



The super-prime supremos

Global hotel designer Hirsch Bedner Associates is moving into the residential market. By Helen Chislett. Photograph by Jamie McGregor Smith

BACK IN 1965, a quiet design revolution began to take hold when a small architectural practice called Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA) unveiled its new look for the Beverly Rodeo Hotel in Beverly Hills, complete with the opulent Chez Voltaire restaurant. Until then, most American hotels had followed a formulaic, corporate style in keeping with their grey-suited clients. Indeed, they were usually designed by the manufacturers of the office-style furniture that filled them. Under the direction of partners Howard Hirsch and Michael Bedner, however, that was all turned on its head. They were the first to market themselves as 'hospitality design' specialists and to recognise that guests would prefer to stay somewhere that felt like a more luxurious version of their own home than an extension of the office, bravely styling rooms around themes such as New Orleans (red and white) and oriental (shades of green).

Today, HBA is the largest hospitality design firm in the world, with 26 offices in 23 countries and a design team of 1,600 and counting. Given that its list of clients includes Four Seasons, Shangri-La, Ritz-Carlton, Hyatt and Kempinski,

to name but a few, the chances are that most well-travelled people will have enjoyed HBA's designs at one time or another. Its project list also extends into urban resort spas, restaurants, casinos and contemporary boutique hotels.

Three years ago, the company launched HBA Residential under the guidance of its global principal, Chris Godfrey. A British architect who previously ran the luxury design practice 1508 London, Godfrey is based in Singapore; but this year sees the launch of a second office in London, headed by former Candy & Candy architect and designer Charlie Caswell. A third office is planned to open in New York by 2020.

For Godfrey, the invitation to launch HBA Residential was an unparalleled opportunity. 'This is the biggest hospitality designer in the world, working with all of the five- and six-star brands,' he says. 'What is less well known is that in fact it was probably *already* the largest designer of private residences in the world, but it had never publicised the fact: work came through word of mouth by virtue of the sort of clients who frequently stay in the hotels HBA

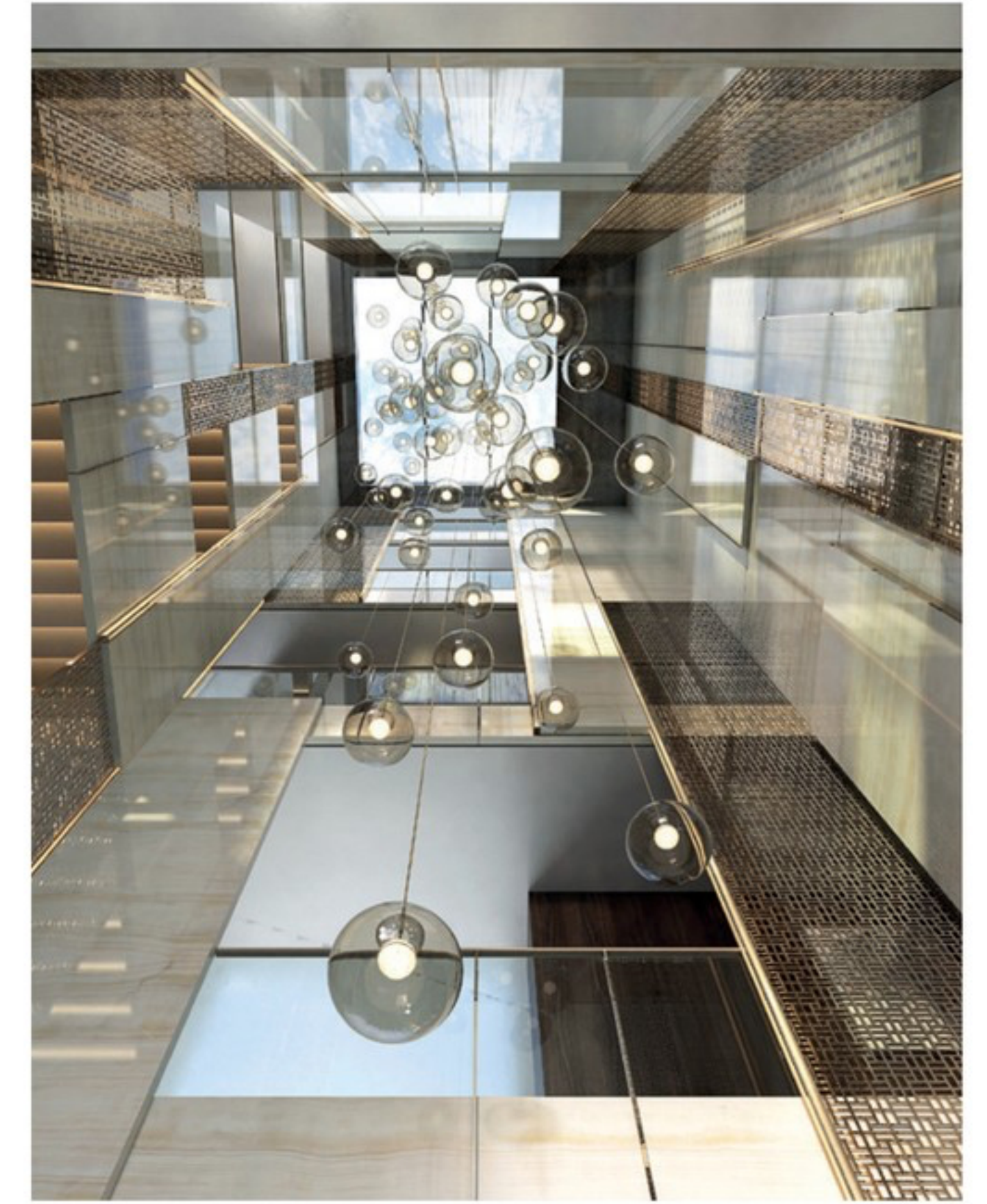
designs. For me, this was an exciting initiative to formally launch the private residence side of the business and make sure we delivered a seven-star service for a truly international clientele.'

The demands of the globetrotting super-wealthy may be far removed from Godfrey's own down-to-earth Yorkshire roots, but it is a world he has mastered with aplomb. Having trained as an architect at the Glasgow School of Art, he moved to London 20 years ago, setting up Scape Architects in east London. He ran this company successfully for 10 years, before being persuaded to join 1508 London when it launched in 2010, taking the role of principal creative.

Looking back, he says that was the moment when he began fully to understand the difference between 'prime' – the big houses in Hampstead that he had refurbished, for example – and 'super-prime'. 'I acquired a greater appreciation of what that meant, in terms of both design and service, and the expectations that come with a certain type of clientele. I also found it inspirational to have such exposure to different parts of the world and other ways of working and delivering. These are clients with homes



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A SITTING ROOM IN BEIJING; THE ATRIUM OF A MUMBAI HOME; A RESIDENCE IN XI'AN. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT, CHRIS GODFREY AND CHARLIE CASWELL



in multiple locations, so you are plugged into an entire global network.'

For Caswell, the first challenge of steering the new London office is to make sure that it is completely aligned with the HBA Residential ethos and processes. 'A commission is not just about creating a piece of architecture or interior design,' he says, 'but about how you get there in terms of taking the client through the process. Pivotal to our success will be the ability to speak the same design language, whether in New York, Singapore or London.' But he recognises that London will have its own challenges compared to Singapore – for instance, the age of its housing stock and the listed status of many of its buildings. 'We need to apply the most ambitious architectural and interior design we can offer within those constraints. Of course, London has a great heritage that needs to be protected, but it is also one of the most forward-looking, dynamic and exciting cities on the planet.'

HBA Residential is a boutique, stand-alone arm to the core business. As Godfrey explains, 'We remain of a size where we can provide an excellent service to a select number of clients,

while benefiting from the infrastructure and global reach of an established international company. It means we can be truly personal and involved at every turn.' Looking through a few of its completed projects, what jumps out is the dynamism and confidence of the designs: a contemporary Mumbai home of glass and stone with triple-height spaces and a five-storey, metal-clad stone stairwell notable for its cascading light sculpture of hand-blown glass globes; a luxurious Beijing apartment richly layered with bespoke finishes from book-matched panels of rare timbers to handwoven silk carpets; or a low-rise Delhi summer house clad in glass, timber and stone, set within rills and carefully manicured lawns, which is the epitome of 21st-century elegance.

Art and sculpture play a big part in HBA Residential schemes, whether the firm is working with a client's existing collection or sourcing new pieces. As Caswell says, 'Our designs are not about crying out for attention. We like to think we are creating a sort of jewellery box within which we can show the key assets collected and curated by a family

throughout their life. The environments have to work not only for the artwork the family currently own, but for future pieces they may buy. A beautifully designed space will reflect that journey – and the intimacy we have with our clients and their art is a real privilege.'

Of course, the great joy of this sector for designers such as Godfrey is the chance to work with clients who appreciate 'the value of design', in terms of producing something genuinely personal and deeply resonant. 'The uniqueness of people and place underpins all our work,' he says. 'The principles are the same as when I was running my first architectural studio in east London. However, at this level, we can also afford to take a really measured and richly detailed approach and bring in a narrative that relates to materials chosen and a way of expressing natural beauty. We aim to create interiors that are both timeless and of lasting value. We might be asked to design a home that will last for 100 years and be considered an heirloom, as we did for one family in India. That sort of commission is really quite profound.' ♦ www.hbaresidential.com