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BIG and Zaha Hadid Among Aga Khan Award for Architecture Winners 2016

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Zaha Hadid Architects were chosen for the Issam Fares Institute, a new building for the American University of Beirut, Lebanon
(Courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture / Cemal Emden)

The winners of the 2016 Aga Khan Award for Architecture were announced in Abu Dhabi this week. Six projects in five countries have made it to the final round, from Bjarke Ingels Group's multiethnic neighborhood "Superkilen" in Copenhagen, Denmark, to Leila Araghian and Alireza Behzadi's multi-level Tabiat Pedestrian Bridge in Tehran, Iran. The list also includes a university building by Zaha Hadid Architects in Beirut; a mosque by Marina Tabassum, as well as a walled-in community center by Kashef Chowdhury, both in Bangladesh, and a traditionally inspired children's library in Beijing by ZAO/standardarchitecture.

Every three years, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture honors projects and concepts by international architects focusing on the needs and interests of communities with a significant Muslim presence. Established in 1977 by His Highness the Aga Khan, and part of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the award, which comes with a prize money of about US\$ 1 million, has since grown into one of the most prestigious and lucrative international accolades for architecture, with previous laureates and jurors

including international stars such as Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Charles Correa, Jean Nouvel, and Hassan Fathy.

2016 once more sees a diverse range of winning projects that reflects the award's intention to honor approaches not only exhibiting "architectural excellence but also improve the overall quality of life."

The two finalist projects from Bangladesh, for example, touch upon religious and social life with the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, and a Friendship Center in Gaibandha. The first was designed by Dhaka firm Marina Tabassum Architects and lauded by the jury for its sophisticated design in the composition of brick walls and reinforced concrete frames. The second is a training center for Bangladesh NGO "Friendship" by Dhaka architect Kashef Chowdhury/URBANA and resembles a "walled town" surrounded by an earthen embankment to protect the facilities from flooding, while embodying what Louis Kahn once termed "architecture of the land."

Meanwhile the Chinese winner, the Hutong Children's Library and Art Center in Beijing by local firm ZAO/standardarchitecture, represents an attempt to preserve the traditional Chinese Hutongs, courtyard residencies with self-built backyard sections, which are rapidly disappearing from the face of Chinese cities to make space for new and glitzy high-rise projects.

Superkilen, a public space bridging various ethnically mixed neighborhoods in Copenhagen in a design by BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group, Topotek 1 and Superflex, also takes a strong stance on urban living by "promoting integration across lines of ethnicity, religion, and culture," and was thus also chosen for the award. As was the Tabiat Pedestrian Bridge by Diba Tensile Architecture and its two founders Leila Araghian and Alireza Behzadi in Tehran, Iran, which, with its multi-level setup across a busy motorway, helped create "a dynamic new urban space."

This year's most famous laureates, Zaha Hadid Architects, no strangers to the award's juries and Steering Committees, were chosen for the Issam Fares Institute, a new building for the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, hailed as "radical in composition but respectful of its traditional context."