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Gang Mentality

by [Alexandra Lange](#)
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courtesy Studio Gang Architects

Aqua Tower in Chicago, a new project by architect Jeanne Gang. Construction of the 80-story tower is scheduled to begin in October 2006.

Architect Jeanne Gang describes her office, on the second floor of a former bank in Chicago's trendy Wicker Park, as a laboratory. The office is an eclectic array of objects, articles, and photographs, and the 19 members of Studio Gang Architects do find themselves experimenting as they explore ideas for new projects. "I have a robin's nest on my desk," says Gang, "and someone else has a wasp's nest."

The nests aren't just objects of idle contemplation or airy metaphors. Rather, they were the inspiration for the firm's Ford Calumet Environmental Center—a sustainable, \$6.8-million education building on wetlands in Chicago's South Side, scheduled for completion in 2008. The project illustrates why Gang is

on the shortlist of top young American architects: her deep local research, green design, practicality, penchant for gestural form and flair for the poetic.

The physical elements that feed Gang's work are beautiful and specific, tough and airy. Not only nests, but also bamboo, bricks and plastic scraps. Turtle shells, for example, inspired a set of new pavilions at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. "When you are doing materials research, you really have to bring things in, break them and scratch them." Gang explains that a project should reflect its "particulars," its physical and metaphorical environment, "rather than being just another piece of sculpture."

Gang's approach can be seen in details, such as terrazzo made from broken beer bottles or steel slag, as well as in big concepts like the kinetic, petal-like wooden roof on the Bengt Sjoström Starlight Theater in Rockford, Ill., which opens silently each clear night. It also links her to her local predecessors. "It is not enough in this town to be a theoretician," says *Chicago Tribune* architecture critic Blair Kamin. "You have to be able to realize ideas with extraordinary power and beauty."

Gang's latest opportunity to build on that tradition comes from James Loewenberg, architect and developer of the 28-acre Lakeshore East project. He met Gang and her husband and business partner Mark Schendel at a Harvard alumni dinner, and hired them to design the 82-story, \$300-million tower, Aqua.

"We decided to use someone new and fresh," says Loewenberg, who has been criticized for the dullness of his past high-rise developments. He was particularly drawn to Gang because she hadn't done a high rise before. "Her work isn't based on what she did last—it is a totally different process each time." But it was one of Gang's many and wildly variegated concept proposals that ultimately seduced Loewenberg. The winning idea took inspiration from the city itself. Gang's premise was that people buy tower apartments for the views, so the firm built a model of Chicago and plotted sight lines, running lengths of string between undulating tower balconies and city landmarks.

"I always wanted to do a tower, but I never thought I would get a chance," Gang says. In fact, Aqua, slated for completion in 2009, is the largest project ever awarded to an American firm headed by a woman. "Maybe it is because the high rise has always been male territory," she says. Treading on male turf doesn't concern Gang. Her father was a civil engineer, and summer trips often involved visits to bridges and buildings. Her work on the Starlight Theater involved an intensive study of hydraulics, structures, and copper. The visually delicate roof design turned out to be so strong that it lifted the steel supports erected during construction, seemingly defying gravity (and amazing the steel workers).

Gang, like New York's Josh Prince-Ramus, is part of the Rem Koolhaas diaspora. Before opening their firm in 1997, Gang and Schendel both worked for Koolhaas at OMA on the Lille Grand Palais. "Rem is such a stimulating person to work with," says Gang. "He gives you as much rope as you need to hang yourself." Kamin sees the influence of Koolhaas in Gang's work as procedural, not aesthetic. "Rem clearly has influenced her with the notion of program-driven solutions," he says. "The extensive research, along with a very sharp eye, enables her to develop buildings that are formally inventive but not anti-urban or wildly expressionistic."

When developing the concept for the Ford Calumet Environmental Center, that sensibility meant becoming familiar with the four-mile stretch skirting the site. "At first nothing was really clicking, then it dawned on me that we have to make this project out of stuff that's already there," she explains. The form followed: a long glass walkway connecting a set of low-lying pavilions, its fragile surface shaded by a web of rebar and metal straps working as human-scale twigs. The end result will be a "library" of

local steel production, and a hybrid of nature and industry, which Gang sees as historically appropriate. “Everything in this area was based on steel mills,” says Gang.

Today industry has been replaced by activism, and the far South Side has developed a new identity in rebuilding the waterfront and reinvigorating the environment. The firm is building a new home for the neighborhood by collecting local shapes and materials and weaving in layers of Calumet history. “Gathering,” Gang says. “Maybe that’s the key to women in architecture.”

Alexandra Lange is a Brooklyn-based writer who covers art and architecture for New York magazine. She has also been published in the New York Times and Metropolis.