

A flash of Wit

Architect Jackie Koo debuts her firm's first major building—the Wit hotel.

By Jay Pridmore
Photography by Dan Dry & Wayne Cable

Not all architects get to put bold signatures on their work, but Jackie Koo, AB'86, recently etched one on the edge of Chicago's Loop. She designed the Wit hotel, a sculptural building with a jagged lightning-bolt motif creased on its 27-story glass façade and an atrium lobby that overlooks the "L" tracks.

Koo's design for the Wit, which opened in late May, revives a once-desolate stretch of North State Street (at the corner of Lake Street), and not just with flashy gestures. The real action of the Wit is inside, where Koo fit 298 guestrooms, two restaurants and a rooftop lounge, and conference and banquet spaces on a narrow urban site. The more startling aspects of form followed Koo's command of the high-rise's function.

The architect, who started Koo and Associates in 2005, has had a good year. Her Wit design won the *Chicago Tribune's* praise as "a bolt of urban energy for State Street"—this while many of her contemporaries are submerged in an economy notably unkind to architects. She's designing another hotel, in the South Loop, which could be completed as early as 2011.



She treats her practice as she does floor plans and utility cores: with a close view to how it will work. Her office remains lean—six architects plus herself—housed in compact quarters in Chicago's landmark Monadnock Building. She promotes a diverse portfolio to get hired for renovations, interiors, and, she hopes, publicly funded work, including public housing.

Koo didn't plan to become an architect when she arrived at the University in 1982 with intense "intellectual curiosity" but no particular idea of what came next. She remembers being impressed by the stately Collegiate Gothic quadrangles. "The campus was so amazing architecturally," she says. "It looked like my idea of a university."

She majored in philosophy, she explains, "at a time when the whole deconstructionist movement was in vogue." Koo insists she has not embraced deconstruction's endless complexity, mixed meanings, and the notion that words and ideas are rarely as they seem. But deconstruction provided "a natural segue from philosophy to architectural theory." Architecture was having a similar movement, called deconstructivism, often focused on distorting traditional elements, leaving abstract and even jarring forms behind.

She started a master's degree in architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, known at the time for its iconoclast dean, Stanley Tigerman, and architect Peter Eisenman, a preeminent deconstructivist of the 1980s, also on the faculty there.

"I went in thinking I would be less a practitioner of architecture and more a theorist," Koo says. But when she graduated she knew she wanted to build buildings, not only talk and write about them. Her first job was as an apprentice in the New York office of Richard Meier & Partners. Meier was a Pritzker Prize winner whose work was considered the leading edge of modern design. Koo worked on Meier's Getty Museum in Los Angeles and remembers the luxury of agonizing for days over small details, like the proportions of a stone bench in the employee locker room.



After a three-year stint in Providence, Rhode Island, working on the city's new riverfront, she returned in 1997 to Chicago, which is famously hospitable to young, ambitious architects: "I didn't want to do my first building when I was 60." She joined De Stefano and Partners, a firm known more for efficient output than for high design.

Koo rose to senior associate at De Stefano, heading projects such as Springfield's State Emergency Operations Center, which won a 2007 American Institute of Architects Award. She also designed the 185-room Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood on a site that previously fit two townhouses.

The Fairfield project's developer, Scott Greenberg of ECD Company based in Lincolnshire, Illinois, found Koo had "an exceptional grasp of aesthetics, but also of the technical aspects of what goes into a building." So when Greenberg conceived the Wit in 2006, he called Koo. "I knew I was going to get something deeper than just bricks and sticks."

What he got was a design that reflects Koo's own philosophy, touched by deconstructivism, which in its radical form created the controlled chaos of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Koo's gentler complexities mix a building's functional requirements with personal expressions.

Rather than sticking with strict requirements, says Koo, "it's the swerve that defines the architect as the building's author." In the Wit, these gestures include the chartreuse lightning bolt as well as the views of the Chicago Theatre marquee, surrounding older buildings, and the "L." As the *Chicago Tribune's* Blair Kamin writes, Koo gives the Wit's lofty lobby "a facade of ultra-transparent, low-iron glass. By doing so, she turns passing Chicago Transit Authority trains into kinetic sculpture."

She solved even practical problems with creativity, like the arrangement of elevator cores on this narrow site. But it's the swerve that makes the building "fresh and unexpected," she says. "That was what the owner was looking for in the Wit, and that was the design's concept from the very beginning."

[Return to top](#)

