The Architecture of Ismaili Centers

By: Arisha Notta

(I did not use AI to write this paper's text or fabricate its sources.)

Architecture has been deeply rooted within the Muslim faith.[1] Throughout history, the Muslim *Ummah* (community) has used architecture as an expression of spirituality, learning, community, and beauty within the built environment. Elements such as courtyards, gardens, water features, and geometric designs not only hold importance in terms of aesthetics but also influence how people interact within the space. The tradition of Islamic architecture continues through Ismaili centers. They form a global network of ambassadorial buildings in London, Vancouver, Lisbon, Dubai, Dushanbe, Toronto, and, recently, Houston. These centres not only serve as places of prayer known as *Jamatkhanas* but also public cultural spaces, bringing together worship, education, and civil life in a single environment.[2] The purpose of these Ismaili centers is to serve not just the Ismaili community but also the wider community in which they live and foster pluralistic ideals through various exhibits, events, and lectures. These purposes shape the architecture of these spaces. Despite being designed in different cultural landscapes and by different architects, the seven Ismaili centers share a recognizable design that is rooted in Islamic traditions and particularly the teachings of the Shia Imami Ismaili sect of Islam. However, these elements of nature are manifested in each center differently. Their forms and designs are heavily dependent on the architect's intentions. His Highness the Aga Khan's vision, and their built environment.[3] Together, the Ismaili centers are a demonstration of a religious community's ability to express its identity, values, and cultural richness in a contemporary global

[1] Farhad Daftary, The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[2] Aga Khan Development Network, "His Highness the Aga Khan and Houston Mayor John Whitmire Open Ismaili Center Houston," November 6, 2025.
[3] His Highness the Aga Khan, interview by Robert Ivy, Architectural Record, Aiglemont, France, August 31, 2001.

context.[4] Across cities from Dushanbe to Houston, the seven Ismaili Centers function as ambassadorial spaces where faith, culture, and community meet the public. By blending Islamic design traditions with

contemporary materials and regional influences, these Centers demonstrate how architecture can express identity, belonging, and diplomacy across diverse urban environments.

Research not only on Islamic architecture but also on the Ismaili community helped me understand how the Ismaili centers function as both spiritual spaces and cultural spaces for the wider public. Farhad Daftary's *The Ismāʿīlīs* establishes the historical and intellectual context of the Ismaili community, explaining its strong values and traditions of pluralism, which form its cultural institutions. Their official community websites *The.Ismaili* and *the.akdn* (Aga Khan Development Network) also serve as crucial sources for factual information, design intent, and plans for public engagement. In terms of architectural theory, *Understanding Islamic Architecture*, edited by Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani, is especially useful in framing Islamic architecture as a system of values that adapts to its environment rather than a fixed visual style. Rudolf Stegers' *Sacred Buildings*, his section in Lisbon, clarifies how Islamic design elements of nature can be reinterpreted across a variety of geographical and cultural elements. The article in *The Canadian Architect* highlights the civic presence of the Toronto Ismaili Centre within a multicultural urban setting. At the same time, P. Davey's account of Hugh Casson in *The Architectural Review* puts London center into the context of deliberate modesty and urban integration. Frampton and Correa's *Modernity and Community* frames Islamic architecture as a contemporary and adaptive practice of architecture rather than a reproduction of the past. Lastly, Meade's *Islam in Iberia* explains the influence of Andalusian architecture's heritage on the

[4] The Ismaili, "The Ismaili Center Houston Nears Completion," *The Ismaili*, accessed December 2, 2025, https://the.ismaili/ru/en/news/the-ismaili-center-houstoHis Highnessn-nears-completion

Ismaili Center in Lisbon. Collectively, these sources establish the necessary architectural, historical, and cultural framework needed to analyze how the Ismaili centers incorporate Islamic design traditions into local contexts while functioning as ambassadorial spaces.

Architecture has always been central to Islamic societies, shaping not only how the community prays but also how they gather, learn, and exist within society.[5] From the early history of mosque architecture, Islamic architecture has centered around ideas of harmony, balance, and a connection to the natural world. Elements such as sunlight, geometric designs, and water features create environments that encourage reflection, spirituality, and social connection. These design choices are very intentional; for example, the gardens symbolize paradise, water represents purity and life, while geometric shapes represent the deeper intellectual tradition within Islam.[6] These traditions lay the foundation for the design of the Ismaili centers, which draw from these principles while adapting them to modern contexts.

To better understand and analyze these networks of centers, it is essential to understand their cultural and historical background. Ismailis are a sect of Shia Muslims, whose history is shaped by intellectual traditions, migration, and strong communal institutions. They follow a living Imam, who is believed to be a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali.[7] The Imam's role extends beyond spiritual leadership; he provides guidance on all aspects of life, education, culture, and civic responsibility, and adapts his guidance based on the needs of that time. Throughout history, from the Fatimid rulers of Egypt to the diaspora

[5] Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani, eds., Understanding Islamic Architecture (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003).
[6] Kenneth Frampton, Charles Correa, and David G. Robson, Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
[7] Daftary, The Ismailis.

communities in South Asia, East Africa, and now Europe and North America, Ismailis have emphasized learning, pluralism, and community service.

The contemporary cultural identity of the Ismaili communities was shaped by His Highness the Aga Khan IV, who served as the forty-ninth hereditary Imam (spiritual leader) of the Ismaili community from 1957 to 2025. He emphasized creating an environment that improves quality of life, fosters cultural understanding and respect, and strengthens civic society. This vision manifested through the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), which was established in 1977, setting a precedent for recognizing designs that are environmentally responsible, socially responsive, and rooted in culture.[8] Under his leadership, architecture became more than a form of religious expression but a vessel to foster civic engagement, encouraging pluralism, knowledge, and public dialogue.

This vision led to the creation of the Ismaili centers. They were commissioned to be more than just *Jamatkhanas* (prayer paces); they were meant to function as cultural institutions, exhibition venues, academic forums, and spaces for interfaith members. His Highness the Aga Khan emphasized that architecture should communicate openness, improve the quality of life, broaden international conversation, and educate on values that support pluralism.[9] Their design language and the use of open courtyards, libraries, and geometric designs invite civic inclusion rather than seclusion and reflect spiritual and cultural identity. Although the architecture includes historic Islamic patterns and architectural heritage, it is adapted to the built environments, climates, and cultural fabric.

[8] Aga Khan Development Network. "Aga Khan Award for Architecture." Accessed December 5, 2025. https://the.akdn/en/how-we-work/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/aga-khan-award-for-architecture.
[9] Aga Khan Development Network, *Aga Khan Receives Architectural League of New York's President's Medal*, YouTube video, July 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhI-u5t1WgI.

Even though each Ismaili center belongs to a different cultural setting, they share a clear architectural approach. Rather than being designed as a single-purpose religious building, they function as multipurpose spaces for communal prayer, learning exhibitions, gardens, and community space. This is what differentiates them from a traditional Ismaili *Jamatkhana*. A *Jamatkhana* is primarily a prayer space for Ismailis and may include a social hall and a *Bait-ul Ilm* or religious education center. [10] While an Ismaili center is both a prayer space and a public cultural institution. *Jamatkhanas* exist all over the world and are mainly used by the Ismaili community for daily prayers, ceremonies, and gatherings. They serve as communal spaces of devotion and are not usually designed to directly engage with the public. On the other hand, Ismaili centers are designed with a much broader purpose. They still contain a *Jamatkhana* at their core but also include libraries, classrooms, gardens, atriums, exhibition halls, lecture halls, and spaces for civic and interfaith programming. The architecture of Ismaili centers is intentionally designed to be more visible, open, and symbolic because they function as ambassadorial spaces, representing the Ismaili community to the wider world.

The network of Ismaili centers spans seven major cities, each center built in different cultural and architectural contexts while sharing the same purpose. The first two centers opened in 1985; the center in London was designed by Sir Hugh Casson, and Neville Conder was intentionally designed modestly, blending into South Kingston through a quiet granite facade and a hidden rooftop garden (Figure 1).[11]

[10] "Don Mills Jamatkhana and Ismaili Centre," *The Canadian Architect* 68, no. 9 (December 2023): 32–34.
[11] Peter Davey, "Hugh Casson 1910–1999," *The Architectural Review* 206, no. 1232 (October 1999): 37.



Figure 1. Exterior granite facade of the Ismaili Center, London.

Source: https://www.archnet.org/sites/3053

While the center in Vancouver by Bruno Freschi blends within its residential community with flat roofs and calm landscaping, creating an approachable and friendly environment (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ismaili Center Vancouver, aerial view.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/gallery-architecture-the-ismaili-centre-vancouver

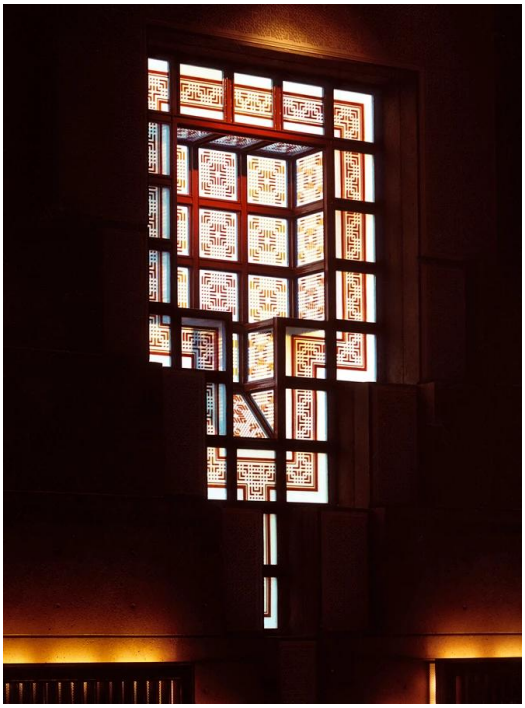


Figure 3. The opalescent cast-glass windows in the Prayer Hall are decorated with stained geometric patterns in Vancouver.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/gallery-architecture-the-ismaili-centre-vancouver

The center in Lisbon was completed in 1998 by Raj Rewal and Frederico Valsassina. It reinterprets Iberian and Andalusian architectural tradition through a series of interconnected courtyards, arcades, and water features that feel contemporary but are still rooted in local architectural history (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ismaili Center Lisbon, courtyard.

Source:https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/ismaili-centres-spaces-uplift-mind-and-spirit

The center in Dubai opened in 2008 and was designed by Rami e-Dahan. It responds to the desert climates with deep colonnades and mashrabiya-inspired screens that filter the harsh sunlight by creating patterned shadows (Figure 5). It also includes a park across the street that is open to the public twenty-four/seven (Figure 7).

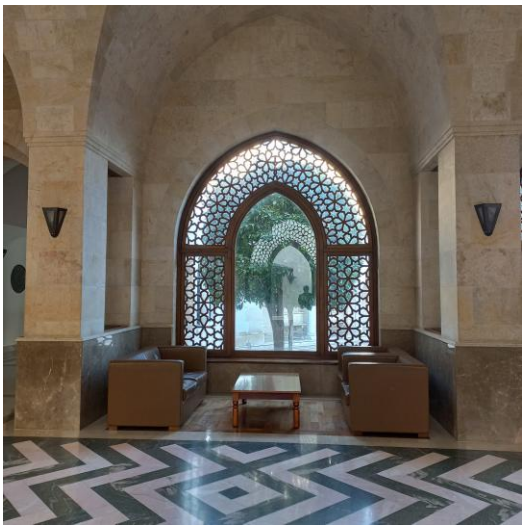


Figure 5. Interior seating area of Ismaili Center Dubai.

Source: https://mindtrip.ai/attraction/dubai-emirate/ismaili-centre-dubai/at-VL5ItHwX

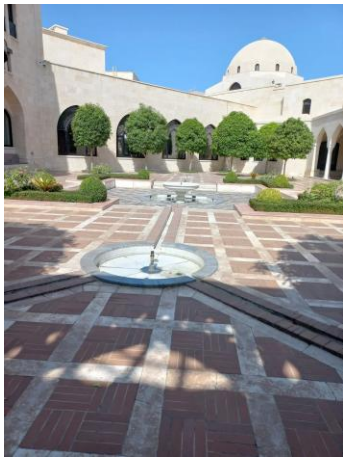


Figure 6. Courtyard of Ismaili Center Dubai.

Source: https://mindtrip.ai/attraction/dubai-emirate/ismaili-centre-dubai/at-VL5ItHwX



Figure 7. View of the Ismaili Center Dubai from the park across the street.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/spaces/ismaili-centre-dubai

In 2009, the Ismaili center in Dushanbe, designed by Farouk Noormohammed, opened. It incorporated local Central Asian craftsmanship through carved wooden columns, intricate detailing, and stonework, making it the most regionally expressive center within the network (Figures 8 and 9).

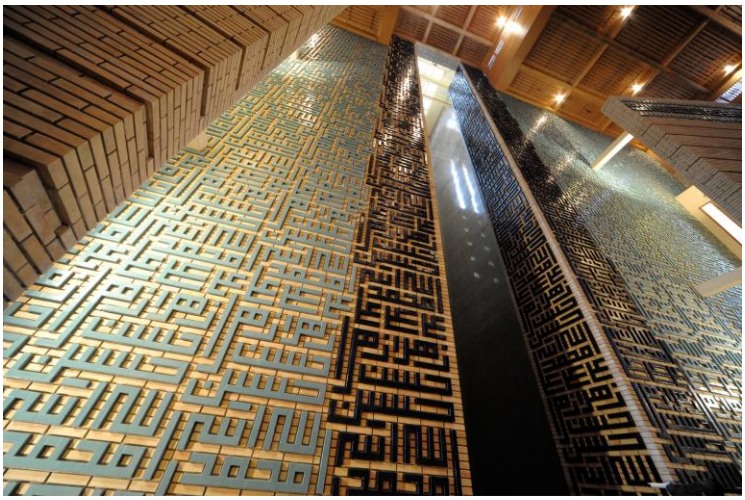


Figure 8. Stone calligraphy in the Ismaili Center, Dushanbe.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/gallery-architecture-dushanbe



Figure 9. This skylight, in the foyer of the entrance to the Social Hall of Ismaili Center Dushanbe, is based on the traditional design of the roof of a Pamiri home.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/gallery-architecture-dushanbe

The Ismaili Center Toronto, completed in 2014 by Charles Correa with landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, sits within an 18-acre cultural park, Aga Khan Park, that also includes the Aga Khan Museum. It features a glass pyramidal roof, bringing diffused natural light into the prayer hall, reflecting the city's multicultural and civic openness (Figures 10 and 11). [12]

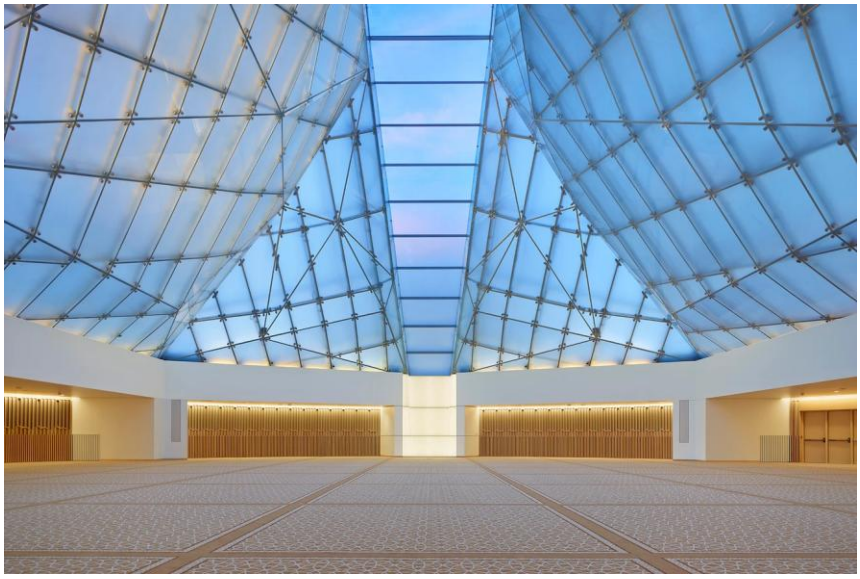


Figure 10. Prayer hall of the Ismaili Center, Toronto.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/architecture-toronto-0

[12] Kenneth Frampton, Charles Correa, and David G. Robson, *Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World*.



Figure 11. Crystalline frosted glass dome of the Ismaili Center, Toronto.

Source: https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/architecture-toronto-0

The newest addition to this network is the Ismaili center Houston opened in 2025 and was designed by architect Farshid Moussavi, landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic and structural engineer Hanif Kara .[13] Located on an eleven-acre site along the Buffalo Bayou park, it was inaugurated with a message from its patron, His Highness Prince Rahim Aga Khan V as a center meant for all everyone not just the Ismaili community.[14] Its design emphasizes openness through large nine-acre gardens, shaded walkways, and multiple public gathering spaces, while maintaining a calm and contemplative interior atmosphere that defines all centers (Figure 12).

[13] Harvard Graduate School of Design, “Ismaili Center Houston Inaugurated,” November 2025.
[14] Aga Khan Development Network, “His Highness the Aga Khan and Houston Mayor John Whitmire Open Ismaili Center Houston,” November 6, 2025.

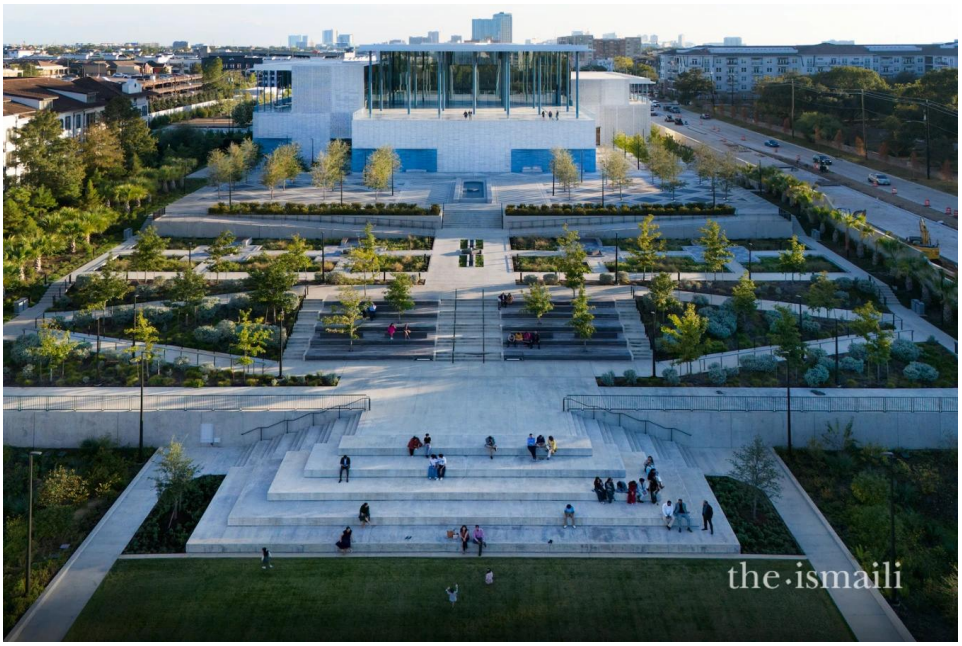


Figure 12. Gardens of the Ismaili Center Houston.

Source:https://the.ismaili/us/en/news/gallery-ismaili-center-houston

Before exploring the shared and different features of the Ismaili centers, it is important to define Islamic architecture. Architects and scholars such as Petruccioli, Pirani, Frampton, and Stegers emphasize that architecture is not defined by the recreation of specific forms from history but by principles rooted in religion, culture, and environment.[15] Elements of Islamic architecture include courtyards, controlled sunlight, geometric order, and a close relationship to nature and the surrounding landscape. These elements create an environment that encourages reflection and community engagement, qualities that have shaped Islamic buildings for centuries. The Ismaili centers hold these same qualities but have reinterpreted them in contemporary contexts. What makes these buildings "Ismaili" is how these architectural

[15] Attilio Petruccioli and Khalil K. Pirani, eds., *Understanding Islamic Architecture*

elements are used to express the ideals within the Ismaili tradition, like openness, pluralism, learning, and civic engagement, tying back to His Highness Shah Karim Aga Khan IV's vision. Features such as courtyards, gardens, and multipurpose gathering rooms are more than just the aesthetics; they support the centers' purpose of serving as ambassadorial buildings by inviting both the wider public and the Ismaili community into a shared space that encourages dialogue. Another distinction is that, unlike mosques, Ismaili centers do not include minarets or typical symbolic religious forms. Their architecture is meant to participate in their built environment rather than dominate it. Its subtlety in its facade in terms of acting as a religious building is a reflection of the center's role as an ambassadorial space that welcomes both the Ismaili community and the broader public. Ultimately, these shared features allow the Ismaili centers to function as architectural bridges and communicate a community's values to the wider public while still supporting spiritual life.

While Ismaili centers can be analyzed through their materials, circulation spaces, and presence, they also allow for a multifaceted reading of the interior and exterior experience. His Highness the Aga Khan IV explains that Islam holds a continuous relationship between *din* (faith) and *duniya* (world), and this concept naturally extends into our physical environment.[16] Building on this idea, we can understand the Ismaili centers as architectural spaces that actively bridge faith and the world rather than separate them. This quote and understanding help form the basis of my own architectural understanding, which considers how the centers balance civic openness and the interior calm.

In their outward expression, *duniya*, they communicate accessibility rather than enclosure. Their public-facing components include plazas, modest facades, and visible entrances

[16] His Highness the Aga Khan, interview by Robert Ivy, *Architectural Record*.

that welcome the wider community. Toronto's glass atrium and large front plaza symbolize a feeling of transparency and welcome, while Lisbon's limestone facade and low massing help maintain the harmony among the neighboring residential buildings. As mentioned earlier, the Ismaili centers do not rely on religious symbolic forms. Instead, their architecture quietly participates in the urban fabric, reinforcing their roles as civic institutions.

Inside, the architecture shifts to an atmosphere more aligned with *din*. Circulation slows, light softens, and the noise quiets down. The high-ceiling prayer halls use diffused skylight, and the courtyards and water elements draw your attention away from the noises of the streets. Material choices such as stones, plaster, and carpet help reduce acoustic and visual distractions. These intentional design choices create an atmosphere that supports reflection and communal worship, allowing one's spiritual life to unfold within the space without disconnecting from the outside world, but instead taking a break from its chaos. The design does not tell you what to feel; instead, it creates an atmosphere that encourages inward focus.

The centers do not switch between being civic buildings and ones of self-reflection and contemplation. They hold both roles simultaneously, balancing both *din* and *duniya* within the same architectural framework. For example, the courtyards can host public receptions and cultural gatherings, yet they still offer shade, a quiet place to catch a break from busy life. The glazed atriums act as transparent entryways that welcome the wider community, but once inside, movement slows down, and the natural lights soften. Similarly, the anterooms support exhibitions and lectures, but they also provide a transition space into the prayer halls, helping people shift their mindset. The water features fit this dual approach as well. They cool the air and create a comfortable atmosphere, but the choice to include these in courtyards and gardens also reflects the long-standing tradition of incorporating elements of nature in Islamic architecture.

Overall, aspects of these spaces aren't purely symbolic but are functional expressions of Islamic values in architectural form, echoing the Aga Khan IV's assertion that faith and the world remain in constant relationship. It's how the same space has multiple purposes and can create a variety of atmospheres. It's not a direct shift but a natural change in use, resulting in a change. The dual approach of this centralized architecture defines the center's ambassadorial role. Through their spatial organization, material choices, and circulation and transition spaces, the Ismaili centers function as architectural bridges between *din* and *duniya*. Creating spaces that support spiritual life while remaining open, engaged, and responsive to the wider society.

Rather than repeating the same formula for each Ismaili center, the centers adjust to their environments while maintaining core aspects such as measured entry, landscape integration, controlled light, and a layered sequence of spaces. Meade notes that the Ismaili center in Lisbon references Islamic Iberian-influenced designs without replicating them directly, a pattern we can see in all of the centers.[17] This approach of drawing from historical Islamic principles while avoiding direct imitation is one of the defining characteristics of Ismaili centers' architecture. Each building adopts local materials and building traditions while preserving the calm atmosphere.

The entrances of each Ismaili center are an experience, carefully curated. Their open courtyards, walkways, gardens, and shaded entries create a transition from the chaos of the streets to a calm interior space. In London, the entrance is modest, blending into the city's landscape, while Toronto uses glass to create openness, making the entrance more welcoming and inviting to the public. Vancouver is similar to London and relies more on indirect pathways and landscape rather than a monumental form, while Houston has a similar sense of monumentality to Toronto.

[17] Mary Meade, "Islam in Iberia," *The Architectural Review* 213, no. 1273 (March 2003): 52–57.

Introducing a larger entry pavilion and plaza, designed to accommodate larger audiences. Across the network of centers, the entrances aren't meant to serve as barriers but as an invitation; these experiential entrances create a shift in mindset. The gradual transition from noise to stillness encourages reflection, contemplation, and focus before entering communal gatherings or prayers. It isn't just in terms of religion; it's environmental psychology, showing the power of architecture.

Courtyards are at the heart of each center's design. They aren't just for the aesthetics but are working spaces, to socialize, sit and pause, and circulate between spaces. Steger notes that Lisbon's courtyards and water features are in reference to Iberian Islamic design, yet still feel contemporary rather than historical.[18] The inner courtyards serve as transitional spaces, moving deeper into the quieter building. These layered courtyards are also seen in Toronto and Dubai, where the outer courtyards support civic events while the inner courtyards allow for reflection and personal contemplation, reinforcing the center's dual nature, supporting civic engagement and inward focus.

Even the use of natural light is intentional, curated in a way that feels like the sunlight is a building material. Instead of allowing natural light to flow freely, the architects shape and filter it in order for it to be more controlled and soft. In Toronto, the skylights allow the daylight to brighten the space without overwhelming it. On the other hand, Dubai, due to its stronger sun, utilizes patterned screens to break the direct light into geometric shadows, creating movement across floors and walls. Similarly, the centers in Vancouver and Dushanbe adapt light through glazing and filtered openings that are best suited for their environments and climate. Materials such as stone, glass, plaster, and wood are kept minimalist to create a calm environment rather

[18] Rudolf Stegers, "Lisbon Ismaili Centre," in Sacred Buildings: A Design Manual (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), 220–222.

than a busy and decorative one. Frampton notes that this design is a way to respect local cultures and climate while also creating a vision of the future rather than recreating historical forms.[19] The centres may contrast in terms of scale but maintain the same core values. The centre in Vancouver meets the streets quietly, creating a low profile that integrates into its residential complex. In contrast, the centre in Houston occupies a large property and holds a more prominent civic presence with large pavilions and plazas. Despite these differences, the centres all contain the same elements of controlled lighting, gradual transitions, and elements of nature. The change in scale is simply a response to each center's built environment and its expectations. Their essence, however, remains the same. Overall, the differences in the seven centers are shaped by climate, urban context, and public expectation, while their similarities reflect a shared architectural philosophy rooted in openness, reflection, and civic engagement. Their ability to adapt without losing identity allows the centers to function as architectural bridges connecting faith, community, and the wider public.

The Ismaili centers demonstrate how architecture can go beyond a single purpose and function as bridges between faith, community, and the city. Across seven different cities, climates, and cultural contexts, these buildings share a consistent approach regarding openness, reflection, and civic responsibility. Rather than using religious symbolism and forms, the centres rely on more subtle architecture strategies, including controlled light, gradual entry sequences, courtyards, and landscape, to create spaces that feel welcoming while maintaining a sense of spiritual focus. What makes these buildings distinct is not their specific architectural style but the way in which they are used and experienced. Drawing on the idea of the Aga Khan, that faith

[19] Kenneth Frampton, Charles Correa, and David G. Robson, Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World.

(*din*) and the world (*duniya*) go hand in hand,[20] The Ismaili centers can be understood as architectural bridges between *din* and *duniya* and maintain both roles simultaneously. Their outward spaces engage the wider public through gardens, courtyards, evians, and transparent thresholds, while their interiors support prayer, reflection, and communal gatherings without separating from the city and built environment. The differences in scale, material, or visibility are shaped by their built environment rather than changes in core values. From more subtle presences in London and Vancouver to more monumental presences in Toronto and Houston, each building responds to its context while sharing an architectural language. This ability to adapt while maintaining identity is what allows the Ismaili centers to function successfully as ambassadorial spaces. Ultimately, the Ismaili centers offer a contemporary model for faith-based architecture that engages with its environment, is rooted in tradition, and is welcoming while painting its spiritual identity. Through their design,s they communicate the Ismaili community's commitment to pluralism, learning, and dialogue, allowing architecture to function as a bridge between communities, faith, and public life, demonstrating how the built environment holds the power to actively shape a more inclusive and pluralistic society.

[20] His Highness the Aga Khan, interview by Robert Ivy, *Architectural Record*.

Annotated Bibliography:

Books

Daftary, Farhad. The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines. London: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Daftary provides a comprehensive history of the Ismaili community, outlining key theological beliefs, historical developments, and their emphasis on learning and pluralism. This book develops the cultural and intellectual background necessary to understand why the Ismaili institutions and community prioritize education, dialogue, and civic engagement. It is essential in understanding the value and traditions of the Ismaili faith that influence their architecture.

Frampton, Kenneth, Charles Correa, and David G. Robson. *Modernity and Community: Architecture in the Islamic World*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

This book frames Islamic architecture as a living and adaptive practice rather than static and fixed to historical forms. This source supports my argument that the Ismaili centers' architecture is not meant to recreate buildings or forms of the past but instead responds to their environments. Frampton’s ideas helped me understand how material choices, light, and subtlety can be used as a contemporary expression of Islamic values.

Petruccioli, Attilio, and Khalil K. Pirani, eds. *Understanding Islamic Architecture*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2003.

This book defines what Islamic architecture is. Rather than focusing on domes, minarets, or repetition, the authors emphasize guiding principles. This frameworks how the Ismaili centers reinterpret Islamic architectural principles in contemporary and regionally specific ways.

Stegers, Rudolf. “Lisbon Ismaili Centre.” In *Sacred Buildings: A Design Manual*, 220–222. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008.

This chapter provides an architectural reading focusing on the Lisbon Ismaili center. Stegerd explains how the building draws from Iberian and Andalusian Islamic traditions without copying directly. I used this source to analyze the layered courtyards in Lisbon and compare those to the ones in Toronto and Dubai.

Articles

“Don Mills Jamatkhana and Ismaili Centre.” The Canadian Architect 68, no. 9 (December 2023): 32–34.

This article examines the Ismaili Center Toronto within the context of the city’s multicultural landscape. It helps in explaining how the centers function as public institutions rather than single-function and inward-facing religious buildings. I also used this source when discussing Toronto’s openness, landscape, integration, and civic engagement.

Davey, Peter. “Hugh Casson 1910–1999.” The Architectural Review 206, no. 1232 (October 1999): 37.

In this article, Davey discusses Hugh Casson’s work within the context of postwar British architecture, emphasizing modesty and civic sensitivity. This helps explain the choice of

intentional integration into its surrounding neighborhood. This source supports my comparison of London's subtle presence and the more visible centers in Toronto and Houston.

Meade, Mary. "Islam in Iberia." The Architectural Review 2013, no. 1273 (March 2003): 52–57. This article explores the architectural legacy of Islamic Iberia, specifically the use of courtyards, water features, and spatial sequences. It provides context for the design approach of the Lisbon Ismaili Center. The article helps explain how regional history influences contemporary architectural interpretation.

Interviews / Speeches

Aga Khan IV. Interview by Robert Ivy. Architectural Record. Aiglemont, France. August 31, 2001.

In this interview, the Aga Khan discusses various aspects of the Ismaili tradition, but specifically the relationship between *din* and *duniya* that can be extended into the physical environment. I used this source to understand the Ismaili centers as architectural bridges between spiritual life and civic engagement.

Aga Khan Development Network. Aga Khan Receives the Architectural League of New York's President's Medal. YouTube video, July 6, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhI-u5t1WgI

In this speech, His Highness the Aga Khan emphasizes the power of architecture in terms of improving the quality of life, sustaining a humane and beautiful world, broadening international conversation, and educating on values that support pluralism.

Web / Institutional Sources

Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

“His Highness the Aga Khan and Houston Mayor John Whitmire Open Ismaili Center, Houston as New Cultural and Architectural Landmark for USA.” November 6, 2025.

This press release provides context for the inauguration of the Ismaili center Houston and defines its mission. It was utilized in my analysis of the center in Houston, as well as to support that the centers were designed for both the Ismaili community and the wider public.

Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

“Aga Khan Award for Architecture.”Accessed December 10, 2025.

This source explains the purpose and values of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Which helped contextualize the Ismaili community and centers’ commitment to socially responsive and culturally grounded architectural design.

The Ismaili.

“The Architect Who Creates Landscapes That Forge Community.” Accessed December 13, 2025.

This article focuses on landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic’s approach to designing spaces that engage the community and allow for reflection. This helped understand the role of gardens, especially those designed by Djurovic in Toronto and Houston.

The Ismaili.

“The Ismaili Center Houston Nears Completion.” Accessed December 13, 2025.

This article documents the design process of the center in Houston. Supporting my discussion of scale, landscapes, and public accessibility of the newest Ismaili Center.

Harvard Graduate School of Design.
“Ismaili Center Houston Inaugurated: Farshid Moussavi and Hanif Kara.” November 2025.
This source provides commentary on Hanif Kara and Farshid Moussavi’s project, partially regarding the structural design and architectural strategies. It was used to support my analysis of the center in Houston, as well as how it maintains its core values while responding to a different environment and expectations.