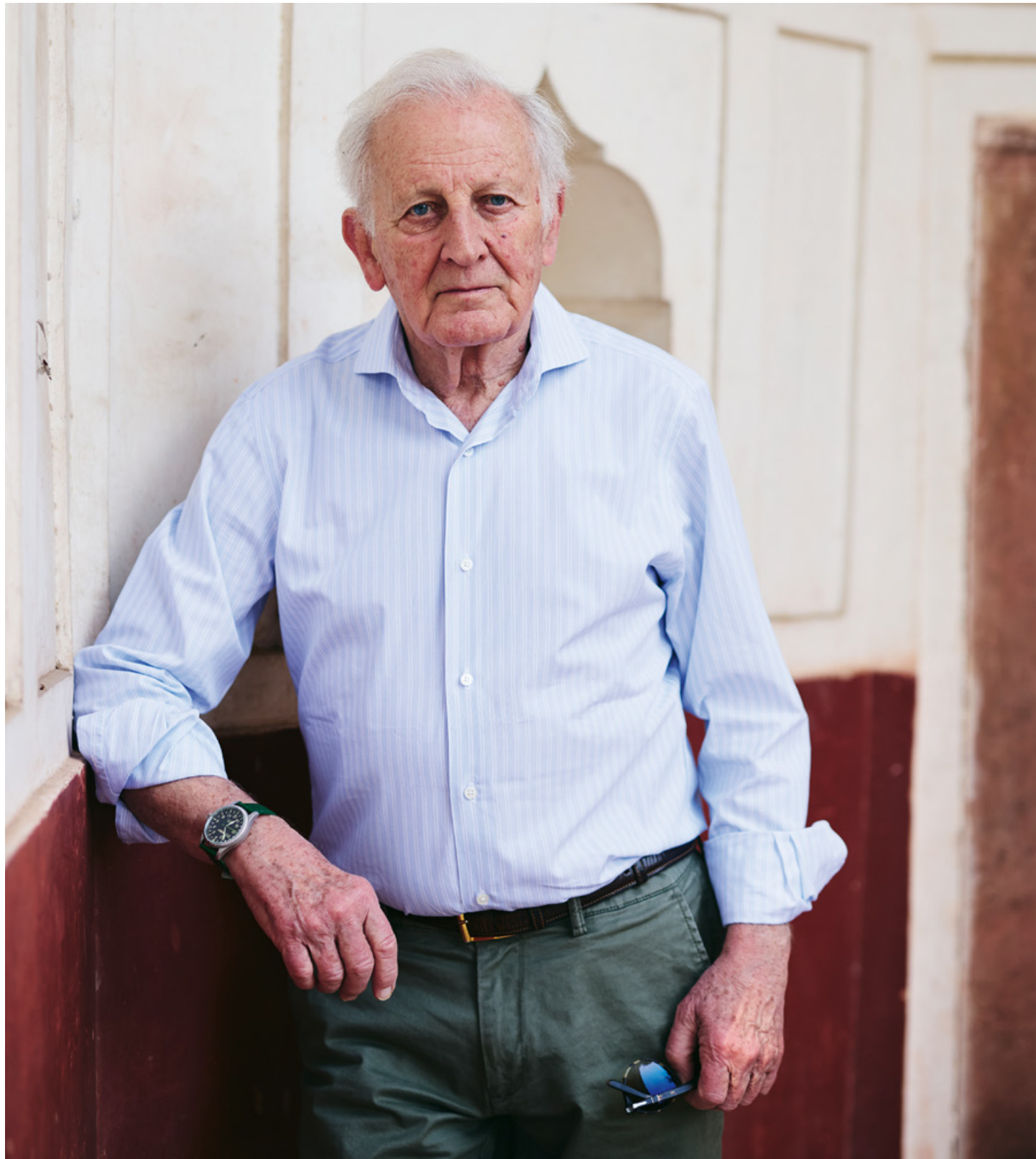


## THE LONG ARM OF THE AGA KHAN



The Aga Khan Trust for Culture is revitalizing Muslim heritage. In India, *Manju Sara Rajan* explores their latest projects with director *Luis Monreal*.

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In India, we live with stories. Tales of djinns and gods, emperors and statesmen, screen idols, crooks and saviors. We like to mythologize our early ingenuity, recite accounts of valor and romance, and lament our defeats, the torments of colonialism and its brutality. And every year, on August 15, we celebrate our collective awakening when, in 1947, as the country’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, said, the soul of a new independent nation, long suppressed, found utterance.

In the business of creating a new India, many things were neglected, not least among them the buildings that have born witness to our long and complicated history. But reclaiming these symbols of the past is important, for nowhere do the dichotomies of India and all of its contradictions—its resilience, its poverty, its somersaulting technological advancements—intersect as clearly as in our architecture.

I spent two days this past winter in New Delhi with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which has, over the last few decades, taken on the task of restoring some of these dormant icons through a slate of urban renewal initiatives—a network of sites that now cover 300 acres in the heart of the Indian capital. The project has included the redevelopment of Sunder Nursery, a 90-acre park; the rehabilitation of Nizamuddin Basti, one of New Delhi’s oldest settlements; the restoration of Humayun’s Tomb (the grandest tomb in the Islamic world before the Taj Mahal was built); and, since July 2024, the opening of India’s newest museum, Humayun’s Tomb Museum.

It’s an expensive exercise. The AKTC is part of the wider Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which bears the name of its founder and chairman, the Aga Khan. His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan is the 49th hereditary imam or spiritual leader of Nizari Isma’ili Muslims—and one of the world’s wealthiest Muslim investors.

Nizari Isma’ilis are a relatively small sect within the Shia community, which is itself the smaller of the two dominant branches of Islam—the other being Sunni. Isma’ili Muslims are spread across 25 countries around the world, with large communities in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Considering Isma’ilis are relatively small in numbers, its community outreach feels outsized: The Aga Khan preaches the ethical acquisition and use of wealth, and financial aid that promotes economic self-reliance among developing countries and their poorest people. With some 90,000 employees in 30 countries, the AKDN is one of the largest private development agencies in the world, operating 1,000 programs and institutions.

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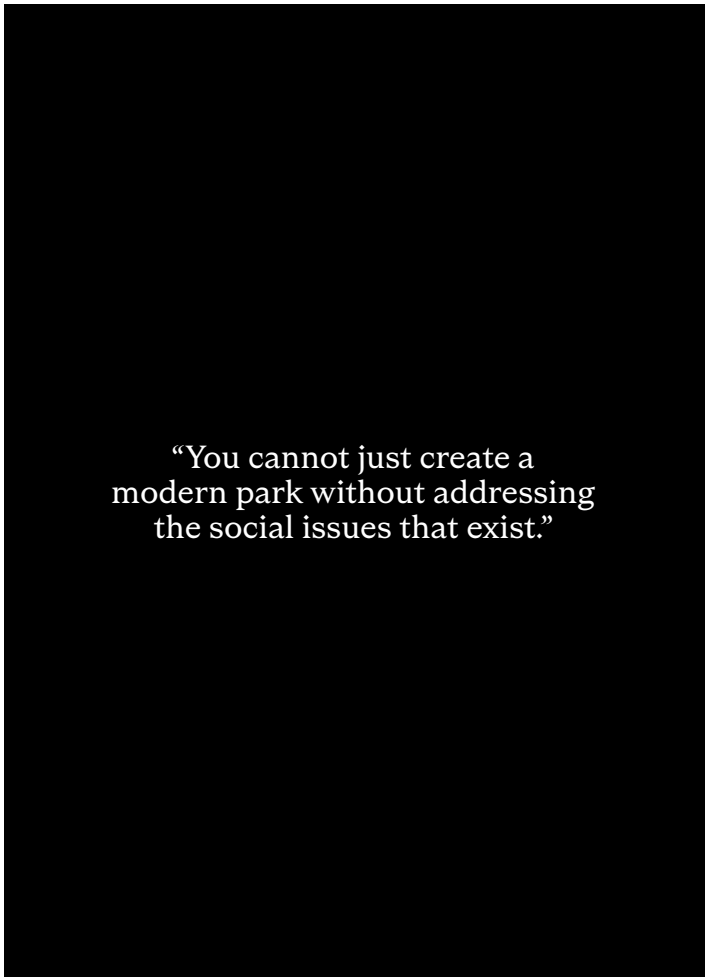
And even though AKDN is inspired by the ethics of Islam, it would be wrong to consider this network of agencies in the same way as one would, say, the Catholic Church. AKDN’s work requires it to be multicultural, multi-faith and secular. The AKTC, a not-for-profit entity, is one of the nine agencies under the AKDN. As in India, the AKTC has played a visionary role as a cultural partner in many places around the world, including Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Egypt, Mali, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan and Tanzania.

For the past 22 years, the Geneva-based trust has been under the leadership of Luis Monreal, a Spanish archaeologist, art historian and author. His association with the Aga Khan began when he was proposed by the architect Frank Gehry to sit as a jury member for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, a prestigious prize for building concepts that address the needs and aspirations of societies with a significant Muslim presence. It brings much-needed attention to practices and projects in parts of the world that are otherwise ignored by Western-centric juries. (Similarly, if there is a thread of Islamic motivation guiding the work of the wider AKDN, then it is that it has chosen Muslim-majority countries to work in and focused a lot of its charitable activities on promoting a better understanding of Islamic cultures’ contributions to the world.) “We work in many countries where there is no Isma’ili community,” Monreal says. “We work for a common good. We don’t distinguish between who we touch with our projects.”









Today, we're in Nizamuddin Basti—one of New Delhi's most crowded and impoverished localities. Tetris-like buildings fan out haphazardly around the minarets of Jamat Khana Mosque—the earliest mosque in Delhi that continues to be used for worship. The area is named after Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, the revered 14th century Sufi saint, who is buried in a *dargah*, or mausoleum, here. For pilgrims, this is sacred ground. Every day, thousands make their way through the neighborhood's tight alleyways, with an estimated four million visiting the mausoleum annually. Being here feels as though one has stepped back in time, into an Edwin Lord Weeks painting; the air is pungent with a mélange of scents—rose petals and jasmine; fresh greasy snacks; whiffs of attar, garbage and chewing tobacco.

The Mughal dynasty, which ruled over vast swaths of the Indian subcontinent from the mid-16th to the early 19th century, left behind a brilliant smorgasbord of architectural gems—tombs, pavilions and other structures—in the area around Nizamuddin Basti. This is where the AKTC and its funding partners have focused their efforts in New Delhi, running education programs and health-care facilities, and executing major renovation works. Monreal says the work stems from the Aga Khan's belief that "architecture is a service to society."

Since 1997, the AKTC has forged partnerships in India with governments of different political temperaments and with multiple central and state agencies, including the Archaeological Survey of India, the Central Public Works Department and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. "We cannot as a private institution alone deal with a project of this magnitude. We need a local public partner to be with us during the process," says Monreal. "These partnerships are so important from a citizen's perspective. That's the reason why people are able to enjoy these buildings in the way that they can."

A short walk from Nizamuddin Basti, Sunder Nursery—a 90-acre green haven—unfurls in genteel contrast to the density of the neighborhood's alleyways. The park was established by the British to propagate saplings and experiment with plants imported from other parts of the British Empire. Today, thanks to the AKTC, its design has been reorganized according to the principles of a traditional Islamic garden—geometric and formal—giving a sense of order, with green squares intersected by gurgling channels of water. There are peafowl fluttering about, as though a Mughal miniature has come to life.

Monreal credits AKTC's unique outlook toward these historical projects for the impact they have had on the local community. "Until very recently, many state organizations and intergovernmental agencies thought of cultural heritage as inert assets," he says. "For 25 years, we've been promoting the notion that these are economically viable assets that could generate jobs, socioeconomic development and cultural understanding. Very few entities work in the area of historic cities from the angle of conservation, social development and education, like we do. It's a method that combines all these aspects into one single project that will endure."

In Islam, a desert-born religion, the relationship to water, flowers and trees is symbolic and powerful. In Arabic, there is a word, *jannat*, that translates to "garden" or "paradise"—a stand-in for heaven, the blissful eternal resting place for those who've led a righteous life. This allegoric connection to nature's splendor presents itself strongly in Islamic architecture, and it seems appropriate that the most impactful work done by the AKTC has been its gift of green spaces to places that would otherwise not have them. From Kabul to Cairo, the agency has created and continues to manage parks in parts of the world where they are not a government priority.

The first of these was Al Azhar Park in Cairo, where, in 1984, the Aga Khan, standing on the rooftop of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy's home and looking out over the city, proposed that he fund the creation of an urban park. At that time, green space per inhabitant in Cairo was about the size of a footprint—one of the smallest in the world. But when Monreal started his job in 2002, almost 20 years later, the park was still unbuilt; the land that had been made available to the AKTC was Al Darassa Hill, a 75-acre high ground filled with rubble and trash. "It became obvious that you cannot just create a modern park without addressing the social issues that exist," explains Monreal.











( above )  
Monreal inside the mausoleum  
of Mirza Aziz Koka—a prominent  
noble in the Mughal Empire in  
the 16th and 17th centuries—that  
has been conserved as part of the  
AKTC’s work in the Nizamuddin  
Basti neighborhood of New Delhi.



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The project kept evolving in scope, with AKTC taking up the rehabilitation of the neighboring district of Darb al-Amar, improving housing and health care while simultaneously restoring historic buildings in the area. “When we started moving earth, [10th century] Fatimid and Ayyubid city walls appeared. So, a new element of the project became the restoration of one and a half kilometers of the former ramparts of medieval Cairo,” Monreal says. At less than a dollar to visit, it attracts close to two million visitors a year and is entirely self-sustaining.

Al Azhar became a prototype for what is possible in India. Managed by AKTC’s India team, which is headed by architect Ratish Nanda, AKTC has not just restored many of the historic structures around Nizamuddin Basti but, through design, created a sort of heritage trail. It has the beginnings of what could become Delhi’s version of Central Park.

On a late weekday afternoon, Sunder Nursery is filled with activity. There are picnickers, strolling couples, friends laughing together, a birthday celebration, plus the odd jogger. Even on a day when New Delhi has been in the news for its thick, hazy cloak of toxic smog, Sunder Nursery feels like an alternative, orderly, green reality—a jannat for the living, if you will.

My last walking tour with Monreal and the AKTC team was through the new Humayun’s Tomb Museum, just around the corner from Sunder Nursery. It has opened at a critical moment in Indian history. Inside, the tale of the Mughals, their contributions to India’s heritage and more importantly, their plurality, is on full display through objects and detailed storytelling. It offers a lively understanding of that dynasty’s impact beyond just the Taj Mahal. For a culture built on stories, AKTC is helping Indians understand our own a little better.