

Aga Khan Library visit



By Carmen De Paz

The Aga Khan Centre is in the Kings Cross area, housed in a newly commissioned building by the Japanese architects Maki & Associates.

I loved the building design, the clear white lines of the exterior, the 'empty' internal vertical atrium going up nine floors, and particularly, the different roof gardens, terraces, and courtyards, at different levels, with their own designs and plants. We were told that the main characteristic of an Islamic Garden is water, and all these internal gardens have a water element, either real (a running fountain) or conceptual (a flat marble stone).

Each garden has been inspired by different historical Islamic gardens from around the world. The beautiful names match the beautiful spaces: Garden of Tranquility, Terrace of Learning, Courtyard of Harmony, Garden of Life, Terrace of Discovery, and Garden of Light.

The Aga Khan Centre is home to different departments and organisations, including the Library (on two floors), Special Collections, and the University Institute for the Study of Muslim civilisation (with an emphasis on Muslim civilisation and culture).



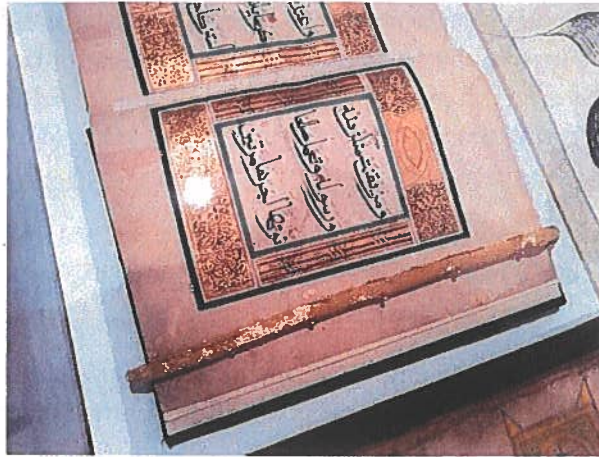
15 - Copy of two pages of the Blue Quran in lightbox.

Photo: Carmen De Paz

Curator Esen Kaya introduced to us to the current exhibition on the ground floor: 'The Quran: Form, Fragrance & Feeling'¹³. There were historical and contemporary art works exploring the Quran in the form of textiles, prints, ceramics, and manuscripts. The exhibition has been designed on three levels: visual (physical art works), audio (background - playing of recordings from the beginning of 20th century of people reciting Quran verses) and an aromatic/smell sensorial level (an inhouse researcher has created a unique fragrance for the exhibition, which perfumes the room).

My favourite items from the Quran exhibition were the copies of two pages from the Blue Quran, illuminated in a light box, and the manuscript 'snakes', which usually keep open the books and which have been covered in gold fabric, sequins, and stones by Masako Newton from the Royal School of Needlework.

¹³<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/gallery/quran-form-fragrance-feeling/>



16 - Embellished book 'snakes'

Photo: Carmen De Paz



I was impressed about the amount of inter-disciplinary collaborations and the detail which went into this exhibition: the wall colours, the layout of the room, the cushions displaying the artefacts etc, everything was carefully thought out and had a meaning.

We had a full tour of the building and a tour of the library with librarian Pedro Sanchez. The library holds over 54,000 volumes on over 60 different languages. They use the Library of Congress Classification, and it holds collections relating mainly to Islamic studies and Ismaili studies.

We then visited a Special Collection display prepared for us by Naureen Ali, Cataloguer at the collection. This was followed by a video presentation about their ongoing Oral History Project, which is about collecting and preserving memories and stories of individuals from the Ismaili community around the world.

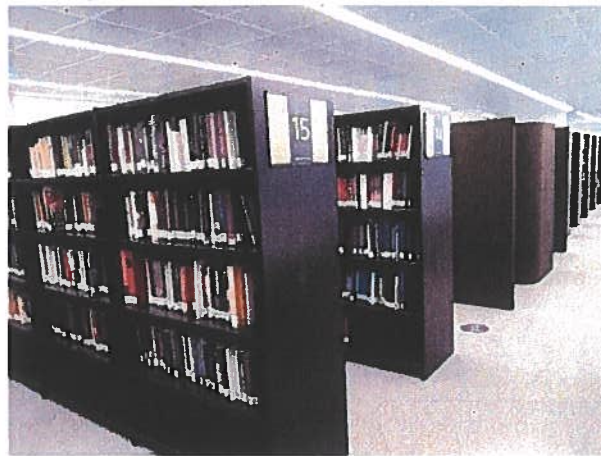
The whole library and building team were very helpful and friendly. The visit finished with tea and coffee, and a very relaxed chat among all the participants.

The good thing for us is that students and staff from any university can join the library for free. I would love to go back, and I encourage others to visit.

The exhibitions on the ground floor are also open to the general public without the need to book.

There are also regular free tours of the building open to all, on Fridays at 5 pm, and on Saturdays at 12pm and at 1.30pm.

This visit was part of the M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries library tours.



17 - Book shelves

Photo: Carmen De Paz

Links:

- [Aga Khan Centre homepage](https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/)¹⁴
- [Tours of the Aga Khan Centre](https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/tours/)¹⁵
- [Ismaili oral history project](https://www.iis.ac.uk/research-publications/research/ismaili-special-collections-unit/oral-history-project/)¹⁶
- [The Quran: Form, Fragrance & Feeling \(until 20 May 2024\)](https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/gallery/quran-form-fragrance-feeling/)¹⁷

¹⁴<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/>

¹⁵<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/tours/>

¹⁶<https://www.iis.ac.uk/research-publications/research/ismaili-special-collections-unit/oral-history-project/>

¹⁷[https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/gallery/quran form fragrance feeling/](https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/gallery/quran-form-fragrance-feeling/)

