

NEW LANDMARK OPENS IN TORONTO

City gets a world-class museum

By **Mansoor Ladha**
For the Sun Times

Tourists visiting Toronto now have a new landmark. A must in every tourist itinerary would be the spectacular Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre, which opened last September heralding a new but proud chapter in Canadian Ismaili Muslim history.

Torontonians, driving along Don Valley Parkway in the Don Mills neighbourhood, have been noticing two magnificent structures — the remarkable buildings of international stature are the Aga Khan Museum and a new Ismaili Muslim community Centre and prayer hall. A beautiful park and gardens, created by Lebanese landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, will be situated between the two the prestigious buildings.

The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the world's 15 million Ismaili Muslims, who has been a great friend of Canada, was in Toronto for the opening ceremony conducted by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Fumihiki Maki, one of the world's prominent award winning architects, designed the Aga Khan Museum while renowned Indian architect Charles Correa has designed the Ismaili Centre. Both Maki and Correa are considered to be elder statesmen of modernism but their architecture and personalities are said to be different.

Toronto received the blessings as a site of the projects after its plans in London, England, fell apart. London's loss is Toronto's gain.

Toronto Ismaili Centre is the sixth among growing network of Ismaili centres built around the world. In the last 25 years, equally architecturally spectacular projects have been built in Burnaby (1958), London, England (1985), Lisbon (1998), Dubai (2003) and Dushanbe, Tajikistan (2009). Similar projects

are planned for Houston, Paris and Los Angeles. The centres are located from quiet suburbs to busy civic hubs, standing majestically as a tribute to the settlement of Ismaili Muslim community in those countries. Each Ismaili Centre serves both religious and ambassadorial functions with a jamatkhana, a space for prayer and contemplation, and rooms for social gatherings, educational facilities and libraries.

Ismaili Centres worldwide portray and reflect the values of Islam. During the foundation laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe, the Aga Khan said: "These centres serve to reflect, illustrate and represent the community's intellectual and spiritual understanding of Islam, its social conscience, its organization, its forward outlook and its positive attitude towards the societies in which it lives."

At a similar ceremony held in Burnaby, the Aga Khan: "It will be a place of congregation, of order, of peace, of prayer, of hope, of humility and brotherhood. From it should come forth those thoughts, those sentiments, and those attitudes, which bind men together, which unite. It has also been conceived and will exist in a mood of friendship, courtesy, and harmony. It is my hope that it will become a symbol of a growing understanding in the west of a very deep and real meaning of Islam."

The Aga Khan Museum, which reflects the art, culture and performing arts of Islamic civilizations, houses artifacts from the Aga Khan family's private collections, dating more than 1,000 years. It will attract scholars and the public not only from all across Canada and the United States but also from around the world. The museum is aimed at promoting Islamic art, with special emphasis on Shia Islam, through exhibitions and provides a forum for exchanges between the Islamic and the western scholars.

In a speech made at the "Musee-Musees" Round Table Louvre Museum in October 2007, the Aga Khan explained the



One of the rare artifacts displayed at the museum.

reasons for building the Aga Khan Museum. He said the Muslim world, with its history and culture, is still unknown to the west. Even today in secondary and university education in the west, the study of Muslim world is still a specialist subject. He said very little of the Muslim world features in the study of humanities in the west, where courses are essentially centred around Judeo-Christian civilizations.

"This lack of knowledge is a dramatic reality which manifests itself in particularly serious way in western democracies, since public opinion is has difficulties judging national and international policy vis-à-vis the Muslim world.

"... the two worlds, Muslim and non-Muslim, Eastern and Western, must as a matter of urgency, make a real effort to get

to know one another, for I fear that what we have is not a clash of civilizations, but a clash of ignorance on both sides. In so far as civilizations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching the two worlds to understand, respect and appreciate each other and ensuring that whole populations are given fresh opportunities to make contact with each other, using new, modern methods imaginatively and intelligently to bring about truly global communication," he explained.

The Aga Khan is well known as a promoter of architecture as he overseas the Aga Khan Award for Architecture which is aimed at promoting projects around the world with themes of housing, urban infrastructure and historic preservation. The museum and the centre buildings reflect his high tastes in architecture.

Describing the design of the centre, architect Charles Correa said that "this jamatkhana must be pluralistic — expressing on the one hand the age-old heritage of the Ismaili community and on the other their newfound aspirations as proud citizens of Canada. So, throughout the building, the architectonic language and the materials used are contemporary (exposed concrete, stainless steel and frosted glass), but there are also references to other values, derived from other times." There is no doubt that the Aga Khan Museum and the Ismaili Centre will strengthen the community's presence in Canada.

By introducing a new actor to the North American cultural and art scene, the Aga Khan hopes to educate and promote knowledge of Islamic art and culture. It will be a source of pride for the total Muslim population in Canada and the U.S., displaying the inherent pluralism of Islam. In the words of the Aga Khan, "the museum will show, beyond the notoriously politicized form of Islam which now tends to make headlines, Islam is in reality an open-minded, tolerant faith capable of adopting other people's cultures and languages and making them its own."

With the upcoming opening of the Aga Khan Museum and Ismaili Centre in Toronto, Canada is perhaps becoming the headquarters of the Ismaili community in the world as the Aga Khan, who was given the honorary Canadian citizenship in 2009, has established four prestigious and internationally renowned projects in Canada, including Ottawa-based Global Centre for Pluralism and Delegation of Ismaili Imam. The total of four high-profile institutions will undoubtedly have a profound and long-term impact not only in Canada but also worldwide, enhancing the Muslim and Islamic presence.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based journalist, travel writer and author of "A Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims and (Detselig)"



The picturesque museum in the background with an imposing water front.