

POLITECNICO DI TORINO  
FIRST SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
Master of Science in Architecture (Construction)  
***Honors theses***

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**Institut du Monde Arabe. A glass-and-steel anthology of a European *fin de siècle***

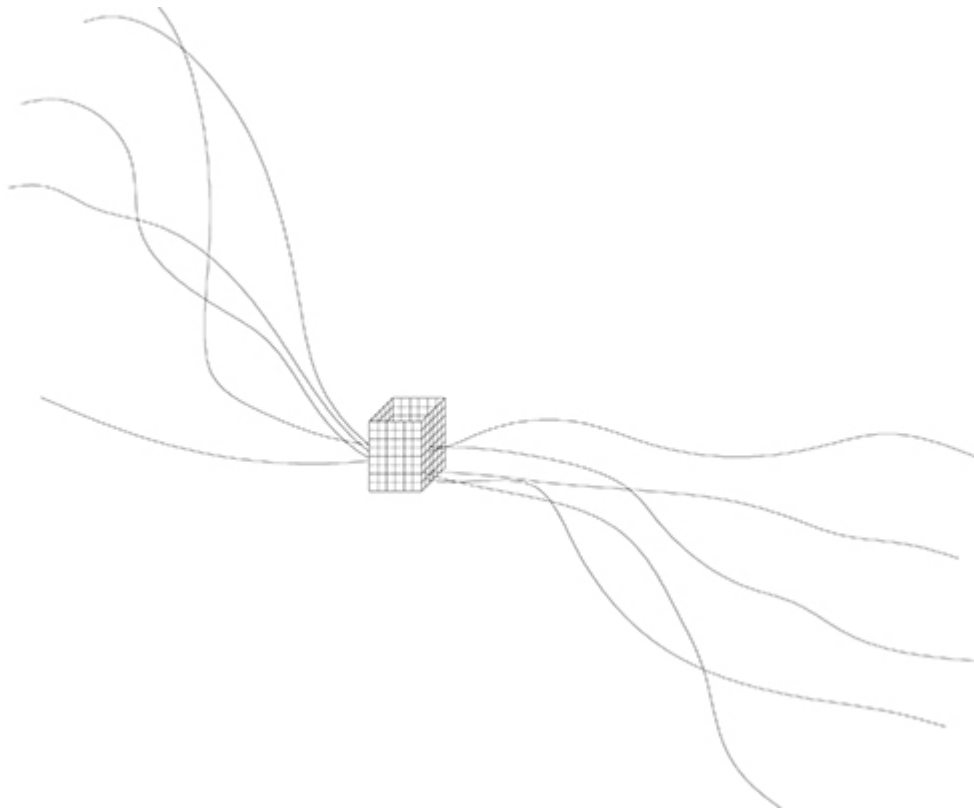
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The Parisian Institut du Monde Arabe workshop saga, being the “workshop concept” considered as comprehensive of every evolution taking place from the early outlines of the institution (1974 and 1980) up to its current activity, can be awarded the historical status of an anthology, rather than just a paradigm or an icon.

No other workshop, except some occasional interactions, shows such an evident and, most of all, peculiar gathering of themes, which were already existing and developing on independent paths within the historical context.



A research concept: IMA as an anthology capable of gathering scattered and independent themes and debates

The status of anthology has been chosen instead of the paradigmatic one since, during the development of the IMA project a completely uncommon interaction of different debates takes place, but a definite resolution of those ones is not reached: after gathering in the historical attractor IMA, in fact, these debates get re-aligned to the former directions they were following. Such a re-alignment is nevertheless preceded by the results of interaction: an enriched sense for the debate itself, and an opening for new and relevant possibilities of comprehension for historical research. That has been the sense and the reason of a research path which has been developed for Politecnico di Torino and Alta Scuola Politecnica V cycle, in collaboration with École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Malaquais, Institut du Monde Arabe, and the architects from Architecture Studio (Paris), authors of the IMA project together with Jean Nouvel and current keepers of the design documents.

A complementary work of “methodological design” had been required - mostly because the current literature was leaking similar research publications, not considering some fragmentary quotation usually linked to Nouvel's work – to achieve a proper critical and contextualized reconstruction of the IMA historical framework and path; this task was effectuated throughout a four-months research campaign, which took place in Paris, exploring the scenes of the project, the construction and the debates.

This work has therefore allowed to deepen themes which have come out as major axes, in different times, for the definition of the Paris urban space, as well as a real testing ground for the historical development of the social role of architects.

A crucial importance has in fact been assigned to the historical context of the vicissitude, more specifically to the socialist era of 1980s France, characterized by an urban space vision which aimed to structure the city around a series of culture-linked built signs. The meaning of cities in the multicultural era is an issue of similar importance: this theme has had an impressive development up until today, and IMA can be considered to have a privileged observation point on it. Paris in particular acts as a node within a Mediterranean-scaled network of interactions featuring a mainly Arabic identity.

The other themes, which can be considered as historically relevant, are the relationship between IMA and its vocation as a public space and the social role of the architects.



IMA nowadays: an *établissement public* searching for an active role as an *espace public* and promoting several activities for several publics

The process for the achievement of the *espace public* status, a real urban space capable of generating debate, has been laborious for the *Institut*, despite its original nature of *établissement public*: the reasons of this are to be found in its progressing separation from the closest Parisian context – a separation which only nowadays is about to be solved – as well as in the arduousness of architecturally answering to the multiple requirements of a changing society. Those requirements and changes are also the origin of the radical change which the authorial and professional status of architects undergoes at that time: architects become new actors of a society involved in a new massive media-orientation process. It is the rise of the *archistar* character, and the project of the Institut du Monde Arabe is one of its early epiphanies.



Early epiphanies of the *archistar*. Jean Nouvel as the designer of a building as well as of a role of author. (© L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1984)

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