

# Five questions with Roman Mars

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, July 22, 2019



ROMAN MARS ON STAGE AT A'19

The creator and host of popular podcast *99% Invisible* offers perspective on design, storytelling, and collaboration.

In 2011, [AIA San Francisco](#) and public radio station KALW launched a collaborative project to bring stories of architecture and design to listeners across the Bay Area. With the creative mind of radio producer and design enthusiast Roman Mars at the helm, the *99% Invisible* podcast was born.

Eight years later—week in and week out—Mars and a team of producers highlight how design happens and how it affects our daily lives. Together, they craft illuminating episodes about creative processes and historical circumstances that contribute to the development of cities we inhabit, the objects that

we use, and the spaces that surround us. The success of *99% Invisible* set Mars on a path toward founding **Radiotopia**, a collective that supports development of innovative podcasts for listeners all over the world.

While taking a break from interviewing **leading designers** and **change makers** onstage at the **AIA Conference on Architecture** 2019, Mars talked with us about his work as a storyteller and offered some career advice for designers who, like him, find beauty wherever they are.

### **How did you develop *99% Invisible*? What inspired you to tell stories about design?**

**Mars:** I knew I wanted it to be bigger than just architecture; I also wanted it to be about broader design. I wanted to create this little gem about the story behind something [listeners] saw every day. An interesting story about a boring thing—that was the main premise.

[My approach was to talk] to a person about a process and not the story of an object. I am really interested in why things are the way they are. I always thought that the most successful version of the show was one that told you a story about [an object or a place], but it also gave you the tools to decode the world in a way. And the next time you encounter something else like it, you're given this toolkit to understand why someone made the choices that were made.

As I started studying design, it made me a much more optimistic person than I was before I started. Because when you begin to notice all the details of the world, you begin to notice how much care was put into all the things that were made for you. If you tune into all the decisions that were made that you [may not normally] notice, you have a nicer view of the world.

### **Why do you think telling design stories is a good way to investigate social, structural, and environmental issues?**

**Mars:** Design is my lens of choice. I think using design as the lens to study these problems is a fun one. It abstracts it a little bit so that you can look at it as a problem to solve and a way to solve it that's a little free of judgment in some ways. Design is about intentionality. There are intentional design choices that make a building the way it is or make a space open,

I think the audience of *99% Invisible* likes the problem-solving aspect of design. The show is really a moral and ethical show. I just feel like there's a way that we can address a problem as a design problem, that allows people to engage with it in a different way.

### **You're the creator and host of *99% Invisible*, but it's not a solo production. You work with a team of talented producers and writers. Why is working collaboratively important to you?**

**Mars:** You can always tell a story that is not true, it's just convincing. So I have a team of people in the show, and [our stories are created through] the collective thought of our group. We do it together. It's a grueling process, but we make sure that we get [many] perspectives.

I think that I have chosen team of people who are really thoughtful, empathic, and kind, who recognize their privilege and recognize their place in the world. And so, they make sure that they seek out people who will teach them what the real experience is. And we just do our best.

### **What are some personal and professional lessons you learned while building your career and launching Radiotopia?**

**Mars:** I have always been rewarded in life by choosing a path that no one else has gone [down]. And I think that what I learned in the non-profit world was how to live on very little, and how to invest in myself, my happiness, and future. And it worked out really well. I always find that choosing a more interesting path always pays off. And so, I would recommend that to anybody, especially in the beginning.

Do business with people who allow you to maintain your intellectual property and always own your work. [Because of the support I received when developing and growing *99% Invisible*], I had created a sustainable show that had no apparatus around it. The idea of Radiotopia was to teach the business plan to a group of other people, and that became the Radiotopia Collective. I am not the boss of Radiotopia. I guide it. I have nothing to do with the operation of those shows. I want them to own the work. The main thing about our show and our collective is we live our values.

So, I would say for every architect, everybody in every community, make friends and collaborate. You don't even have to collaborate [professionally]. But collaborate as humans, collaborate as fans and really support each other. It's so worth it. Definitely look for greatness in people that are not already deemed great. Really try to be open to it.

### **Finally, you close every episode by saying that the podcast is produced in “beautiful downtown Oakland, California.” What do you find so beautiful about Oakland?**

**Mars:** Oakland is an extremely intense mix of everything about a city and set of cultures. It is a beautiful and strange place with a lot of troubles, but you can see, there's something about the way all these different influences and all these different cultures are butting up against each other and truly aggravating each other a lot of the time. But they always work it out. I find it to be a pretty inspiring place to be.

It's in a real state of flux right now. It's growing like crazy and I do not know what Oakland's going to become. I'm nervous for it. I mean, a funny thing about gentrification is you want development and you want a place to process. The reason why gentrification happens is because in the beginning, it's good for everybody in a lot of ways. Then it becomes quickly not good for everybody. So what you want is this constant mindfulness and change, but change that doesn't leave behind the people who created Oakland in the first place. I'm just fascinated by Oakland.

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