of other reporters, often join the chorus. Of particular note is the lispy voice of his toddler son, Mazlo, who tells wildly entertaining stories as part of various promotional spots at the end of the show. The incorporation of family thus welcomes the listener even farther into Mars’s interior space.

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—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 Odyssean and mechanical; telephones; the noises our interactive devices make; and the honks and squeaks 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 characteristically 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 outside Ann Arbor, Michigan. Greenspan and Mars began the episode with a dramatization 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 landscapes.

This construction of an affective architecture, built of texture and sound, is Mars’s forte. As he told Boots Riley of the Onion’s A.V. Club, one of his overarching interests is the “art form of information.”11 Mars explores these aesthetics of communication not only through his chosen subject 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 something 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 architecture: 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% 99% Invisible 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 highlighted 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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Nicky Gogan and Paul Rowley, directors
Build Something Modern: Ireland’s Modernist Mission in Africa

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
In the 1940s to the 1960s, designed churches, schools, and hospitals for missionary religious orders in Africa. Eschewing a narrator, the collage-like film moves back and forth through interviews with architects and priests, reworked archival footage, animation, experimental presentations of drawings and photographs, accompanied by a distinctive sound track. The different parts come together to leave the viewer with an overall impression, rather than a fully coherent position.

The film begins and ends in 2010 in the company of the Kiltegan Fathers, a group of elderly missionary priests now returned to Ireland. We spend time with them at their home: St. Patrick’s Missionary Society in Kiltegan, County Wicklow, a 1950s building designed by Pearse McKenna, one of the Irish architects discussed in the film. Here we learn about the wave of missionary priests and nuns who left the young, recently independent Ireland for an Africa experiencing the end of colonialism, and the tensions it brought. If this was a time of emerging independence, and the tensions within it, it was also a period of tremendous change in the church, determined by Vatican II, designed following the “huge change in the church, conversion to Christianity, and the organizational space of the church, consolidated by the modernizing reforms of Vatican II in the early to mid-1960s. The architecture examined in Build Something Modern embodies this moment in modernity.

One of the architects interviewed, Dr. Richard Hurley, wittily characterizes McKenna’s pre-1963 modernist church designs in Africa as “old wine in new bottles.” Hurley discusses his own Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Eldoret, Kenya, designed following the “huge change in the church” codified by Vatican II, whereby priest and people were brought together within both the physical and the organizational space of the church. In Eldoret, Hurley translated the symbolism of this shift into an architectural aesthetic. The building, as he describes it, is horizontal and thus earthbound in what he calls the African tradition. In plan, the cathedral fans out, gathering people around the altar and the tower, in which the vertical dimension departs from the earthedness and moves toward “a more lofty aspiration,” where light explodes back into the building.

The entire roof structure rests on one column, symbolizing unity.

We see footage of the cathedral under construction: converging ribs of the white steel structure, stark against the blue sky; light spilling through the horizontal strip between roof and wall; low alcove spaces, carved into the depth; softer, reflected light on the discolored concrete; defined spaces of darkness, and sharp circular pools of sunlight from round rooflights. Against this panning footage, we hear the rhythm of one slow-paced hammer, gradually getting louder as music is added, building into a more intense yet still minimalist juxtaposition of sound. Indeed, the cathedral was constructed with just one small concrete mixer, and without a building contractor.

Father Jim Sharkey describes arriving in Nigeria in 1959 as a young man with no building experience, and his parish told him to build a church. The design was Gerald Fey’s—sixteen pillars in a circle with a complex roof, which became the “most admired church in the diocese.” These two examples present how Irish architects were pushing the modernist aesthetic, investigating the potential of radical structure—sometimes beyond what was happening in their home country at the time. Indeed, in a recent article on Irish modernism Ellen Rowley proposes that 1950s Irish architecture was a period of “transitional modernism,” a time of “generational collision.” In turn, then, designing for Africa would have been a liberation from the “nostalgic tone” and “architectural uniform” imposed by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid in the thirty-four Dublin churches he commissioned from 1946 to 1965: contemporary materials and structure that Rowley suggests are “dressed … in Hiberno-Romanesque hybrid-classicism and other revivalist clothing.”

In the film, the stories of individuals continue: Dr. Seán Roarty, the self-described “card-carrying modernist” who first practiced with Michael Scott in Dublin, working in Kampala, Uganda; Allen Smith, who lived in Freetown, Sierra Leone, describing the challenges of dealing with the penetration of equatorial sunlight into the buildings; and Gerald Fey, recounting his encounter with a parish in Nigeria that had been making and stockpiling concrete blocks for twenty years, and his commission to design a church out of those 50,000 blocks.

Recent scholarship points out the complicated position of Ireland after decolonization. Barry Crosbie notes that “nationalism … was generally equated with anti-imperialism.” But Ireland had a long-standing and complex involvement in empire. As Joe Cleary argues, the Irish “were in effect more or less … enthusiastic co-partners and beneficiaries in the British imperial enterprise.” Furthermore, the “international network” of religion is, according to Stephen Howe, “in great measure a product of Irish participation in the British Empire.” Such positions support Thomas Bartlett’s question as to whether Ireland, “so far from being a colony, should be considered a mother country in her own right?” In her extensive work on the area of Irish missions in Africa, Fiona Bateman proposes that “the Irish Catholic missionaries … were engaged in the task of constructing a ‘Spiritual Empire.’ Ireland is perceived and portrayed by these missionaries as a kind of motherland, with a duty to nurture and protect as well as to spread God’s word.” In a letter to the Taoiseach Seán Lemass, following his 1960 visit to a convent and school of the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles in Nigeria, Sister Pius, regional superior, wrote that in Nigeria, Ireland “is known for what she is: A Spiritual Mother Country with no imperialist or colonial aims.” The Irish missionaries sought to mark the difference of their work, driven by spiritual and educational motives. As Bateman writes, Irish missionaries did not necessarily perceive Africans and African customs as a threat to Ireland (in the way that Britain had long perceived the Irish as a threat) as such, but they were fearful of paganism and convinced of the need for African conversion to Christianity. ... Irish Catholic missionaries attempted to bring their own version of “civilisation” to Africa, one that lacked the materialistic, corrupting elements of British imperialism.
Explicit consideration of the complex discourses on mission, empire, and colonialism do not find their way into Build Something Modern. It is as though the viewer is expected to already have knowledge of such discourses, or perhaps the filmmakers deem them unnecessary to the film's intent.

A similar critique applies to the way in which the buildings themselves are considered within the film. Reacting to the state of affairs in their home country, the architects are presented as searching for places where they could build, to follow in the footsteps of Le Corbusier, acknowledged in the film as the master whom they all admired. As Rothery recalls in the film, “We thought we were great!” Of Kampala he says, it was a new city, so “we could do whatever we want.” In giving voice to the individual missionaries and architects, such statements are left unquestioned by the film. The viewer is left without, for example, a discussion of Le Corbusier’s “loyalty to the idea of la grande France” or without a sense that his projects of urbanism “were expressions of the French colonial consensus.” So although the visual material of the film hints at the overwhelming complexity of contrasting cultures, at no point is there an explicit critique of the architectural imperialism, beyond the clearly enjoyed passion for the modernist aesthetic.

One of the architects describes the huge change in understanding the notion of time that he experienced in Africa—that time, to Africans, was a much slower pace—both visual and aural—are deliberate strategies of the filmmakers, and the overall tempo of the film matches this slow perception of time, in which moments are given the space they need to communicate: the punctuation of slides clicking in their carousel; the whistling of the wind in the Wicklow trees; the oscillating buzzing of the searing sun. At other times, the pace is increased by reusing old film footage. The chosen footage is shown framed by two white vertical bars on either side or broken up, its numerous pieces rearranged within a shifting white-and-black grid of out-of-sequence adjacencies, almost like looking through a frame of moving window multiples. Animation is used to describe technical concerns and environmental conditions. Such techniques vary the filmic experience, while the composition accompanying these inventive ways of making visual material speeds and slows the pace of the film as needed.

Told from the perspective of the elderly architects and missionaries, the frailness of humanity—the vulnerable life of the person and of the building—pulses through the film. An architect recalls how, on his return visit to Africa fifty years later, he discovered that all the buildings he had designed were no longer standing. Another wonders why his radical African cathedral received no architectural recognition at home in Ireland. Silhouetted against a big overcast sky, old priests, some in wheelchairs, eat their lunch, living out their days with each other in the institution that welcomed them “home.” A priest sits on a bed, packing brightly colored shoes into a plastic bag—a lifetime placed in a small wardrobe. In the way the film makes its emphases, emotion remains unspoken but palpably present.

After viewing this film, I was left wanting to know much more. In the way that it is directed, relying on atmosphere over articulation, the film can only go so far in exploring the architectural legacy left by these pioneering Irish architects in Africa. The lesser-told living histories that this film reveals offer potential for architectural research of Irish and international significance.

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Notes
3. Ibid., 203.
4. Ibid., 205.
14. Ibid., 74.