

# Grace Farms is spreading its wings

By [Greg Reilly](#) on December 23, 2015 in [Community](#), [Highlights](#), [Latest](#), [Latest News](#), [News](#), [Religion](#) · 0 Comments



Still in its third month since opening, Grace Farms is taking on life, developing and already fulfilling its missions. The foundation reported that the property and programs attracted an average of 3,000 visitors per week during November and December. It opened Oct. 9.

On any given open day, people walk the grounds, explore the outdoors or sit inside the glass River building walls and take in the views of the hills, pastures and woods — the Nature aspect of Grace.

Grace Farms Foundation Director of Operations Adam Thatcher provided an update on general activity.

## **Community and art**

The element of Grace Farms that is community is taking shape in a variety of ways. The Court indoor recreation facility is busy, especially on weekends, with people of all ages shooting baskets. There is an average of 70-110 people using the Court per day, with greater use on weekends. The strongest attendance is from teen boys coming from New Canaan High School, John Jay High School, Darien High School and Norwalk High School.

Children and adults with disabilities have also been using the Court.

Lunch in the Commons is proving to be a very popular, according to Thatcher. “We have gotten letters about the grilled cheese (cheese, bacon and thin slices of apple),” he said. “We have fed over 10,000 people at this point and, thanks to the warm weather, we’ve already been able to harvest greens from our community garden that were only planted this October.”

Thatcher reports that the use of the Grace Farms facilities by non-profit organizations is growing. “The space is restorative for those working in difficult areas,” he said.

There was a retreat last week with a non-profit that helps Newtown families heal. Sixty attended an International Institute of Connecticut discussion with resettled refugees after a sold out Community Dinner.

Overall Grace is working with 25 non-profit organizations, which have contributed to programming or have received various space grants. The organizations include Arts for Healing, New Canaan Land Trust, New Canaan Mounted Troop, Future Five, Trust for Learning, Yale Center for Faith and Culture, International Justice Mission, Pura Vida, the YMCA, and others.

The Grace element of art has been experienced by 50 children a week at the Grace Farms West Barn art studios for informal Saturday art classes, which carry a modest \$5 fee to cover supplies.

Also, there are twice-weekly art plus architecture tours, which have been full. The plan is to continue them (they are 90-minute tours) during January and February once a week on Saturdays at 12:45.

In conjunction with The Glass House in New Canaan, Grace conducted a sold-out joint architecture study tour in November.

Further, there have been Tour plus Tea events for seniors through Staying Put.

## **Justice and faith**

In early November Grace’s Justice initiative held its first public event with a workshop to help the private and public sectors develop strategies and partnerships to combat child sex trafficking and gender-based violence.

Related, Grace is hosting Big Data training for 40 law enforcement officers on a monthly basis to explore high tech methods of tracking predators.

The faith element of Grace Farms — one-fifth of the foundation’s scope — is centered within Grace Community Church. The non-denominational Christian church has increased its average attendance from 600 to 800 since moving to the Grace Farms property on Luke’s Woods Road, according to the foundation. With children attending in classrooms, Thatcher reports that the Sanctuary has been not quite full during Sunday services.

## **— Greg Reilly**

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ART & DESIGN

# The Spiritual and Spectacular Meet at an Ultramodern Community Center in Connecticut

By TED LOOS OCT. 16, 2015

NEW CANAAN, Conn. — A group of friends and neighbors thought that this area could use a new community center with a spiritual underpinning.

So they built one.

But Grace Farms, as the project is called, will never be mistaken for a modest Amish barn-raising. In this corner of Connecticut, budgets are less tight than elsewhere. The nonprofit, tax-exempt Grace Farms Foundation spent around \$120 million on the new center — a price that included the purchase of 80 acres of some of the most expensive real estate in the region.

It hired the Japanese architecture firm Sanaa, which later won the Pritzker Prize, to design an ultramodern building that features, among other bells and whistles, five site-specific works by art stars. And the finished complex, which opened on Oct. 9, takes the concept of “multifunctional” to a new extreme: Grace Farms is a nature center, gym, hub for social justice groups, community garden and a part-time ecumenical chapel — and that is only a partial list.

The main building, called the River, is a sinuous form that winds its way down a hill just a few hundred yards from the New York border, with five separate sections. Large glass walls provide views of forests and meadows; its covered roof twists and turns with the landscape.

“This is exactly what we hoped for,” said Sharon Prince, the president of Grace Farms Foundation, as V.I.P. visitors and journalists milled for a first look at the 83,000-square-foot building.

The “we” she referred to are well-to-do friends — led by Ms. Prince and her husband, the hedge fund executive Robert P. Prince of Bridgewater Associates — and more than 100 donors. They joined forces to create a hybrid entity that many will find easy to admire in part but that may be harder to comprehend as a whole.

The inaugural weekend activities at Grace Farms, which is open to the public, reflected that wide-ranging vision. Cliffe Knechtle, the pastor of the nondenominational Grace Community Church, gave a blessing. The church occupies a Sanaa-converted barn on the property and holds Sunday services in the 700-seat portion of the River called the Sanctuary. Grace Farms, while a separate entity, was founded by some of the same people who founded the church almost 15 years ago, including the Princes. Then there was a panel discussion featuring artists who have done installations on the site, including Teresita Fernández and Thomas Demand. At night, Krishna Patel, Grace Farms’s director of justice initiatives, discussed the organization’s campaign against child trafficking. Later, the Paul Taylor Dance Company performed.

And that was only the first day. On Saturday, 2,500 people came to sample another busy slate of activities.

“My wife brought me here as a surprise,” said Gordon Schnell, a lawyer who lives in neighboring Westchester County. “It’s gorgeous and inspiring.”

The spiritual aspect of Grace Farms was attractive to Mr. Schnell. “The thing that caught my eye is that they say they welcome people of all faiths, or no faith at all,” he said. “I want to know more about that.”

The project was initially approved partly for religious purposes. The myriad functions of Grace Farms even stumped the architects at first. “When we first met with Sharon, it was difficult to understand what Grace Farms was to be,” Kazuyo Sejima, the co-principal of Sanaa, said in an email. Now that the project is completed, she added, “it is clear that what they had in mind the whole time was a

new kind of public space.”

The primary concept was for the building to melt into the landscape. “When we said we want the building to disappear into nature, they lit up,” recalled Ms. Prince of her meetings with Sanaa.

Ms. Prince was admittedly a client with very specific requests. “We asked for no front door — total porosity,” she said. “We didn’t want a threshold that gives you a second thought about entering.”

The Princes are among the donors but they declined to disclose amounts or the names of other contributors. Grace Farms will play host to nonprofit groups to be determined.

Although it will be open to public use, some of the neighbors haven’t always been happy about the project’s scale and subjected the zoning permit to multiple appeals to New Canaan’s Planning and Zoning Commission over six years.

To respond to local concerns, Grace Farms added berms around the property, altered the design of the parking lot and had the traffic tested. An amended permit was approved in 2013.

In the end, the naysayers were no match for Ms. Prince.

“It’s hard to tell Sharon ‘No,’ and I say that in an affectionate way,” said Jay Fielden, the editor in chief of Town & Country and a board member of the Grace Farms Foundation. Mr. Fielden, who lives nearby, got to know Ms. Prince when his house burned down; the Princes took him and his family into their home temporarily.

Ms. Prince has an M.B.A. from the University of Tulsa, where she met her husband. While raising their three children, she had also been involved with various businesses as an entrepreneur.

So far, Grace Farms has a staff of 25 but no executive director, and Ms. Prince has been largely filling that role.

“Sharon is the juggernaut behind all this, the heartbeat,” said Peter King Hunsinger, the chief revenue officer of Golf Digest. He and his wife, Jane, are donors to Grace Farms and are among the original core members of Grace Community Church.

“Each step of the process has been informed by the ideals of Christian faith, but it’s not a place that’s about proselytizing,” Mr. Fielden said.

Because of the overlap between the church founders and the movers behind the Grace Farms, Ms. Prince took pains to note their separation. “We’re not building a church,” she said pointedly.

In addition to donating space to nonprofit groups, exposing visitors to art is part of the stated mission, too. The artist Olafur Eliasson, who contributed a site-specific work called “Mat for multidimensional prayers,” said, “Once I looked at the project, I realized it overlapped with my sense of spirituality a great deal.”

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor emeritus at Yale who has written widely on theology, reviewed the plans for Grace Farms and said the crosscurrents coming together made it noteworthy.

“In the olden days, most art was connected to the church, except for the aristocracy,” Mr. Wolterstorff said. “Here,” he added, “by putting them under the same roof, they are separate but together.”

Those close to the project acknowledged that its lack of a single focus was the biggest hurdle.

“In this robust celebration, how does one specify one’s ambition?” said Miroslav Volf, a theology professor at Yale who is on the foundation’s board. “It will require constant attention to carry the vision through the entire project.”

Fatou Niang, a local real estate agent attending the opening, said she saw Grace Farms simply as a local attraction. “It’s an extra element for the city, to bring people who see New Canaan as a retreat,” she said. “We have the Philip Johnson Glass House, and now this.”

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# 'It's a gift!' Inside America's miraculous new centre for arts and faith

Japanese architects Sanaa get spiritual with the sublime \$83m Grace Farms centre for arts, faith and justice in New Canaan, Connecticut, which is backed by a hedge fund manager. Just don't call it a church



Serpentine slither ... Sanaa's Grace Farms project snakes down a hillside in New Canaan, Connecticut. Photograph: Dean Kaufman/Grace Farms

## Oliver Wainwright in New Canaan

Friday 9 October 2015 11.50 EDT

**I**n the bucolic idyll of New Canaan, Connecticut, a silvery serpentine rooftop slithers down the hillside. Charting a course of shallow switchbacks, gently flaring up and down as it swooshes down the slope, it looks like the path of a snowboarder, frozen in motion and raised up on slender white slalom poles.

Groups of people drift beneath this wafer-thin canopy, dissolving into glass pods that nestle below the roof like dew drops under a leaf.

Such a delicate vision could only be the work of Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, aka Sanaa - the Japanese architects who have devoted their career to conjuring structures so thin they might



evaporate at any minute. They have blown concrete into improbable balloons, stretched glass into ribbons and made steel levitate on toothpick columns, creating buildings that seem to come from another, lighter realm. And now in Grace Farms, an \$83m centre for faith and the arts, it seems they may have finally found a client and brief that meets their ethereal match.

“It is a place for people to just come and ‘be’,” says Sharon Prince, president of the Grace Farms Foundation, when I try to pin her down on what exactly this new facility is for, after a four-hour site tour. “It’s a gift,” she adds. “A place for people to experience nature, foster community, pursue justice and explore faith - with artistic expression as a common thread”.



‘Close to sublime’ ... the five glass pods glow beneath the rooftop by night. Photograph: Iwan Baan/Grace Farms

The ambitious project has been eight years in the making, since Prince and her husband Bob, co-chief investment officer of Bridgewater, the world’s biggest hedge fund, came together with others to acquire the site back in 2007. They had originally planned to build a 1,200-person sanctuary here for the Grace Community Church, which they founded with three other families in 2001, but local opposition forced them to scale the plans back. After years of litigation and community consultation, the project developed a broader vision, providing facilities for sports, performances and education, with a library, cafe and gym set beneath the wiggly roof in beautiful 80-acre grounds, open for free to all.

“It is not a church,” Prince stresses, keen to emphasise that this is not the HQ of some strange religious cult for the well-heeled bankers of Fairfield County, one of the wealthiest communities in the US. “It is a place to make good things happen, for people to come and make a difference.”

The sanctuary remains, in more scaled-down form, in a 700-seat auditorium at the top of the slope, where the snaking roof spreads out in an expansive bulge. It is a miraculous space, where long wooden beams dive in low arcs across the ceiling above a sloping concrete floor, free from any liturgical clutter (a simple cross will be brought in for the Sunday service), and it was no small miracle to achieve.

In-keeping with Sanaa's perfectionism, the 30m-long glue-laminated beams each had to come in one seamless piece - the problem being that the roads across the Rockies (between here and the west coast of Canada where the timber is manufactured) were not straight enough to carry them. They had to be driven right around the continent, via New Mexico, instead. The glass walls - the largest curved insulated units in the world - underwent a similarly ambitious safari: the glass was made in Britain, curved in Spain and assembled in Germany, then joined together on site with caulking that's just 7mm thick.



'A place for people to come and "be"' ... the view from the 'commons' dining area. Photograph: Iwan Baan/Grace Farms

When Sanaa's projects leave the rarified realms of Japanese construction, they can fall down on detail, the architects' exacting standards sometimes boded in translation. But Grace Farms is remarkably faithful to the minimalist dream: its steel columns are just 13cm thick and the roof profile is as thin as the harsh Connecticut winter allows. Reality only intervenes in the occasional clumsy handrail, belatedly fitted after the building control inspector deemed one shallow-pitched staircase a touch too adventurous. No doubt Sanaa would have preferred the whole thing to look as thin as their paper models, but project architect Shohei Yoshida is diplomatically satisfied: "I like the rustic American construction," he says with a smile.

Walking along the meandering length of the building, which stretches for over 400m, you catch views between the undulating layers of the zig-zag roof, which was continually tweaked by fractions of an inch during the design process to perfect the sight-lines. From the "commons" dining area, sitting at one of the long oak tables made from trees felled on site, you can look up at people reading in the library window, down to a game of basketball in the sunken gymnasium below, and across to where the resident tea master is preparing matcha in the welcome pavilion. It is a true *promenade architecturale*, as Le Corbusier put it, the different parts of the building disaggregated and dispersed along a route, which forces you to slow your pace.



Hovering low ... the project continues Sanaa's pursuit of free-flowing canopies. Photograph: Iwan Baan/Grace Farms

“We hope people will come here and slow down,” says Kenyon Adams, who heads up the arts programme and has already invited a number of artists and performers to come and experience the tranquility. “It’s amazing to watch their reaction,” he says. “They change their pace and become a version of themselves they’ve been trying to access for so long.”

He describes the facility as a “third space, outside the cut and thrust of the art world”, with a mission to explore the connections between art and faith, “which have long broken down in the west”.

Permanent installations include a large photograph by Thomas Demand of Sanaa’s paper models (more of which are now on show in London), along with a group of woollen honeycomb prayer mats by Olafur Eliasson. Susan Philipsz has installed a sound piece around the lake, while Teresita Fernández has fitted 10,000 shimmering glass cubes to a wall. The performance programme for the opening weekend includes work by the Paul Taylor Dance Company, New Chamber Ballet and Broadway Inspirational Voices, while Prince proudly tells me that choreographer Bill T Jones advised on their sprung-floored rehearsal space, housed in a refurbished farm building on the site, where therapy sessions by Arts for Healing will also take place. Various other charitable groups are involved in the programme, including Full Court Peace, who will have use of the spectacular sunken gym hall for their basketball games - and there will even be therapeutic donkeys in one of the paddocks.



Sunken gym ... the basketball court at the lowest end of the snaking building. Photograph: Iwan Baan/Grace Farms

The ambition goes on. Heading up the centre’s “justice initiatives” is Krishna Patel, a US federal attorney for the last 15 years, who will be bringing her battle against child trafficking here, conducting big data analysis with funding from the Grace Farms Foundation. Mirsolav Volf, professor of theology at Yale, will be teaching his “Life Worth Living” class here, while the basement “media lab” will be run by a film-maker with Sundance credentials. The site is even being protected by the former head of Connecticut homeland security.

“We can marshal resources and people in ways that may not have been connected before,” says Prince, as she reels off more high-powered names involved in the endeavour. “They’re all drawn here by their passion and commitment to the mission - an open pursuit of truth.”

Grace Farms is the rare kind of client that has also allowed Sanaa to indulge in the pursuit of its own special truth - pushing their free-flowing rooftop as far as it will go. It is a line of inquiry first begun by Oscar Niemeyer in 1943, with his spermatozoid pavilion in Belo Horizonte, the Casa do Baile, a project that has long been a touchstone for Sanaa. Here in New Canaan, where Philip Johnson’s hallowed Glass House stands nearby (joint tours are planned), along with a clutch of other modernist villas built by his Harvard contemporaries, Sanaa has taken it one step further. In this arcadian setting, with a dreamlike brief, they have reached something close to sublime. Just remember not to call it a church.

. This article was amended on 13 October 2015. An earlier version stated that Prince and her husband acquired the site in 2007. This has been corrected.

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