

# Art Institute builds a show

## New exhibit focuses on works of architect Jeanne Gang, firm

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Architecture is an optimistic discipline: Nobody builds without believing in the future. In the new show "Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects" at the Art Institute of Chicago, architect Jeanne Gang and her crew take hope to a whole new level.

Each of the dozen projects in the show demonstrates the firm's willingness to address the most challenging problems of our day, pressing against constraint to make each job undertaken more responsible, socially and environmentally. Absent the sense of head-banging helplessness many of us feel when the subject of global warming comes up, for example, these architects believe that small efforts matter, that, one after another, little solutions can add up to something substantial.

Many of the projects included have either not been completed or are on hold, courtesy of the economy. In those cases, it is not possible to evaluate design, intention and performance against reality. Nevertheless, the show makes a good case for a firm doing compelling, innovative work using its collective brain — it habitually brings in a variety of advisers and specialists — to probe for design insight from an astonishing range of sources.

Zoe Ryan, the Art Institute's curator of architecture and design, who curated the show with Karen Kice, says the projects in this exhibit are "a snapshot" of the office at a pivotal moment. The attention lavished on the best known of the firm's built work, Aqua Tower with its distinctive undulating balconies that appear to ripple upward through the building's height, has attracted promising, large-scale commissions to Studio Gang, among them the

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Solar Carve Tower planned for a site adjacent to High Line park on Manhattan's West Side. For that one, Studio Gang turned the zoning code requirement for setbacks upside down — literally. The setback steps back into the building volume at the level of the High Line like a bite taken out of a piece of chocolate. This was not a gratuitous novelty: The bite lets the sun in where it needs to go — on the park.

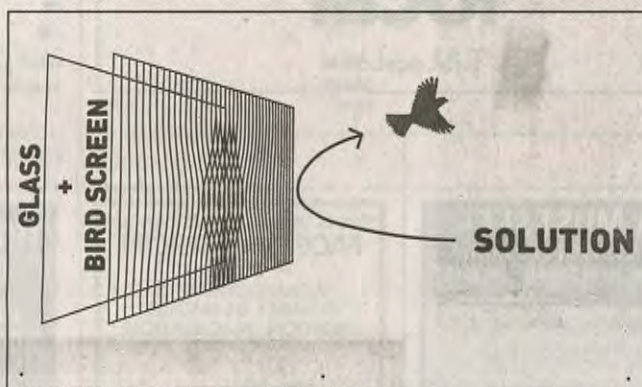
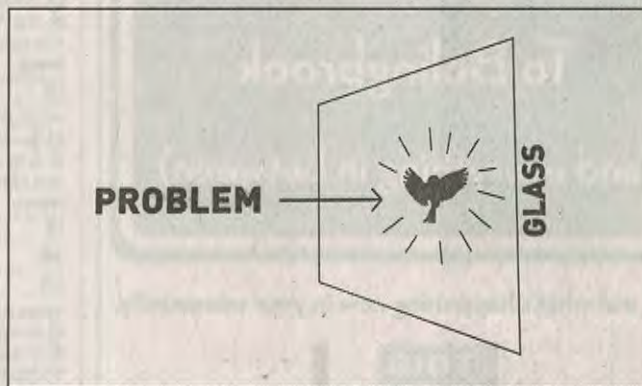
In case it is not clear, the pivot the curators refer to is Studio Gang's move to the big time.

Three sections are named for concerns that preoccupy Studio Gang. Building Nature includes Chicago projects like Northerly Island and the Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo. Both are redesigns of constructed landscapes, turning them into sustainable ecosystems. Under Building Density is found urban projects such as Aqua Tower and the New York job. Building Community contains City Hyde Park, an apartment and retail project to be built where a parking lot and strip mall have stood.



ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

The new exhibit "Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects" at the Art Institute of Chicago delves into the work and inner workings of architect Jeanne Gang, above, and her firm, which is recognized for emphasizing social and environmental responsibility.



NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Company drawings, above, hanging at the Inside Studio Gang exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, show how the firm identified a problem and its proposed solution.



MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO 2009

Aqua, the 82-story residential tower that features curving balconies that appear to ripple upward, is perhaps the best-known project by Studio Gang.

Consistent with the "snapshot" spirit, the show's installation is informal. It is meant to bring the visitor inside, to transform the passive museum viewer into something closer to a participant in the design process. The drawings and sketches with scribbled notes are copies — nothing precious — attached directly to the wall surface in a chest-high continuous ribbon that shows the evolution of ideas.

The work is informed by historical research materials referenced in the exhibit and by the objects on display. The latter range from milkweed pods to geodes and suggest the size of the net cast on the water by Studio Gang in a search for the right design solution.

Most arresting are the three-dimensional constructions that are like transparent circular rooms with a wall made of rope run in opposing patterns and stretched between circular metal frames at the floor and the ceiling. Inside these "rooms" are places to sit (stools also made of rope stretched between opposing frames) or tables with plans and documents to look at. Aside from adding a needed and appealing sculptural dimension, these "rooms" are inventive and playful and capture an essential quality of the firm and the way it works.

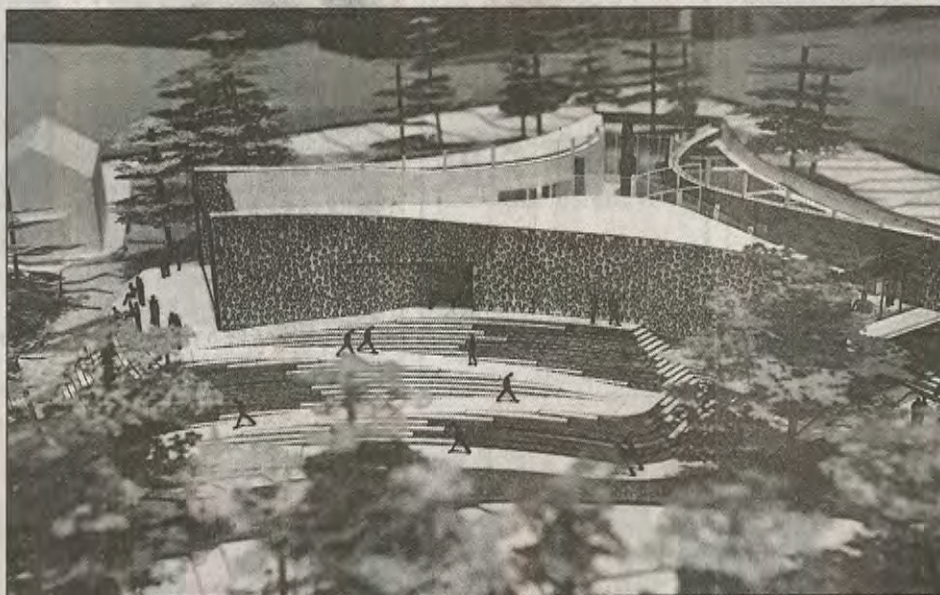
In a second room, the studio concept is pushed further with prototypes and production tools from built and yet-to-be built projects. From the half-round pavilion at the Lincoln Park Zoo Nature Boardwalk (possibly Studio Gang's second best-known job) there is a prototype of the bentwood frame. Nearby is the mold used to cast the fiberglass interstitial elements fitted into that wood frame.

The shape? Exactly the same as a milkweed pod.

An entire wall in this space is papered from floor to ceiling with 168 design-development drawings for the relatively small 10,000-square-foot Arcus Center for Social Justice and Leadership that is just breaking ground at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. The drawings show the level of care and thought going into the Arcus Center as well as a promise of a genuinely innovative building of a wholly new sort.

Aside from the drawings there is a prototype of the wall construction, a revival of an old, indigenous method called wood masonry in which sawn logs are stacked and the gaps filled in with cement. Unlike the traditional wood cabin most of us think of, here it is the sawn edge or section of the log that is visible instead of its length. The technique is both thermally efficient and is intended to tie the new building into the wooded landscape in which it will stand.

The curators say they spent a lot of time in the Studio Gang office observing, going so far as to attend meetings among the architects. A lot of time is spent at the beginning of a project when the architects dissect the client's program rather than taking it as the given starting point most clients intend it to be. This may be why the range of projects — and their sense of joy — feels identifiable as Studio Gang's.



A model of the Jeanne Gang-designed Arcus Center for Social Justice and Leadership, left, for Kalamazoo College in Michigan shows her revival of an old, indigenous construction method called wood masonry in which sawn logs are stacked and the gaps filled in with cement. Claire Cahan and Juan De La Mora, bottom, architects with Studio Gang, help put the finishing touches on the installation of the show at the Art Institute. The exhibit runs through Feb. 24.

