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Societe Generale: architecture and finance at the time of the Belle Époque

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Founded in 1864, Societe Generale has always sought to demonstrate its solidity, and to attract and satisfy its clients. This approach was also required due to the high level of competition amongst banks. It ultimately resulted in the bank choosing an architectural expression of its ambition based on modernity and innovation.

At the heart of the city

Societe Generale's emergence cannot be separated from that of its real estate holdings. It began with a search for respectability. Then, at the start of the 20th century, the bank took on a monumental shape to signify a reassuring form of power.

At the turn of the 20th century, network branches – with few exceptions – had a number of features in common, the first of which was their location within the urban grid. Societe Generale wanted to mark its presence and be easily identifiable within busy commercial areas, and to have a recognizable and unique style. Just like its competitors, the bank picked locations for its offices in the downtown areas, and whenever possible, in corner buildings on squares, avenues, and boulevards, where the main business activity was taking place. While elegant stone buildings were the norm, the bank added its own touch, placing its name on the front or the windows in block or gold letters along with the company's capitalisation figures, which needed ongoing adjustment. Marble signs were affixed on each side of the entrance, announcing the services offered by the establishment. Cast-iron columns allowed for large windows on the ground floor that let daylight flood in. The façades were in painted wood with two-metre-high windows, also allowing natural light to enter while remaining too high for any passers-by to see in. Posters with the "SG" letters intertwined listed the various investment offers



Rue de Provence in 1910. On the right side: the Societe Generale headquarters' entry.
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Art Nouveau in Toulouse, 1912. © Archives historiques Société Générale

available to customers. In some branches, grooms were present to welcome visitors, among other duties.

Before reaching the main floor, customers passed through the first open space from the street: the dispatch hall. This was the

communications and information hub for the headquarters and the branches. It was where stock market updates with the latest dispatches, daily newspapers and commentaries written in chalk on blackboards could be found. The interior architecture



The Bourse "A" branch in Paris, 1906.
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A branch in Paris, rue de Lyon, in the Bastille district, around 1912.
© Archives historiques Société Générale



Art Nouveau in Chalon-sur-Saône, 1924. © Archives historiques Société Générale



Art Nouveau in Chalon-sur-Saône, 1912.
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conveyed the bank's image as a permanent, solid and active institution. A long counter in polished mahogany paneling separated the employees from the hall where the customers would congregate near the windows. This allowed each client to speak privately with his bank contact and sometimes sit on the high stools. It was a place to exchange information, separate from the employees making entries in the books. The rest of the décor was understated: sculpted wood, gas lamps and a clock comprised the main decorations. In spite of this apparent simplicity the bank did not hesitate – for example in Bordeaux, Angers and Dijon – to use new technical and architectural innovations that were the result of industrial changes. At the close of the 19th century, new techniques

and building materials were used with a mixture of iron, glass and cement to create an enclosed space crowned by glass panes, offering overhead lighting and a new aesthetic.

At the same time Societe Generale was also occupying buildings whose architecture was not in classical bank style. In some cases, such as in Alsace and Brittany, regional architectural styles were used. In Paris, branches "A" and "U" – which stood for the Bourse and Croix-Rouge – were "banking palaces" at a time when the bank was trying to enrich its brand image. Located in Paris at 134 rue Réaumur in the 2nd arrondissement, the "A" branch was close to the Palais Brongniart. Construction was completed in 1901

by architect Jacques Hermant. The majestic and imposing structure stood out because of its monumental quality. It had identical motifs on either street, connected by a tower on the corner that gave it its central theme. It was topped by a domed roof and a lantern. Each wing had five floors and a balcony with a loggia. The tower had six floors, with a clock located in the central portion and a molding in the shape of a semicircular pediment. With a façade of rusticated stones to provide more depth, the building exuded respectability, power and modernity.

The U branch, located at 131 rue de Sèvres in the 7th arrondissement, was a metal frame building with balconies, a pavilion roof and bas-relief sculptures. The façade was very beautiful and the interior just as



The Bordeaux branch in 1924. © Archives historiques Société Générale



*Art Nouveau in Nancy, 1906.
© Archives historiques Société Générale*

stunning. Above the entrance doors, architect Georges Balleyguier, who supervised the construction, had created a rich mosaic décor. The decorative motif in gold letters spelled out the bank's name within mixed trophies and plant-related moldings. The caduceus, a symbol of Hermès and Mercury, the Greek and Roman gods of commerce, decorated the composition. The symbol was a baton with two entwined snakes with wings. The baton represented power, the snakes stood for wisdom, the wings diligence and movement. The caduceus was mounted on a cogwheel representing industry, with horns of plenty symbolizing wealth. All these symbols referenced the bank's main purpose.

Societe Generale could be found in the most unexpected locations. As it was developing its real estate holdings, the bank sometimes opened offices in historically important buildings. These could be town houses or very simple storefronts. For example, at Pézenas it took over the Hôtel de Lacoste, famous for its spiral staircase and Gothic style vaulted ceilings. In Castres, it was the Hôtel de Nayrac, a renaissance palace with a portico decorated with family crests, mullioned windows and round towers that was selected to become a branch. At Saint-Just-Saint-Rambert, the building opened onto a grain market dating back to the Middle Ages. At Saint-Omer, the bank

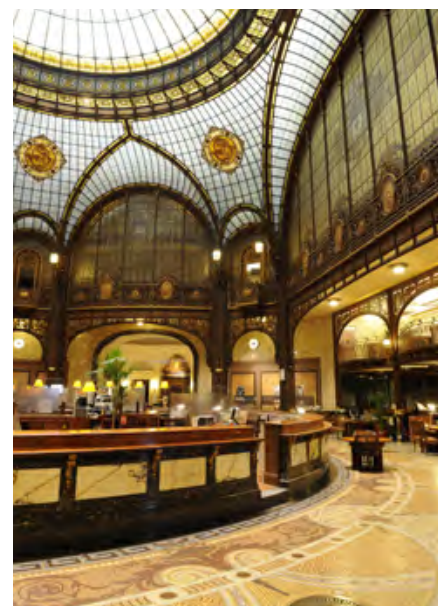
bought an old municipal building called the "Conciergerie," where city magistrates would meet at the end of the 17th century. Other buildings acquired showcased national landmarks. At Aix-en-Provence, the Hôtel Mirabeau, whose staircase was a model of pure Louis XIV style, was also a branch. The same style characterised the Hôtel Terrier de Santans in the centre of Besançon, whose façade had a wrought iron balcony and Ionian pillars decorated by a coat of arms. At Rennes, the Hôtel Le Gonidec de Traissan was in the same rich style and in Saumur, imposing Atlantes sculptures framed the entrance and were just as impressive. In Reims, Societe Generale went even further when it completed an unfinished work of art. In 1910, it built a branch on the place Royale, following the blueprints, decorative elements and materials decided upon by architect Jean-Gabriel Legendre in 1755 - an initiative that was welcomed by the entire city. We should note that today the bank no longer uses these locations, some of which have been declared national monuments, or have been partially restored and may only be visited by tourists.

At the start of the 20th century, Societe Generale established links with Art Nouveau and built several buildings that were part of that art movement. This highly ornamental style had a flexible architecture with many floral decorative motifs, and a permanent

commitment to lighting using glass windows. The branches at Toulouse, Bressuire and Chalon-sur-Saône were in this style. The latter location had internal floral arrangements for the columns and linear woodwork with stained glass windows. External decoration was almost exuberant, as illustrated by the frontage representing a ring of cherubs serenading the bank's customers. It was in Lorraine that Art Nouveau found its best expression - at Rambervilliers, and even more at Nancy, where architect Georges Biet and carpenter Eugène Vallin combined their talents to construct a building inspired by plant motifs in 1903. The ribbed lines were part of both the structure and the décor. Strong vertical moldings were inspired by plant stems, creating a dynamic and original effect that enhanced the use of certain basic materials such as iron in the decoration. The building was made up of four beams on five levels, with a metallic front crowning the façade. The central hall was lit via a glass dome held up by metal support brackets. The carpentry was of remarkable quality, both at the teller windows in exotic wood with molded paneling and in the sculpted bronze columns that were used as windows separating the various counters. But that style became obsolete and Art Nouveau would not survive the First World War. It was replaced by Art Deco, whose neoclassical style was better suited to banking institutions.



*Exterior view of the 29 boulevard Haussmann, in Paris.
© Jean-Marie Cras / Archives historiques Société Générale*



Interior view of the 29 boulevard Haussmann, in Paris. © Jean-Marie Cras / Archives historiques Société Générale

The Central Branch: a “banking palace” of the Belle Époque

At No. 29 Boulevard Haussmann, right in the centre of Paris, the building can be found, which has served as the Group’s headquarters for the past century. It is a true architectural masterpiece, certain parts of which are now featured in the list of French Historic Monuments.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, Societe Generale made the decision to acquire new headquarters. Too overcrowded in its original offices located at 54-56 rue de Provence, the bank became interested in a nearby block of buildings located behind the Opera in Boulevard Haussmann. Competing with Galeries Lafayette, the bank officially acquired it on 2 April 1906. The Board of Directors decided to engage the services of the architect Jacques Hermant, a teacher at the Beaux-arts de Paris, to transform these apartment buildings, which occupied 2,600 square metres, into a banking establishment.

The works lasted six years. On 26 June 1912, the new headquarters was opened at 29 Boulevard Haussmann, in the presence of Baron Hély d’Oïssel, President of Societe Generale. The result exceeded all expectations. On the exterior façade, the ground floor and mezzanine are finished in horizontally rusticated masonry, punctuated by arched bays with grilles over a plinth

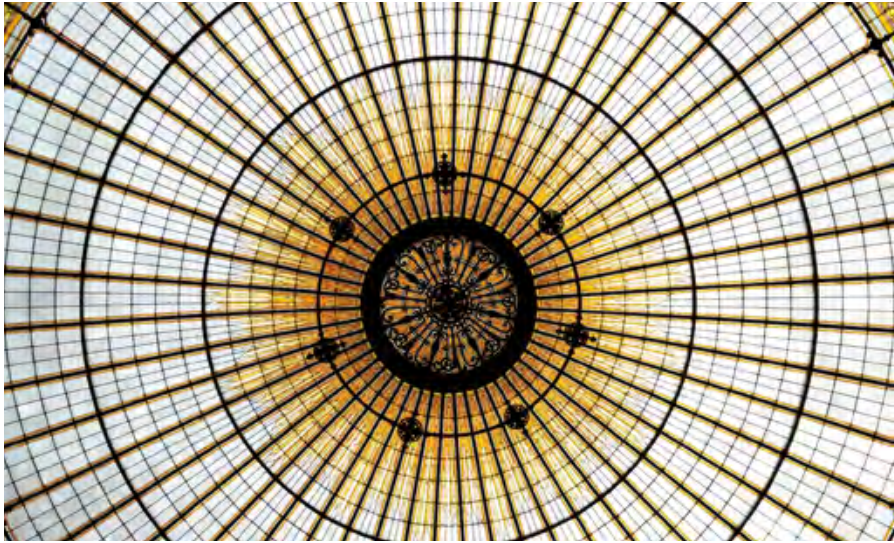
of Comblanchien stone. In the Boulevard Haussmann, by virtue of special dispensation, the centre line has been redesigned across its length in such a way as to create a pattern above the entrance of number 29. Its upper part is a pediment decorated with allegoric sculptures. On the third floor, against the pillars and between the balconies, six Corinthian style statues were installed in 1919 to illustrate various aspects of commerce and industry. Three large bays made up the entrance. Their vaults are adorned with carved grotesques.

Open on all sides, the grand central hall is of a luxurious, innovative design. The trapezoidal room occupies most of the ground floor, with a great circular counter in the centre, nicknamed “the cheese”. In 1919, a mezzanine was built to make extra space for the staff. The centrepiece of the hall is the splendid pinnacled dome which overhangs it. It is suspended 23 metres above the ground from the roof with a metal, umbrella-like structure composed of a self-supporting system of fine steel profiles. Glass and metal blend harmoniously to form an enclosed space while preserving the overhead illumination. The 18 metre diameter dome, designed by master glass craftsman, Jacques Galand, displays an elegant gradation of colours. It is made up of 51 tapered parts arranged from a central rose.

The interior decor contributes to the

charm of the building. The four arcatures each bear a coat of arms in the centre, representing the Societe Generale in Paris, Lyon, Marseille and Bordeaux. Bronze medallions decorate their bases, and symbolise the bank’s activities throughout France. The corners are embellished with the monogram “SG”. Decorative ironwork is made up of oak leaves and acorns and the whole is enclosed by a wrought iron railing. The mosaic tiled floor is the work of ceramists, Alphonse Gentil and François-Eugène Bourdet. Around the hall’s rotunda, a plant pattern of interwoven and knotted leaves forms an enormous rosette. On the floor, twelve ornamentally embossed openwork copper plaques conceal the heating and ventilation ducts.

The basement contains the strong rooms, all in steel. These are laid out on four levels, the lowest being 11 metres below the ground. An impressive circular door, clad in shiny steel with gold and silver highlights guards the only entrance. Designed by locksmiths Fichet, the piece was constructed in the Creusot (iron working centre of France), transported by rail to Paris and then brought to the Boulevard Haussmann on a dray pulled by a team of nine horses. The diameter of the exterior door is 2.76 metres. It weighs 18 tonnes, and its armour plating is 40 centimetres thick. An access drum connects it to a second reinforced door. Inside



Door of the vault room. © Jean-Marie Cras / Archives historiques Société Générale



Dome of the building. © Jean-Marie Cras / Archives historiques Société Générale

the rooms there are 399 strong rooms, accounting for a total of 8,134 safety deposit boxes and 22 safes. These basement rooms are only opened progressively for clients.

Today the Central Branch still retains its original character, to the great pleasure of clients and employees alike. It is open to the public for French Heritage Days every year on September. Since 1915, this building has housed the headquarters of the bank and, in spite of the management board having moved to the business centre in Paris-La Défense, it remains so.

The Trocadéro complex: Societe Generale builds its own “Fort Knox”

The major construction work undertaken by Societe Generale during the golden years of France’s “Belle Époque” was prompted by new requirements for greater security. Completed in 1914, the Trocadéro complex that housed the bank’s central securities deposit is one of the most impressive examples of the work carried out. It is an ambitious monument to maximum security.

On the eve of the First World War, banks in France were faced with new security requirements. The Great Flood of 1910 in Paris and its surrounding areas had exposed the precarious structure of certain buildings, and a spate of daring armed robberies, notably by the Bonnot Gang, dominated the headlines. At Societe Generale, the inspection committees were quick to recommend the implementation of the “most effective and modern measures against the



A groom near the door of the vault room, 1920. © Archives historiques Société Générale

risk of theft, assault and fire”. The clear need to reassure customers called for tangible initiatives to convey the image of a solid and steadfast establishment. As a result, alongside the construction of its new head office at 29 Boulevard Haussmann, the bank’s management decided to build a new site to house the securities “deposited and transiting” with the bank in the 16th arrondissement, not far from the Eiffel Tower.

Nestled on the Chaillot Hill, the chosen site, located between the Place du Trocadéro, Avenue Kléber, the Rue de Longchamp and Avenue Malakoff, (now the Avenue Raymond Poincaré) was formerly home to the stables of the Compagnie générale des Omnibus. In 1911, the bank acquired the property and

demolished the existing buildings. Completed in 1914 after three years of work, the new Haussmann-style complex was designed by architect, Jacques Hermant, who had already worked on the bank’s Agence Centrale and Agence Bourse offices. Sober and modern in appearance in keeping with its surroundings, the complex formed a triangle in a district in full boom. Each of the buildings making up the three sides of the complex had its own basement, raised ground floor and another six floors, two of which were dominated by long, recessed terraces. Although the main entrance was located at 112 Avenue Kléber, the inside of the complex was divided into two separate sections, one consisting of offices and the other of



Plan of the construction, 1910.
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The Trocadéro tower under construction, in 1912.
© Archives historiques Société Générale



Inside the fortified Trocadéro tower in Paris, 1957. © Archives historiques Société Générale

private apartments. The complex had a covered courtyard, a loading bay for armoured vans and two strong towers: one that was square and average in size and which was home to “transiting” securities for transactions in progress; and another that was cylindrical and which was reserved for deposited securities and, later on, used to store all manner of valuables, objects, works of art, documents, etc.

As time went by, this somewhat unusual construction, which was first known as the “Trocadéro Tower” and then “Sogégarde”, proved to be the ultimate vault and was Societe Generale’s own “dungeon”. Unique in its genre, with an outside diameter that was 50 metres long and 34 metres high, it was made up of two circular walls in reinforced concrete and built on a composite floor with a limestone base. 15 metres below ground, a circular masonry wall mirrored by a parapet dug into the rock face was built around the perimeter to reinforce the structure and to isolate the basement from the former surrounding quarries. Any efforts to undermine the construction were to prove impossible, particularly as the peripheral section was flooded

to form an additional natural barrier rendering it impenetrable. At the end of each day, after the last employees in charge of closing the site had left, the underground passage they used was filled with 40 cubic metres of water, making it impossible to pass and also impervious to fire. In addition, the top of the tower was closed by a concrete domed cover. The ceiling was fitted with large observation panes made of reinforced glass, which, each night, were covered by slabs of thick reinforced concrete which together weighed over 500 tonnes. The basement was divided into several reinforced vaults: seven levels housed ten peripheral chambers built against the wall where the safes were located. The only access to the tower from the outside was via a single opening on the ground floor. Controlled from the inside only, it was protected by concrete slabs reinforced with a thick steel frame, a strong armour-plated door and a heavy wrought-iron gate. For decades, the tower remained an untouched sanctuary, which was regularly adapted to the latest surveillance techniques. Many referred to it as the bank’s own “Fort Knox” or one of the rare buildings in Europe capable of

withstanding an atomic bomb. In 1976, it was fitted with a radar surveillance system. In the underground floors, sound detectors were followed by surveillance cameras and soon completed with motion sensors, heat-sensitive instruments and nerve gas spray systems.

With the dematerialization of securities, the reconversion of the Trocadéro Tower to house works of art and the IT records for Sogégarde customer service would have been extremely costly given the operational constraints of the site. The building was thus sold and entirely redeveloped as part of a real estate programme in 1987. ●

Author profile

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