

# Jeanne Gang

**The renegade architect on intervening with nature, creating happier suburbs and why coyotes have a place in cities**

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By GREG LINDSAY



Photography by Daniel Shea

DESIGNING WOMAN | Gang at her architecture firm in Chicago

THE WORK OF 48-YEAR-OLD JEANNE GANG may at last herald the end of the starchitect era. The founder of Chicago's Studio Gang Architects puts more faith in her raw materials—and the purposes they can be put to—than in the pursuit of iconic shapes or the mind-bending possibilities of computer-aided design. That's not to say her buildings aren't expressive in form. The rippling concrete balconies of her 82-story skyscraper, Aqua Tower, flow in gentle undulations. But they're also functional: Their shape disrupts gales off Lake Michigan, allowing residents to sun themselves eight hundred feet in the air.

## Photos: Designing Woman



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Gang designs slowly, buying time to consult her team of ecologists, hydrologists, artists and engineers. She also delves deeply into the limits of her materials, first exploring their physical capabilities in her Wicker Park studio, then allowing their attributes to dictate her projects' form. Gang is the rare architect who loves nature and tall buildings, classical techniques and new technology. She sees herself not as an artist, but as a dot connector, a problem solver. Her other Chicago works include the Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, which inserted a wild urban habitat adjacent to the city's Gold Coast, and plans for Northerly Island, which will transform the former Meigs Field airport into a waterfront park with a reef. Among her most recent projects are a proposal to reverse the flow of the Chicago River to restore its polluted banks, and reimagining suburbia in "Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream," an exhibit at New York's MoMA this spring.

Gang receives the museum treatment herself this fall with "Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects" at the Art Institute of Chicago (September 24–February 24, 2013). It isn't a retrospective—Gang is young by architecture's standards—but an intimate snapshot of "a practice that's just hitting its stride," she says. The same is undoubtedly true of Gang herself, who last fall was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow—the first architect to win the so-called "genius" grant in more than a decade. "Gang is setting a new industry standard," the foundation remarked about its pick. Translation: These times call for buildings that are inexpensive, beautiful and sustainable.

I'M IN AWE OF NATURE and its incredible variety and creativity, but we've been messing with it since the beginning of time. We design nature these days. We learn from it and then intervene. In one instance, we proposed reestablishing the natural division between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River watersheds (essentially disconnecting them) in order to restore the banks of the Chicago River. But it's been altered so many times—and so destructively—that it's not as though we're restoring a pure state of nature.

The truth is that cities and nature are completely intertwined, and we should find ways to make them seamless. With the human population now at seven billion and climbing, cities have become huge territories that don't allow the passage of other species through them. What's interesting to me is figuring out how closely we can get these two communities to intersect, so that animals can have their territory while at the same time increasing and concentrating the human population. We can bring seams of nature—like veins—through the middle of the city. We need to.

At the Lincoln Park Zoo, we turned a 19th-century picturesque pond into a real habitat. The number of species has soared; coyotes visit on a nightly basis. It's really buzzing and wild, right smack in the middle of the city. I've always been worried about the loss of bio-diversity, which is partly the result of sprawling cities. If we can find a way to build these habitats within them, it will make cities better and more exciting.

Biomimicry—borrowing ideas from the natural world—is a valuable tool, but I'm not interested in just mimicking forms. If you start there, you run up against the limits of your materials. But if you start with your materials, you unlock so many potential ways the architecture can take shape. For me, starting with the materials is nature. It means basing your design on what the material is naturally capable of, and how you can push it. It's a lot different than settling on an iconic form that looks natural and then trying to figure out how to build it.

We're at the end of a boom that demanded architects focus on iconic buildings that prized shape over structure and form. On the plus side, it pushed forward our understanding of both. Some of the buildings completed in the last 10 years would not have been possible at any other time in history. The fact that the Burj Khalifa in Dubai exists blows my mind—it's just awesome. But now we're at the dawn of a new mode of work requiring cross-collaboration, and somebody who can see all the different facets of a problem is critical. We see it in science all the time, where none of the most important problems can be tackled by a single discipline.

For our work exploring the future of suburbia, we asked, "How can we deal with a polluted postindustrial landscape while making room for more residents and giving them space to both live and work?" In Cicero, a Chicago suburb with thousands of foreclosures and a booming immigrant population, we interviewed local residents, real-estate developers, housing, immigration and financial-policy experts and even the owners of the freight rail lines that run through town. I assembled a team that knew their way around the suburbs, including people like Theaster Gates (see page 98), an artist who knows how to start dialogues with communities. We synthesized our ideas into a proposal: select an abandoned factory site, salvage its materials and reuse them to build à la carte housing that better fits the needs of extended immigrant families. The project is a completely new way of envisioning the suburbs, integrating all aspects of life instead of separating them into live, work and play.

Architects have a powerful role to play in solving some of society's most pressing issues, like urbanization. The design of a city can either make life exciting or pure hell. I think we have something important to offer. That's probably one reason a lot of us at Studio Gang still work into the late hours of the night. What drives us is the possibility of making a breakthrough. That's my adrenaline: To think that, one of these nights, we might end up changing the world.

—Edited from Greg Lindsay's interview with Jeanne Gang.

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