one could argue that this building only came about because of the forces of globalization. Maki has suggested that by the time his AKM design was completed, he had practised architecture for over four decades, but it was only within the preceding decade—that is, around the turn of the century—that his international projects expanded substantially (previously, most of his work was focused on Japan). The unprecedented flow of capital, information, and ease of communication, partly thanks to the Internet, abetted by the turn to computer-based design, has helped bring about new methods of practice that are unified and global in nature. This, Maki contends, has meant undermining existing, more local and regional modes of architectural production. See: Maki, Fumihiko, 2008, "Design Notes: The Lights and Shadows of Globalization," *Shinkenchiu*, in Omori and Tomii (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 4-13.
75. Maki himself has been praised for his sensitive work in Japan: "He is a modernist who has fused the best of both eastern and western cultures to create an architecture representing the age-old qualities of his native country while at the same time juxtaposing contemporary construction methods and materials." See: "Jury Citation," The Pritzker Architecture Prize, 1993, *op. cit.*
76. To my knowledge, there are only two reviews that spoke of the subject. One spoke of how the AKM might change perception of places, such as Iran and Afghanistan, ravaged by war. The other briefly discussed the impact of 9/11 on Muslim societies in the West, and how negative perceptions of Muslims are perpetuated by ongoing conflict in countries like Iraq and Syria. Rochon, "Maki's Aga Khan Museum Makes its Debut," *op. cit.*; and Whyte, "Toronto's Aga Khan Museum Aims to Build Cultural Bridges," *op. cit.*
77. While some might see a discussion concerning a building and contemporary geopolitics in the same breath as hyperbole, it must be underlined that Orientalism does not simply operate on purely aesthetic or conceptual levels—especially within a globalized world. Indeed, it might take a few decades for a historian to be able to identify the full implications of the AKM building, and see connections that might not be visible to myself or others at this point. For example, it was only in her analysis, half a century after the project was proposed, that Çelik was able to situate Le Corbusier's iconic projects for Algiers in relation to his infatuation with the Muslim world, and to French colonialism. From his early ruminations in *Voyage d'Orient*, to his trips to Algeria, Çelik contextualizes Le Corbusier's fascination within the legacy of French Orientalism and preoccupation with "Other" cultures, which in turn have shaped official and public consensus about colonialism and France's role in the world. Through her analysis, she presents an argument that goes beyond previous appraisals of the project, and suggests that Le Corbusier's proposal would have constituted colonial subjugation and appropriation of the city's "different" local population and urban form like no other project could have achieved. Çelik, Zeynep, 1992, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," *Assemblage*, no. 17, April, p. 59-77.
78. An early review of the AKM building and site, then still under development, credited the Aga Khan for bringing up the challenges facing such a project. Specifically, the Aga Khan had addressed how presenting the Muslim world through a museum will eventually have to confront "misunderstandings associated with issues such as religious wars, terrorism and regional strife—elements that are not representative of the vast majority of Muslims." Chodikoff, "Ummah Cum Laude," *op. cit.*, p. 31-32.
79. Aga Khan, Karim, "Speech: Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre," *op. cit.*
80. Aga Khan, [Karim], "Preface," *op. cit.*, p. 6.
81. From the very beginning, the museum was meant to focus on: "a wide range of other cultural expressions, including poetry, philosophy and literature, music, architecture, science and social organisation." Aga Khan, Aryn, "Speech: Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto." *op. cit.*
82. "The Museum & Site," Aga Khan Museum, [<https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/the-museum-and-site.html>], accessed February 21, 2019.
83. I have deliberately placed the label "Islamic" in quotation marks, especially as it pertains to the categories of "Islamic art" or "Islamic architecture." These categories are Orientalist constructs in their own right, which speak of Western superiority and interest in essentializing and marginalizing the architecture of Muslim societies under the banner of religion. I am not the first to criticize these labels, but they do continue to exercise a strong hold on the discipline.

84. Notwithstanding the fact that Brazilian granite was chosen for its ability to endure extreme weather conditions (Italian marble was abandoned because it could be damaged by the cold).
85. Maki has implicitly suggested that when he works abroad, his designs may indeed be whimsical, although still true to his approach: "Most architects . . . entertain a romantic vision even in a foreign country. They seek in another country release from the custom-bound ways of their own country or region . . . [However] works overseas are often acts of self-affirmation," and he proceeds to cite examples of works of modernist architects built outside their home countries, including Le Corbusier in India, Frank Lloyd Wright in Japan, Alvar Aalto in the US, and Louis Kahn in Bangladesh. Maki, "Design Notes," *op. cit.*, p. 8.
86. In his review of Said's book on its fortieth anniversary, Adam Shatz contends that the discourse is still alive and relevant today, an integral part of the "West's political unconscious," describing how the powerful addresses the Other: "The syndrome is very much in evidence today." However, the discourse is also vastly different in the contemporary world, especially under conservative governments in the US and Europe, where the desire to know the Other has been replaced by a hardline, intolerant, and ignorant bureaucracy that knows only the language of force and military confrontation. But he believes this unbridled hatred has only been unleashed because Muslims are now everywhere, and particularly inside the West; this fact, coupled with a crisis of identity in the West itself, has led to explosive tensions, making it easier for politicians to further vilify Muslims as the ultimate enemy. Shatz, Adam, 2019, "'Orientalism,' Then and Now," *The New York Review of Books*, May 20, [<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/>], accessed January 15, 2020.
87. Rabbat wrote specifically about the continued relevance of Said's work to architectural culture today: "Edward Said's *Orientalism* still figures heavily in the academic offerings at AKPIA [at Harvard and MIT] and other graduate programs devoted to the study of Islamic art and architecture" not only thanks to its theoretical salience, but also because of the "canonical rigidity and cultural complicity of architectural history's dominant discourse, which still treats architectural experiences outside its own traditional geopolitical and historical domain with suspicion or contempt, especially when these other experiences are motivated by a sense of resistance to that same discourse and its exclusivity." Rabbat, "The Hidden Hand: Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Architectural History," *op. cit.*, p. 394.
88. By suggesting this reading, I do not mean to propose or perpetuate a stereotype about Canada as the land of snow and ice (if anything, Toronto's winters are milder than other places in the country). This was simply my impression of the building, and to my mind, an analogy to a local climatic or environmental phenomenon is a lot more appropriate than the displaced references in Maki's design—if the intention is to create a building situated within its immediate context.
89. Although not expressed explicitly by the architect, and aside from the professed references, it would not be a surprise if Maki had intended to evoke a reading more rooted in the Canadian setting. He emphasizes a concept he calls the "construction of scenery," which speaks to his interest in turning certain ideas into spatial configurations, and establishing relationships between these spaces and the specific community and context where his buildings are situated. Maki, "Introduction," in *Fumihiko Maki*, *op. cit.*, p. 6-7.
90. Perhaps even the geometric patterns could have been meaningful, if they were thoughtfully created in response to an original and innovative design concept that justifies their inclusion.
91. The Aga Khan has emphasized the role that he wishes the AKM to play, in promoting cultural diversity and pluralism, which essentially unifies humanity. He elaborated: "We must also recognize that we have a common heritage, built on centuries of cultural and commercial exchanges, and must do our utmost to value and protect what is greatest in this common humanity." Aga Khan, [Karim], "Preface," *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- The Aga Khan's brother, chairman of the AKM's Board of Directors, has expressed the urgent need to address such tensions, toward overcoming global divides precisely by combatting misconceptions and stereotypes: "[A] knowledge gap continues to exist and perhaps even grow, and the result of that gap is a vacuum within which myths and stereotypes can so easily fester, fed by the amplification of extreme minority voices," adding: "Images of demagoguery or despotism, of intolerance and conflict, come to dominate in such an environment with global repercussions." Aga Khan, Aryn, "Speech: Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto," *op. cit.*