



# An architectural manifestation of the continuity between tradition and modernity

**Fayaz S Alibhai** on the establishment of the Ismaili Centre in London, the first religious, social and cultural space built for Ismailis in the West

**N**ESTLED in the heart of South Kensington on an island site across from the V&A in a neighbourhood replete with monuments to history, science and culture stands a quiet and unassuming yet remarkable building. Inaugurated in 1985 by then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the presence of the Imam of the Ismailis, His Highness the Aga Khan, the Ismaili Centre was the first religious, social and cultural space specially designed and built for the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community in the West. Conceived in the spirit of peace and dialogue, the search for knowledge and respect for human dignity, the centre represents a vision of Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith.

For visitors, these ethics are reflected in its various activities and the quality of its design. Over the last 25 years, the Ismaili Centre has regularly hosted numerous international seminars and academic conferences, exhibitions, lecture series and cultural performances, and participated annually in the Open House, Open Gardens and Exhibition Road Music Day. In terms of its design, a key brief stipulated that the centre stand in harmony with the varied architecture surrounding it, but that it maintains its Islamic mood. Everywhere inside, therefore, light and water, geometric patterns and calligraphy are just some of the elements characteristic of Islamic architecture that unfold multiple spaces of order and rhythm and calm and contemplation.

The second-largest Shia community in the world, the Ismailis are settled in over 25 countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America. Like the *ummah* (global Muslim community) as a whole, the Ismailis represent a rich diversity of cultures, languages and nationalities. Ismaili traditions fall within four broad geographic and ethnographic groups: Arab, Persian, Central Asian and South Asian. Settlements in Africa comprise primarily Ismailis of South Asian origins, while recent settlements in the West come from all of these traditions.

Ismailis started to arrive in Britain in the early 1940s, first as a community of students, then increasingly as professionals and businessmen in the 1970s, some having lived through such political instability as to be forced to seek new homes in countries where peace, pluralism, the rule of law and respect for individual freedom prevailed. Like many

**The roof garden: designed to evoke the Islamic vision of paradise (above)** Photo courtesy of Gary Otte, AKDN

other Muslim communities in the West, the Ismailis thus availed themselves of opportunities to improve the safety and quality of their lives. In doing so, they also aspired to contribute to the strength of Britain's social and cultural fabric and to its future.

Migration threw up a raft of challenges, however, including the threat of a rupture, over time, between the community's Islamic value system, unifying *din* and *dunya* (spirit and matter), which it has held for centuries, and that of the dichotomy of matter and spirit that is characteristic of the West and often identified as a trait of modernity. How, then, could the growing community continue to draw upon its faith and transmit its ethics to a new generation and yet simultaneously seek to engage with all that was best from its new environment and encounters in the West?

The establishment of the Ismaili Centre may, therefore, be seen as an architectural manifestation of the continuity – rather than a rupture – between tradition and modernity. Flowing naturally from the specific concept of a *jamatkhana*, common to a number of Sunni and Shi'a communities in many parts of the world and, literally, a place of gathering for the community, the centre enabled the creation of a space for social, cultural and intellectual encounters not only between members of the community itself, but also among wider public and private institutions, both religious and secular, who share its values.

As such, in addition to a space reserved for prayer and the daily rhythm of the ritual life of the community, the Ismaili Centre was from the outset, as His Highness the Aga Khan said at its opening ceremony in 1985, 'a pledge and a token of understanding between East and West'. Like its counterparts in Vancouver, Lisbon and Dubai (and imminently in Dushanbe and Toronto), the Ismaili Centre in London reflects a humble mood, yet forward outlook. It is a symbol of the aspirations of the Imam and his community, and of their hope for the continuing friendship, dialogue and mutual understanding between them and the wider communities within which they live.

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