An Interview with Jeanne Gang

Corbin Keech and Jeanne Gang
Studio Gang

Corbin Keech is an architect at Studio Gang and an alumnus of Kansas State University. Here, he questions the concept of innovation in architecture through the lens of the studio's work, in conversation with founding principal Jeanne Gang.

Corbin Keech: During my undergraduate and graduate studies, architecture seemed to me to be relatively uncomplicated. Our curriculum was a function of a university mandate to prepare students for a steady career as a competent professional. Nevertheless, I recall developing a pretty fierce obsession with the idea that architecture should be connected to something much larger than itself, an attitude that defines the culture of Studio Gang—an attitude that brought me here. With that in mind, in retrospect, as a student, I don't recall creating anything truly innovative, but I do remember long, frenzied, yet fulfilling hours fueled by an unwitting and haphazard desire to create something...interesting.

Now that I've been practicing architecture for a number of years—three and a half years at Studio Gang—I've been fortunate to participate in your design process and your particular method of conceiving, testing, and producing architectural projects that are frequently characterized as "innovative." What does this term innovation mean to you? What is the nature of innovative design, and where does it come from?

Jeanne Gang: Innovation is incrementally or radically evolving that which has already been done. In architec-

ture, I think innovation emerges out of an attentive design process—in fact, the design process itself can be innovative as well...But it's not interesting to me to try to be innovative just for the sake of it. There is always a reason to try to evolve something new, like a problem in the world that needs solving. Innovation comes from a process of listening, testing, combining, editing, and prototyping. In my view, architects have special abilities unique to our profession—we can connect dots between many fields of knowledge and diverse audiences. These are the same abilities that allow us to envision the future.

North American cities have unique challenges and by working with communities and learning not only their challenges but also their potential, we can more productively use design to find innovative solutions. In doing so we collectively decide which futures to push forward. Overall, I think the places we choose to look at and the issues we are moved to address are what define us as people and as architects.

CK: Why is this the role of the architect, instead of say, a community organizer or activist? And at what point does design come into play?

JG: You mention community organizing, but I think you could just have easily asked about the difference between architecture and urban planning or landscape architecture, because each of these fields is also in

the space of defining the urban realm and good at recognizing systems. As an architect, however, one is able to make the connection between the system and the individual. I think that bringing this intimate human scale to the greater system allows architects to connect and inspire people. Design at the architectural scale is the spark that can start a chain reaction toward addressing larger more systemic urban needs.

The process we have developed at Studio Gang to be better urban designers is to begin each project with an intensive research and discovery phase before proposing solutions. This is part of the innovative process I mentioned earlier. During this research phase we are absorbing information with an open mind. The process of distilling and documenting

research, sketching observations, and assembling the documents that form the base of our research is in itself a foundational act of design. Our process entails knowing all of the factors involved in a project, whether they are physical constraints, environmental realities, or cultural observations about the attitudes of a specific community and bringing all of that information together as we begin to generate formal and programmatic architectural solutions. There's also always a material research aspect to any of our projects, and I've found that there is a deep connection between how we innovate with material and how we innovate at the scale of the city.

CK: I'm glad you highlighted this ethic of allowing observation preceding form because I think this distinguishes our

work from others, and I'd like to drill down into this idea. I've often heard people say that Studio Gang's work is not defined by a specific style, form, or material, something that I agree with and find to be complimentary. In my view, this is a direct function of a process that consistently reveals new typologies rather than deliberately seeking to create them. I'm interested in how you see this attitude, this process, manifesting at different scales.

JG: I think if someone is attentive to our body of work, they would begin to identify tendencies and themes, even formally. But because we address such a wide range of scales and types, our projects are bound to have differences in aesthetics. We embrace these differences instead of trying to force every project into a formally identifiable oeuvre. You are right to point out that we see our greatest strength as making the projects specific to the organization we are working with and specific with respect to the place for which we are designing. But by working on different kinds of projects we can transfer knowledge from one type to another and this also brings about innovation.

Our most recent built work, the Writers Theatre in a suburb of Chicago, was informed by the theater company's goal of creating the most intimate experience for their visitors. We also wanted the theater to fulfill its mission of being a place for relevant contemporary discussion. These goals, together with an understanding of the place and of

public space led us to design a very community-oriented theater where the lobby acts as a forum and civic space.

Another example is the Nature Boardwalk for the Lincoln Park Zoo. Built in the nineteenth century, the pond was intended to create a picturesque version of nature. Over time it became a degraded, polluted, shallow pool. We were asked to design a pavilion to make the park attractive, but we saw an opportunity to create a more robust piece of urban infrastructure. In my mind, the project is as much about the renovation of the pond as it is about the pavilion. By blending these goals we arrived at a new kind of public space that is working on numerous levels: stormwater infrastructure, education space, and urban habitat for wildlife. Yet this architectural scale works to energize the larger urban planning element in the collective imagination. As a fun, attractive, vibrant space in the city, it is able to provide casual and formal opportunities to teach people about ecology.

CK: The notion of a process that can be scaled up and down is interesting because it implies success stemming from a broad skillset. You've spoken before about the expansion of the studio's repertoire rather than growing for the sake of growth, as well as engaging directly with experts in ecology and public policy. Can you talk about the challenge of developing a studio structure and design methodology that supports that project? More spe-

EDUCATION

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WETLAND

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HYDROLOGY

Increasing Pond Depth and Expanding Local Watershed Improves Water Quality and Creates a Balanced Pond Ecosystem. Excavated Fill is Reused to Aid in Surface Flow.

EXISTING POND

Fully Engineered Edge, Shallow Pond Depth, & Nitrogen Rich Pollutants Contributed to an Unhealthy Pond and an Unbalanced Ecosystem.
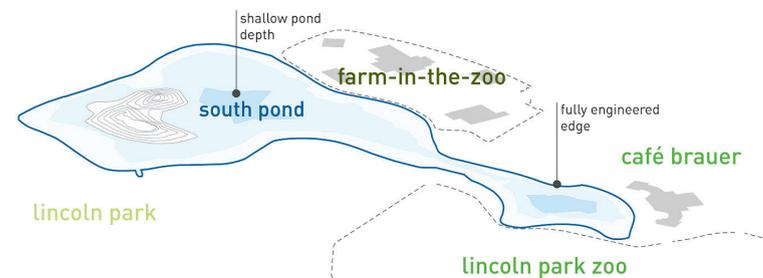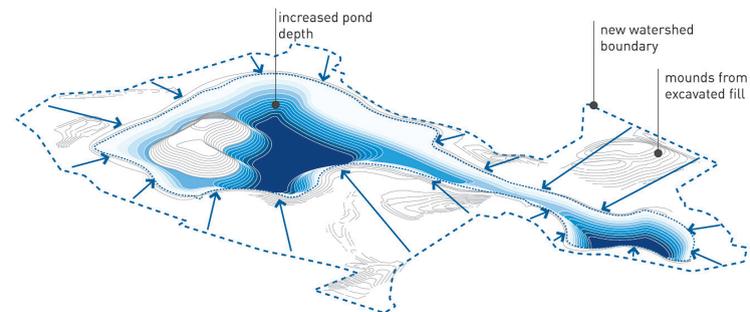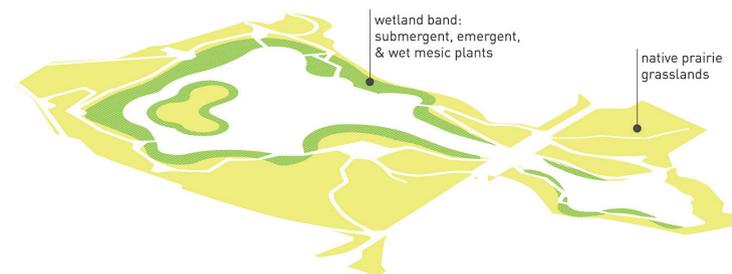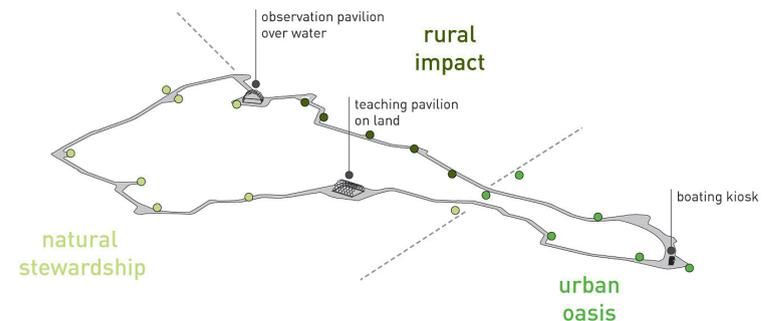
cifically, can you describe how this interest was materialized through the design and construction of the Chicago Boathouses?

JG: The types of issues that architects must engage are multiplying, and our practices are changing. We need to collaborate in order to bring relevant expertise to the difficult issues facing our communities. And because architecture reflects of culture, we are always engaging contemporary issues. Commissions can allow us to address contemporary problems, but we can also self-initiate projects that we think could start a discussion or tip the scale. In 2011, a collaboration with the Natural Resources Defense Coun-

cil resulted in a book and research project called *Reverse Effect: Renewing Chicago's Waterways*. In communicating the complex history of the Chicago River to the public, the project highlighted the challenges of poor water quality and invasive species, while exploring opportunities for a healthy river ecosystem and economic revival. As a "call to action" it recommended increasing public access to the river in order to catalyze support for its remediation and long-term stewardship.

Building on the book project, the opportunity arose to put our ideas to action. The City of Chicago decided to introduce a series of publically accessible boathouses along the river.

Studio Gang designed two of these boathouses, which serve the public and Chicago youth rowing programs.

CK: So environmental justice and social justice are interlinked?

JG: Neighborhoods are ecosystems, no different than a forest or body of water. When a neighborhood or city is out of balance, it can't function—similar to what we see in natural areas that are out of balance. In recent work, we have tried to address the growing imbalance in American cities and neighborhoods by giving attention to crucial community infrastructure and the health of natural resources. We are interested in the physical dimensions of policy issues.

In what ways can architecture and urban design contribute to a dialogue about equity and social justice in the American city? Furthermore, how can focusing on a healthy environment for all, be beneficial to the economic situation for neighborhoods?

CK: I'm happy we're ending with neighborhoods, since it seems to take the studio beyond the explicitly architectural scale, and because community engagement seems to be a growing area of our expertise, something we have consciously made a priority. I wonder how this trajectory differs from previous projects involving significant community outreach. Why are you interested in this engagement and why is it innovative?

JG: It is clear that our studio wants to expand our influence and make a positive difference in the world. We are in a time of difficult environmental change caused by over consumption of the world's resources. We think there are exciting ways to help change our current system and make the world more just at the same time. That's why we are interested in how architecture can improve both the environment and social issues. We think that our effectiveness on larger issues is going to start with communities.

By listening to what people have to say at the neighborhood level, we can understand what people need and want. We are expanding upon an inclusive and engaged design process that has its roots in the 60s but today is more needed than ever. Our goal is to help architects become effective listeners, translators, and idea generators articulating and envisioning the city we all want.

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