

POINTS OF DISCOVERY



Jeanne Gang

PHOTO: CHRIS KTAHARA

AQUA IS ALL MOTION. The Chicago skyscraper's rolling curves and fluid energy are a striking addition to the city—an expressive, twenty-first century entry into the most exclusive section of Chicago's skyscraper pantheon.

The building's success since its completion in 2009 has transformed not only Chicago's skyline, but also the reputation of the building's chief architect, Jeanne Gang. Gang already was a rising star, but she is now fully arrived: Aqua won an award recognizing it as the world's best new skyscraper in 2009, and Gang earned effusive press in prestigious publications around the world (*The New Yorker* called Aqua "ingenious," while British newspaper *The Guardian* said the tower is "a revelation").

Now Gang is poised to join a long line of luminary architects who have both lived and worked in Chicago, a list headlined by Daniel Burnham, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It was Mies, of course, who guided IIT's College of Architecture for 20 years in the mid-twentieth century, and in some ways it is his legacy that Gang most directly confronts as she forges her own path.

Gang joined IIT as an adjunct faculty member in 1998, shortly after founding her Chicago-based firm, Studio Gang Architects. She says her teaching style contrasts with what she describes as Mies' highly technical approach.

"When you're in school, that's the time to conceptualize, to focus on big ideas and to let yourself really explore issues," says Gang. "When students work for [Studio Gang], they learn nuts and bolts. In school, I emphasize the exploration and ideation that's possible when you're a student."

That approach is also evident in Gang's work, according to Donna V. Robertson, dean of the College of Architecture. Robertson hired Gang early in Robertson's tenure as dean, as part of a wave of promising young architects that also included John Ronan, an associate professor still at IIT, and Bob Piotrowski, who now leads a practice in Germany.

"Jeanne is very experimental; she doesn't have one fixed type of architecture [that she creates]," says Robertson. "She likes to move in and examine all the givens defined by a client, and then move beyond that restricted vision to uncover new opportunities."

Gang describes that process this way: "We make sure our work meets [a project's technical needs], and then we try to find out where the inflection points are—where we can discover something new," she says. "What drives me is the goal of making a discovery. But a [project] has to serve the people paying for it, as well; it has to meet their needs and fit their budget. Without that, you risk not being able to build it."

Indeed, Aqua's developer told Gang that a three-month delay or bloated budget would have killed that project.

As Gang's practice has grown, she's been teaching less frequently at IIT. She has, however, been hiring: there are nine IIT alumni on her staff, nearly a quarter of the firm's 40 employees. Not all of the firm's projects are as grand in scope as Aqua, but as Gang focuses her creativity and energy on buildings that range from community centers to carports, private homes, and concert halls, the possibility of a great discovery is ever present. For a young architect, that hope generates a sense of energy and motion that recalls the Aqua tower itself.

—Steve Hendershot

MORE  ONLINE

IIT College of Architecture: www.iit.edu/arch
Studio Gang: www.studiogang.net