



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Light Upon Light: Inside Ottawa’s Spectacular New Landmark – The Delegation of the Ismaili Imam

By Dr. Karim H. Karim

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It sparkles like a brilliant jewel, shining whiter than the fresh snow that blankets its wintry landscape. The Delegation of the Ismaili Imam, Ottawa’s newest landmark, is a graceful marriage of East and West. Situated on a prime section of Sussex Drive with the Saudi embassy on one side and the Department of Foreign Affairs on the other, the building features a confluence of traditional Islamic motifs and contemporary materials – its intent to serve as “a metaphor for humanism and enlightenment” reflected in both exterior and interior. The shapes of its structures, the flows of its space, the sightlines, the materials and the finishing, all serve to accentuate the effect of light.

Walk-through

The design appears to be inspired by a well-known verse from the Holy Qur’an:

*God is the light of the heavens and the earth
The parable of His light is as if there
Were a niche
And within it a lamp
The lamp enclosed in glass
The glass is as it were a brilliant star
Lit from a blessed tree
An olive, neither of the East nor of the West
Whose oil is well-nigh luminous
Though no fire touched it
Light upon Light!*

During the day, the building is radiant, while at night it gleams. It is not entirely of the East or of the West, but draws creatively from both. Worldly aspiration has embraced heavenly inspiration.

The 8,570-square-meter edifice was commissioned by His Highness the Aga Khan, the hereditary Imam of Ismaili Muslims worldwide. “It affirms our intent to share, within a Western setting, the

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best of Islamic life and heritage,” he said at the inauguration ceremony in December 2008. The Imam has sought to construct a building that reflects Ismaili Canadians’ desire to engage with modernity while remaining empathetic to Islamic tradition – a building that complements his stated role of providing spiritual and worldly guidance to his followers. The Delegation, which will house the Imam’s institutions, has been described by the Imam as “an open, secular facility ... a sanctuary for peaceful, quiet diplomacy, informed by the Imam’s outlook of global convergence and the development of civil society.”

In Canada, the Aga Khan is also building the Aga Khan Museum and the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana in Toronto and is in the process of converting Ottawa’s old War Museum on Sussex Drive into the headquarters of the Global Centre for Pluralism. The buildings solidify his presence in Canada, a country whose values he has often said converge with those of his own transnational community. The national capital is an obvious choice as the Delegation’s Canadian base, but Ottawa also happens to be the home of Safar Ali Ismaily, the first Ismaili to arrive in this country half a century ago. The city is now home to about 1,000 Ismailis. (There are much larger communities in Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary.)

The Canadian projects form part of a network with a worldwide reach. Managed by the Imam from his estate north of Paris, the Aga Khan Development Network boasts vast resources and is one of the world’s largest international non-governmental organisations. Indeed, it has diplomatic status in many countries. (The European Commission and the International Committee for the Red Cross also use the term “delegation” for the offices of their representatives in other countries.) Lisbon has been named as the site of a second Imam Delegation.

His Highness selected renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, whom he calls “a master of form and light,” to design the building. Architectural writer Philip Jodidio says the Aga Khan discussed with Maki the source of natural light “emanating from God’s creation” and “that which emanates from human sources, in the form of art, culture, and well-inspired human knowledge.” At the same time, he pointed out his affinity for rock crystal and its refractive properties.

“It wasn’t until we began studying rock crystal and obtained a sample that we fully understood what His Highness was communicating to us,” says Maki’s associate, Gary Kamemoto, “The way light behaves on rock crystal makes the object change.”

A type of colourless quartz, rock crystal was much valued by the Aga Khan’s Fatimid ancestors, whose imperial seat was in Cairo. Skilled Egyptian craftsmen carved the crystal into prized objects often presented as diplomatic gifts. The medieval Muslim historian al-Maqrizi reported that the treasury of Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir Billah had 1,800 rock-crystal vessels. These artefacts now command millions of dollars in auction houses and are mostly to be found in museums and private collections.

The Aga Khan invited the architect to connect the building symbolically to the faith and to a cultural history “centred around the beautiful mysteries of rock crystal.” Its multiple planes give rock crystal iridescent properties that make it appear transparent, translucent, or opaque as the angle of light moves. The crystal’s hues are widely diverse and can be variously subtle or striking – clear, milky, or smoky, its colours ranging from white to rose, gold, or black. “It is because of these qualities that rock crystal seems to be such an appropriate symbol of the profound beauty and the ever-unfolding mystery of creation itself – and the Creator,” the Imam has been quoted as saying.

The client's brief was complex and required subtlety in execution. He wished to see the building suffused with crystalline luminescence that symbolically expressed the exoteric and the esoteric insights of Islam, as well as the community's wish to "stride boldly and confidently ahead into modernity."

Today the building's offices are occupied by the Aga Khan Foundation Canada. On the upper floor, His Highness's residence includes offices for his personal staff, as well as a private maple-panelled meeting room. A cut-out in the wall of his balcony allows him to gaze directly over the Ottawa River while leaving the traffic on Sussex invisible and preserving the Aga Khan's privacy.

The building is centred around an open air *chahar-bagh*, a garden that plays off the traditional Persian four-division garden. A frequent landscape design in Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia, the Ottawa version is adapted to the northern climate with evergreen junipers, boxwood hedges, silverberry trees, and flowering ground cover. The garden forms an oasis that is visible and accessible from the atrium and eastern entrance. From that garden, light streams through large glass panes into the entire building. The *chahar-bagh* and atrium form a hub that links different parts of the building while creating an inner sanctuary.

It is the atrium, which will host public engagements, that is the Delegation's most distinctive feature. An open space whose highest point measures 17 metres, the atrium is airy and filled with light, covered by an asymmetrical glass roof. A structure of multiple planes is meant to simulate rock crystal. Viewed from outside, this is one of the most unusual aspects of the building. Its silhouette is clearly visible across the river in Gatineau. Under the outer shell of the roof, an inner layer of woven glass fibre appears to float over the atrium like a canopy. In asymmetrical alignment with the upper layer, it creates a functional shade of intricate patterns that deflect exterior and interior light at varying angles. Light-coloured flooring made from Canadian maple further heightens the sense of illumination in this space.

Beautiful *jali* (screens) on the four sides of the atrium give the effect of enclosing the large space without creating a significant barrier to the flow of light. Gazing at the atrium through the *jali* on the upper floor evokes a rich sense of mystery. Such patterned lattices are traditionally found in South Asian architecture, including the Taj Mahal and Rajasthani palaces. The *jali* screens, manufactured in Cambridge, Ontario, hang some 2.5 metres above the edges of the Delegation's atrium. Made of cast aluminium, they bear a repeating double-layered configuration of hexagons and pure lines, a seemingly unending pattern that symbolises divine eternity. While it draws inspiration from Islamic design, the innovative design is not a traditional one. The pattern also appears on glass surfaces on the building's exterior.

"The building as a whole will be an inter play of visual clarity and opacity, overlaid with various degrees of translucency," said Maki during construction. Some 300 glass panels enhance that sense of openness and transparency. It is possible to see through the 87-metre-long building. Different types of glass have been combined and arranged in a subtle manner to give the edifice an ethereal quality. The primary walls of the facade are clad in panels of Neoparies. A unique building material made of crystallised glass, Neoparies have a marble-like appearance, its reflective properties subtly changing colour depending on the time of day. The tiles pick up and reflect colour from the surrounding environs, including green and autumnal red from the vegetation, blue from the sky and gold from the sun.

The building rests on a black granite podium that levels the slope of the land and separates it from the park on its grounds. (Not only did the Delegation's design have to negotiate the cultures of the

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East and the West, it also had to meet National Capital Commission standards on the western side of the property and the needs of residents to the east.) The architects dealt with these challenges by creating numerous plazas and terraces.

For the Aga Khan, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat manifests the pluralism that he holds to be vital to the future of humanity. Bringing together design influences from various Muslim lands, Japanese architectural ingenuity, local materials, and an engagement with the Canadian natural and cultural environment, he has seen his vision of a spectacular building appear near the edge of the Ottawa River. Concluding his address at the inauguration ceremony, he said: “It is our prayer that the establishment of the Delegation will provide a strongly anchored, ever-expanding opportunity for rich collaboration – in the devoted service of ancient values, in the intelligent recognition of new realities, and in a common commitment to our shared dreams of a better world.”