

Crystal Clear

Meet Our Neighbours: The glass-and-stone Delegation of the Ismaili Imam at rising next to DFAIT will be a place of openness, reflection and work on the challenges of human development. By Mebs Velji

A stroll along Sussex Drive on Ottawa's ceremonial route, otherwise known as Confederation Boulevard, reveals a number of changes that have occurred over the past few years. Nothing is more noticeable to us at DFAIT than what's happening next door at 199 Sussex, with the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat building, due to open in January.

The name of the building refers to the office of the Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community, His Highness the Aga Khan. The Delegation is to be an open and secular facility that will reinforce existing partnerships and cultivate new initiatives with organizations in Canada, while promoting global cooperation. It will also serve as the headquarters of Aga Khan Foundation Canada, an international development organization, and include institutional offices for the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a group of agencies covering social, economic and cultural development, especially in Asia and Africa.

Conceived as a pavilion in a park—featuring a garden, atrium, meeting spaces and a resource centre—the modern building was designed by renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki.

Maki's design draws inspiration from rock crystal, which appears transparent or opaque, depending on the angle from which it is seen. The facade is covered with crystallized glass panels and the building rests on a granite podium, surrounded by landscaping that will reintroduce a public pathway between Sussex Drive and Boteler Street. The building's distinctive silhouette is created by the asymmetrical glass dome covering the atrium. There is also an exterior courtyard, or *charbagh*. This blurring of the division between indoor and outdoor spaces is a characteristic found in much of Islamic architecture.

When asked about the links between the Delegation's mandate and Canada's international agenda, Khalil Shariff, the CEO of Aga Khan

Foundation Canada, stressed that the Imamat and the AKDN over the past three decades have formed partnerships with a wide range of institutions across Canada for the benefit of the developing world.

The Delegation will provide opportunities to strengthen Canadian expertise and bring the country's intellectual and technical resources to bear on the challenges of human development, he said.

Through policy round tables, research and educational initiatives, the Delegation will encourage reflection on issues similar to those faced by DFAIT and CIDA. These include countering the narcotic economy in Afghanistan, addressing development and security challenges in Africa, and looking at Canadian engagement in Central Asia. A regular schedule of public events will include lectures, film screenings, cultural performances, panel discussions and a speaker series featuring academics, authors, journalists and leaders from around the world.

These activities will all happen in a striking building, a place of transparency with a central location in the nation's capital, Shariff said. "We hope that the Delegation will be a platform to build on our strong partnerships with Canada and Canadians to address pressing global issues."

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