rowing up in Belvidere, Illinois, a city 70 miles northwest of Chicago, Jeanne Gang didn’t have to go far to glimpse her future. Her father, James, was a civil engineer and highway superintendent in Boone County, and on Saturday mornings, the girl who would one day become a world-renowned architect would visit his office and sit at the drafters’ drawing boards or clamber onto the heavy equipment used in road construction that sat idle in the county garage. On family vacations, James would pack his wife, Marjorie, and their four daughters into the family station wagon to drive around and look at bridges. “I really loved that,” recalls Gang. “We traveled to almost all the states, and I developed a love for the great landscapes that we have in this country.”

Gang’s education continued at the University of Illinois, where she graduated with a degree in architecture in 1986. The recipient of a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship, she traveled to Switzerland to study at ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal University of Technical Studies). “I gained exposure to an international faculty and students that brought depth to my understanding of urban design,” she says. “Being able to do that really expanded my horizons.” She went on to earn her master’s degree at the Harvard Graduate School of Design — where she now serves as a Professor in Practice — and spent two years working with Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas.

In 1995, Gang took a job in Chicago, a city with arguably the greatest collection of buildings in the United States — or at least, as Gang has asserted, the city with “the highest architecture IQ in the country.” Two years later, she started her own firm there; known today as Studio Gang, it also has offices in New York, San Francisco, and Paris.

In 2010, Gang established herself as Chicago’s most prominent and creative architect with her 82-story Aqua Tower, a sensuously undulating building whose curved concrete overhangs evoke rippling water while also diffusing the Windy City winds. A structure both profoundly beautiful and eminently practical, Aqua earned Gang a slew of accolades and awards: Emporis, a global building-data research company, anointed it the best new skyscraper of the year, and PETA chimed in

A renowned Rotary alum affirms her commitment to environmentally sustainable architecture

THE CONVERSATION

Saverio Truglia/courtesy of Studio Gang
WE'RE WORKING COLLABORATIVELY AND COLLECTIVELY ON PROJECTS THAT CONNECT PEOPLE TO EACH OTHER AND TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT.
“SUSTAINABILITY IS ALSO ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUAL RIGHTS, AND REDUCING POVERTY.”

have to install single-pane windows because they existed in the original. That is literally what you’re asked to do to maintain the historic preservation label. I think that’s a problem we have to address soon. I think reuse should be more aligned with efficiency than with pure historical preservation.

Is a net-zero carbon footprint a feasible goal in building construction? It’s not a question of whether it’s feasible. We have to do it. It’s an urgent thing, but it’s not easy to get there. We have two projects that are striving for that. At the California College of the Arts, we’re using a microgrid as part of the solution. They have activities like glass blowing, which produces excess heat. So one could use that heat to create energy to produce hot water in the residence halls. I like working at different scales and on different types of buildings and not specializing. We can innovate a lot that way, because we find strategies that work in one building type and can apply them in other building types.

Tell me about Polis Station, Studio Gang’s contribution to the Chicago Architecture Biennial in 2015. That was an attempt to present a concept as an open-source idea for other people to adopt. A lot of people are thinking about the problem between police and community members — the fear that police put into members of the community that they should be trying to protect. We wanted to explore what public safety might look like in these publicly owned buildings. We wanted to see if the design could start to positively impact those relationships. We recently completed a fire-rescue training facility in Brooklyn. It’s interesting that everyone loves rescue workers and firefighters, and that firehouses are often open to the public. What other types of buildings can we innovate a lot that way, because we find strategies that work in one building type and can apply them in other building types. What’s the future of this type of architecture? How is that changing with the way that people are thinking about the neighborhoods around buildings?

When Rotarians travel internationally, how should they think about architecture? It’s good to see architecture in different places, but it’s always informed by the culture that’s there. Some interesting projects that are happening now involve designers thinking about mitigating natural disaster. Rotarians could think about how design could improve places that they are familiar with. Some of the homes there are being sold below the market value. Some people are displaced. When Rotarians think about the future of architecture, they should consider the types of buildings that are affordable luxuries for some people?

Are energy-efficient innovations for buildings affordable luxuries for some people? That’s a difficult question, because there are so many different ways to do affordable housing. A lot of affordable housing already uses wood construction. Surely there is less of a carbon footprint in a modest-size apartment built with wood than in a large, elaborate, high-end home. When you look at carbon footprint per household, it wouldn’t be an equal calculation. Sometimes it’s required that affordable housing be woven into a project. We are finishing up a high-rise in San Francisco, called Mira, that’s very high performing, and yet 40 percent of the homes there are being sold below market rate.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1997 Jeanne Gang opens her own architecture firm, known today as Studio Gang.
2003 Gang unveils her first public building, the renovated Starlight Theater in Rockford, Illinois.
2008 Emporis names Aqua, Gang’s 62-story Chicago high-rise, its best new skyscraper of the year.
2011 Gang wins a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.”
2012 The Art Institute of Chicago stages Building inside Studio Gang, the firm’s first solo exhibition.
2017 Jeanne Gang is elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
2019 An architectural team led by Studio Gang wins an international competition to design a new global terminal at Chicago’s O’Hare airport.
2023 Chicago’s Vista Tower and the publication of Studio Gang: Architecture cap the firm’s first 20-plus years.

RICHARD GILDER CENTER FOR SCIENCE, EDUCATION, AND INNOVATION

When completed in 2022, this 190,000-square-foot addition to New York’s American Museum of Natural History in New York, where the Studio Gang–designed Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation is slated for a 2022 opening, they’re bringing together their technical programs and the arts and different kinds of media are being adopted in the arts. It’s exciting for us as designers. We’re mixing classrooms and exhibit spaces, and we’re thinking of it as an institution that has a strong educational focus at all levels, from kids to teachers to K-12 students. It’s a research institution that’s also focused on education for visitors.