

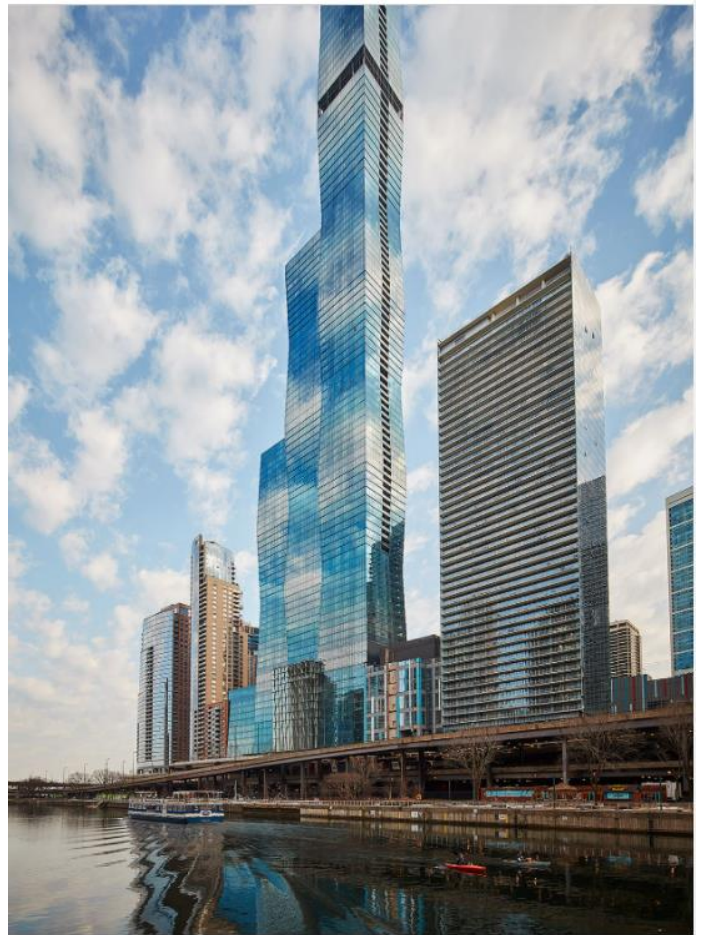
ART REVIEW

A Sculptural Skyscraper for Chicago

St. Regis, the latest structure by Windy City architect Jeanne Gang, is a mixed-use tower that undulates as it rises and is the tallest building designed by a woman

Do not confuse the shape of a fashionable residential tower with the artistic line drawn by an architect. It is the line of truce after a battle. A developer fights to expand his territory, his holy volume of rentable space, and the architect pushes back, trying to carve and sculpt that volume, and to make it beautiful. The developer wins, of course, giving us the box with an all-glass skin that is the industry standard of high-rise housing.

But there are exceptions. The three interlocking and progressively taller towers that make up the St. Regis Chicago, this city's newest and most prominent residential and hotel development, are as exquisitely contoured as a work of abstract sculpture. Each successive level is set back five inches and then, once 12 stories are reached, the process is reversed and the levels start to step outward. These 12-story modules have the shape of a decapitated pyramid--the technical term is "frustum"—and in their alternating inward and outward taper the towers call to mind Brancusi's celebrated Endless Column. Yet for all their slenderness they manage to



The St. Regis Chicago TOM HARRIS/STUDIO GANG

accommodate a daunting 1.9 million square feet, a colossal amount of residential and hotel space, in the most elegant fashion imaginable.

The St. Regis Chicago (which began life on the drawing board in 2014 as the Wanda Vista Tower) was meant to open last year, but after the inevitable delays it is opening only now. The 393 condominiums on the upper levels are partially occupied while its 191-room hotel and restaurant are still under construction. Nonetheless, it is sufficiently complete to take its measure. Prominently sited on the Chicago River, just west of Lake Michigan, it rises a full 101 stories, making it the city's third-tallest building. It is easily the most important addition to the Chicago skyline in a generation—no small feat in America's most celebrated architectural city.

The building is the work of Studio Gang, the Chicago firm with a knack for drawing aesthetic lessons from purely technical considerations. For nearly a decade it has been experimenting with "solar carving," its term for the shaping of a building in accordance with the moving path of the sun. With the St. Regis, the calculations were unusually complex. As its girth varies, so does the relative amount of sunlight it receives, the heat gain rising as the footprint shrinks. To offset the difference, the architects hit upon the idea of progressively tinting the glass so that each floor receives the exact same quantity of sunlight and heat.

The calculus may be heartless but the results are lovely. Six different tints are used, and they vary in intensity from a deep ocean blue to the pale turquoise of a wave illuminated from behind, not a bad palette for a waterfront building. The darkest bands do not come where the eye expects them, on the floors that taper inward, where they would strengthen the sense of shadow and recession as in a sculpture. Color and form do not align precisely, and the effect is like that of a camouflaged ship, which shimmers and pulses, and teases you with its shape. One would swear that it has curves; it does not (some published accounts notwithstanding).

As you approach you are startled to learn that the central tower barely touches the ground but is held aloft by its neighbors, like a pleasantly wobbling reveler

supported by two companions. What would otherwise be an impenetrable leviathan is thereby made porous. Alas, the audacious engineering feature that makes this possible—a 508-foot-tall concrete shear wall within the central tower that transfers its load to its neighbors—will never be seen by the public.



View of the 'blow through' at the St. Regis | PHOTO: ANGIE MCMONIGAL/STUDIO GANG

Nor will the public see the building's most dramatic space, at least not from within. Late in the project's evolution, testing showed that it would sway more in heavy winds than had been foreseen. To reduce what would otherwise be an alarming sway, levels 83 and 84 are left open to create a "blow through," the first use of the feature in a Chicago building.

As electrifying as the building is against the sky, it strives to be a good citizen on the ground. At street level, a 13-story pavilion bursts forth to express the part of the building reserved for the hotel and restaurant. Nicknamed "the Cube," it mediates between the monumental scale of the towers and the human scale of the Chicago

River waterfront. The intention is admirable although it reads as unhappily additive, as would perhaps any appendage to a building as formally resolved as this.



'The Cube' at the St. Regis | PHOTO: ANGIE MCMONIGAL/STUDIO GANG

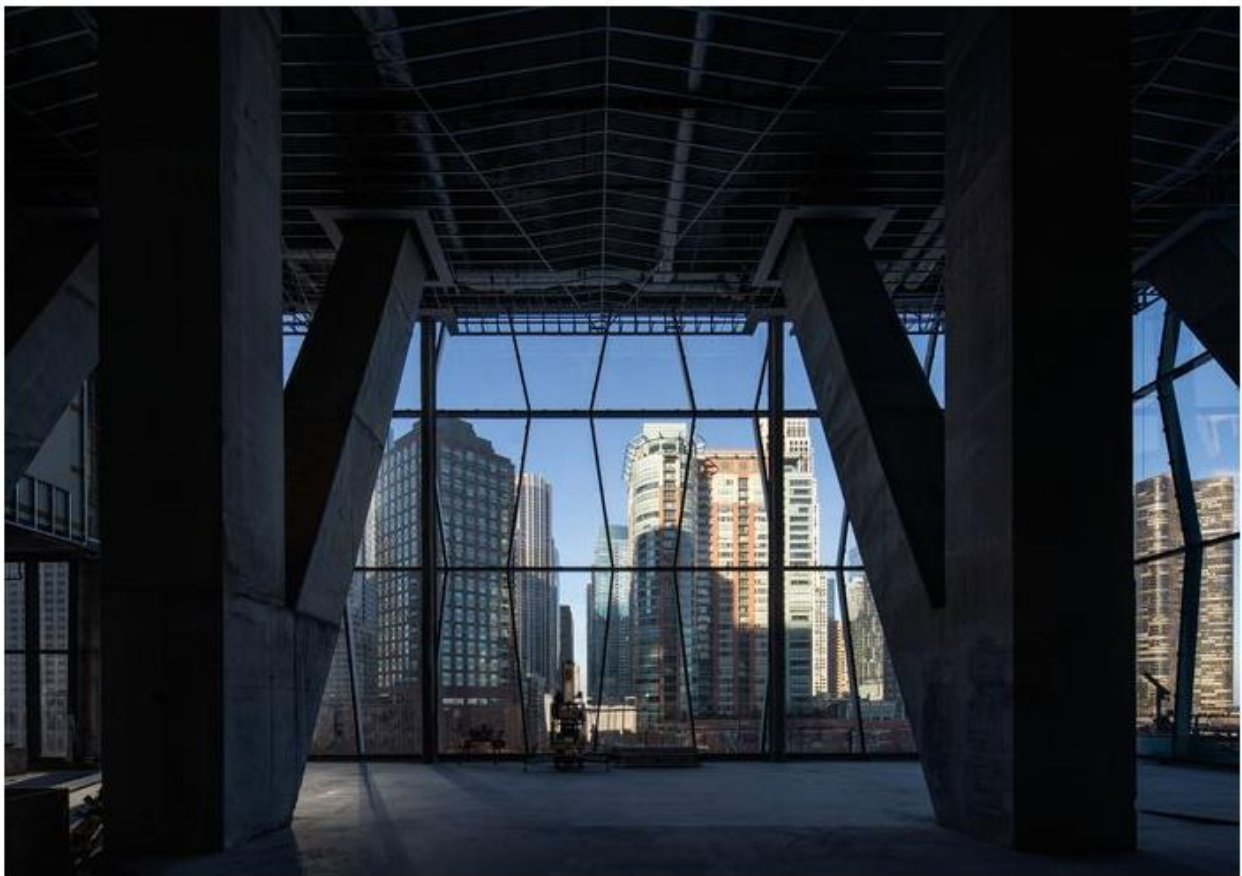
The St. Regis Chicago is the product of a complex collaboration of numerous firms, including Gensler (the hotel), HBA (the interiors), and bKL Architecture (the

architect of record), but it is an eminently personal building, as is almost all of the work of Jeanne Gang, the founder of Studio Gang.

I asked Ms. Gang if it was difficult to relinquish her building to other architects and interior designers. “Not at all,” she told me. “A building should be able to change and adapt.” A becoming modesty from the author of the tallest building ever designed by a woman, and what is surely the world’s largest work of inhabitable sculpture.

—*Mr. Lewis teaches architectural history at Williams and reviews architecture for the Journal.*

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the location of the St. Regis in relation to Lake Michigan.



St. Regis Chicago

PHOTO: ANGIE MCMONIGAL/STUDIO GANG

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