EPISODE 031

HCMA

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Bonnie Retief, hcma

AND

Paul Fast, hcma

INTRODUCTION Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode 31 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on hcma, an architecture and design practice that designs buildings, brands, and shared experiences that connect people. Headquartered in Vancouver, Canada, with offices in Victoria and Edmonton, hcma works on a diverse range of projects for institutional clients, government entities, and community initiatives.

The project, designed by hcma's own communication design team was posted on Brand New on April 7, 2021. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast031 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast031, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Bonnie Retief, Creative Lead at hcma and Paul Fast, Principal at hcma.

In this conversation we hear about the thoughtfulness that lead hcma to build its own communication design team and how that has enriched their process and opened up a slew of opportunities. We also get some useful insights into how hcma carried out their own rebrand

and the different approaches to implementing it from the inside out. It was also great to hear about their commitment to craftsmanship and creating meaningful objects in a way that reflected the firm's process and values. But the highlight was learning that the selected logo that made it all the way to the end was originally a wildcard option. Presented as the most daring and an outlier in contrast to eight other options. A reminder to never shy away from presenting those wild ideas that push people outside of their comfort zones.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Bonnie and Paul.

ARMIN VIT   Hello everyone today we're going to talk about an architecture firm, which is not something that we talk about often on Brand New, much less on the podcast. So this is very exciting territory and we'll get right to it. Bonnie, Paul, thank you so much for joining me today on The Follow-Up.

PAUL FAST   Thanks for having us.

BONNIE RETIEF   Thanks Armin. Great to be here.

ARMIN   Paul, we're going to start with you. Usually the brands we talk about on this podcast are well-known at a large scale, and there's a built-in knowledge from our audience about what, or who we're talking about. But in this case, hcma might be a little bit of a mystery in a good way. Can you tell us a little bit about your firm?

PAUL   hcma is an interdisciplinary design practice. We're based in Vancouver, Canada on the West Coast, we have offices in Edmonton and in Victoria, and we have a long history of architectural design and more recently of communications design as well. So, we're about a hundred people strong in our team and the history of the firm goes back almost 45 years. Like I said, primarily rooted in architecture historically, but that's now shifted over the past five to six years.

ARMIN   And has the shift been significant in that you're doing a lot less architecture and more communications and branding?

PAUL   I'd say the architectural practice has continued to grow, but we've now folded in a new communications design team. And that has been growing substantially as well over the past five to six years. We're seeing a really strong integration between those two teams and a general growth of both of those.

ARMIN   And what prompted the firm to start a communication arm?

PAUL   The answer is, I think we realized that architecture alone wasn't able to solve the problems that we want it to be a part of solving. And so, it was a really momentous turning point in the firm's history, about five to six years ago where, we as a firm woke up one day and we said, you know, there's issues going on in the world, whether that's climate, systemic racism, loneliness, community resilience, things like that, that we as designers feel we want to be a part of solving. Also recognizing that as architects alone, we weren't equipped to do that on our own. I know we needed to expand the voices that were part of that solution creation at the table in a much, much more powerful and meaningful way. So, we started that sort of interdisciplinary journey about five or six years ago, and started by bringing on a whole bunch of different disciplines, but primarily focusing on the integration of communications design into the practice, and have seen really powerful, tangible kind of benefits to how that's opened up new perspectives for us as designers. Unlocked new solutions, and it's been a really powerful journey for us in discovering how we as a design firm can have a positive impact from a social stand point.

ARMIN   That is a wonderful answer. I think it would have been acceptable if you said like, well, we wanted to expand our business and bring in other sources of income, but this is much better. It's a really nice way of thinking about what we do, which we often think that what we do is enough—or within our capabilities. But it's nice to hear that ambition of wanting to do more based on the abilities that we have as creatives in general, and bringing those two practices together. Bonnie, how

has that communications aspect of the firm evolved since you joined? Because I understand that you joined once this was already in play.

BONNIE I joined end of 2015, and I was the first official hire on the Communication Design team. The first opportunities for identity work came in through architecture projects in the form of public engagement. And now, traditionally, engagements were taking place in an open house format with easels and presentation boards. I'm sure you can visualize what that looks like. And the form of communication felt very one-way. hcma wanted to do things differently, and engage communities and stakeholders in a far more meaningful way to encourage participation and reach community members who may otherwise not have had a chance to have their say. So this is where the blending of architecture and communication design, as Paul mentioned, really started to reveal its power. I quickly realized as a designer, that the approach to these projects is quite different. The identities that we created needed to be recognized as non-commercial marketing, they couldn't feel too polished or else they would send the wrong message that we have everything figured out, here it is, ta-da! We often strategically designed identities around the tools of engagement, which made the whole experience so much more memorable for people.

ARMIN We often design for the appeal of designing. We often tend to forget how this is going to be used by other people. So it is great to hear that you do take that approach.

PAUL Yeah, I was just going to say there was a really powerful moment where we realized that our ability to communicate with the public around design issues was totally changed by the addition of communications design team in our practice. And we saw that in measurable ways, like there was numbers around engagement and the types of input we were getting, who we were getting that input from, that changed quite dramatically when we started to fold in communications design aspects to architectural engagement work. It wasn't just a, you know,

let's just start doing communications design. It was actually having a profound influence on us as architects in the work that we do with our communities.

ARMIN That's fantastic to hear. So how big is the communications team at the moment?

BONNIE We have five designers, we have a production lead, and a client lead on the team.

ARMIN So it's almost like a really small design firm in-house. That's a significant amount of people doing good work. Paul what prompted the company to want to redesign at this point in its history?

PAUL You know, I mentioned we were on a sort of a journey over the past five to six years of really sharpening our vision as a firm, and refocusing our efforts, and our mandate as a social impact driven firm—away from a traditional design practice. And so we've been on that journey for over six or seven years. And collectively, we've kind of gone through these stages where the brand that we've been associated with, or that we've been projecting with, has felt a little less comfortable the more we go down that changing vision, right? It was really time for us to adopt a brand that embraced both the fact that we were now also communications design practice, and not just an architectural practice, that was a big part of it. The other perspective on that is we're also shifting away from a firm that was historically defined by four partners with the names and the initials, which is a very traditional way of recognizing a design practice. So we started as Hughes Condon Marler Architects, then we changed to HCMA Architecture + Design, and now we deliberately changed to hcma because we're on that path of divesting ourselves of individual identities and working towards a collective identity. That was really important for the rationale behind why rebrand.

ARMIN Did you consider changing your name completely?

PAUL We did. We did. We did a lot of soul searching around that. The reason we decided to stay with hcma was there's a lot of brand recognition and capital in the marketplace that we operate in, and it was too great an opportunity to sort of just ditch by the wayside. So, while we are going away from any reference to Hughes Condon Marler or names attached to the hcma, we felt it was still an important part of who we were as an identity in the marketplace.

ARMIN That makes sense. And another self reflection question, did you consider hiring an outside firm to do this job?

PAUL We did. We asked ourselves that question for sure. At the end of the day, we realized that we needed to be able to stand on our own two legs as communications design firm. We wanted to take that challenge on ourselves, and of course there's a whole host of challenges that come with designing an identity for yourself, which Bonnie can speak to. But along the way, we did consult with some external agencies, they gave us sort of a peer review perspective on the process and was really helpful in giving us some pointed feedback from an outside perspective as well.

ARMIN So speaking about challenges, and I think this is a challenge that everyone faces when trying to design for themselves, whether you're a solo designer or a large firm. How difficult or perhaps not difficult, was it to carve out time and resources for this project when you probably have plenty of client work to keep you busy?

BONNIE Well, initially it was a challenge to get started on this project. I'll let Paul talk more about capacity and resourcing, but from my perspective, just picking up on something that Paul mentioned earlier. I think it's safe to say it is every designers fear to implement a rebrand for your own company. It felt so close to home, and therefore the fear of failing, or under-delivering was immense. And I think that's what kind of made it particularly difficult to get going in the beginning.

PAUL From a general sort of capacity standpoint., you're right. There's always project work that will fill in the gaps. Fortunately, we got a bit of

a silver lining from the pandemic in that situation, right? Because there was a period of time when the pandemic first hit—a lot of our architectural projects and comms projects went on hold. We were all trying to figure out what the future looked like from a business standpoint. So we said, you know what? We've got some space, we've got some breathing room, let's invest in the firm and let's position the firm well coming out of the pandemic and just use this time when we have some capacity internally to really sink our teeth into this, and engage the leadership around this, and figure out… you don't get some traction on branding process.

ARMIN   It's interesting how over the course of a year that we've been doing this podcast, which started as a sort of a reaction to the pandemic, how often the silver lining of time has come up. All of a sudden people have time to either revisit work that they were working on or take on challenges like this one, redesigning their own identity. As horrible as it has been, it's been a nice side effect that we've all had time. And I think just the sort of the urge to reconsider how we do things.

BONNIE   I think another piece of that was also the pandemic resulted in us all of a sudden working from home. And just to paint the picture of what it's like working in our office, we have a very open plan office. Where I sit in the office, I'm kind of on the one end, my back is to the central space and I've got these huge monitors. And so working on your own design identity within the office felt quite vulnerable; and I felt very exposed exploring concepts at an early stage. Moving all of that exploration home was really quite enlightening. Yeah. It just gave me a freer sense to test new things and fail in a way.

ARMIN   So this process started early 2020.

PAUL   More or less. Yup.

BONNIE   Yeah. That's when it really kicked off.

PAUL   We'd been going through this process with our leadership team about really nailing down our mission/vision principles. And then that

triggered the question about rebrand, and so that happened prior to 2020. But 2020 is really when things started to hit the ground.

BONNIE With us looking quite closely at our brand values during that time, I think everyone would agree with this, the importance of people really… that's where the focus was. We were seeing how community bonds around the world were strengthening despite the adversity and uncertainty. And for ourselves, all of a sudden our offices in other cities felt like they were just next door. There was this different way of working, but we as an organization felt stronger at that time and it really threw our brand values into sharp focus.

ARMIN So you started this process at the office. How did you kickstart that process? Even with the fear of failure, which I can relate, and I think every designer out there can relate whether they're designing for themselves or for others. There's always that feeling of, I hope I don't screw this up! When something good comes out of a project, you're like, oh wow! Something good came out of it. But I think fear of failure is something that, for better or for worse, drives most designers. So how did you get started in that whole exploration process and figuring out how you're going to tackle it?

BONNIE I started in a very similar way to most branding projects, but it very quickly took its own path. We had a brief, maybe a slightly less defined brief than usual, but we knew our objectives. We just didn't know in the beginning how far we were going to take it. I quickly realized that starting with the logo, wasn't the right path, the logo being the most immediate representation of an organization, our people, our brand. It honestly just felt too difficult to begin there. So we started working from the outside in, by looking at some of our everyday objects around the office, like notebooks and mugs. Objects, which whether we realize it or not, actually communicate so much about our brand. I'll talk you through an example, our hcma mug. It's the thing that we use the most, but think about the least. It's such a humble object.

And for many of us, our morning beverage is the cornerstone to any good day. In our office, we gather around the coffee machine, debating the left top or the right and, you know, discussing wild ideas. The whole scenario is quite ritualistic, but our current coffee mugs were black and white, smooth and uniform, you know, made through a mass production technique. So we started to ask ourselves, how do we introduce a human quality to the mugs? To better align with who we have become? So we thought, what if we collaborated with a local artist for example, to produce them? It was that thinking that aligns so closely to everything that's so important to us in our project work. Getting closer to the craft and seeing every opportunity as an opportunity to learn and get closer to the source of how things are made. Thinking about the rebrand through the embodiments of objects really helped to set us on a path. And it was a great way to kick off that creative process and help us define our brand characteristics in a tangible way.

ARMIN It's funny because as you were mentioning, the one object that sort of help you kickstart things, or the one asset that sort of drove the thing… we have a client, and what they wanted is they wanted a really strong sticker. It was a coworking space that they would be proud to put on the back of their laptop. And that became the driving thing for the whole identity. That was the number one proof of concept that we had to work against. Does it make a good sticker? So, in this case, does it make a good coffee mug? Seems as good a place to start with and I agree, there's something about just that initial burst of happiness that comes from a coffee mug in the morning. So you have the coffee mug, you have that interest in exploring different objects, how does it evolve from there? And at what point do you actually start working on the logo?

BONNIE I think once we had dial down what those brand, characteristics where, then it was easier to see how that influenced all the choices after that. In the beginning, we kept exploration so board on this project—the brief started as a brand evolution, initially we thought it would be a slight shift with some subtle changes. In the early stages we started

pulling together concept boards, a mood board, and the responses that we got from the partner group and the greater leadership team, I got the sense that we were searching for a transformation rather than an evolution.

PAUL   And that was a really important shift. We did originally go down this road of thinking, we were just going to sort of tweak or evolve the brand as opposed to start from scratch. Bonnie's absolutely right, it came to a point where we realized, no, this is actually not what needs to happen here. And it's kind of like waking up one day and realizing that the clothes you're wearing just don't feel comfortable anymore, and that you need a new set of clothes. We reached that point, and once we kind of made that decision, it was full steam ahead.

ARMIN   With most projects, you go through a round of exploration, you set up a meeting with a client, you present, there's a big moment where decisions are made. Was this the case here? Or was it more of like an ongoing day-to-day, week-to-week check-in between the communications team, and the partners team, to see where you're aligned or was it also this dynamic of, let's set up this big meeting and try to get a reaction from the partner?

PAUL   Probably a little bit of both. My role on the project, I'm the partner in charge of marketing at the firm—I'm one of seven partners in the firm. I was sort of the go-between. And then, in a sense, the marketing team was the client for Bonnie and her team. We tried to structure it a little bit that way to give the process a bit of structure, and order, and rigor because being your own client can sometimes be the worst thing in the world, right? I think that helped. It wasn't, you know, let's work on this in the corner and go do the big reveal and hope it gets a positive reaction, and then keep on working. It was more fluid than that. There was a few different check-in points that we had structured around that with the partners, and then with the broader leadership team as well.

ARMIN Let's talk a little bit about the logo. At some point you realize that a simple evolution is not what you need, how did you get to this crazy weird logo that you ended up with?

BONNIE Well, like I said, the exploration that we did was really broad. The first presentation to the partners included nine distinct concept directions. It was actually originally eight, but then concept nine was imputed as a wild card, and I'll let you take a wild guess as to what concept nine was. Regarding the first round of exploration, we knew that the meaning of our name has moved beyond the acronym and that the business was no longer defined as a series of individuals. That took away the constraints of having letters organized in a linear format. And quite honestly, we wanted to avoid that. So that theme of collective… the collective effort became central to the design brief. And any concepts that didn't reflect that, essentially got trashed.

ARMIN Then out of all the ashes came out this weird, the least linear logo, but in a way also linear because it's made out of lines that contoured and shaped those letters. Paul, what was your, and the rest of the partner's reaction to this logo? Assuming that it looked a little bit like that at that exploration phase.

PAUL Yeah, it did. It did. And I'll be totally honest Armin, I think my first reaction was a little hesitant. It was a big departure for us and as an architect being used to being represented in a different way, it was a departure from that. It's not the logo of an architectural firm. But I totally fell in love with the story. And when Bonnie talked about the story that was embedded in the logo around this kind of nature of the collective and the spaces between—we started to see it as a space, the logo as a space, and that's something that I as an architect and kept behind and understand it. Like it is with many good design ideas, it grows on you. And now I don't think we could have had any other logo. We're all head over heels in love with it. But it did take a bit of climatization. It took us kind of getting the rest of the partners, taking them along for the ride, some of them adopted it right off the bat. Others, it was a slower process. We are all fully on board now.

ARMIN And was there another logo up for contention? That sort of went toe to toe with it? Or was it from the start, this is the direction we want to go in—let's just push forward with that.

BONNIE There was a second contender. We went through a series of presentations to the partners and the concepts got kind of whittled down or refined with the feedback that we were receiving. But then there were two front runners and they were so distinctly different. One was the one that we have now, which was such a bold choice for the partners. I mean, I felt so proud that that was where we were going, that we were pushing it that far. The other was more of an evolution, I would say, like a subtle move for us, which would have felt safer. We might've resulted in two years down the line, going, maybe we need to consider a rebrand again.

ARMIN That's no good. Especially if you're going through the effort once, might as well go big or go home, which we're already home. You know, you chose to go bold, was there still any concern of like, oh, you know, are we going to alienate any of our clients? Especially working in the civic space, it's a little bit more conservative. I don't mean that in a bad way, there's just a little less room for something as daring as this. Were you at some point like, eh, maybe not?

PAUL Certainly. And we got some really good advice around that. Somebody told us that your existing clients, they know you, they love you, they're going to come along for the journey no matter what. Even if they may not like the new logo or react poorly to it. Which I don't think they have. The new clients that kind of look at you and the new brand, they're going to see you based on how you've decided to project yourself. We are comfortable with the statement we're making with the new logo and how it represents us. In a way it's sort of a self-selection filter, right? We want people to come to us, and work with us, that are comfortable and get to really know us, we don't want to kind of put a smoke screen up and project an identity that we actually aren't. It fits us, and we're comfortable with the statement it makes about hcma.

ARMIN When you believe in how you're represented and how you put yourself out there I think that just attracts the right kinds of clients, collaborators, staff members, things like that. You have a weird logo, you have a mug [laughter], how do you start developing the rest of the identity elements? Which are really, really exciting too—there's the shapes, there's the patterns, there's the typography, color palette… how do you start building out all that stuff?

BONNIE It was a huge undertaking to begin with. We had to design the brand as a sort of kit of parts. It needed to cater towards not only our marketing efforts, but also provide a graphic toolkit for the various departments at hcma. We have teams who often produce drawings and diagrams on the fly, and these diagrams have to communicate complex information quickly and clearly. So, the toolkits consisting of colors, graphic forms, tight guidelines, to name a few, was intended to remove the need of teams having to reinvent the wheel each time and inevitably create visual consistency across the firm.

PAUL One of the kind of exciting parts of the process for me as an architect was, we had this conversation around how deep do we drive the brand? Does it just live as an external representation? Or do we take it completely internally? Rebrand everything internally? And, how far does it influence architectural production? And we decided, you know what, we want this to be comprehensive. Right now we have a team that is now taking the brand and actually weaving that into architectural drawing production. And so the color consistency between the drawings we put out there in the world are going to be fully aligned with the brand and the way in which we represent people. So the people in the tote bag that you got are actually the figures that we use in our architectural drawings. We want it to be comprehensive and complete. That's been a really exciting part of the process from the architectural side.

BONNIE The interesting thing about the pattern on the tote bag is that it kind of came full circle because the origin of that idea, it was inspired by the tiny people illustrations that architects use to populate their drawings.

And, you know, it was intended to symbolize a thriving community. We've got a mix of people, and nature, and pets, and everyday objects in that pattern. And now it's come full circle and it's fed back into that graphic toolkit, which is just great because it helps connect everything within the identity.

ARMIN Kind of like very high level synergy, but at the most subtle levels that clients might not recognize why everything feels so connected, which is those little cues that make it all work together. So that is pretty fantastic. It's the kind of thing that we often don't think about… where are those small areas where we can imbue our brand with it without just splatting the logo on top stuff. Speaking of all the materials that you're producing, how do you go about restocking everything in the office? From notebooks, to mugs, to tote bags? Is it a phased approach or did you just one day say like, allright, everything old out, everything new in.

PAUL This is another silver lining story because nobody's been in the office for the past year. And so we got sort of a chance to clean house a little bit. We didn't want to be irresponsible with the materials we already had, and so there's big signs that went up and said, you know, if your kids need sketchbooks, then take our existing sketchbooks home, 'cause here's the new ones. There's been a marker in time, and we've tried to be as clear as possible around the flipping of the switch from the old brand to the new, particularly when it comes to templates and the digital assets. The things that are going out to our clients, we were hoping for sort of as seamless a transition, and as clear a transition between the old and the new as possible. Obviously there's some challenges with that, you know, things get tweaked. So we launched the first round and now there's feedback coming back from people using it, but like the day-to-day stuff that needs to be incorporated and updated. It's sort of an ongoing process. We were aiming for sort of as seamless a flip-over as possible.

ARMIN Bonnie, is that ture?

BONNIE Yeah. We're still currently working through some of the phase two elements. It was pretty seamless in the end.

ARMIN Then in terms of your team involvement, who's doing what? How are you dividing up the workload? Especially as you're in your own houses?

BONNIE I would say that this is easily one of the most challenging rollouts I've ever worked on in terms of scale and scope. But thankfully we have a tremendous team that supported us all along the way. So there were really three main areas leading up to the launch. Production of all the new collateral, which our production lead, Judy Bau managed, she was an absolute saint throughout it all; she allowed me to select 10 different colors of notebooks and you know, all the things that she had to juggle, she managed all the vendor relationships brilliantly wearing multiple hats throughout. Then there was the internal rollout, which Paul mentioned, and we were very aware of how disruptive this could be for teams if not managed property. Flipping the switch from old brand to new when project teams are already managing their own time sensitive deadlines was a huge consideration. In order to enable a smooth roll-out, we recruited brand champions across the office. And these recruits sat in a few training sessions, they helped us test a lot of the templates that we were developing, and then prior to launch and post-launch, they acted as a conduit for any and all brand-related questions. The third and final was the messaging for external communications. We couldn't lose sight of how we would announce this to our clients and collaborators. When you rebrand, you only really have one chance to get it right. So, we worked closely with our marketing team to craft the right messaging and cadence for that roll-out.

ARMIN That's a pretty interesting technique. I don't know if that's the right word for it, but just using—not using—that's not the right word either, I'm just choosing all the wrong words, but… [laughter] having people that, you know, they start believing in the brand, and then they implement it without them being the brand people, they're not the designers, but they're just the ones that are going to help carry it forward. That's an interesting approach for our listeners to consider

suggesting to their clients. And it's something that I might steal as well. So it's a really interesting approach.

BONNIE The teams were so supportive, and I think they were just really excited, and really hungry for better systems, and a better reflection of who we were. They were all totally on board. It was amazing because we could not have done it without their help.

ARMIN Definitely. So you have your marker in time that you're changing. Have you had any feedback from clients, collaborators, the press?

PAUL We've had really good feedback actually. And the one anecdote that I found really rewarding was when we sent out the broadsheet—what we call the broadsheet—which was sort of a mini newspaper that described the rebrand. And I had a client just a couple of weeks ago, actually… and she sent me a note and she said, "I just want to thank you., the best part of my day for many, many days was when I got a physical copy of the broadsheet. And I took 10 minutes out of my day and I was able to leave through that. And it was something that was physically tactile and super rich from a content standpoint when the entire last year has been totally digital". It was a way to kind of connect back with our clients. It was an excuse to connect back with them in a meaningful way, not just to kind of say, Hey, we've rebranded, but to say here, we want to give you something. We're going to give you something that hopefully makes your day a little brighter and it totally hit the mark from that standpoint. So we've had really positive feedback. And I think the media generally has responded really well as well. The story of an architectural firm and a communications design firm working together in this manner is a fairly new story in many ways. And so I think it's been interesting to see how that's been picked up.

ARMIN Especially when the result has been so different and so unexpected. It's not rare for an architecture firm to have a designer in-house, and then they redesign and they could have that sort of evolution that's expected. But when you have a result like this with like, oh, it does make you pay attention. As myself, you know, being the media, I

guess… when I saw it, I was like, this is not normal. This doesn't come from an architecture firm on a regular basis. It's nice to hear that other outlets are reacting the same way. Starting to sum up here, Bonnie, what was the most exciting aspect of working on this project?

BONNIE The most exciting part I think was getting to produce things, and also the opportunity that we had to work with so many different talented makers. The sheer diversity. We were getting to see the identity manifest in various forms, such as the woven label on the tote bag, the wooden puzzle, which was inspired by Enzo Mari's Animali puzzles. I've always been a fan of those. Ceramics, motion graphics, motion reel— we just got to work with so many interesting people and I rarely felt that the whole process of this project, from start to finish, was a reflection of the ways that we always strive to work at hcma. Bringing in different talents and creating ideas together, and then seeing things happen. Seeing the magic that comes out of that. I'm a very tactile person, so that process of making and prototyping was just so exciting.

PAUL And one of the things that I've learned from you and your processes is that you work in a very physical way and Armin, if you could see the office, it's littered with the prototypes and artifacts of Bonnie's process over the years. It was a surprise to me that graphic design could be so three-dimensional, that it could be so spatial. And so many of the concepts that she brings to her work are very spatial, more than just two-dimensional. And so that's been a really rewarding for me to see as an architect ,from my position, is being able to engage with things that I can touch and feel that come out of that process. So it's been really fun.

ARMIN We can totally relate because here, me and my wife and business partner, you know we have this conference that we do all the materials for. We make lanyards and programs, they will have a hand assembly aspect to it. And we're the same way, we have to test things out. I mean, we still have, mock-ups like physical mock-ups here in our basement from 10 years ago. How can we do this testing different

materials? We can definitely relate not just making them, but keeping them, which is a problem because they have no real design value anymore. They are just a sentimental moment, where you tried something and it either sparked that great solution, or it was just like, ahh, don't do that ever again. [Laughter].

BONNIE It's funny how sometimes those objects actually become more special to you as a designer, than the end result.

PAUL They do. They do. And our shelfs have models of buildings that have never been built before, but that I'll never be able to throw away because they're just… they're special.

ARMIN They represent the manifestation of an idea at some point. And it's just hard to discard that. Kind of the same way that you keep files forever, I guess… you could have empty bad idea files, but you keep them. Getting back on track, Paul for hcma as a business, what is the most exciting aspect of this identity moving forward?

PAUL I think it clears the decks for us to really talk convincingly about what our purpose is as a firm. You know, we are a purpose driven organization. And so we feel now like we have an identity that matches that. We feel like we're whole, in that sense. It's a platform for us, it's platform to talk about the things that we think matter in the world, and the way in which design can help move those things forward. It's removed some of the barriers for us to be able to grow as a business in the way that we weren't previously. That's been a really powerful part of this process.

ARMIN That is wonderful to hear. As I mentioned already, I think there's something very special about this identity in the sense that it's so unexpected. It communicates many different things in not an overt way, they're all subtle messages. The idea of the spaces within, that's such a powerful concept. It is about those counter spaces, and negative spaces, that often make the positive spaces work so well. So, I'm a big fan of the identity. As I wrote on the blog, I haven't been that complimentary in a long time and even our audience, you know, our

audience is very hard to please, especially with things that come out of left field. We don't always know if it's going to win or lose, but the reaction from the audience was outstanding. I think it got favorited a couple of hundred times, which is rare. Congratulations on pulling it off, especially within the challenges of the pandemic. And I want to thank you, Bonnie and Paul, for spending your lunch hour with me on The Follow-Up.

PAUL   Thank you so much Armin, and we really do appreciate very much your kind words about the work, Bonnie and her team have done. And it's been really positive to be able to follow up with you about that and be part of this conversation.

BONNIE   Thank you so much Armin. It's been so great to meet you, and talk about his, and hear about it from your perspective, so, thank you.

BRYONY   Designing your own identity, whether an individual or a firm, is one of the hardest tasks we face. You can follow hcma's example in a few ways: establish who the decision maker is; define what your values are; set up a rigorous process and timeline to keep you in check; and, most actionably, if you feel stuck when trying to imagine what the new logo would be… stop, and start with the coffee mug instead.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.