Multimedia

Tuning in to the Invisible: Roman Mars’s 99% Invisible Radio Show and Podcast

Presaging today’s age of quantification and Big Data, Buckminster Fuller habitually wielded exponents and percentages as rhetorical devices. He famously aimed to “make the world better, for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time,” and claimed that the Union Internationale des Architectes was on board, committed to “the reuse of the world’s intellectual and physical resources” so that “100 percent instead of 44 percent of humanity” might enjoy a higher standard of living, better education, more travel, and other intellectual and physical comforts.1 Complicating such problems, into our everyday strictly sensorial experiences and immaterial networks that inform how our visible and material spaces take shape.2 This invisible landscape has captured the attention of one fantastically named radio producer, Roman Mars, who explores the stories behind design in his fantastically popular radio show, 99% Invisible. Launched at the end of 2010 and supported by the San Francisco chapter of the AIA, the show is produced as both a 4.5-minute series for KALW public radio and an expanded podcast. In 2012, 99% Invisible raised $170,477 on Kickstarter, far exceeding its $42,000 goal and making it the most successful journalism Kickstarter campaign to date. The funding allowed Mars to hire producer Sam Green and revamp the show’s website.

In his appeal to funders, Mars admitted that a radio show about architecture and design, “disciplines usually appreciated through the eyes,” might sound crazy. But, he said, “I don’t need pictures to talk about design. . . . I like making stories that tell about us and what we are through the lens of the things we build.”3 In an interview with Mother Jones, Mars said, “I really wanted to focus on the everyday, even the mundane, and not the things that were shiny and new and exciting. And not things that people think of as designer things”—in other words, no coverage of starchitects and product releases. “Manhole covers, that’s my beat.”4

As of this writing, in October 2013, Mars had produced ninety-one episodes and was seeking funding, through another Kickstarter campaign, to go from roughly biweekly to weekly for season 4. Up to that point, he and his team of collaborators had explored such varied topics as culs-de-sac, hospital logistics, steering wheels, queuing theory, the design of solitary confinement facilities, Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City, ship camouflage, skateboarders’ love of Philadelphia’s LOVE Plaza, slot machines, maps, hand-painted signs, cities’ secret staircases, rebay, city flags, background art for Warner Bros. cartoons, the design of paper currency, Trappist beers, the structural engineering of the Egyptian pyramids, privately owned public spaces, pneumatic tubes, toothbrush design, the periodic table, and parking.

Of course we cannot see any of these objects or phenomena on the air, so Mars relies heavily on description and the personal stories of various people behind the designs. But he also infuses each broadcast with a rhythm and sense of musicality that impart dimension and texture to his subjects. He designs a soundtrack to set the scene and provide intellectual cues: “Music will drop out when I need a key point committed to memory,” and “when I’m explaining something, I tend to use this plucky explaining music; when I’m making you feel the . . . bigness of something, [the music] tends to have that awe-inspiring . . . [drone-type] . . . feel to it.”5 Plus, the show as a whole has a song-like structure, with repeated choruses and a signature cadence.

Mars also leans in close to the microphone, creating that “inside the head” voice, suggesting that he’s in the same space as the listener. Since the podcast audience is likely using headphones, the sense of intimacy and interiority is all the greater. Plus, the coolly animated “grain” of Mars’s voice—which he describes as a mashup of the “plaintive wail” of Benjamen Walker from Your Radio Nighttime, the “soothing, explanatory” sound of Jad Abumrad from Radiolab, and the “conversationalist” tone of Ira Glass from This American Life—contributes a texture to that sonic architectonic.6 Other voices, including those
of other reporters, often join the chorus. Of particular note is the lispy voice of his
toddler son, Mazlo, who tells wildly enter-
taining stories as part of various promo-
tional spots at the end of the show. The
incorporation of family thus welcomes the
listener even farther into Mars’s interior

Mars spoke with designer Debbie
Millman, host of the Design Matters
podcast, about “being radiophonic,” that is,
exploiting radio’s distinctive properties to
tell the story of design in new ways, not
least of which is highlighting the sonic—
the literally invisible—properties of our
designed environments and the designed
objects and systems we fill them with.8

Some of my favorite 99% Invisible episodes
have explored urban noise; musical iPhone
apps; deaf composers and blind architects;
Max Neuhaus’s sound art; design for the
hearing impaired; sirens, both Odysseyan
and mechanical; telephones; the noises our
interactive devices make; and the honks
and squawks of Washington, D.C.’s Metro
escalators, which, in various locations,
sound like “whales mating,” “Indian drone
music,” or an “aviary of … ravens taunting
you as you ascend into your workday.”9

One particularly striking and unchar-
acteristically long episode, produced by
On the Media’s Alex Goldman, explores
Joseph Kinnebrew’s Heydon Pavilion, a
mysterious and much-mythologized
structure that sits off the beaten path out-
side Ann Arbor, Michigan. Greenspan and
Mars began the episode with a dramatiza-
tion of Alex and friends’ teenage visits to
“Heyoon,” as it was known to the locals.

As How Sound’s Rob Rosenthal explains,
“The result is a lively, visual, radiophonic
telling of events from many years ago. While
a montage of quotes would have worked well,
the dramatization definitely takes the
story to the next level.”10 The sound track—
composed of the expansive drone of Stars
of the Lid; the sparse, whimsical sounds of
Lullatone; and the mechanical rhythms of
Hauschka’s prepared piano—re-creates
both Heyoon’s physical and emotional


interests is the “art form of information.”11

Mars explores these aesthetics of commu-
nication not only through his chosen sub-
ject matter—queues, monuments, logistics,
interaction design—but also through the
way he gives form and feeling to his own
communication, to the way he gives texture
and shape to the invisible.

“I’m often approached to do some-
thing in print, do a book or something,”
Mars said.12 “I would like to do a graphic
novel, because I think a radio script and a
graphic novel script are … similar; they’re
more conversational, they’re more plain.”

They both “tune in to,” as Fuller might
say, the richness and multisensoriality of
our experiences in the designed landscape,
by translating them into an abstracted archi-
tecture: one composed of sound, the other
of lines and color. Such forms work well
for the stories Mars chooses to tell, which,
by focusing on the stories behind design
rather than on the shiny designed objects
themselves, “[don’t] require a perfect picture
in someone’s mind.”

Not coincidentally, in his pre-99%-days Mars produced for KALW a show
called Invisible Ink, a “radio zine” that, as
he explained to Millman, allowed you to
“see [its] staples.” It called attention to its
techniques of construction and high-
lighted its structure, its own “art form of
information.” We can see a similar approach
in recent architectural graphic novels like
Chris Ware’s Building Stories and the work
of Jimenez Lai. Yet while Ware and Lai

tell design stories through the architecture of
the page, Mars constructs a textured, rhythmic space though the invisible medium
of sound. And in those 4.5 minutes of air-
space, he brings into focus the “99-percent
invisible world of reality,” and amplifies
those everyday aspects of design that we so
often tune out.

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The New School, New York

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2. R. Buckminster Fuller, Critical Path (New York:
3. See Center for Land Use Interpretation,
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4. “99% Invisible: Season 3,” Kickstarter, last
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5. Maddie Ostman, “Roman Mars and the Secret
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7. Mark Lukach, “99% Invisible”: The Awesome
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11. Boots Riley, interview with Roman Mars,
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Nicky Gogan and Paul Rowley, directors
Build Something Modern: Ireland’s
Modernist Mission in Africa
Still Films, 2011, 70 min., http://www.volta.ie
/films/build-something-modern

A melding of images and colors, voices and
rhythms: that’s the impression one is left
with after viewing Build Something Modern:
Ireland’s Modernist Mission in Africa, a film
documenting the Irish architects who, from

Notes
1. Quoted in “World Game,” Buckminster Fuller
Institute, n.d., http://bfi.org/about-bucky
/buckys-big-ideas/world-game, and in Joachim
Krausse and Claude Lichtenstein, eds., Your