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Cultural Signification in Architecture: Architecture after the Aga Khan Award

Since its inception in 1977, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) has risen to occupy a central position in the study and promotion of architecture in the Islamic world. Hundreds of nominated projects have been selected, evaluated, critiqued, and published over the last thirty years turning this domain from being totally neglected to an inescapably acknowledged contributor to the understanding of contemporary architecture. Yet, the motivations behind the AKAA, its intellectual roots, evolution, dialectical relationship with its wider architectural context, and agendas have rarely been examined.

In an attempt to redress this oversight, the seminar will aim to situate the AKAA in the larger discourse on Islamic architecture as a design category, a discourse that underwent a series of profound shifts in the last century. Coyle emerging as a series of revivalist trends that mimicked the eclecticism of the early



1900s, Islamic architecture remained on the margins during the late colonial and early nationalist periods when the more vocal category of modernity embodied the architecture of the new nation-states. This dominance, however, was challenged and somewhat supplanted by the historicist impetus of post-modernism, which, along with the parallel burgeoning of critical regionalism, undergirded the various experiments with Islamic architecture of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Coming on the scene at that moment, the AKAA initially focused on historical continuity, vernacular revival, and critical regionalism. But in a bid to respond to rising challenges to architecture and development such as environmental degradation and globalization, the AKAA purview grew to encompass contemporary design, social housing, community improvement, historic preservation, reuse and area conservation, as well as landscape and environmental design.

The seminar will first establish the historical background that led to the reemergence of Islamic architecture and the creation of the AKAA both as a gauge of that architecture as well as an influential factor in shaping its trajectory. It will then use the projects selected and the literature produced by and about the AKAA as the lens through which to investigate how contemporary Islamic architecture, in a rather conciliatory manner, incorporated various technologically and environmentally driven, adaptive reuse, and conservation concerns within its core historicist and regionalist criteria to accommodate the diverse currents of thoughts affecting its evolving discourse. Whether this process is leading to an identifiable and definable architectural tradition or not is the question that will inform all class inquiries.

CLASS MECHANISM: Each session will be divided into two parts: a short lecture then presentations of weekly responses by students. In the first few weeks, responses to historical and theoretical readings will be first presented during seminar meetings then submitted to instructor a week later (1-3 pp). In the second part of the seminar, each student will select one winning project from the category examined every week and write a critical appraisal of that project, to be presented in class. Students' appraisals will be collected to form a parallel (electronic) publication to those done by the AKAA. The final paper is a 10-15 page reworking of one of the projects' reports submitted by the student, to be selected in consultation with the instructor.

SPRING 2011

DAY:	Tuesday
TIME:	2:00 - 5:00
ROOM:	5-216
INSTRUCTOR:	Nasser Rabbat
UNITS:	9 or 12
LEVEL:	H

PREREQUISITE: Permission of Instructor. Open to advanced undergraduates and graduate students with some knowledge of Islamic architecture.