

New building to strengthen ties between Canada, Aga Khan

The Ottawa Citizen

Tue 19 Oct 2004

Page: B1 / Front

Section: City

Byline: Maria Cook

Source: The Ottawa Citizen



Renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki has designed a landmark Sussex Drive building for the Aga Khan Foundation that aims to create a positive image of Islam and strengthen Canada's role in the Aga Khan's humanitarian activities.

The Ottawa Centre for the Aga Khan Development Network is the first building in the world designed to represent the Aga Khan and his agencies.

The building promises to become a major architectural attraction that will command worldwide attention.

"This is very significant," said Steve Fai, director of the Carleton University school of architecture. "I don't know if there are any buildings in Ottawa by an architect of that international stature."

The Pritzker-prize winning Mr. Maki has designed numerous buildings in Japan, Europe and the United States, including the Media and Sciences Building at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Earlier this year, he won a competition to design a building for the United Nations in New York.

This is the Tokyo-based architect's first building in Canada.

Mr. Maki is working in association with Moriyama & Teshima Architects of Toronto.

"It is a big deal," said George Baird, dean of the University of Toronto school of architecture. "The fact they would choose the most senior Japanese architect to design it is a significant consideration. It's not an expedient way of doing this."

Gary Kamemoto, an associate of the 75-year-old Mr. Maki, presented plans for the building in an exclusive interview before last night's information session, which attracted about 35 people.

"It's not a loud building," he said. "It has a quiet presence, but at the same time, somewhat stately and ceremonial."

Construction is to start next summer for completion in 2007. The budget has not yet been established.

The Aga Khan, a British citizen, is the 49th hereditary spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community, which has about 12 million members, including 75,000 in Canada.

He is one of the richest men in the world, a racehorse owner and an important patron of architecture. His vision is of a peaceful and intellectual Islam that helps the world to become a better place.

The centre will be a secular facility that will provide information about the Aga Khan Development Network, a series of agencies involved in international development, health, education and culture.

"This is great news for Canada," said Gulzar Haider, a Carleton University emeritus professor of architecture, and Toronto design consultant. "It will reinforce the message that we are a pluralistic country with an interest in human development."

The building will house meeting rooms, exhibition areas, a lecture theatre, research library and private apartments.

"His Highness sees Canada as a long-term partner in international development," said Firoz Rasul, president of the Aga Khan Council for Canada.

"He wanted a presence in Ottawa to work with the government of Canada as well as commercial and non-governmental organizations."

The building will occupy a highly visible, irregular and sloping site facing Sussex Drive. It is bounded by a grassy embankment of King Edward Avenue to the north and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the south.

The 8,500-square-metre structure, including underground parking garage, is designed to manifest Islamic features and ambience with a contemporary expression.

Two storeys high, the building will have a simple rectilinear form resting on a granite podium. An asymmetric, crystalline dome, 17 metres at its apex, emerges from the building, creating a distinctive silhouette.

"We want it to be something very dynamic that changes in light and changes throughout the day," said Mr. Kamemoto. "We hope there will be a new discovery every time you see it."

Residential and administrative areas surround two large symbolic spaces -- an interior atrium and exterior courtyard -- which together create an inner sanctuary, somewhat separated from the outside world.

The courtyard recalls the traditional Persian-Islamic garden -- the chahr-bagh, a garden that is divided into four sections. These spaces are intended to be an interpretive expression of Islamic architectural character.

However, from key vantage points, fragments of the atrium and courtyard will become visible to the passerby.

"It creates a sense of mystery, but it has a sense of openness," said Mr. Rasul. "To really understand it, you have to step in, to get closer. And that's not unlike Islam."

The building was conceived as a pavilion in a park to create a feeling of openness and transparency. Terraces and balconies extend its interior spaces.

The Aga Khan gave Mr. Maki the commission in 2002, requesting he take inspiration from the angular and mysterious qualities of a rock crystal.

As a result, different types of glass have been combined to give the building an ethereal quality and varying degrees of transparency, translucency and opacity.

The primary facades on Sussex Drive and Boteler Street are clad in white neoparies, a modern material made of crystallized glass that produces a soft opaque colour and smooth marble-like texture. The north and south walls are arranged in alternating bands of transparent and translucent glass.

Within the glass dome is an inner membrane made of glass-fibre fabric that will appear to float over the atrium space.

It will be draped with a composition of patterned aluminum lattice screens that recall traditional carved screens.

"The interplay of light in terms of transparency, translucency, opaqueness and shadows is an important feature in Islamic architecture," said Zool Samji, who heads the foundation's project development team.

"I think the architects have come up with a quite magnificent representation of that."

The Aga Khan Foundation Canada bought the one-hectare site in 2000 from the National Capital Commission for \$5.24 million.

The foundation is a non-profit international development agency established in Canada in 1980. As part of the world-wide Aga Khan Development Network, it supports social development projects in Africa and Asia.

The Aga Khan's interest in architecture is far-reaching.

He has established the Aga Khan Program for Islamic architecture at Harvard University, and an online resource called Archnet. His triennial Aga Khan award for architecture recognizes outstanding contemporary design in societies where Muslims have a significant presence, with prize money totalling \$500,000 U.S.

"He feels that the built environment has a very important role to play in the development of people," said Mr. Rasul.