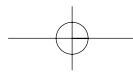
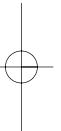
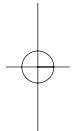
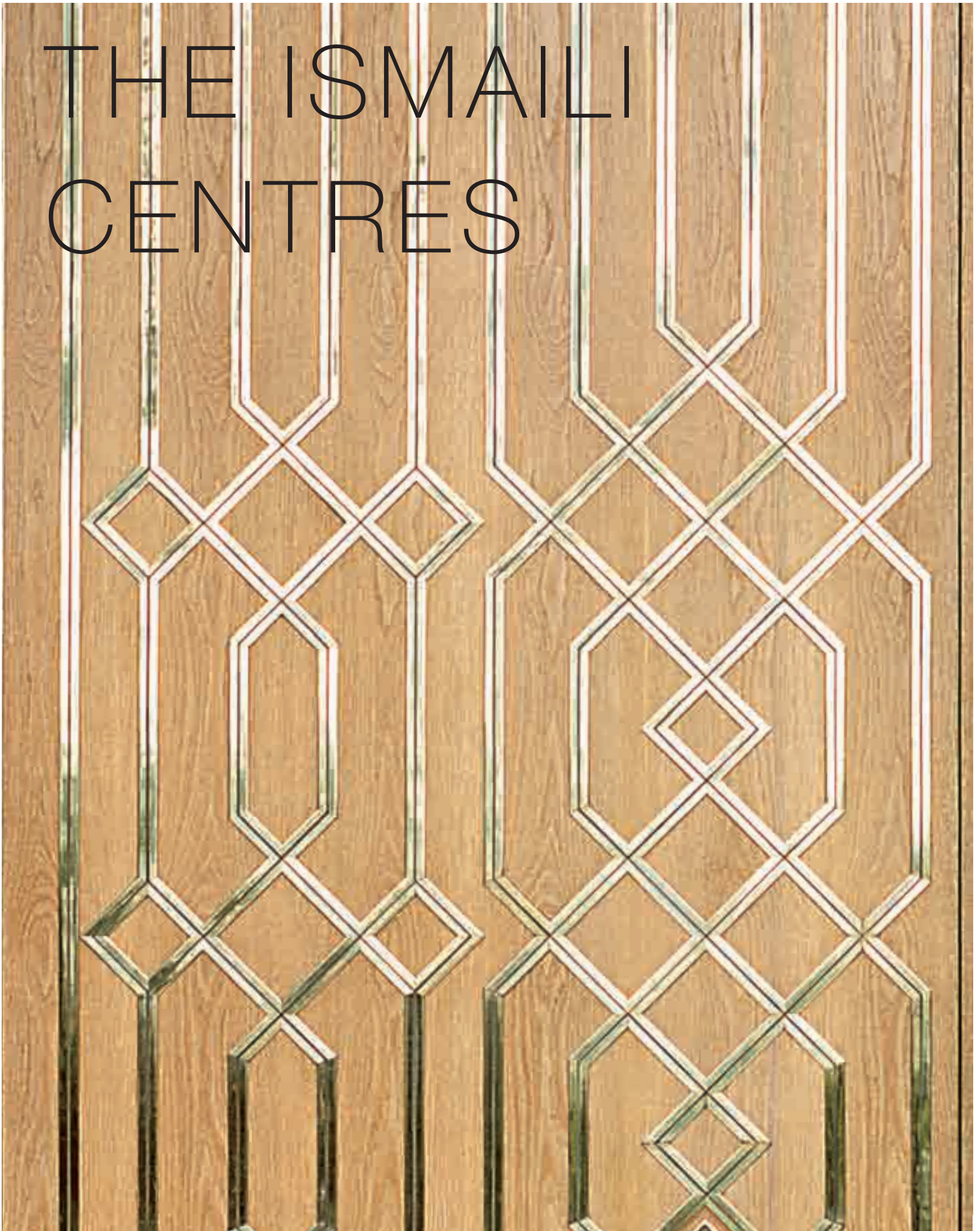
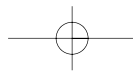
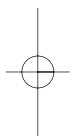
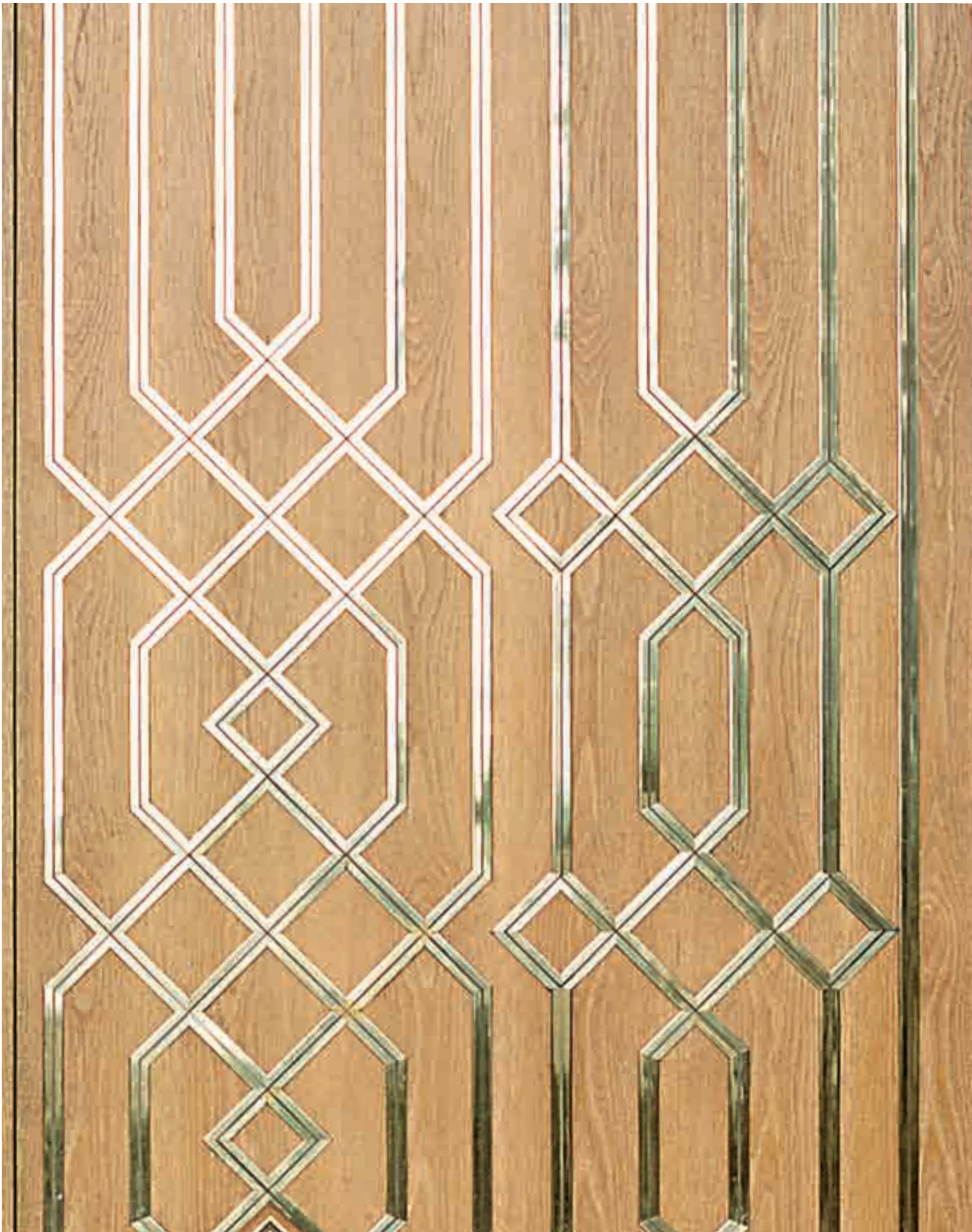
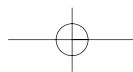


THE ISMAILI CENTRES





The Ismaili Centres

We have clarity and direction enough when the Koran affirms that to save a life is, as if, to save humankind altogether. It is in this context that I request that you view the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre, Houston, as much, much more than a place of congregation and a home for administrative offices. The Centre will be a place of peace, humility, reflection and prayer. It will be a place of search and enlightenment, not of anger and of obscurantism. It will be a centre which will seek to bond men and women of this pluralist country to replace their fragility in their narrow spheres by the strength of civilized society bound together by a common destiny.¹

His Highness the Aga Khan

The Aga Khan has done a great deal to make people across the world aware of the issues facing architecture in the Muslim world. Through educational institutions, his sponsorship of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and work on the ground by the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme he has created a now indispensable link between the past, the present and the future of architecture in parts of the world often ignored or underestimated in the West. There is a strong and present relation between this extensive involvement in architecture and the religious responsibilities of the Aga Khan. He stated in 1984: "As the Imam of a twelve-million strong community spread among some twenty-five countries, I have been constantly concerned with the construction of schools, clinics, hospitals, office complexes and indeed ordinary housing. In so doing I have become more and more concerned with the physical form that the Islamic world of the future will take and with how technological experience can be appropriately utilized to assist it ... My awareness that there might be a case for seeking to reinvigorate and perhaps reorient the built environment of the Islamic world was awakened by the needs of my own Ismaili community. But I decided very early on that to attempt to tackle my own constituency alone could be interpreted as self-serving and might even isolate us from other Muslims if they did not genuinely share our concerns. The problem appeared generic to the whole Islamic world and if this was confirmed, as indeed it was, it had to be approached in the widest context."²

The Ismaili Centre in Houston is one of a growing number of such buildings erected in London, Burnaby in Canada, Lisbon, Toronto, Dubai, and Dushanbe in Tajikistan. All of these centres are places of prayer and gathering for the Ismaili community in the countries concerned. Indeed, it is the very history of the community that has placed a particularly great responsibility on the shoulders of the Aga Khan. He explains: "In 1957, I was still a student at Harvard when I inherited the responsibilities of the Ismaili Imamate from my grandfather, Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah. It seemed inconceivable then that there would ever be substantial communities in the West. The Ismailis were too deeply rooted in their ancestral homes, indeed frozen there by the Cold War in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. But dislocations in the wake of decolonialization, and more recently the collapse of the Soviet Union and the prolonged difficulties in Afghanistan have caused a number of Ismailis to seek new lands and homes. These migratory movements over the last half century have resulted in

a substantial Ismaili presence in Russia, in Western Europe, the United Kingdom and Portugal, and particularly in the United States and Canada.”³

The Ismaili Centres thus far created have often been the work of non-Muslim architects like Hugh Casson (London), Bruno Freschi (Burnaby) and Raj Rewal (Lisbon). The architects have worked nonetheless with briefs that call for “a synthesis of Islamic architecture and contemporary building design, a synthesis of architectural principles steeped in the tradition of the Faith, while at the same time coexisting with the requirements of modern-day society – a fusion symbolic of the Ismaili community.” Often quite physically substantial, as in the case of the 18,000-square-metre facility in Lisbon, the Ismaili Centres have thus far not necessarily broken new ground in contemporary architecture in any conventional sense. They have represented solid and surely lasting efforts to create bridges between the past and the present, and above all between Islam and such significant locations as the Cromwell Road in London. They have also provided strong symbols and comfort for the Ismaili diaspora. The quality of the architecture of the Ismaili Centres is undeniable, however architecture needs to be understood in these cases in terms of the broader objectives enunciated by the Aga Khan himself: “A place of search and enlightenment, not of anger and of obscurantism,” as he stated in Houston in 2002 in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001.

1 Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the inauguration of the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana, Houston, 23 June 2002.

See: <http://www.akdn.org/speeches/texas.html>.

2 His Highness the Aga Khan, on receiving the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal in Architecture, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 13 April 1984.

3 Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the inauguration of the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana, Houston, 23 June 2002.

See: <http://www.akdn.org/speeches/texas.html>.

Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

Architect/Planner: Casson Conder Partnership
Date: 1981

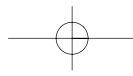
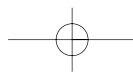
■ The first 'high-profile' Ismaili Centre to be built in the West was designed by the London architects Casson Conder Partnership for a very visible site in South Kensington, on the Cromwell Road, opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum and diagonally across the street from the Museum of Natural History. A religious, social and cultural meeting place, the building contains a Prayer Hall, but also social spaces and a gallery. Sir Hugh Casson (1910–99) was director of architecture at the 1951 Festival of Britain on London's South Bank. Working with Neville Conder, Casson designed the Elephant House at

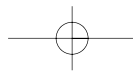
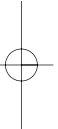
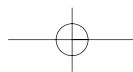
the London Zoo and worked on the master planning of the Sidgwick Avenue arts faculty buildings at the University of Cambridge. Provost of the Royal College of Art (1970) then President of the Royal Academy (1976–84), he designed the interior of the royal yacht *Britannia* and was also credited with teaching Charles, Prince of Wales, to paint in watercolours. As a member of the first two Steering Committees for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (1980, 1983) Hugh Casson had a significant influence on the creation and early directions of the Award.

Right, the Ismaili Centre in London, United Kingdom, is prominently located near the Victoria and Albert Museum (visible in the background). This view shows the south elevation from the west along Thurloe Place.

Below, the Ismaili Centre viewed in the direction of the approach from London's West End.







Left, windows and panels are in stainless steel, teak and bevelled glass, with three different surface finishes for the granite.

Below, the roof garden with its central fountain and four radial water channels.

The London Ismaili Centre certainly holds a significant place in the history of the involvement of the Aga Khan in architecture. As His Highness stated when it was decided to build the Centre: "This building and the prominence of the place it has been given indicate the seriousness and the respect the West is beginning to accord Muslim civilization, of which the Ismaili community, though relatively small, is fully representative. May this understanding, so important for the future of the world, progress and flourish. I sincerely believe that when this Centre is completed, it will be, both by its presence and the function it fulfils, an important addition to the institutions in London, a source of pride to all who took part in its creation, and a pledge and token of understanding between East and West."¹

The focal point of the building is the Prayer Hall located on the second floor, but for religious reasons, it cannot be photographed. The building also contains a smaller prayer hall, classrooms for religious instruction of



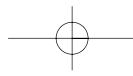
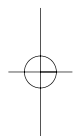
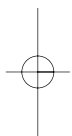
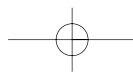
children, an office, a multi-purpose social hall and a separate art gallery and exhibition space. In 1951, a religious, cultural and social centre was created by the Ismaili community in Kensington Court in London, which moved, in 1957, to Palace Gate in the Borough of Kensington. A site for a new centre was selected in 1971 at Albany Street in the Borough of Camden. The present site was acquired thereafter and on 6 September 1979 Lord Soames, then Lord President of the Council, laid the foundation stone in the presence of the Aga Khan. At that time Lord Soames said that the new building would “remind Londoners that not all architecture sprang from Greek and Italian roots.” The architects were asked to “respect the mood of Islamic architectural tradition” while fitting into an area that can only be described as heterogeneous but Western in terms of the inspiration of its buildings. Members of the Ismaili community, Islamic scholars and architects or designers specialized in Islamic design were consulted as part of the process of Casson Conder. Also of importance was the capacity of the building to receive a relatively large number of people without upsetting the routines of the community, and to provide a quiet environment within despite the hustle and bustle of the urban setting. The top floor of the building provides for an unusual garden, designed by Don Olson of Sasaki Associates. The use of running water, a play of light and shade and an integration of interior and exterior spaces are part of the aspects of this area that fully respect Islamic tradition while maintaining a modern feeling. A comprehensive attempt was made in the interiors to reconcile the “aesthetics of traditional Islamic interior design with an aesthetic that was at the same time contemporary and situated in a Western context.” Decorative patterns link the exteriors and interiors of the building. The use of stylized and abstract calligraphy, honeycombing (*muqarnas*) and carved woodwork (*mashrabiyya*) are part of the efforts of the architects to create the stated link between the Muslim world and the West. Essentially, this link is at the very heart of the project of the Aga Khan in erecting an Ismaili Centre in such a prominent location in London.

1 His Highness the Aga Khan, in: *The Ismaili Centre*, London 1985.

Right, the main stairway of the Centre with its large chandelier.

Below, in an inversion of the more common order, the granite cladding on the upper part of the volume is relatively closed, while windows below, in this night view, make the lower part of the building glow from within.







Left, the social hall, and, below, the council chamber in the Imaili Centre, London, United Kingdom.

Right, the Brazilian blue granite fountain pool in the entrance hall is set on an interweaving geometric floor pattern intended to be "characteristic of Islamic art."





Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana

BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Architect/Planner: Bruno Freschi
Date: 1984

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, those attitudes which bind men together, which unite. It has been conceived and will exist in a mood of friendship, courtesy and harmony. It is my hope that it will become a symbol of growing understanding in the West of a very deep and real meaning of Islam.¹

His Highness the Aga Khan

■ Located in a “tree-lined suburb of Greater Vancouver,” the Burnaby Centre was the first purpose-built structure of its kind in Canada. Ismailis first arrived in Canada in the mid 1960s, mostly as students. The population increased with political upheavals in East and Central Africa and in particular the expulsion of Asians from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972. The Ismaili National Council for Canada is based in Vancouver, whence the desire to build a centre there. The architect of the Centre, Bruno Freschi, was born in Trail, Canada, in 1937. He studied in London at the AA (Architectural Association) before joining the firm of Arthur Erickson (Massey-Erickson, Vancouver) in 1964. He was the chief architect and planner of the 1986 Vancouver Exposition site. Although of Italian Catholic background, he took on the Burnaby commission with a sense of the importance of the work he was carrying out, building a bridge between two worlds in many senses.

The design brief, once again, required that the building be “a synthesis of Islamic architecture and contemporary building design, a synthesis of architectural principles steeped in the tradition of the Faith, while at the same time coexisting with the requirements of modern-day society – a fusion symbolic of the Ismaili community.” As is the case in London, the focal point of the building is the Prayer Hall, “emphasizing its primary religious function providing facilities for prayer.” The building

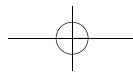
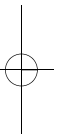
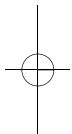
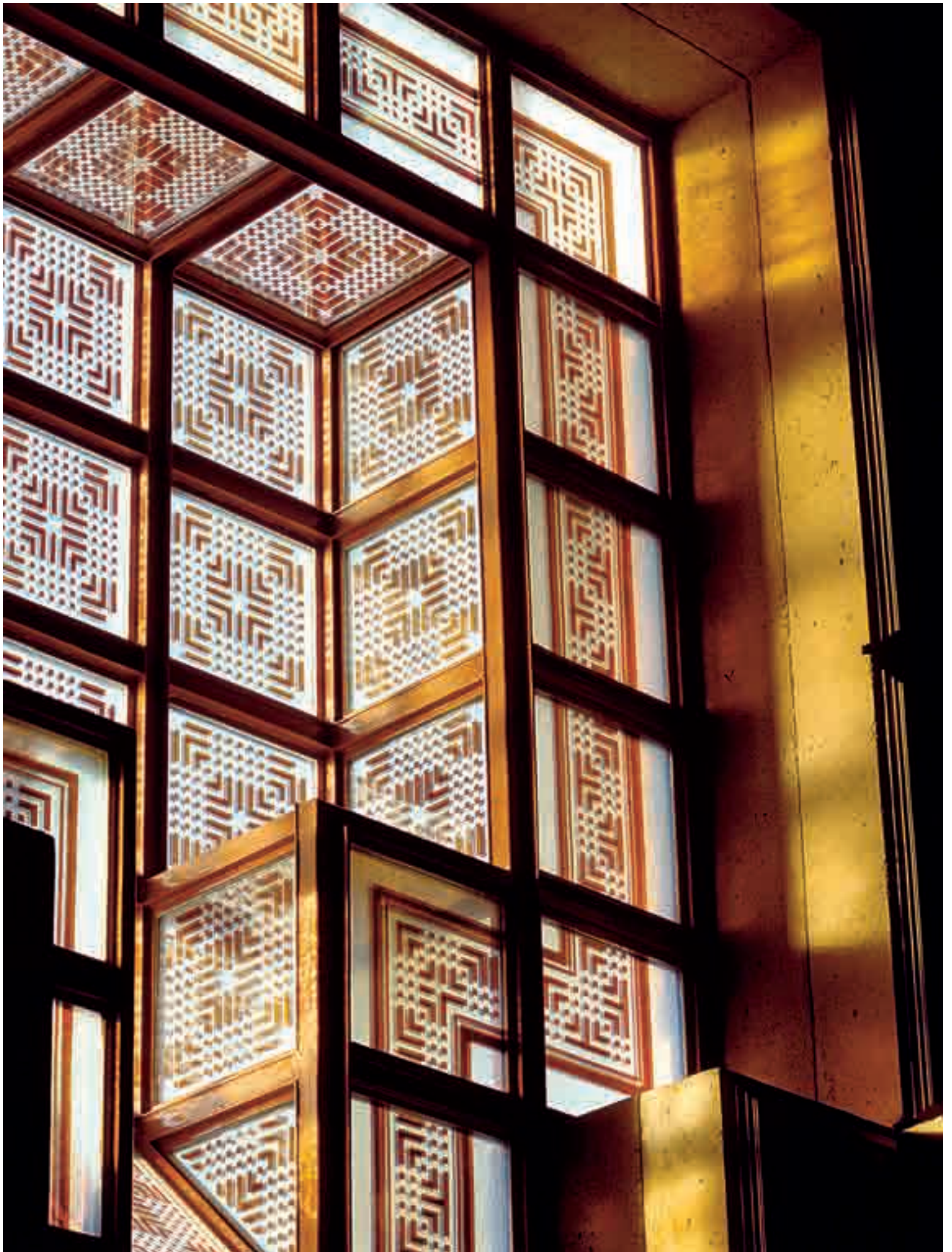
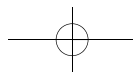
also serves as the administrative headquarters for the Ismaili community and includes a social hall, administrative offices, a council chamber and classrooms. Built in warm beige sandstone, based on a double-square plan and including six octagonal stairwells in the corners, the geometric, octagonal theme is repeated in interior decors as are calligraphic themes inspired by the traditions of Islam. Sandblasted coral and rose marble panels inlaid with brass are used to form the *mirhab*, in the Muslim architectural indication of the direction of prayer. Thirteen octagonal domes with brass circle rings bring natural light into the space. The building is accessed to through a courtyard garden containing fountains, trees and flowers. An ivory-coloured marble portal marks the main entrance. The building is centred on a 1.5-hectare site and aligned on an east-west axis. Five copper domes and glazed cupolas mark the roof of the building. The description of the building affirms that “the building is a fusion of timeless aesthetic principles of a functional facility and an environment to sustain the sacred purpose to which it is dedicated. In Islam, man is answerable to God for whatever man creates, and this is reflected in Islam’s architectural heritage.”²

- 1 His Highness the Aga Khan, foundation ceremony of the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana, Burnaby, Canada, 26 July 1982.
- 2 *The Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre*, Burnaby, B.C., Canada 1985.

Below, the west facade of the Burnaby Ismaili Centre is clad in Carrara marble and Italian sandstone.

Right, the opalescent cast-glass windows in the Prayer Hall are decorated with stained geometric patterns.





Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana

LISBON, PORTUGAL

Architect/Planner: Raj Rewal; Frederico Valsassina

Date: 1998

Dedicated to the preservation of spiritual values, the promotion of social development and the enhancement of intellectual discovery, the Ismaili Centre will seek to contribute to the enjoyment by citizens of Lisbon, and visitors alike, of spaces and buildings whose inspiration will aim to empathize as well as expand our cultural horizons.¹

His Highness the Aga Khan

■ After the Burnaby and London Ismaili Centres, the Lisbon building was the first such facility in continental Europe. The first Ismailis arrived in Portugal in the mid 1960s. As was the case in Canada, upheavals in Eastern and Central Africa in the 1970s led many Ismailis to settle in Portugal. An Ismaili National Council was created in the country in 1979 and the Aga Khan Development Network has been active in the country since 1983. Working with such partners as the Gulbenkian Foundation and the University of Minho, the AKDN has been actively expanding its efforts to better educational and social conditions for underprivileged children in Portugal. Five architects were invited to present schemes for the Lisbon Ismaili Centre and the winner was Raj Rewal, born in 1934 in India. His built work includes the Nehru Pavilion, Scope office complex, Central Institute of Educational Technology, World Bank building, National Institute of Immunology, Parliamentary Library, and the Asian Games Village, all located in New Delhi. A professor at the New Delhi School of Architecture and Planning, he has placed great emphasis on the importance of affordable housing. He was a member of the 2001 Master Jury of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. In Lisbon, he worked with the local architect Frederico Valsassina who designed the Eden Theatre and the Olympic Swimming Pool in the city.

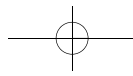
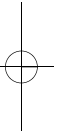
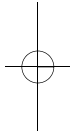
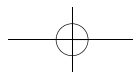
The site of the Lisbon Ismaili Centre covers no less than 18,000 square metres, of which 9825 square metres is covered by construction (including 1935 square

metres for courtyards). This leaves a large landscaped area of 12,200 square metres. The building is quite large because it includes not only a Prayer Hall, but community and multi-purpose areas as well as offices for the Aga Khan Foundation, the Ismaili Institutional Council and teaching facilities. The sources of inspiration listed by the architect are numerous and include Lisbon's Monastery of the Hieronymites (1502–52) designed in the Manueline style by Diogo Boitac, India's Fatehpur Sikri and Spain's Alhambra. In India, Rewal used computer-driven stone cutting techniques for his World Bank and Parliamentary Library projects. Here, early in the process, careful studies were made of the engineering aspects of the building in consultation with Peter Rice. Rewal's rather heavy latticework design, constituted in good part of granite and steel with limestone cladding in some places, is certainly original and calls on numerous aspects of Islamic design, including recurring geometric patterns. The structural stonework lattice had to take into account that Lisbon is in an earthquake zone. Domes are suspended on pre-stressed cables. A main courtyard is laid out in the tradition of the Islamic garden with water channels, flowering plants and a central fountain. The protected calm found here is intended to close out the surrounding, busy urban environment and provide a place of peace and contemplation. Indeed, this is the architect's response to the lofty goal set by the Aga Khan in this case: "To achieve equilibrium between human existence and the Absolute, and therefore to attend to both spiritual and physical needs."

¹ His Highness the Aga Khan, foundation ceremony of the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana, Lisbon, Portugal, 18 December 1996.

Right, the central courtyard of the Lisbon Ismaili Centre with its fountain and chahar-bagh-style garden.









For the Lisbon Ismaili Centre, the architect sought inspiration from a wide variety of sources including Persian gardens, the Alhambra, Fatehpur Sikri and, more unexpectedly, Lisbon's Monastery of the Hieronymites.

Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana

DUSHANBE, TAJIKISTAN

Architect: Farouk Noormohamed Design Associates (FNDA), Vancouver, Canada
Date: 2003–

The recent history of this entire region has been one of considerable change and turmoil. Fortunately, wisdom has prevailed, ushering in a period of peace, reconstruction and renewal, rendering even more tolerant, more open and more inclusive, a valued heritage. It is my earnest hope that the creation of the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will contribute to this endeavour. Its design will draw inspiration from the magnificent landscapes of this region, but also from its architecture, construction techniques, materials and decorative traditions. In seeking to enliven the encounter of the past with the future and foster a mutually rewarding dialogue between tradition and modernity, the Centre will attempt to reflect lessons from structures both monumental and mundane, from spaces both religious and social. The Centre will seek to provide a place where people will come together to share their creativity and their wisdom. Above all, it will be a place for contemplation, upliftment and the search for spiritual enlightenment.¹

His Highness the Aga Khan

■ Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan, a mountainous, landlocked country in Central Asia that borders on Afghanistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the west, Kyrgyzstan to the north and China to the east. It has one of the lowest per capita GDPs among the fifteen former Soviet republics. It was estimated in 2003 that the country has a population that is eighty-five per cent Sunni Muslim and five per cent Shia Muslim. Dushanbe, a small town until about eighty years ago, had a population of about 562,000 people at the moment of the 2000 census. Khorog, in Tajikistan, is one of the three sites selected for the University of Central Asia presently being designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. The Ismaili Centre announced for Dushanbe in 2003 is the first such facility to be located in Central Asia.

The architects of the Dushanbe Ismaili Centre are Farouk Noormohamed Design Associates (FNDA) based in Vancouver, Canada. Founded in 1986, the firm has

done a considerable amount of work for the Ismaili community, including *jamatkhanas* in Markham, Ontario, Burnaby Lake, Atlanta, north London, Los Angeles, Dallas and future facilities in Calgary and Edmonton, as well as a number of projects at the Aga Khan University in Karachi (with Payette Associates). The architect specifically describes the architecture in terms of both local and Ismaili traditions: “The essence of the design concept is derived from the Persian garden. First, the Garden of Eternity consists of four rivers: Wine, Milk, Honey and Clear Water.” Working with the Vancouver landscape architect Fred Liu and Associates, Noormohamad states: “One of the essential responsibilities of a landscape architect is to take the elements of nature, together with the man-made elements and combine both to arrive at an elegant scheme.” “The five towers,” he goes on to explain, “remind the believer of the Panjtan Pak – reminiscent of the five pillars used in the construction of the traditional Pamiri house. But here, the interpretation of these pillars reminds the Ismaili that whereas in the past the five pillars within their home reminded them of their faith and the challenges to practising their *tariqah*, here, in a new political and social climate, the five towers, serving as symbolic pillars, now hold up the endless sky as the roof – and reassure the believer that now the entire world is his home. It represents a symbolic connection with the *umma* and the *jamat* worldwide, all of whom share the same roof, held up by the same pillars and beliefs.” In terms more specifically related to the architecture, Farouk Noormohamed evokes the entrance portal of the complex: “Once through this portal, the magnificent great court becomes visible, its strong sense of geometry and symmetry unmistakably Islamic, and its look and feel modern but clearly rooted in the Central Asian idiom. Here, he is greeted by bubbling fountains and large open spaces ideal for gathering in good weather and for public events such as Eid prayers. The four-*iwan* layout is reminiscent of the great courtyards of

Drawings and plan of the new Dushanbe Ismaili Centre show that it is a substantial structure, inspired both by local tradition and, in a larger way, by Islamic architecture. The large, symmetrical square inner court and garden, with its central fountain, is clearly visible in the plan.



Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva and places a very local context to an otherwise very modern structure. The opening in the wall leading to the youth and education courtyard reveals a space markedly different from the gallery space. Its residential scale provides a place of comfort and a nurturing environment for its primary users – the youth. The linear courtyard leads to smaller courtyards to give the younger children attending classes direct access to outdoor spaces adjacent to their classrooms. These courtyards also lead to outdoor play areas and a performance amphitheatre where performing arts and dance, such an integral part of Tajik culture, can be explored in an outdoor setting ... Looking toward the courtyard, and above, glass louvers provide shading of the walkways and are treated with sandblasted calligraphy which, when lit from the side, will appear as though floating in mid air.”

Throughout, the spirit of tolerance and openness expressed by the Aga Khan is the leitmotif of this building. Energy efficiency and “ecologically benign materials” are used, while “the building form and plan are integrated with the site, the region and the climate to increase and encourage a harmonious relationship between the inhabitants and nature for the surrounding community.” The architect has also paid careful attention to the potential for seismic activity in the region, creating an “elastic roof diaphragm” designed to transfer the stress engendered by an earthquake to the supporting elements of the structure.

1 Address by His Highness the Aga Khan at the foundation stone ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 30 August 2003. See: http://www.akdn.org/speeches/15_dushanbelC.htm.

Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Architect: Rami El Dahan & Soheir Farid RDSF
Date: 2004–07

The transformation of the small trading port that was once Dubai into a vibrant metropolis has paralleled its demographic growth and cosmopolitan evolution. The intermingling of cultures that so enlivens this thriving city is one of the strengths on which Dubai has built its renown as a point of global convergence. It is precisely this notion of convergence that has characterized the Ismaili community's successful endeavours to contribute, through the institutional framework of the Aga Khan Development Network, toward addressing critical development challenges of the day. The Centre will provide facilities to promote cultural, educational and social programmes from the broadest, non-denominational perspectives within the ethical framework of Islam. Amongst them will be an Early Learning Centre where the Aga Khan Education Services, a philanthropic agency, will draw on its own extensive experience in many parts of the world to offer broad, holistic, early childhood education on a secular and non-denominational basis at the highest international standards of excellence. The objective is to have a curriculum of proven calibre, taught by competent teachers, to help lay strong foundations for a child's continuing educational growth.¹

His Highness the Aga Khan

■ In a trend shown in a number of his speeches in the early twenty-first century, the Aga Khan here addresses not only the pivotal role of Dubai in its region, but also the nature of the work that he expects this new Ismaili Centre to undertake. He makes a deliberate connection between the situation of the world and the place that his institutions can or should occupy. The Dubai Centre is clearly intended as an ambitious link between Ismailis, but also in a broader and more ecumenical sense between Muslims and the rest of the world. Continuing the description of the Centre's role and its relation to Muslim tradition in his 2003 speech, the Aga Khan stated: "At this juncture, perhaps, it would be appropriate to situate one of the functions of the Ismaili Centre in the tradition of Muslim piety. For many centuries, a prominent feature of the Muslim religious landscape has been the variety of spaces of gathering coexisting harmoniously with the *masjid*, which in itself has accommodated a range of diverse institutional spaces for educational, social and reflective purposes. Historically serving communities of different interpretations and spiritual affiliations, these spaces have retained their cultural nomenclatures and characteristics, from *ribat* and *zawiyya* to *khanaqa* and *jamatkhana*. The congregational space incorporated within the Ismaili Centre belongs to the historic category of *jamatkhana*, an institutional category that also serves a number of sister Sunni and Shia communities, in their respective contexts, in many parts of the world. Here, it will be space reserved for traditions and practices specific to the Shia Ismaili *tariqah* of Islam."²

At a time when Dubai is undergoing one of the most substantial architectural revolutions of any city in



In a decided contrast with the towers of Dubai, the new Ismaili Centre calls on Fatimid tradition for the inspiration of its forms. The Egyptian architects Dahan and Farid had used similar formal sources in their Hilltop Restaurant in Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt.



the world, recently completing the tallest skyscraper on earth, the Aga Khan has chosen not to create an Ismaili Centre in this spirit of astonishing modernity, but rather looks back in some sense to the sources of Muslim tradition. “In the tradition of Muslim spaces of gathering,” he says, “the Ismaili Centre will be a symbol of the confluence between the spiritual and the secular in Islam. Architect El Dahan has drawn inspiration from the Fatimid mosques in Cairo. Like its functions, the Centre’s architecture will reflect our perception of daily life whose rhythm weaves the body and the soul, man and nature into a seamless unity. Guided by the ethic of whatever we do, see and hear, and the quality of our social interactions, which resonate on our faith and bear on our spiritual lives, the Centre will seek to create, inshallah, a sense of equilibrium, stability and tranquility.”³

Muslims represent ninety-six per cent of the population of the United Arab Emirates, with Shia Muslims numbering about sixteen per cent of the total. Dubai is the most populous of the seven Emirates and quite unusual in that expatriates, roughly 100,000 British and other Westerners, as well as significant numbers of Indians or other nationalities, constitute a good part of its population. Although Sunni Islam is the religion of state, Dubai in particular allows substantial freedom of worship. Shia mosques, for example, are considered private and receive no government funding. Dubai is also the only Emirate that has Hindu temples and a Sikh *gurdwara*.

The architects of the new Centre are the Egyptians Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid (El Dahan & Farid Ltd.), who designed the Hilltop Restaurant, inspired by Fatimid and Mamluk building traditions, in Azhar Park in Cairo. Here, again, Rami El Dahan has openly called on Fatimid traditions. Knowledge of Fatimid designs is limited by the fact that there are only five mosques from the period left in Cairo – al-Azhar, al-Hakim, al-Aqmar, al-Saleh Talai and the small mosque of al-Juyushi on the plateau of the Muqattam overlooking the city. As the architect describes the building: “The project has many courtyards and water features which are important elements in the architecture of the Islamic world; the courtyards range in size and scale from the intimate Morning Prayer Hall courtyard with its *salsabil* to the large courtyard with the large fountain and a *chahar-bagh* garden.” Rami El Dahan goes on to explain: “We also have seven main feature domes in the project with genuine designs, notably the sixteen-metre-span Congregation Hall dome carried on eight intersected arches, forming an octagonal star, the dome of the Morning Prayer Hall, a multi-facet prismatic brick dome, carried over large intersected stone vaults

and the dome of the heptagonal hall with seven sides.” As is the case with other major Ismaili Centres, the Dubai facility is quite substantial (15,500 square metres of floor area). The main Prayer Hall alone covers 1342 square metres and a total of more than 7000 square metres is used for courtyards and gardens. The first Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana to be located in the Middle East, the Dubai Centre has a basement, ground level and three storeys above ground and is built on a 13,200-square-metre site given by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum to His Highness the Aga Khan.

With its accomplished wood and stonework, the Centre bears a clear relation to the past, as its architects wished. It gives the feeling of a building intended to last, like monuments of other eras. In the midst of the real-estate boom that has swept over Dubai, the Ismaili Centre recalls the traditions of a region more than of this specific location. In this cosmopolitan, expatriate-dominated city on the Gulf, the Ismaili Centre is a signal that the lessons of the past still have meaning today. In its Prayer Hall, before the stone *mirhab* wall, but also under its brick domes, the Centre materializes a sense of spirituality that cannot be captured in photography.

1 Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the foundation stone-laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre and Jamatkhana in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 13 December 2003.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Below, a plan showing the ways in which the architects have integrated the complex plan for the Dubai Ismaili Centre into this corner site.

Right, the Congregation Hall dome with its clear reminiscences of Islamic architecture of the past.

