SAM HOLLERAN –

Estate of Grace: Confronting Privilege and Possibility at SANAA's Grace Farms

Citation: Sam Holleran, "Estate of Grace: Confronting Privilege and Possibility at SANAA's Grace Farms," in *The Avery Review*, no. 13 (February 2016), http://averyreview.com/issues/13/estate-of-grace.

New Canaan, Connecticut, has long been conflated with the WASPy ur-'burb depicted in Rick Moody's 1994 novel-turned-film *The Ice Storm*: popped collars, monogrammed bags, and picket fences. This image has been hard to shake for this high-income town at the end of a Metro-North rail spur, which is, to be sure, a comfortable place to live—far from the clamor of New York City but close to its jobs (and also reasonably buffered from the poorer, immigrant-heavy pockets of Fairfield County that line Interstate 95). This community of 20,000 is blessed with rolling hills, charming historic architecture, and budgets big enough for graceful living. Its outskirts are latticed with old stone walls and peppered with luxe farmhouses and grazing deer. The town's center, or "village district," is a compact two-block elbow of shops that hinge from the rail depot (the arterial connection to New York City's capital flows). Their exteriors are municipally regulated by Design Guidelines mandating Colonial building styles—red brick façades with white-framed windows, low-key signage, and other "charm-enhancing" elements. [1] The result is a New Urbanist core that is relatively pedestrian-friendly and pleasant, if a bit stuffy.

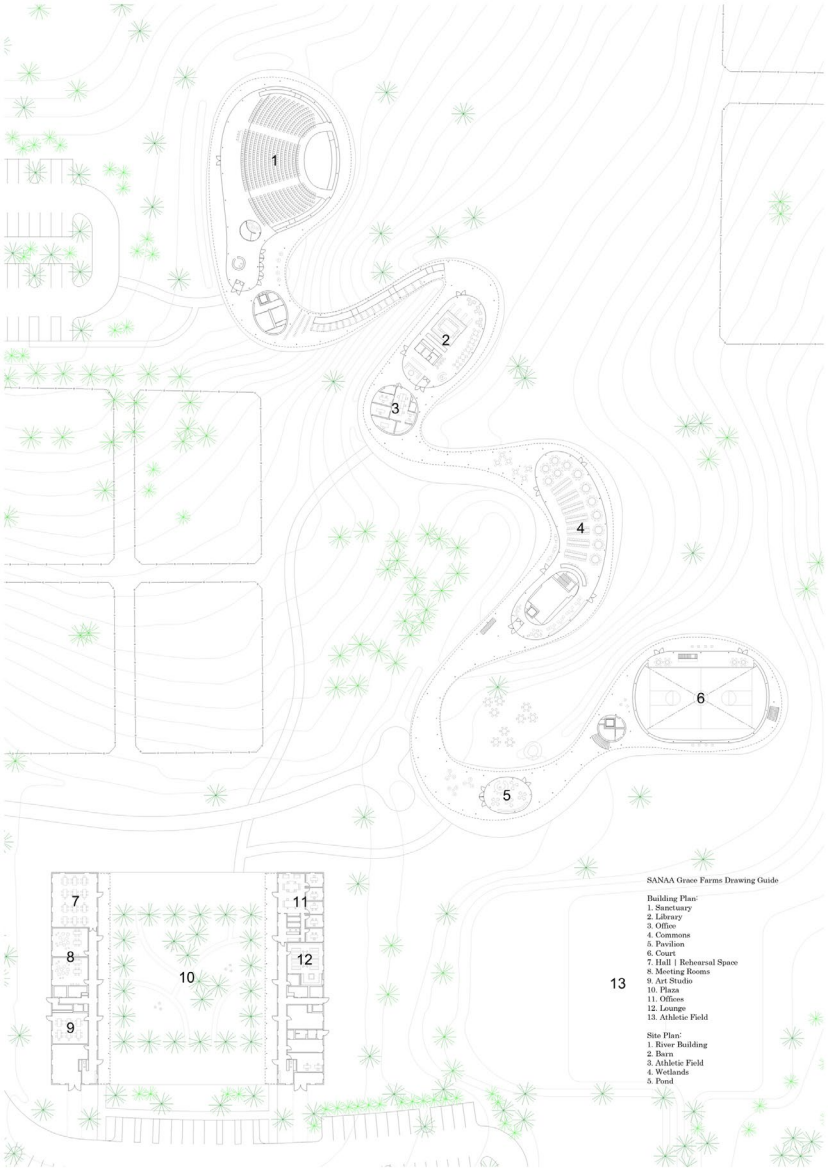
Just up the hill lies New Canaan's spiritual heart, "God's Acre," a row of three white, Colonial churches—the oldest of them dating back to the 1830s—perched above the town's center. Each year on Christmas Eve, carolers with candles muster there to sing beneath the old oaks, spires, and sky. While the town is not home to the pulpit where Jonathan Edwards delivered his evangelical vision (that honor is Canaan, Connecticut's), it is anchored by churches.

The town's newest church is an ecumenical chapel-cum-community-center called Grace Farms. Labeling it a "church" or "community center," however, is a typological misnomer. Designed by SANAA with landscape architect OLIN and located at the edge of the New Canaan town line, it is a sprawling complex whose verdant 80-acre site includes sports facilities, walking paths, wetlands, and a multipurpose "River Building" housing community gathering spaces and a multi-faith sanctuary (which hosts nondenominational Christian services on Sunday mornings). The building, which traces the contour of a hill at a grade somewhere between Christo's Running Fence and a switchback railway, was commissioned by a 501(c)(3) nonprofit (the Grace Farms Foundation) whose board comprises hedge fund managers, executives, and other notables local to this corner of Fairfield County. [2]

[1] The Town of New Canaan Village District Design Guidelines "Town of New Canaan Village District Design Guidelines") explicitly prohibit signs that are "designed primarily to attract public attention" or "contribute to visual clutter," including signs that feature "greater-than-life-size models of food or other products…spokespeople…rows of flags or banners, and internally lit bands of color [i.e., neon]." The use of logos in primary signage is also forbidden.

[2] "About," Grace Farms Website, link.

The River building at Grace Farms at sunset, SANAA, 2015. Photograph by Dean Kaufman.



Grace Farms building plan, SANAA, 2015.

Blending an undulating roof and glass curtainwall with the rolling glacial hills of New England, Grace Farms' River Building is a churchgoer's, and an architectural photographer's, dream come true. The structure frames and reflects woodsy vistas of the surrounding topography of paddocks and barns, meadows and forests. It is organized as five distinct areas under one flowing, aluminum-clad roof—like stations on a pilgrimage to the top of a (very small) mountain, with the fifth station, an airy sanctuary, positioned at the peak. This is a 700-seat indoor amphitheater described, by an employee, only as a "place to find inner peace." On Sundays it hosts services with Grace Church (from which the Grace Farms Foundation and the building originated) but is otherwise open for concerts, lectures, and programming intended to help people "experience nature, foster community, pursue justice, and explore faith." [3] The positioning of the structures along a sort of trail suggests a spiritual progression and provides a multitude of small spaces, seating areas, stairways, and ledges that lend themselves to chance encounters, hangouts, and chats. A small library features a variety of books from Thomas Merton to Ta-Nehisi Coates, while nearby tea sets, designed by SANAA, are to be had for several hundred dollars. Groups of visitors trot up and down staircases, branching out to walk through the grounds, and to recharge at the warmly lit cafe. The architecture steps up to meet these multiple programmatic needs, offering a space that is both sacred and civic.

[3] "About," Grace Farms Website.

View through the River building's dining area, SANAA, 2015. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

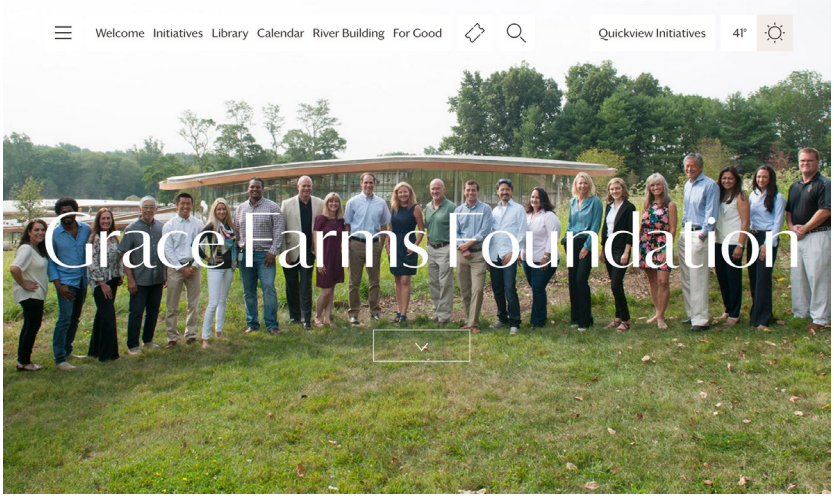
Of course, Grace Farms isn't New Canaan's first architectural treasure. For more than sixty years the Glass House has pulled many a visitor off the Merritt Parkway. Philip Johnson, who built the house for himself in 1949, was joined in residential work in New Canaan by John M. Johansen, Marcel Breuer, Landis Gores, and Eliot Noyes. These "Harvard Five" (named for their association with the Harvard Graduate School of Design) built scores of houses, putting the tiny town on the map of midcentury Modernism.

The density of wealth that makes this cluster of architectural masterpieces possible is, in many ways, problematic, as is the tension between the stripped modernism of SANAA and the Harvard crew, and the gussied-up

Interior of the Glass House, Philip Johnson, 1949. Photograph by Carol M. Highsmith, 1980.

historicism of the town's center. In recent years the area's affluence has threatened its midcentury heritage as a new wave of hedge fund managers and traders have swept in, demolishing these smaller homes and replacing them with hulking, faux-Colonial McMansions. [4] When viewed in this context, SANAA's contribution to New Canaan can be seen as returning it to its postwar architectural roots (with distinctly contemporary programmatic motivations). The gentle volumes that make up Grace Farms and the meditative activities that are meant to occur inside (reading, prayer, tea ceremonies, and meditation) speak to recent cultural preoccupations of the upper middle class with mindfulness, decluttering, and downsizing. Visitors are largely from the earnest, monied set who have spearheaded the mindfulness movement and who are interested in all things charitable. Other users of the site, including school groups and community groups from surrounding communities, are considerably more racially and socioeconomically diverse. Inequitable wealth, the project reminds us, does not have to take the form of large, ostentatious homes, jewelry, and SUVs; it can also create elegant and open spaces on a smaller scale.

[4] Jay Fielden, "Connecticut's Disappearing Modernist Homes," DEPARTURES, May 6, 2011 link.



Landing page of the Grace Farms Foundation website, January 2016.

Indeed, the Grace Farms Foundation has been the recipient of enormous largesse. The purchase of the 80-acre property and the project's construction cost more than $120 million. It is a major question how public this largely privately funded gift will be. New Canaan's population is less than 20,000 people, and while residents of neighboring communities will certainly use the site, it is tucked away down a series of windy country roads and is not accessible by foot or public transit. There is certainly a need for new civic structures in northeastern suburbs as new immigrants and low-income occupants, increasingly priced out of the urban core, have settled in first-generation suburbs like Valley Stream, South Orange, and Port Chester. Connecting communities to civic structures (even well-marked ones along major roads) remains a challenge. The tucked-away locale—that creates an exciting approach to Grace Farms—also limits the possibility of visits by those who aren't already in-the-know. This geography makes the project a far cry from a Carnegie library, which, because of their central urban locations, were far more physically accessible to learners from the (white) working classes. [5] While the latter architectural form of philanthropy was urban and more easily accessible, Grace Farms' affluent suburban location complicates its civic mission.

[5] Carnegie did fund public libraries that served African Americans, but these institutions were segregated and very often underfunded. See "A History of Public Libraries," Digital Public Library of America, link.

Aerial rendering of the 80-acre Grace Farms site, SANAA, 2015.

This same sort of geographic seclusion and security are in large part what made the architecture of the Glass House and its midcentury coevals possible. These homes fluidly mixed interior and exterior, their cantilevered, glassy volumes opening to the surrounding woods, creeks, and laid stone walls. The free movement of sun, breezes, and smells allowed by their transparent, permeable designs was predicated, to some degree, on the constrained movement of human beings. One could pessimistically look at New Canaan in the 1950s—a time of restricted communities, golf clubs, and schools—and see the Harvard Five's creations as continuations of the nineteenth-century home-as-fortress: stone walls bounding the property, covenants encircling the neighborhood, and toll bridges and roads forming a sturdy shield from menacing city dwellers. Only in this exclusive township was it possible for architect and resident to so thoroughly let their guards down.

At Grace Farms, where the River Building's glass curtainwall and sunken spaces allow visitors to look in from above, we don't so much let our

Now, space unlimited in a new house!

By Neil H. Kuehni

Every once in a while, we discover a house that offers a startling amount of useful space—far more than its size or cost suggests. Usually it has a simple plan and clean, uncluttered lines. Such a house recalls a basic, centuries-old building fact: that simplicity and well-organized space nearly always go hand in hand.

The John Black Lee home in New Canaan, Connecticut, is a perfect example. This house is just a rectangle—with four corner bedrooms, two baths, and a large central area designed for family living. That's all . . . no halls, no stairways, no extra ups, downs, or sideways about it.

Why is this house so successful with space? Since simplicity has nothing to hide, it's easy to find the answers:

1 **Glass walls** open house to enjoyment of the outdoors.
2 **Deck and roof overhang** add low-cost, high-use space.
3 **High ceiling** and windows expand all active areas.
4 **Simple, light interiors** make rooms seem much larger.
5 **Low divider walls** let living areas share space.
6 **Skylights** brighten efficient baths, central kitchen.

Outside, the formal balance, the roof raised above a band of glass (a clerestory), and a cool veranda surrounding the house—all make it a delight to behold. The lines are slim verticals and sweeping horizontals . . . a marvelous blending of posts and beams, with walls of wood and glass.

More photographs on page 153

See how simple—yet livable—this plan is. Family living, dining, and working areas share a 32x30 center square, with clerestory above. There's a 13x12 bedroom in each corner, and a skylighted bath for each pair.

"I love my kitchen in the center of things," Mrs. Lee told us. "It's a wonderful control point for watching the children, whether they're indoors or out. And the big plastic skylights keep everything bright and cheerful all day."

Rear-facing living area has air, light, and view all around. As part of a central "all-day" room, its furniture arrangement is very flexible; the space may be divided among various activities. Wide cabinet houses hi-fi, TV, and the wood is birch ply, stained cherry. Convenient kitchen is just beyond.

"Symmetry," says Webster, "is the beauty of balanced proportions." This house takes advantage of classic lines for its stately exterior. Even the chimney is nicely centered. Middle section, with clerestory glass, is 10½ feet high; rooms, baths are standard 8-foot height. Veranda surrounds the house.

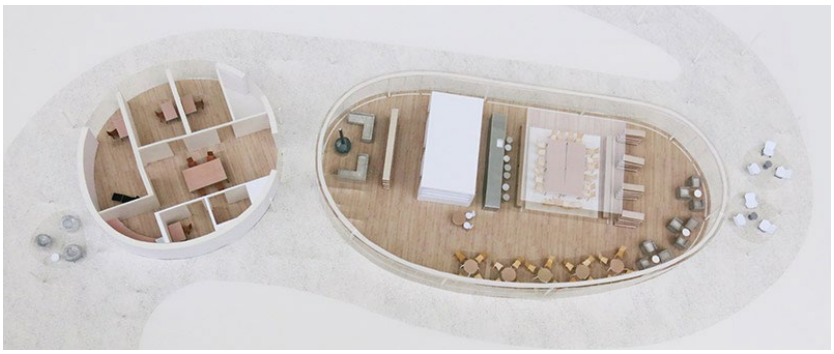
Photographs: Lissell; Stein; Elizabeth Kehl

The John Lee Black house in New Canaan, feature spread from Better Homes and Gardens, 1954.

guards down as consent to a new form of exposure. If Johnson's Glass House sits on the rolling land like a biscuit on an unmade bed, the River Building is an ant farm—channeling through the earth, popping up from below, and dropping down into the folds of hillside. The change in grade allows for unique moments; going for a layup in the sunken basketball court (one of the building's five glass-enclosed volumes), a player might catch sight of a picnicker peering down from ground level. On my last visit I stood outside watching a group of young men in a pick-up game, their squeaking sneakers and cries muted by the giant picture window. Under the same roof, in a neighboring transparent pod, two women studied each other intensely while participating in a tea ceremony. Perched on high stools in an almost empty room, they looked like part of a diorama showcasing early twenty-first-century life—participants performing community on impeccable sets designed by SANAA, with props contributed by artists like Olafur Eliasson. The 360 degrees of glass that surround each space is meant to "create a sense of community" because you "can see [each other] along the river," notes Sharon Prince, president of the Grace Farms Foundation, making reference to the building's serpentine shape. But this transparency also makes the vulnerability of people acute. [6] This is the same condition that prompted the fearful response to Johnson's Glass House upon its 1949 completion—that modern architecture had knocked the screen down on private life. [7] It's not private life that's newly exposed at Grace Farms, however, but civic life, and it is interesting to project what sort of "community" might spring up here when grown in glassed-in petri dishes.

[6] "About," Grace Farms Website.

[7] A 1952 talk that Johnson gave at the New Canaan Kiwanis Club set off a famous spat that played out in rhyming poems sent to the New Canaan Advertiser that pitted the Harvard Five against anonymous critics with pen names like Rocking Chair Anne, Ogden Gnash-Teeth, and Stone-Walled Whitman. A poet going by "Edgar Guess Who?" lamented "It takes a heap of livin in a/ place to make it home/ And I wish those guys like Johnson/ would take their plans and roam./ They're lousing up the countryside with buildings most alarming,/ it isn't like New Canaan, where/ things have been most charming… Maybe I'm old fashioned or maybe/ I'm not keen/ But when I take my monthly bath/ I'd rather not be seen…" Quoted in Earls, William, *The Harvard Five in New Canaan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 170.



Model of the River building's library and office spaces, SANAA, 2015.

Women participating in a tea ceremony in the River building's pavilion space. Photograph by the author.

SANAA's building may be, as Kenneth Frampton said of Glass House more than thirty years ago, a "sophisticated intersection of many strands, a final closure of bourgeois utopianism…a folding in of humanism on itself." [8] Unknotting the means by which it was built and the blandly stated progressive mission of its commissioning institution is tricky. Made possible by the kind of "philanthrocapitalism" recently described by John Cassidy—a hallmark of today's rising inequality—everything at Grace Farms nevertheless feels well-intentioned, even christian in the sense of the adjective: ecumenical, decent, kind, and righteous. [9] A sort of New Age hybrid of church, park, and recreation center, it is surely elitist in its geography and Whole Foods–inspired heraldry, but with a slew of social justice programming it seems to want more, a broader audience positioned on more equal footing.

[8] Frampton, Kenneth, "The Glass House Revisited," *IAUS Catalog 9*, 1978.

[9] Cassidy writes about philanthrocapitalism as a way for billionaires to put "some very large chunks of wealth permanently outside the reaches of the Internal Revenue Service," shrinking the country's tax base and, potentially, putting our democratic ideals at risk.

Critical understanding of Grace Farms' architecture will expand as it is used, especially as the Foundation makes decisions about the programming and accessibility of the site. If the Foundation can find a way to accommodate more people, from more diverse backgrounds and places—perhaps by establishing a shuttle to meet the local Metro-North train—they will start to succeed in creating a space that can build real community and give people free access to clean air, gorgeous fields, and unique architecture. If the site remains isolated from the lower-income communities that surround it, it will be just one more jewel in a highly affluent town's already dazzling architectural crown. As the solicitous Grace Farms staff reminded me several times while I was there, the project is a "work in progress."