



## Happy Anniversary to HBA and WATG

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Two giants celebrate the creativity that keeps them on top

By **Mary Scoviak**

This year, two mega-watt forces in hospitality design are celebrating major milestones. WATG turns 70 while HBA/Hirsch Bedner Associates reaches the half-century mark. That's a lot of staying power through a lot of business cycles and against decades of tough competition.

The **story** *Boutique Design's* editor Matt Hall wrote on HBA's co-ceo René Gross Kaerskov for our September issue really brought home how hard even these giants work to constantly reinvent themselves, stay relevant and remain on the short lists of owners who want fresh eyes and the star power of the next hot young firm.

Okay, so being good street fighters is in these firms' DNA. Both HBA and WATG were founded by visionary mavericks who saw long before the Ian Schragers and Barry Sternlichts that every hotel needed to tell an individual story. It could be sense-of-place driven, which was a fundamental differentiator for WATG, or it could blend lifestyle with a bit of theater or wish-list style, as HBA's work demonstrates. Whatever the concept, these companies led the way in terms of making clients understand that architects and designers are as much business advisers as creative engines behind hotel architecture and interiors.

It took a lot of courage to say those things—both about the design business and concepts—when a lot of clients didn't want to hear them.

With decades of hindsight, it's easy to forget these firms were struggling start-ups with the same worries as any architect or designer who puts out a shingle. HBA's founder Howard Hirsch was very upfront with me in several interviews about his uphill battles to sell something other than "international style" to clients—and whether anything else would bring in enough business initially keep the office lights on. And, there were a lot of raised eyebrows when George "Pete" Wimberly wanted to use locally-accented shell-shaped sinks in what was, in 1946, Wimberly and Cook's first hospitality project, the renovation of the iconic Royal Hawaiian Resort, Waikiki. Neither of these men could have worked any other way. Once their work was on the radar, clients soon saw that their way was the highway to success.

What continues to make both firms worth watching is that, despite a few missteps, they've maintained that start-up mentality. They have an ear to the ground to determine what's next. That's as evident in the kinds of project they do as the way they look at their business world. For example, HBA had millennially correct fun with its 50th anniversary gala held at Hollywood's Ricardo Montalban Theater last Sunday. Sure, it was a glittering event. But, HBA had fun playing with the theater setting—serving up popcorn and soft drinks to the massive crowd.



*HBA's co-ceos René Gross Kærskov and Ian Carr at the firm's recent 50th anniversary event. Photo: Courtesy of HBA/Hirsch Bedner Associates*

But, with both firms, it's clear that how to improve design, test new ideas and get ahead of guest demand is the primary driver. As ST Media Group CEO Tedd Swormstedt (who represented *Boutique Design* and its parent company) reported back, "HBA's anniversary event was as much a celebration of 50 years of great, innovative design as a tribute to founders of this wonderful industry that believed in entertaining its clients, as a challenge to the hospitality design market to work hard and continue to explore the evolution of great design with passion and zeal."

With that attitude, it's not hard to see why these companies not only survive but thrive.



