

Another Tomorrow



In conversation with the CEO and Founder of Grace Farms Foundation

SHARON PRINCE

Q | We have so much to talk about so let's start by setting the scene at Grace Farms, where this was shot and we first met. It is a magical place imbued with your incredible energy. Would you share some of the journey behind its creation?

Before we get to Grace Farms, you are creating such camaraderie with these shoots among those of us on the front lines of environmental and social sustainability - all in your modern warrior, sumptuous pieces which I love.

I believe that architecture, when activated, can play a significant role in a more just and equitable world. And that is what Grace Farms does, along with just being a great place to be. So akin to your concept of clothing being a pathway to activism, Grace Farms is an entry point and generative platform to advance good in the world, to create a more humane future. A hopeful space.

The idea for Grace Farms started with conserving this land with 10 diverse habitats that was slated to be developed and broken up into 10 large residential parcels, and then the aspirations were formed around the concept that 'space communicates'. We asked the question, 'So, what could space do over many generations for good, and could it inspire new outcomes?'

In March of 2010, we selected Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of SANAA as the architects for Grace Farms, just months before they won the Pritzker Prize. Sejima was only the second woman to win at that time. They designed a plethora of schematics using their white models; but we immediately recognized that the undulating River building solved a challenging set of aspirational and utilitarian architectural directives. We wanted to create a hopeful place with nature in the foreground and where the building recedes. Sejima noted that the building would become a part of the landscape, which they deftly achieved. Natural light flows through more than 200 floor-to-ceiling individually curved glass panels in the River building, generating 360-degree views of the landscape in the changing seasons. The pathways under a curvilinear roof follow the flow and elevation of the land. The porous design of Grace Farms and the River building was meant to inspire and break down barriers between people and stimulate new perspectives.

This design has been elemental to Grace Farms Foundation's interdisciplinary humanitarian mission, which is to pursue peace through five initiatives – nature, arts, justice, community and faith – and through the 80 acres at Grace Farms, where we convene people across sectors. Our stake in the ground is to end modern slavery and gender-based violence, and to create more grace and peace in our local and global communities.



Q | I take deep inspiration from the way you lead movements in ethics and transparency at a truly systemic level in several areas while maintaining a deep sensitivity to the need for people to connect with the issues you are working on as individuals.

This coherent multiplicity of approaches is manifested in Grace Farms as a place and an institution, and it very clearly stems from your leadership. What were some of your formative experiences that contributed to this approach?

I so appreciate you understanding my aim to drive change systemically and at an individual level. While I believe that space can be an anchor to galvanize a movement, space alone can't drive change. It takes people to envision what can be, make a commitment and then vigorously work to accomplish it.

Unlike most built projects that start with an existing institution requiring a new space, our institution was created the day we opened Grace Farms and is still evolving. There is no existing parallel model. I also started with a clean slate in terms of selecting my team, which would be gender balanced and diverse with capacity to do the impossible. I could also create our own culture from day one with extraordinary people from very different sectors and backgrounds and most often never the exact experience required for a position, because everything we created was from scratch. For example, Kenyon Adams, founding Arts Initiative Director, starts off our staff meetings with a poetry reading and response from *and souls are candles*, our commemorative book published for our opening in 2015 of poetry and prose. I believe that poetry distills the complex and creates an entry point for everyone, from all backgrounds.

So yes, Grace Farms is the ultimate entrepreneurial venture - which is my background starting more formally in graduate school as an assistant to the leading scholar on women entrepreneurs, to various businesses I formed over time.

An architect friend of mine shared the concept that space communicates around 2006 while I was still president of the Icelandic technical outerwear brand in North America, 66North, which we sold in 100 stores designed as fashion and outerwear, an anomaly at that time. My experience over 14 trips across the ethereal landscape in Iceland created a sense of awe and wonder in expansive nature. In determining what the universal common denominators and values are to advance good, there could only be a multivalent way of thinking. Everyone, to the person, responds to nature, which I also believe is God's creation and we can't build anything better - and we need to preserve and protect it. As we both have experienced, our journeys in business have had unexpected pathways to the next endeavor.



Q | You and I have spoken now for hours, finding common cause and many parallels in our approaches to reconstructing the systems that support humanity from ensuring the most vulnerable in global supply chains are treated with dignity to a stewardship-based approach to nature.

Grace Farms' initiative - Design for Freedom, works to address forced labor in the built environment, an issue of rampant, global modern-day slavery in the world's largest industrial supply chain. Baseline awareness of this issue is low. Can you share your knowledge, your theory of change and how our community can begin to take action in their daily lives?

Awareness of forced labor and environmental conservation in various industries has risen over the past several decades. It started with food, then clothing, and *next* will be shelter.

Let's consider the built environment and its challenges. The construction sector is the largest industrial sector in the world; but it is also the most disaggregated and the least modernized. It accounts for 13% of the global GDP, and it is also at the highest risk of forced labor. So change may be slow; but we believe it is ripe for disruption and labor inputs should be factored in new production and material technology.

Like textiles, global laws forbid the use of slave labor in the built environment; yet our buildings and the materials that go in them are heavily reliant on forced labor. The design and construction industry has been given a labor transparency pass and has not considered how forced labor is embedded into the very buildings in which we live, work and go to school. Yet, it is in the unchecked building materials that comprise our foundations, curtain walls, MEP systems, roofs and interiors. *It is time to check*, as there are two laws that apply and have teeth. The Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015 disallows any materials made with forced and child labor from entry into the United States. The Lacey Act of 1900 prohibits trafficking of illegally harvested wood, amended as of 2008, and the US is the second largest importer of timber, behind China. Unpaid forced labor in the material supply chain subsidizes a project's ROI and is also linked to environmental degradation.

We launched the Design for Freedom movement to create a radical paradigm shift last year by galvanizing now more than 80 global leaders to take the next step in sustainable design, to include fair labor practices in the building materials. We are helping institutions initiate pilot projects, sharing and inviting research in university classes, and even translating the need for transparency to art installations and exhibition spaces—including Grace Farms as a central site for this examination and public awareness. A top down and bottoms up approach.

As a part of our launch, we released a ground-breaking report that includes original analysis and data on the dozen at-risk materials that we pulled together, including timber, bricks, copper, steel, rubber, solar panels, glass and textiles. There was no list, so we created it with our team of experts. We also launched a dedicated website with tools, resources, and original content.

So, what can we all do? Ask if the materials in the next chair, piece of plywood, window, curtain and flooring are made with fair labor and check for third-party audited certifications for no forced or child labor, which can be found in our report.

This year, we developed a first-of-its-kind ethically manufactured, sustainable Design for Freedom face mask which Herman Miller is supporting and distributing, with President Debbie Propst's commitment (she is also a member of our Design for Freedom working group). Commissioned by our founding Creative Director Chelsea Thatcher, who also co-edited the Design for Freedom Report, two project architects of the River building designed the wearable mask as a tangible statement of our movement's aspiration — to bring awareness of forced labor in the building materials supply chain and eradicate it forever.



Q | Shifting to food, you've also just come out with [Grace Farms Foods](#), which includes the world's first internationally certified Fairtrade cookie - and which I have had the pleasure of eating... This is no small feat given the complexity of the supply chains behind these seemingly simple ingredients and really makes tangible that the work you are advocating for is possible (and delicious).

What was the vision behind this move into food? Where do you want to take it?

Food has been central to the visitor experience at Grace Farms since we opened. We use food as a way to bring people together, so when Adam Thatcher, our founding Operations and Sustainability Director, proposed the idea to create a new philanthropic venture that demonstrates our ethical and sustainable sourcing *and* gives back 100% of the profits I was very interested. He spun off just before the pandemic and co-founded Grace Farms Foods with me, launching earlier this year.

Grace Farms Foods is a pending Certified B Corp that is 100% owned by Grace Farms Foundation, which means 100% of the profits benefits our work through Design for Freedom to end forced labor worldwide. Together we have created a new model of social entrepreneurship in which a business was created to demonstrate and help fund the charitable purposes of Grace Farms Foundation.

Like our tagline says, Grace Farms Foods is an invitation to “share in something greater.” Each of our incredibly delicious (as you noted!) and purpose-filled cookies, coffee and teas is a model of ethical and sustainable supply chains, which is what we have been advocating for. For example, our organic coffees are exclusively sourced from women-led co-ops around the world, and we just launched the first and only Fairtrade certified cookie in America in partnership with Chopped champion, Silvia Baldini. It has been a very collaborative project so far, and we are just getting going. These products provide an opportunity to share Grace Farms with the larger community and join our work to end forced labor forever.

Q | In the year ahead, you are also going to be intensely focused on forests, and plainly, the need for trees. Do you have advice you can share with our community on how to contribute to reforestation at the individual scale?

It is easy to become obsessed with trees, so it is worthwhile to learn about them. *The Architecture of Trees* is a beautifully drawn book by landscape architects Cesare Leonardi and Franca Stagi that is open and admired in Grace Farms' Library, among many more.

At Grace Farms, we have more than 2,000 trees that represent more than 50 different species sequestering 100,000 pounds of carbon per year and have converted 70% of our mowed lawns into meadows, which aid the trees through accelerating biodiversity. And while our Justice and Nature Initiative teams work internationally to address environmental crime and sustainable management of forests, each of us has the purchasing power to promote reforestation and sustainable management of forests. FSC certified wood recently requires ILO-based forced and child labor audits and is now more widely available - as a conscious consumer, just ask your local lumber yards, furniture manufacturers and builders for it to create market demand.

Interestingly, Another Tomorrow uses FSC certified textile materials which I was not dialed into - FSC certified viscose from Sweden, which also mandates reforestation programs.

During our Wonder of Trees Earth Day at Grace Farms in 2022, visitors will be invited to take an oak seedling home with them to plant. Incredibly, 250 species of life thrive in these trees, so the effects on our local ecosystems and beyond, even by planting one tree, can be considerable.



Q | One of few risks I see here is that you make it all look easy, and yet we both know that is not the case. So I always like to ask one uncomfortable question that dispels the concept of linear success and progress. Has there been, what Seth Godin coins, “The Dip” for you? That miserable moment when what you’ve been trying to achieve or are building feels like an impossible grind... And if so, could you share a little bit about a dip you’ve experienced and how you navigated?

I am an optimistic person, so I like to find the opportunities among the challenges, even when they seem enormous. What keeps me going, as the challenges never do subside, is that I make it a practice to identify the challenge of the day and the good news of the day. I am also a marathoner (well, my marathons were a bit ago) so I am wired and have trained to go the distance, even when the road dips.

Some challenges I have encountered included those who continually told me Grace Farms couldn’t possibly work, that our mission to end modern slavery and gender-based violence was too audacious; that a building with a glass envelope would never work in Connecticut; and that focusing on five initiatives - nature, arts, justice, community and faith - were too many. I even had to make the decision to restart the entire project with a new architect search after two years because we were not reaching our vision, even though the schematics earned an AIA Unbuilt Merit Award. But I kept my head down and did the work and on the other side of it, I am glad to say, that it did work with SANAA and our brilliant, dedicated team - so many have experienced and become a part of our work Grace Farms over the past six years. We have welcomed more than 100 mission-aligned not for profit organizations to our Space Grant program and hundreds of incredible artists have added to our place and purpose - including the peerless Carrie Mae Weems as an artist-in-residence who performed *Past Tense*, and then contributed a text to open our Design for Freedom Report, followed by a collaboration on PPE relief to Native Communities 6 months ago. Others include Teresita Fernández, Beatriz Milhazes, Bill T. Jones, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Alyson Shotz, Andrea Miller, Julianne Swartz and many more.

Now that we know, we cannot un-know all we absorbed about the pressing issues we all face. So there is no retreating! We do have a hopeful future - and I am emboldened everyday as I see us take steps forward together.

Q | And looping back to the role of creative expression, we love sharing current sources of creative energy, solace and just plain joy. Are there people, books, art, film, music or other aspects of culture that currently inspire you?

The list is long! I am ever in awe of Carrie Mae Weems who is a tour de force in how she tackles pressing issues of the day, including racism, gender equity and even the lack of shared joy, multi-disciplinarily. *The Shape of Things* opened at the Park Armory last week and will include a critical convening and concert this weekend! Recently at Grace Farms, Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith gave a powerful reflection on Time which Alyson Shotz also responded to with a new site-specific, breathtaking sculpture *Temporal Shift*, on view until September.

And how could you not be filled with joy and fire power when you listen to Jon Batiste, Black Pumas, Florence and the Machine or Rodrigo y Gabriela? To listen on a hike outdoors recently: Yasmin Williams, a remarkable young solo guitarist.



Q | In closing, what resonates for you with Another Tomorrow? And I think I know the answer, but do you have a favorite piece of the collection?

As you have heard me say a few times, I am all about the jumpsuit! It's my go-to when traveling and when I have both professional and social outings in one day - in any season too. While I have just become fond of the ethical merino wool in the turtleneck sweater dress and new jacket, I have many well-worn favorites.

When I think of what resonates with me about Another Tomorrow, both our organizations are guided by our values, incessant curiosity, and a pioneering spirit - your collections push the boundaries of what responsibly grown and ethically manufactured materials can achieve - with excellence. You created the first luxury clothing brand B-corp with remarkable transparency. Your unique QR codes tracing the provenance of the materials in each piece crystallizes your work and a model for the raw and composite building materials. Textiles are a major material in building interiors. Carving the pathway and a demand for good, for the planet and human dignity, is why I am so keen on Another Tomorrow. And you are doing this in short order!

If you bring exceptional people together - who also share the same values - you can create paradigm shifts. And now I am so looking forward for people to learn more about your journey and Another Tomorrow at Grace Farms in March 2022!

Sharon wears our Single Button Jacket, Wide Leg Suit Pant, Oversized V-Neck, Collarless Jumpsuit, Funnelneck Dress and Draped Overcoat.

You can find more from Grace Farms at @gracefarmsct on Instagram and Twitter.