Herbert, Uta and the Long Game

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Christopher Hibma October 20, 2026

Last April I was sitting in an opulent *schloss* called Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria surrounded by the theatrical ghosts of the man whose castle it once belonged to: Max Reinhardt. Max, I came to learn during my stay, had been the mentor of the man who founded the acting studio I am now helping to lead in New York: Herbert Berghof, the co-founder of HB Studio. Outside the schloss, the skies were dreary and grey, but inside, gilded rooms dripped with art, colors and memories.

Photograph of Max Reinhardt installed inside Schloss Leopoldskron

I was in the Alps that week as a Fellow of Salzburg Global. It was also on those very grounds where famous exterior scenes from *The Sound of Music* were filmed, too. After taking my obligatory photo in front of the placid pond embodying my inner Julie Andrews, I settled into one of the many chintz-covered chairs in the castle for a global exchange on the future of cultural infrastructure.

Gazing at the schloss from across Leopoldskroner Weiher

My serious face, the Austrian Alps, and a rather glorious morning at Schloss Leopoldskron

As my fellow Fellows and I debated the ins/outs of what was and wasn't cultural infrastructure, I struck up a conversation with someone I had admired for quite some time: Laura Callanan from Upstart Co-Lab. I was sharing with Laura about the once-in-a-lifetime moment HB was facing as we were in the process of selling our buildings on Bank St. Sixty-seven years in the West Village. I was lamenting (and seeking a sympathetic commiserator) about how hard the past year had been and about how the loss was being experienced across the HB community – naively announced recently as the "curtain coming down" in *The New York Times*.

While we ate our highly caloric Austrian lunch, Laura listened to me with that quiet intensity she possesses, and when I finished, she took a pause. And then, she launched into a passionate monologue about how the investment that Herbert (and Uta Hagen) made in real estate those many years ago were an example of artists being excellent stewards with their money. Among other things, Upstart Co-Lab, has introduced a creativity lens to impact investing. Her point to me was that HB's story was one to be celebrated as an achievement rather than a failure. A real estate acquisition made in 1959 is liberatory in 2026 when leveraged wisely. Laura's point of view on HB's real estate transaction reframed my thinking from that moment on.

A few weeks later, while at the Ibsen Scope Festival in Norway, I tried on Laura's confidence in a talk I was asked to give. The topic I was given to speak on was "Civilization". (yikes!) Connecting my ah-ah moment in Salzburg with my opportunity to speak in Skein, I made the case that civilizations are defined not only by what they create, but by what they enable future generations to do next.

This feels very real to those of us who have been entrusted to lead HB Studio right now. We are now able to imagine a different future because our founders, Herbert and Uta, made a financially-wise decision decades ago. In the late 1950s/early 1960s, they purchased three properties in Greenwich Village with the help of hundreds of student-artists who believed in their vision of a rigorous training center. That decision gave generations of artists an artistic home on Bank Street for decades. Now, though, these buildings have become too burdensome for the organization and their repair would bankrupt HB.

Artists are typically considered irresponsible with money, while people with "real jobs" are treated as the adults in the room. Yet, as we know all too well, that artists build our lives around risk. We invest years in our practice without reliable income or a guaranteed return on our investment. Herbert and Uta understood uncertainty as they immigrated to the US from repressive regimes. They used their craft, and eventually real estate in New York City, to create a little protection from that uncertainty.

A young Uta Hagen and a relief sculpture of Herbert Berghof (Photo: Graham Dickie, *The New York Times*)

In 2026, we are at another crossroads at HB as we ask ourselves what we should do with this asset that they made possible. As we have opened ourselves up to that question over the last two years, we have also been examining the organization itself. It's clear from engineering reports that years of deferred maintenance have taken a toll on the facility, and it's obvious to anyone who visits that only able-bodied artists have been able to practice here. But, before placing the buildings on the market and accepting an offer to sell, we drafted dozens of financial models that explored staying and renovating, as well as imagining a different future. We've flexed our technology and fundraising muscles, too. Do our systems support the work? How about our leadership and reporting structures? Are we equipped to make one of the biggest decisions in HB's history, and to make the most of this opportunity?

Here's the bottomline… HB could get a good price for these buildings (which we did… we will reveal the price after the buyer closes on the sale). HB could relocate efficiently (which we intend to). And… we could still miss the *real* opportunity. We can change our address, but if we don't also consider our habits, our systems and our assumptions that have accumulated over the last 81 years, we will have missed the opportunity this moment is offering us.

I first learned this lesson while working at Sundance Institute. Later in my tenure there, I participated in planning for Sundance House in Park City, UT that would have brought administrative offices, public space, a screening room and an artist residency program under one roof for the first time in its history. My role was to envision the residency program elements of the plan. Designed with Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, the project was also a partnership with the city, which had planned to incorporate a new transit hub and new homes for two local arts organizations. It was ambitious, collaborative and so, so beautiful. But the pandemic arrived and the project was never realized. And now, interestingly, Sundance has no physical footprint at all. They are a remote workforce, although their new Festival home in Boulder is the next chapter of their story. Which, in itself, is a fascinating narrative about a traveling legacy…

Likewise, finishing a building project does not necessarily mean that it has fulfilled its greater purpose. At the Guthrie Theater, I worked inside one of the country's most celebrated performing arts buildings, designed by Jean Nouvel. I helped lead their Public Space Inclusion Project that examined how the building might become more welcoming, more actively used and more connected to the community around it. We conducted hours and hours of meetings for internal and external stakeholders. That project was intended to bridge the gap between architecture and belonging, but, ultimately, the project didn't go much further than the final report.

Architecture tells a story about who we want inside. Everything matters, in my humble opinion. How visitors approach the entrance, the width of a doorway, how the gathering spaces make you feel and the visibility of staff all shape who is welcome. The story is clear, whether it is spoken or not.

It's HB's aim to become a more sustainable and accessible organization with this move to a new home. When a facility works as it should, it supports the work. Artists have what they need, people feel welcome and the institution can use its resources to advance the mission. For a while now, though, HB has been supporting its buildings ($$$) and that needed to change.

Some in the HB community have wished for a White Knight to save HB from this moment. To protect the buildings. To save the spirits in the bricks and walls. That desire is real, yet not rooted in reality. Yes, many now-famous people studied at HB, but the link to their wallets is not direct. Philanthropy is about relationships, not only association or nostalgia.

I also want to be very aware here of the emotional burden this has been for the HB community. Change, although inevitable, is hard. Rootedness is important and there has been a comfort knowing that Bank St has been a haven for so long. Walking

through the leafy West Village and arriving on cobblestoned Bank Sttreet is a singular experience. Sitting with the idea that HB will live elsewhere is sometimes hard to imagine.

And yet… I believe that artists are uniquely qualified to imagine something that doesn't yet exist.

I've been writing recently about the muscle that artists, in particular, have when it comes to ambiguity, precarity and risk. An actor can train for years without stable employment, a playwright revises work long before an audience sees it, a choreographer creates something that disappears as soon as it's performed. This same muscle can be applied to institutional decisions, especially financial ones. It's not that we are irresponsible with money. It's that we usually don't have access to capital, which typically doesn't afford us a runway to properly plan.

The 2026/27 Hagen Core at HB Studio (Photo: Graham Dickie, *The New York Times*)

Precarity is not naïveté. The two are not the same. This real estate evolution here at HB makes that clear. The challenge we face now is whether these buildings acquired 67 years ago can liberate the organization for the next 67 years.

The opportunity before us exists because Herbert, Uta and generations of students took their artistic conviction and invested it in an asset. The responsibility of our generation today is to utilize the value they created with the same seriousness and

long view. Francesca, the Board of Directors and dozens of others have helped us decide how this inheritance can serve the artists who come after us.

This is an exciting opportunity to think beyond our own lifetimes. No one generation owns an institution. Each of us decides how to use what we have inherited.

Two truths can coexist: a building can hold potent memories *and* be financially unsustainable. It can be beloved *and* not quite work as it should. We can mourn its loss *and* look toward a bright future somewhere else. Recognizing the limitations of Bank Street does not make us disloyal.

We mustn’t confuse our mission with our address.

HB’s legacy will be best honored by carrying its deepest commitments into something that can serve future generations of artists. That is the light we carry forward.

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