

A Profile of Cathleen McGuigan, Editor-in-Chief, *Architectural Record*

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

Cathleen McGuigan is the new (as of May 2011) editor-in-chief of *Architectural Record*. This is momentous news in the design and building world. The big jobs don't turn over often.

McGuigan took the helm of McGraw-Hill's 120-year-old publication when Robert Ivy left after nearly 14 years to become the Executive Vice President/CEO of the American Institute of Architects. He is a tough act to follow, but *Record* needs to simmer down after a few years of jolts, starting with the 2009 abrupt departure of Norbert Young, who was head of McGraw-Hill Construction, which published *Record*, *ENR*, and others. Then *Record* lost the 13-year-long contract with the AIA to Hanley-Wood. Ivy departed in February 2011, and for a few months, the magazine basically ran itself. Cathleen McGuigan, self-described as "hands-on" editor and newshound, was a very interesting choice.

McGuigan also has become editorial director of two other publications: the five-year-old *GreenSource*, which focuses on sustainable design and construction and serves as the U.S. Green Building Council's official publication, and the large-format *SNAP*, a products publication that began in 2009.

McGuigan is not a trained architect. Thus, *Record* reverts to the era of Walter Wagner, who edited a magazine on sailing before he tacked over to McGraw-Hill. Wagner would say that he'd rather teach a journalist to write about architecture than teach an architect to write. He was followed by a 25-year-long string of great architect/editors-in-chief: Mildred Schmertz, Steve Kliment, and, lastly, Ivy.

Actually, McGuigan is a "cultural journalist"—which basically means that she tells the news but in its social, artistic, or community context. A BA graduate of Brown University (major: English, minor: Art History), she got the dream job at *Newsweek* in 1977 as a researcher and reporter for the magazine's art critic.



Is Good Business, now described as a pilot project, though it looked very real for its few issues.

Architecture was always on her radar; much later, she would be the first critic to write about Gehry at Bilbao.

McGuigan's final billet at *Newsweek* was arts editor and architecture critic, rising to senior editor in 1992. Between the end of that relationship in 2008 and this new post, she observed McGraw-Hill up close as editor of *HQ: Good Design*

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Cathleen McGuigan is tall and erect, classic in her signature crisp white shirt. Although perpetually on deadline, she'll graciously sit to talk to you—but not for long. I did, however, catch her twice, once at the AIA convention in New Orleans before she officially took over and again in late August. She was disinclined to discuss her plans for the magazine and its flourishing online version. I asked her pointedly about the September issue, the first completely McGuigan-edited publication. "You'll see," she kept repeating.

McGuigan insists that there won't be any glaring shifts. She wants better integration between print and Web, and many features on the Web site will expand, including more tutorials. Naturally, given her background, news coverage will be beefed up. The three-times-a-year China issue produced in China in Chinese

and English that Cliff Pearson edits is “gorgeous,” successful, and ongoing. “I’ve got a really strong staff and I’m not going to make any changes,” she offered.

She will continue to do *Building Types*, “but how they play in the magazine will vary.” The Novartis headquarters in Basel, Switzerland, a Frank Gehry design, for instance, was the August cover story. It began as a lighting story, but the campus hadn’t been covered, so she gave the story more space and the lighting design became part of an architectural feature.

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Obviously, she will broaden coverage of collaboration between disciplines: landscape architecture, art, and urban design among them. The High Line strikes her as the “power of rich collaborations between landscape architects and architects.” She is much less inclined to focus on a star architect in favor of how “technology enables collaboration.”

What else intrigues her? Here’s an important clue: “I do think how a building works—how it suits its purpose and serves its users—is the bottom line... I like architecture that is beautiful and has artistic flair but it should function.”

In her debut editorial, “A New Perspective,” she called for a curated mix of “essential reporting, analysis, and design criticism.” Note her rallying cry: “The magazine should also be an advocate, a sharp elbow, a resonant voice for design’s essential role in grappling with some of the country’s most urgent difficulties.”

“What about the loss of the relationship to the AIA?” I asked her. McGuigan is ambitious for her magazines, comprehensive in her approach. Her reply: “We have kept our readers. [Paid circulation is now 91,300, whereas *Record* was a member benefit for AIA]. The independent voice of *Architectural Record* is going to be tremendously important.”

McGuigan was working on a book on Aline Saarinen when she was tapped for *Record*. The wife of architect Eero Saarinen, Aline was an art and architecture critic of some standing when they met [she had gone to Michigan to interview him]. Saarinen died suddenly a few years later, however, and she ultimately emerged as an elegant TV cultural commentator and personality. Although she very much had her own career, she worked for the Saarinen firm to make certain her husband got the recognition his talent

deserved. Still, Aline Saarinen didn’t like being in the margins, and I suspect that Cathleen McGuigan—also a Michigander—doesn’t like being in the margins, either.

Jenna McKnight is *Record*’s news editor. If you want to read a masterful release, find her announcement of McGuigan’s appointment. I asked her, “How’s it going?” McKnight didn’t want to underplay the achievements of the Ivy years, but she did report: “There is great new energy here. Ramping up news and online has been exhilarating and, I think, successful. Cathleen sees architecture from many different angles—just look at the September issue. It’s been an exciting few months.”

Incidentally, it’s cathleen_mcguigan@mcgraw-hill.com. Tell her what you think of her approach. [m](#)

About the Author



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