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Storytelling and Branding: Creating “Moments” in Financial Services in Chicago

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The Chicago offices of Société General, a financial services firm headquartered in Paris. Designed by Ted Moudis Associates. Photography: courtesy of Ted Moudis Associates

Clients often ask designers to create a branding strategy for their new workplace. The better and more interesting the company culture, the easier it is to develop this part of the design strategy. Some companies have an amazing history and great culture, and at the other end of spectrum are companies without a clear vision, poorly engaged staff, and underwhelming culture.

It's up to the design team to gather the **necessary knowledge about the company** and use their **storytelling techniques and design tools** to create a narrative for everyone who enters the space.



Reception

Using storytelling to proffer a better brand strategy is no doubt a great thing. But designers need to consider *how* they should be stripping or scaling down the picture, or zooming the picture way out, to get the largest or most important pieces of the story. What's the vision? What's the most important message? Designers must do the work to understand the full picture, at a large scale and zoomed into details, so they can tell the right story by pulling out the *right* pieces.

Société Générale, a financial services firm headquartered in Paris, asked Ted Moudis Associates (TMA) to design a new Chicago location shortly after they merged with another local Chicago trading firm. The firm also has locations all across the United States and 66 countries around the world, and is one of Europe's largest financial services organizations.

At Société Générale Chicago, Ted Moudis Associates found the *right* pieces of the story: the firm's history in Paris, its Société General identity in the marketplace, and the home of the office in question – the city of Chicago itself.

The three themes each present very different viewpoints and design challenges, thus TMA couldn't simply string them together in an obvious way; a disjointed workplace would have prevailed.

TMA conducted visioning sessions with SG to land on the right pieces of the SG narrative to tell the *best* SG story for that space. To do so, they created a series of "moments" people experience in the space representing the three themes, all flowing together seamlessly.



SG settled on the 24th and 25th floor of a space at 440 S. LaSalle Street in Chicago.



Pantry and breakroom seating with great views.

Heritage

Heritage moments focused on providing a historical reference to Boulevard Haussmann in Paris – a nod to the firm’s financial legacy headquarters.

Wood floors and two-story wood material columns in the reception area provide a grounded backdrop for a dramatic two-story graphic wall holding an image of the inside of the historical stain glass dome ceiling at the original Boulevard Haussmann.

“Their roots, and where they came from – it was such a source of pride for them,” said **Diana Pisone**, team principal at Ted Moudis Associates in Chicago. “The Boulevard Haussmann graphic also appears in their NYC offices, which were completed five or six years ago, so that legacy continuity is carrying over in more than one space.”



Double height

Société Générale

WORKPLACE STATS

- >Office size: 52,000 square feet; 384 occupants
- >Private offices: 18 (5%)
- >Open plan workstations: 366 (95%)
- >Regular workstations – 6ft; Trading workstations – 5ft 6 inches
- >Workspaces away from the primary workstation were tripled compared to the previous office: 222 seats in enclosed spaces, 51 seats in open collaborative areas, 73 alternative work areas, i.e. hi-top bar seating, lounge chair with built-in power.
- >Additional amenity spaces: wellness room, worship room with prayer mats and foot baths

Société Générale wanted its new Chicago offices to maintain a visual continuity of the SG brand. For TMA, that meant adopting the standards and manufacturer preferences the client already had in place.

Some of the materials and manufacturers synonymous with an SG build-out include “Bentley carpet, I.O.C. wall fronts, specific lighting manufacturers and strategically placed SG square logos.”

“Société Générale was a very educated client, and a very architectural client, which is really wonderful to work with,” said Ms. Pisone. “They have the knowledge and the financial background piece allowing them to go through pricing and vetting the options themselves, so they had certain manufacturers they wanted to use. We had to figure out how to work with those pieces and ensure they don’t just feel as if they’re dropped in and out of place. It should feel as if all of those pieces are meant to be there.”

Chicago

Even with its position as a dominant global brand, Société Générale wanted to make sure its staff and visitors got a sense of the city they were in, via the interior spaces.



Informal conference room

“Chicago is the birthplace of modern architecture, and of the skyscraper, and we wanted to bring that mindset to the interior,” said Ms. Pisone. “At the beginning we had two one story spaces, but we wanted to add height – to see those beams opened up. We developed a steel staircase hanging from above, completely supported from above by three steel rods.



Formal conference room.

The Chicago moments are experienced through materiality and verticality – raw black iron throughout the two stories, for instance, in an exposed ceiling on the trading floor, in the elevator lobby and the cafés – and accent materials focusing on textures of the “White City.”

“We painted the elevator cabs black, to continue to accent the verticality of the space, and it worked.”

In addition to the three themes in the space, TMA was able to find ways to put their own spin on existing design elements within the SG framework.

Even within the constraints of SG’s standards and manufacturer preferences, there’s room for creativity.



Pantry and dining area.

“We were able to streamline and tweak their standards, on the aesthetics side, not infrastructure, to benefit them economically,” noted Ms. Pisone. “Everything looked and felt the same, but we were able to save them money by making these small tweaks here and there.”

In the elevator lobby, a stock ticker lines the base of the wall. The stock ticker exists in other Société Générale locations, but TMA fought to change its placement, from the middle of the wall to near the footpath.



Lobby with stock ticker.



Open office area.



Trading Area.

“We lowered the stock ticker to the ground for two reasons,” said Ms. Pisone. “We wanted to **further accentuate height and verticality of the space. But we also pushed for this for a more functional reason; people often walk with their heads pointed slightly downward, especially when they’re on their phone. We’re putting that stock ticker where your eyes already are.**”

Every client and every project has its own narrative, and it’s the designer’s business to find the **details that matter, making them pop throughout the interior.**