



**THE AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY 50
of PARIS YEARS**

**Rafael Mahdavi
Jonathan Shimony
GATEWAY**

Celeste Schenck
President of The American University of Paris

Introduction

This monumental sculpture – made for the fiftieth anniversary of The American University of Paris – was born in my office in the midst of a discussion with artists RAFAEL MAHDAVI and JONATHAN SHIMONY about the mission of one particular university. Capturing AUP's *raison d'être*, *Gateway* gives form to the very essence of our learning community. An opening book, an entry space through which students can literally walk into their post-college lives (the sculpture invites people to stand inside its perimeter), *Gateway* is the emblem of Paris' only comprehensive, foreign university and home to students of over 100 nationalities, faculty of over 26, and some 117 languages and dialects since we began counting them in 2002. The particular mix of cultures, languages, ethnicities, faiths, ideologies, and world views that makes up the AUP classroom also inflects all learning at the University. What better openness to the world, openness upon the world, than a gateway book, beckoning students to reading, to reason, to relationship, and to responsibility. We see ourselves and find ourselves in this sculpture.

Artists Jonathan Shimony and Rafael Mahdavi worked together creatively to build this tribute to fifty years of liberal arts learning just under the Eiffel Tower, borrowing from that structure the edge, the steel, the loft, the bolts that characterize it and mark our quartier. The sculpture suggests both spaciousness and structure, innovation and constraint, and features a diversity of shapes and compositional elements. Installed before the doors of our Combes Building and just inside its gates, *Gateway* will point us ever forward to our academic creed: to provide learning experiences to our students that challenge their intellectual preconceptions, invite them both to master traditions and to make anew, and open upon the rich variety of cultural backgrounds that our students bring into the community of the University. *Gateway* is a sculpture made for generations of AUP students, our students of the world.



David Galloway

Approaching Gateway

For the casual passerby, the sculpture by RAFAEL MAHDAVI and JONATHAN SHIMONY that now stands at the entrance to The American University in Paris might seem merely a graceful ornament, a filigreed tower of interlocking elements that suggest both thrust and balance, tension and repose. A closer look suggests an open book or a gate that stands ajar, beckoning us to enter. Both metaphors are consistent with the intentions of the two expatriate artists who co-authored this work. Both interpretations are consistent, as well, with the goals of the University, whose fiftieth anniversary is commemorated by *Gateway*. As the University's president, Celeste Schenck, explains, 'An AUP education is a gateway upon the world, providing students of 100 nationalities with an opportunity to live and learn and read and play and work together. The mix of faiths, creeds, cultures, languages, and ethnicities that makes up the AUP classroom is our particular adventure in learning.' Its alumni network embraces 125 countries.

One might thus think of the word gateway in its contemporary usage as a network point enabling Internet-users to access different communications protocols. Yet for some who pause as they move along the rue du Colonel Combes, unaware of the work's symbolic implications, the sculpture may well strike a playful note, evoking childhood fantasies given form with the aid of an 'Erector' set – a toy that this year celebrates its centennial. With miniature structural-steel beams, nuts and bolts, the sets that premiered in New York City in 1913 were meant to encourage young engineers, but the more artistically inclined could also break the rules and give free rein to their creative fantasies. Long before the days of political correctness, the toy was marketed with the slogan 'Hello Boys.' With *Gateway* the 'boys' Rafael Mahdavi and Jonathan Shimony give us yet another memorable example of the fact that playfulness itself is frequently an essential ingredient of creative achievement. (And lest the analogy to an Erector set seem too trivial for dedicated art-watchers, it should be noted that among the many serious purposes the toy has served was the production of the first prototype of the artificial heart, constructed at the Yale School of Medicine in 1949.)

With a generous dash of poetic irony, the 'Erector' brand born in America now belongs to the French toy-manufacturer, Meccano. In principle, the original version







of the toy applied the construction principle used for Paris's celebrated Eiffel Tower, which served as a symbolic gateway to the Exposition Universelle of 1889, attracting a vast international audience with the latest in technical, scientific, and cultural achievements. In little more than six months, more than six million visitors used the specially constructed railway connecting highlights of the fair. Similarly, AUP draws students and teachers from throughout the world to enjoy the resources of 'a renowned global center for innovative interdisciplinary research,' as the school's website asserts.

Though its essential form language may recall Erector-set fantasies for some observers, the work by Mahdavi and Shimony largely passes over nut-and-bolt construction in favor of the ancient craft of welding. (*Gateway* is thus coincidentally a sort of homage to Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths, craftsmen, and artisans.) Some eighteen months ago, Jonathan Shimony paid a visit to 'Le Cloud,' Mahdavi's house and studio near the village of Chalmoux in southern Burgundy. Shimony was intent on refreshing his own welding skills, acquired while studying at Harvard with the Greek-American sculptor Dimitri Hadzi. The host himself had acquired proficiency in metalworking at Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1966. Historically, welding has been a craftsman's technique requiring skills and special equipment not available to most studio artists. In the modernist period, when old hegemonies were repeatedly challenged, techniques like welding or silk-screening, once viewed primarily in commercial terms, entered the revolutionary repertory.

Accomplished practitioners have included Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, Anthony Caro, and the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida, who in the 1950s began to work with a local blacksmith near his native San Sebastián and later installed a forge in his own studio. In addition to his admiration Chillida's eloquent use of Basque metalworking skills, Mahdavi has also expressed respect for the achievements of David Smith, who is credited with executing the first welded sculptures in the United States. These were realized at Bolton Landing in upstate New York, where he installed a forge, but works were also created at an iron foundry on the Brooklyn waterfront. (When Smith moved permanently to Bolton Landing, he designated his studio as 'Terminal Iron Works.')

As a young man, Smith had acquired a welded sculpture by Julio González, and he later published an article under the title 'Julio Gonzalez: First Master of the Torch.' Though González plainly embodies a Catalan tradition, he had learned his basic skills at a Renault factory in Boulogne-Bilancourt, on the outskirts of Paris. He generously shared those skills with both Picasso and Brancusi, though they never collaborated in the sense that Mahdavi and Shimony have done – first with small maquettes, then with *Gateway*. Such co-authorship is exceedingly rare in the field of sculpture. In the case of such famous teams as Christo and Jean Claude or Claes

Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, actual authorship is not entirely clear. Beyond Andy Warhol's collaborations with Basquiat, painting also offers few examples. Only the photographic medium has produced a number of successful duos, including Bernd and Hilla Becher. Successful artistic collaborations are more likely to take place on an interdisciplinary basis: the choreographer-dancer Merce Cunningham with the composer John Cage, for example, or the ceramist Joan Gardy Artigas with Picasso and Miró.

Shimony and Mahdavi are a noteworthy exception because of the dialogue that ensued at Le Cloud between two men of multicultural backgrounds with a profound belief in the power of dialogue, a love of philosophy, and what Mahdavi terms 'a healthy distrust of culture, which makes us open to all experiences and ideas.' The two friends also richly illustrate the artist's hunger for new horizons and the capacity to function as a true global player. Rafael Mahdavi, born in Mexico to an American mother and an Iranian father, spent his early childhood on Mallorca, from the age of ten attended boarding schools in England, Spain and Austria, and speaks five languages. ('Farsi,' he wryly notes, 'is not among them.') After completing his studies in 1968, at the renowned Cranbrook Academy, near Detroit, he practiced his welding skills building theater and opera sets in New York City, Paris and Rome. In Rome he also built 'mechanical monsters' for films being produced at *Cinecittà*. In the years that followed, he would experiment in a wide range of genres and mediums, including painting and drawing, photography, printmaking, and even poetry.

In 1987, fresh from Harvard College, Jonathan Shimony went to Japan on a Henry Luce Scholarship to work with Saito Yoshishige and Hachiro Lizuka, whose outdoor sculptures were realized in metal. 'Once in Japan,' he proudly recalls, 'I became the first American invited to build monumental sculptures and construct installations in the bombed-out parts of Tokyo and beyond,' he explains. 'I felt honored to be entrusted with such projects. The Japanese asked me, I believe, because I speak Japanese and had been adopted by the Saito clan.' Returning to the United States in 1989, Shimony earned an MFA degree at the Massachusetts College of Art and worked as an assistant for his former Harvard professor, Dimitri Hadzi. As a Fulbright Fellow, Shimony arrived in Paris in 1994 and has lived there ever since. In addition to realizing numerous commissions in Europe and Asia, he has been a faculty member at AUP since 2007.

Speaking of their numerous similarities and their equally prominent differences, Shimony reflects, 'Our mutual feeling of working as outsiders in France binds us together. For the making of our maquettes and our large works, we find the different pieces of steel together, hold the elements in place for each other to see, discuss every placement, and decide on each color. We hope to make a statement about

cooperation, compromise, and understanding. Rafael's decades of life in Europe, his thoroughly mixed roots, and his Vietnam War generation's struggles meld with my experience in Asia and my end-of-the-Baby Boom outlook. All of this counted when we built *Gateway* – the gateway to a more fluid and open world.' Thanks to the success of this first collaboration, the two artists are now developing projects for Beirut and Shanghai.

Both Mahdavi and Shimony stress the importance of process in their collaborations. Furthermore, the raw steel elements they choose for a project have already been through a complex fabrication process that involves the skills of numerous craftsmen. Hence, it is not such an anonymous material as it might seem at first glance. 'Steel is so real,' Mahdavi reflects, 'and it can even kill you – especially if, like us, you are doing the actual fabrication yourself, instead of delivering a maquette to a foundry.' In an interview that I conducted with Keith Haring (Paris, July 9-10, 1989), the artist expressed strikingly similar thoughts:

A painting, to a degree, is still an illusion of a material. But once you cut this thing out of steel and put it up, it is a real thing. I mean it could kill you. If it falls, it will kill you. It has a kind of power that a painting doesn't have. You can't burn it. It has this permanent, real feeling that will exist much much longer than I will ever exist, so it's a kind of immortality.

Although Haring did not fabricate his own cut-steel sculptures, he was almost always present at their birth. Despite the gloominess of his reflections on 'immortality' (provoked in part by his struggle with AIDS), the works of which he speaks are bright, spritely figures that project a contagious joie de vivre. In this sense, they have a certain cousinage with the playfulness that illuminates *Gateway*, embodied in the gold-leafed bars that appear like a grace note in the total composition. As Mahdavi explains it, 'We wanted something surprising, touching, soft, poetic, unexpected, an addition that would 'radicalize' the piece.' It is also a nod to the gold-leafing found throughout Paris on grills, gratings and public sculptures.

Gateway thus incorporates that 'sense of place' so often evoked by Henry James, the expatriate American author who lived in Paris from 1875 to 1876, at the height of the Gilded Age. Whether applied to a house or a park or an entire city, James believed that one's physical surroundings could find spiritual and intellectual resonance within the individual. His concept derived in part from the classical notion of genius loci, according to which a guardian spirit (often depicted as a figure holding a cornucopia) protects an important location. In tune with such iconography, *Gateway* now stands watch over The American University, a golden scepter held at the ready.



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