

**Firm:** HBA (Hirsch Bedner Associates)  
**Interviewee:** Meghann Day, Partner, interviewed by Jeremy Bitter  
**(New!) Location:** South Beach/South Financial District, San Francisco  
**Size of firm:** 40 employees in SF (18 offices worldwide, 1500 employees worldwide)

### **HBA History:**

[It all started] “in 1965, Howard Hirsch, Michael Bedner, started design work for Hilton in Los Angeles, bringing a residential feel. They then started HBA. It was the first hospitality company. Our company was the grandfather of hospitality design [with our] corporate office in Santa Monica. In 1979 Howard opened a Hong Kong office, then Atlanta, San Francisco, London, Dubai, Australia, etc.”

### **Beginnings of the San Francisco Office:**

“In 2009 we were down to two and revamped the office, we decided to take the ‘boutique’ angle. HBA is a big corporate company, but kind had personalized services we could provide, we sought to change the attitude that people had about HBA and large companies, big company big fees, and approach it as a boutique office.”

### **Structure:**

“Two Principals, Meghann Day and Miguel Beaza (LA-based), each associate has a team with members. We may have 4-6 team members with an associate on each project, and those team members may also work on other projects under another associate depending on project demand.”

### **Tell us about the new office!**

“I love that we have conference rooms that are closed! No more taking calls in the hallway or stairs. We have a great vibe here we didn’t have before. We’ve got a rooftop. We’re just excited to be in the same room together. More individuals didn’t really care about the move, they just wanted to be together.”

### **Culture**

“It’s a very open culture. We have an open office space. We don’t have separate offices for principals, associates; it’s very collaborative. It’s exciting because we review everyone’s projects, exchange ideas. We help each other, even if it’s not your project, we review it and talk about it collectively as an office, which I love.”

“We have 11 languages spoken in our office: Diversity. We have 15 people from other countries. Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Luxembourg, Spain, Brazil, India, Korea, Japan. Everyone celebrates all the holidays of many cultures, so it’s a great cultural education. We have a very young group, so we’re always hear what’s the next greatest tech thing or what’s happening. The cultural diversity and the marriage of our stateside employees plus those who have moved here, that relationship makes us special.”

### **Where do you find inspiration?**

“It think what’s important is that we’re an international firm. We have a lot of projects internationally. Everyone in the office travels. We take our juniors with us to job site visits. For example, when we go to Brazil, we make sure they tour two or three hotels. You see that helps with inspiration, we do the

tours, check out the restaurants. We encourage them to stay an extra day or two to see and experience different hotels and countries. In San Francisco, we do hotel tours with local hotels and restaurants. A, you're educated, and B, you're inspired. We take the team and visit the hotel model rooms, to see some projects we've done, and some our competitors have done."

[Secondly,] "Pinterest- it's a dirty word. Everybody's using it. Pinterest has changed a lot of how people present. We've had architects present from Pinterest, and have clients select what they like from the images. Things have changed."

### **Most challenging project, and why?**

"I think during the recession we had a lot of work in China. We worked with a very large technology corporation, and the chairman was very quick to change his mind, and change his mind in design. We saw buildings come up and go down in the same year. Working through that, education, aesthetics, and then,.... with China, we know that only 50% of what you spec is going to be approved. We aim to work more locally, find out what it is they prefer, what vendors do they prefer. We streamlined how our process works. China actually helped us with our other projects, like in Mexico. It was kind of similar with local resources. With our Mexico City project, or Mexican projects in general, they're not allowed to import anything because of tariffs; they don't want to pay for the importation of certain products. So, working locally, overcoming that, sending people to factory tours... etc. Basically, work with the local sources. It's good for you to know as a designer that they're going to change things, your design is going to change at least 50%."

### **How do you overcome the challenge of a client who keeps changing their mind, which causes you to do the work multiple times?**

"We used to have problems with that until we started doing 3D renderings. With the 3D renderings, we're able to do a quick 30 minutes worth of changes to show option A, option B. It's helped us with so many of those issues because we can say, here are the two options you wanted, they can see it, visualize it, and understand, and it minimizes any future changes."

### **Favorite Project, and why?**

"For us, Hilton Mexico City was our first big project that put us on the map. We were a startup essentially, we were down to two and started over. To prove ourselves as a viable office, [that] we were different than the other HBA offices, a young, contemporary design team. Unique spaces and unique projects in other countries, it sets us apart and was a little bit different than the Hilton standards, which they loved. It was something that was off the books with their standards, a little more modern. For us, it was published, it was installed, it won awards. For me it was our favorite because it took us to the next step of where we wanted to go with the office. .... And it still looks good!"

### **Words of wisdom?**

"I'm all about the team, we're a family. Even though we are 40 we have grown together. I love that I still have the same team members as when we started. They're part of this group and that collaboration with the team, we've been successful because of the excitement and unique projects, the collaborations and the result. They're all a result of the office culture and the success, which we're very proud of. It always makes you nervous, I know our projects are okay, but is our office okay? Are the team members okay? There were challenges, especially during the recession, a lot of hours and not enough staff. The

fact that those team members stuck with it and continued with us; they've been rewarded, and they have their own projects, they're continuing to be excited about new projects. So, for me, the inspiration for me is the success of the team and the office environment. If you don't have that, everything falls apart, I think."

### **What makes HBA San Francisco unique?**

"Every project is unique. Every project is customized, not a copy. A few years ago we've set ourselves apart with technology aspect. We had to set ourselves apart from the other HBA offices in terms of competition. we are independent offices, event thought we are global, we run independently, we don't share projects. We have our own design teams, design staff; we bring our own projects in, our own clients in. Even though it's a global company, it's independent with each office."

### **On Technology**

"We do 3D flythroughs, everything is in 3D. We have a 3D team that is amazing. Everything is digital, everything is online. We're here, we're in the tech valley, so we try to see what's the next thing, how do we present better. Because we're hospitality-based, we use whatever [software] our architects advise us to use. [We do] quick and loose [flythroughs] with Sketchup, and then we advance to 3D renderings with Rhino. We realize everyone is so visual. We now just do 10-15 renderings, so they understand every room, every aspect. [With] 3D flythroughs and model rooms, they see the entire space modeled. Then they actually build the model room, they're not surprised."

### **Sometimes on a big project clients want to see beautiful, photorealistic renderings, and often this is outsourced. Do you do this yourselves, and do you find clients are willing to pay for it?**

"All of our presentations we'll show them before and afters with previous projects. We have not had pushback in the past 4 years. We put it in the contracts. They love it! Most projects they want add services for more renderings."

### **What can we look forward to in the future with HBA?**

"We're excited because we're working on two new builds here in the city in the SOMA area. What's fun about one of them is that it's very tech oriented, it has a rooftop, all these F&B, it has a terrace. It's a very exciting, fun, creative [place] with pops of color, a boutique hotel. We're super excited. We have an other one that is a large new build, a couple of towers that have hotel and residential components. We're excited because we have a property in Tahoe install in this January right off the Lake. It's the only entitled hotel for the next 25 years, it's a new build north of the casinos, 250 rooms, very cool property, indoor/outdoor spa, restaurants, cool public spaces. It's really well designed. We're very excited."

### **Favorite Lunch Spot?**

"We used to go to The Grove downtown. Now, on Brannan Street we have the food trucks! Every Tuesday and Thursday they have different food trucks with Off the Grid. There's menus on the wall, the schedule of the trucks, and who's coming what day."

### **Favorite Bar / Happy Hour?**

"I'm going to say Jax Winery, it's next door and we go all the time."