



1989 Technical Review Summary  
by *Atilla Yucel*

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# Arab World Institute

Paris, France



## *Architects*

Jean Nouvel, P. Soria & G. Lezènes  
Architecture Studio: Robain, Galmiche, Tisnado & Bonne  
Paris, France

## *Client*

Institut du Monde Arabe  
Paris, France

## *Completed*

November 1987

TECHNICAL REVIEW REPORT ON  
THE ARAB WORLD INSTITUTE BUILDING  
(IMA - INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE), PARIS

by Atilla YÜCEL

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## I. Introduction

The Arab World Institute (L'Institut du Monde Arabe - IMA) is one of the large scale projects ("Grands Projets") built in Paris in the last decade and which were conceived as the new architectural landmarks of the capital, aiming at "announcing the Paris of the year 2000".

Situated in the center of the capital, the building provides a meeting place for the two cultures which have produced it: France and twenty Arab countries. It provides a place for "continuing artistic, technical and scientific exchange between two old civilizations which have continuously enriched each other".

Its main objective was to reinforce the French understanding of Arab culture and civilization, and "to change the Arab World's image in France".

The Institute's facilities include a library, a museum, an information center, exhibition areas, a news room, an auditorium, a restaurant and a bookstore.

The building which includes the space for these activities together with other administrative, technical and service spaces is the winning project of a competition with limited entries. It is a nine storey building divided into two sections: The first curved northern wing follows the line of the Seine while the second section runs parallel to the neighboring University of Jussieu buildings, thus creating an axis between the two. A cul-de-sac type driveway separates the two parts, and an inner courtyard is located at the end of this passage.

The architecture is contextual in terms of its urban relations, transparent, discreetly high-tech. (which differentiate it from the extroverted technophilia of Beaubourg), full of spatial contrasts and referential metaphors. It has raised up a large interest in the parisian and european cultural milieu and has been widely publicised in general and professional press.

## II. Context

### A. Historical Background

The "official" history of the IMA dates back to 1980 when the twenty founder states signed, on 28 February, the certificate of the foundation of the Institute. However, the idea was older; and goes back to the time of President Pompidou; but it was concretely actualized during the last years of presidency of M.Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The period corresponds to the developing relations between the West and the Arab countries with their growing importance in world politics, their developing economy, their investments and the petro-dollars, the North-African and Lebanese presence in France etc.

The founder states were: Algeria, the U.A.E., France, Irak, Jordan, Koweit, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen (Arab Republic), Yemen (Democratic Republic). Egypt was not taking part at the beginning, due to political reasons, and Libya joined the founder Arab states in 1984.

The Institute was founded as a French institution, and acknowledged by the French Law as a foundation of public utility.

According to the agreement signed between France and the Arab countries, the land was to be provided by France and the building costs to be financed by the Arab counterparts. The functioning and the finance of the Institute were given to an Executive Committee

of twelve members, six French and six Arab; and a 36 members High Council.

Within the year of the creation of IMA, a first site was allocated at the 15th "arrondissement", on the rue de la Federation near the Boulevard Grenelle, located in a residential district not far from the Eiffel Tower. However, this decision created a general reaction among the residents of the neighborhood who apparently protested against building on a site which they were using as a sports area. The Municipality approved their claim and this created a first crisis between the Arab ambassadors and the French authorities. In the meantime, a project had already been prepared for this first site by Henry Bernard, the architect of the Radio House located at the opposite bank of the Seine. The program was relatively small when compared to the present one, and the architecture with the colonnades, arches, patios and cupolas, was an example of the well known Western visual expression of the Arabo-Islamic image.

All works stopped in 1981 and the mayor of Paris, M.Jacques Chirac began to propose new sites: at the Halles, La Villette, Bercy. Finally it was the minister of Culture, M.Jack Lang who selected the new site located at the historic 5th arrondissement. Culturally and historically the new site had a higher value; and its location on the oldest part of Paris, facing Notre-Dame through l'Ile St. Louis, conferred to it an exclusive significance.

The new socialist government wanted to encourage the new generation of French architects for this prestigious program, and invited seven architects for the new competition, cancelling the old project.

These architects were: Roland Castro, Henri Ciriani, Edith Girard, Yves Lyon, Jean Nouvel, Gilles Perraudin and Christian de Portzamparc, briefly a group representing the rising generation.

Three weeks were given to them for proposing, starting from a general program, their architectural solutions. A pre-selection was



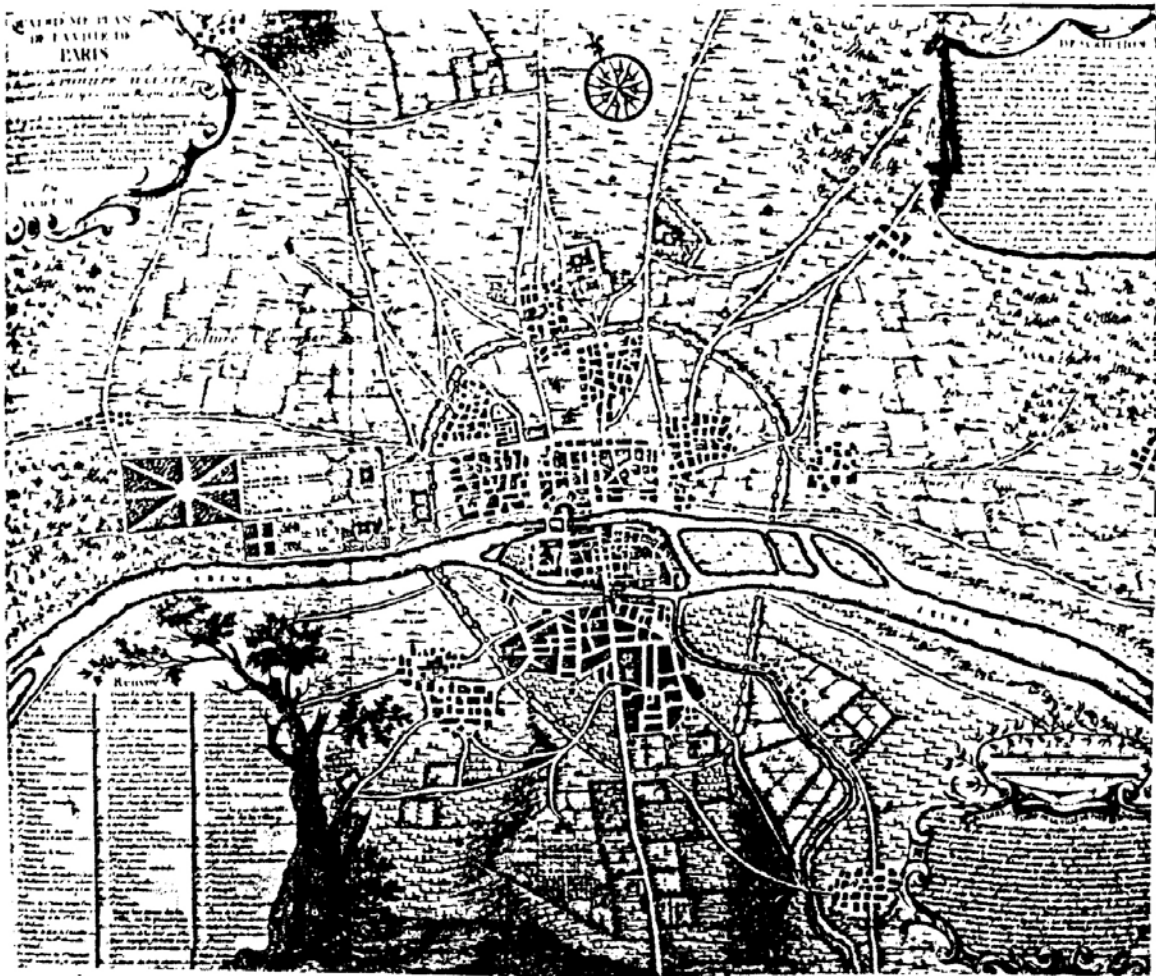
than made by an Evaluation Committee of eleven members and the shortlisted projects were submitted to the President Mitterand for the final selection.

All the entries, except the project of the Nouvel's team, proposed low-rise solutions, using the whole site: terrace blocks, courtyard patterns, etc. Nouvel proposed a relatively high, compact block; thus leaving the space between his building and the University buildings free, and following exactly the curve of the quai St. Bernard and the line of the adjacent buildings. It was this solution Mitterand preferred.

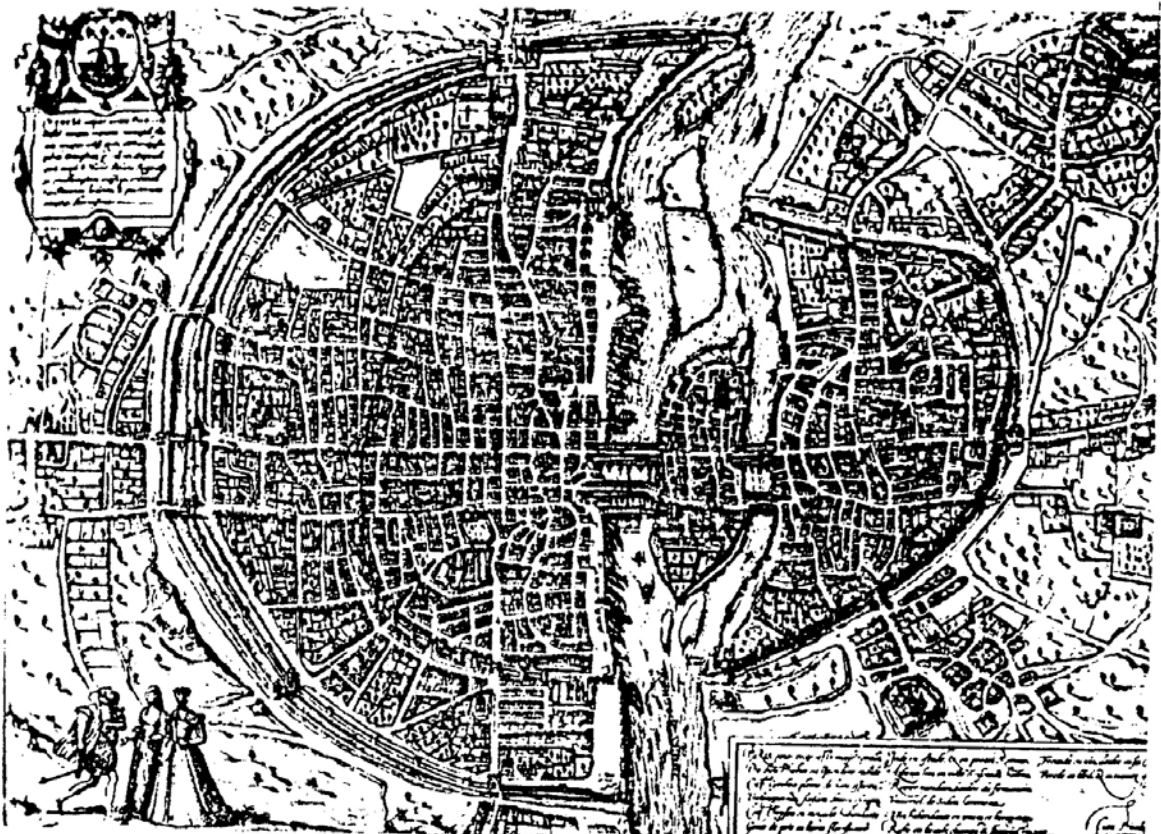
Historically the site is situated at the heart of Paris. Facing l'Ile St. Louis and la Cité, the oldest settlement of Lutece, it is surrounded on the west by the rue des Fosses Saint-Bernard, which marks the boundaries of Paris of Philippe-Auguste and the city walls which he built in the XIIth century. This sector of the old Paris, restructured by Haussmann was partly demolished in the last century: The Austerlitz railway station, the Botanic Garden (Le Jardin des Plantes) and the university buildings of the Université de Paris VI-Jussieu were built on the eastern part of the area. Temporary university buildings, constructed on the location of the demolished Vine Market (Halle aux Vins) were occupying the site on which once an old city gate existed, namely la Porte de Blondel.

## B. Local Architectural Character

The urban architecture of Paris is well known and excludes any need for detailed description. The neighborhood in which the site is within includes historic landmarks such as Notre Dame, and some old blocks on which row houses and larger mansions dating from XIVth century and on were built. But most of the buildings including those of the northern front of the Seine date from XVIIIth century on, those of the immediate surroundings being predominantly more recent buildings of the last decades.



Paris under the reign of Philippe-Auguste



Plan of Paris called "aux trois personnages" (XIV. century) showing the site facing the city walls and the islands of the Seine



La Cité with Notre-Dame, Ile St. Louis and the Rive Gauche area  
(XIII. century)

Relating to local architecture, another question raises: whether the "local" dimension mentioned here should include or not the intrinsic characteristics inherent to the Arab architecture. This constitutes a very relevant question pertaining to the "arabicity" of the project. However, this contextual issue will be discussed in relation with the design concepts and the formal aspects of the project.

#### C. Climatic Conditions

They do not constitute a very important set of conditions in a air-conditioned high-tech. building programme. The tempered European climate of Paris is also well known.

#### D. Immediate Surroundings of the Site: Architectural Character, Access, Congestion, Landscaping, etc.

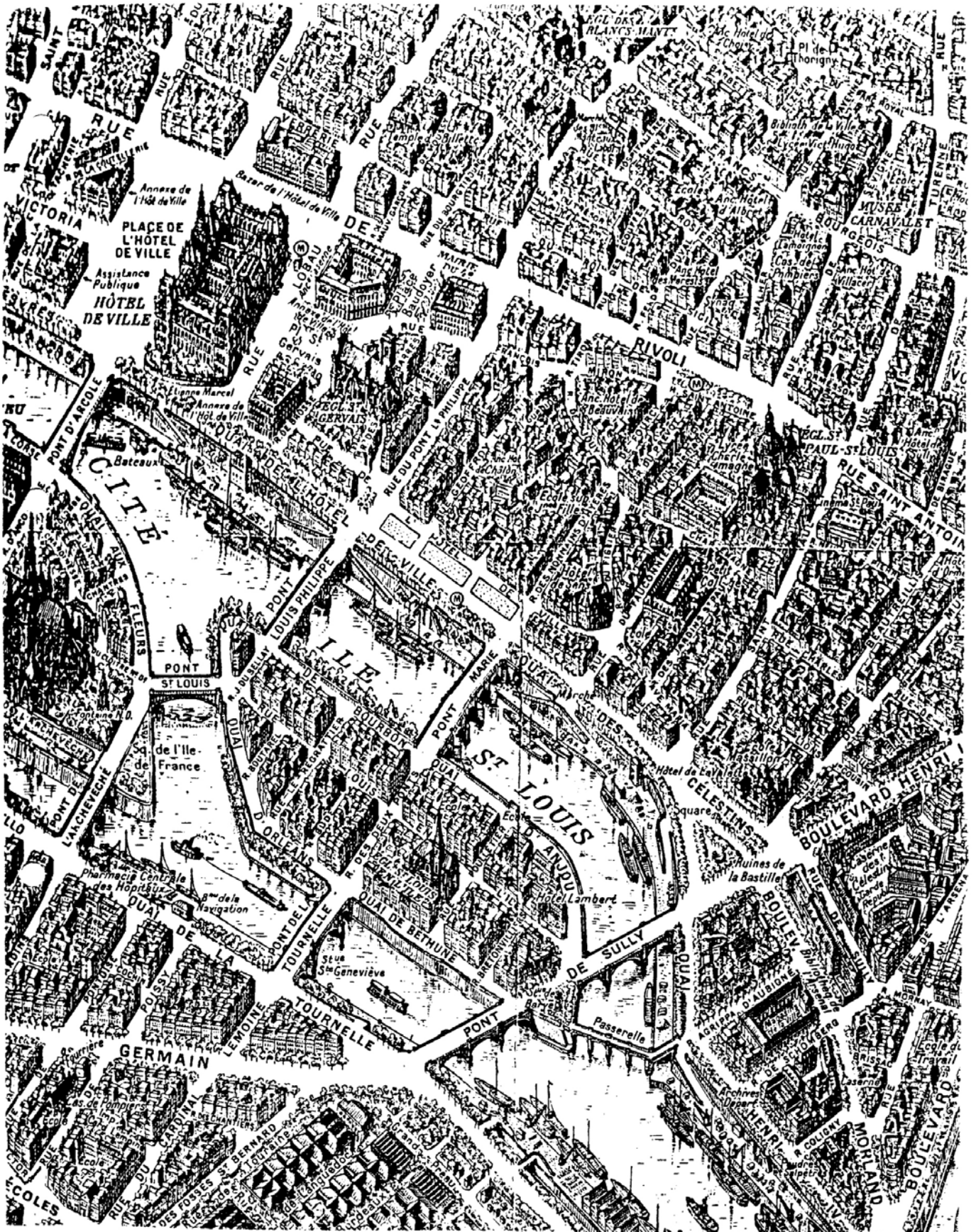
The building site of IMA is surrounded by the Seine and St.Bernard quay on the north; the Jussieu University building blocks on the south; the continuing line of other blocks along the quay on the east and the rue des Fosses St.Bernard on the west, with the corner of the eastern end of the Boulevard St.Germain. On the north and north-east, the site faces the buildings of the St.Louis island and those of the Rive Droite (east bank) of the Seine along Henri IV. quay toward the Bastille.

There are two important characteristics of this surrounding space: the architectural and the urban ones. The northern "Front de Seine" buildings and those which constitute the southern bank front and continue the street façade, together with the buildings along the Boulevard St.Germain are mostly five to six storey 19th Century buildings reflecting post-haussmanian parisian architecture of the 1st and 5th "arrondissements". On the other hand, the surrounding university buildings and those which are located on the rue des Fosses St.Bernard are more recent. They date from the sixties: reinforced concrete rectangular blocks with repetitive façade modules. Among these, the Sciences School buildings of the Jussieu University constitute long bars aligned parallel to the Seine.





Detail of Blondel Plan of Paris, showing the site of the Wine Market at Jussieu  
(1940 ies)



Axonometric view of the neighborhood with the Wine Market structures (1940 ies)

Relatively far from these rises the culminating architectural element: the profile of Notre-Dame.

But the urban character is much more important. It relates these different architectures which are aligned continuously along side the boulevards: These haussmanian arteries planted with chestnut and plane trees constituting long axes. The continuity of the streets which is strengthened on the riverside by the presence of the Seine; and the uninterrupted alignement of the buildings confer to this parisian cityscape its more significative urban character regardless of the formal difference between its architectural constituents. Another significant urban characteristic is the morphological break the Jussieu University pattern creates within this urban continuity. This constituted the first interruption in the eastern Quartier Latin district and raised an important contextual dilemma for the urban solution of the competition projects of IMA.

#### E. Topography of the Site

The building site is flat, approximately five meters higher than the la Seine water level, as it is all along the riverside.

### III. Description

#### A. The Antecedents: from the General Objectives to the Formulation of the Programme and the Architects' Brief

As it was stressed before, the general objective was to change the image of the Arab world in France, or in other terms to give the correct cultural image of this world with all its historic and contemporary dimensions.

This general objective was more explicitly formulated in the following terms:



- To encourage the cultural exchange between France and the Arab world and communication and cooperation concerning particularly technical and scientific fields.
- To promote good relations between the two parties and through this, better cultural relations between the Arab world and Europe.

For translating this general objectives into a functional programme, some existing institutions constituted the first models of reference: French Cultural Centers abroad and obviously the Centre Pompidou. The Institute was to be something in between; and the preliminary programme which was foreseen for the architectural competition of 1981 resulted from this intermediate model.

The usable floor area was estimated to cover 13.000 sqm and the whole built-up area 20.000, to be consisted of:

- The Museum of Arab Art and Civilization: 5000 sqm (3800 sqm permanent and 500 sqm temporary exhibition space)
- The Library and Documentation Centre: 2500 sqm/25.000 volumes library with a total capacity of 100.000, and 400 sqm actuality hall (newspapers, periodicals)
- The Auditorium and Conference Hall: 800 sqm
- The High Council Hall and related Offices: 1500 sqm
- Hall: 500 sqm
- Cafeteria: 180 sqm
- Public services (restaurant, etc): 650 sqm
- Other administrative, technical and service spaces (including the parking area).



#### D. Building Data: Volumetry, Massing, Surface

The present IMA building conserves the general structure of the original programme like its formal aspects which are very close to the original design of the winning project.

Compared to the 20.000 sqm estimated gross built-up area, the actual figure is 24.000 sqm. The 36 meters height of the original design was reduced to 32, due to the urbanistic regulations, while conserving the original ten storey mass and its formal configuration.

The building measures to be 77 meters long, 35 meters wide and 32 meters high. On a site of 10.000 sqm, 7250 were used in ground floor and the basement.

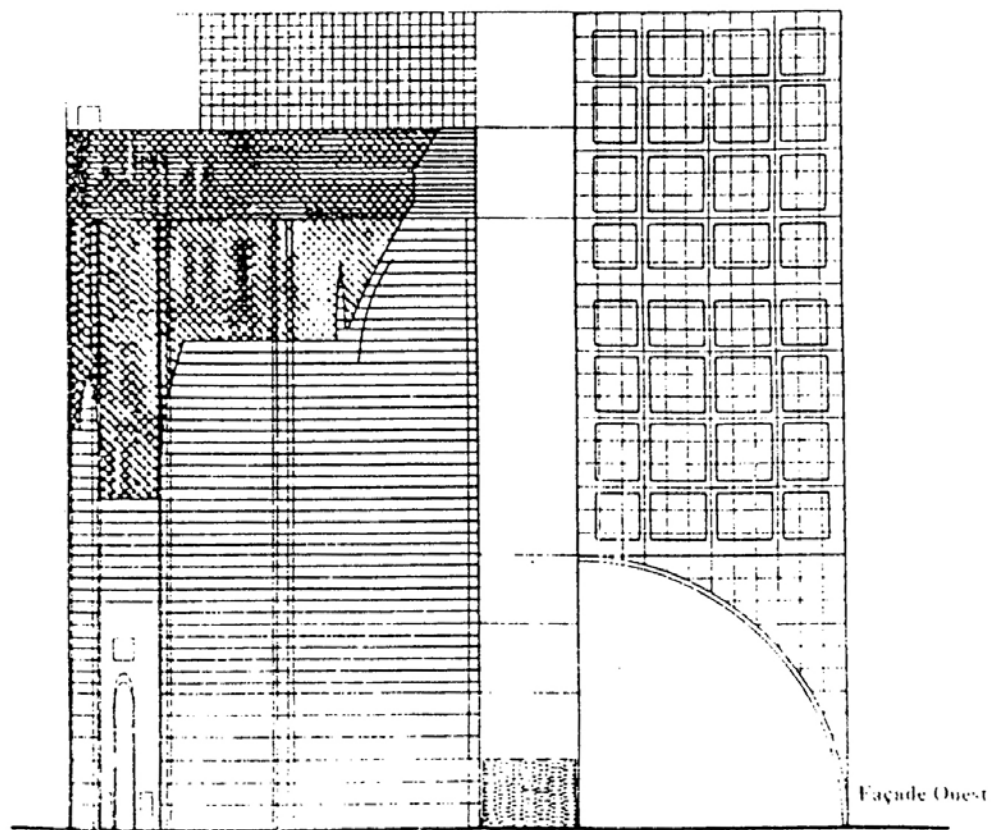
The details of the actual use of the floor surfaces are as follows:

- Museum, exhibition halls etc.	: 1900 sqm.
- Library, Documentation Centre and Actualities Hall	: 1900 sqm.
- Sound and Image	: 160 sqm.
- Auditorium (364 seats) and annexes	: 760 sqm.
- High Council Hall	: 430 sqm.
- Offices	: 2150 sqm.
- Restaurant and Cafeteria	: 600 sqm.
- Car Parking (129 places)	: 3350 sqm.
- Square, roof terrace, court and ramp	: 5780 sqm.
- Services, Technical and circulation spaces	: 7290 sqm.

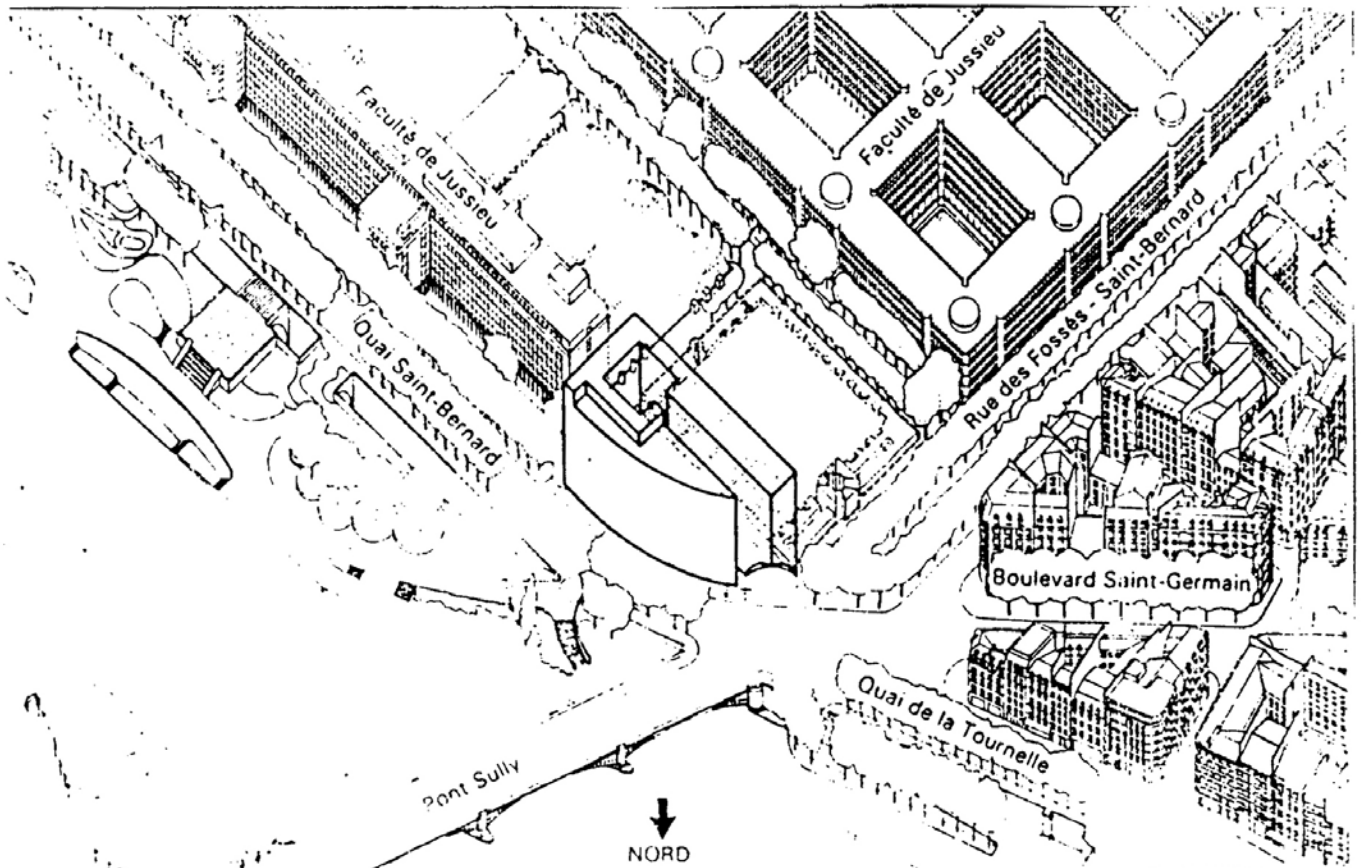
#### E. Evolution of Design Concepts

##### 1. Response to physical constraints:

Among the physical/environmental factors which have affected the project the conditions pertaining to the site and the urban form were the most influential ones. The project site was an exceptional one not only because of its privileged location on



West elevation of the Nouvel's competition proposal (with the quart of dome at the south wing and the Porte de Blondel reference facing la Seine (top)



Schematic axonometry showing the integration to the site (competition entry proposed)

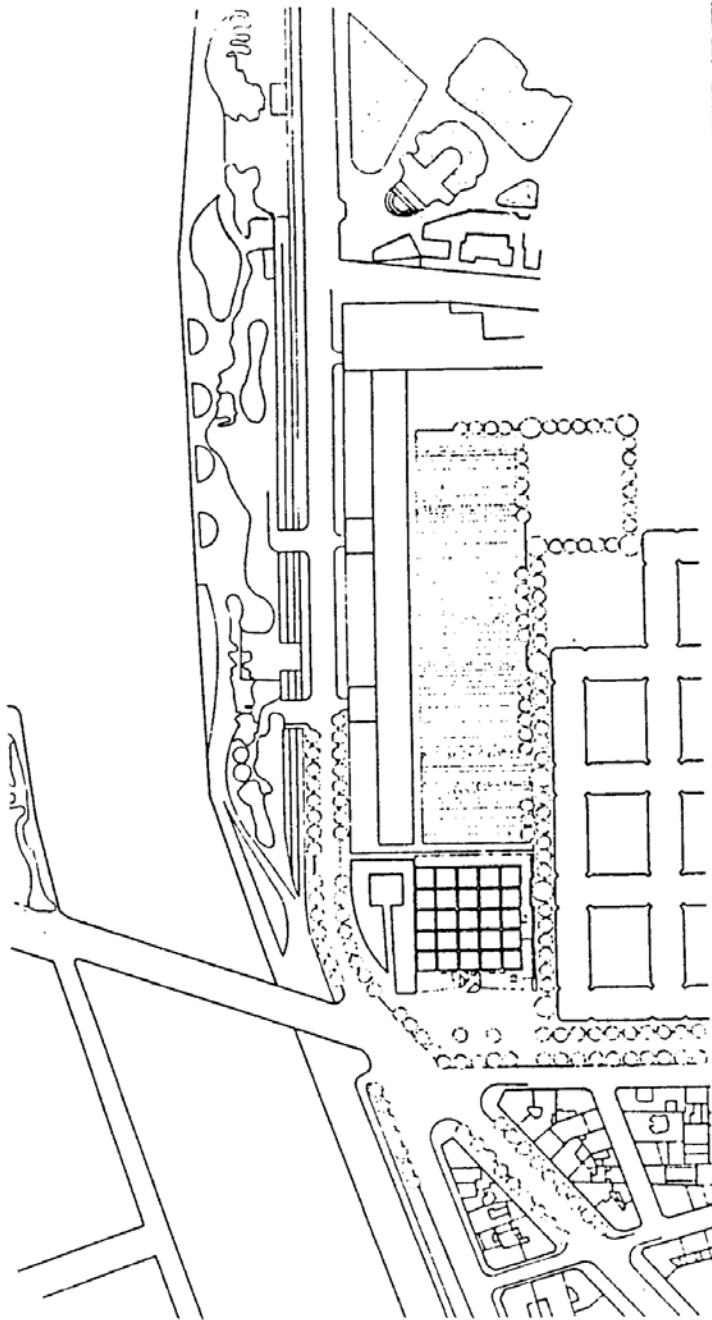
the Rive Gauche at the fringe of the Quartier Latin and facing Notre Dame, but also due to the ambiguous urban context of its immediate surroundings. This corner of the Quai St.Bernard and rue des Fosses St.Bernard, facing the eastern end of the Boulevard St.Germain constituted a very problematic setting where the natural, historic and urban continuities of the Seine and the haussmanian Paris interlace with the discontinuities created by the University buildings first, then the Jardin des Plantes and the Austerlitz railway station at east.

On contrary to all other entries which tried to avoid this ambiguity by hiding the discontinuity of the Jussieu blocks, Nouvel's project included them in its concept, continuing the line of the northern block parallel to the southern one, and creating an active open space between them: the square of IMA (le parvis de l'Institut).

Within this contextual paradigm the northern façade follows the curve of the street parallel to the Seine, while the southern one continues exactly the alignment of the southern façade of the northern block of the University. A deep slit introduced in the scheme, and ended by a square courtyard dividing the block, conferring it roughly the form of an iron. The axis of the slit is directed towards Notre Dame; the curve of the northern wing orients the perspective towards the boulevard St.Germain; and the building is perceived from the corner of the latter as a tall, narrow landmark, characterized by the library tower block and the dramatic slit between the wings: a very characteristic corner building which articulates the urban space around.

On the other hand, this solution creates a strong axis towards east, and proposes a spatial link between the Quartier Latin district and the public spaces of the Botanic Garden, the railway station, and the eastern development area of Bercy where a series of new Grands Projects have been built -like the

General site plan and the axis between IMA and the  
Jussieu University blocks



Ministry of Finance and the Sports Palace- or are projected -like the new National Library extension-.

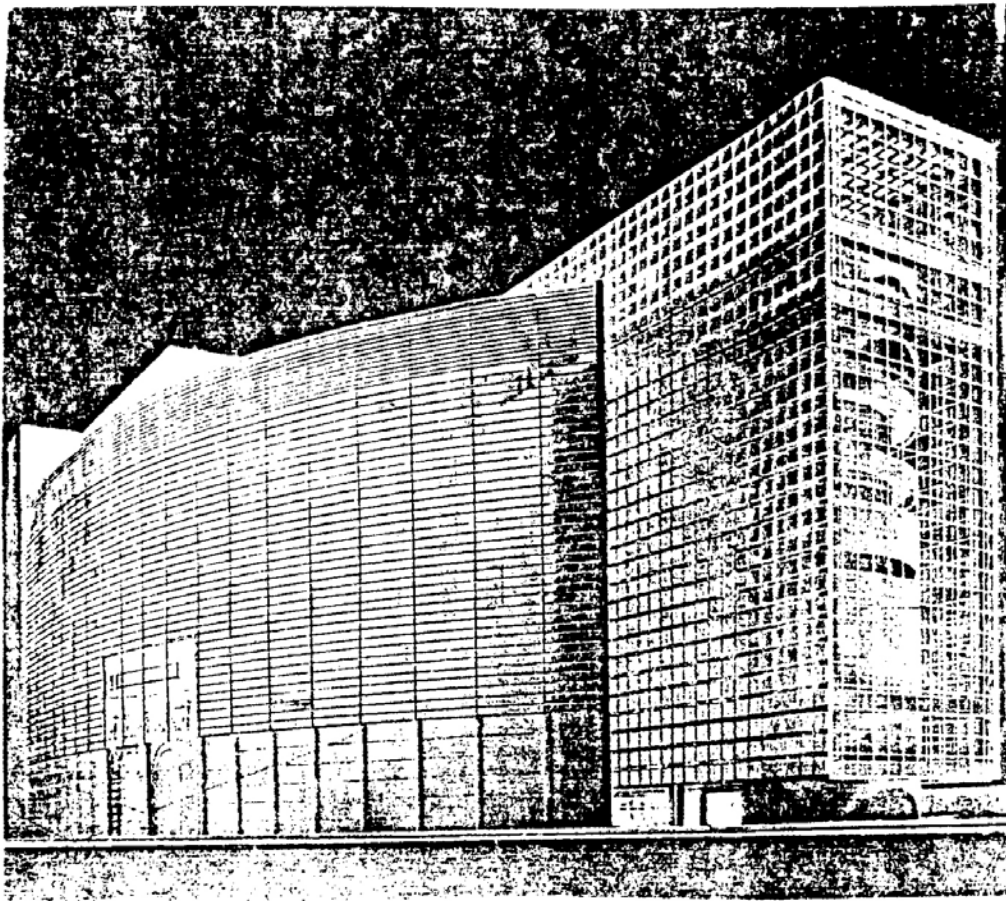
Therefore, starting from an urban discontinuity, the IMA building realized a series of morphologic and spatial continuities strongly articulated by a very simple urban solution.

Other factors, like the climate or the urbanistic regulations are less important. Although the difference of northern and southern façades and the masharabiya- diaphragms which were conceived on the latter were influenced by the orientation, these are interpretations aiming at aesthetic and connotative architectural expressions rather than solutions to climatic constraints in a high-tech., air-conditioned building context. On the other hand, except the reduction of the initially proposed building height, urbanistic restrictions did not play an important role within the context of a competition for a prestigious government project.

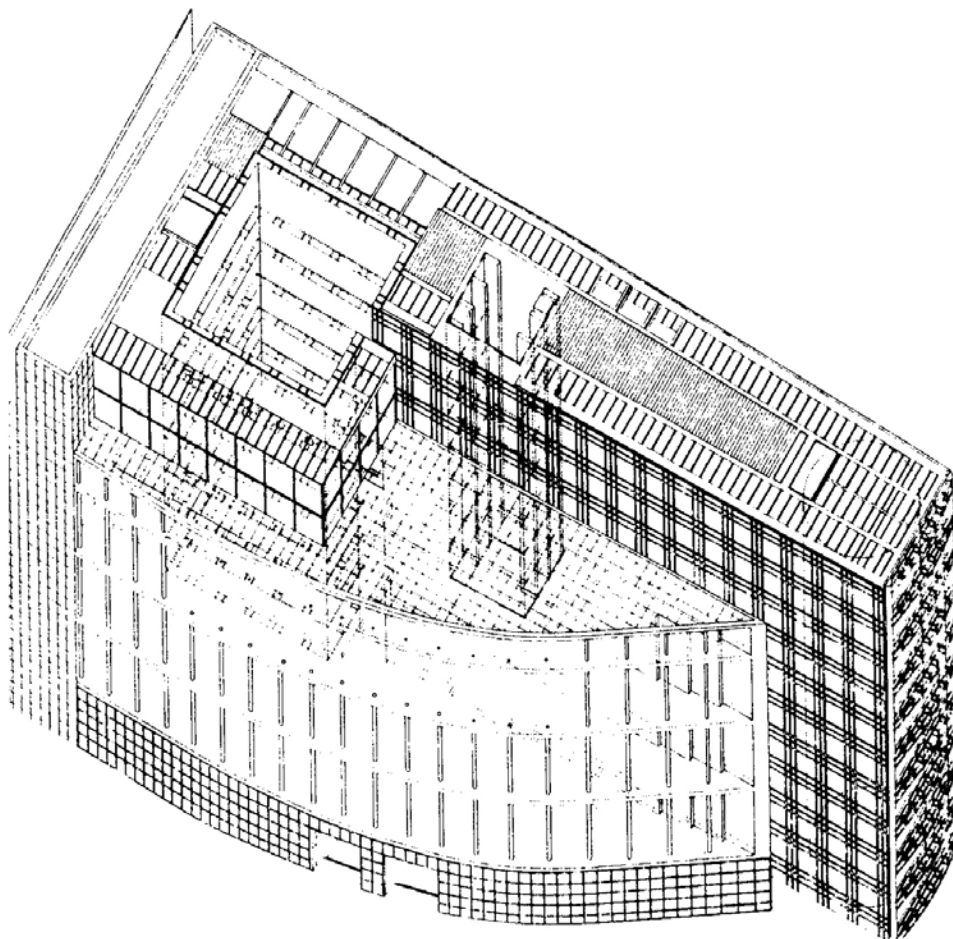
## 2. Spatial organization:

The division of the IMA block into two wings with a cut in between created by the narrow east-west slot and then the court has been reflected in the distribution of different spaces defined in the preliminary programme. This solution also has made the utilisation of different entrance gates arranged in various levels possible.

Independent from the functional requisites an important quality which was sought in the organization of spaces was the contrast and surprise effects: emotional tensions to be created by these contrasts and between different spatial sequences. Thus, a series of contrasting spatial values alternate: The horizontally dilatated space of the "parvis" follows the narrow gateway porch on the rue des Fosses St.Bernard. The extremely squeezed entrance space from this square constitutes another spatial



Model and axonometric drawing of the final project





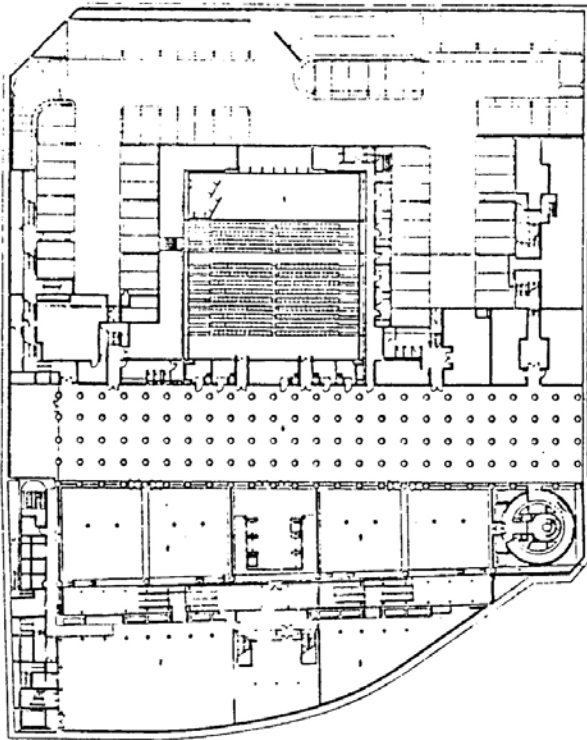
difference, followed by the extremely high, vertical space of the "chimney" of the elevators. The transparency of the activity spaces, their split level continuity contrasts with the gloomy, heavy space of the hypostyle hall. The narrow access which creates the cut between the wings and the quiet cubic geometry of the court constitute other contrasting spatial sequences.

Within this sequential framework, the programme elements are distributed: Two entrances, one from the bank in the north, the second from the square give access to the building; they lead to the elevators tower in the two sides of which the Reception and Bookstore spaces are arranged.

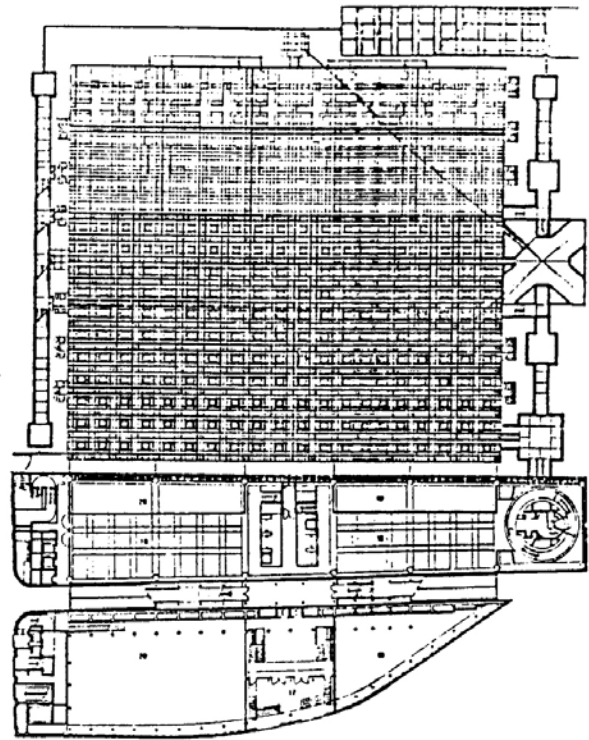
These two spaces with equal low ceiling heights are visually connected to the exhibition spaces of the lower floor by means of the galleries above.

The lower floor, a basement partly under the main structure and partly beneath the square consists of the Exhibition Halls, the Actualities Hall, the Hypostyle Hall -which is also used for exhibitions, but mainly as a lobby space for the Auditorium which completes the functional elements of the basement level. Another separate functional space is constituted by the car parking partly built.

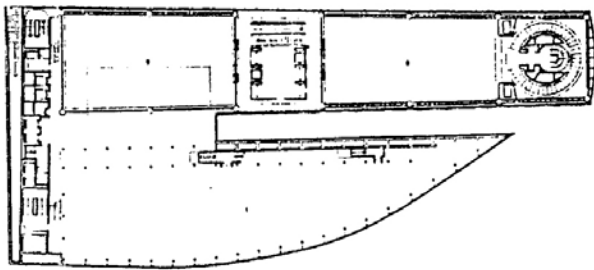
In the upper floors, two vertical elements, one being the main elevators cage and the other staircases are placed at the middle of the southern wing; while the service elevators, other staircases and some sanitary units are located at the eastern part of the building. An open staircase embedded between the eastern blind wall of the IMA building and the adjacent university block was also designed in order to provide a direct and emergency access to the upper terrace. However, this element was not implemented, neither was a kind of waterfall (shallal) substitution also proposed by the architects.



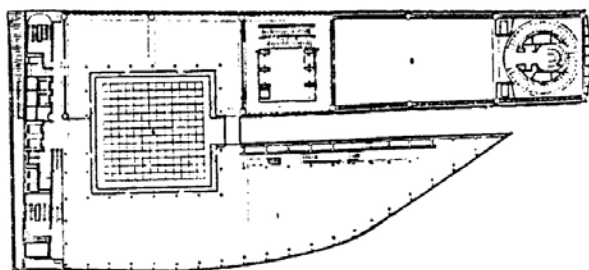
■ Plan of basement floor:  
2 Exhibition Hall  
3 Plenary Hall  
4 Hypostyle Hall  
5 Auditorium to seat 352



■ Plan of ground floor:  
17 Entrance  
18 Hall  
19-20 Well looking onto  
halls on lower floor



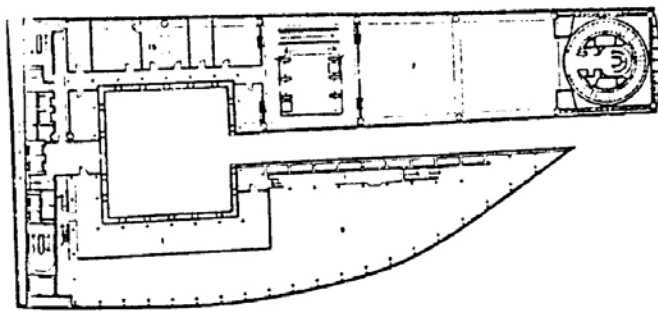
▼ Plan of second floor:  
1 Museum  
8 Well onto library



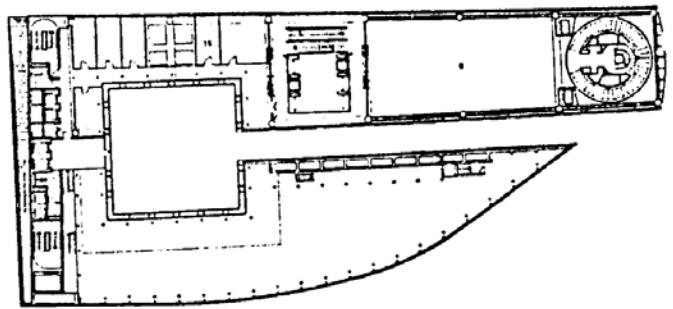
▲ Plan of fourth floor:  
1 Museum  
6 Patio

Generic plans - from the basement to the 4th floor

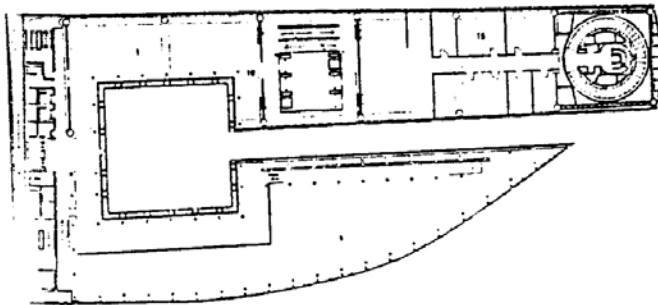




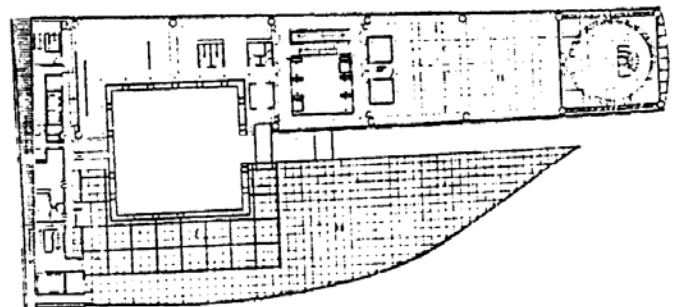
■ Plan of fifth floor:  
1 Museum  
7 Library  
9 Well onto museum  
15 Offices



■ Plan of sixth floor:  
1 Museum  
8 Well onto library  
15 Offices

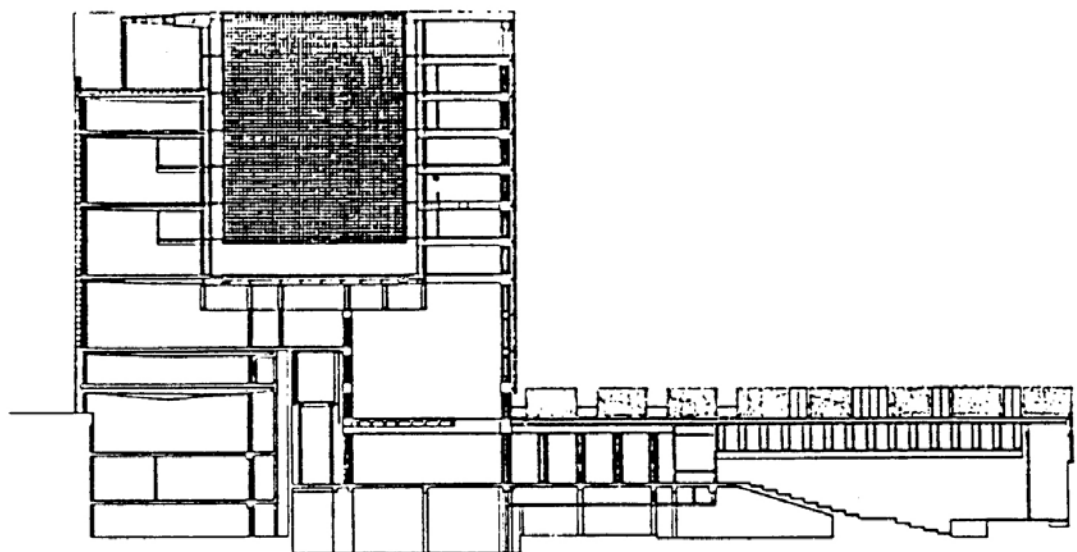


■ Plan of seventh floor:  
1 Museum  
9 Well onto museum  
10 Museum entrance



■ Plan of ninth floor:  
11 High Council Chamber  
12 Buffet  
13 Terrace

Generic plans - from the 5th to the 9th floor; and section (below)



From the first floor to the sixth, at the south-western part of the building is located the Library, with its minaret like spiral staircase at the western end, facing the boulevard St. Germain from its transparent envelope. The Library's lecture spaces use three double floors, connected by the ramp which is used as a book deposit space as well.

From the first up to the seventh floor, the Museum is arranged. Different ceiling heights, sometimes low and occupying a single floor, sometimes doubled, and sometimes using galleries which allow views from above to lower museum sections give diversified and permeable visual effects. Administration units are located at different levels: generally at the 1st., 5th., 6th. and the upper floors, where also takes place the top-managers sector with the Meeting Hall of the High Council at the 9th.

The slit between the northern and southern wings includes the ramp which leads from the corner of the walkway to the VIP entrance at the 1st floor. This narrow space is connected to the court beginning from the 4th floor.

The northern wing's terrace has a panoramic view towards the Rive Droite and the islands. It is used as cafeteria, with a partly covered cafe-restaurant space on the eastern side thus surrounding the court.

These spaces are not organically articulated by the play of intermediate levels, stairs or ramps as in many of the similar buildings. They are even simply juxtaposed. However, the transparency created by the use of glazed surfaces, by the quality of the light, and the dynamism of the spatial contrasts avoid any banal collage effects and any annoying monotony. The space is also made transparent vis a vis of the exterior: Different spatial and functional units, including large exhibition units -glass boxes suspended by metallic bracing-wires are visually interconnected and connected with Paris at

the background. This visual link is mostly stressed in the northern wing through the glazed curtain wall façade, whose ornamental characteristics accentuate the parisian impression.

### 3. Formal aspects:

The contrasting effect sought in the organization of the space is also expressed in the formal aspects of this architecture of impressions and symbolism. The first dramatic impression is given by the contrast between the extremities of the two wings: the pointed end of the northern wing which stands on the corner of the site like a cythe or a liner's bows -as these comparisons were often made by many critics-, and the tall, narrow rectangular front of the southern wing through which the library staircase can be seen, with the deep slit between them: a slight reference to the cul-de-sac ending with a courtyard, metaphoric allusions to the Arab space.

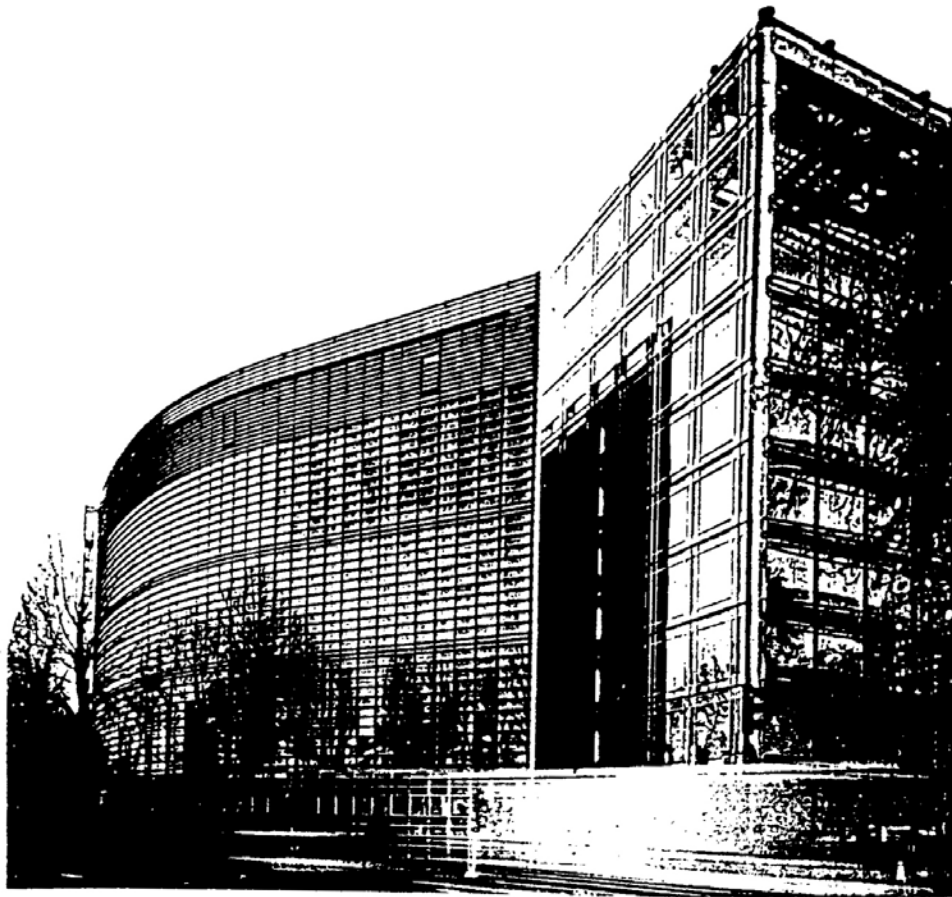
Another contrast arises from the difference between southern and northern façades. Both are glazed curtain-walls; however, both go beyond the genuine, rationalistic curtain-wall pattern: The north front, on the Seine, and facing the Rive Droite, displays a polished look, heightened by a "silk-screen simulating the reflection of the sky-line on the opposite embankment of the river". Adding to this serigraphical impression on glass of the parisian buildings, another reference to the city was made on the ground floor: the pictural image of the demolished, old Porte de Blondel was reproduced on the glazed surface and it constitutes the northern entrance of the Institute. Continuous aluminium frames softly shaped divide this polished surface horizontally, strenghtening the curve of its line; the result is a pure negation of the interior, of the levels and the function inside, even the negation of the material essence of the curtain-wall for the benefit of a parisian reference.

In return, the perfectly flat southern façade is made of a 240 squares grid, reproducing vertically the horizontal pattern of

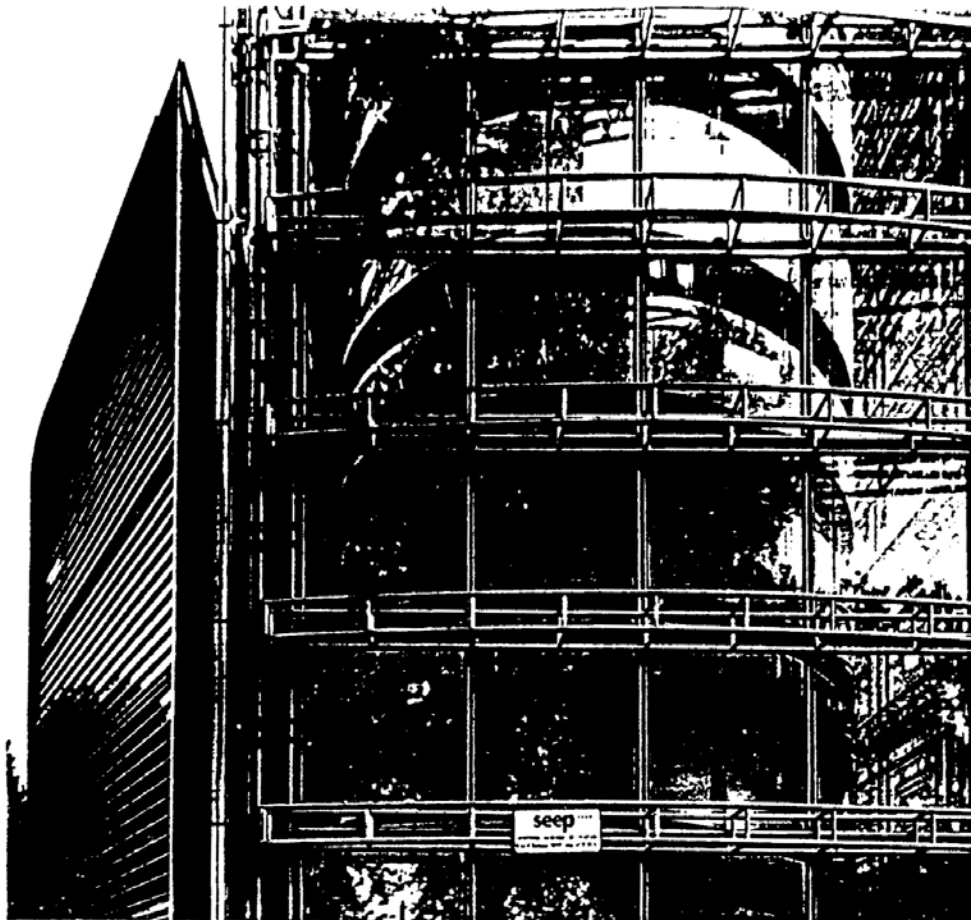
the "parvis". They function as diaphragms of a camera shutter: metallic irises which filter the sunlight through the glazed surface, allowing 10 to 30% of the light to be kept. These high-tech. masharabiyas are constituted of 16320 mobile modules: lozenges, squares, hexagons, circles, and combinations of them whose reflection match the mozaic patterns on the Institute's floors.

At the west end of this wing, and facing the corner of the boulevard St.Germain, is placed the staircase tower of the library: It is the only inner element made visible from the exterior. Indeed, here the outer envelope is perfectly neutral and transparent; and the minaret-like structure can be easily perceived from the boulevards, especially at night. A quarter of dome conceived by Nouvel to be encrusted in the lower corner of this façade was not realized. It was sought to make the tower more apparent and also to constitute another Arab (or Islamic) connotation via architectonic forms. In return, the main entrance to the square of the Institute constitutes the final reference to Islamic architecture: a kind of porch, recalling some Iranian structures -Hast Behest, apparently-.

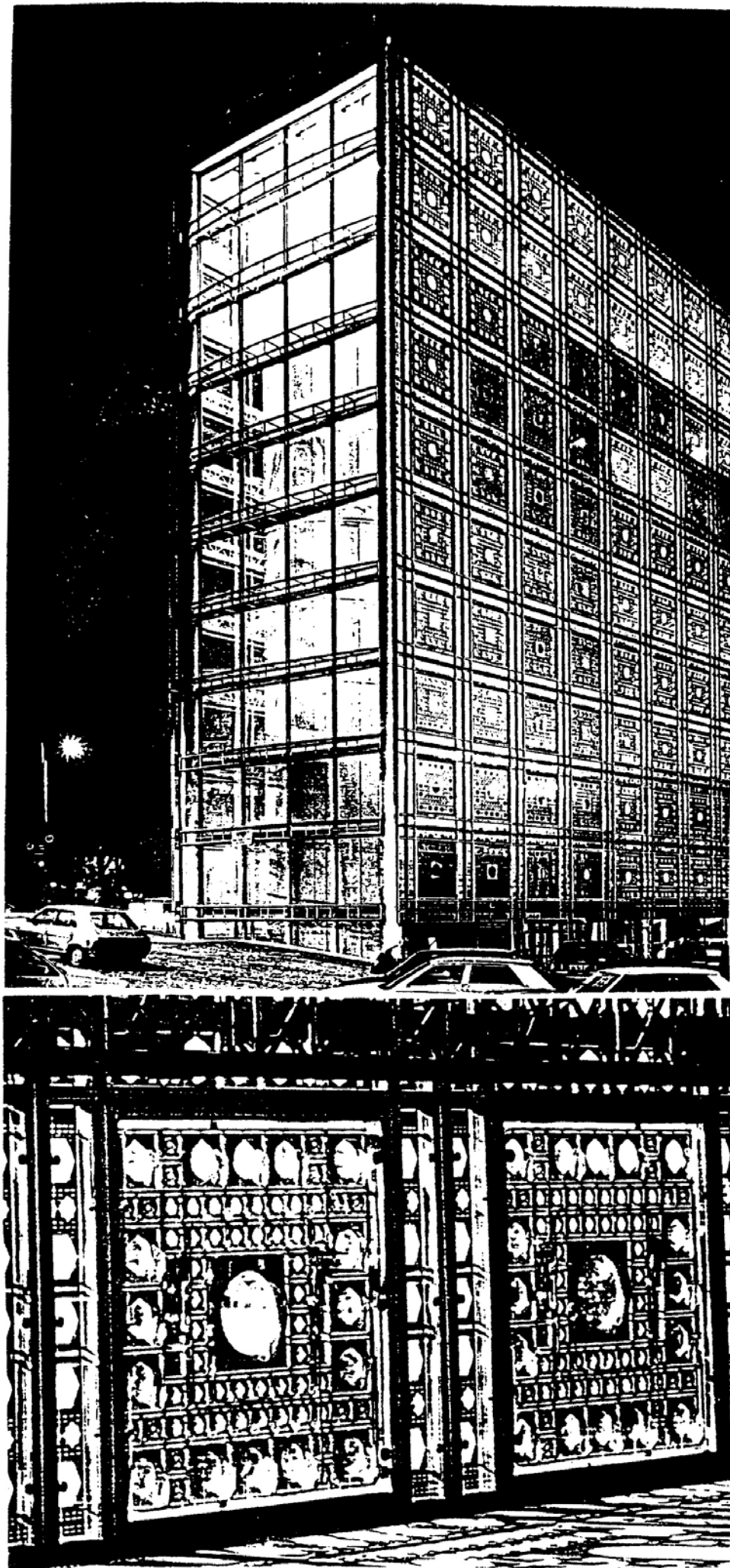
The cut between the wings impressively divides these two metaphoric curtain-wall treatments; and the final aesthetic and symbolic expression is purely connotative: The northern front facing Paris also reproduces it by the reflection on the glazed surface but also by means of architectural solutions: the line of the façade, its decorative features, and its "archeological" interpretations (Porte de Blondel), while the southern façade and the whole southern part is full of direct connotations to Islam and to the Arab world. Between these two "worlds" takes place the slit which runs from the inner court space -another Arab and Islamic element- to another and a very prestigious Parisian and Christian landmark, the Notre-Dame: the image of the link between the two cultures.



West front with the curve on the Seine, the staircase tower of the Library and the slit



The southern façade -  
exterior and interior  
views





The whole is highly connotative; but semantic expression does not begin or end the dichotomic interpretation of the façade. The metaphoric approach to the curtain wall solution, using it as a blind element hiding the interior and "showing" other images, creating other impressions, using this very high-tech. glazed surface as a "mask" is, according to the chief-architect an intentional reference to the Arab architecture also, whose façade and some architectural characteristics: introversion, blind walls, mashrabiya trellises etc., were interpreted as mask effects. On the other hand, a series of other metaphoric or connotative use of forms and elements can be found in the IMA building: the staircase of the library tower; the elevators chimney -allusion to wind towers-; the diaphragms -both as elements (mashrabiya) and by their geometric patterns-; the use of square (on the form and pattern of the parvis reflecting the southern façade by "folding it down"; on the façade, on the plan of the court and on its walls; the court itself and its mercury fountain -not yet realized-; the cul-de-sac type ramp space; the quality of the light; the space sequences; the hypostyle hall; the neutrality and sobriety of the colorless aesthetic simplicity of the inner space constitute these connotative references.

Apart from the connotative images it gives, this neutrality is the most pertinent formal and aesthetic characteristics of the architecture of IMA. The whole architecture from the exterior façade to the inner space and the smallest detail bears the touch of the same neutral, unifying, and masking aesthetic interpretations: perfectly grey surfaces of smooth changes of the tonality constitute all the architectonic elements, made of few materials: stainless steel, aluminium, tempered glass, marble, with the addition of a very few touches of white: the alabaster panels of the courtyard walls... From the outer and inner surfaces to the carpets of some spaces and to structural joints, or metallic ceilings and even to the furniture, the unity remains unchanged. The whole gives an impression of

airliner's fuselage, and in this respect the IMA building is the opposite of Beaubourg: Perfectly high-tech. as the former, it hides its technology by the very means of this technology -another mask effect. The architect relates this interpretation to recent trends in industrial design, and to his (Jean Nouvel's) passion: cinematography. An architecture which does not reflect its reality, but which translates cultural values, images and impressions was sought in IMA. And this is the exact opposite of Beaubourg where the image is the perfect reflection of the material reality of the building -even a somehow exaggerated extroversion. In this respect, Nouvel -who says he wants "to forget the structure" of his buildings, can be associated with the post-modernist tradition in which architectonic reality is hidden for the sake of a symbolic, metaphoric, and basically culturalistic expression. His, or the architects of IMA's only difference -from a Boffill, or a Venturi- is the technological vocabulary which is used in order to cover all formal aspects and the metaphors which are more implicitly expressed. However, the images are clear; and this ease of clear message through abstract images makes this architecture of contrasting sequences very akin to the cinematographic expression. A final characteristic of this formal expression relates to its effect on the Museum space: The perfect neutrality of the smooth grey surfaces emphasises the objects and thus the architectural space becomes an adequate support for the museographic scenario.

#### 4. Landscaping:

In its urban-contextual approach, the project conserved all the existing trees of and around the pathways in order to make the building more parisian. On the other hand, the large axis prolonging the square of the building and which was conceived to run for 600 meters towards the Austerlitz direction is a very important landscape decision it has introduced in urban scale.



## F. Structure, Materials, Technology

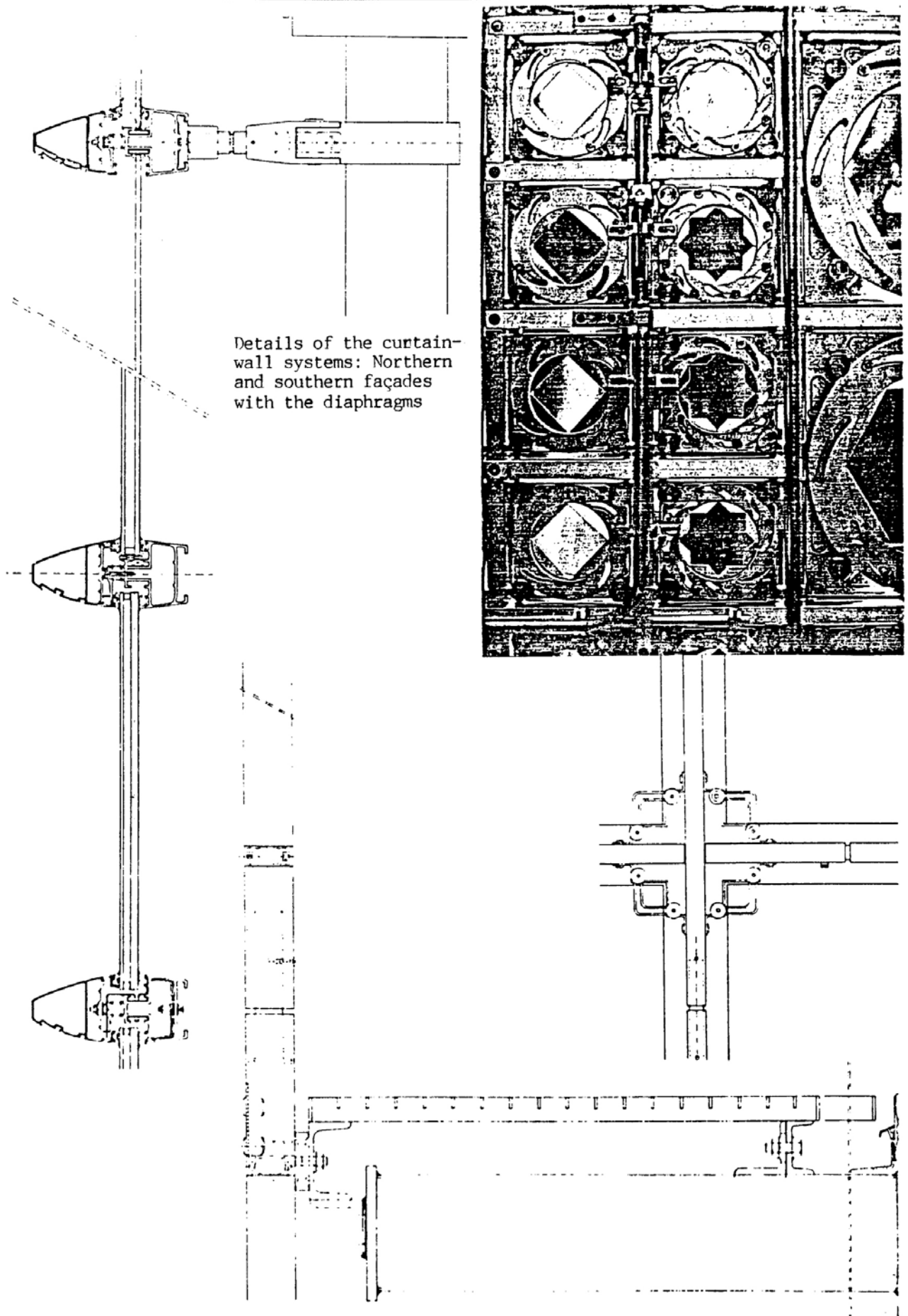
1. The structural system is a steel frame with different spans according to the general shape of the building. Steel columns, beams, trusses and secondary supporting elements for the curtain-wall façades were used.
2. Besides the structural material, generally industrialized building materials, components and systems were used: Stainless steel, aluminium, tempered glass, plastics, and finally marble. The curtain walls are made of glazed aluminium frame and tempered glass. Aluminium and glass are also the main materials for interior partitions and doors. Structural joints and air-condition or other systems are covered with glazed aluminium or stainless steel elements.

Ceilings and most of the floor surfaces as well as the stairs are also metallic, sometimes in combination with plastic surface layers. The balustrades, elevator cage frames etc. are made of stainless steel and aluminium as well. Frameless glass elements are generally used in the exhibition units of the museum, fixed by steel bracing-wires as in the balustrades of the staircases.

Marble is used in the court -pavements and the alabaster panels on the walls-.

All security, control, detection equipment and outlets are provided, sometimes combined with the industrialized metallic finishes.

3. The construction technology is completely industrialized and high-tech.
4. The site provides all necessary utilities: basic infrastructure, services, and advanced auxiliary telecommunications, security control and other systems.



## G. Origin of Technology and the Labour Force

In an industrially developed context as France, this question becomes less important. In IMA project, all technology and labour force were local, say French. The architects and other professionals were also French. The materials and systems were products of French firms -or European products, within the EEC context.

## IV. Construction Schedule and Costs

### A. History of Project

The chronology of the IMA project can be summarized as follows:

- 1980 : IMA officially founded
- 1981 : The new site was selected  
IMA Competition launched and concluded
- 1983 : Commencement of the works on the building site
- 1986 : Construction terminates
- 1987 : Opening of IMA

### B. Total Costs and main Sources of Finance

At the beginning, the financial model was, as it was already mentioned, based on the provision of the land from the French government, and the construction costs to be covered by the founder Arab states. The initial cost estimate -and the available funds raised in 1980- was 80 MFF. (million French francs).

By the time, the cost has risen. The first construction costs estimate of 170 MFF which was calculated according to the architectural project finally reached the actual figure of 230 MFF. for the finished building. With the additional amount of 120 MFF. spent for interior arrangements and the furniture -including the museographic arrangements-, the total cost of the completed building rises up to 340 MFF. tax excluded. With taxes this figure rises to 400-.

By the time, the budget of the Institute also augmented: From 5,5 millions in 1980, it passed 25 MFF in 1984; reaching 75 MFF in 1987 and 83 MFF in 1988. The 3/5 of this budget was provided by France and the 2/3 by the Arab countries. The same share was also realized in equal ratios for the construction budget, together with a special fund of 25 MFF.

### C. Comparative and Qualitative Analysis of Costs

Apart from the slightly interfering apportionment of the construction (230 MFF) and "decoration" costs (120 MFF) within the total sum of 340 MFF., it is worth mentioning the cost of the diaphragms, which constitute the most exuberant element of this technological design: The cost of a window frame equipped with these computer controlled diaphragms conditioned by photovoltaic sensors is 60.000 FF. The total cost of the system rises up to 3 MFF.

More significant is the cost per sqm., which is roughly 9.000 FF/sqm. Excluding the infrastructure costs, the unit cost becomes approximately 8.000 FF/sqm. This can be considered as a high cost; however, for a very sophisticated high-tech. French building and when compared to other parisian Grand Projets, the unit cost is relatively modest. Indeed, IMA is the smallest of the Grand Projets, and it is also the less expensive one in terms of construction costs.

### C. Maintenance costs

The figures relating to maintenance costs for 1988 were as follow:

- General and technical maintenance	:	8 MFF
- Energy consumption	:	4 MFF
- Security (special staff and equipment)	:	1.5 MFF
- Maintenance personnel	:	not included
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Total		13.5 MFF

This amount represents roughly the 16% of the annual budget. Within a staff of 188 persons, 17 are maintenance and technical personnel and they are remunerated by the Institute.

## V. Technical Assessment

### A. Functional Assessment

The IMA is very actively used. Its premises remain open 6 days a week, from 13 to 20 PM. The restaurant can be separately used for dinner, and the auditorium for special meetings and other organizations.

A large variety of people of different origins and nationalities use the museum, the exhibitions, the library, the "mediatheque", the cafeteria. But also, and due to its architectural attractivity, people come and see the building freely. In this respect, like Beaubourg or other spectacular parisian buildings, IMA has become a fashionable visiting place.

Among all these different purposes, the specific functional activities and the spaces which house them represent a particular use value. Their fit with the programme objectives, in other terms the functional assessment made according to the testimony and records of the IMA department responsables and some users can be summarized as follows:

#### 1. The Library:

The library of IMA consisting of 40.000 volumes, 802 periodicals, 200 microfilms, 300 microcards and some 100 plans, is widely used. The daily frequentation is about 500, 60% of them being students. The French and Arab readers are equal in number (the distribution of the documents according to the language is 35% Arabic and 65% French and other Western languages). The number of the library personnel is 30. The present forecasting capacity of 200.000 volumes exceeds the previous one of 100.000. However,

there is small chance for expansion, which raises the first criticism of the personnel.

The users generally are satisfied with the aesthetical quality and the light. However, they are more critic on other aspects: The personnel finds the book deposit solution in a spiral tower not adequate and they also think such a solution lacks flexibility and control. They also criticise a certain lack of intimacy, of introversion which they think is necessary in a library: The space, according to them is too transparent. They also find the solution in three different levels less adequate and this raises some problems of control and circulation. The readers complain about noise and they find the seats uncomfortable- in terms of stability-. A general opinion is that this space is pleasant but not comfortable and not really functional.

2. The Actualities Hall, The Documentation Centre and The Audio-visual Division (Mediatheque):

They are actively used. The tightness of the space and the difficulty for any possible expansion is felt especially in the latter, despite the highly sophisticated and efficient information retrieval systems it uses.

3. The Museum:

The original program has been partly modified and the anthropological section was not realised. The reasons are generally economical. Also some collections which were supposed to be transferred from the Louvre could not been brought yet. Another space which completes the museum and which is not completed is the court.

There has been contradictory views about the museography and the museum space within the IMA administration. The opinions of the other French museum curators are also conflicting. However, the responsables of the museum and the public opinion in general is very positive, and this positive feeling is widely expressed on

general and professional press. They feel satisfied with the museographic sequences of the "parcours"; they appreciate the distant, and somehow cold neutrality of the space which emphasizes the value and the visual quality of the objects which they think communicate more with the visitors.

The museum responsables also like the transparency of the space its "modest luxury", its elegance and its flexibility, despite the general pointed shape of the building which is not much suitable for such a purpose. The aesthetic quality and the light are unanimously recognized as very positive assets. A general problem is the lack of extension possibility.

#### 4. Cultural Activities and Exhibitions Spaces etc.

The reactions and criticisms concerning the exhibitions and other cultural events are generally related to the organization of the activities rather than to space. However, there are problems arising from the difficulties of organizing large scale exhibitions, lack of adequate auxiliary space for the preparatory work and also there is a problem of security due to spatial organization of the hypostyle hall which could have provided a more efficient use for exhibitions.

#### 5. The Auditorium

The installation of some equipment remains uncompleted. There has been relatively few opportunities for using it efficiently. There is also a problem due to the lack of supporting spaces for parallel sessions, which could have been solved by a possible extension to the unused basement space adjacent to the hypostyle hall and the parking.

There is also a criticism about the High Council Hall for complete darkness cannot be obtained during the daytime meetings. Since this space is also used for small scale seminars, it raises a general complaint for slide projection purposes.

## 6. The Offices:

Some of the staff complain about the climate and the noise of the air-condition system, but these are general complaints about all air-conditioned offices.

Finally, there is a less shared criticism about the height of the entrance and reception spaces, and a better founded one about the non adequacy of the northern entrance hall. The fact that the VIP ramp is not used is also a negative asset which makes this space functionnaly questionable.

Generally, the reactions about the architecture are positive, and the objections concern utility and functional issues, the more acid criticism is about the organization and the administrative/budget related problems of IMA.

## B. Climatic performance

In air-conditioned high-tech. space, these environmental aspects become secondary. They are generally well solved. A slight criticism comes from some noise during the functioning of the south façade diaphragms, and the already mentioned problems in the library and the office spaces.

## C. Choice of Materials, Level of Technology

They raise no problem in terms of use, and the users appreciation which relates to their aesthetic value is very positive. The fact that the technology used was the highest building technology available in France and this technology was very smoothly expressed in the architectural vocabulary, thus helping to solve the problem of fit between technology, building materials and use of space.



#### D. Ageing and Maintenance

Since the building is very recently completed and the maintenance is confined to special departments -and also to special firms, in the case of the diaphragms and other mechanical / electronic equipment-, this problem looks less important in a developed context as the French one. However, the sophistication of the technological devices requires a special care which the responsables of the technical department already feel: The small noise of the diaphragms, the fixing of emergency exits on the curtain-walls, the handles of the glass doors which do not work well are such problems. There are also some details which seem not solved or well implemented -or not completed- in tri-dimensional joints, in the joints between structural elements and staircase bases etc. which, if they remain so, can create small maintenance and cleaning problems. However, correct solutions and systems were provided for the general cleaning of the façades; an overall technical maintenance network and organization conceived for all sophisticated systems and all of these systems function well.

#### E. Design Features

The IMA building became one of the most popular modern architecture achievements in France. It raised up a considerable amount of interest in media both in France and abroad. Almost all these comments even those made by architectural critics whose ideology and conceptual approach differ from the architects of IMA agree on the formal and aesthetic qualities of the building: "The IMA building graces Paris", "one of the most beautiful parisian palaces", "one of the nicest buildings in Paris", "elegant liner", "magnificent parisian liner", "an urban triumph", are some qualifications which critics make about the architecture of IMA.

The detailed analysis of the urban, spatial, and formal characteristics of this design work were already made in the report. Thus a very brief assessment of the important assets such an achievement

introduces and which lead to such a widely shared positive criticism will be made:

- The first positive asset of the formal aspect of this design is its urban dimension: By its respect to the conditions of the site, it realizes a perfect integration to it and realizes a real urban contextual architecture well rooted in the parisian urban morphology.
- The soft, dramatic, contrasting interpretation of the mass and the metaphoric and elegant approach to high-tech. aesthetics is also a valuable achievement, both in the context of the surrounding space, the inner space and also the contemporary architecture in general.
- The soberness of the space, its perfect neutrality reach an aesthetic integrity in the inner space. The fact that such a neutral, "distant" aesthetics being on a par with a contrasting, connotational, expressive use of the spatial and morphic elements is a very subtle duality. The simplistic ease in which this architecture seeks and finds its proliferant impressions and symbols, very akin to the expressive worlds of the cinema or the fashion reflects a very sensitive architectural intelligence.

## VI. Users

As it was stressed above, the IMA building is very intensely frequented, daily and in the nighttime. The users are either the regular participants to the Institutes activities, the visitors of the museum or the exhibitions, the users of the library, briefly those who benefit from the cultural activities of IMA, or the people who come and see this interesting building -since visiting is free of charge-, stroll through the spaces, go up to the terrace and take photographs or use the cafeteria; in summary the building has a very large range of frequentation, from the specific functional utilization to a general promenade.

The composition of users and the visitors' is very diversified: parisiens, French people, France resident Arabs, Arab visitors, other foreigners. But for the regular activities, the three main categories of users are the French people, French of Arab origin and Arabs. Among them the younger generation and the elderly are the majority. According to the IMA responsables, their appreciation of the building and the activities it houses is very positive, and this is also stressed in the general public opinion reflected by general press.

## VII. Persons Involved

From the origin of the project to the present, the main actors can be identified as follows, regardless of their importance of contribution to the architectural/functional success or failure of the project:

- M. Jack Lang, former Minister of Culture
- M. François Mitterand, President of the Republic
- M. Jean Nouvel, chief architect (together with other members of his team and associates)
- M. Paul Carton, President of IMA during the development and the achievement of the project
- M. Bassem el-Jisr, Director of IMA
- Mme. Christiane Naffah, Curator of the IMA Museum.

(The complete list of the persons and societies involved can be found in the attached documents)

0959.FRA  
Arab World Institute  
Paris, France

This short study on the Arab World Institute (Institut du Monde Arabe, IMA) is divided in two parts: firstly, a report on the small survey made on the spot for the purpose of this study; secondly, a brief semiotic analysis of the building and its features, drawn from our own point of view with the help of a methodology devised for the description of meaning.

**I. The Survey**

*a. Population Surveyed*

The survey was conducted on the spot by one person (myself), on three afternoons: May 21st, 22nd and 26th. The visitors were invited to speak informally about the building, its adequacy as an Arab World Institute, its relation to the image of Islamic culture, their feeling about it ...

Thirty-two persons answered questions in four locations: the bookstore, the library, the exhibition room and the top terrace. They are natives of eleven different countries (Algeria, Brazil, England, France, Ghana, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia) and practice more than ten professions (administrator, architect, journalist, librarian, painter, poet, publisher, student, teacher, translator).

When they were not students, all these people belonged to the intellectual and/or financial elite of their respective countries. Considering the small number of interviewed people and their social status, the results must be handled with care. In particular, no statistic value can be granted to the figures nor to the redundancy of some answers. Nevertheless, the survey provides a qualitative idea of how the building is viewed.

Many of the interviewed people were in groups of two to four persons, this fact being at the origin of some "collective" answers and/or discussions. This feature should be stressed: people often come to visit the IMA in groups (members of the same family, friends) and some even come to meet each other on the premises. Our survey reveals therefore that the IMA is a place of conviviality, for Arabs and non-Arabs alike.

Direct observation reveals that the majority of visitors is formed by non-Arabs and non-Muslims. This fact was even a hindrance for the survey: approximately 80% of the people on the terrace were non-Arabs and non-Muslims; 50% of the people at the exhibition were non-Arabs and non-Muslims. This proportion goes down to 40% in the library. Such figures are not attributable to calendar specificity.

The terrace visitors were there mainly for the building itself. Most often, they went up directly, neglecting to visit the interior rooms, or postponing it to another visit. All of them knew about the building before they came; only a few entered it by chance. When asked how they found out

about it, they mentioned magazines or newspapers, without precision: the building exists, it is a technical and/or architectural achievement, part of their environment, and they want to get acquainted with it. Very often, they knew almost nothing about Arab or Islamic culture, and they think that this building is a good introduction to it.

b. *Results of the Survey*

The opinions expressed are not very detailed: interesting/uninteresting, adequate/inadequate, Arab/non-Arab, welcoming/unwelcoming are the categories most often used to qualify the building. Arab visitors are not different in this respect from other visitors. This phenomenon is not specific but rather common: a survey seldom results in clear and detailed answers.

*Arab Character of the Building*

For most of the visitors, this building is not an Arab building. It may have Arab features (the façade, the inner courtyard, the narrow passage) or Arab elements (the *mashrabiyya* diaphragms), but this is not enough to make it an Arab building.

The southern façade has an Arab character. This is the identity factor that comes up most often in conversation. Sometimes, the northern façade is opposed to it as non-Arab.

Metal, grey colour, the absence of light and shades interplay, the absence of colours and vegetation are invoked as non-Arab features, whereas stone and arcades, flowing water and mosaics are mentioned as common elements in Islamic architecture.

*The Arab Visual Identity*

When asked, no visitor was able to say what is Arab in terms of visual identity. Most often, the reference to Arab culture is made through Morocco, which appears to be the Arab country best known to French visitors, and naturally to Moroccan visitors. Some persons added, in an effort of clarification, that there is no such thing as an Arab style: we know only of historically and geographically defined Arab or Muslim architectures. Notwithstanding this inability to define what is in style, it was easy for them to define what is not Arab.

Some Arab visitors said that this building provided no privacy: everything is open or transparent, therefore it is not in conformity with Arab architecture, where privacy is a necessity. The absence of privacy makes the building unwelcoming (*manque de chaleur*). "Hot" and "cool" used in the way determined by MacLuhan, were often used by visitors: this metal and glass building is too "cool", they would have preferred a "hot" stone construction. The same people would add that the transparent vistas are beautiful in this building. They would see no contradiction between the two appreciations: the fact of being beautiful has nothing to do with being Arab.

*Role of the Arab Character*

Many Arab visitors do not care about the Arab character of the building: this institute is in France, and it may be an expression of French architecture. The reason given for this attitude is that the main aim of the IMA is conceived to be a link between East and West, therefore, it can have a western appearance in order to attract westerners.

Most Moroccan visitors forcefully deny the role of architecture as a medium: they do not care for it, stressing much more the content of the building as opposed to its envelope. For them, the function of the building is more important than the building itself. They tend to reject the building because they are not satisfied with the messages being developed in it.

On the other hand, Arabs from the Middle East accept the idea that architecture is a medium, and they tend to appreciate the building as an image of the Arab world. There is a tendency, in this group, to overlap Muslim architecture with Arab architecture: they would imagine that all branches of Islamic architecture stem from Arab architecture.

#### *Arab Versus Islamic Character*

Curiously enough, the question does not seem to be pertinent to the majority of the people interviewed, as if the secular atmosphere in France eluded the religious distinction. Even when the question is clearly formulated, answers are evasive or syncretic, assimilating both terms in the perspective of culture and the IMA.

#### *Past and Future*

All visitors agree that the Arab character, when identifiable, is related to the past. It may also be on this account that Arab and Islamic images are confused. The non-Arab character of the building may also depend on the absence of historical references in it.

The modern architecture of the IMA is seen by some visitors as a possible image of the future in Arabic and Islamic countries. Others deny that, saying that this is an imitation of others' future. In this case too, there would be no alternative image offered.

A small group of non-Arabs identifies the building style with the rising Arab power and wealth, mainly those related to the Gulf States. This group projects on the Arabs a form of future familiar to its own background, in terms of technological breakthrough, perfection, achievement... They see in this building an acceptable partner for cultural exchanges, at their own level, and a good introduction to a foreign and developing culture that is bridging the gap and comes nearer to what they know.

#### *Function versus Image*

Issues of functionality came up regularly in the conversation with the large majority of Arab visitors, while they were almost totally absent in the preoccupations of non-Arabs.

With the exception of some students who are fully satisfied with the library, all the Arab visitors complained that the IMA is too small, does not work properly and is ill-managed. When asked about architectural features, they complained about misuse of space: too many volumes are left unused, while the offices are cramped under 2.05 m ceiling, and are overcrowded with people...

Critiques are directed towards insufficiencies, not towards the existence of the institute. This fact becomes more evident when we realise that the Arabs who formulate these critiques are familiar with the building: they are users more than visitors. A good part of their dissatisfaction may be related to the fact that they were not associated with its elaboration and control.

The Arab staff - and a part of the French staff - share this dissatisfaction. Moreover, they make it known in their informal conversation. A very deep feeling is nurtured against Jean Nouvel, the architect co-ordinator, who is perceived as a dictator who imposes his conception of space and things, apparently interferes with everything, even with the placing of flowers offered on the opening day for exhibitions.

It may be possible that Arab visitors still sincerely believe in such dogma, but it is much more likely that the complaints are the result of a conflict situation.

Such an ideological position is obviously related to the denial of the communication role of architecture, and its value as image or symbol of a culture.



### *Fragmentation*

It appears that most visitors do not visit the whole building: they have specific interests. Thus, visitors to the terrace do not go to the library nor to the museum, and vice versa. Many say that they will visit the remaining parts on another occasion.

Only a few people have a synthetic idea of the building and those who do are mainly architects.

### *Feeling of Exclusion*

Nonetheless, some people feel that they are kept out of the main part of the building: they see many glass partitions, beyond which lay forbidden spaces. Given that the building itself is small, they have the feeling that they should be able to visit it entirely, a programme they are denied.

### *Pride*

All Arab visitors are proud that the building exists, whatever their opinion may be about its architecture, its aesthetics, or its functionality. They do appreciate its presence as a "window open between the East and West".

Some of them are proud of the building itself: they bring their friends and parents to see it. This group is formed by those who like the architecture and its image. Some others say that they would not care to show it.

## **II. The Analysis**

### *a. Aesthetics*

#### *Collage*

When the observer tries to grasp a comprehensive idea of the building, it appears to be a compendium of independent elements: the south façade, the north façade, the inner courtyard, the books' tower, the back staircase, are elements that owe nothing to each other. They are brought together by the sheer will of the architects, and they hold together by means of an intelligent collage that operates at two levels: the general volumetry, and high-tech materials.

The south façade has a formal logic of its own. The interpretation of the *mashrabiyya* in high tech materials and mechanical forms has been carried to an extreme of aesthetic and technical rationality. This makes it a visual symbol and a strong identity mark. It is undoubtedly a communicational success, even if it is not an ecological achievement. The offices behind it need electric lighting all day. Air-conditioning is an absolute necessity: the façade does not play the ecological role of *mashrabiyyas*.

The north façade displays another technical achievement, but this one remains invisible to the ordinary visitor. It also suffers from its location, the heavy traffic forbidding its appreciation, both by pedestrians and car drivers. In any case, it has no relation at all with the south façade.

The books' tower is visible from the main access avenue, namely the Boulevard Saint-Germain. It takes a fairy aspect at dusk, with the interior lights glittering while the falling daylight is still sufficient to outline its exterior forms. This tower fills the gap between the two façades, adding a third heterogeneous element.

The collage of these heterogeneities is rather elegant. But it is not unquestionable, because it implies a meaning: from this design, the observer may derive the idea of heterogeneity in the Arab culture. Thence, the building may be seen as made of elements borrowed from other cultures, namely from Europe.

#### *Volumetry*

The IMA building has a wide open esplanade contrasting in a very interesting way with the plane south façade. It recalls the *sahn* of mosques. If its relation with the environment was better treated (in particular, the unfinished basement walls of the nearby faculty should be hidden and the esplanade visually isolated from the street), this flat expanse of stone would become a compelling aesthetic experience.

A white cube, cut with a few slots, constitutes the IMA portal, directing the visitors towards the building's door. The idea is excellent. Today, it fails to play its role, mainly because the esplanade beyond remains visually accessible: the logic of this portal is to play with what is hidden and what is shown.

The slots in the cube are the immediate echo of the split, hidden in the mass of the building, directed towards the back of Notre Dame cathedral. The portal slots signal the split and bring to the visitors' minds the idea of an entity that opens onto another entity. This is a metaphor for the institute itself.

#### *Technicity and Functional Minimalism*

High technology is what holds the IMA together. The building stands on a light steel structure on which are clipped the various equipments. High tech constitutes also the common denominator to the multitude of parts combined together in order to make the elements. Technology is recognisable in the floors, ceilings, stairs, railings, elevators, glass panels, diaphragms, TV monitors, light fixtures... the IMA building is an ode to technology, with technical rhythms and rhymes.

Technology is so present in the foreground that many people notice only this aspect in the building which induces them to relate it to the future and not to the past.

Some technological features point to what can be called an "ethics" of functional minimality: the volumes are simple, no decoration seems to be added, everything is apparently reduced to the strict minimum. Such a message of restraint is backed up by the quality of the materials and their finish: in order to be ascetic, you have to be rich, otherwise, you are only poor. And undoubtedly, the IMA building is rich in its ascetic trends. This accounts for a large part of the amazement expressed by some visitors: how is it that such a rich building appears to have so few decorative elements? The aesthetic of ascetism is not dominant today, it is unusual. Therefore, it is not well understood. Ascetism is mistaken for "cool", and even "cold" environment.

In order to be fair, we must add that this aesthetic choice is not carried fully to its end: some elements are mainly decorative, added on the structural features. But only professional eyes are able to make the difference, and the ordinary visitor perceives the general "functional minimalism" message alone. For instance, cylinders have been added on some columns that did not need such coating. The reason given for this procedure is to convey visual homogeneity. This process is not different, in its essence, from any decorative addition.

It is interesting to point to another fact related to the visitors' perception: functional minimalism in the structures is not far from functionalism in space. Therefore, we might say that the criticisms formulated against the misuse of space may be related to messages formulated by the building itself.

### *Sheen and Smoothness*

Glass is shiny, and aluminium can be worked into a smooth, shiny and velvety surface. These qualities pervade the entire environment, projecting on it an overall character of perfection, richness, and lofty superiority. Combined with high tech, these qualities make the building comparable to a jewel or a precious clockwork mechanism, especially when the observer gets near the inner face of the south façade.

No culture can match this level of perfection in all its productions. But the IMA building appears to set a model for the Arab countries, not only in the technical field, but mainly on the level of ideas, criteria, or goals put forth to be achieved in all fields. For all the people interested in making the future, this message is fully understandable and acceptable.

#### *b. Anthropology*

##### *Transparency and privacy*

Once inside the building, the visitor almost sees no plain wall: all partitions are made of transparent glass. Even the elevators' walls are made of glass. A consequence of this is that you may see through successive partitions, sometimes more than four in a row.

This feature accounts for the feeling that there are no secrets in this place: everything is transparent, and there is no hiding room. The visitors who expressed this feeling did not really try to explore the entire building. Those who did so discovered spaces that may be partially seen through a glass partition while they remain physically inaccessible. This fact accounts for the feeling, expressed by some visitors, that they are kept out of many things, all the more so because the building itself is rather small, and its size gives the impression that one should be able to grasp it entirely.

##### *Scale*

The building is small. The feeling is amazing, especially if the visitor has already seen pictures and read something about the content. He knows that there are many things, but he discovers they are stuffed in a small volume. It is not uncommon to learn that the visiting architects imagined the building to be three to four times larger.

The visitor who wants to visit the building for its own sake discovers quickly that the visit is rather short. The library users discover that the sitting places are few. The museum goers discover that the display is rather limited.

The staff feels enclosed in a small container. The librarians, museum keepers, cultural activities officers... need more room for their projects, in both open to the public and reserved to the administration of everyday activity in the institute, not to speak of the 2.05 m low ceilings.

Therefore, there is a discrepancy between the general feeling of the building from a distance and its use from within. Some might say that this is a good feature, and that the IMA should remain a starting point from which other actions are to be developed. Nevertheless, the architecture announces more than what the building is able to fulfil, and this creates an uneasiness in the visitor who becomes familiar with the building. An adjustment is needed.

##### *Circulation and Fragmentation*

The circulation scheme starts from the top and percolates through the levels and departments. This unusual procedure propels the visitor into an interesting exploration trajectory. If he uses the stairs on his way down, he quickly has the feeling of a maze, and that the interesting levels are

kept beyond his reach. He has to go to the ground floor in order to buy a museum ticket. The documentation centre is of no interest if he is not a scholar. The same thing is true of the library. Very quickly, the institute is decomposed into a finite number of visitable spaces, fragmented on different levels, independent from each other.

Such a fragmentation parallels the heterogeneity of the architectural elements. It is of no consequence if the visitor's interests are limited. On the other hand, it is highly undesirable if the IMA is supposed to convey a synthetic image of a culture.

c. *Recommendations*

Two levels of meaning can be read in any given building: one is related to its pragmatic use by people (visitors and staff alike), the other is related to the symbolic level attached to its various components. Both levels are closely bound to a double mechanism: deciphering and projection.

A basic component of the meaning inscribed in a building is to be deciphered progressively through the use of its spaces and facilities. This meaning is partly based on the activities taking place inside and/or around the building, another part being made of the possibilities it offers for other activities and relations with people. Such a meaning may be modified by concrete action and communication strategies. Both procedures need time in order to stabilise a meaning accepted by the community of users. If meaning is not stabilised by use and acceptance, it is liable to quick change.

The symbolic meaning inscribed in architecture often results from a series of projections made by a community. All buildings that emerge with a peculiar scale or shape undergo a process of discussion in society before the meaning projected on them is widely accepted. Such a process may be observed daily in Paris, with the multiplication of official architectural enterprises. The media participates in this process.

The prizes and awards bestowed on a building play a considerable role in the stabilisation of meaning. For instance, when the IMA won a French prize for architecture, it gained not only a considerable echo in the media, but also the image of a French accomplishment. If an Islamic prize is bestowed upon the building, the event is liable to change its meaning, and this fact is to be taken into consideration. In particular, it is predictable that if such a prize was awarded, people would start to look for the Islamic elements and meanings in it, while they tend to skip them today, and to concentrate on French and/or Arab elements.

The IMA building is a shiny jewel that may accumulate significations along its historical evolution. It has many features, none of which appear to be clearly marked on the cultural level. Therefore, it may be considered as a sponge into which meaning can be poured, or as a piece of wax to be modelled into a given image. In this process, the activity taking place in the building will play its role besides the symbolic transformations, and this activity is not to be underestimated. An exhibition on Mecca and Madina, an official visit (e.g. Yasser Arafat), the nomination of a "political" president, are such events, whatever we may think of them.

Therefore, we recommend the attribution of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture to the Institut du Monde Arabe building, partly for its technical and aesthetic achievements, and partly to crystallise its signification.

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