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Re-Thinking Islamic Architecture

**A Critique of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture
Through the Paradigm of Encounter**

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Abstract

This research examines how the Aga Kahn Award for Architecture, established in 1977, manifests a re-thinking of Islamic architecture since the formation of the predominant discourse on that topic in the nineteenth century. It identifies a shift in thinking in recent scholarship from representations of Islamic architecture as 'other'—that are traced to the formation of an influential discourse about Islamic architecture by European scholars in the nineteenth century—toward a more dynamic confluence of architecture and Islam.

To do so, this research privileges the paradigm of 'encounter' to capture an entangled terrain of contemporary architectural practice and coexistent assertions of cultural difference. To address this simultaneous condition of interaction and difference, this thesis turns to an interdisciplinary shift away from essentialist representations of culture. This research draws specific inspiration from the writing of anthropologist James Clifford. Clifford characterises essentialist representations of culture with the metaphor of cultural *roots*. This thesis adopts this metaphor to describe the pervasive tendency to represent architecture as an essential expression of Islam, often represented as a homogeneous religious and cultural entity. Clifford's alternative metaphor of cultural *routes* enables the conceptualisation of varied experiences of dwelling and travelling amidst global encounters today. Encounters provoke assertions of cultural identity—of 'self' and 'other'. Paradoxically, encounters enable coexistence, interaction and transformation.

The Award manifests this paradox. A collective search for Islamic identity and its potential manifestation in architecture, promoted at the time of the Award's conception, can be linked to perceptions of escalating encounters between Islam and the West. However, a homogeneous 'self' image and its potential manifestation in architecture has been uprooted during the sophisticated evolution of the Award. The Award presents a unique forum for the articulation of plural, often contradictory, perspectives on architecture and Islam (predominantly published in English). This has inspired further reflection in this thesis on the creative possibilities arising from the productive encounter of differences. This thesis complements the merits of a unique Award that has received minor critical attention. It aims to further contribute to global debate on identity and difference, whilst bringing timely insights to contemporary architectural scholarship and practice.