

EPIISODE 050

JODRELL BANK

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Michael Johnson, Johnson Banks

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 milestone episode number 50 of The Follow-up! Before we get into this week's episode, a quick housekeeping announcement that the next episode of The Follow-up will be released in early to mid July as Armin and I head out to Europe next week for our two-week, three-city tour of First Round.

This week we are following up on Jodrell Bank, which is the name of a site in Cheshire, England, owned by the University of Manchester that was first used as a botany field station. With the arrival of Sir Alfred Charles Bernard Lovell, an English physicist and radio astronomer, the site began its development as a world-leading science research institute and observatory. The site is now home to the Lovell Telescope, the third largest steerable radio telescope in the world with a diameter of 250 feet (or 76 meters), along with the more modest Mark II (25 meters) and the appropriately named 7m telescope. In 2019, Jodrell Bank was inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage Site list in recognition of its, quote, "internationally significant science, heritage and cultural impact". As an active research and academic site, it has also welcomed visitors for many years and is a must-see item for all locals.

The project, designed by London, UK-based Johnson Banks was posted on Brand New on April 13, 2022. You can pull it up on

your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast050 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast050, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by only one guest, Michael Johnson, Founder of Johnson Banks.

In this conversation we get to hear about the painstaking process of arriving at what is seemingly such a simple logo. Echoing the concave structure of the satellite, it not only required Michael's cleverness and his team's expert capabilities... it also required the help of Michael's oldest son, an architect, who looked at the challenge not from an artistic or designer perspective but from a structural one that helped unlock the challenge. In between the wonderful conversation covering the details of the project we get some bonus bits of wisdom and insight from Michael, who has been in this business for 35 years and knows a thing or two about the industry, making this episode all the more enchanting.

Now let's listen in as Armin follows up with Michael.

ARMIN Hello, everyone today we're here to talk about a bank with Banks. Yet, this has nothing to do with financial institutions and everything to do with a big ass satellite on a site called Jodrell Bank, and we're here with Michael Johnson of Johnson Banks. Michael, welcome to The Follow-Up.

MICHAEL Well, it's lovely to be here Armin, lovely to see you and hear you after slightly too long. Couple of years.

ARMIN Yeah. It's been a while.

MICHAEL It has been a while.

ARMIN I think the last time we saw each other was at the Nashville Brand New Conference, 2016.

MICHAEL Really? Okay. Right. Yes.

ARMIN Possibly.

MICHAEL Yes. Quite possibly or Amsterdam. When was that?

ARMIN That was 2016 as well. We saw each other a lot in one year. Yeah.

MICHAEL Slightly overexposed in 2016.

ARMIN Yeah. <laugh> that's right. <laugh> all right. So let's start at the beginning with a simple question. How did Johnson Banks get involved in this project?

MICHAEL I had a look at the dates and we were approached February, March last year by this famous radio telescope just south of Manchester in Northern England to talk to them about their brand and narrative. We were approached actually by what was then called The Discovery Center. So if you like the visitor attraction part of the team, they approached us for some help. So a little bit over a year ago.

ARMIN And did they just reach out to you alone? I mean, maybe you don't know this, but was there a big RFP put out? Or was it just more for the direct referral?

MICHAEL I'm fairly sure that we were one of three or four. I'll be completely honest, I don't know who the other three were. I should know that, shouldn't I? I think sometimes there's an inverse relationship. If you don't get a project, you want to know who you didn't, who you lost to, but if you do get it, you don't care.

ARMIN That's exactly what I was gonna say. You don't know because you won. So it doesn't matter.

MICHAEL <laugh> I think it's fair to say that we were very, very excited to get this kind of call because we have been longing to do a significant piece of what you might call cultural branding for a while. And they're quite hard to get actually, because everybody wants to do a museum, or a gallery, or a big cultural or a scientific reference. So, it's not easy wherever you are in the world as a graphic designer to get one of these

projects. No. It was not a creative pitch. It was more like, what are your thoughts? What are your insights about our situation? So that was how it went basically.

ARMIN And here you sort of hit at two for one with both a cultural client, as well as a scientific—

MICHAEL Yes.

ARMIN —client in that they touch on both things. So with that segue, how is the institution set up in the sense that it is an academic research center, but it also has this visitor aspect for it. Are there two things managed by the same person? Is there more of a division between church and state or, you know, science and tourism in a way?

MICHAEL It's a little tiny bit confusing. There's lots of things happening on the site. Our client was technically the, what was then called The Discovery Center. There is technically a Jodrell Bank observatory, which is probably the phrase that everyone would use for the whole site. There's also an astrophysics department, which isn't onsite, which is in the University of Manchester. The whole thing is a subset of the university of Manchester. It's quite confusing. And we went around the houses quite a lot, even at the first conversations about all of this. And in fact, I think we were fairly clear from the getgo that, whilst we understood why all of the different fiefdoms, if you like had a thing to say about what their fiefdom was, we kept saying to them really, even from the first meeting, well look it's Jodrell Bank. Jodrell Bank over here in the UK and perhaps in Europe is an icon of science in the post-war period of fifties and sixties, especially. And it's also still a functioning site. So we said, well look, maybe guys, you should stop arguing about which bit is which, and just let's concentrate on the main game here, leave the kind of squabbling for another day. <laugh>

ARMIN How much of a destination is it today for locals around the UK? Is it a must see in your lifetime?

MICHAEL Yeah, possibly. Yes. Increasingly. Certainly if you're from Northern England, anywhere in the Manchester region. It's absolutely huge, 230-foot across and you can see it from the motorway. It's absolutely vast. So anybody who lives up there has all been to see it. So one of my team had been there several times as a child and she was just deeply excited by getting the project, as we all were, and went up to see it as well. It's a very big deal.

ARMIN Have you been?

MICHAEL I still haven't been! Bizarrely, even though I am from the North, I couldn't go on the team trip. I'm bidding my time. You know, I'm waiting till they make the ticket tape, you know? <Laugh> and cut that, those fancy little ribbons and stuff.

ARMIN Yeah. Make it worth your trip.

MICHAEL Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

ARMIN I understand. There's a new building opening this year that will serve as a permanent exhibition space. And it's clear that something like that would drive the need for a redesign, but given that there really wasn't anything before this, there wasn't a clear brand. I mean, there was stuff, because institutions do need something, but there wasn't anything with the clarity that it has now. Were there other reasons beyond the opening of that permanent space that were driving this change now? Or was that just the sole driver?

MICHAEL I think the opening of this pavilion, which is opening this summer was one of the key drivers. I think that was one of the things that was making them think about what were they saying to the world. And also, it's fair to say that they have hundreds of thousands of visitors a year without having a fancy new exhibition center. People were going anyway. Yeah? And now they've got another reason to go. It's on a beautiful site, the radio telescopes is very famous, and there's lots of miniature telescopes as well. When I say miniature, they're still functioning, still doing a great job. So I think the point had come

at which they'd invested in their brand. They'd got UNESCO World Heritage site accreditation, not that long ago, actually three years ago. That means that they get to put the UNESCO badge on everything. And that's a very big deal. Actually, if you're in the same category as Stonehenge and the Parthenon, you know? You're up there, you know? And now they really just wanted to make the most of it. And it was time.

ARMIN And what kind of brief, of direction did you get from them? If any?

MICHAEL Oh no, it was really about paraphrasing what I just said really.

ARMIN Okay.

MICHAEL We're already world class and will famous, but oddly it was one of those great situations, I think, to be fair where their brand, if you like, in quote marks was already huge. But everything in the way that the brand was communicated was not. It didn't reflect reality, which of course is the best way around you could possibly want with a project. It's when you are trying to create a great brand out of nothing, that you sort of feel like a content creation, or pretend you're kind of magician, but this way around is much, much better. When you've got the most amazing things to say, and you just have to find a better way to get it out there. And so they knew that they needed to be clearer, and communicate, and help people with this confusion a little bit about the site itself.

ARMIN And they didn't have a strong predisposition to looking sciencey, or looking more like a museum, or anything like that. Did they just come in with an open mind, and then it was your job to figure out what that approach was?

MICHAEL The usual challenge with this kind of project... it's like doing a science museum, say, you want to keep that element of science, but you want it to be fun, and interesting, and appeal to a family who want to go on a day out. You can't make it too geeky. You can't make it too science. You can't make it like, you know, the only people that can visit are people doing undergraduate cosmology degrees, or astrophysics, or

something like that. I mean, that is still a market, people who want to go, but you know, if you do anything in the scientific cultural sector over here, at least you end up having a conversation about a 12-year-old. 'Cause a 12-year-old is deemed to be a key market. i.e., they're smart enough and grown up enough to get certain concepts, and you want to keep them interested. That's kind of the, in a way, because then mom and dad will want to take the 12-year-old to Jodrell and maybe one day they'll be inspired to be a scientist. So, it's all a kind of virtuous circle from that point onwards, really.

ARMIN And from those initial conversations that you had with the client, how do you start designing on your end? Like on your website, you do show some sketches of the—

MICHAEL Yeah.

ARMIN —satellite. Not sketches of the satellite, but sketches based on the satellite. Did you go in on that concept from the start and that was that? Or did you explore different things before getting into the details of how to make it work?

MICHAEL Well, before we started the design stage, we did a fairly chunky narrative stage working with an external consultant, Joe Marsh, who's done a lot of work in cultural. We wanted someone who really knew what she was doing there. And that led to that what you see in the public domain, this idea about creating wonder, and then a little bit of narrative around that with very high narrative really, about creating discovery, and wonder, inspiring... connecting people to the infinite wonders of the universe, inspiring lifetimes journey with science. So very high positioning of the narrative. And this idea about creative and wonders. Once that was agreed, we then started the design phase and the dish, the big dish as they call it, was kind of the elephant in the room throughout the whole of that first stage., really. The conundrum from our perspective, in a way, was that we discovered that if we did a drawing, you know, a symbolic drawing of this huge, great dish and put it on a photograph of the dish, you had a duplication. It's like

doing a visited destination, trying to think of an American equivalent, but over here, a lot of castles and stately homes will have little line drawings of the stately home or the castle as their logo. And when you pick up the brochure, and you've got the photograph of the castle, and then the logo is the castle, you've got double castle. And we had exactly the same problem with this, which is that when we did things that were a little bit too literal, you ended up with this weird duplication. So we did try other things. We did try things which were more metaphorical. We tried ideas that were about the way a radio telescope listens. You see it doesn't see. So how does it listen to the universe? And turn that into images? Which it does. We tried ideas about the Big Bang, because with the radio telescope, you can listen back into the very first origins of the universe. <laugh> this is getting quite existential, isn't it? I'm sorry, but we also did try, sure enough, two or three ideas that alluded to the big dish in certain way. That's how we approached it. Quite a wide, first round as it were.

ARMIN And this first round, did you show all of that to the client? Or did you edit a lot beforehand? Which we all do, I'm just curious about how much you actually show the client.

MICHAEL Well, funny enough, I had a little look back actually, today. And we did show the client five or six different ways of doing it. But actually weirdly, I've just looked at my summary slides. I've done that thing, which I might do a few times, which I sort of said, okay, we showed you five or six ideas, but clearly these three didn't work. <Laugh> We might do that sometimes because even as we present them, we'd be sort of saying... in some ways, some clients find it useful anyway, because they've been through the journey of, oh, I see they tried that, but it didn't quite work, you know? And the old days where you just design a logo and go home, some of the ideas we show them, would've worked, 'cuz they would've had a logo that they could put on things and then gone home. But now when you're looking for an idea that has ultimate widths, and ultimate breadth, and can be everything from an animation, to a poster, to a favicon, to a 48-pixel this, 2-8, 20,

80-pixel that, you're looking for ideas which are really wide. And I think that we probably had two or three that were wide enough, and one which was the Genesis of the final design route that you see now.

ARMIN And when you do something like this, are you concerned that they might go for something that you know wouldn't work? Or are you fairly confident that you can explain why you're showing it, but why it wouldn't be the best way to go?

MICHAEL That's a good question. There is a nervousness, yes. About showing something that you are perhaps not completely convinced would work and that does, maybe... some people wouldn't do that, yeah. Some people would just say, here are three routes or even here's THE route. I've never been completely sold on that strategy really, just because I think the kind of clients that we have, it's a gamble going in with here it is. Isn't it great? The truth is... actually, though having said that even when we do show like fiveish rather than three routes or even two route, the truth is the best route nearly always will out, you know? Clients aren't stupid. They can see. They're smart people. They can see, okay, that could really work for us. It's very, very unusual for us to be landed with something that wasn't quite gonna work. But what we don't do is that kind of old trick of the safe route, the interesting route, and the far-out route. That's a very dangerous strategy because the far-out route very rarely gets chosen, and clients get driven back to the safe route so that we don't do that. We'll show them five routes, all valid, you know, there'll just be slight issues with one or two.

ARMIN And how do the client react in this case to that first round? Was it love at first sight?

MICHAEL Well, they liked a few elements of some of the other routes, but it was unanimous. Yes. The idea of taking the ethos of the big dish, and writing the words inside it, and turning it, so it both rotated, and it gently moved backwards and forwards, and span. To be fair, they adored the idea from the beginning. And that sounds, I can't say that on—

ARMIN Self congratulatory?

MICHAEL —yes. And I wouldn't normally talk like that, but they were really into this idea, yeah. I think we thought that they would be, and as soon as we got this idea to work, 'cause it took a while even to get the rough working—as soon as we saw it sort of working, we thought, oh, they're really gonna like this. And it was true. They just really liked it. Yeah.
<laugh>

ARMIN So getting into those details of refining it, and making sure that it works, because it's a thing that you can sketch it out and you're like, ooh, this could wor, but then getting it from idea,

MICHAEL Yeah.

ARMIN —to final execution... that's a really hard thing. Especially in this case, it just seems like you had to get every element right. So, can you walk us a little bit through that process? Maybe even before showing it to the client, then show it to the client, and then the final?

MICHAEL The idea of this massive great dish, which is concave, i.e., the dish goes in, and putting typography on that, and seeing it dish downwards. That was an idea, yes, as you say that was in our sketchbooks and on crappy little roster in the beginning, really. The actuality of doing it proved to be very taxing, especially as we're not natural 3D designers as it were. We did do some quick experiments and stuff and thought, oh, that looked dreadful. And then my eldest actually is studying architecture and we were... <laugh> we were on a weekend away, poor chap. and I said to him, Joe, could you do me a favor? I'm just trying to get this idea to work and I can't really get it to work. And so what was interesting is he approached it not from an animator's perspective, he approached it from an architect's perspective. And he said, okay, well tell me what the proportions of the dish are, and tell me how deep it is, tara-dad-ad-ad.

He basically then built it as though it were an architectural model. And what we then did was try putting pieces of type on the curve, and

then realizing, and seeing almost immediately how weird that often looked. And when you turned it, I think we'd originally thought that it might be really cool if you had that kind of backwards to forwards turn. And I think in our heads we thought, oh, that'd be really great. But actually it was just illegible, you couldn't read it. So that was a bit like that idea was canceled. And then I tried turning it, and using very simple condensed capitals, that seemed to work a bit better. But even when you turned it, it still was a bit strange. And then we had this little breakthrough, this is my poor son over a long bank holiday weekend. Every morning, I'd to wake up and go, I had a thought, can we try <laugh>? And so, so then I think the breakthrough was... well we had two breakthroughs. Really one was putting the big circle around it. And that seemed to define the edge of the ellipse in your head. The other breakthrough was realizing that not seeing the back of the type was the kind of, I guess, was the genius move really? Because what happens is it turns and it disappears, whether it's turning vertically or turning horizontally, eventually becomes just a single line and then your brain goes, whoa! And you can turn it, and not show that half rotation. 'Cuz when you actually physically turn it, half the animation, there's nothing there. Yeah? Because you're see the back. And so I said to Joe, one day, can we just, just cut that bit of the animation off? And then, 'cuz most people don't see it and they don't realize it, but your brain is completely fooled into seeing the turn. Am I going into too much details? Very geeky isn't it?

ARMIN It's an absolutely delightful level of detail.

MICHAEL Oh, okay. Because of course I'm just—

ARMIN You can keep going.

MICHAEL I thinking if no one's seen the logo, they're thinking, what the heck is this guy on about anyway...

ARMIN By this point, everybody has seen the logo and we include a little—

MICHAEL Okay.

ARMIN we include a link in the notes so that they can go see if you're like, what is this guy rambling on about?

MICHAEL What is he on about? So we'd only got to that point. By the time we presented to the client, we just thought, okay, this behavior, if you like is interesting, the motion. And then the development of it went on for months because we were auditioning different typefaces. 'Cuz typefaces behave very strangely when you put them into a dish like that. And typefaces that we thought would look great for the scheme, when you distorted them effectively, just look really strange. And every time we, I think we had, gosh, we had 15 or 20 that we auditioned quite hard, old typeface families. And of course unsurprisingly, what worked the best was bold, sans serif, condensed type. Both filled the circle and also gave you this fantastic optical effect as it turned. I guess we should have seen that. And maybe it's interesting that my first proper rough, and the one that was accepted in the end, was sort of bold, condensed type. We just got it to work better and better and better. But that wasn't the end of it really? Because by the time we got that to work, we then said to Joe, the animator— my son, the animator—poor chap. <Laugh> Well, can you do some big outputs for us? You know, like 800 pixels. And when we looked at them, we couldn't use 'em as a logo. So then we had to draw it, draw it, draw it. And some poor lettering artwork in the depths of North London had to draw that, took days as well. How the pixels bend is different to how you draw it as a vector element. I'm definitely geeked out way too much.

ARMIN No, that is fascinating because in the final design, you look at it like, well, yeah, it makes sense. It works perfectly. But as you're pointing out, there's a lot that goes behind the scenes to get it to feel so right. And how you have to also cheat physics, in a way, to get the—

MICHAEL In a way...

ARMIN —effect to work.

MICHAEL Yeah.

ARMIN So for one, I hope that your son got a consultant fee for his hard work, especially on a holiday...

MICHAEL Absolutely. Yes. I forgot an interesting fact was you have to fool Blender to do that. 'Cause Blender, and a lot of the 3D programs automatically want to put rendering on there. They want to put grading.

ARMIN Right.

MICHAEL And his first question was, so what kind of shading do you want? I went, I don't want any shading. And he looked at me like I was an idiot, okay. We had the same interesting conundrum with the Climate Change project we did a couple of years ago, when we created that turning world. That was in three colors, and the animation company that we used to do that... proper, really high-end animation company, the first one they showed us had these gradients on it. We're going, wow, we don't want those gradients, they're horrible. And they looked utterly shocked when we said this to them. We just want it to be flat color.

So it's quite interesting though. Programs assume, make an assumption. Yet we as graphic designers and, and in my case, graphic design, I think yours too graphic designers who love that sixties period of slightly distorted type that was usually done under a PMT camera. Yeah?

ARMIN Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL Actually physically angle the type, and then take a shot downwards, and then use it—always loved that stuff. But the idea of doing that, but also doing it in genuine 3D, and in motion, and in one color so you can put it onto things. Which is what comes next, that was the kind of what was driving me, at least thinking, you know, I don't want shading, I don't want color... I wanted this thing that I can then turn, and place onto anything I want.

ARMIN Yeah. And I think it's funny how you mentioned how they did it in the 1960s, which was probably harder to do then. It's easier to do now, but it's almost harder to grasp now that, oh, that's what you want. Like you want it wrong even though we can do it technically, right?

MICHAEL Yes. Yes.

ARMIN So you have the final logo, and everybody's happy. You figure out how to make it work. Were you working all the other elements of the identity at the same time? Or did you just first need to figure that part out before getting into the portals and the other type treatments, things like that?

MICHAEL I think all of that was kind of happening in parallel really, because I was beavering away on the animation and the wider team and myself were working on what would the typography be? And could those rings that are in the logo, could they be in the scheme? And how would we treat photography? Could we take the ends, the kind of ellipses which are implied, but the opening of the dish could we use those at different angles? And so all of that was developing. And I think we did that slightly classic thing of doing way too much, and having much too much content at one point. In fact, at one point I remember everyone was on holiday apart from me for some reason, I dunno why—I put another element in for a development presentation—Jodrell was instrumental in discovering Pulse Stars, which are stars that are very far away that make the pulse, hence their name, Pulse Star. Pulse Star, pulsar.

So there these famous recordings of Jodrell defining Pulsars. And at one point they all came back from holiday and I'd put this pulsar reference along the bottom of everything, and everyone's sort of holding their hands and go, Michael, what have you done? You put more in, you know? And to your question, really, I think what we kind of had borderline too much, and we spent quite a lot of time just trying to work out how much did we really want? But we kind of loved the fact with this scheme that there was very rich, and there was a lot of things that you could do. Because, and let's face it, I think graphic

design, especially graphic design that's doing big brand schemes, they get slightly obsessed with limiting things down to, well, here are your three or four core elements. And we were thinking, well, this is a really exciting, lovely project. Why should we limit it? It's very maximal, this scheme. It's not minimal at all. That might be a reason why some people might hate it, and think, gosh, there's too much here.

ARMIN Probably why you cannot be left alone...

MICHAEL Yes, yes!

ARMIN At the studio.

MICHAEL Yeah. Yeah. What do we learn from this? Never leave Michael in charge of a development presentation. Yeah.

ARMIN That was gonna be one of my questions. If at any point you think there were too many things, or too many ovals in circles, but it does seem, at the end that you could take it as a representation of the cosmos. Like there's a lot of stuff up there. So might as well figure out a way to bring it into our own little world here.

MICHAEL Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And also I think it's worthwhile saying this. It would be naive of us to say to Jodrell Bank, here is your imagery style because they are the kind of client that will be using a picture of the cosmos, or they'll be using an astronomy picture, or they'll be using a NASA picture, or they'll be using a picture of a rocket. They might be using a lot of different imagery styles. And it's just not gonna work for us to say, you will always put a blue duotone gradient over every picture. It's just not realistic. So in a way, the portals, the little holes and ellipses, and the circles, and all the other graphic devices, they give the scheme a bit of glue, but very flexible glue. That's the idea really.

ARMIN And speaking of things to give to the client, how are they implementing this? Do they have a team of designers?

MICHAEL They don't have a team, but they have a few designers, a couple of designers. The website, actually, we were a little trepidations about the website. That's pretty good. You know?

ARMIN Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL It's early days. It's literally only launched, what are we now? Six weeks ago. So it's very, very early days for this scheme. It's one of those things you sometimes wonder, well, should we wait a while to see how it beds in? But what they've done so far, what we've seen, has been really lovely. And it's interesting though, it is maybe implicit in your question is, how will a scheme land? What will happen to a scheme once, if you like in our case, Johnson Banks has done it's majority of work? I mean, we of course would love to keep working on it, but cultural institutional clients, such as Jodrell Bank, they don't have a lot of cash.

So can they afford to keep asking us to do posters? Maybe not. We would probably do 'em 20P if they asked, but you know. It's beholden on you to try and give a... I think I remember from your past, definitely from my past Armin, but we've been on the backend, we've been recipients of dodgy design manuals in the past. Yeah? People listening to this might even be the recipient of a dodgy design manual, as we speak. There's nothing worse, really getting this 50-page document and you read it and think, oh, I dunno what to do. So we were really determined that we would supply someone with the design manual that hopefully people would be really excited to get, and go, oh, I could do this, or I could try that, or I could do this. And that is sometimes quite difficult to do, but we are really hoping we could do that.

ARMIN Which is the reason why a lot of design schemes end up with a blue gradient on top of the grayscale photograph.

MICHAEL <laughter. Yes.

ARMIN Because it's easy to replicate.

MICHAEL It is. Yes. And of course there are a thousand and one clients where that kind of rigidity, and what's the word—I nearly said boredom, not, I don't mean boredom—I mean control. That kind of control is, you know, here's our illustration style get on with it. And we do see a lot of that of course, but we were keen. I think <laugh> one of my team says to me every now and again, you know, Michael, we always do these complicated schemes. Why can't we do something simple? She/he has got a point and perhaps what we'll start doing is start doing really reductionist schemes again, you know? Like those 60s scheme, here's the logo, here's the typeface, this is the color. Go home, you know?

ARMIN <laugh>These are the approved sizes.

MICHAEL Yes! exactly.

ARMIN Do not dare to mess with it!

MICHAEL Don't mess with them. It just seems a bit unrealistic in this day and age, to do that.

ARMIN So speaking of your schemes, one of the most distinctive traits of Johnson Bank's work is the significant role that copywriting plays and is often, I think the reason why many of your design approaches work so well. And you sort of mentioned that you worked with a consultant early on to develop the high narrative. But then getting down to the more granular copywriting, how did you arrive at that tone of voice for a Jodrell Bank?

MICHAEL That's a good question because not in our normal way. We're doing a project at the moment where we have agreed the narrative, and the name, and I can't stop myself. I have written a couple of pages of headlines and sample messaging. And that's not unusual. I can't help it. And I've got a few great copywriters, including the great Nick Asbury, who we work with all the time. So we would often do that. In this case, interestingly, we didn't do that. We didn't really load up the design schemes with, here is the brand narrative you must use all the time. This particular idea that became the final way forward u you like,

it started off with me writing wonder headlines, you know, “big dish, big day out,” “come and experience the universe close up”. So slightly grand, and big copy like that. And at some point, I can’t really identify when I started doing it, but I think I started thinking that maybe it was a little bit over the top. And so I started doing this odd thing in the route early on, where I started putting these strange, <laugh> these little bylines in which I thought was really funny. And the more I wrote, I thought, oh, this is really funny. We know that they’d need to do posters around Manchester and say “opens at 10, leave at five” classic destination stuff. When I was thinking, well, that’s really boring. And so I was remembering, I think, Star Trek episodes from a child. So I wrote the line “Boldly go at 10, boldly go home by five”, which is in case you don’t know is a terrible Star Trek joke. And I thought, I actually, that’s really funny. But of course it’s there in the body copy, it’s in the, you know, the fly—I dunno what you call it in the States, the fly copy.

ARMIN Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL And I thought, well, that’s really funny. And so I started writing more of these, you know, “discounts for children OAP and little green men”. And then Nick wrote a few as well. You know, there’s an ice cream poster that says “only two earth pounds”. He and I started to really geek out on this. If you like, we have two levels of narrative, really. You’ve got this big bold “come and see the universe happening”. The big bang starts in a muddy field in Manchester, whatever. And then you’ve got this double level. And when we showed them this, they really liked it because it gave a sense of humor to the site. I mean, things can get a bit stiff in this area, but it is amazing stuff. It’s also kind of... it does create wonder, but you don’t want to turn it into one of those places that feels like a museum of 60s science. You want to have a bit of fun with it. That’s a very long answer to your question. I think I just couldn’t resist having something, a little twist in there. I got worried it was a bit too straight. So it just kind of slightly twisted it.

ARMIN I think it grounds the design system in something more human and more like, hey, we're people, we can also have fun with this.

MICHAEL Yeah.

ARMIN I think it humanizes the research and the science behind it in a way that a lot more people can relate to it beyond just open from 10:00–to–5:00. And instead it's just like, hey, we all know that you know, about Star Trek and Star Trek is silly—I don't wanna offend any Trekkies, but you know, the kind of lines they are silly, it allows you to have a little bit more fun.

MICHAEL Yes. I'm hopeful that they can pick up on that.

ARMIN Yeah.

MICHAEL But you're right. Yeah. Actually you said it much better than me. It just humanizes the science a little bit. It just softens it a bit.

ARMIN So trying to sum up here, what was the most exciting aspect of working on this project for you?

MICHAEL I think that, I mean, we've been lucky. We do get calls every year, or every two years from something which is just gob-smackingly unique a bit like when we got called by Cambridge University to do some work with them. And when we got the call about their Climate Change conference, commonly known as COP26. And, this is one of those where you're thinking, well, this is an utterly unique project. I've been doing this for 35 years and I've never done a radio telescope. You do not get that call every day. So getting the chance to work on something like this is a sort of once in a lifetime thing, really. Maybe I'll get a call now from the other two big radio telescopes in the world who knows. But, <laugh> I, I just love working on these huge projects, with massive impact.

And that gives me a bit of a buzz. I sort of feel like I'm making a difference if I can take these massively important things and do them justice, you know? Hopefully I think we've done it with that. And also

there was some really lovely things that we discovered as we dug into this project. The guy who founded Jodrell Bank after the Second World War was a chap called Bernard Lovell. He started off with some radar trucks in a muddy field, south of Manchester, listening, trying to track meteorite showers. And then I discovered that he was really inspired by science lectures as a kid, as a teenager, I think. And when you hear those kind of stories... and this is the man who goes from radar trucks in a muddy field, to building the world's, then the world's biggest radio telescope 10 years later. And it's this amazing story, but it started off by being inspired by science. With a project like this, you're hoping that maybe you can inspire the next Bernard Lovell, who might go on a school trip to Jodrell Bank and see the actual thing, and then go going to their planetarium section, and see the logo spinning. And maybe you can spy the next—that's what drives me on a project like this. That you're dealing with things which are huge conceptual ideas. And we're kind of lucky as graphic designers, in a way, to be invited in, invited to the party to be part of it.

ARMIN That is a wonderful way to sum up, not just this episode, but also to sum up what we do, which is as you mentioned, and it's a lovely thought trying to do justice to the work that our clients are doing. And in this case, I think you were able to do just that, and bring in that massive, as I mentioned earlier, big ass telescope to the masses in a new, original, interesting way that is unexpected, it looks great. And it was fantastic to hear all the hard work and minutia that went into making it happen. So, Michael, thank you for joining me today on The Follow-Up.

MICHAEL It's my pleasure. I must say actually it has been one of the most, I think possibly the most well received projects we've ever done. I'm used to a bit of snark. Yeah. I'm used to people going, oh, it's Johnson Banks. Eh, maybe you kind of expect that a bit. I think what the Australians calls a Tall Poppy Syndrome, but <laugh>, this has just been amazing. People love this project. It sort of makes you believe again, actually. It sounds a bit dippy, but you sort of think, oh gosh, it is possible to do something that people really like, and not start a Twitter war. So

many things get lost in that don't they? And makes you sort of believe again. Well, it certainly makes me believe that it is possible. I think the world's become very polar hasn't it? And so to do something, even just as something as relatively insignificant as a rebrand and think, gosh, people really like this, you know, it's rare in a way, it sort of makes you believe again in what we do and hopefully makes some other people feel the same.

ARMIN Yeah. And I think the fact that this—it's such an optimistic project to begin with—just the fact that you have a big structure that listens to the universe. I think that begins to set the tone. Like this is not something frivolous. It's not another fashion brand. It's not another hard seltzer. But it's something that is actually contributing to humanity. You know, you were able to do it in an original way, at a time when we all need a little pick-me-up.

MICHAEL Maybe.

ARMIN And if that came in the form of a funky little dish logo, then all the more power to you.

MICHAEL <laugh> The funky dish pick-me-up. Yes. I think that's, that's a very good summary. Yeah. Cheers.

ARMIN Well, Michael, thank you so much again.

MICHAEL Thanks again, Armin.

BRYONY With projects like this, that seem so much fun on the surface once it's all said and done, it's sometimes easy — as the audience looking at the finished project — to lose track of how significant some of the work we all do is. This may seem like just a big satellite in the middle of nowhere but consider that it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site, just like Stonehenge or the Tower of London, and it dawns on you how much responsibility we have to, as Michael said, do justice by and for them, which this project certainly did. To close out this fiftieth episode, one subtle bit of information that Michael shared early in the conversation,

seems appropriate to highlight. He mentioned how 12-year-old children are a key audience segment not just for Jodrell Bank but for other science museums and cultural sites as they are old enough to grasp some of the more complex concepts but still young enough to be wowed by them. This project certainly awakened the 12-year-old in us but it also made us realize how excited we get, like 12-year-olds many a time, of hosting this podcast and talking to some of the best and nicest people in the industry as they wow us with their insight into how these projects come to be.

Today, on our fiftieth episode, thanks for listening so far. Until the next 50, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.