

# Building on a (Rotary) foundation

Alumna Jeanne Gang is now leaving her blueprint on Chicago, a city known for its architectural richness by Jan Parr



One of the things Jeanne Gang learned while studying in Switzerland on a scholarship from The Rotary Foundation nearly 20 years ago was that a person must rest on Sunday. As she did her laundry one Sunday in the basement of her apartment building in Zurich, the police arrived and ordered her to cease the washing. A concerned neighbor, it seems, had called to report the infraction. Gang gathered up her wet clothes. ¶ She looks back on it with a shrug. “It might be why the crime rate is so low in Switzerland,” she says. “People take action.” Much of the country has since abandoned this cultural practice of a Sunday day of rest. »

Gang stands at her Kam L. Liu Building, a community center she designed in Chicago's Chinatown.



Not that Sunday – or any day, for that matter – has ever been much of a resting day for Gang, 43, an innovative and in-demand architect based in Chicago. On any given day in her office on the city's Near Northwest Side, Gang can be found juggling several high-profile meetings and appointments as well as working on projects with her design teams and getting ready for the college classes she teaches. Her 25-person firm, Studio Gang Architects, won a competition to redesign post-Katrina homes in Biloxi, Miss. Gang is also the designer behind an 82-story

has to deliver on that promise. I have every confidence that she is likely to do that in the broad arch of her career," he says.

### Family foundation

Gang, a rare woman in a field still largely dominated by men, says her year as a Rotary Scholar (now called Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar) in 1988-89 was pivotal for her career. During that time, she studied at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, or ETH) in Zurich. At universities, the

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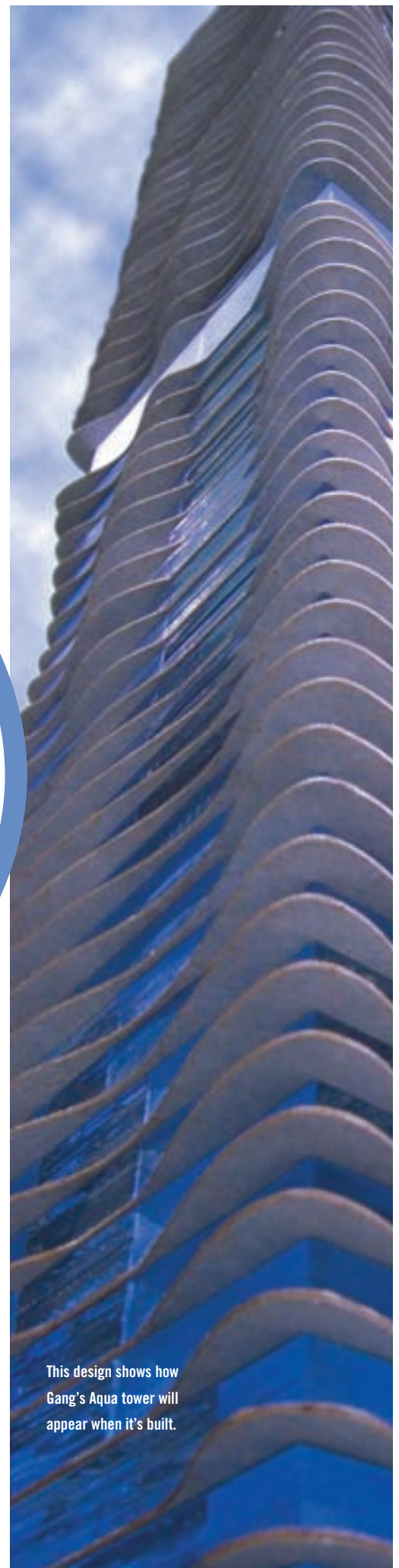
commercial and residential high-rise in Chicago known as Aqua, an undulating concrete and glass tower. And her studio also submitted designs as part of the proposal for Chicago’s bid against Los Angeles to host the 2016 Olympics. Clearly, Gang’s work ethic has paid off: She’s made a name for herself.

“Jeanne is one of a group of very promising, relatively young architects who are invigorating Chicago’s design scene with new energy,” says Blair Kamin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of the *Chicago Tribune*. “They’re grappling with and giving form to new challenges, such as the desire for sustainable architecture.” Of course, as Kamin points out, in architecture, a good design isn’t enough. “She still

study of architecture can be lumped with art, design, urban planning, or engineering. Gang chose the school in Zurich for its strong engineering bent.

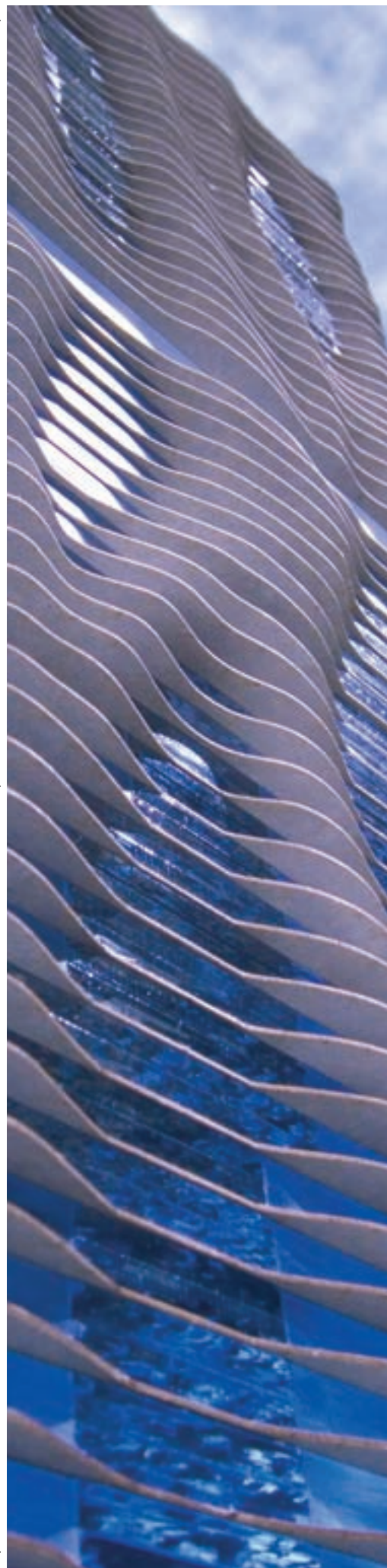
“The ETH influenced the way I think about architecture and materials,” Gang says. “Materials have inherent qualities. I think about what a building will be made out of first, and the form second. I am a builder.”

Indeed, building is in her family. Her father, a civil engineer who worked on bridges when she was growing up in Belvidere, Ill., was a great influence on Gang. “We used to take family vacations to look at bridges,” she says. Her mother, a seamstress, made her aware of materials and the way they move and behave.



This design shows how Gang's Aqua tower will appear when it's built.

PAUL MERIDETH



After learning about the Foundation's scholarship through another student in Belvidere, Gang immediately applied, drawn by the chance to study abroad, as she had in France during her junior year at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Gang, who has taught architecture at Harvard University, Yale University, and the Illinois Institute of Technology, recalls the scholarship interview in Dixon, Ill. Sitting in a dark hallway, she waited nervously for her turn. What impressed the committee, she believes, was the obvious connection between travel and architecture, and how a year in Zurich would influence her worldview. Gang also came prepared. She had researched the ETH and knew it was the school for her.

"Instead of just letting every student be as creative and intuitive as they wanted to be, there was a methodology for design," Gang says. "This methodology produces very competent architects, still. The few great architects from Switzerland are the ones who have gone beyond the methodology, but their work is still very well crafted and engineered."

A highlight of Gang's study in Zurich was visiting the house and studio of Alfred Roth, then one of the last architects still alive who were part of the original generation of international modern architects. Roth had worked for the pioneering modernist architect Le Corbusier on the important villa and apartment blocks in Stuttgart, Germany, an experiment in functional modern housing. But Roth was also a painter who was friends with artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian. "He had original paintings of theirs hanging on the walls of his house," Gang recalls. "The house itself was a remarkable example of his ideas on functionalism. This was the first time that I had met an architect with such a long history of commitment to

architecture. He was still practicing in his 80s at the time and was acutely aware of contemporary architects and exhibits. He was very tuned in, and that impressed me."

At the university, Gang attended history lectures given in German, but her primary activity was an independent study of cities. She traveled extensively to small towns in northern Italy to record and study the public spaces, the scale of the buildings, and infrastructure such as roads, water systems, and markets. Today, these studies and drawings are tucked into low, horizontal filing cabinets in her glass-lined corner office. (On top of one cabinet rests a bird's nest – the inspiration for one of her projects.)

In Zurich, Gang also found lasting personal connections. "I made good friends, the international type of friends that you meet when you are an outsider yourself," she says. "In my case, the longest-lasting friends are Chinese and Japanese. We still keep in touch and visit each other."

Gang's year in Switzerland also exposed her to the environmental movement. "I still remember that glass yogurt bottles were picked up outside the house by the company to be cleaned and reused," she says. "In addition, there was a movement in ecotourism that I learned about there. Ever since then, this is something I search out when traveling."

### Impressive portfolio

Once back in the States, Gang received a master's in architecture from Harvard, went back to Europe to work in the Netherlands for renowned architect Rem Koolhaas, and met her future husband, Mark Schendel, on a project for the Grand Palais in Lille, France. She later returned to the States to work at Booth Hansen, a respected Chicago architecture firm.

In 1997, she founded Studio Gang, which she runs with Schendel, a Harvard-educated architect. Her firm is probably

best known for the Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre in Rockford, Ill., with its dramatic, star-shaped roof that opens like flower petals, and the Marble Curtain, a feat of engineering with puzzelike, thin marble pieces that was displayed in 2003 and 2004 at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. Gang's studio also conceived the Ford Calumet Environmental Center, which, like a bird's nest, was designed to be built with materials nearby or discarded or in oversupply, such as salvaged steel from the Calumet industrial region on Chicago's Far South Side. It's expected to be completed in 2008.

Studio Gang's projects in development include a 9/11 memorial in Hoboken, N.J. Gang also is helping to renovate the South Pond of Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo as a natural habitat space. To help make the water cleaner, the pond will be dug

deeper, and a plant terrace will replace concrete around its perimeter to help filter the water.

The architecture world is also watching how she'll deliver on the towering Aqua, which, in its designs, seems to move like water or shimmering fabric blowing in the wind. The skyscraper will house apartments, condominiums, offices, and a hotel, and is expected to be completed in 2009.

Kamin has called Aqua "Chicago's most sensuous skyscraper." It's also one of the tallest buildings ever designed by a female-run firm. "Her Aqua project

appears to be innovative in its use of the computer to design balconies that form a cliff like a mass," Kamin says.

Practical to the core, Gang knew that scenic views are all important with a high-rise. Not just the mythical views that architects sometimes dream up when thinking of a building standing alone, but the ones that people would actually see, taking into account neighboring buildings that block some sight lines. The upper stories are easy, of course, but for the lower ones, she designed balconies of varying widths and angles to maximize views. She also proposed metal "curtains" for the balconies to protect them from the wind and provide privacy.

But best of all, residents can rest assured that they'll be able to do their laundry any day of the week. ■

*Jan Parr, editor of Chicago Home magazine, was a Rotary Scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1980-81.*

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»» **Married to:** Mark Schendel (above, left), business partner and fellow architect

**Selected awards and teaching experience**

»» 2006 Academy Award in Architecture, American Academy of Arts and Letters

(for overall achievement)  
 »» 2005 Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Award for Architectural Excellence in Community Design (for Kam L. Liu Building, the Chinese American Service League's community center in Chicago)  
 »» 2005 United States Institute for Theatre Technology Architecture Merit Award (for Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre)  
 »» 2004 Citation of Merit, American Institute of Architects, Chicago chapter (for Kam L. Liu Building)  
 »» 2004 Honor Award, American Institute of Architects, Chicago

chapter (for Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre)  
 »» 2003 Award of Honor, Society of American Registered Architects (for Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre)  
 »» Speaker at the Architectural League of New York's annual Emerging Voices lecture series, March 2006  
 »» Louis I. Kahn visiting assistant professor, Yale School of Architecture, 2005

**Selected buildings**

»» Kam L. Liu Building, Chicago (2004)  
 »» Bengt Sjostrom Starlight Theatre, Rockford, Ill. (2003)  
 »» Chicago Visitor Center (2001)

**Vital statistics**

»» **Jeanne Gang:** President and founder of Studio Gang Architects ([www.studiogang.net](http://www.studiogang.net))  
 »» **Birthplace:** Belvidere, Ill., USA  
 »» **Age:** 43  
 »» **Education:** Harvard, master's in architecture, with distinction, 1993; University of Illinois, bachelor's in architecture, with honors, 1986  
 »» **Hobbies:** Language study (speaks French and German and is learning Portuguese); travel (especially interested in cities with populations of more than 10 million)