

Art and Christianity 57

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Rona Smith *North Elevation*, 2008
Photo: Richard Davies

Lumen United Reformed Church

Some church redevelopment plans seem to be on everyone's watchlist for the duration of their planning, fundraising and building phases; others seem to appear from nowhere which make them genuinely surprising and impressive by the quiet fastidiousness which brings them to fruition. One such surprise project is the United Reform Church in Tavistock Place WC1 where the post-war church of 1965 – a muscular reprise of earlier Modern German churches – has undergone very contemporary and thoughtful changes in order to facilitate the life of the Church's service to its surrounding communities. A small worshipping congregation has embraced the student life, multi-culturalism and entrepreneurship at its heels, and given form to an architect's brief, interpreted with both humour and eloquence by Theis and Kahn. What the church now has at its disposal are three community rooms surrounding a courtyard, a light-drenched café at the street end of the church and, not least, a new intimate space for worship, meditation and counsel which sits within a floor-to-ceiling conical form in the centre of the church. How exactly this space will function for the congregation has, I would venture, yet to be worked through. The experience of being inside the cone is not unlike that of one of James Turrell's works; it is both calming and uncomfortable – claustrophobic even – but its appearance from the main church space is mesmeric and subtle.

In re-ordering elements of the 1960s church Theis and Kahn transposed a large stained glass window to the liturgical east end leaving plain glass fenestration in its aperture. This north-facing window overlooks the street and is a shop window, if you like, for the café and community activities within. It also became the opportunity for an art commission as did the elements of a font (in the church) and fountains in the courtyard. With success under their belt at St Martin-in-the-Fields the art consultants Modus Operandi commissioned the well-respected and Turner Prize-shortlisted artist Alison Wilding as well as the young ACE Award-shortlisted Rona Smith. Wilding's measured response is very much in tune with the architects' vocabulary and her use of materials – particularly in the silver-plated bowl of the font – are of trademark sensitivity. Smith's commission



Theis and Kahn Architects *Lumen*, 2008
 Left-hand corner: Alison Wilding *Font*, 2008
 Photo: Nick Kane

meanwhile was to augment the new plain glass north window. What has been born of that blank canvas is a remarkable bronze construction fitted within the window but proud of the glass itself and, at the top section, almost imperceptibly curling into the church. Through its size and gentle assertiveness – it is not merely some souped up decorative security grill – it commands a presence to both equal and temper that of the cone. Its symmetrical patterning is derived from the same 'power of two' formula that Smith used in her marble dust installation shortlisted for the ACE Award. Squares of increasing size fan out from a star shape at the centre of this controlled vortex and, paradoxically, curves not unlike leaf forms emerge from the sides of accrued squares.

Theologically, it occupies a plural though not neutral position which the

church hopes will attract members of other faith traditions to use its community rooms. But over and above the advantage of inclusiveness, there is tremendous potential for this piece to become a talisman for the building and its people – its aesthetic seriousness is underscored by a gracious acknowledgement of nature, divinity in creation and, quite literally, an over-arching sense of a higher being. Whilst the Lumen Church and the wider URC upholds its traditional emphasis upon social mission and ecclesiastical restraint, this redevelopment and its art commissions demonstrate that that does not need to detract from a sophisticated aesthetic which resonates with a reformed theology.

Laura Moffatt is Director of ACE