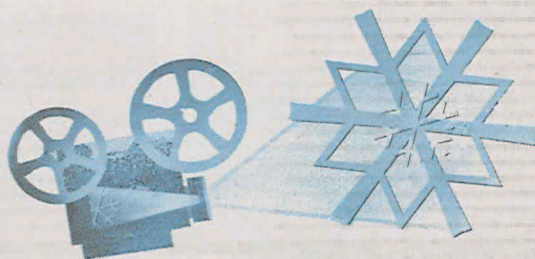




This week in **Sunday**

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# arts & entertainment

## Winter movie preview

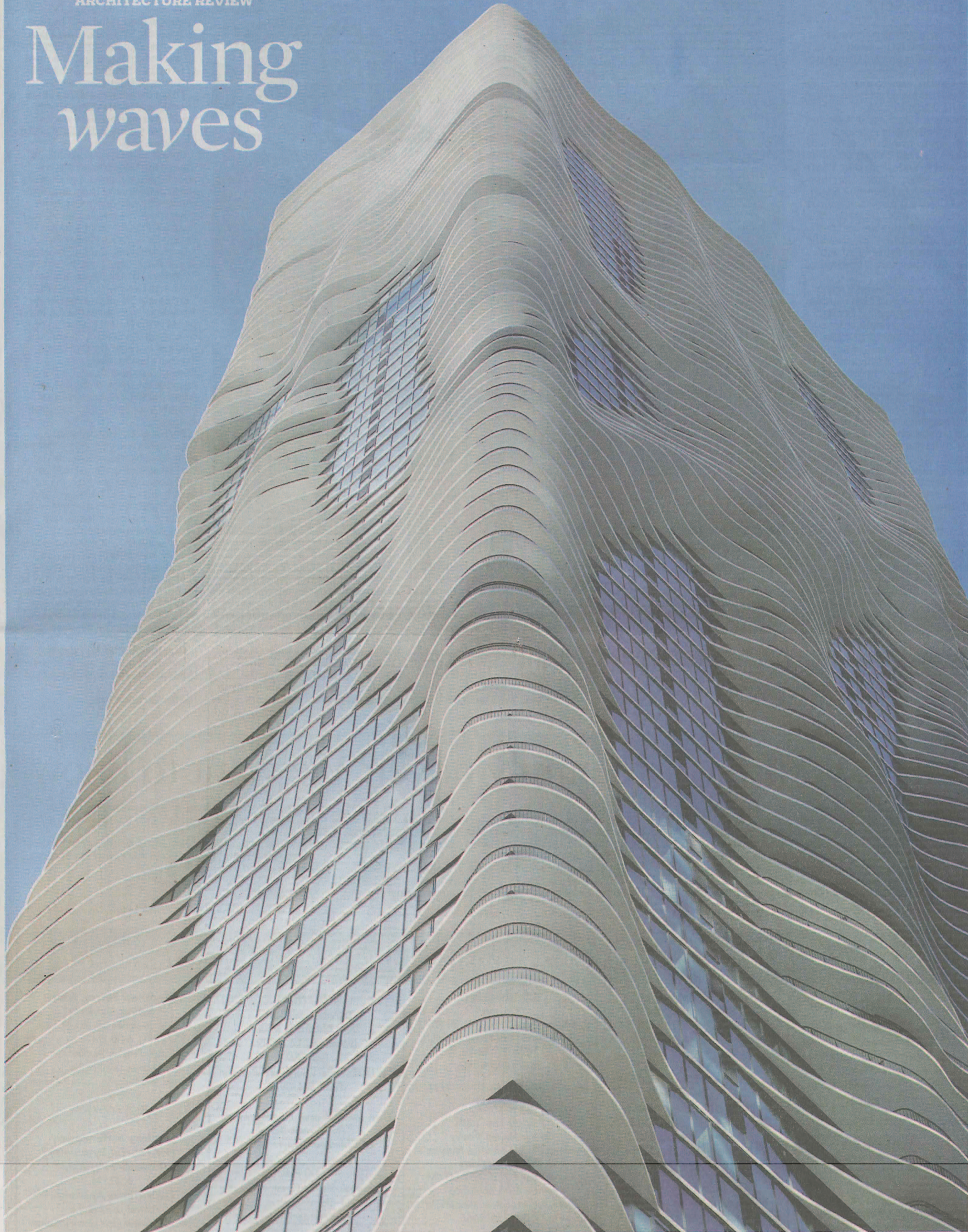
Film critic Michael Phillips chooses 10 films worth considering this season. Will Pedro Almodovar's "Broken Embraces," with Penelope Cruz, above, be one of them? **PAGE 10**

Also, news on Roland Emmerich's "2012," starring John Cusack; the vision of the afterlife in "The Lovely Bones"; and more films coming soon. **PAGES 6-11**

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ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

# Making waves



Architect Jeanne Gang and her colleagues produced a novel concept: a skyscraper whose balconies would be stretched outward, by anywhere from 2 to 12 feet, to capture views that would not be available otherwise. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

## **AQUA**, the world's tallest building designed by a woman, is one of Chicago's boldest and best new skyscrapers



**Blair Kamin**  
CITYSCAPES

Aqua, the spectacular new Chicago skyscraper with the sensuous, undulating balconies, is the pearl of the long-running, now-ending Chicago building boom, a design that is as fresh conceptually as it is visually.

A skyscraper typically consists of repetitive, right-angled parts, a money-saving device that frequently produces aesthetic monotony. But in this defiantly non-Euclidian high-rise, almost nothing seems to repeat.

Its white, wafer-thin balconies bulge outward, each slightly different from the other. They race around corners and shoot upward in fantastic, voluptuous stacks. This is a new vision of verticality, and it makes Aqua one of Chicago's boldest — and best — skyscrapers in years.

Located just north of Millennium Park at 225 N. Columbus Drive, the 82-story tower is still in the finishing stages, so it is impossible to fully assess whether its function is as successful as

its form. Nonetheless, it can be said that Aqua is remarkable on several counts.

It is the tallest building designed by a female-owned architectural firm and the first skyscraper from Chicago's Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang Architects, who is only 45 years old. Aqua also is a real estate miracle: Its financing documents were signed in late August 2007 — just before the credit crunch hit it. Had the tower been delayed by 60 to 90 days, says the building's architect-of-record and co-developer, Jim Loewenberg, it might never have been built.

None of this would matter without Gang's singular design, whose three chief floors are hotel space (for now, without an occupant) on floors 4 through 18, apartments on floors 19 through 52 and condominiums from floors 53 to 81. There are

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# A new spin on the skyscraper

Final product fulfills promise of Gang's concept

Continued from Page 1

also shops, parking and town-houses.

Essentially, then, Aqua is a residential skyscraper, a place to live (or sleep) rather than a place to work. And it fully takes advantage of the aesthetic freedom afforded by that identity, which means it doesn't have to be tidy and buttoned-down, like a corporate headquarters.

Santiago Calatrava's design for the 150-story Chicago Spire also promised to endow the skyscraper genre with a new sculptural freedom. Due to the recession, the Spire remains nothing more than a hole in the ground. But at least we have Aqua.

The story of how this tower came to be is already the stuff of legend: In 2004, Loewenberg, a veteran Chicago architect and developer who had blighted River North with banal high-rises, was seated next to Gang — a rising star whose then-tallest independently completed work was a Rockford community theater that had a 90-foot-tall fly tower — at a Harvard Club dinner where Frank Gehry was the speaker.

Loewenberg was looking for a young architect who would produce an out-of-the-box design for a tall tower at Lakeshore East, which rises west of Lake Shore Drive and south of the Chicago River. In Gang, he found one.

Responding to the site for the proposed tower, which was surrounded by a forest of nearby high-rises, she and her colleagues produced a novel concept: A skyscraper whose balconies would be stretched outward, by anywhere from 2 to 12 feet, to capture views that would not be available otherwise. If you lived on the east side of the tower, for example, you wouldn't just see Lake Michigan. You would be able to peer through the thicket of adjoining high-rises and see Millennium Park.

In turn, Gang sculpted the balconies into a larger visual order inspired by the layered topography of limestone outcroppings along the Great Lakes. Reflecting her talent for giving poetic form to mundane materials, the design seized on the plasticity of concrete. When the plan was unveiled in 2006, it prompted raves from critics — and no small amount of private sneering from some of Gang's male competitors, who clucked that the balconies would be mere decorative appendages.

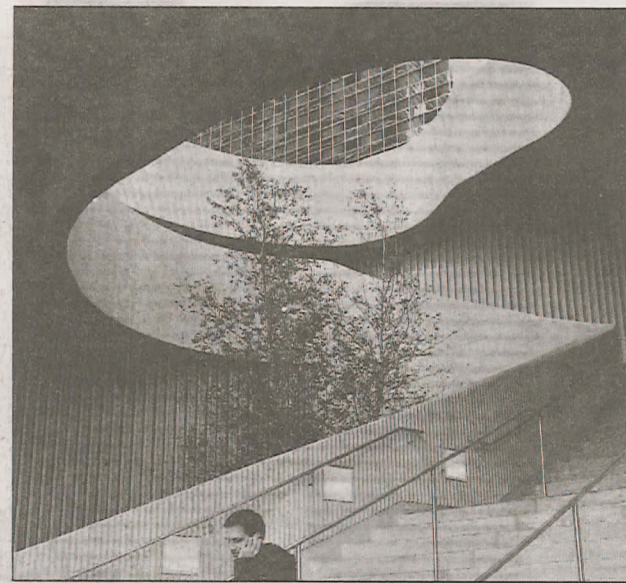
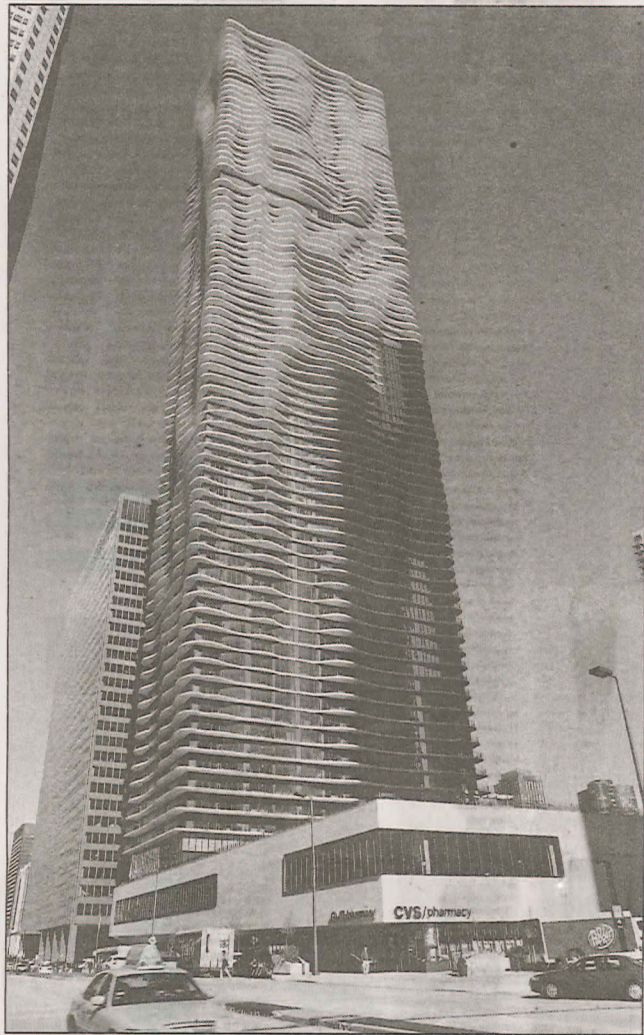
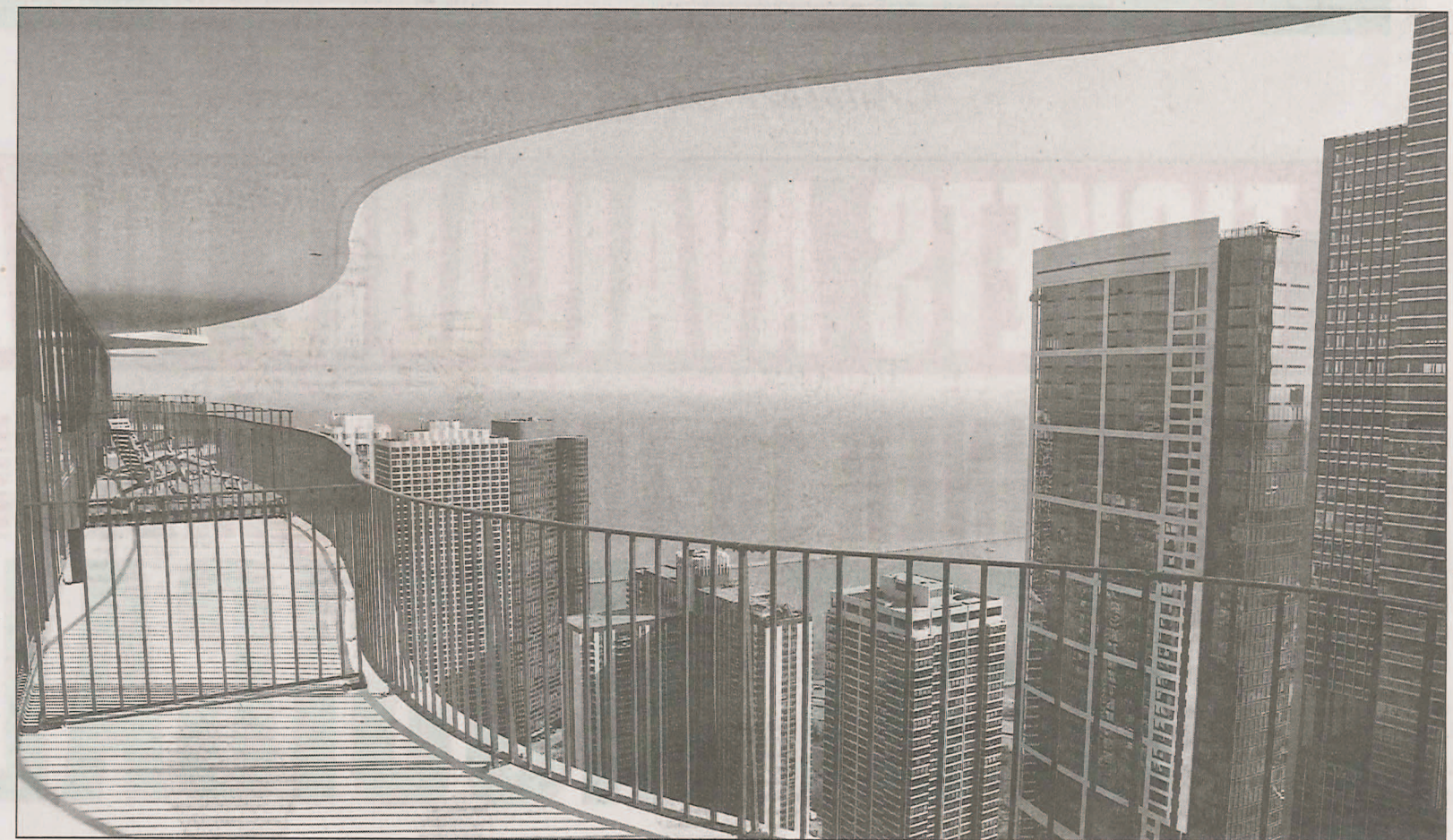
Yet the nearly finished outcome richly fulfills the promise of Gang's concept. The balconies elevate an otherwise-ordinary concrete-framed structure to the level of art.

From afar, to be sure, the balconies don't have much of a skyline impact. But as you move closer and see Aqua from oblique angles, they become a stunning presence, flowing like ocean waves across the facade and forming organic, irregularly shaped towers within the tower. Crucially, the thin metal pickets on the balconies fade from view, allowing the tower's sculptural forms to predominate.

In the 1920s, the great flourishes of tall buildings came with richly decorated bases and highly articulated tops. The middle was almost an afterthought, simply a way to connect these two parts. At Aqua, the old base-middle-top formula is out. The top is conspicuously flat. It is the middle, with its playful bulges, that is the star.

The balconies, it turns out, were not a wild extravagance. The premium for them, Loewenberg says, was about 1½ percent of the building's \$325 million construction cost, which works out to about \$4.87 million — not a bad deal considering all the buzz they generated.

Contractors built the balconies by loading Gang's specifications for the curving balcony edges directly into a surveying tripod



**ABOVE:** As many balconies as possible were placed next to living rooms, forming visual extensions of the living spaces.

**LEFT:** Sculpted concrete stairs let pedestrians walk from Columbus Drive and the ground-level park at Lakeshore East.

**BELOW LEFT:** The third-floor roof terrace is an activity level that includes a running track, exercise courts and seating areas.

**FAR LEFT:** The tower sits on a beautifully sculpted two-story base, which is rectilinear enough to shape the street, but not so rectilinear that it's a visual bore.

MICHAEL TERCHA/  
TRIBUNE PHOTOS

with a built-in computer. That allowed them to bend steel formwork to precisely the contours Gang and her colleagues designed.

In a further display of the virtues of customization, Gang tweaked the balconies for sunshading, making them deeper on the south than on the north. She and Loewenberg also put as many balconies as possible next to living rooms, thus forming visual extensions of the living spaces. Finally, the oval "pools" of glass between the balconies use a tinted, reflective glass (as opposed to the clear glass employed elsewhere) to prevent apartments from overheating.

These features allow Aqua to rise above a criticism frequently leveled at such "wow" buildings — that they are simplistic one-liners where form overrides function. At Aqua, there is a reason for everything. If the tower indulges in expressionism, it is at least a rationalized expressionism, grounded in Midwestern practicality.

The only problem has to do with the thicket of skyscrapers that formed the balconies' reason for being: This show-stopping, but hemmed in, tower lacks an effective stage on which to preen. You wish you could set it alongside the Chicago River, where it could show

off like its curvaceous, 1960s antecedent, Marina City.

Aqua's other great virtue is that it is skillfully woven into the fabric of the city, setting it apart from Marina City, whose corn-cob-shaped high-rises meet the ground awkwardly.

The tower sits on a beautifully sculpted two-story base, which is rectilinear enough to shape the street, but not so rectilinear that it's a visual bore. Atop the base is an outdoor activity level, one of Chicago's largest green roofs, that forms a "fifth facade." When residents of Aqua and occupants of nearby buildings look down on it, they see irregularly shaped pathways and swaths of green, not an ugly asphalt roof.

Gang further joined her tower to the city with two boldly sculpted concrete stairs that let pedestrians walk from Columbus Drive (which occupies the highest level of a multilevel street system) and the ground-level park at Lakeshore East. One is a switchback with corrugated concrete walls; the other, a spectacular helix. These aren't just stairs. They're architectural events.

The most dramatic space of the tower's interior is a clear-span hotel ballroom, which is not sealed

off from the outside world, as ballrooms tend to be, but offers pleasant views of the nearby park. Only when you venture upstairs do the functional advantages of the balconies — and some possible disadvantages — become clear.

Aqua's apartments, which range from convertibles to two-bedrooms and have 8-foot ceilings, are not exactly spacious. Without the balconies, they might have felt claustrophobic. With the balconies, they seem far more expansive.

Some offer striking views, not only of the cityscape but also of the curving, sheltering underside of the balconies above. That impact is even more pronounced in the mostly unoccupied condos, which range from studios to penthouses and have ceilings close to 9 feet high and roughly 13 feet in the penthouses.

Gang speaks of the balconies as an "inhabited facade," conjuring visions of urban cliff dwellers enjoying a communal outdoor space on the side of a skyscraper. Given that Aqua's uppermost balconies reach 200 feet higher than those at Marina City, it's going to be fascinating to see whether people actually use them or shy away because of vertigo.

While the minimal presence of the thin metal pickets is just right when Aqua is seen from street level, some condo dwellers may feel the need for a greater sense of enclosure.

That caveat aside, Aqua can be deemed a smashing success, a building that takes us in dazzling new aesthetic directions yet still manages to respond to both its urban environs and to the environment as a whole.

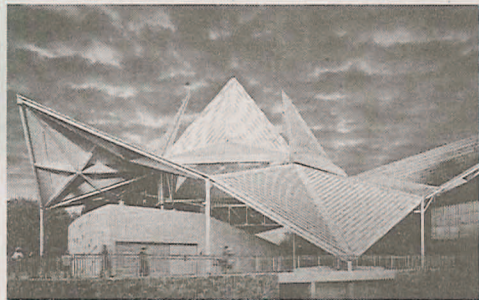
The tower has enough energy-saving features to strive for a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) silver rating from the U.S. Green Building Council. It has already won an award from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals because birds will be able to see its curving balconies and therefore will be less likely to fly into the tower.

So credit Gang for an extraordinary debut on the big stage, one that adds to Chicago's allure as laboratory for skyscraper innovation. And credit Loewenberg for a risk-taking act of enlightened patronage. The risk has paid off. At Aqua, to paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald in "The Great Gatsby," the building boom finally has produced something commensurate with our capacity for wonder.

bkamin@tribune.com

## Architect displayed high style in previous projects

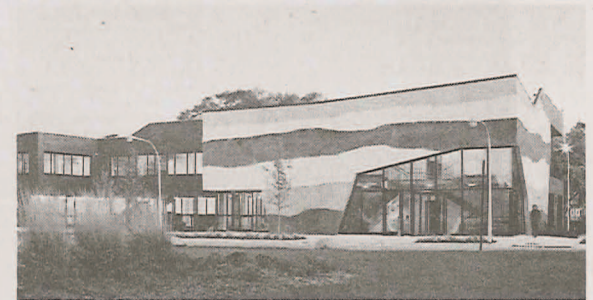
With the 82-story Aqua, a mixed-use residential tower that is the tallest building designed by a woman-owned firm, Chicago architect Jeanne Gang has made a great leap forward in scale. But her innovative use of materials and technology is evident in smaller projects previously completed in and around Chicago. Here are three examples:



**The Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre, Rockford:** This community outdoor theater has a movable roof that folds and unfolds like origami, allowing the theater to perform whatever the weather. The theater was designed when Gang's firm, now Studio Gang Architects, was known as Studio Gang O'Donnell.



**The Kam L. Liu Building of the Chinese American Service League, Chicago:** Located at 2141 S. Tan Court, a block west of the Chinatown gate along Cermak Road, this three-story structure avoids sloping pagoda roofs and other visual clichés. An elegant box clad in titanium, it mostly serves Chinese immigrants and their families.



**The Lavezzorio Community Center at the SOS Children's Village, Chicago:** The center, at 7600 S. Parnell Ave. in the Auburn Gresham area, had to be designed taking donated materials into account. Gang made a virtue of this necessity, creating a unique wavy facade, consisting of layers of concrete arranged in bands of slightly different colors.