



## theMART Gets Staring Role at NeoCon 2017

The lounge was designed to become the epicenter of a giant structure, a gathering place that is a hub for countless activities.

Words by Bryce Stuckenschneider







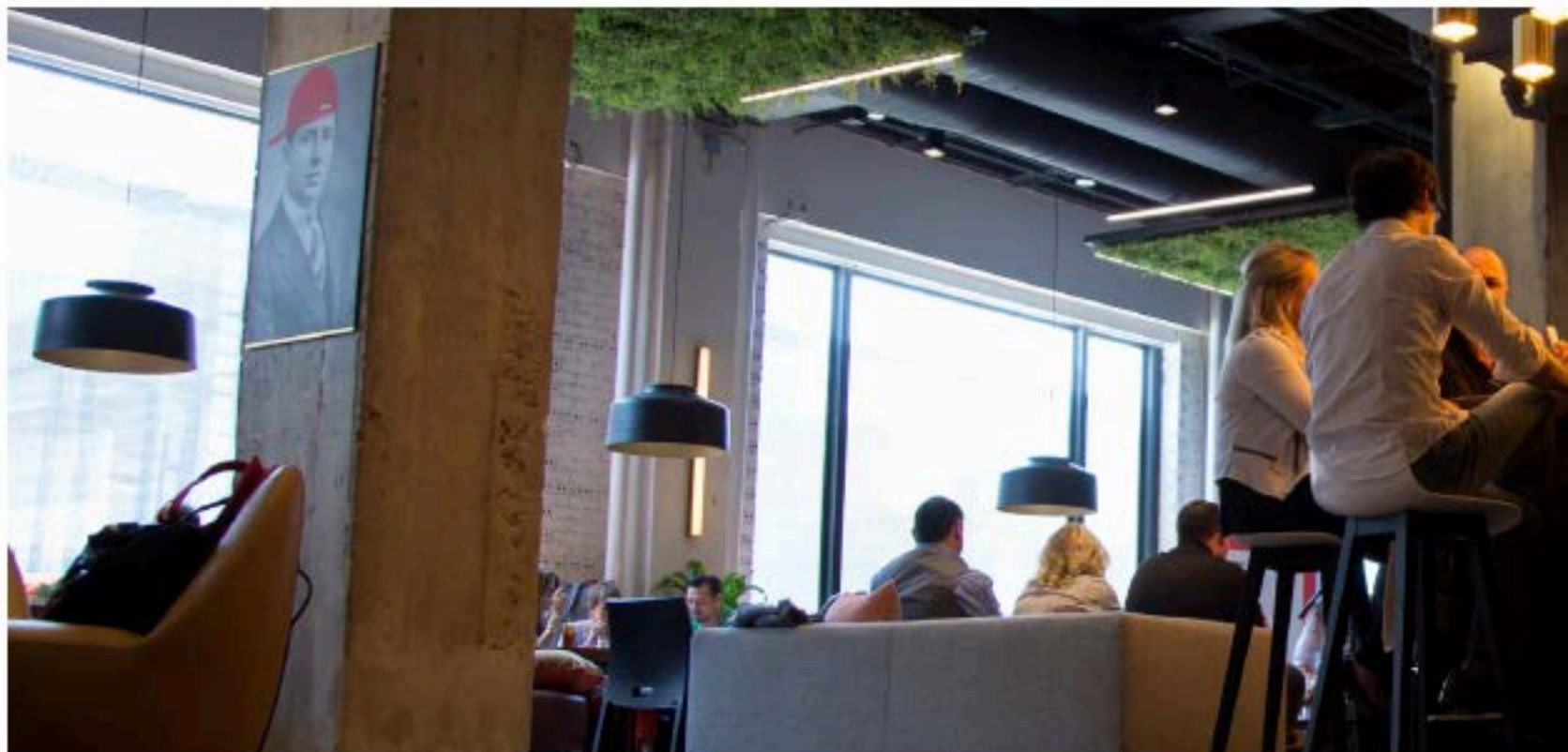
Hundreds of manufacturers showcased thousands of new products for tens of thousands of design professionals for the 49th installment of NeoCon. Designers, dealers and end-users from around the world traveled to Chicago's famous Merchandise Mart (theMART) for inspiration on the workspaces of tomorrow. But the most inspiring thing I discovered at the show wasn't a new take on ergonomic work tools or the latest in acoustic panels. There were countless opportunities to be inspired by manufacturers pushing the design world forward, but I was most inspired by the building that housed the action itself – theMART.











Managed by Vornado Realty Trust, the MART has been rolling out impressive updates to the facility for several years. Most recently, it completed a five-year \$40 million renovation plan to modernize the space. Digital signage, a completely remodeled food court that features more emphasis on gathering small groups and letting in natural light, and a grand staircase were all met with critical acclaim. All of these improvements make the MART more inviting and a place people can navigate more easily.

From the beginning, there was a clear intent to encourage visitors to gather more comfortably, frequently and intentionally. But the latest addition to this 4-million-square-foot structure is jam-packed with tiny details that somehow allow guests to forget, for a brief period, they are surrounded by 50,000 people in the middle of a bustling metropolis.

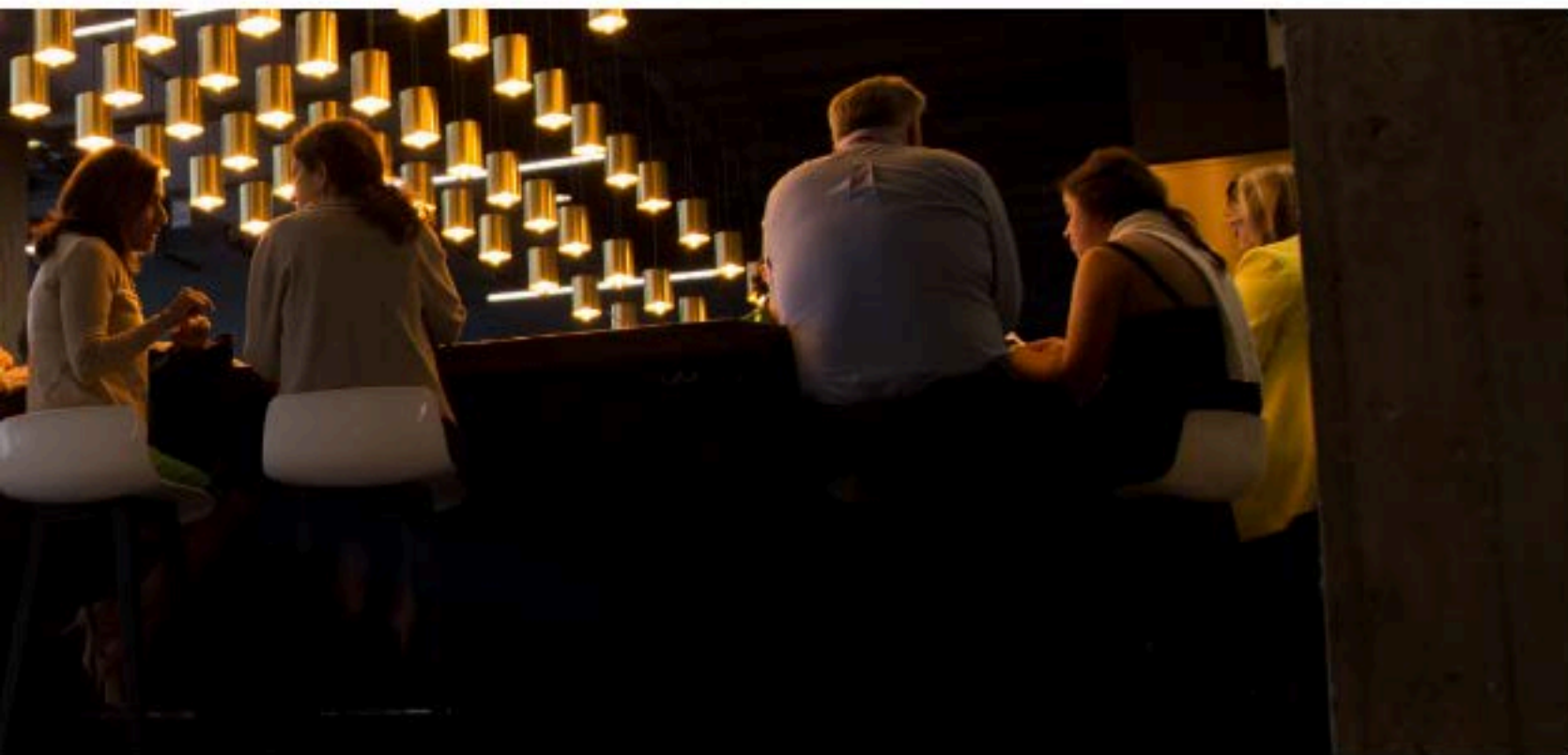
Marshall's Landing opened the Friday prior to NeoCon as a modern lounge, offering high-quality food and beverage choices in a casual atmosphere. Whether you're looking for artisanal coffee, craft beer from a local Chicago brewery, a full-service bar with crafted cocktails, or tasty seasonal menus that are chef-inspired — Marshall's Landing has you covered. But it isn't the food or drinks that provid-

ed an "aha" customer experience (it was delicious, don't get me wrong). I visited Marshall's landing three different times (once for breakfast) during NeoCon because of the atmosphere.

The lounge (it's more appropriately called a lounge than a restaurant, and the MART likes it that way) is situated at the top of the grand staircase on the second floor of the Merchandise Mart. Based on the available square footage, the space's designers (A+I designed the space and the award-winning grand staircase and lobby) could have easily packed in seating for 200+ people. Instead, it comfortably seats about 80-90 people. During a show synonymous with rubbing shoulders and more than a few claustrophobic episodes in an elevator, Marshall's Landing is a refreshing place to relax, connect and re-charge. The style of seating chosen was meant to inspire guests to sit and stay, not cycle them through as fast as possible. There are places to touch-down that have personal, library-style reading lamps, outlets for charging devices and working while you grab a bite and even a subtle piece of technology that gives visitors control of their experience.

Marshall's Landing employs a fleet of tiny black buttons scattered around the tables for guests to beckon their servers. When I first visited, this was





described very intentionally to me as “a way for our guests to get anything they want as soon as possible. But not just that, this is a place to relax and recharge, so we don’t want to keep bothering our guests if they don’t need anything.” A simple press of the button notifies the designated server for wherever you may be sitting.

I was in Marshall’s landing for almost two hours on Tuesday of NeoCon. I had a series of meetings, and it felt like such a convenient place to gather. Throughout the time, I only needed service once or twice. Instead of a server hovering and refilling my Coke for the 30th time, I was left to meet with my colleagues and greeted with a smile when I was ready for the check two hours later. Modern touches like the call buttons, coupled with intentional design and furniture selection make Marshall’s Landing my favorite part of theMART. And that’s before I tell you the food is excellent (by far the best available in the entire building).

The lounge was designed to become the epicenter of a giant structure, a gathering place that is a hub for countless activities (in its first week alone, Marshall’s Landing hosted a number of events, parties and awards ceremonies). In designing this space, theMART embraced many of the criticisms of the building and flipped the narrative. The 222 Mer-

chandise Mart Plaza was missing a high-end dining option, a central space to gather, a venue to present to hundreds of people and a place to breathe. Somehow the grand staircase and Marshall’s Landing accomplished all of these needs.

Marshall’s Landing was a unique collaboration between A+I, theMART and DMK Restaurants (and founders David Morton and Chef Michael Kornick). The team at Vornado takes great pride in this project as the final installment in its multiyear plan to take a historic landmark and make it relevant to tenants and guests for decades to come.

Paying homage to both the origin of the building and the intent of the space, theMART chose to name the new lounge after Marshall Fields. The Merchandise Mart was, after all, originally a warehouse and wholesale center for Marshall Fields before World War II. The first name coming from the original tenant, and the latter name (Landing) chosen because theMART and A+I wanted this 12,000 square-foot space to be a landing place for visitors, first and foremost. And that idea, finding a place to “land,” was the experience that stuck with me through my week in Chicago. **BoF**