

The Language of Light

BY KERI K. WEHLANDER



In ancient times, people would erect stelae to help them find their way, or to mark significant events. These were often made from stone, and had inscriptions carved into them. Markers of this kind that remain today serve as sources of significant information about the stories and beliefs of cultures that have preceded our own.

When Sarah Hall reflects on her *Lux Nova* project, she thinks of it in much the same way. “It is a contemporary stela – it has a deep resonance with the wayfinding stelae from ancient times.”

Lux Nova is an extraordinary stained glass installation located on the campus of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. It is the central element in a 40-foot high glass tower that rises above Regent’s underground theological library. At first glance, the viewer is drawn in by the aesthetics of the design and the interesting architecture. But there are many intricate layers to this project, each revealing something about the ongoing process of theological reflection in a contemporary setting.

The tower itself is called the *True North Wind Tower*. Designed by architects Clive Groat and Walter Francl, it provides natural ventilation for the library below, thereby reducing the need to rely on electricity. The mechanical system of the library is based on the concept of a radiant heating and cooling system, and the triangular tower plays a key role in this green technology. Regent was intentional in making these choices as a part of their theological understanding that we are meant to be caretakers of God’s creation.

There is another significant element to the design of the wind tower. The tower points up at an angle, and is directed at the North Star. Dal Schindell, Director of Publications at Regent College, reflects on the tower in this way, “We are located at the main gate to the University of British Columbia, and the tower is the most visible public art project for both campuses. It communicates our concern for the world and our encouragement to others to shine your light wherever you are. The tower directs us to the North Star – the one still point in our part of the universe. Ultimately, it is a reminder that humans need to be pointed to something that is true and is bigger than all of us.”

Lux Nova participates in this layering of meaning in a way that makes it a North Star in its own right. It is the first photovoltaic art glass installation in North America. Photovoltaic modules collect solar energy, which can then be utilized for other energy needs. It is a green technology already used extensively in Europe, but relatively new to North America. Solar cells transform the glass facade into a clean, long-lasting energy source that does not emit harmful greenhouse gases. In this installation, the solar energy collected during the day is used at night to illuminate the stained glass and surrounding park with a changing LED light display.

Through this installation, Sarah Hall has explored an unexpected intersection: the ancient art of stained glass with the latest in solar technology. In doing so, *Lux Nova* will provide a remarkable model for future design possibilities. Ursula Franklin, a renowned physicist and recipient of the Order of Canada, has high praise for Hall and *Lux Nova*:

Sarah Hall [has] opened herself willingly to a further and unique extension of her craft: the inclusion of photovoltaic cells in her windows’ overall design and purpose. She was willing to learn and experiment, moving into quite uncharted terrain...[She] is, to the best of my knowledge, the only Canadian artist who has taken this step of active collaboration with electronic engineers. The first public result of this collaboration – her windows at Regent College on the campus of the University of British Columbia – will,

I am sure, be regarded in future as a seminal installation, showing how in the hands of a masterful artisan the craft can incorporate the oldest and the newest knowledge in one beautiful and functional work.

Remarkably, the photovoltaic glass is only the first layer in this innovative work. Hall describes the layers of glass as being “like pages in a book.” The second layer of *Lux Nova* is made up of a series of twelve crosses that pattern the glass from bottom to top. Hall intentionally used a Greek cross, so that the general public encountering it would not immediately think in stereotypical terms about Christianity. Similarly, she hopes that the number twelve will open itself up for interpretation: the twelve disciples, the twelve tasks of Hercules, the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve months in a year, and so on. The coloured crosses embedded in this layer of glass are made from dichroic glass, which is most commonly used for windshields on spacecraft!

The third layer of the work led Hall to do some interesting – and memorable – research. The theological setting and heavenward orientation of the tower made Hall think of the Lord’s Prayer. As she thought about the beauty of the prayer, and its universal qualities, she decided to integrate it into the design. However, she wanted to incorporate it in Aramaic, since that was the language it was first spoken in. She contacted David Goa, a friend and Director of the Chester Ronning Centre, to ask for his assistance in finding a manuscript containing the text. He suggested that she contact a Chaldean church. The Chaldean church is one of the historic Christian communities of the Middle East that has preserved the use of the Aramaic language in their communities and their worship. She was able to locate a congregation in Toronto, and set up a meeting with Hanna Zora, the Chaldean Archbishop who serves there. At one point during their conversation, he sang the Lord’s Prayer for her in Aramaic. Hall describes the moment as “beautiful” – one that will stay with her for a very long time. The Archbishop then transcribed the text for her, which became the source she used to etch the letters into the glass.

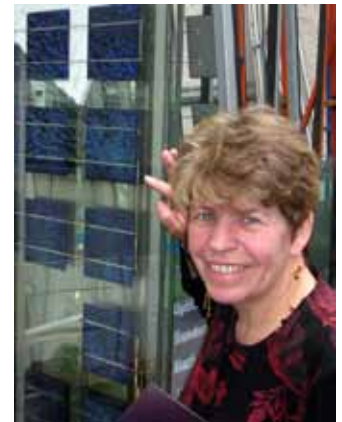
The final layer in the piece is a waterfall of coloured light, flowing in blues, violets and whites. Hall found that these colours particularly suited the West Coast environment. “The light is really different in Vancouver,” she says, describing it as a “silvery kind of light.” The waterfall also honoured patron Heather Alloway and her work with the organization “Living Water.”

Part of the work on this layer involved designing the changing colours of the nighttime LED light display. Hall often works on her artwork with music playing in the background, and she credits the music of Canadian violinist Oliver Schroer as the source of inspiration for the gracefully moving coloured light display that she created.

Hall’s fascination with the play and movement of light is a longstanding one. Michael Mills, a visual artist and Lutheran pastor who knows Hall, reflects on her work through the retelling of a story:



Sarah once told me a story about when she was a young girl and her father was chairing the building committee of their church. For a year, Sarah would accompany her father as the building committee toured churches every Sunday afternoon. At these times, Sarah would sit in the worship space with its coloured glass windows, and she would watch the gently changing patterns that the sun projected onto the walls as it traced its voyage across the heavens. It was then that she fell in love with the weight and movement and feel of light. As I see her work today, I see her still playing with the glory of simple sunlight as if she were a child. There is a richness and joy in her work that is deeper than words. It is the joy of the ephemeral, the joy of the spirit world which fills all space and all matter, if you have eyes to see. Sarah has eyes to see. And to experience her work is to return to a deep, unspoken part of one’s self. It is to connect again with the holy.



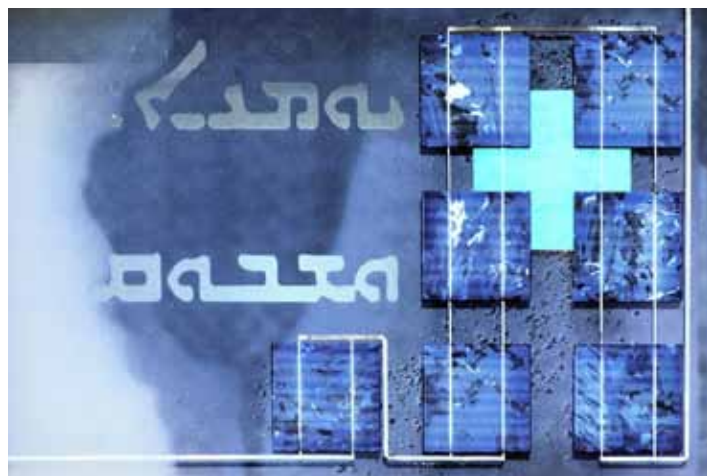
Hall’s affinity with light and colour led her to decide to

study the art of creating stained glass. She enrolled in the Architectural Glass Program at Swansea College of Arts in Wales, and graduated with her Diploma in Architectural Glass from the City and Guilds of London Institute. After apprenticing with glass master Lawrence Lee, Hall spent a year in Jerusalem studying gold-leaf and techniques from the Middle East. She opened her own studio in Toronto in 1980, and as her projects increased in size, initiated a working relationship with a fabrication studio in Germany. Germany plays a leading role in European stained glass, as it has a well established set of studios with highly trained artisans dedicated to the production of stained glass. It was during one of Hall's visits to Germany where she first encountered the use of photovoltaic light and began to investigate the possibilities for using it in her own work.

She has created close to 1,000 stained glass art installations for sanctuaries, embassies and public spaces across North America, and has won numerous awards for these works. For Hall, every setting "has a language of its own." She examines every building carefully – along with its interplay with light – to understand how her work will interact with the space. When working in a church or synagogue, Hall does not ask what kind of colours or pictures they want. Instead, she asks them to describe their spirituality. In listening to the stories that this question generates, Hall always discovers a hidden "gem" that, along with the architecture, gives her a place to start from. In turn, her clients are likely to refer to the process of working with Hall – and the finished stained glass installation – as having a deep spiritual significance.

Sarah Hall's own spirituality lies at the core of her approach to her artistic work. As a Quaker, she notes, "We don't have a set creed. Faith is not something which is frozen in history, nor is it a fixed set of beliefs. It is something able to change and transform." Hall enters into her artistic projects with the same sensibility: "I don't have a set style that I bring to every project. I like to challenge myself by working on projects where I explore new techniques. My work continues to be a creative act, because I continue to learn more with every step." As far as the underlying theology in her work, she says, "The power of stained glass comes from the colour and the movement of light itself. It can transform a space into something new. But if the picture that the stained glass forms is too literal, it can overtake this quality. This applies to faith as well. If it is static, it loses its primary power. We must be able to keep growing in our faith."

It is interesting to note that there is a strong language of light that is central to the Quaker tradition. To pray for someone is to "hold them in the light." George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, referred to the Holy Spirit as an "infinite ocean of light and love." The concept of "Inner Light" is one which Quakers use to refer to the presence of God within a person. No doubt, Hall's fascination with light has also been informed by these elements of Quaker spirituality.



As an artist, Hall cites the beauty of nature, scripture, her family and friends, art, music and theatre as essentials for feeding her soul. She also relies on the "support and creativity" of her fabrication studio in Germany. She says, "They always lift my spirits." However, given the fact that there are 65 other artisans working in these facilities in Germany, she doesn't do her design work there. She has a solitary workspace in Toronto that she describes as being "something like a cloister." The space has large windows which are made of white glass. The colour in the glass begins with opaque white and moves through gradations until it becomes transparent. She says that the windows give this space a serene feeling that she finds conducive for her work.

She describes the work on *Lux Nova* as being very demanding from a technological point of view: "It's not as if there were a tremendous number of examples to draw upon. It was a steep learning curve for everyone. When I finally saw the light being collected from the sun, it felt great. I knew that it demonstrated that we don't have to depend on, exploit or invade countries where oil and gas are found for our energy." Her hope is that this project will help to bring about change. "When people see an alternative energy source, they don't necessarily get excited. But when beauty and technology come together, it has the potential to inspire, and bring about wonderful possibilities."

The marriage of beauty and technology. A tower with layers of meaning. An installation that is the first of its kind. A place where theology, technology, ecology and creativity meet. Sarah Hall is a deeply spiritual visionary who brings all these elements together through her own willingness to let the light inform, inspire, and transform her. She is fluent in the language of light. As a stela for our own time, there is no doubt that *Lux Nova* will shine a light to help us all find our way forward.

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