

SIGN IN

McGraw  
CONSTRUI

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

**AIA Members:** Your AIA subscription to *Architectural Record* ends with the December issue. [Renew now!](#)



Photo © Steve Hall / Hedrich Blessing

# Media Production Center, Columbia College Chicago

Studio Gang Architects

Chicago, Illinois

Jeanne Gang turns to cinema to shape the spaces inside a new academic building.

By Joann Gonchar, AIA

The southern reaches of Chicago's South Loop might seem an odd place for a college academic building: The neighborhood is a gritty mix of warehouses, surface parking lots, loft conversions, and recently constructed residential towers. But for Columbia College Chicago, a private, 12,000-student arts and media school, a long-vacant city-owned plot at the corner of 16th and State Streets was a nearly ideal location for a Media Production Center (MPC) to house its programs in film, television, and related fields, such as video-game design.



## Program

The site is within walking distance of many of Columbia's 21 other buildings, all to the north, but scattered throughout the South Loop. School officials had assumed they would only be able to afford land much farther from this existing cluster for the 35,000-square-foot MPC and its professional-level facilities, including sound stages, a motion-capture studio, a set-production shop, and classrooms. So when the city issued a request for proposals in June 2004 for the 1-acre lot, offering it at a discount to encourage nonresidential development, Columbia jumped at the chance. The location had only one liability — the rumble from heavy car traffic on State Street as well as from trains on nearby freight tracks and a Chicago Transit Authority "L" line. The noise and vibration were potentially disruptive to the audio and visual recording that would go on inside.

## Solution

To design the MPC, Columbia turned to Jeanne Gang, FAIA, and her firm, Studio Gang, now best known as the architects of [Aqua](#), the 82-story mixed-use tower with a rippling facade that sits just to the north of Chicago's Millennium Park [RECORD, May 2010, page 60]. Curiously, the MPC displays none of Aqua's sculptural expressiveness. Except for a colorfully glazed elevation inspired by the bars in television test patterns, the long and horizontal MPC is a much more low-key affair that seems to respond to the still largely industrial character of its surroundings.

Gang has organized the essentially one-story building as three parallel strips. The main studios, where occupants needed complete control of lighting and sound, are

### PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

- **Concrete panels:** Dukane Precast
- **Metal/glass curtain wall:** Kawneer; Viracon
- **Green Roof:** American Hydrotech

### VIDEO



Gang explains how film inspired her firm's design for a Media Production Center at Columbia College in Chicago.

#### RELATED LINKS

**Aqua**

**Studio/Gang Designing Chicago Skyscraper**

**Studio Gang Architects Wins Contest to Build Environmental Center In Chicago**

contained inside the largest strip — a windowless box bordering an alley at the western edge of the site. Spaces where a connection to the activity outside and access to daylight were considered desirable, including classrooms, the set shop, and the directing studio, are lined up along State Street, behind the colorful facade. Sandwiched in between these two outer volumes are spaces devoted primarily to equipment and prop storage.

A system of precast-concrete walls and steel trusses supports and encloses much of the building. This construction method, with fabrication of the wall panels performed off-site, helped contractors stick to the tight 13-month construction schedule and the \$13.7 million budget. In addition, the precast units, made up of outer and inner layers of concrete of different thicknesses separated by several inches of insulation, provide an “impedance mismatch” that prevents unwanted noise from penetrating the sound stages, according to Scott Pfeiffer, a principal at Threshold, the project’s acoustics consultant. This combination of thicknesses and acoustical properties would have been difficult to create had the walls been poured in place, he explains.

A green roof covering about two thirds of the MPC also plays an acoustical isolation role. One of its chief benefits is that it nearly eliminates noise from pelting rain. And, as green roofs often do, it helps counteract the urban heat-island effect and reduces storm-water runoff. The roof, along with other resource-conserving features, is part of the MPC’s bid for LEED Gold certification.

Visitors and regular users enter the building through a slight kink in the vibrant State Street facade. Just off this space, at the northeast corner, is a double-story lounge. It contains an artifact from the beginnings of Chicago’s movie industry — an early-20th-century masonry arch that was part of a recently demolished film-distribution

building a few blocks away. A wide stair doubles as bleacher seating for lounging or for viewing movies and other programming that faculty and students can display on the room’s set of retractable LED screens.

The studios and other instructional spaces are on the lobby’s opposite side, reached by way of a clerestory-topped circulation spine that first passes a skylit equipment-checkout area envisioned by Gang as the MPC’s hub. A ramp leads to the classrooms, then loops around to hug the building’s State Street edge, ending at the top of the lounge’s viewing stair.

Cinematic compositional devices shaped this route, explains Gang, with windows framing views through multiple spaces and to the building’s exterior. Other openings have been carefully positioned to create different daylighting conditions and accentuate the sense of layering.

#### Commentary

These film-inspired visual links are intended to encourage collaboration among students, according to Gang. Whether or not they actually facilitate this hoped-for interaction remains to be seen. However, the interconnections, which might have seemed contrived if

less skillfully executed, do provide a welcome complexity to an otherwise almost industrial building type. In a similar way, the colorful facade escapes being hokey: It lends the MPC a spirited energy and hints at the program housed inside, stopping just shy of the overly literal.

**Total construction cost:** \$13.7 million

**Gross square footage:** 35,000 sq.ft.

**Completion date:** December 2009

**Architect:**

Studio Gang Architects  
1212 N. Ashland Avenue – Ste. 212  
Chicago, IL 60622

November 2010