

Sitting Lightly on the Land

On a gently sloping site in New Canaan, Sanaa designed spaces for public gatherings in the form of a meandering river.

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In essence, the building of glass, concrete, steel and wood is a single long roof that seems to float above the surface of the ground as it twists and turns across the landscape. The amphitheatre in the foreground seats 700.

A

few kilometres from Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, Sanaa has created a structure that is even more transparent and immaterial. Aptly named the River, it comprises a canopy of Douglas fir, supported on slender steel poles, that descends a gentle slope in a series of switchbacks, widening at five points to embrace rounded glass enclosures that seem as insubstantial as soap bubbles. From one end to the other is 140 m, but it is tucked into a space half that length. From above, the gently bowed roof of anodized aluminium panels picks up the light as though it were a watercourse, and constantly shifting perspectives give it a sense of motion. This linear shelter was commissioned by the non-profit Grace Farms Foundation to house its non-denominational worship space, as a gathering place for the community and as a belvedere from which to observe a 32-hectare nature preserve.

Their first impulse was to save this last undeveloped plot of countryside in Fairfield County. For nearly two centuries, New Canaan was a quiet country town distinguished by white, high-steepled churches, and that image lingers on. Forests were cleared for farming, watermills provided power. This was the cradle in which Colonial America was nurtured before it won independence and set off to conquer the wild and rugged west. In the late 1940s, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson and other protégés of Walter Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design settled here on their way to New York, and the houses they built encouraged fellow spirits, so that New Canaan became an unlikely hub of modernism. Unfortunately, its proximity to the metropolis also lured wealthy commuters and vulgar excess is eroding the frugal legacy of



modernism. Grace Farms' intervention in 2007 preserved rolling farmland of great natural beauty from becoming yet another cluster of ostentatious mansions.

To create a structure that would express its concerns for nature, community, social justice and faith, the Foundation invited Bill Lacy, former executive director of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, to propose 25 architects. Together, they narrowed the list to ten and explored the work of four finalists: Weiss/Manfredi, Machado Silvetti,

and the Japanese firms of Shigeru Ban and Sanaa. Each submitted proposals and when the partnership of Kazuo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa showed their first model of the River, the selection committee knew they had found the right scheme. Two months later, in May 2010, Sanaa was awarded the Pritzker. In its citation, the jury praised the architects for their 'vision of a building as a seamless whole, where the physical presence retreats and forms a sensuous background for people, objects, activities, and landscapes'. Those qualities are

eloquently expressed in Grace Farms, as they were in the glass rotundas of the museums in Kanazawa, Japan, and Toledo, Ohio. Since then the firm has designed the massive Rolex Center in Lausanne and other foreground buildings.

'We collaborated closely with Sanaa from the start,' recalls Grace Farms President Sharon Prince. 'Our 35-page program and the site gave them a lot of freedom, and the original design was tweaked right up until the ground-breaking in 2012.' She praises the porosity of the structure and the absence of a





one level above the other. Following the Sanctuary is the Library, then the Commons, where visitors can eat and hang out. The Foyer serves tea, and the sequence concludes with the Court, a sunken basketball court that doubles as a meeting hall and performance space. The enclosures frame views and each step along the way brings fresh vistas of trees, ponds and wetlands, and of the building sitting lightly on the land. Walking trails encourage visitors to engage more closely with nature.

The River displays the delicacy and precision that characterize Sanaa's best work. As in the floating canopy of the Naoshima ferry station and the Serpentine Pavilion in London that preceded this commission, the architects have pared the concept of shelter down to its bare essentials, while infusing it with poetry. It's designed to operate year-round, through hot summers and frigid winters, and 55 geothermal wells help it achieve a high level of sustainability. But the mechanical services are as well-concealed as the gutters that drain the roof, and the LED lighting is almost as unobtrusive. Furniture and cabinetry was crafted from the varied trees that were felled, sawn and kiln-dried on site adding warmth and colour to the fir ceilings.

Grace Farms draws on the idealism that inspired the first settlers of New England to create a just and equitable society. The Puritans of Massachusetts, who imposed harsh dogmas,

hanged women they believed were witches and fought native Americans betrayed that ideal, but the region is now an island of sanity and progressive ideas in a country hobbled by the polarization of wealth and the lunacy of far-right fundamentalists. Sanaa's architecture speaks to the Foundation's goals of bringing people together to do good, ask questions about the meaning of life and help others. It's an inspiring place to be, not least for the fusion of New England culture and Japanese aesthetics. —
sanaa.co.jp

