

CHRIS GODFREY

GLOBAL CO-CEO, HBA

HBA turns 60 this year. Co-CEO Chris Godfrey talks legacy, leadership, and why scale doesn't have to come at the cost of creativity

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AT A GLANCE

Pipeline
SHA Emirates Wellness Hotel & Branded Residences, Abu Dhabi
Mandarin Oriental Bolidhuffaru Reef Resort, Maldives
Sofitel New York

Recent openings
Four Seasons Hotel, Dalian
Jumeirah Marsa Al Arab, Dubai
St. Regis Longboat Key, Sarasota

hba.com

HBA (Hirsch Bedner Associates) is a world leader in hospitality design and needs little introduction. Founded in 1965 in Santa Monica by Howard Hirsch and Michael Bedner, its inaugural project – the iconic Beverly Hills Hotel – set the tone for decades of design innovation. Today, the firm has a global presence, with 24 offices across 14 countries and a team of more than 1,600 designers. As HBA celebrates 60 years in the industry, its portfolio spans nearly every commercial sector, with a client list that includes many of the world's most prominent hotel groups.

Being Co-CEO of the world's largest hospitality design firm is a finely tuned balancing act between commerce and creativity in a high-energy world. Fortunately, Chris Godfrey is bursting with the latter, along with original ideas and contagious enthusiasm – qualities essential for strong leadership and, as it turns out, a lively interview. Based at HBA's global headquarters in Singapore, when we meet he's wrapping up a visit to the firm's London office, where he's been sharing his vision and strategy for a company that clearly benefits from his presence.

Chris has been at the London office in Bayswater for 10 days in which time he hasn't stopped to draw breath. "I have been talking strategy and going through specifics with the teams here, in back-to-back meetings. It's been brilliant, but non-stop."

It's hard to miss Chris' northern accent, and before we get into commerce and creativity, he takes me back to his roots. Hailing from Hull, he's a proud Northerner and eager to share his story. "I think it's important, as it's relevant to the here and now. It's something I reflect on, given the position I'm in now – and I guess being a certain age," he adds.

"I left school at 16 with nothing and started as a print boy in an architect's office in Hull. It was the second-oldest architectural practice in the UK, and they would take on one school leaver a year – just to give them a chance. If you lasted nine months, you graduated to being an apprentice. At that point, you were assigned to the oldest person in the company, and it was his job, in the final years of his career, to pass on all his knowledge and experience. It was incredible – I got a lifetime of experience. It was old-school, but more than that, it was a commitment to people. That really is part of who I am."

Four years of hard graft, encouragement and night school paved the way to a degree in architecture in his hometown of Hull. "It wasn't a formal route, but good results secured me a place at the Glasgow School of Art for my postgrad, which felt like a real step up."

After completing his Master's, Chris moved to London and worked for a couple of practices on small-scale residential projects. "By that point, I was pretty employable. I'd been in the workplace, I was qualified, and I'd already built buildings. ►



Confidential Members Club
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF HBA



Quite early on – and somewhat accidentally – I set up my own business Scape Architects."

Accidentally? I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I was working on a project for a practice, and afterwards, the client came directly to me and asked if I'd take on his next one. I agreed, thinking I'd just do that single job before joining another firm – but one project became two, then four, and before I knew it, I had staff to look after and things to manage! It was a rapid education, and I learnt on the job."

I ask Chris whether he had a natural instinct for business.

"Not at all," he says. "The only thing I'd ever really been good at was art – I was all about the left side of the brain. But it was the late '90s, and I was living in Shoreditch, surrounded by creatives, all running

small businesses and making beautifully crafted things. It was an exciting time, and it taught me the value of every decision you make as a designer – the business of design, and the cause and effect of every choice you make within it."

The 2008 global financial crisis prompted a return to the world of PAYE, and he joined 1508 London – then a start-up design firm, now a competitor to HBA – as Creative Director, alongside its founding partners.

"It was perfect. I suddenly found myself working with business-minded people, which was exactly what I needed. Even before the global financial crisis, I'd known I needed partners who could provide more structure, more shape, more purpose. This came about through adversity, but it turned out to be ideal for me. They were business

Above and left Mandarin Oriental Bolidhuffaru and Kimpton Qiantan Hotel Shanghai

minded people – the right side of brain people. They brought the structure, and I brought the creativity. We were so motivated; we devised a business plan predominantly for the residential sector, which we were constantly working and acting on – we weren't going to take 15 years scratching around!"

The plan Chris describes centred on the idea that design needed to be scalable – integrating architecture, interiors, and furniture. The model proved so successful that, following a project collaboration with HBA, Chris was approached with a view to applying a similar approach to establish a residential division at HBA. Accepting the offer, in 2014, he switched both companies and continents, relocating to HBA's Singapore office.

Today, under Chris' leadership, that original plan has evolved to encompass a broad range of design disciplines. "Essentially, we've grown from being a hospitality interior design firm to one that offers a wide spectrum of services – brand strategy, lighting design, graphic design, signage and wayfinding. We have food and beverage specialists, casino and gaming experts, and we're about to launch an art consultancy studio, based in London. Most recently, we've acquired a second architectural landscape company.

Put simply, from a client's perspective, they no longer need to source these associated design specialists themselves – we remove that headache by solving problems before they even reach the client. And with the help of design technology, we're able to create all kinds of efficiencies."

All of this falls under the 'One HBA' strategy. While it originated from the business plan Chris initially wrote, he's quick to emphasise that much of the growth has also happened organically.

"One HBA is founded on the simple notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We had all the parts, but we weren't necessarily making the best use of how they worked together. I don't really like the term, and I keep looking for an alternative," he says with a grimace. "But it seems to have stuck – people in the studio echo it back to me, which is great, because it's been adopted across the company. And that's what really matters."

With around 3,000 projects across 50 countries in progress at any given time, I ask Chris if the design method is consistent across the global studios. ►



Above and opposite Conrad Tulum Riviera Maya and The Ritz-Carlton Rabat

"Given the cultural and technical differences between, say, LA and Tokyo, it would be wrong to expect a single methodology – it would be polemic in every sense. Instead, we're working towards a level of operational consistency that still allows individual studios to express themselves. That's the challenge: delivering global efficiency while preserving local identity. Each studio has its own personality and idiom, shaped by teams who truly understand the culture they're designing for. There's a broad process and a shared sense of what it means to be HBA, but the design has to be driven by local insight."

So, does that mean only studios with a geographical connection to a project's location are typically assigned to it I wonder?

"Yes and no," he begins, somewhat cryptically, before clarifying that it's seldom that straightforward. "Sometimes, a client specifically wants the cachet of having the London team involved. I took a call last night about a project in Hong Kong. We've got an office there, less than two miles from the site, but the client still wants London on board. So, we'll pair people on the ground – who have the language skills and local insight – with the London team, to meet the client and assess the brief."

What you get is a global matrix – who's in the right place and who has the right skills. Sometimes that's the same person or studio, sometimes not. We've got all these capabilities, so it becomes less about geography and more about finding the best solution."

As the interview draws to a close and I prepare to leave – armed with what I believe to be a rudimentary understanding of the inner workings of the world's largest hospitality design firm – Chris surprises me with one more HBA insight.

In an industry as competitive as this one, I can't help but wonder: might some potential clients find the sheer scale and corporate stature of the brand a little daunting – even intimidating?

"Absolutely!" he says without hesitation. "Which is exactly why we've invested in smaller companies – to address that very issue. They're all different studios, each with their own flavour, aesthetic, and way of working. For example, former HBA partner Robbyn Carter now runs her own studio, Studio Carter. We collectively recognised that she could serve everyone –





Above Raffles at Galaxy Macau

herself, the client, and us – better by operating as an independent force with her own brand.”

He explains that HBA’s business development team typically has a sense, early in a conversation, whether a potential project is better suited to HBA or one of their boutique studios. “It’s about giving clients the best solution for them. That’s the key for us.”

While these smaller studios often drive their own development and pursue their own opportunities, HBA’s infrastructure can support and feed into that pipeline. “A great example is a project in Qiddiya, Saudi Arabia,” Chris says. “It involves three large, interconnected assets. Studio Carter and byKK design were the desired creative teams for them, and HBA is acting as the orchestrator. We’re providing the support – project management, documentation,

drawings, BIM, lighting and wayfinding. We’re centralising all the operational elements so they can focus entirely on the creative. It’s a model that actually makes sense – and proves how multiple parties can collectively deliver the best possible solution.”

Other people’s success is always impressive, but never more so than when the journey has been entirely self-driven. Chris is a creative through and through – yet he’s that rare breed who can carry his creativity beyond the drawing board and apply it to business. Still, I can’t help but wonder if part of him misses the studio. He simply smiles and shrugs – clearly, I’m not the first to ask.

“You know what? I’ve never been more creative than I am now – and I don’t even touch a pencil anymore.” 5