

## *San Francisco Chronicle*

### Visionary architect fuses imagination, common sense

- [John King](#)

Tuesday, October 10, 2006



Architecture lectures can be a slog: very smart people use very long words to describe very meticulous projects that often won't ever be built. And even when the images are seductive, the real world seems far, far away.

That's why Jeanne Gang's talk in San Francisco last week was such a treat. Not only could a layperson like me make sense of her words, her most provocative visions are coming to life -- including an 82-story residential tower that breaks ground in Chicago this month.

"It's a project I never thought I would do at this point in my career," the 42-year-old Chicago architect confessed to the young audience at the California College of Arts. "But I've always wanted to do a high-rise."

Gang would be worth hearing even if she wasn't about to leave her mark with a tower nearly the height of our Transamerica Pyramid, because her message resonates across the map. Architecture isn't about styles or dogma or polemical points of views. It requires a thoughtful grasp of what can make a place and project shine -- and a design that makes this happen in fresh, imaginative ways.

The first project that Gang presented gave a sense of where she's coming from both personally and professionally: a 1,600-pound "curtain" assembled puzzle-like from 622 wafer-thin slices of marble and displayed in 2003 and 2004 at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

It's the sort of mind-bending conceptual exercise you'd expect from an architect who, along with her partner Mark Schendel, worked for iconic hipster Rem Koolhaas at one point. And she downplayed the luscious glow of the masonry: "nothing is decorative; it's completely about the structure."

But she also conceded that "when it turned out that the most beautiful stone was the strongest, we were very excited about that." She also touted -- not for laughs, but as a pointer for students -- the "amazing high-tech material" used to bind the marble and its backing: plain old-fashioned glue.

"Architects are always embarrassed about glue," Gang said, standing before a slide of you-know-what. "They don't like to admit using it, but it's very strong."

There you have it: someone who experiments with materials and structural forms, but also takes pride in crafting something that looks as good in real life as it does in a computer.

It's a fitting combination for Chicago, which has produced so much path-clearing architecture with such straightforward ease. What earns respect is getting things done -- and people are open to the unexpected if it seems to make sense.

This came through in another project Gang talked about: an environmental study center designed for Chicago's Calumet River, a favored migratory stop for birds even though steel mills loom on all sides.

Gang won the international competition after a conceptual leap that fused imagination and common sense: "We could make a building like a bird would make a nest, and use materials salvaged from nearby." Instead of conventional columns there will be bundles of steel rods, for instance; the terrazzo floor will be a buffed blend of slag and old bottles.

The design of the project (which should begin construction next year) looks a bit like a nest as well -- thanks to a thin weave of rebar outside that should prevent birds from flying into the glass-walled structure.

One of the interns at Gang and Schendel's 19-person firm told them about how an estimated 97 million birds each year are killed by collisions with glass; Gang, who grew up outside Chicago and confesses "I knew nothing about birds when I started this project," then resolved "to make sure we didn't kill all the birds people were coming to see."

Can't argue with that.

The final project shown was Aqua, the 82-story tower Gang has designed for a block just north of Millennium Park, the wondrous new urban playground along Michigan Avenue. While it will stand among a dozen similarly scaled behemoths -- this is Chicago, after all -- Aqua is sure to attract notice: The balconies will swell out and pull back with tidal grace, as though waves were rippling across the facade. With no two floors exactly alike.

Whimsical and indulgent? Not at all. The undulations may be reminiscent of weathered limestone -- Gang's analogy -- but they serve a purpose. The undulating balconies will reach out as far as 12 feet, and the most pronounced ripples will be in spots that grab unexpected views of nearby landmarks.

Gang also hopes the Aqua's ever-shifting silhouette will pay dividends to the public at large. It becomes a show for passers-by, a new dimension to a dense city.

"We want to give something to the person who's a pedestrian, acknowledge that their viewpoint is different, privilege them in some ways," Gang said, adding, with dry candor, "that's not something you talk about with the developer."

It's difficult to imagine a tower like Aqua in San Francisco. Naysayers would carp that it's too big, or too weird. The abstract form would be attacked by people who like their buildings neatly packaged in predictable styles.

But architects such as Gang are exactly what the Bay Area needs: talented designers who respond to the challenges at hand in ways that are adventurous and subtle at once.

And that means we -- developers, government, the public -- need to search them out and give them a chance. The region deserves nothing less.

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