

Building embodies an open Islam

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Byline: Rhys Phillips

Column: Rhys Phillips

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Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, principal designer of the proposed Ottawa Centre for the Aga Khan Development Network, is an international superstar and winner of the 1993 Pritzker Architecture Prize, the profession's Nobel.

More important, over 40 years of practice, he has produced a humane, sometimes eclectic Modernism based first on creating excellent spaces for human activity, what he has called "unforgettable scenes" or "an overall image of life." Only then does he create the outward presentation of their form. If these eventual exteriors are frequently abstract, sometimes enigmatic collages, he has always remained seized with the role his buildings play within the city's context.

All of this made him an appropriate choice to design the Aga Khan centre. First, the proposed site, the last vacant land on Sussex Drive, demands excellence. It is, after all, both a remarkable

belvedere providing sweeping vistas up, down and across the Ottawa River and a complex, irregularly shaped piece of land visible from all directions.

"We were amazed by the site's beauty," says Maki associate Gary Kamemoto, "as well as its four-sided openness within the city, a characteristic so rare in Japan." Kamemoto and Maki hopped on bicycles and pedaled around the site and over to Gatineau to better understand how the building would be experienced. As is standard for the firm, it took more than six months of study before the architect felt he had it right.

The choice also fit well with the client. The Aga Khan is a major force in the development of a progressive Islamic architecture. He sponsors a major Islamic Architecture Awards program that showcases work including historic restoration, low-cost building, urban design for developing countries and glistening high-tech modernism. He and the network are major architecture clients.

The Aga Khan was clear that he wanted not "a slavish version of an Islamic past" but a building that reflects Islam and the network's approach as open and modern, while grounded on "optimism, fascination and enlightenment." Based on his visits to Ottawa, he also wanted the views fully exploited.

As presented (it remains to be fully detailed), the design responds with finesse to the challenge of representing something that is not entirely indigenous while also making it part of a specific place. Even if it remains perhaps apart -- a uniquely white, horizontal, if engaging artifact in Ottawa's urban landscape -- the centre's abstract modernity is refreshing and evocative.

At the same time, within the context of its author's work, the centre represents a fine synthesis of both the language and form frequently found throughout his career with new ideas of lightness and ethereal imagery that have increasingly engaged Maki over the last decade.

In 1988, the American critic Charles Jencks referred to Maki's work as representing an intuitive modernism marked by coolly abstracted linear geometry that nonetheless introduced "a fragmented complexity to create a vigorously moving surface." These surfaces relied on intuition, on sensibility rather than reason, to create "very animated buildings by shifting outlines and volumes." The results are buildings that "convey the ethereal abstraction of a Japanese Shogi screen."

Only a few years later, however, critic Kenneth Frampton noted Maki's increasing interest in lightness, "both in fact and in metaphor, that derives in large measure from the immateriality of modern material." Examples include the mammoth Makuhari Messe convention centre (1997) and several gyms and concert halls with metal roofs that seem to suggest a samurai helmet.

But if Maki's forms have changed over time, they also tend to reappear; nothing is really lost, just put away to be reborn, often juxtaposed to newer ideas. So, with the Aga Khan centre we are given an asymmetrically faceted "rock crystal" wrapped -- but not completely -- by a series of rigorously orthogonal and tightly linked forms. Inside the dome, a secondary shell of tensioned glass fabric pulled off the diagonal axis to provide a sense of rotation, adds a further "ephemeral membrane" of lightness.

Set on a granite plinth, an example of Maki's frequently employed "artificial ground," each element has its own unique, entirely modern facade that is simultaneously porous and enigmatically opaque. In particular, along Sussex a crisply carved-out, but apparently windowless plane clad in white, re-crystallized glass panels floats above its recessed first floor and seems to ignore the possibility of splendid views. By angling generous glazing across the faces of the facade's two terraces, however, Maki purposely frames views that largely "remove" the city.

From all sides, the design offers glimpses either through to the closed atrium or into an open courtyard that provides the complex's other core element. On its south side facing the Saudi Embassy, the crystal is fully exposed; from Sussex it is visible through the glazed entrance at the first level. The idea, says Kamemoto, is to hint at, but not fully expose the essential interior of the centre. And, once inside, both spaces serve as places of sanctuary, "as universal spaces that lose the sense of being in Ottawa."

There can be little doubt that the centre will have a unique quality of interior light (if for no other reason than the closeness to windows of all working and living spaces) created by the transparent double dome. It remains to be discovered how the exterior neoparies, or marble-like glass cladding, will play with Ottawa's strong nordic light. Probably well, for as the Pritzker jury wrote in its citation, Maki "uses light in a masterful way making it as tangible a part of every design as are the walls and roof."

Despite its Modernism, the centre also reflects certain traits of Islamic architecture, such as the four-part inner courtyard, or chahr-bagh, and a geometric screen, albeit of aluminum, that will surround the atrium. "These spaces are intended to be an interpretive expression of an Islamic architectural character both spatially and aesthetically creating a dichotomy and a congruency with the exterior environment," explains the architect's project statement.

In its dance of contradiction between representing both the here and the other, Fumihiko Maki's pavilion should contribute a uniquely challenging addition to Ottawa's urban landscape.

Rhys Phillips, of Ottawa, writes about architecture and urban design.