The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture:
An Experiment in Architectural Education

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Since its establishment in 1979, The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) has been experimenting with specialized architectural education and has itself been seen as an experiment in architectural education that received more than its fair share of attention, praise, and criticism. AKPIA is located in two leading institutions with firm disciplinary parameters, the Department of Architecture at MIT and the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, and is dedicated to the study of the history and practice of art, architecture, and urbanism in the Islamic world. Its overall mission is to promote scholarly work at the front edge of history, theory, and criticism of architecture, to explore approaches to design that allow thoughtful and critical responses to contemporary conditions and aspirations in the Islamic world, and to provide a base of information about architecture and art of the Islamic world which is open to scholars, teachers, and practitioners.

Giving the ACSA conference's objective, this paper will discuss a complex and hotly debated issue in architectural education today that the experience of AKPIA within the Department of Architecture at MIT has brought into sharp focus. The aim is not to resolve it but rather to sustain the critical tension it has generated.

The issue is the agency of culture in architectural education. Is architectural knowledge universal, and therefore the methods of teaching it universally applicable as well? Or is culture important for architectural education, as it is taken for granted to be important for architecture itself? In an age of rapid change both in the conception, implementation, and transfer of knowledge and in the definition and subdivision of professions and professional expertise, how can we design architectural education to both enhance the creative role of culture and question existing cultural barriers?

The major hurdle we face is the ideologically constructed polarity between what is usually projected as a discipline of architecture with its own internal agenda and culture (based essentially on Western architectural history and theory) and what is generally delegated to cultural studies (i.e. other architectural histories). The location of AKPIA at MIT is both an instance of that polarization and an opportunity to contest it. Whether AKPIA ends up by reaffirming the dichotomy or constructively challenging it would determine the next step in the continuous project of restructuring architectural education to both embrace marginalized histories and experiences and to maintain the ideals of scholarship, intellectual curiosity, and quest for knowledge which have hitherto been portrayed as exclusively Western attributes.