



Hirsch Bedner Associates has an enviable legacy, built on years of creating some of the world's most stylish hospitality projects. *CID* talks to HBA Dubai's managing associates

# 40 Years of Design

**E**stablished forty years ago, Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA) is a stalwart in hospitality design. It has completed nearly 600 hospitality projects including the Landmark Hotel and Carlton Tower, London; One and Only Le Touessrok, Mauritius and The Mandarin Oriental, New York. It has a network of 11 offices worldwide and it established the Dubai office six years ago, which now boasts 40 staff and a bulging portfolio of Gulf projects to its name, including The Grand Hyatt, The Taj Palace and the new Ritz Carlton in DIFC. *CID* talks to the three managing associates of HBA Dubai: Markus Stebich, Michelle Evans and Sayeli Uysal.

**CID: What are your individual design backgrounds?**

**SU:** I came to the UK in 1988 from Turkey and got a place at Cambridge College of Fine Art and I ended up staying for 16 years. I worked for HBA for nine years, but it was time for a change as, back then, London mostly consisted of renovation projects while this Gulf market was emerging and everything was happening so quickly. I can work

on a project in a year, and then dine in it the next.

**ME:** I have been designing hotels for 18 or 19 years and I was very interested in architecture and how you can change people's environments. I have mainly worked overseas: Africa, Asia, USA, London for HBA and then the Middle East. Working in Africa 13 years ago, you didn't have catalogues, or libraries and so you had to be very resourceful and custom-design a lot.

One of my passions is building what you design as well as resourcing and researching from your local environment. If I hadn't gone to Asia, I wouldn't know the difference between designs from Thailand, Burma, Singapore, Japan. Working in different cultures teaches you to see the subtlety in design.

**MS:** I worked for Germany's largest architecture firm and a highlight was working on a tower with Norman Foster. Germany was booming at this time after its reunification. I worked on a hotel project, which led to one hotel after another. For me, as an architect, it was a natural progression to also work on

the interiors; I realised that, especially on hotels, a really good interior designer can actually influence the whole architecture of a building.

**CID: A lot of your projects do seem very architectural.**

**MS:** Many of the senior designers and directors of HBA are architects. We are very big on space planning and progression of space. Everything from the macro to the micro. Some people say that you can decorate your way out of bad planning but that's not the situation you want to be in. 95% of HBA's projects are hospitality and hotel design is possibly the most complicated type of interior design project. There are all sorts of requirements from safety to operator needs; issues of material longevity; the different area sizes; the circulation between front to back of house. You need to know the way the operator thinks.

**CID: What was the thinking behind setting up an office here?**

**SU:** Nearly one third of our projects are in the Middle East and so we had to be here. It was an incredible opportunity as

1. The three managing associates of HBA Dubai, left to right: Sayeli Uysal, Michelle Evans and Markus Stebich.



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so many operators are opening up here and 80% of our business is repeat business, much of it through the operators and so if they want to be here, so do we.

**MS:** We don't necessarily actively look for new hotspots or areas of growth. HBA follows its clients around the world.

**CID:** What challenges do you face designing in Dubai?

**MS:** Maintaining the quality with the strict time schedules is a challenge. Then sourcing the materials we want without making any compromises.

**SU:** Also, everyone wants to do better than the one they did before or that their competitor did recently, so they commission the best architect, the best contractor, and best consultant and interior designer. These firms can be at opposite ends of the world and so communication is often a challenge.

**MS:** On the other hand, that's a positive aspect because they do want you to push the boundaries and to see what else you can come up with. Everyone is looking for a new iconic design – even if that word is a little over-used now.

**ME:** Also, architectural traditions are being challenged and with every new building shape come new exciting options for the designer.

**CID:** Every developer seems to strive for luxury, how do you interpret this?

**MS:** Everyone has a different benchmark by which to measure luxury. I think that it is a beautiful composition of space, light and materials. Luxury can be done for a number of different budgets, but it's mainly the attention to detail. It is important to research the client, the location and their brand and how we can adapt to their own definition of luxury.

**CID:** How do you make each hotel project different?

**ME:** Before we design we have to understand the space. We try to custom-design more and more, the chandeliers and the carpets and material combinations, specific to a project.

**SU:** We have two very important components already in the company, we have a large graphics department, but we also have a large art consultancy firm that has over 5,000 artists from

all over the world. We have about 400 designers working at HBA worldwide with different backgrounds and experience and we have built up an extensive image library over 40 years and we can tap into the suppliers and contacts from each of our offices. So we are a little bit luckier than most I think.

**CID:** How do you choose your suppliers?

**MS:** Wherever we can see there's a proven record of professionalism and quality we will work with them. When materials or companies are emerging that are completely untried or new, we have to be more careful with them and keep a closer eye on the quality.

**ME:** You just have to make the client aware that we do not have a proven history with this supplier so we cannot guarantee the quality of their products.

**SU:** Getting items made overseas is about the same price as having it made here, which is a downside to pioneering manufacturing in Dubai, it often doesn't make sense financially. In the UK, you get so spoilt of having everything in one place, or so easily acces-

2&3. HBA's striking visuals of an undisclosed hotel project under construction in Doha. Left, the fine dining restaurant; right, the grand lobby of the unserved apartments.

4. The lobby leading into the corporate offices of the Doha hotel has strong angles and a linear design.



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8. The Lebanese restaurant in the Sheraton Bahrain.

9. The all-day dining restaurant in the Sheraton Bahrain.

10. HBA followed European trends and opted for open-plan living in the Doha guest suites.



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**ME:** We are finding that clients are asking for less decoration, paring it down, not overfilling spaces. We work a lot with textures and layers, and of course choosing the right lighting designer is imperative.

**SU:** More clients want architectural spaces, as well as textures and materials, rather than decorative items.

**SU:** We use a lot of accent colour in our projects. Michelle loves her colours.

**ME:** Sometimes I present something and even I think oh no, it's a bit too bright when it's up there on the presentation board and I stand there hoping it doesn't shock them, and then they surprise me by loving it!

**CID: What new materials have you seen recently that have impressed you?**

**SU:** We go to all the shows in Europe and have an extensive library. We do get a lot of materials. But sometimes it is difficult to use them here.

**ME:** We love developing new products with different suppliers and realising the ideas that we have. Even if we don't have a particular project in mind at that point in time we still work with the sup-

pliers developing innovative items ready for when we do have a suitable project.

**MS:** We recently saw this amazing translucent concrete. It is stunning.

**CID: What project has impressed you?**

**MS:** Architecturally, it was the Guggenheim in Bilbao. I wasn't expecting it to be THAT good. And the Opera House that Zaha Hadid is doing, if she needs an interior designer, then I'd love to work on that project!

**ME:** Actually, we've all said that, working on Hadid's projects would be such an amazing honour.

**CID: What are the favourite projects you have worked on?**

**SU:** Badrutt's Palace in St. Morritz. It is one of the most exclusive ski resorts in the world. There are 167 different types of guestrooms. You walk through the rooms and there's a Picasso, you turn around and a Renoir is there or a Monet, all set against the most amazing scenery of the Alps. I would love to go back to see the project again.

**ME:** We very rarely go back to revisit completed projects, which is why it will be odd designing and living in this mar-

ket. You walk around the finished hotel and you feel like you've lost a building, when you made the decision on every piece in there, you chose every ornament and met the artist, sourced every tile etc. It's quite a wrench to separate yourself from it sometimes. I felt like that with the Grand Hyatt in Tokyo, I was so intensely involved, it's a very special project for me.

**SU:** It would be so interesting to go into a place and see things through the eyes of someone that's not a designer, to see what they see first, and what they pick up on. Do they notice all the things that we see? We are so trained to see what is there, we look at a ceiling and we see the grills and the access panels – what do normal visitors just go in and see?

**CID: What is your instinct about Dubai and the ambitious projects that it has planned?**

**MS:** My answer changes from day to day, one day I think it's complete madness and the next it's exciting and challenging, on a normal day it's probably a bit of both! ☑