In the Making:
The Aga Khan Museum,
The Ismaili Centre and The Park

A Photo Essay

COPYRIGHT: Presented by Simerg.com and Jim Bowie. Reproduction prohibited without the written consent of the copyright holders.
The sun sets gloriously every night over the site that will one day be the Aga Khan Museum, Ismaili Centre and their Park.
And so it begins

This site – which sits at the intersection of the Don Valley Parkway and Wynford Drive, used to be the home of the Bata Shoe Company. After many years of exhaustive planning, the first trees are removed in March 2010. They will make way for the construction equipment and hundreds of skilled professionals that will make this site their ‘office’ during the multi-year construction period.
The plans call for beautiful parklands on the site. There will be trees. The passing motorists need not be concerned.
Once ground is broken, things begin to happen very, very quickly. Heavy equipment makes short work of clearing all of the trees. Grass and deteriorated pavement that have been left unattended for many months - waiting for the all important signatures to be applied to the necessary permits - soon disappears.
Massive tents take more than three weeks to be erected. Are these construction offices? Every day, more machinery and trades people show up for work at this ever-changing site.
The day of the ground breaking

Our answer - the erection of the tents is complete and the stage is set for the ground breaking ceremony to be performed by the unveiling of a plaque by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and His Highness the Aga Khan.

It is an historic day for Toronto and Canada – on this - the 28th day of May 2010.
On that perfect day, the entourage of the Prime Minister, the Aga Khan and other VIP guests drive westward along Wynford Drive toward the site of the project.
A small crowd of excited well-wishers gather outside the site and watch the motorcade go by. There is a CP24 Toronto television media crew vehicle among the cars parked within the enclosure.
The motorcade makes its way into the ceremonial ground. Inside the ceremonial tent, the Aga Khan and the Prime Minister will unveil the ground breaking plaque, and Stephen Harper will give a mounted certificate to the Ismaili Imam, honouring him with Canada’s Honorary Citizenship.
The Prime Minister’s Remarks on the Formal Presentation to His Highness the Aga Khan With Honorary Canadian Citizenship

Your Highness, there are no superlatives to adequately describe the admiration Canadians have for the work that you and your organisations do in the service of pluralism, peace and development around the world. You truly inspire our own hopes for a better world. We Canadians are rightly proud of the fact that we have built one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse and harmonious societies on earth. This achievement is rooted in our founding values: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

But it’s also rooted in our unique history and the heroic agreements our founding peoples made to acknowledge and accommodate their diversity. As you yourself have said, your Highness, and I quote, “We cannot make the world safe for democracy unless we also make the world safe for diversity.” If I may say so, sir, you sound like a Canadian. And in fact, you are. On June 19, 2009, our House of Commons voted unanimously to bestow Honorary Canadian Citizenship on His Highness the Aga Khan. This is, if I may say, a richly deserved honour.

The motion introduced by our Government recognised, and I quote, that “[...]the Aga Khan, leader of the worldwide Ismaili Muslim Community, is a beacon of humanitarianism, pluralism and tolerance throughout the world; [...]the Aga Khan is also actively involved in humanitarian and development projects throughout Asia and Africa.”

...To which I would only add, that the motion also recognises the exquisite symmetry between your values and Canadian values, and our deep appreciation for the extraordinary contributions you are making to Canada and the world through the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat, the Global Centre for Pluralism and the Aga Khan Museum. It is therefore my great honour and pleasure, on behalf of the Government and people of Canada, to formally present you today with Honorary Canadian Citizenship. Welcome to our home and native land, your Highness. It is, now and forever your home, your Highness, your home as well.

The Aga Khan’s Response

Let me begin by expressing my profound appreciation for the great honour which this country has paid to me today by extending this generous gift of Honorary Canadian Citizenship. I have been deeply moved by your gracious gesture — which I also regard as a tribute to the institution of the Ismaili Imamat, which I represent. It is a significant recognition of the values which our community of faith shares with the people of Canada.

Je suis très profondément touché par l’immense honneur que vous m’avez si généreusement accordé, à moi personnellement et à l’Imamat Ismaili.

Mr Prime Minister, I have always felt very much at home in Canada, but never more so than at this moment.

(All excerpts from speeches delivered at the Foundation ceremony on May 28, 2010)
The Aga Khan now an Honorary Canadian Citizen.

The Imam he says is “truly a beacon of humanitarianism; of pluralism and of tolerance throughout the entire world.” The Prime Minister calls His Highness “a great partner and long-time friend of Canada, and a great benefactor to humanity.”
Our original plans were to build here a new Ismaili Jamatkhana. But as time went along and added space became available, the concept grew. It now includes three elements: a new Ismaili Centre, a new Aga Khan Museum; and a beautiful, welcoming Park.

Together, these three projects will symbolise the harmonious integration of the spiritual, the artistic and the natural. At the same time they will also express a profound commitment to inter-cultural engagement, and international cooperation.

The Aga Khan Museum will be a place for sharing a story, through art and artefacts, of highly diverse achievements — going back over 1 400 years. It will honour the central place within Islam of the search for knowledge and beauty. And it will illuminate the inspiration which Muslim artists have drawn from faith, and from a diverse array of epics, from human stories of separation and loss, of love and joy.

My own family has been intimately involved in Islamic cultural history, notably during the Fatimid Caliphate which founded one of the world’s first, great universities in Cairo. The core collection of the new Museum in Toronto includes elements that have been gathered by my family through many generations, including the miniatures collected by my uncle, the late Prince Sadrurddin Aga Khan, which will be displayed in a replica of the Bellerive room from my late uncle’s home in Geneva. We are deeply grateful to Princess Catherine for this generous gift.

I should emphasise, as well, that the Museum building itself will be an important work of art — designed by the great Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki.

The Delegation building [in Ottawa] was inspired by the evanescent mysteries of rock crystal. The new Toronto Museum will take as its theme the concept of light. From the outside, it will glow by day and by night, lit by the sun and the moon. This use of light speaks to us of the Divine Light of the Creator, reflected in the glow of individual human inspiration and vibrant, transparent community.

As the poet Rumi has written: “The light that lights the eye is also the light of the heart... but the light that lights the heart is the Light of God.”

The focal point of the Toronto Ismaili Centre will be a circular prayer hall, dedicated to spiritual reflection, while other spaces will provide for deeper engagement with the broader community among whom Ismailis live. The building will feature a crystalline frosted glass dome — standing like a great beacon on top of a building that is itself at the highest point of the site — and illuminating the Prayer Hall and its Qibla wall.

What about the Park? The Park will comprise some 75 000 square metres — and what an impressive site it will be! Vladimir Djurovic, design draws upon the concept of the traditional Islamic garden, and especially the gardens of the Alhambra.
Prime Minister Stephen Harper and His Highness the Aga Khan unveil the plaque commemorating the Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, the Aga Khan Museum and their Park in Toronto (Photo: AKDN/Moez Visram).
The ceremonial tents that were erected for the ground breaking begin to get removed. This is a soggy day in Toronto, especially for the cyclists on the Don Valley Parkway. It is bicycle day. The site is soaked with water and mud.
While the white ceremonial tents are dismantled, the heavy duty construction resumes. Workers and more vehicles converge on the site.
Cranes come on site – mountains of sand unearthed

The cranes are brought in and erected. Portable offices and stations are positioned. Activity on the site resumes once again with the tents gone. Fences surround the site. The DVP on the near side has been without trees for some time, now. Has anyone noticed?
Now there are four cranes that have been erected, and solid structures start appearing. Mountains of sand dug up from the site is moved and begins to rise on the site. This sand will be returned back to where it came from – except it will be mixed with water and cement.
The structure of the site begins to take shape. Hard solid work has been underway for a few months now. The summer is drawing to a close.
As autumn seeps in, a small crowd gathers outside the premises once again. What now?
Aga Khan in Toronto again...

Yes, the presence of the crowd can be easily explained. The Aga Khan is here with his son, Prince Rahim. He has come to deliver the prestigious La Fontaine-Baldwin lecture on October 15, 2010 in downtown Toronto. A convoy of 9 to 10 black cars arrives at the site. The changing trees look gorgeous in their autumn garb.
The Aga Khan seen giving his speech to a packed audience. At top right, he acknowledges the standing ovation he receives. The symposium was organized by the Institute of Canadian Citizenship whose Co-chairs are the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson and her husband, Canadian essayist and philosopher, John Ralston Saul. They are both seen seated at front in lower left photo. After the lecture, Mr. Saul engages His Highness in a discussion.
The 10th Annual LaFontaine-Baldwin Symposium
(Excerpts from the Aga Khan’s speech, October 15, 2010)

You may know how, in ancient times, the common view was that nature had separated humankind into distinctive peoples. Aristotle was among the first to reject such arbitrary distinctions, and to conceptualize the human race as a single whole. It is interesting to note that his young pupil, on whom he impressed this notion, turned out to be Alexander the Great – whose international empire was animated by this new intellectual outlook.

But even as Europe fragmented after the fall of Rome, another success story emerged in Egypt. I have a special interest in this story; it concerns my ancestors, the Fatimid Caliphs, who founded the city of Cairo 1000 years ago. They were themselves Shia in an overwhelmingly dominant Sunni culture, and for nearly two centuries they led a strong pluralistic society.

Let’s for the moment look at the present situation. New technologies mean that people mix and mingle more than ever before. Massive human migrations are part of the story. The variety of the world is not only more available, it is nearly inescapable. Human difference is more proximate – and more intense. What was once beyond our view is now at our side – and, indeed, to use the popular expression, it is “in our face.”

The challenge of diversity is now a global challenge – and how we address it will have global consequences.

It has never been easy for people to live together. I am not one who believes in some natural, human disposition to welcome the stranger.

What we must seek and share is what I have called “a cosmopolitan ethic,” a readiness to accept the complexity of human society. It is an ethic which balances rights and duties. It is an ethic for all peoples. It will not surprise you to have me say that such an ethic can grow with enormous power out of the spiritual dimensions of our lives. In acknowledging the immensity of The Divine, we will also come to acknowledge our human limitations, the incomplete nature of human understanding.

In that light, the amazing diversity of Creation itself can be seen as a great gift to us – not a cause for anxiety but a source of delight. Even the diversity of our religious interpretations can be greeted as something to share with one another – rather than something to fear.

In this spirit of humility and hospitality – the stranger will be welcomed and respected, rather than subdued – or ignored.

In the Holy Quran we read these words: “O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul ...[and] joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace ye became brethren.”

As we strive for this ideal, we will recognize that “the other” is both “present” and “different.” And we will be able to appreciate this presence – and this difference – as gifts that can enrich our lives.

Let me conclude by emphasizing once again the urgency of this challenge. We are at a particularly complex moment in human history. The challenges of diversity are frightening for many people, in societies all around the world. But diversity also has the capacity to inspire.
Although hard to distinguish in this particular photo, Prince Rahim Aga Khan, older son of His Highness, is identified just outside the lower-most construction trailer in a circle with three other persons.
Work continues. Day after day, the site is ever-evolving, with many obvious changes hour by hour. New shapes and structures emerge. Most of these passers-by on the DVP and on Wynford cannot see what is happening as it is still below grade.
One of the latest photos of the site, taken on rainy Tuesday, November 30, 2010.
These images are the result of many happy coincidences. It was the desire to be back with family that returned Jim Bowie from his work assignment in the USA. He searched for a condo in the same building where his daughter resides. He happened to secure one on the 16th floor that also happened to overlook this site. And finally, he happens to be a photography enthusiast. Jim has tried to take a picture of this site every day since the ground broke. “I have missed a few days with travel and work,” explains Jim, now a real estate agent in Toronto, “but I have most of them. I will continue to head out onto my balcony – despite the cold and snow – with the goal of taking one picture every day!” The following slides show a few more pictures from Jim’s balcony. Note that most slides that now follow do not have captions; only a theme superimposed on the photo. Photographs with Nikon D80, using an AF-S Nikkor 18-135mm...lens.
Twilight glimmer
On centre stage – the moon and the Aga Khan projects
The enclosure lit under floodlights.
Fiery glows all around... moon evokes calmness.
The crane holds its own, with the second day of the new moon on the horizon.
Northbound Don Valley Parkway (or a parking lot)
Magical Effects – The Moon, Autumn Foliage and City Lights
The long exposure required to take a picture at night captures headlight and taillight streaks on the Don Valley Parkway, as well as the lights of commercial jets circling the city until they can land.
Foresters Building on right houses the Aga Khan Council Offices on Don Mills Road. Reaching for the sky is one of Canada’s most famous landmarks and attractions as well as a wonder of the modern world, the iconic CN Tower.
The crane becomes idle for the night
Fully ablaze but standstill; it’s night time
Competing lights – Nature is victorious, for now
This picture is from the night of November 29, 2010. It was a very long exposure so it created this "halo" from the lights. It is not an effect that Jim Bowie created, and he can’t quite explain it.
Another day to come
The model...and future

The builder and the listener
“All in all, the Wynford Drive complex will represent a rich tapestry woven from widely varied strands. As we look ahead, we can anticipate with some confidence that the Wynford Drive project will be a beautiful part of the future — a proud gift from our generation to future generations — even as it celebrates so fittingly what past generations have given to us.”

*His Highness the Aga Khan, 49th Imam of Shia Imami Ismailis*  
(speaking at the Foundation ceremony on May 28, 2010)