Backgrounder

Aga Khan Centre (AKC) to open in King’s Cross, London

New UK home for institutions founded by His Highness the Aga Khan focused on education and international development

- Designed primarily as an academic building for teaching and research, the organisations based at AKC work to increase understanding of Muslim civilisations and improve the quality of life of some of the world’s most disadvantaged communities
- The building design, by world-renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, represents openness, dialogue and respect for diverse viewpoints
- A series of roof gardens, terraces and courtyards - the ‘Islamic Gardens at King’s Cross’ - showcase the diversity of Muslim cultures through landscape architecture

Public opening on 22 September 2018, www.akdn.org / #agakhancentre

This summer will see the official inauguration of a unique building in King’s Cross, at the heart of London’s thriving Knowledge Quarter. The Aga Khan Centre (AKC) will be opened by HRH The Prince of Wales in the presence of His Highness the Aga Khan.

The inauguration takes place during His Highness’ visit to the UK as a guest of Her Majesty’s Government. This year marks His Highness’ Diamond Jubilee - 60 years of his role as Imam (spiritual leader) of the global Shia Ismaili Muslim community. For six decades, His Highness the Aga Khan has transformed the quality of life for millions of people around the world in the areas of health, education, cultural revitalisation and economic empowerment.

The Aga Khan Centre in King’s Cross is a place for education, knowledge, cultural exchange and insight into Muslim civilisations. It is home to a number of organisations founded by His Highness, including The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC), and the Aga Khan Foundation UK (AKF UK). Together the organisations work to bridge the gap in understanding about Muslim cultures. The Aga Khan Centre will be a venue to connect the public to global development issues and the work of the Aga Khan Foundation.

London has been a home for these institutions for forty years, due in large part to the city’s role as an international centre that has a pluralistic outlook and respects the free exchange of ideas. The thriving King’s Cross neighbourhood is a natural fit for these educational and international development organisations. The IIS and AKU-ISMC work alongside leading UK universities and are active members of London’s Knowledge Quarter. Through their Higher Education programmes, research and publications, they seek to promote scholarship on Muslim cultures and societies, historical as well as contemporary.

AKC also houses the ‘Aga Khan Library, London’, which brings together the collections of IIS and AKU-ISMC. Located over two floors, the library provides space for publications, areas for study and secure archival storage for rare books and manuscripts. The library collections include academic materials for teaching, research,
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comparative study and publications about Muslim civilisations, including a unique collection with a focus on Shia Islam and its Ismaili traditions.

Architecture and Design

The design of the Aga Khan Centre is influenced by Islamic architectural heritage. It is the first London building designed by Japanese architects Maki and Associates. Fumihiko Maki is considered one of Japan’s most distinguished living architects and is renowned for his extensive work on academic and education spaces, as well as his ability to use light, a simple palette and limited materials to create a unique atmosphere.

The new 10,000m2 building appears to ‘float’ with its cantilevered façade, hovering above glass walls at ground level. It re-arranges a traditional Islamic architectural format, of multiple spaces organised around ground level courtyards, to a vertical layout - placing a series of open learning and office spaces upwards around a central atrium. The building spans across 10 floors.

The building is the third by Maki and Associates that His Highness has commissioned, following the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat in Ottawa and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.

Islamic Gardens at King’s Cross

Central to the building and across multiple floors is a series of terraces, gardens and courtyards. The ‘Islamic Gardens at King’s Cross’ are inspired by the diversity of Muslim societies, drawing from regions ranging from North Africa and Spain to the Middle East, Persia and India. The beautiful spaces offer a series of contemporary, contemplative gardens which have been commissioned specifically to represent the diversity of the Muslim world, while jointly bringing a connected ‘ribbon’ of new green spaces to the developing King’s Cross area. These have been created by Maki and Associates as well as other leading garden designers, including Madison Cox and Nelson Byrd Woltz.

His Highness the Aga Khan

His Highness the Aga Khan is the 49th Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, a hereditary role that has a 1,400 year history. The inauguration of the Aga Khan Centre is part of a series of commemorative events around the world to mark the 60th anniversary – the Diamond Jubilee – of His Highness’ accession to the leadership of the Shia Ismaili Muslims on 11 July 1957. The Imam’s hereditary responsibility includes the transformation of the quality of life for his community and for those among whom they live. Driven by the ethics of the Islamic faith, including generosity, brotherhood, compassion, voluntary service, self-reliance, and an emphasis on the role of the intellect, His Highness has been at the forefront of development for the past 60 years of his Imamat.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS)

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) was established in 1977 to promote scholarship and learning about Muslim societies and to encourage a better understanding of their relationships with other cultures and faiths. Its research, publications and educational programmes promote scholarship in previously marginalised areas of the study of Islam. These include the intellectual and literary heritages of Shia Islam, with an emphasis on Ismaili traditions. IIS’s programmes focus on multiple approaches, expressions and interpretations, giving it a reputation for openness and tolerance.
Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU ISMC)

The Aga Khan University (AKU) established the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) in 2002. AKU-ISMC is a higher education institution with a focus on research, publication, graduate study and outreach. It promotes scholarship that opens up new perspectives on Muslim heritage, modernity, culture, religion and society. AKU-ISMC students conduct innovative research into Muslim civilisations and religious traditions primarily from the perspectives of the social sciences and humanities.

Aga Khan Foundation (AKF UK)

The Aga Khan Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life, enhance self-reliance and promote pluralism in poor and marginalised communities of Asia and Africa. Established in 1967, its long-term, community-based approach addresses and benefits people of all faiths and backgrounds, especially women and girls. Its activities enhance agriculture and food security, promote early childhood development and access to quality education, improve health and nutrition, advance economic inclusion, and strengthen civil society. With the support of partners such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), other government partners, individual donors and numerous volunteers, the Aga Khan Foundation has helped to lift millions of people out of poverty.

From September 2018, the Aga Khan Centre will run a public programme of lectures and exhibitions, and members of the public will also have opportunities to visit the ‘Islamic Gardens at King’s Cross’ housed in the building as part of regular scheduled tours.

The Aga Khan Centre joins the Ismaili Centre in London as an ambassadorial building of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and the institutions of the Ismaili Imamat in the United Kingdom. The Ismaili Centre, located in South Kensington in London’s Cultural Quarter, will continue to bring people together around arts, culture, and thoughtful debate as part of its ongoing programmes serving the Ismaili community, its neighbours and friends in the London area.

CONTACT

For further information, please contact Imran Jina at agakhancentre@brunswickgroup.com / +44 (0)20 7404 5959

Additional media resources on the inauguration and other aspects of His Highness’ Diamond Jubilee visit to the United Kingdom, including biographies, images are available at www.akdn.org/UKvisit