

November 2009

North Elevation

By: **Rona Smith, Soraya Khan**



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Rona Smith, 'North Elevation', architectural installation at Lumen United Reformed Church, 2008. Photo: Nick Kane. Courtesy: Theis & Khan



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Rona Smith, 'North Elevation', architectural installation at Lumen United Reformed Church, 2008. Photo: Nick Kane. Courtesy: Theis & Khan

Artist Rona Smith, public art consultant Vivien Lovell and architect Soraya Khan discuss the development of Rona's ambitious *North Elevation* work which was permanently installed at Lumen United Reform Church last year.

My work has often been ephemeral in nature, taking inspiration from the effects of time and wear on materials. Consequently, the invitation to present at competitive interview a proposal for a permanent work was an exciting opportunity to explore new territory. *North Elevation* is a bronze, latticed panel suspended in the north-facing window of Theis and Khan's remodelled Lumen United Reformed Church, Bloomsbury. Its geometry is based on traditional designs found in Islamic and Hindu contexts, and reflects the use of Lumen as a facility for people of all faiths. The panel peels away from the window, curving as a wave might before breaking, to give the sense of an opening or entrance into the space.

Since this was my first experience of working with an art consultant and architect, I was unsure as to how our relationship would develop, yet as negotiations progressed and plans were finalised I found our roles and responsibilities became more clearly defined. One of the factors that made for a successful relationship with Soraya and Patrick, directors of Theis and Khan, was the mutual respect we shared for each other's artistic concerns. I observed, for example, the need to be sensitive to the surrounding architectural features such as the light-filled Sacred Space in the centre of the floor, and took into account the way my work would impact on the rest of the building. Simultaneously, I felt confident that the architects respected the integrity of my work in its own right and appreciated the call for it to fulfil my original intentions. My relationship with Vivien, Director of Modus Operandi art consultants, required consistent communication to ensure that all parties were aware of any developments or setbacks. It was reassuring to find that we shared a sense of urgency in resolving problems as they arose and I benefited from Vivien's wide experience in developing permanent works of a comparable scale.

Of course, the project was not without its share of problem solving. For logistical reasons, the work was to be fabricated in three separate parts that were then bolted together. Since the necessary inclusion of bolts compromised the strength of the panel, they were specified to be much larger than I had anticipated, and as a result very conspicuous. In order to achieve the aesthetic essential to my proposal, extensive negotiation between myself, Soraya, Vivien and Benson Sedgwick fabricators was required and – on the part of the project's structural engineer – exhaustive mathematics. The resultant fixings were successfully camouflaged and flush with the surface of the bronze. Consequently, I believe this process of experimentation and discussion is an example of how artistic vision can be reconciled with the sort of boundaries often set by engineering requirements.

Throughout the project, I recognised the work ethic and sensitivity of the individuals with whom I collaborated. I also gained a great deal of confidence in resolving the kind of complex issues that require consideration of multiple points of view. The liaisons that formed during this commission have influenced my current standards of professionalism and will function as a valuable model on which to base future collaborations.

Rona Smith

Our initial brief for Lumen United Reform Church was to create a sense of openness in a building that had been created within a stern, 1960s Presbyterian sensibility. The front elevation was dark brown brickwork with an existing north window in obscure glass. The sill height from the external ground level was a forbidding 2.8m high, presenting a blank and impenetrable façade to people walking passed the church.

A café was to be created at the front of the church and it was essential that this could be seen from the pavement. This meant lowering the sill and reglazing the window with frameless clear glass. This was designed to work with a new glazed entrance in place of the existing car park entrance doors. However, Camden Planning department had an issue with altering the north window and especially lowering the existing window sill. At a meeting with the planners where it seemed our proposed design would be dismissed completely, we put forward the idea of engaging an artist to create a piece of work specifically for the north window. The Conservation officer was immediately taken with the idea and a way forward was found.

Our mutual friend Cornelia Parker suggested Vivien Lovell of Modus Operandi to be the art consultant on the project. We later found that Vivien had written the original policy for the London Borough of Camden planning department for incorporating art in the public realm. Lumen was a wonderful opportunity to put this into practice. A shortlist of artists for the north window was drawn up by Modus Operandi and a series of interviews were held.

Rona Smith was one of two possible artists chosen from the shortlist. She was ultimately selected because her approach embraced the Christian and multi-faith ethos of the church. She used a similar geometric approach to creating her sculpture that we as architects had used to design the building. Geometry used to express a universal relationship between the church and other faiths. She used the height of the church space well by curving the top of the sculpture, drawing the eye to the highest point of the window. It was a simple, practical piece to install that worked seamlessly against the flush glass within the window recess. The proposed bronze structure would be durable, needing little maintenance. It also referenced traditional church building materials.

Rona appealed to the church members because she was young, fresh, enthusiastic and very professional.

The construction process for Rona's sculpture involved a number of people working together. Rona, Patrick, Soraya and Peter from Theis and Khan Architects, Trevor the project structural engineer from FJ Samuely and Partners, and Benson Sedgwick. Trevor had to find a way of supporting the bronze sculpture within the structure of the window reveal using only two points of support. The main problem to overcome was the twisting movement top to bottom. Rona consulted with us throughout the design and construction process. We discussed the positioning of the centre of the 'rose' in relationship to the glazing joints and height from the ground floor level. Rona asked advice on the final configuration of the 'rose'. We talked through the bronze section sizes to ensure that the sculpture did not look overly heavy and thick. She sent us samples of alternative bronze finishes for us to comment on in terms of the degree of patination that we thought would work with the materials in the rest of the church.

The sculpture was finally bolted together having been brought to site in pieces and erected shortly before the building was complete in September 2008.

Soraya Khan, Theis and Khan Architects

Modus Operandi was recommended by Theis and Khan Architects to work on the Lumen United Reformed Church project, and we were subsequently interviewed and appointed. Our initial role as art consultants was to consider the scope for art commissions on site, and following an initial meeting with the client group we honed this down to two main artistic opportunities. One of these was the north window. I researched a long list of artists in connection with each of the opportunities. We invited four artists to present their ideas to us at a competitive interview/initial design approach, and Rona was selected above other, more experienced artists. Alison Wilding, an established artist, was appointed to design and create the font, drinking fountain and garden fountain.

Rona was within our radar as an emerging artist, and she'd previously been shortlisted for one of the Art and Christianity awards. Although she was someone who hadn't been 'proven' through tackling a permanent commission before, we all felt she had the capability of working on a large scale.

Rona developed her proposal with our and the architects' guidance. Rona offered a sample design at interview which she then reworked and adapted in conversation with us and the architects to harmonise more sensitively with the architecture of the space. Part of our role was to encourage Rona to pare back the design and refine it, whilst ensuring that the concept remained taut.

It is very satisfying to work with a young artist on her first major commission – in the thirty-one years I've been a public art commissioner I've always consistently ensured that clients consider younger, less proven artists, and also those who haven't worked with a particular material or scale before. We're always looking for new artists for particular situations. We have a database of hundreds of artists' work, and we're continuously researching good new practice.

The selection of Benson Sedgwick fabricators was instrumental in the project's success. We knew from their track record of working with artists that they were able to translate an artist's concept into a large scale piece that works successfully within a specific site. Theis and Khan Architects were absolutely brilliant throughout, and without their support, and that of the client of course, Rona's piece would not have been the success it is. There were moments where both I and the architects wondered whether it would work aesthetically as well as physically within the space. We recognised that it was crucial that the dimensions of the metalwork didn't appear too large in relation to the north window, that it should appear delicate yet strong. It required a number of parties to bring Rona's initial design to successful resolution, including Benson Sedgwick and Samuely, the client's structural engineers.

Rona responded very practically throughout the whole process; she was very professional to deal with and accepted the aesthetic criticisms as well as practical suggestions that we felt would improve the project. If she'd tried to preserve the form and detail of her initial design concept it wouldn't have been commissioned; that is the great value in an artist being flexible yet still retaining the integrity of their proposal.

It will be really interesting to see how Rona develops her own voice as an artist; she is someone who perhaps has been quite influenced by established female artists such as Tess Jaray, Shelagh Wakely, and Shirazeh Houshiary. Hopefully this commission will give her the confidence to continue to develop and move forward with her own voice.

From a conversation with Vivien Lovell, Founder-Director of Modus Operandi Art Consultants.

PROFILES

Rona Smith is an artist working predominantly in sculpture and installation. Her practice includes both site-responsive and gallery-based projects. there is often a time-based element to her work: in *High Rise* (2009) for example, rainwater seeps slowly through a breeze block stood on its side. In other works such as *Teacup* (2008) the viewer witnesses evidence of a process that has already taken place. here, delicate, linear tea-stains on the inside edge of a cup remain after its contents has evaporated. Many of Rona's works are concerned with themes of control and abandonment, taking inspiration from physical processes and transformations triggered when objects are neglected. these works often originate from the arbitrary and accidental traces that are left behind as we carry out everyday activities. Rona graduated from Leeds University in 2007. In the same year her installation, *Power Of Two* at St Marks Church, Leeds was shortlisted for the ACE trust award for art in religious contexts. Rona has exhibited in group shows across the UK, most notably 'Presque Rien II' at Laure Genillard, London and her first solo exhibition, 'Quietly' took place earlier this year at South Square Centre in Yorkshire. In 2010 Rona will carry out a studio residency at Fremantle Arts Centre, WA, Australia and will exhibit at Fulham Palace Gallery, London. www.ronasmith.co.uk

Vivien Lovell FRSA, Hon FRIBA is a visual arts curator with long-established expertise in commissioning permanent and temporary art within the designed environment. She was a pioneer in the field of Art and Architecture, and has extensive experience in generating and leading art/architecture/landscape collaborative projects, aiming to integrate art strategically as a key element of environmental, architectural and regenerative schemes. She founded Modus Operandi in 1999 as an independent consultancy. Current and recent projects include the Docklands Light Railway Public Art Strategy and Programme (ongoing), the Woolwich Squares Public Art Framework; the BBC Broadcasting House Public Art Programme; Light Up Queen Street (City of London); Liverpool housing Action Trust Public Art Programme; and commissions for the Barbican Arts Centre, the Young Vic, the Roundhouse, the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, and many other public and private sector clients. Previous projects include award-winning regenerative art programmes for the Phoenix Initiative in Coventry and Mitsubishi Estate Co. Ltd. in Tokyo.

Whilst Director of PACA, Lovell led the Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay (recommending a Percent for Art Policy and the establishment of CBA_T), the Strategy and Art Programme for Birmingham City

Council, and public art commissions for clients including London Docklands Development Corporation, the Foreign Office Overseas Estate Department, European Passenger Services, tSB, and St John's College Oxford. From 1990-94 she chaired Public Art Forum and in this capacity initiated the Alliance for Art, Architecture and Design with the RIBA, a fixed-term project that successfully generated wider acceptance of interdisciplinary collaborative practice.

Lovell lectures internationally; her areas of research include artist-designed public spaces, alternative responses to 'monument' and 'memorial', and artists' ecological projects. Publications include 'Public: Art: Space' (Merrell Holberton 1998), and 'Phoenix: Architecture, Art, Regeneration' (Black Dog, 2004). She is a member of the Royal Academy Forum for Art and Architecture, and the Fine Art Faculty of the British School at Rome.

www.modusoperandi-art.com

Since it was founded in 1995, Theis + Khan Architects (TKA) has developed a new humanism in architecture – an ethical approach that results from a thorough examination of a building's true purpose. From churches to community centres, arts foundations to housing associations, each TKA project is driven by a spirit of inquiry. TKA was established by Patrick Theis and Soraya Khan, and since 2008, has been augmented by a third director, Peter Vaughan. the practice now engages on all manner of projects from its central London base, with an emphasis on the civic realm. TKA believes that research is the key to successful architecture, as well as to constructive client relations. this approach continues throughout the total execution of a tKA project, resulting in buildings that express a sense of place, are meaningful to their users, and have architectural integrity. A TKA building project is always underpinned by rigorous judgements of geometry and proportion, as well as respect for the essence of the materials used.

TKA's reputation for sensitive, pro-social projects has resulted in a vivid and award-winning portfolio that includes Lumen United Reformed Church and Community Centre; Quaker Centre, Friend's house, Euston; Bethnal Green health Centre; the UK headquarters for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; Coram's Fields youth centre. Current projects include St Paul's Bayswater URC; Wheathampstead URC and the Steven's Building, Royal College of Art for the Department of Humanities. TKA also works in the private realm, with many residential commissions to its name, and the practise is accomplished in the creation of new-build projects as well as merging modern and historic fabric.

TKA enjoys developing long-term relationships with clients, and at the same time encourages the wider architectural conversation, to encompass citizens as well as planners and practitioners.

Rona Smith, Soraya Khan

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