

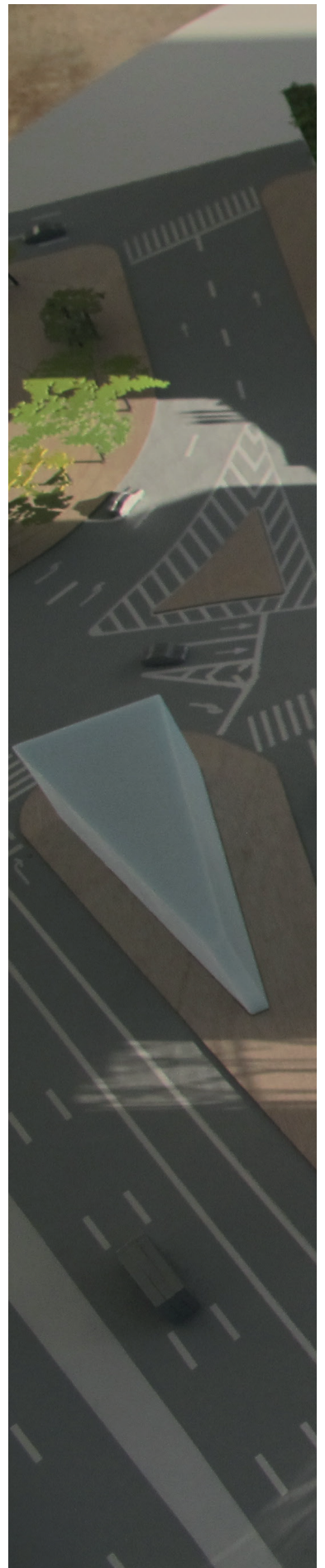
# INSIDE STUDIO GANG

## ON MAKING AND DRAWING

*In conversation with William Cassell and Jonathan Russell*

Chicago architect Jeanne Gang, principal and founder of Studio Gang, is a practitioner and thinker at the forefront of her field. Gang's body of work, from high-rise apartments to vast landscape interventions, is notable for its variety and inventiveness: rather than hewing to an in-house style, Studio Gang privileges research and inquiry as primary design drivers. These methods are exemplary in their responsiveness to complex, dynamic contexts, and produce buildings in which the quality of the finished outcome speaks to the rigour of its creation. If the architectural process is an act of projection, we can learn a great deal by studying the strategies and methods of architects like Jeanne Gang. In conversation with *Inflection*, Gang discussed the role of drawing and research in contemporary architecture, touching on her designs for Chicago's Aqua Tower and Northerly Island. Her perspective provides insight into the value of a rigorous, multi-disciplinary approach to architecture.

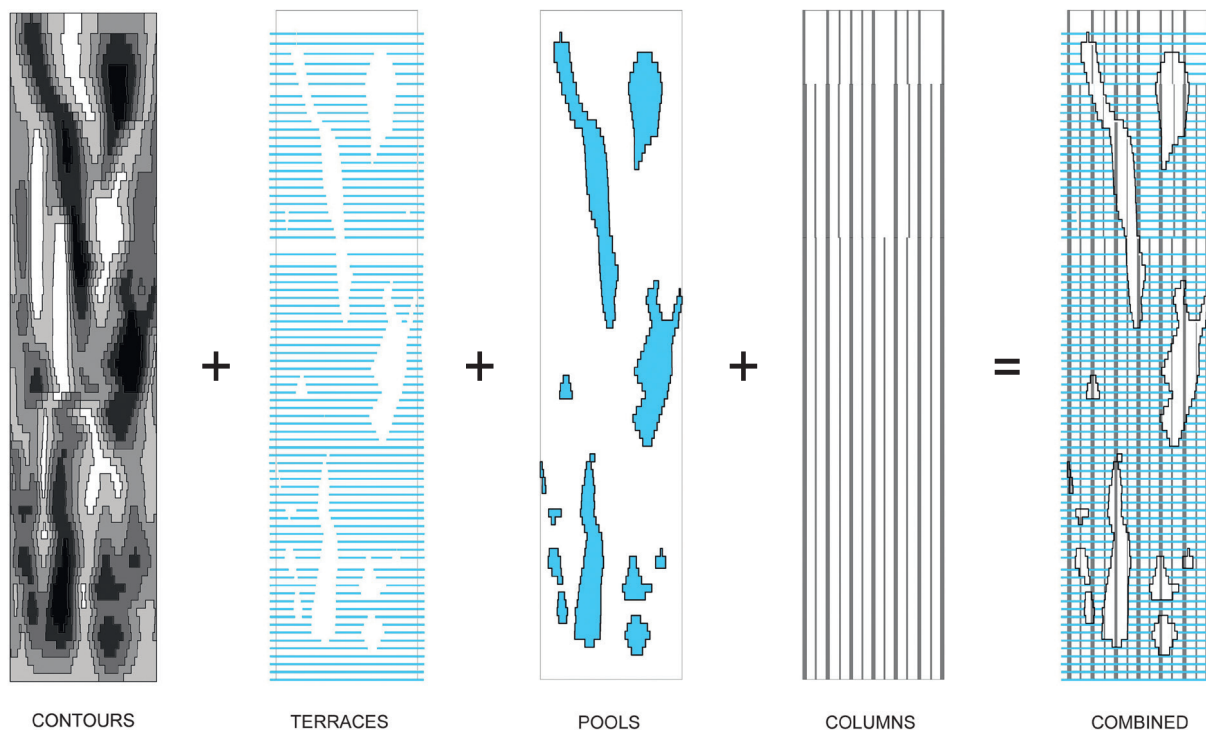
Opposite:  
Studio Gang  
*Model Photograph, Solar Carve, 2012*











### ***Inflection:***

*One sense in which we're interpreting our theme of projection is that, when we draw as architects, it's often in plan, section or elevation, which are reductions of the real world. For your process, which seems so deeply rooted in observation – in standing in a place or experiencing a city – do you find that the necessary reduction of drawing and projection is a sidestep away from the end goal?*

### **Jeanne Gang:**

I think, for me, there's this huge importance to the plan and the section, because they're lenses to see the project through. You can look through perspective drawings or renderings – which are also a reduction because they are of one moment, looking in one particular direction – but the plan is something that I'm afraid as architects we're not paying enough attention to any more. It is a kind of abstraction, it's a slice, but there's a total art to doing a good plan. One thing that happens in practice is that you start out with a really clear plan with a strong idea and concept and then, as you move toward reality, it can get muddled. It's also possible to lose it because you are not looking at it as a slice any more, you start looking at it just as a model. And so it's important to step back and just look at the projection of plans and sections as things in and of themselves. It's so true that you can perceive a good plan in three dimensions when you finally go into a building. I hope it's not a dying art, to do a good plan. It's our language, and we need to keep speaking our language.

Above:  
Studio Gang  
*Process Diagram, Aqua Tower, 2010*



*Have you deliberately looked outside the architectural canon to find a process of building that's more relevant to what buildings should aspire to be today?*

I've looked outside architecture because I'm interested in things outside architecture and I feel like in our practice we can connect these dots somehow, between being in the world and making design. The processes of making – whether it's the building documents, the models, the drawings or the actual making and construction – are some of my favourite parts about architecture. Inspiration comes from all over the place and maybe it's that the architecture research is already embedded in your brain and you can bring those precedents to bear, but for the content it's about being in the world and the things that are going on in the world. You have to look outside architecture for that.

There is a school of thought that says we should not be going beyond our own boundaries and that we should learn our own tenets and speak our own language. But I don't think that's even possible. The core things that we have to know are constantly being rewritten. Right now it's history – why are we only looking at Western architectural history? There's amazing stuff out there that I never got in my history class. We constantly have to update it, but it's something to do with knowing the past and making sure that we don't lose anything that was good in trying to look forward. And I do think that drawing is essential, it doesn't matter what the tool is, pencil or computer, drawing is essential to what we have to teach and to learn and to expand on.

Above:  
Steve Hall / Hedrich Blessing Photographers  
*Aqua Tower*, 2010





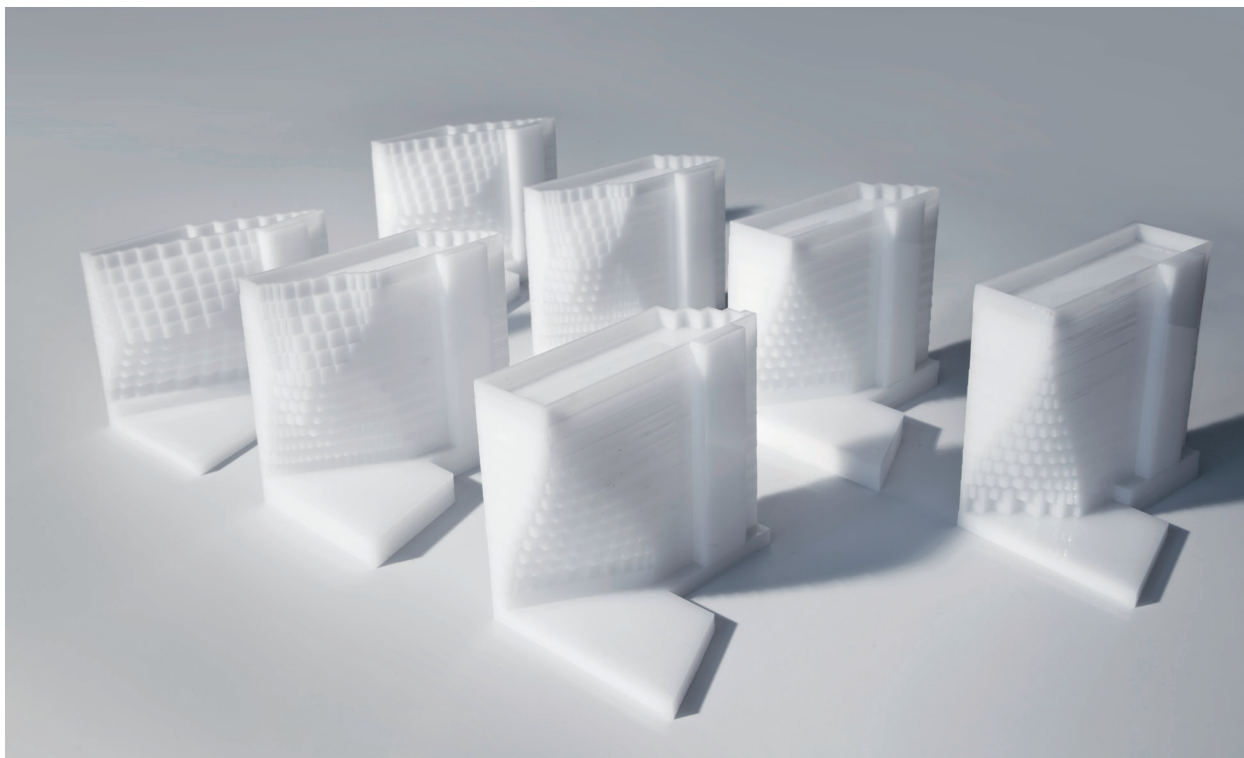




Northerly Island is very exciting: it's obviously a complex scheme in its relationship to Chicago, and also in its symbiosis between the man-made and the natural. As I was reading about it, I couldn't help thinking about William Cronon's book, *Nature's Metropolis* – that idea about the constructedness of the city and the constructedness of nature in its relationship to the city. Can you expand a little on that hybrid nature of Northerly Island?

Well, it's interesting because originally, in Daniel Burnham's plan of 1909, he envisioned these islands that would help break waves and provide calm waters near the city centre. In the 1930s they decided to build Northerly Island (which is actually a peninsula), so it was man-made, it was sand from the bottom of the lake. And the first thing they did was have a big expo fair – 1934, the Century of Progress show was there, so it was full of Ferris wheels and all kinds of contraptions. After that they turned it into an airport – it was kind of like every single generation was just mapping their desires onto this man-made piece of land. So now it's our turn! The airport's gone, and we won a competition to design it – together, of course, with landscape architects and ecologists and water hydrologists and a whole team of engineers. We conceived it as a much more rich, biodiverse island that would provide an interesting space for inner-city people, youth, to actually have an experience of nature. But it actually has to be *designed* – everything about it was sectioned to encourage nature to come in and take it over. So, for example, we dug out a wetland and made topography. The section allows for fish spawning and the type of grasses that like to have wetland water, and then the higher lands are more like savannah landscapes, and all of these things work together to attract animals and make it a more interesting place than a flat green baseball field. So I think it's important to start intertwining these wild types of nature into the city, and not just think of city landscapes and recreational green monoculture lawns, which is mostly what we have right now in cities. The design of it used a hexagon as a scale unit to develop the territories of the different landscapes. There's some legibility to the hexagon geometry in the landforming, in an acknowledgement that it is designed. It's not just trying to mimic nature completely, it shows that we can still get that natural diversity, but have it be more visibly touched.

Left:  
Studio Gang  
*Photomontage, Northerly Island, 2014*



*Research during the initial stages of a project plays a very important role in your practise. How do you make sure that the research you've done continues to direct the project?*

Well, in a way you don't have to, because it's already inside the head of the studio, and the way that we share our research within our teams – the way that we *maintain* the research – makes it accessible to everybody working on the project. If a new person comes in, they can jump in and hit that research part. But it's almost important to put it away when you're starting to *make* – you have to step away. You have to go to the model shop and make something, or draw something. It's possible to do too much research, you've got to start making something somewhere, and then let that work speak back to you. What is it that you made?

If it's a model or a drawing, how is it telling you something new? The method is definitely not to continually try to force the research on it – you can hinder your creativity if you do that.

*So, the balance of research, of taking things in, with the projection outwards of hands-on design is very important?*

I think it's also interesting the way that research accumulates within an organisation, especially with towers. They're particular because there are limited things you can do with structure and limited things you can do with the areas. It's such a particular building type, so the area where you can innovate is narrower. Maybe the tower doesn't get built, but the things you've started to discover can actually be applied to other towers, so you don't have to always start from scratch with the research. People joke about that, like, 'oh, these architects designed that in a competition over there, and now they're building it over *there*' – but there's something to that, especially for us in the tower category. Maybe there's an idea that's really good but didn't get built – you can take what you learned and try to apply it to another problem.

Above:  
Studio Gang  
*Study Models, Solar Carve, 2012*





*Staying on the theme of towers – and Aqua in particular: it's a tall building in a city whose identity is defined by its tall buildings. What was your attitude towards the existing skyline when you were thinking about Aqua?*

There are a couple of things: one is, a lot of times in our practice we start with the material or the structure. In this case it's concrete, you can see it in the Chicago skyline – we wanted to exhibit the fluid qualities of concrete. The same way the John Hancock Center does with steel – it's made of steel, it's showing that it's steel. Or the Monadnock Building – it's masonry, it looks like masonry, it is masonry. So Aqua is not decorated, the structural material is the aesthetic of it. So I think it fits in with that heritage of tall buildings there. And then I always thought that there was a little bit of a relationship with the Bertrand Goldberg building, the Marina Towers, because that's a residential building too – I always liked how people's personal things start to inform the building, like, people put little Christmas tree lights on the balconies, or somebody has astroturf on their balcony. So you see the life coming out on that, and I like that aspect of it – it's not cold, it's interesting. So with Aqua tower, we provided those outside terraces and sure enough people are starting to take them over with their own personal things, and that gives it more interest. People lock their bikes to the balcony railing and people have various things out there. It is pretty interesting – it's not as fully taken over yet as the Marina Towers are, but I think it would make me pretty happy if it were.

Left:  
Steve Hall / Hedrich Blessing Photographers  
*Aqua Tower, 2010*