The Institut du Monde Arabe, or IMA, is one of the large scale projects to have been built in Paris during the last decade, a new architectural landmark, heralding Paris of the year 2000. Situated in the centre of the city, the building provides a meeting place for the two cultures that produced it, France and twenty Arab countries. Its aim was to change and correct the poor image of Arab culture in France, and to reinforce France's understanding of that part of the world.

Officially the idea for the IMA goes back to 1980 when the twenty founder states signed the foundation charter of the Institut. These states included Algeria, the UAE, France, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen (both North and South); Libya did not join until 1984, and Egypt also joined later in 1989. It was established as a French foundation of public utility, and subject to French law. According to the agreement, the land was to be donated by France but the building costs were to be financed by the Arab countries. The responsibility for the administration and financing of the IMA was given to an Executive Committee of twelve members, six French and six Arab. A High Council with thirty-six members was also established.

The first site allocated for the IMA was in the fifteenth arrondissement. It was turned down by the residents of that neighbourhood. In 1981, the Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, selected the new site, in the historic fifth arrondissement. This site was culturally and historically more prestigious; its location in the oldest section of Paris and facing Notre Dame conferred upon it a special significance.

Seven young architects were asked to submit proposals for the competition. They included Roland Castro, Henri Giriani, Edith Girard, Yves Lyon, Jean Nouvel, Gilles Perraudin and Christian Portzamparc. They were given three weeks to present their architectural plans for the site. Jean Nouvel's novel and hi-tech solution won the day.

The site for the IMA is an impressive one. It is bounded by the urban fabric of the nineteenth century Boulevard St Germain to the west, and the more modern Jussieu University buildings to the south. But it is the north front that demands true attention, and makes the site a privileged and exceptional one. Here, facing the River Seine, and with the profile of Notre Dame in the distance, was the challenge of a lifetime for any modern architect.
Jean Nouvel tackled the project by presenting a neutral face masked by curtain walls. The mass of the IMA is divided into two wings with a cut between them created by a narrow east-west slit ending in an interior court. The building measures seventy-seven metres in length, thirty-five metres in width and is thirty-two metres high. It is nine storeys high, and contains museum and exhibition halls, a library and documentation centre, an auditorium, a High Council Hall, offices, a restaurant and cafeteria, a roof terrace and a car parking garage. It has a large open square, a **saja**, to the south, in which the already existing trees formed the only landscaping.

There are two entrances into the complex, one from the river bank in the north, and the second from the square in the south. The lower floor houses the exhibition, plenary, and Hypostyle halls as well as the auditorium. The car park is built under this floor. Two vertical elements, the elevators and staircase in the south wing and the service and sanitary units in the eastern section of the building, rise through the upper floors. The library which is located in the southwestern part, goes from the first to the sixth floor. Its spiral staircase, resembling a minaret, can be seen from the outside through the building's transparent skin.

The Museum has been so arranged as to occupy levels going from the first to the seventh floors. The different ceiling heights and diversified levels add to the visual effects of the exhibition space. Administration and office spaces are also on various levels, on the first, fifth, sixth and upper floors. The director's office and the High Council Hall are on the ninth floor. A cafeteria in the north wing of the roof terrace offers spectacular views of the Right Bank and the islands in the Seine. The interior spaces of the IMA are juxtaposed at all levels. Most of the spatial and functional units are interconnected with each other, the glass and metal see-through effect visually uniting the interior spaces.

From the outside the building is a study in comparisons. The pointed end of the north wing contrasts sharply against the tall and narrow rectangular front of the southern section, the two divided by a thin slit, a metaphoric cul-de-sac. The contrast continues in the appearance of these two facades, both curtain walls but treated in very different ways.

The north facade, facing the Seine, is bow-shaped and has a polished look, better to reflect the architectural skyline of the river embankment opposite. Continuous aluminium frames horizontally divide its polished facade, and act as a curtain wall hiding and negating the interior divisions of the building.

The flat southern facade is made up of two hundred and forty square grids. They function like diaphragms on a camera shutter, metallic irises which filter the sunlight through the glazed surface, allowing from ten to thirty per cent of the light in. These hi-tech **mashrabiyyas** are made up of 16,320 mobile modules; lozenges, squares, hexagons and circles combine to reflect and match the mosaic patterns of the floors of the IMA. The only element visible from the
outside is the staircase tower of the library, which shines at night out to the boulevards.

The architect personified the role of the building in its exterior facades. The masked aspect of Islamic architecture, introverted, and hidden behind walls, is rendered here by the modern hi-tech curtain walls of aluminium, stainless steel and glass. Nouvel has said that he wants to 'forget the structure' of his buildings; here he hides it by a neutral, and modern skin which belies the reality inside.

The northern face of the IMA mirrors and reflects the Paris skyline, while the southern one conjures up the Arab World. Between these two worlds runs the slit which connects the inner court space to the outer one. The Islamic courtyard is symbolically linking up with the Parisian and Christian World, exemplified by Notre Dame across the river.

The site measures ten thousand square metres, but only 7,250 square metres were actually used for the ground and basement floors. The largest spaces are occupied by the Museum and Library, both 1,900 square metres, and the offices which take up 2,150 square metres. The services take up 7,250 square metres of space, the garage for 129 cars takes 3,350 square metres, and the terrace, square, court and ramp take 5,780 square metres.

The structural system is made of a steel frame with spans. Steel column, beams, trusses and secondary supporting elements support the curtain wall facades. These are made of glazed aluminium frames and tempered glass. Aluminium and glass are also the main materials used for interior partitions and doors. Ceilings, floor surfaces and the stairs are also metallic, and they are sometimes combined with plastic surface layers. The balustrade and elevator cage frames are also made of stainless steel and aluminium. Frameless glass elements, fixed by steel bracing wires, are used in the exhibition units of the museum. Marble is utilised for the pavements of the courtyard, while alabaster panels are used for some of the interior walls. The construction technology is completely industrialised and hi-tech; in fact it utilised the highest building technology available in France at that time.

The sophistication of the technological devices requires care and maintenance. Specialised firms were made responsible for the care of the mechanical and electronic equipment. A technical and maintenance network was organised to take care of the upkeep of the sophisticated materials used in the building, and this included the cleaning of the facades. So far all the systems seem to work quite well.

The IMA has very rapidly become a popular meeting place in Paris. It is frequented by many visitors who come to see the exhibitions, use the library, or just to see and wander about the building. They stroll on the terrace, use the cafeteria, or take photographs of Paris. These visitors are from diverse backgrounds. Although reactions to it are varied, they are generally positive. Most visitors agree that the formal aspect of its design integrates well with its urban Parisian setting, and that its elegant and dramatic use of hi-tech materials makes it a valuable addition to the architecture of Paris.

A survey conducted by Manar Hammud during one normal day elicited many interesting results. People were invited to express themselves freely on any subject connected to the building. The majority of visitors to the IMA that day were non-Arab and non-Muslim. Approximately eighty per cent of the people on the terrace, fifty per cent of the people in the exhibition, and forty per cent of those in the library were non-Arab and non-Muslim. For most of the visitors questioned, the IMA is not an Arab building, nor is it Muslim; it is simply an expression of French architecture. However, all Arab visitors seem to be very proud of the building. They appreciate its presence as a 'window open between the East and the West'. However, most visitors seem to think the building is too small and/or misuses its space.

The staff feel likewise. The transparent walls make privacy impossible. They feel enclosed in a small space with very low ceilings. All of them, librarians, museum keepers, and staff officers alike, feel they need more room for their projects. Although it appears large in photographs, in fact, the building is small in size. Visitors and architects alike expect it to be larger than it actually is.

The discrepancy in the reactions between the visitors and the users is dissipated by the fame that has come to the building. The prizes conferred on the building and the press and architectural accolades invariably influence people, and will transform their viewpoints.

High technology is what holds the IMA together. The volumes are simple, giving forth a message of restraint, a restraint based on understated wealth. It is in the rich quality of its materials and its finish that this building shines. Glass shines, and the surfaces of the aluminium shine. These shiny new qualities pervade the entire building, projecting a cool and perfect exterior facade. The IMA building appears to set a model for the Arab countries, not only in the technical field but also on the level of ideas, or goals to be achieved. No easy pastiche of Islamic motifs and designs is present in this building, no arches, no niches and no domes. The mashrabiyyas are used to explore geometric patterns, and are extraordinary technological innovations. Even when Nouvel uses the essential Islamic architectural idea of hiding a rich interior behind blank walls, he totally transforms it. His exterior facades reflect the outside world, and bring them into the interior spaces. It may be a message indicating the way for the future of the Islamic World.