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## Special Report

### Portugal Celebrates Islamic Art, Past and Present, With Aga Khan Awards

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*By Marvine Howe*



Part of the revitalized Birzeit Historic Center. (Photo courtesy Riwaq Photo Archive)

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"Sitting in a village in the center of Palestine, you have the feeling that nobody knows about you in the midst of all the upheaval of the Arab Spring; then some people notice you, and it makes you feel very good," said Suad Amiry after ceremonies in honor of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2013, held in September in the Portuguese capital.

Amiry, better known as the author of *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, is founder of the Palestinian NGO Riwaq, a winner of this year's Aga Khan Award for the Revitalization of Birzeit Historic Center. The international jury said the Birzeit project "manages to transform not only a neglected historic core but also people's lives, and restores not only buildings but the dignity of their users."



*Suad Amiry (r) with former Riwaq director Nazmi Ju'beh. (Photo courtesy Riwaq Photo Archive)*

Besides the Birzeit revitalization, four other projects—chosen from nearly 500 entries—share the 2013 architectural prize of \$1 million: the rehabilitation of the Tabriz Bazaar in Iran, the Salam Cardiac Center in Sudan, the Hassan II Bridge in Morocco, and the first Islamic cemetery in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg.

Although Portugal was not among the prize winners, nor even represented on the jury, the Architectural Award assumed the importance of a national celebration of Islamic art, past and present. The award ceremony took place in Lisbon's Sao Jorge Castle, with its Moorish fortifications, in the presence of the president and foreign minister of Portugal, the mayor of Lisbon, leaders of Lisbon's Sunni and Ismaili communities, and the Aga Khan.

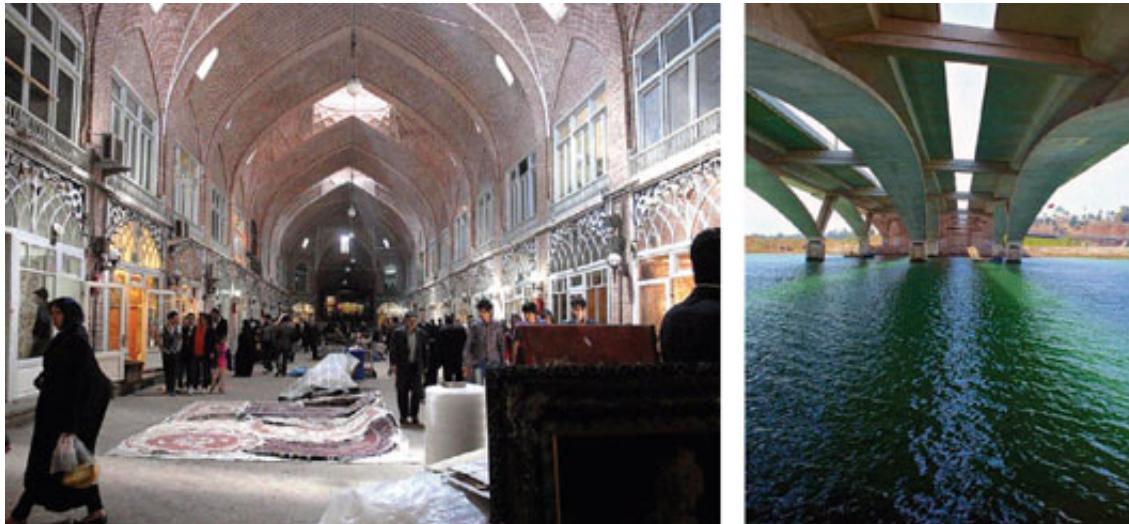
Simultaneously, the City of Lisbon inaugurated an exhibit on "Architecture: the Islamic Heritage in Portugal" in Sao Jorge's main exhibition hall, with the cooperation of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The exhibit features recent excavations of art produced during the Muslim rule in Portugal from 711-1245, and will be open to the public until Jan. 6, 2014.

Addressing the assembly of Portuguese personalities, diplomats and leaders of the country's small Islamic community (about 80,000 in a population of 10 million), Prince Karim Aga Khan noted that this was only the second time the award ceremony was held in a predominantly Christian country (Spain having been the first, in 1998), and praised Portugal's "spirit of pluralism and a respect for diversity." The Ismaili leader explained he set up the architectural prize in 1977 out of concern that the Islamic world was in danger of losing its "proud architectural heritage." He cited as reasons the "colonial impact on Islamic cultures" and the impression that Islamic architecture seemed "consumed by a growing passion to be truly 'modern.'"

This year's projects were more "socially oriented" than those of the past, according to Farrokh Derakhshani, director of the architectural awards, which are presented every three years. He stressed that the prize was not just about restoration or new models of buildings, but rather "the impact on the environment and its users."

Riwaq decided to do "rehabilitation through job creation" in 2000, after then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon barred some 150,000 Palestinians—many in the construction industry—from working in Israel, Amiry said in an interview. The Revitalization of Birzeit Historic Center was launched in 2005. Like other Palestinian villages, Birzeit had suffered from the general decline in rural life after 1967, and its situation worsened when Birzeit University moved

to Ramallah in the 1980s. Now, numerous old limestone buildings have been restored as cultural institutions, tourist accommodations and residences; streets have been paved and public spaces created for a playground and gardens. Five NGOs and a post office have moved in. Birzeit has become a model for Riwaq's ambitious "50 Cities" program. "If the historic centers are improved and more services provided, people and jobs will come," Amiry declared optimistically.



LEFT: Iran's Tabriz Bazaar; RIGHT: The Hassan II Bridge, connecting Rabat and Sale, Morocco. (Photos courtesy of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture)

*LEFT: Iran's Tabriz Bazaar; RIGHT: The Hassan II Bridge, connecting Rabat and Sale, Morocco. (Photos courtesy of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture)*

The Tabriz Bazaar is said to be the world's largest covered market, extending over 67 acres and housing some 5,500 shopkeepers. Dating back to the 10th century, it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1780 and rebuilt. By the end of the 20th century, the traditional brick buildings were badly deteriorated, customers had declined, and the bazaar was slated for demolition. Then ICHTO, the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of East Azerbaijan province, took up the rehabilitation project. Akhbar Taghizadeh, an architect with ICHTO, told a press conference that to persuade the *bazaaris* to participate in the project, a pilot project was launched, with the government paying 90 percent of the cost. Now customers have returned, the *bazaaris* are paying 90 percent of the costs, and everyone is happy, he said.

The Hassan II Bridge, designed by French architect Marc Mimram, is much more than a link between the Moroccan capital of Rabat and its country cousin Sale. The sleek, low-lying bridge was designed to be "connected to the social landscape and the people," according to the architect. There are separate lanes for pedestrians, tramway and vehicles, and underneath, place for a new covered public space.



LEFT: The Salam Cardiac Center outside Khartoum, Sudan. RIGHT: The Muslim cemetery in Altach, Austria. (Photos courtesy of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture)

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In 2004, an Italian NGO named Emergency, specializing in medical treatment for war victims, proposed to the Sudanese government the establishment of a state-of-the-art hospital for cardiovascular diseases in a suburb of Khartoum. The Salam Center for Cardiac Surgery was designed by Italian architects of Studio Tamassociati and opened for free-of-charge treatment in May 2007. The one-story hospital has three operating theaters and 63 beds, a guest house for relatives, a prayer and meditation pavilion, and housing for the medical staff in 95 containers with a double-shell insulation and bamboo panels.

Until recently, the Muslim community of the Austrian state of Vorarlberg sent their dead for burial to their countries of origin: Turkey, Bosnia, Chechnya, North Africa—a costly process. Acceding to requests from the Islamic communities, the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities agreed to the construction of Austria's second Islamic cemetery in the Alpine city of Altach in 2008—the first, in Vienna, is only for local Muslims. Austrian architect Bernardo Bader built the cemetery, with lattice-like rose-colored concrete walls, five graveyards oriented toward Mecca, and a one-story building for meetings and prayers. Speaking to journalists in Lisbon, architect Eva Grabherr acknowledged that there is Islamophobia in Austria. "Cemeteries raise fewer problems than mosques," she added. "It's more difficult for people to be against a cemetery."

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