



Aga Khan Award for Architecture

Report of the Master Jury

2025 Cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

26 June 2025

This Cycle

This cycle of the Award has unfolded in a world in tumult, at a moment of global insecurity. When so many pressures are placed on *living*, the challenges of *building* may feel even greater. As the Master Jury for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, we would like to convey a message of hope, inspired by the projects we have reviewed: a message that architecture offers many lessons for forging a path ahead. This year's shortlisted architectural projects – their inventors, their inhabitants, their supporters, and their custodians – teach us not only how to build but also how communities thrive and find optimism.

Our Response to the Brief

The Steering Committee, in its brief to the Master Jury, transmitted three guiding values for our work: “Transcendence”, “Pluralism”, and “Progress”. In our discussions of the projects, we found these values productive in that they guided us to the fundamentally forward-looking aspect of these projects. When looking for *transcendence* (that quality of being “timely and timeless”), we were captivated by architectural projects that transcend the limitations of their difficult situations (whether social, political, or financial) to produce genuine discovery and delight, hope and joy. When guided by the *pluralism* of cultures and knowledge systems, we found a remarkable creativity and novelty in flexible building methods. These systems were flexible, were open to unpredictable results, and made the best of imperfections. The jury has taken this lesson to heart philosophically, being open to unexpected outcomes in its own work as well. When seeking evidence of *progress*, we discovered projects in which architecture showed a remarkable capacity to coalesce the demands, ideas, and resources of a human community, contributing *leaps* in the human capacity to regenerate society, beyond technocratic visions.

A Range of Scales

The projects we reviewed exist at a range of scales: from the urban core of a megalopolis to the growing edges of a modern city; from the centre of a suburban town to the matrix of a historic settlement; from the geological landscape of an island's topography to the ever-shifting shores of a waterscape. This range shows how architectural excellence spans from the territorial to the elemental.

A Range of Time Horizons

Those who build – architects, builders, communities, and institutions – are increasingly asking themselves what it means to make a permanent mark on the earth. At the same time, a genuine desire persists for buildings that offer communities a sense of belonging and shelter from constant



movement or precarity. We have been impressed with the intelligence of projects that allow reconfigurations of buildings and spaces, and that design for permanence amid permanent change. Even when not designed to be adaptable, many projects contain ingredients for new solutions, transmit elements from the past, or tweak given techniques, ideas, and images into the future.

A Range of Geographies

True globality is not defined by geopolitics. Architectural cultures, whether vernacular or monumental, have always been characterised by flows of ideas, materials, people, and even typologies, across territorial borders. We seek to recognise projects that reflect the increasingly hybrid landscapes (physical and social) in which architecture exists and is made.

The projects of this cycle form the basis for a veritable architectural discourse, which can be expressed through the following questions:

1- How do architecture's social dimension and materiality reinforce each other?

Architecture can arise from social needs and relations, providing spaces where people may connect and exchange knowledge. However, architecture cannot be reduced to process; form and material have value and agency in their own right. While these two dimensions may exist independently, it is their synthesis that catalyses architectural excellence.

At times, we have evaluated beautiful forms and excellent innovations that have fallen short in terms of their social impact. Good intentions and noble attitudes do not justify any means or solutions. The projects that rose to the top demonstrated a symbiotic relationship between the social, formal, and material dimensions. The projects that were awarded do not merely facilitate a social programme; they demonstrate generosity on the part of architects, clients, and communities.

2- Can excellent architecture be imprecise?

When reviewing this year's cycle, we were faced with the dilemma of how to approach projects whose promised ambitions were not fully realised in terms of detailing, materials, or the institutionalisation of a programme. Conversely, wholly unexpected outcomes sometimes occurred that went beyond the stated intentions of clients and architects, increasing the cultural value of a site, giving shape to new programmes, and offering seeds for future experimentation.

Another dilemma arose from projects characterised by the simultaneous presence of precision and imprecision. We recognise that imperfection and messiness are integral to good architecture, and we appreciate the honesty of projects that do not shy away from revealing, rather than hiding, compromises that had to be made within given constraints. The quality of the awarded projects lies exactly in their ability to negotiate between frayed edges and stated precision and to demonstrate dexterity, whether through economy of means, negotiation of new and pre-existing methods, or offering seeds of new paradigms for the future.



3- In light of current global trends involving the movement of people, capital, materials, and ideas, whose innovations are recognised?

Reflecting the realities of a global and interconnected world, we observed projects in which innovation was driven by actors with different capacities and backgrounds. This diversity of actors creates power dynamics that can manifest in different ways, such as the perpetuation of colonial dynamics involving Western actors or investments operating in developing countries, or architectural experts overriding local knowledge or informal networks. In this context, it was important for the jury to consider notions of epistemic justice and to acknowledge that different knowledge systems exist and are equally valid. The strength of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture lies in the acknowledgement of all those involved, including trained architects, government agencies, businesspeople, and/or community agents. We were impressed by projects demonstrating transgenerational and transcultural knowledge exchange from which scalable lessons could be learned and implemented in different locations.

4- In the face of serious challenges to the world's most basic political and economic lifelines, how can architecture achieve excellence?

The jury is mindful of the sensitive ethics involved in awarding and receiving this award. Apart from celebrating the exceptional achievement of a project and its team, the purpose of this award is also to give visibility to overshadowed subjects and foreground issues through the lens of architectural responses. In light of the current political climate, the jury was faced with the difficult dilemma of the potential harmful effects of making something or someone visible. At what point does excellence get silenced for the greater good? Drawing on the experience of those who build architecture in fragile contexts, the jury navigated the challenges of rewarding architectural excellence with visibility, arriving at its own ethics.

Architecture, its makers and users, are all active agents in modelling possibilities and providing powerful demonstrations of how to create a life worth living.

Although project implementation may be constrained by a scarcity of resources, we learned that great architecture uses those constraints as an incentive for innovation. Great architecture transcends limitations and does more than just the bare minimum: it “works” not despite the obstacles, but precisely because of them. It creates beauty, dignity, and optimism in the most challenging of circumstances, showing that every human being has the right to a quality of life. In these times, this right is unfortunately not given to all, and architecture alone cannot resolve this problem.

5- How can we “measure” the full impact of architecture?

While quantitative performance indicators are a valuable means of measuring a project's impact, we were impressed by some projects whose success was evident in the budgetary creativity or the number of actors involved and people affected. However, the jury also recognised that not



everything can be quantified. When identifying architectural quality, we had to consider how to capture the less visible aspects of a successful project, which may be anchored in the social realm. We are very grateful to the site reviewers for their impeccable and diligent work in assessing such intangible dimensions.

As the Aga Khan Award for Architecture considers projects that have been built and operational for at least a year, many of the projects have already demonstrated impact in the form of a method that can be learned from an architecture that has generated a new cultural paradigm, or a regenerated city area. We have also seen projects that drew direct inspiration from those that were awarded or shortlisted in previous cycles. This is a testament to the Aga Khan Award for Architecture's impact in producing and disseminating knowledge about architecture. While we recognise the potential of all these projects, the impact of architecture evolves over time, and some of the projects will reveal the full extent of their impact in years ahead.

6- How does architecture offer delight, hope, and joy in this moment?

The challenges we face today are so vast that they can easily lead to hopelessness, cynicism, and inaction. The crises we face as a global community today are also crises of imagination, modesty, openness, and flexibility. In these times, it is imperative that architecture offers a positive outlook. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture's process is a challenge to our imagination, inviting us to conceive of architecture as more than simply a response to crises, but as a creator of a future world in which we wish to live.

The Recipients of the 2025 Aga Khan Award for Architecture:

Jahad Metro Plaza, Tehran, Iran

Vision Pakistan, Islamabad, Pakistan

Revitalisation of Historic Esna, Egypt

West Wusutu Village Community Centre, Hohhot, China

Wonder Cabinet, Bethlehem, Palestine

Majara Residence and Community Redevelopment, Hormuz, Iran

Khudi Bari, various locations, Bangladesh

Azra Akšamija, Noura Al-Sayeh Holtrop, Lucia Allais, David Basulto, Yvonne Farrell (chair), Kabage Karanja, Yacouba Konaté, Hassan Radoine, Wong Mun Summ

June 2025



Jahad Metro Plaza

Tehran, Iran

With 159 stations and a length of over 250 kilometres, the Tehran Metro is one of the most extensive in the world, carrying millions of passengers every day. As critical urban infrastructure, the functionality and appeal of the Metro are central concerns for the municipality, the client for this project.

The redevelopment of the station entrance transformed a once conventional and modest access point into an open public space: a plaza that encourages passage, encounters, and events. Unlike the former structure, which closed off stairways at ground level, the new design opens the station to the sky and neighbourhood, converting former stair areas into a pedestrian zone with direct street access and thus improving accessibility.

The wide facade enhances ventilation and provides a welcoming space for public interaction, informal commerce, and urban life, acknowledging the need of metro passengers for space beyond transit.

The project's architecture is characterised by its striking volume and integration of vaults, arches, and circular forms, which reference Iran's rich civilisational heritage. The use of brick further strengthens this historical connection, and its warm, subtle texture emphasises the station's status as a new urban monument. At the same time, the station blends in with its contemporary surroundings, standing out among the newer buildings that frame the site.

This renewed identity imbues the metro station with energy and distinction, establishing it as a landmark within the neighbourhood and the wider city. The strategic location further enhances its potential to become embedded in the collective memory of Tehran's residents and visitors.

Aesthetically, the design draws upon Iranian architectural traditions. Daylight penetrates through large openings in the ceiling, illuminating the interior and improving the station's environmental quality. The widened entrance brings in light and air, creating a sense of openness and flow.

Through its subtle strength, attention to heritage and craft, and its aim to revive pedestrian space and social interaction, the project exemplifies the role of architecture in shaping public spaces as living dialogues between history, people, and ideas.



Vision Pakistan

Islamabad, Pakistan

Two people – one an experienced educator, the other a young practising architect – work together and invent a new wellspring of respect, a new skills training centre, a place where young people feel that they matter, where not-yet-discovered talents will be trained and encouraged.

The educator, Rushda Tariq Qureshi, had a vision: to educate, to involve the youth, and to form a community where students will feel useful and valued.

The architect, Mohammad Saifullah Siddiqui of DB Studios, was trusted with the task of understanding Rushda's vision. Together they transformed a plot of land close to public transport and invented a building that would not only contain a new type of education, but be full of light, spatially interesting, economically efficient, and highly distinct.

The six-storey building's two lowest floors, with their future-proofing storefronts, are designed to relate to the major street. Arranged across the storeys above, the cared-for, plant-filled classrooms and prayer hall interlink and are visually connected through the 10-metre-high atrium. Students can see each other, benefiting from being able to observe each other's training and progress, aware that they are part of a caring community. The roof-level dining area and kitchen provide precious opportunities for further personal development beyond the vocational programme.

The life within this three-dimensional cube is held by strategically important environmental values: good natural light, cross ventilation, solar protection, low maintenance costs, and robust materials.

The architectural expression of this new building is provided by its concrete screen, held in front of the two street facades. This applied grid of 9 squares high and 10 squares long both protects the interior and expresses this contemporary building to the city. It does this by reinterpreting the familiar and historic *jaalis*, metal screens, both in various geometric patterns and in different colours. This combination of interpreting history to provide a visually controlled, yet joyful facade gives this building an easily recognisable and distinct surface.



Revitalisation of Historic Esna

Esna, Egypt

The initiative to revitalise historic Esna goes beyond the usual limits of an urban conservation project that is formally framed in advance and instead presents a bottom-up strategy through an inclusive, socially structured programme to gradually improve the heritage environment. Hence, residents play a major role in maintaining the urban synergy through its living heritage, sparking sustainable regenerative momentum in what had become dilapidated built fabric.

By restoring or reusing buildings – commercial, residential, and spiritual – the project is stimulating a whole historic urban metabolism to cope with the contemporary challenge of improving human conditions and working infrastructure for craftspeople. Its community-driven initiatives are a catalyst for upgrading the local economy through small and micro enterprises. Accordingly, the project echoes local techne and know-how through innovative small and accumulative results to actively generate the conservation of the urban core, the city’s identity, cultural dynamism, and economic resilience.

In doing so, the project clearly shifts the paradigm of urban conservation to another level, prioritising the role of residents’ collective intelligence in transforming their challenging and derelict built environment. Rather than only addressing monuments and other tangible historic fabric, the focus is also on intangible cultural capital as leverage to revitalise both the material and immaterial dimensions.

The key gain from the revitalisation of historic Esna is how it reactivates historic spaces through incremental and accumulative actions to synergise the social, cultural, environmental, and economic potentials through the community’s ingenuity. Thus, it introduces social innovation as a creative tool for urban upgrading, such as the Okra women-run initiative for gender inclusion and local economic growth.

With its highly participative approach towards urban heritage conservation, the project became the first “conservation plan” for a non-monumental urban area to be approved by the Government of Egypt. Unprecedented in its combination of adaptive reuse with community empowerment while stimulating the local economy, it could bring balance to Egypt’s otherwise more formal heritage conservation strategies and policies.



West Wusutu Village Community Centre

Hohhot, China

The West Wusutu Village Community Centre shifts the paradigm of contemporary architectural design beyond object-based and aesthetic end-results, orienting it towards translating users' daily community needs into a well-conceived architectural vehicle. The dynamics of this project significantly enhance social interaction, cultural experience, and environmental resilience. Thus, by integrating diverse users and embracing a high multifunctional articulation through its fluid spaces, the centre has generated a valuable shared and inclusive communal microcosm within a rural human macrocosm.

The project's architectural performance is based around integrating multiple communal activities not through rigid functional and confined spaces, but rather through a permeating circular courtyard at its core. Beyond its tangible form, this courtyard orchestrates continuous circulation and orientation to different, openly linked rooms. With a ramp linking the ground level and the rooftop as a continuous public space, the architectural ensemble ingeniously rethinks notions of public and private spaces as well as rigid level boundaries.

Accordingly, it demonstrates how sensitive and sensible design can be in a rural open environment, by encapsulating villagers' communal interactions in a compact physical envelope to generate inclusiveness, resilience, sustainability, and well-being. The project pursues a spatial-articulation strategy which has been painstakingly translated via a material form, yet being careful not to fall into a dichotomy of space versus function.

In addition to its highly optimised form, the structure presents a transcendent, impactful landmark in the village's landscape. The architecture takes advantage of the beauty of its natural environs, with its views towards the Daqing Mountains, while remaining anchored to the site by surviving trees as a marker for villagers' collective memory.

In terms of tectonics and feasibility, the West Wusutu Village Community Centre embraces a clear, non-alienating geometry where horizontal and vertical permeability are exemplary. Whereas the cooling towers enhance the overall aesthetics of the envelope, they also link the ventilation systems to enhance passive performance. In addition, the large-scale reuse of bricks conveys a critical message of sustainability – especially in a rural context, where nature is predominant.



Wonder Cabinet

Bethlehem, Palestine

Initiated by the architects to fill a gap in the cultural offerings for youth in the city, this project expands the agency of architects to the roles of client, designer, cultural practitioner, and activist.

Designed as an open, flexible, and transparent beacon of cultural production and resilience in the Al-Karkafeh Valley, the spatial organisation of the building facilitates exchange, dialogue, and community-building. With a mixed programme of artists' studios, production spaces, a radio station, a restaurant, and the architects' offices spread over different platforms, the cross-sectional void traversing its three floors encourages physical and visual connections, both within the building and towards the surrounding landscape.

Borrowing from the contemporary language of the concrete frame construction prevalent in Bethlehem and its environs, the project demonstrates that spatial complexity and richness can be achieved through the judicious application of standardised construction methods and minimal material use. The concrete grid becomes an inhabited infrastructure of cultural production as well as a domestic monument – anonymous in its expression and scale, yet monumental in its impact. The building manages to both blend in with the other buildings in the city through its architectural expression and stand out through its transparency as an open and welcoming gesture in the landscape. Its bare concrete frame is complemented by locally produced artisanal elements such as the spinning signage, portholes, and murals that celebrate contemporary Palestinian production.

Firmly nestled within a deeply charged setting, the Wonder Cabinet offers new horizons: reintroducing making, music, wonder, and joy in the city. By imagining both the cultural institution and the physical structure that hosts it, the architects have created a building that transcends its immediate political context, providing a model for an architecture of connection that is rooted in contemporary expressions of national identity and asserts the importance of cultural production as a means of resistance.



Majara Residence and Community Redevelopment

Hormuz, Iran

Set within a breathtaking geological context that dates back millions of years, these projects on Hormuz Island, Iran, are framed in relation to a vast mountain range typified by colourful mineral and salt deposits. So, while being intricately geo-referenced to the site, they are meaningfully embedded within the social and cultural fabric of the land.

The project can be understood as a vibrant and colourful archipelago of varying programmes that serve to incrementally define a truly alternative model for tourism in this context and beyond. Following on from its first new structure – the simple viewing and interpretation organisation called Rong Cultural Centre – the Majara Residence presents an offer within a growing global industry. Choosing not to follow a hyper-luxurious and resource-demanding typology, it leans instead towards a pluralist and inclusive framework that counters excess and becomes part of a community-driven evolutionary process of growth.

Predominantly built using a sandbag “superadobe” structural system, alongside more conventional building processes, the project exploits knowledge systems that leverage both local and wider global expertise, realised with the community. It complements the remoteness of Hormuz with a comprehensive off-grid suite of solutions that reduce pressure on the island’s limited energy and water resources.

As well as the new structures, which include the “Typeless” building used largely for activities related to monitoring the scheme’s impact, the ongoing urban acupuncture interventions in the town of Hormuz are another key strength of the initiative.

While the Majara Residence project has won many awards and has received worldwide attention on social media, what has tended to remain unsaid until now is how it sits at the intersection between geology, community life, and tourism – an industry which can be so destructively globalising. In its deep sensitivity to context, this project exemplifies how architecture can become a formidable force of optimism and rigorous resolve to shift the social, cultural, and material pendulum.



Khudi Bari

Various locations, Bangladesh

The Khudi Bari project has been granted the Award for developing a flexible system that addresses global challenges with vernacular solutions, reframed through a contemporary lens to evolve and scale up so as to deliver a wider, regional impact.

Based on a module of elementary geometry, its rationalisation – paired with the adaptation of vernacular bamboo techniques – puts humanity before aesthetics, and it is humble enough to allow for an open-source use that enables communities to build and localise by themselves. Its easy and rapid deployment and disassembly provide an engaging solution for the nomadic condition of the climate-displaced communities in the flood-plains of Bangladesh, for whom it was first designed, already impacting the lives of hundreds of families.

As it grows into larger-scale communal projects, the Khudi Bari maintains the simplicity of its structure while still delivering grace and beauty, reminding us that design for survival doesn't exclude architectural quality. Thanks to the flexibility and open-endedness of its geometry, the design allows for the individual module to scale from a single shelter into collective communal buildings, widening its impact from personal dignity to social infrastructure, in the form of classrooms, community kitchens, and humanitarian aid centres.

The project has a deep ecological framing, contributing to the global advancement of bamboo as a material. A living, regenerative resource widely available across the Bamboo Belt in the Global South, it is increasingly being adopted as perception changes from that of a precarious material to a viable, scalable, sustainable solution, delivering value that goes beyond style.

Clear and powerful architectural ideas have the possibility to reach and inspire others worldwide, but then have to be downloaded into specific contexts to be built with local resources. Ideas can and should go global, but materials need to stay local.

The Khudi Bari project is profoundly optimistic, as it reframes the role that architecture can and should play in times of difficult global realities – as a hopeful, actionable, and human-centred solution that is grounded and systemic.