



AMAZING GRACE

Behind every state-of-the-art architectural scheme and urban regeneration project lie thousands of invisible human stories. We meet the DYNAMIC AMERICAN BUSINESS WOMEN SHARON PRINCE and CHELSEA THATCHER of DESIGN FOR FREEDOM on a mission to eliminate forced labour and modern slavery in the construction sector, one ethically sourced brick and timber at a time.

By SARAH BAILEY

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IT WAS A STILL JUNE LONDON EVENING and the notes of Dvorak's American Quartet - inspired by the African-American spiritual music the Czech composer encountered when he emigrated to the US - fill the — cylindrical walls of The Black Chapel, this year's bravura architectural pavilion project mounted by The Serpentine Gallery in the expansive green of the city's Kensington Gardens.

The heart-wrenching score, played by a quartet of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's string musicians, had been chosen with care. The evening marked the United Nations World Day Against Child Labour. And as the guests who gathered within the extraordinary structure, designed by the Chicago artist Theaster Gates and realised with the help of Gates' friend the British architect David Adjaye, were about to hear, the show stopping pavilion was notable for having been built with materials that are less at risk of forced labour embedded in the supply chain.

"The construction supply chain is plagued with slave labour," said the evening's host Sharon Prince, the energetic CEO of Grace Farms Foundation (an American interdisciplinary humanitarian and cultural organisation) also founder

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of Design for Freedom, which has acted as the Responsible Materials Partner for the Black Chapel. Design For Freedom was founded in 2020 with the aim of eliminating forced labour and modern slavery in the construction supply chain. "Collectively, we have given our focus to the ethics and sustainability of food, and then clothing..." Prince told her rapt audience from the lectern. "The next sector that demands our attention is shelter".

A few weeks later, I encounter Prince again for this interview (by Zoom). She is just as compelling and charismatic via a slightly glitching video call, dressed in Chloe, one of her

favourite labels, whose ethics and point of view on sustainability sit well with her own (she enthusiastically lifts her raffia platforms above the desk to give me a better view). She is joined by her daughter Chelsea Thatcher, the Creative Director and Chief Advancement Officer of Grace Farms Foundation, who if a little more reserved in her manner, is just as passionate and progressive an entrepreneur as her mother. Thatcher founded her first company "The Intern

Left: The Black Chapel in the Serpentine Gallery in London, designed by Theaster Gates. Right: Sharon Prince



From the left: Sharon Prince and Chelsea Thatcher in the gardens of the Grace Farms Foundation, the design of which brings the outside to the inside. Temporal Shift by Alyson Shotz for the Design for Freedom Pilot Project.

Circle’ at just 19-years-old (providing a network for young people taking their first baby steps of their careers) and was running her own thriving publishing agency, when Prince invited her to join her in the Grace Farms mission. “I really always trust her visionary leadership,” says Thatcher, with a smile. “We are constantly launching things together and there are opportunities to really move the needle every single time. It’s very clear what the impact will be.”

This clarity of purpose was recently recognised by Fast Company (the US business title on every savvy entrepreneur’s reading list) which included Prince in their Most Creative People In Business 2022 Awards for her endeavours in “cleaning up construction”. “What’s really great, is that quite literally just prior to that happening, I was saying we had to get on to the business community, because ultimately, this is a business issue,” says Prince. “It was just really tremendous, because it allowed us to alert our broader sector.”

It has certainly been a productive period for Design For Freedom, with five high profile architectural “Pilot Projects”, where they get to see their responsible building tenets and guidelines for slave-free materials sourcing put into action. The Black Chapel in London is the first such project to be completed - its timbers, steel joists, plywood benches and exterior cladding all tracked to meeting rigorous standards of ethical production. Others projects still under construction include the Harriet Tubman Monument, celebrating the American abolitionist and social activist who was born into slavery, by artist Nina Cooke John, which opens later this year in Newark New Jersey. In India, a new Arts and Culture Centre in New Delhi India, with Serendipity Arts, promises to be the largest museum in the world when it is built. Also underway is a state-of-the-art knowledge and learning centre at New Canaan Library in Connecticut for research and pursuit of low-risk materials (ie. those less likely to be sourced or produced through forced labour). And collaborating on these projects are some of the mightiest names in architecture, building construction and engineering including Turner Construction,

Arup and CRAB Studio to name just three. Thatcher estimates that within the year, “more than a million people will walk through these spaces and see a tangible example of materials that prioritise ethical transparency,” says Thatcher.

“There are 160 million children subjected to child labour and this is the most egregious violation of social equity that exists, that everyone should be made aware of and everyone can do something about,” says Prince with passion. “We can all ask the question: ‘Are buildings ethically sourced without forced labour, as well as sustainably designed?’. We all have agency to make more ethical choices when selecting materials that go into our homes, or offices, or communities or landscapes, to inspect say no to the dozens of materials and composites we identify as high risk.”

Prince, who is married to prominent American hedge fund manager Robert Prince (Co Chief Investment Officer at Bridgewater Associates), began her own business journey nearly 20 years ago, when after a trip to Iceland in 2003, she discovered and acquired distribution rights to the active wear brand 66 Degrees North. With no retail experience to speak of, the venture was fuelled by gut and personal passion. Prince had fallen in love with the magical landscape of the country, she explains: “I was drawn to by being able to literally snowmobile on a glacier the same day that you could dip into a geothermal spring.” Plus, she had a hunch that there was an opportunity in the market, “to revamp their advertising to capture the coolness of Iceland. And perhaps as an outsider, I could see that more readily and then take on the full US and Canadian marketplace.” The brand ended up selling in 100 stores and it’s a hallmark of Prince’s gutsy approach that without any PR to guide and manage the messaging, she invited The Wall Street Journal to travel with her for four days to the snow-covered terrain of Iceland to breathe in the magic of it all and report back to their readers which they duly did. “It was a tremendous boost”, she recalls with a grin.

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She divested her interests in 66 Degrees North in 2007, but regards that experience as formative for her as a creative “social entrepreneur”, realising “the opportunity for community, culture and commerce to merge across the Atlantic...I really do see business as an art...how you combine elements to create value.” Of course, building a humanitarian organisation - built on pillars of nature, art, justice, community and faith - is a very different proposition to an extreme weather luxury apparel brand. The foundation first came into being in 2009, when swathes of land in New Canaan Connecticut, where Prince lives, came up for sale. “The idea was to convert what has been private land for always in private and convert that to this new kind of public space to make it available to all,” says Prince. Infact, The Grace Church (founded by a handful of Connecticut families, including Prince’s) worships here, however, this is played down by the foundation, which presents itself as a multi-faith space, for seekers of all faith backgrounds and persuasions to explore “life’s big questions”.

There is a history of spectacular architecture in New Canaan, Connecticut: Philip Johnson’s 1949 Glass House’, one of the most lauded examples of Modernism, is here. And today, perhaps a ten minute drive away, Grace Farms is another notable landmark on the architectural map, thanks to the multi award-winning River building (opened in 2015), by SANAA, the Japanese Pritzker Prize-winning architecture firm, in the US. In the Zoom call background I can see its serpentine structure, almost blending with the landscape, each curve and swoop seemingly bringing the outside to the inside outside.

Unusually for a project of this scale and ambition, “we did not hold a typical design competition” says Prince. Instead the brief was to create “a porous space where people can move in and

out ... to remove barriers between people and sectors”, a place to “pique curiosity”, and “to create a place of respite, but at the same time inspire an active community.”

For Prince commissioning the building was awakening in more ways than one. After the River building was built, she was invited on the judging panel of the AIA (American Institute of Architecture Awards). She was, incidentally, the only non-architect on the panel. “Having done the justice work in our place it had started to raise my consciousness about forced labour in materials... and so when I was evaluating another project that was in an area I knew had a high degree of risk in terms of the bricks being made by children and enforced labour conditions... I asked the other jurists to bear with me and I asked the question, ‘Do we know whether the bricks that were made for this phenomenal girls school were made by girls?’. And everybody fell silent...I realised this group of leaders had not thought about materials [from a humanitarian perspective]. And I had

PHOTOS: IWAN BAAH, SAHAR COSTONHARDY, DEAN KAUFMAN.



From above: A concert in The Black Chapel in London and Sharon Prince speaking to guests about ethics in the construction industry.



done the same, you know, I didn't think about the human impact of the materials on Grace Farms, in the way I did think about the job site."

It was a moment of epiphany. "From that point, I immediately went to the AIA headquarters and went to the president. I went to everyone who worked on Grace Farms who were leaders in the industry and we realised that the construction industry has been given a labour transparency pass." Then, with some of her fellow AIA jurors, she went to Bill Menking, the late Editor of The Architects Newspaper, who agreed that there really had been no examination of the construction marketplace. "On the spot - which is really how I approach everything - I said let's just start a working group right now... And that was the beginning!" recalls Prince, who has since recruited Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the former UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to the cause. "This is how a good revolution begins!" noted Al Hussein at the Design for Freedom Summit earlier this year.

The movement certainly has momentum. There are now 80 industry leaders tracking building materials and allocating resources into identifying and eliminating those products in their supply chain which are reliant on forced labour and slavery. Design for Freedom published a 100 page report on human sustainability in the supply chain which is far-reaching and rigorous. Log on to the Design for Freedom website, and you will also find an easily accessible toolkit for anyone embarking on a construction job available to use. This open-source approach is key, says Prince, who invites business rivals to sit around the Design For Freedom conference table to strategise. She and Thatcher seek allies everywhere - in business, education, media, science... and are excited to see how their story and their mission resonates in Greece, the birthplace of the modern city (Thatcher cites their enthusiasm for Athens' Ellinikon Metropolitan

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Sharon Prince in the River building of Grace Farms Foundation

Park, poised to become Europe's largest coastal park: "Tamar Warburg from Sasaki talked about the ecological commitments during the Landscape Forum at Grace Farms," she mentions).

Right now, it's Fall in New Canaan Connecticut: The season's cultural programme is in full flow at Grace Farms, with talks, concerts, walks and tea ceremonies for the public to

enjoy amid the splendour of the season's changing leaves. Prince and Thatcher will soon be flying back to London for an 'Ethical Actions Community Meeting' to continue the conversations that began at the Black Chapel with material science companies, sustainability experts and

construction leaders to ask practical questions (can models mapping carbon sequestration be easily adapted to add in human impacts?) and continue to expand the definition of sustainability to include human sustainability. "That is another great reason why we have these Pilot Projects," says Thatcher. "They are creating awareness, creating a response, a platform for continued conversations, catalysts for future projects."

"I've always been fascinated by places," reflects Prince. "I've always understood that you are shaped by spaces. But

once I understood the power of architecture to create advancement in the world, and to create humanitarian outcomes, it became more of a powerful obsession. That's the power of architecture, because it is communicating. And once it's built, it's built. And those stories matter. Who built the pyramids? Who built The White House? Those narratives remain..."

They do indeed. And thanks to Design For Freedom, those narratives might soon start to change for the better, one ethically sourced, slave-free brick at a time. "I'm optimistic," says Prince. "I think you have to be, right? In order to do the work we do at Grace Farms. I'm wired to be optimistic as well." ■

PHOTO: DEAN KAUFMAN