



His Highness Prince Aga Khan Shia Imami Ismaili  
Council for the United States of America

**PRESS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **ISMAILI CENTER TO BE HOUSTON'S NEWEST CULTURAL ASSET**

**Houston, Texas, 15 November 2021** – The design for the Ismaili Center to be built in Houston's Buffalo Bayou watershed was presented to the public today at a gathering of government and civic officials, community representatives and leaders from civil society organizations.

Situated on Allen Parkway and Montrose Boulevard, the Ismaili Center is commissioned by His Highness the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims and founder and Chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network.

Dedicated to advancing pluralism, public understanding and civic outreach, the Center in Houston joins its counterparts established in London (UK), Lisbon (Portugal), Dubai (UAE), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Vancouver and Toronto (Canada). Each of these buildings - designed by architects of international standing and multi-cultural sensitivity - is reflective of their own geographies and contexts. As ambassadorial buildings around the world, they are symbolic of the Ismaili community's presence, pluralistic outlook and ethos of volunteering. The Ismaili Center Houston, with its openness of both purpose and structure, will seek to express these values. Speaking in Sugar Land, Texas in 2002, His Highness observed that "since all that we see and do resonates on the faith, the aesthetics of the environments we build and the quality of the interactions that take place within them reverberate on our spiritual lives."

The Ismaili Center Houston will be a venue for educational, cultural and social events, to encourage understanding and facilitate the sharing of perspectives across peoples of diverse backgrounds, faiths and traditions. It will aim to build bridges through intellectual exchange by hosting concerts, recitals, plays, performances, exhibitions, conferences, seminars, conversations, book launches and community gatherings. The building will also provide space for quiet contemplation and for prayer, as well as serve as the administrative headquarters of the Ismaili community in the USA.

In presenting the design, Farshid Moussavi, internationally acclaimed architect, who also designed the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, observed: "What made this project especially rewarding was the close alignment between the aspirations of the client and architect. What made it especially challenging was my awareness of the rigorous standards that His

Highness the Aga Khan has established for architecture! We have tried to work with Islamic design philosophy, and celebrate its singularity and unique qualities as well as the features it has in common with Western design, so that the building, both through its fabric and through the way it is used, would act as a symbol of dialogue.”

The building is designed with a compact footprint, leaving large portions of the site to be used as gardens. Given the frequently hot and humid climate of Houston and the prominence of the site in the city, it is designed with a tripartite form with each of its volumes hosting a soaring eivan (veranda) to enable social and cultural gatherings to occur outdoors throughout the year. The eivans are supported by forty-nine slender columns reminiscent of those used in Persepolis and seventeenth century palaces in Isfahan, Persia. In being open on all sides and visible from all approaches to the site, the eivans will make the Ismaili Center open and inviting in every direction. At night, they will transform it to a beacon of light along Montrose Boulevard and Allen Parkway.

The Center’s design, contemporary in its expression, is reflective of a historically rooted, rich architectural heritage. It combines contemporary architectural technology – its light steel structure - with traditional Persian forms and ornament, including ceramic mosaics and screens drawn from Islamicate traditions around the world. Its design for sustainability includes assuring enhanced energy performance and longevity and durability of materials, by encasing exposed steel with concrete for a 100-year lifecycle, and using stone for the building’s exterior walls. Conceived as a tapestry in stone, the exterior walls will transition from solid areas to porous screens that will provide shade and privacy, and from flat surfaces to deep alcoves to permit shady repose fronting the gardens. The building exterior will therefore be defined by simplicity of form, openness, and an abstract decorative character.

The building interior will include three atriums that will act as common, non-exclusive flexible spaces between rooms dedicated to specific events. Each is located adjacent to an eivan to bring in natural light and views of the sky to the heart of the building. The central atrium’s stepped structure clad in ceramic screens, celebrates the heritage of the cupola dating back to 3000 BCE, dominant in both the architecture of the Sasanian period in Persia and the Christian buildings of the Byzantine empire. The west and east atriums will give access to a theater, a large hall and learning spaces.

The Center’s landscaped gardens will provide a sense of serenity and peace, offering a respite from its urban surroundings. The gardens will include tree canopies, fountains, shaded footpaths, flowerbeds, lawns and walkways. These will be spaces of solace, providing for the rejuvenation of the mind and the spirit.

In his remarks, Houston Mayor Turner reflected, “The Center will elevate, yet again, Houston on the world map as a global city where people of all backgrounds can come together. This notion of learning about and accepting differences amongst peoples and communities, what we call pluralism, is central to the Aga Khan’s vision for the survival of an increasingly interconnected world. The Ismaili Muslim community in Houston and the United States continues to actualize the values that these Centers aim to promote – friendship, service, and mutual understanding.”

Speaking at the ceremony, President Al-Karim Alidina of the Ismaili Council for the USA acknowledged the role of the various teams: “This project, would not be possible without the dedicated efforts of Farshid Moussavi Architecture, Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, AKT II – Structural Engineer and DLR Group the architect and engineers of record. We also look forward to working with the construction manager McCarthy Builders and the numerous local contractors who will build and craft this building over the next three years.”

The Ismaili Center Houston will offer a new dimension to the cultural life of the city and a place of gathering for the Ismaili community where visitors will be welcome.

## **Notes**

### **His Highness the Aga Khan**

The Ismailis are united in their spiritual allegiance to His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims and a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). A graduate of Harvard University, he has stressed the role of the intellect in faith and has promoted an understanding of Islam that draws on the values of generosity, tolerance, pluralism, forgiveness, stewardship of God’s creation, and the unity of our shared humanity.

The principles of intellect as an important facet of the faith and responsible individual conscience, inform the Ismaili tradition of tolerance. Adherence to these tenets have engendered in the Community an ethos of unity, self-reliance, and generosity. Under that guidance, it has developed a well-defined framework of cultural, social, and economic development institutions for the common good of all, regardless of race or religion. Through these institutions, the Community has been able to give expression to the ethic of compassion and concern for the less fortunate.

In this tradition, the Aga Khan has established and presides over the Aga Khan Development Network as a contemporary endeavor of the Imamate to realize Islam's social conscience through institutional action.

### **The Ismaili Muslim Community**

The Ismaili Muslims are a culturally diverse community living in over 25 countries around the world. They adhere to a 1,400-year tradition of Shia values that are expressed through a commitment to a search for knowledge for the betterment of self and society; embracing pluralism by building bridges of peace and understanding; and generously sharing of one's time, talents, and material resources to improve the quality of life of the community and those among whom they live.

Present in the United States since students first arrived seeking further education during the early twentieth century, the Community is today established in virtually every state in the Union with notable presences in Texas, California, Illinois and Georgia. A consistent partner to local and state governments, universities, museums, other civil society and faith organizations, it has a long history of civic outreach, volunteer service and humanitarian support. Most recently, the Community was recognized by the State of Texas for its public service engagement during the pandemic as well as during Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

**For further information and high-resolution images, please contact:**

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