

Architecture

THE BOATHOUSE'S ZIGZAG
PROFILE WAS INSPIRED
BY THE SHAPES OARS MAKE
WHILE ROWING

Front row

A shapely boathouse has become a model regeneration project for Chicago's riverfront

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVEN HALL WRITER: JAY PRIDMORE



THE BOATHOUSE IS ONE OF FOUR PLANNED AS PART OF A REGENERATION PROGRAMME FOR CHICAGO'S RIVERFRONT



FOR MORE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BOATHOUSE, INCLUDING A LOOK INSIDE, DOWNLOAD THE IPAD EDITION AT WALLPAPER.COM/IPAD

Chicago-based architect Jeanne Gang and her office Studio Gang are commendably straight shooters; design influences are made clear and distinct in their finished buildings. The studio's Ford Calumet Environmental Center, completed in 2008, for example, used the way birds make their nests out of found materials as a model, with salvaged steel and reclaimed industrial scrap being used to build the sustainable structure. Meanwhile, the firm's 2010 Chicago skyscraper Aqua featured undulating balconies inspired, says Gang, by the layered limestone outcroppings that border the Great Lakes.

The practice's latest project uses a slightly more abstract, but nonetheless convincing, leitmotif. The WMS Boathouse on the banks of the once-squalid Chicago River has a profile inspired by motion-picture pioneer Eadweard Muybridge's early films of men rowing. For the architects, the geometry of oars in motion suggested the building's roofline of alternating M- and inverted V-shaped trusses.

The result is an exterior profile that enlivens a once-abandoned riverfront on a city park site, miles from the waterway's main branch through downtown Chicago. The design encourages human interaction with nature – the staggered clerestories opening to southern sun in the winter and cool breezes in the summer – echoing the sport it houses, 'where each person has to be in tune with other people in the boat', says Gang.

The boathouse commission came to Studio Gang through happy coincidence. In spring 2011, Gang was teaching at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and challenged students to design a dam structure primarily to prevent invasive species swimming through the Chicago River into Lake Michigan. The project led to a publication, *Reverse Effect*, which addressed the opportunities to transform the Chicago River's overall ecology.

Simultaneously, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel conceived a series of initiatives to revitalise the river network, which runs some 20 miles along three branches within the city. Chicago's lakefront was a 20th-century triumph and the mayor was determined to do the same for the river. The WMS Boathouse, one of four planned on Chicago Park District land (Studio Gang will soon design another), provides facilities for competitive rowing, as well as more casual canoeing and kayaking, to locals and nearby schools. The project came about in part through money donated by WMS Industries, a slot-machine maker with a glassy new office building on the opposite bank of the river.

Gang, with *Reverse Effect* to her name, was an obvious choice for this first boathouse, and her research for the

project ran deep. She rowed as a guest of established teams, including one composed of cancer survivors. She interviewed coaches. She visited older boathouses around America to discover how the sport was traditionally housed. She found specialists who designed and built rowing tanks, essentially lap pools with mechanical currents.

The boathouse that came out of her extensive research is comprised of two separate buildings, with an impressive opening in-between that creates a stately gateway from the road to the river. The \$8.8m project cost an impressively low \$3.17 per sq ft, and it includes a state-of-the-art tank room with fittings for practice in both sweeping (where the rower operates one oar) and sculling (where the rower uses two). Gang proudly points out that the repetition of truss forms was cost-saving, as was the limited palette of materials, which includes zinc, slate and wood. The building also aids the local ecology with a permeable concrete pavement.

While the boathouse is not glitzy in any way, there is an undeniable elegance to its low profile and interlocking, naturally lit interior space. The ceiling over the large second-floor training room, which can double as a reception hall when the rowing machines are removed, is a continuous membrane of curved unpainted plywood sheets. 'We're interested in creating complex surfaces with simple materials,' says Gang.

It may seem remarkable that one of America's most distinguished architects (Gang was a 2011 MacArthur Fellow, recipient of the \$500,000 'genius grant') would occupy herself with a brief for which a shed might have sufficed. But the project chimed with her objective of designing beautiful buildings that are both sustainable and economical. And with the sawtooth façade of her boathouse, she has created an eye-catching landmark on the riverfront. 'We believe that to change the world you have to work at multiple scales,' says Gang. 'Addressing urban blight and climate change – these things can't be resolved in just one way.'

The mayor agrees. 'Jeanne Gang shares the city's vision of transforming the future of our river.' He calls the boathouse 'part of broader efforts to revitalise the river as the next great recreational frontier'.

It's a worthy goal for a city project that has quickly brought life to the waterway among younger Chicagoans, unaware that an older generation once called a stretch of the river Bubbly Creek because of the methane caused by old stockyard waste. Today, riverfront projects like this one bear witness to architecture's ability to effect social change. ★ *studiogang.net*

