

With Every Fiber: New Long-Term Exhibition Addresses Inclusivity and Accessibility

Known for its boundary-defying culture, Grace Farms has undertaken a neurodiversity design assessment

By Chelsea Thatcher

On May 4, 2024, Grace Farms in New Canaan, Connecticut, opened the new long-term exhibition *With Every Fiber*. Aimed at inspiring people to understand and care about the materials that make up the built world around us, the exhibition asks, “Where do our building materials come from? Are they made with fair labor?”

These are some of the core questions of Design for Freedom, the movement led by Grace Farms to eliminate forced and child labor from the building-materials supply chain. Globally, nearly 28 million people work as forced labor on any given day, according to the International Labour Organization. Many of them are cutting down the trees that make our lumber, digging the gravel that goes into our concrete, or weaving the textiles used in our furniture.

As the exhibition’s curator, I wanted to create a dynamic environment within the context of Grace Farms, encouraging people from around the world to pause and consider the hands that make our building materials. *With Every Fiber* is the Grace Farms Foundation’s first major initiative in bringing the Design for Freedom movement to the public.

While working with 20 pre-eminent designers, material suppliers, artists, cultural institutions, and construction industry leaders featured in the exhibition—designed

by Nina Cooke John, Principal of Studio Cooke John Architecture + Design, with graphics by Pentagram—we were all committed to creating a dynamic experience for *everyone*.

Studio Cooke John is a multidisciplinary design studio that values placemaking as a way of transforming relationships between people and the built environment. Cooke John was one of the first architects in the U.S. to commit to a Design for Freedom Pilot Project. As part of the *Shadow of a Face* public monument—a Newark, New Jersey, initiative celebrating the life and legacy of Harriet Tubman—Cooke John tracked down fair-labor materials. The concrete cast of Tubman’s eye, used in creating the monument, is on view in *With Every Fiber*.

For the exhibition, Cooke John collaborated with MillerKnoll—the first global manufacturing and retail company to support the Design for Freedom movement—to wrap the exhibition in a new façade. The façade uses a Maharam textile, creating what Cooke John calls a “shadow wall” that invites visitors to notice the architecture in a new way.

Of the exhibit, Cooke John said, “*With Every Fiber* responds to Design for Freedom’s efforts to remove the veil covering



Grace Farms’ *With Every Fiber* exhibition offers insights into forced labor in the building-materials supply chain.



The exhibition features building materials that traditionally involve forced labor, and highlights innovative bio-based building materials made with fair labor.

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the reality of unethical labor practices in the construction industry. The exhibition draws Grace Farms visitors—neighbors from across the street, and design professionals from around the world—into the space, and invites them to contemplate what goes into making our homes, places of work, cultural spaces, and sites for commemoration.”

Together, we created an immersive experience aimed at encouraging people to consider the unseen labor embedded in the materials that make up our homes, schools, cultural centers, stadiums, landscapes, and more. We hope people leave the exhibition with a new perspective that involves considering these individuals and the materials that surround us daily.

In working towards an inclusive and accessible multi-sensory experience, Buro Happold provided an inclusive design consultation in-kind, particularly in relation to neurodiversity. Their neurodiversity and inclusive design practice at Buro Happold, headquartered in the United Kingdom, has helped draft some key legislation for the U.K.

(PAS 6463:2022, November 2022) around designing for neurodiversity.

Buro Happold has a long history of delivering award-winning inclusive and accessible projects, including authoring the accessibility guidelines for the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Those particular Games were subsequently cited as the most accessible Paralympics ever.

The Buro Happold team provided Grace Farms with excellent guidance on how to make design adjustments for neurodiverse visitors. We found that these adjustments also made the design better overall. Some results included adding window shades, using a single audio source, and making adjustments to typefaces to enhance the readability of exhibition texts.

Numerous arts institutions and artists—including the London Philharmonic Orchestra, U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo, artist Carrie Mae Weems, and international humanitarian photographer Lisa Kristine—have all contributed at various stages of the Design for Freedom movement, drawing attention to the ethical layers of this cause. Their art is presented anew in the exhibition to engage viewers and listeners in a multisensory experience.

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Concrete cast of Harriet Tubman's eye, used in Nina Cooke John's monument to the abolitionist, *Shadow of a Face*, a Design for Freedom Pilot Project.

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Grace Farms' River building and Barns were designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning firm SANAA.

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Grace Farms' open architecture is designed to break down the barriers between people and nature.

With Every Fiber reflects the phrase, “with every fiber of my being.” Everything we do gives us an opportunity to make choices that value human flourishing. Part of valuing and advocating for human flourishing is being inclusive. And this exhibition moves us closer to that goal.

To enhance the accessibility of this free exhibition, it will also be available online, designed by Hayes Davidson as a virtual exhibition, accessible to all via a hyperlink. Visitors also have an opportunity to learn more through the Bloomberg Connects app, and other supporting technology. The supplemental content includes an audio guide, audio descriptions from Lisa Kristine on her documentation of modern slavery, and more, allowing viewers and listeners to absorb information in multiple ways, and through multiple experiences.

Addressing neurodiversity comes at a time when institutions—including cultural ones—are working to better understand the need to be more inclusive, and what that entails. Inclusive design cannot be separated from good design. A recent *New York Times* article questioned whether the sensory experiences that have replaced “staid dioramas

and wall labels” in exhibitions, for instance, are failing to consider individuals who have trouble processing stimuli, from sound effects to high-contrast lighting. This is an important question.

With an estimated 15 to 20% of the global population experiencing the world and interacting with it in neurodivergent ways, there’s a tremendous opportunity for museums and other cultural organizations to accommodate them. As Harvard Health cited in an article about neurodiversity, there is no one “right” way of thinking and learning, but perhaps there is a “right” way to be more inclusive and accessible.

We began this journey to address forced labor within our built environment—with the Design for Freedom global movement, and now with the *With Every Fiber* exhibition—simply because it was the right thing to do. Undertaking a neurodiversity design assessment presents an additional opportunity to continue to do the right thing and advocate for our values of inclusion and equity.

We are grateful to the associates, partners, and friends who worked with us to make this exhibition happen, donating in-kind time, materials, and financial support. They include Studio Cooke John Architecture + Design, Sciamè, the Yale Center for Ecosystems + Architecture, the Anahata Foundation, Assa Abloy, Buro Happold, Hayes Davidson, MillerKnoll and Maharam, North American Stainless, Nucor, Delta Light, and others. To the suppliers, your generosity and openness to track your materials with us—as far into the supply chain as possible—is a model for many other companies interested in taking the “right” action. 🙏

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The River building features four site-responsive artworks, including Double Glass River by Teresita Fernandez.

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The Commons in the River building is a community gathering space.

MELANI LUST



Grace Farms sits on 80 acres and is home to 10 biodiverse habitats.