

# Inside Jeanne Gang's studio

In advance of the Art Institute's exhibition on the MacArthur Fellowship-winning architect, we tour her studio—and try to figure out what makes her tick.

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These rope barriers will divide the Art Institute's Studio Gang exhibition into different "rooms."

Courtesy: Studio Gang Architects

The self-designed offices of Studio Gang Architects consume the second floor of a sturdy commercial building overlooking the Division Street Blue Line stop. The reception nook resembles the waiting area of a casual family restaurant, with cozy wall-to-wall cushioned booth seating bolstered with cheery fabric. Pinned to the walls above are plans for a building at 56th Street and Cornell Avenue—the highly anticipated Solstice on the Park housing development, which has yet to break ground.

The reception desk, for the moment, is empty. The entire office looks empty, based on the half-dozen desks in view. But audible clues of a morning in progress—the pleasant whir of a coffee grinder, a spoon scraping up the last bite of cereal from the bottom of a bowl—drift from a communal area of the office that's tucked out of sight. The genius of the layout lies in its deception: There's much more going on here than meets the eye.

So, too, with the firm. Studio Gang principal Jeanne Gang, who one year ago this week was awarded a \$500,000 MacArthur Fellowship genius grant for exceptional merit in creative work, is best known as the architect behind Aqua, the award-winning 82-story skyscraper in Lakeshore East. But that building was completed two years ago, and Gang is busy with about 15 other projects. The biggest of these are what will shape the firm's 21st-century legacy.

Not yet two decades into its existence, Studio Gang has 40 employees, with Gang and her partner, managing-principal Mark Schendel, at the helm. Current projects, both under construction and on deck, range from a 10,000-square-foot center for social justice leadership at Michigan's Kalamazoo College to the reimagining of the mile-long Northerly Island. Handling projects of this scale is not the norm for firms of Studio Gang's age or size. Its success is an anomaly, which is the foundation for this month's exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, "Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects," opening Monday 24. This, too, is a rarity: The Art Institute hasn't hosted a solo show for a living architect since 2006.

"This is a very pivotal moment in their career," says Zoë Ryan, chair and curator of the Art Institute's department of architecture and design, who began exploring the idea of a Studio Gang exhibition after introducing the architect at a lecture in 2010. Ryan says: "Mark and Jeanne and I got in a cab [after the lecture] and went to dinner, and she turned to me and said, 'Oh my God, I loved your introduction.' And I thought, There's a bond there. When you're doing an exhibition, you work so closely with people. In many ways, it's like working on a piece of architecture, and I remember thinking she'd be a perfect collaborator."

Two years later—an unusually short window for ushering in a major exhibition—Ryan and AIC assistant curator of architecture and design Karen Kice are seated in their offices, poring over a round table stacked with binder-clipped heaps of collateral for the exhibit. It resembles any number of projects pinned to the walls at Studio Gang, complete with plans and elevations and mock-ups galore. (The original idea for the exhibition was to move Studio Gang Architects' entire studio into the Modern Wing, but it quickly became clear that a for-profit business would have trouble operating in a nonprofit space. Still, Kice says, "I think the firm was excited about the 10:30 to 5 o'clock hours.")

"They're only 15 years old," Ryan says, "but have a career succession of really important buildings with many more on the horizon, and they have a career one might equate with an older firm because they've built a lot already, and they have a lot being built. At the same time, this is a very transitional moment, where the projects are getting larger and more complex. We're not sealing her career and legacy."

Northerly Island, for one, is a huge commission and long-term commitment for the firm. Spanning 91 acres of lakefront that currently lacks a real draw beyond Adler Planetarium and Charter One Pavilion, the manmade peninsula will transform under Studio Gang's watch to strike a balance between active and passive urban programming over a carefully designed ecosystem. When it's finished—the target date is 30 years out; construction on the first phase, due for completion in 2017, begins this year—there will be urban campsites, canoe portals and a 12,000- to 14,000-seat amphitheater replacing Charter One.

There are much smaller projects, too, such as Studio Gang's collaboration with [Expo Chicago, which opens Thursday 20](#). For the contemporary art fair's inaugural year, Studio Gang designed an exhibition floor plan for Navy Pier's Festival Hall that will position galleries on a Chicago-inspired grid, diagonal streets and all.

Mid-morning in the Studio Gang offices, things are still quiet. There are more empty chairs than not, meaning people are out at project sites or other meetings. This is far from the frenetic work environment I imagined; things seem almost dull. But every few feet, there are signs that work is furiously happening somewhere: Plans for projects line the walls in one long show-and-tell, called a "charette." At Studio Gang, this means pinning everything on walls at the final stages of design, after you've been sleeplessly working for days and you're finally ready for the whole office to see—and critique—your plans.

Design-team member Claire Cahan, 28, chats as we walk through the halls, past more plans and a workshop where, later that day, architects will be busy building models. Studio Gang's employees are divvied up into teams managing multiple projects, Cahan explains. She split the month of August working on the Art Institute exhibition and Northerly Island plans.

"It's amazing," Cahan says, "because in my day-to-day, when I'm overwhelmed, Jeanne is seeing five different projects going from this scale—" she gestures to the Kalamazoo project, for which the team is currently studying wood masonry for the building's exterior, "talking about bug issues in the wood, super zoomed-in, to Northerly Island and how we can plan for the next phases of it. [Jeanne and Mark] have a real ability, and they use that ability to see the different directions people are going in, and they bring that to all of their work."

Notable about Studio Gang, from a curator's standpoint, is the depth of research that's plainly pinned to their walls. "It's very inspiring when you go there," Ryan says of Studio Gang's HQ. "What's interesting about them is that Jeanne

is less interested in formal solutions as she is in trying to find solutions that really open up projects to, perhaps, possibilities that aren't expected."

For museumgoers, Ryan and Kice grouped a selection of Studio Gang's work into four themes—nature, density, community and performance—to showcase similarities. That's the main room of "Inside Studio Gang Architects," the traditionally curated side of the exhibit, showing off the firm's research, materials and studies as well as the requisite plans, models and renderings.

As for the back room, Ryan explains, "It really will be just like you've been given the keys to Studio Gang's office and are allowed to look through top-secret information." Raw building materials, iPads loaded with imagery, formal presentation documents used for clients—it's all there to touch, read, study. In the center of the room is a giant round table at which a series of lectures called "archi-salons" will be staged throughout the duration of the exhibition, led by local architects, free and open to museumgoers. "Jeanne, of course, will be there," Ryan says.

Meanwhile, Gang declined an interview for this story, instead issuing a statement via e-mail explaining that the whole team, not just Gang, is valuable. "Good design is only possible when talented people are involved in every niche of the process," she explains. The 48-year-old architect has actively removed herself from the media of late, perhaps in hopes of letting her firm's work speak for itself. But some suspect her hesitance is due, at least partially, to the way she has been portrayed in national media, which tends to highlight Gang as the token female ambassador to an otherwise male-dominated trade. Every other article seems to point out the fact that she is a "female" or "woman" architect while similar coverage of male-run firms dubs them, simply, architects. Questions directed to her lately have gone beyond buildings; lifestyle magazines have queried the office for Gang's beauty regimen.

Also, as Studio Gang residential client David Hernandez observes, her reticence comes naturally: "[Jeanne and Mark] are every bit as modest and humble and straightforward now as when we met them back in 2004." Hernandez and wife Tereasa Surratt hired Studio Gang Architects to redesign their West Town home, better known as Brick Weave House, which was completed in 2008 to critical acclaim. "They're the antithesis of the stereotypical elite architecture firm," Hernandez says. "She's wonderfully soft-spoken and modest and Midwestern. She's a small-town Illinois girl, basically."

Gang's statement speaks only of the task at hand: her firm's ever-expanding portfolio. "At this point, our office is leading work on a variety of building types, scales and geographical contexts," the e-mail reads. "We are working with ideas that are specific to the particulars of each project while also refining the more general set of principles that applies to our overall body of work. There is great energy in the office right now and it feels like we are hitting our stride."

That energy may have come at a slow burn on the morning of my visit. But things are humming by 11am, and probably well past the 5 o'clock hour. Ideally, Cahan says, Gang and Schendel operate on the periphery of their colleagues' teams, plugging in for updates as needed. "We all attend a lot of meetings and try to use our time really wisely," Cahan explains—but by the nature of their work, meetings don't end until everyone understands the big picture. There's no time to go back and rehash once a project is moving forward, she says: "Things move too fast."