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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 improvement efforts, however, was the fact that much of Spaceship Earth had become nonempirical:

Technology expanded reality 999-fold to include the whole range of the invisible events of Universe. These had been held previously by humans to be magical and superstitiously mystical. Now they had become the realities of everyday pure and applied science. With the inclusion of this 99-percent invisible world of reality, along with its as yet myriad of unsolved problems, into our everyday strictly sensual reality came the radio-introduced concepts of tuning-in and tuning-out.²

More and more contemporary designers, scholars, and artists are tuning in to

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this invisible terrain, mapping the "signal space" of cell phone and Internet infrastructure, exploring the subterranean structures and immaterial networks that inform how our visible and material spaces take shape.³ This same 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-span 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 us about who we are through the lens of the things we build."⁴ 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."⁵

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, rebar, 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."⁶ 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 Benjamin Walker from *Your Radio Nightlight*, the "soothing, explanat[ory]" sound of Jad Abumrad from *Radiolab*, and the "conversationalist" tone of Ira Glass from *This American Life*—contributes a texture to that sonic architectural.⁷ 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 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*—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 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 uncharacteristically 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%* 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 through 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.

SHANNON MATTERN
The New School, New York

Notes

1. Quoted in "World Game," *Buckminster Fuller Institute*, n.d., <http://bfi.org/about-bucky/buckys-big-ideas/world-game>, and in Joachim Krause and Claude Lichtenstein, eds., *Your*

Private Sky: R. Buckminster Fuller Discourse (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 1999), 256.

2. R. Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 54.

3. See Center for Land Use Interpretation, <http://www.clui.org>; Michael Chen, "Signal Space," *Urban Omnibus*, 6 July 2011, <http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/07/signal-space>; Shannon Mattern, "Infrastructural Tourism," *Places*, 1 July 2013, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/infrastructural-tourism/37939>; Kazys Varnelis, ed., *Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008).

4. "99% Invisible: Season 3," Kickstarter, last modified 2012, <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1748303376/99-invisible-season-3>.

5. Maddie Oatman, "Roman Mars and the Secret Allure of Highway Stripes and Manhole Covers," *Mother Jones*, 28 Sept. 2013, <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/09/interview-99-percent-invisible-roman-mars-podcast>.

6. Vanessa Quirk, "Disruptive Minds: Roman Mars, Host of 99% Invisible," *ArchDaily*, 6 Sept. 2012, <http://www.archdaily.com/269181/disruptive-minds-roman-mars-host-of-99-invisible>.

7. Mark Lukach, "'99% Invisible': The Awesome Little Radio Show about Design," *Awl*, 4 May 2012, <http://www.theawl.com/2012/05/99-invisible-design-radio-show>.

8. Debbie Millman, interview with Roman Mars, *Design Matters*, 6 Apr. 2012, podcast, <http://observermedia.designobserver.com/audio/roman-mars/32498>.

9. "The Accidental Music of Imperfect Elevators," *99% Invisible*, 19 Dec. 2011, podcast, <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/episode-43-the-accidental-music-of-imperfect>.

10. Rob Rosenthal, "Heyoon," *How Sound*, 25 Sept. 2013, <http://howsound.org/2013/09/heyoon>.

11. Boots Riley, interview with Roman Mars, *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, 19 Feb. 2013, podcast, <https://soundcloud.com/bullseye-with-jesse-thorn/boots-riley-roman-mars-and>.

12. Quoted in Quirk, "Disruptive Minds."

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