



SOUTH SIDE STORY

Studio Gang
Architects

by Nichole L Reber

Jeanne Gang has earned international awards and recognition for the creative compositions and compelling tactile textures of her buildings. She is a consummate architect, blending equal parts designer, engineer and builder as she addresses each project thoroughly, down to the form and foreseeable wear-and-tear of construction materials. Born and raised near Chicago, she came to know the city well. Her education and experience, talent and thoroughness, have helped her make her mark on the city's internationally renowned skyline. That's no small feat, considering other famous architects from the city include the 'grandfather of skyscrapers', Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright, probably the most influential architect in American history.

At the onset of her career in the 1990s, Gang worked with Rem Koolhaas in Europe. She returned to the US in 1998 and ventured off on her own after a short stint at a small firm. Today her 40-person strong practice, Studio Gang Architects, is working on projects in Vancouver, Mexico City and elsewhere. Particularly notable among the firm's commissions are the Oculus 3 in Taipei, Taiwan; the Tellapur O2 in Hyderabad, India; and the Northerly Island Park in Chicago.

In regard to the project in her hometown, the City of Chicago's Park District had selected Gang's firm to enliven the notorious South Side, which has lagged behind the rest of the cosmopolitan city for decades. The client and Gang decided to erect what they hope will become yet another icon of the city, alongside the world-renowned Millennium Park and Lincoln Park, both of which are located in Chicago's affluent North Side. The envisaged result will be a 91-acre urban ecological habitat that fulfills Chicagoans' desire for more options of year-round urban outdoor activities. In specific, the park is slated to contain infrastructure for cross-country skiing, walking and ice skating, as well as an amphitheatre and reef. Visitors will also be able to enjoy an educational journey via active and passive learning experiences embedded



throughout the park. These strategically placed learning stations will function as outdoor classrooms. On the mainland will be an 'earth station' and an 'aquatics station', and on an island within Lake Michigan visitors will have the choice to either continue their environmental lessons in the 'cosmos station' or watch a concert at the amphitheatre. At the 'northerly station' people will be able to learn about local marine life and history or indulge in some bird-watching. Not surprisingly, the project's construction and design methods are intended to qualify for an LEED Gold rating.

hinge caught up with Gang as she buzzed from meeting to meeting, and asked certain questions architecture writers always want to ask their subjects, while also soliciting advice for up-and-coming architects.

What's the current status of the Tellapur O2 and the Oculus 3?

The design of the Oculus 3 was completed last year as part of an international competition. Studio Gang Architects' entry was one of the top three. The Tellapur O2 hasn't been built yet either, but we think we'll get it started again soon. Right now we're looking at a potential project in Mumbai. I've been going there to determine how the city operates and what it looks like. We're interested in the context and the rhythm of the city. You've been to Mumbai, so maybe you can tell me about the slums there. I'm interested in learning what they're composed of, how people move through them, what the space is like.



How do you think architects are adopting more sustainable practices in the context of their designs?

The first thing to consider in context is climate; it's not just the nearby buildings. The reason vernacular architecture looks the way it does is because it's responding to the climate. These days we're even thinking about extrapolating what the climate will be like in 50 years, even in places like Chicago, which will later be more like Alabama and Texas.

What would you like to achieve next?

I'm interested in designing some large-scale urban buildings that are public, like the Oculus 3, something part of the city's cultural infrastructure. I like helping a city with its cultural and ecological goals. The Northerly Island project addresses both of these. There you can learn about the environment. The ecology and design of it highlights how buildings can be more in tune with their environment and use less energy, while also teaching people about the exciting aspects of the region.

You give presentations all over the world and have many young architects in your firm. When working with newly minted architects, what are three things you try to impress upon them?

I tell them to follow their passion and not try to do the things everyone else is doing. I also tell them to understand how things are made. With the predominance of renderings and images, architects forget about making buildings — their construction and assembly and properties. Start out by considering what the structural material will be — for example, is it concrete? The third thing I tell them is to rethink almost everything in our cities. Cities are the most important pattern of living we have now. Presently 50% of the people on this planet live in cities, and the figure is increasing. So make the cities liveable.

The textures of your buildings get people talking. Is texture your passion?

We do less work where things are covered and coated. The curving slabs of the Aqua building are the structure, the expression of the material and the quality — as opposed to covering it up and hiding it with cladding or some other texture. For the Tellapur O2 project in Hyderabad, the idea is to use a compressed block made right on the site. It's a way of creating less of a footprint. The block is really green, too, because it's not fired in a kiln; it's air-dried.

What are your favourite buildings in the world?

In Chicago, I've always liked Mies van der Rohe's SR Crown Hall at IIT. I also like the São Paulo Museum of Art by Lina Bo Bardi; its structure creates a whole outdoor plaza that's used for events. In Europe I have always liked Corbu's Convent of La Tourette and Villa Savoye. His most important work, though, has been things he's done in India, such as his museum in Ahmedabad, and his Unité d'Habitation in France, because it was designed as an affordable housing project and it really considered how people look at tall buildings. It allows for more density. Every floor has outdoor access, so you have exposure on both sides to light and air.

You are internationally renowned but don't have the persona of a starchitect. Why is that?

I don't really like that term, "starchitect". In fact, I don't think any architect does. It's a term that's been applied mostly by the media. Instead, I think of myself as simply an architect, an urbanist.

It seems that in their foray into the developed world, East Asians today are highly concerned about designing and building the 'world's tallest this or that', and the 'world's greenest other thing'. How does this affect the zeitgeist of architecture? What do you think about the race for superlatives in East Asia?

The most extreme case of that is probably in Dubai. They really want to create this city full of extraordinary structures. It's a strategy to bring people to these new cities. Cities are in competition with one another for many reasons in this global culture we're in. A city can differentiate itself with its architecture, so I don't see the end of that any time soon. It's not just architecture; it's having the fastest trains, the most high-tech infrastructure....

What's forthcoming?

Well, in addition to the possible project in Mumbai, we're working on a project called Solstice in Chicago.

Learn more about Studio Gang Architects at www.studiogang.net

