

00:00:00	Jesse Thorn	Promo	Hey all, it's Jesse. As 2020 draws to a close, think about what you're thankful for, other than—I'm willing to bet—2020 drawing to a close. What got you through the year? Odds are, if you're hearing my voice, public radio was one of the things. Public radio gave you accurate, dependable news about the election on the pandemic, information about local stories that matter to you. You got fun and fascinating interviews from shows like <i>Bullseye</i> . If you wanna show your gratitude at the end of this year, consider supporting your local public radio station. Public radio stations really need your help right now, more than ever. And it's really easy to do! Just go to Donate.NPR.org/bullseye and give whatever you can. And thanks.
00:00:43	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:44	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:55	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> "Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team.
00:01:02	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is Roman Mars. Roman hosts the podcast <i>99% Invisible</i> . It's a show about the little-known stories behind everyday design and architecture. Things like pre-fab homes, trash can design, those little ramps you see on sidewalk corners. How and why did stuff like this come to be? Now, after the show's been around for just over ten years, Roman is exploring those same themes in a book. <i>The 99% Invisible City</i> is a beautifully illustrated look at how cities work and why they work the way they do. Roman is also the founder of the podcast network Radiotopia. He's worked in podcasts and radio for decades. I've known him for nearly as long. He actually came up with the name for this show, <i>Bullseye</i> !
			He sent it to me in an email! A list of ideas. Unsolicited, by the way. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Anyway. I'm really excited to talk with Roman about his new books, so lets get right into it.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:02:06	Music	Transition	My conversation with the great Roman Mars. Bright, thumpy, brassy music.
00:02:12	Jesse	Host	Roman Mars, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It's nice to talk to you.
00:02:14	Roman Mars	Guest	Oh, it's so good to be here. Thank you so much.
00:02:17	Jesse	Host	So, congratulations, Roman, on finally utilizing a visual medium for your design <i>[they both break into laughter]</i> and architecture podcast.
00:02:26	Roman	Guest	Well, you know, it was a long time coming. Big leap, but we finally did it. Yes.
00:02:31	Jesse	Host	When you started <i>99% Invisible</i> as a radio show and podcast, originally it was kind of like made to order. It was in part driven by the desire of the AIA, an architecture trade group, to have an architecture show. And I wonder whether you would have done a show on that subject had someone not suggested that it might be cool and what you were worried about trying to do audio about design.

00:03:04 Roman Guest I mean, I think I already had the interest in architecture, but I don't know if I would have necessarily jumped on it as a subject had someone, you know, not requested it. But what I always knew was like, I liked the idea of doing it on the radio because I knew that I and other people had real biases when it came to the image of buildings, the way buildings looked. And I was really interested in the problem-solving and design aspect of buildings and I thought that I actually—on the radio, it actually made you understand the story of a building before you had the visual image and that could make you love or appreciate a building in a different way. And I always thought that was our secret strength, actually, as a show. Let's talk about buildings for a second. The show covers much, much, much more than buildings.

00:03:49 Jesse Host

[Roman agrees with a laugh.]

00:04:08 Roman Guest But what is an example of a building that is—if someone looked at it, they might not appreciate it in the way that they might appreciate it if they knew its story?

Well, you know, one of the first buildings I ever really appreciate in this way was when I was in Chicago. I was working at WBZ and I took the architecture boat tour that the Chicago Architecture Foundation gives—so, you go on this big boat and a docent tells you stories about the buildings as you go along the river. And there's this one building in the Montgomery Ward Complex that's the headquarter building. And it's—it's a really basic, rectangular building, but it has these big, concrete corners on it. And I pass it all the time. I never cared for this building. I thought it was boring modernism, really ugly.

00:05:22 Jesse Host And then the docent told the story of the fact that the reason why it has these big, concrete support columns on the corners was because the Montgomery Ward Company, at the time, prided itself on this egalitarian hierarchy and they didn't want their vice presidents fighting over who got the corner office. And so, they made a building that eliminated any possibility of a corner office at all. And it just kind of made me love it. And you know, before I thought of it as nothing, ho-hum, kind of building. And then I noticed like, "Oh, there's real genius even in the architecture that I don't appreciate.

It's interesting, architecture and design are fields that, like any other specialized field, they're prone to specialization of knowledge and intense connoisseurship and, you know, professional knowledge—stuff that Joe Blow off the street might not get. They're also, at least theoretically, specifically created to be accessible. To be used.

[Roman agrees several times.]

00:06:05 Roman Guest And that's kind of an interesting tension to me. Like, I think of all—like, buildings on college campuses that the students all hate.

[They chuckle.]

Mostly but exclusively made of giant blocks of concrete. It's true. I think that's one of the—what I love the most about it. And I think that the show takes into account the fact that this is the art

and design that we live in. And it makes us feel a certain way. And we actually preference that when we present architecture. Like, we're not just the—you know—academic list of isms. Modernism and brutalism. You know, I like to pay attention to how these buildings make us feel and that is part of the story. And it really is accessible, because you feel it, regardless of whether or not you know anything about architecture. You feel this sort of sense of *[sighs]* like, wonder. Like, there's a reason why when you go to Washington DC you kind of feel the federal government. *[Laughs.]* You know? Like, you feel this sort of glory in this stuff. And they were onto something when they did that. And you kind of feel the heaviness of brutalism.

And then maybe I can tell you a little bit of the story of it to make you change your mind a little bit, to get beyond your initial—you know—visceral reaction to it. But that initial, visceral reaction is totally valid and is part of the design and is worth talking about. I love the unintended and intended consequences of someone's intent when they design something. And that weirdness that you might feel for some crappy concrete building that you have on campus—the Mudd library at Oberland is a brutalist like masterpiece and everyone complained about it when I was there. *[Chuckles.]* Like, everyone thought it was oppressive and horrible. And it kind of is. But it's also glorious, too. And I just—I didn't know enough to appreciate how it was glorious.

00:07:48 Jesse Host

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Roman Mars. He's the founder of the Radiotopia podcast network. He's also the host of the show *99% Invisible*.

I've listened to this show since—not to brag, but the first episode.

00:08:03 Roman Guest
00:08:04 Jesse Host

[They laugh.]

I know you have.

But I've listened to this show forever and I remember very early on in the show's run, having a conversation with you about it and you telling me that one of your guiding principles for the show was, "No stories about people, just stories about stuff."

[They laugh.]

And I have to say, you know, all these—all these, you know—a decade or so in, you have done a pretty good job of sticking to that. I mean, sometimes you have to tell the stories of people to tell the stories of stuff, but it's never like meet the man behind the Golden Gate Bridge. It's, "This person did this interesting thing that created the Golden Gate Bridge."

00:08:59 Roman Guest

Why did you leave aside the like—the number one easiest technique for feature journalism? Which is, "This is the life story of the thing—of the person behind the thing that you know."

I mean, yeah. We do it occasionally and I do like humans to show up in the story. And I do think that the story of the stuff is the story of humans and our values and the things we care about. But there's just something more fun about making a story about bigger ideas than a person and their feelings and not boiling everything down to some personal story. You know, like—when you're watching like a

biopic and then there's that moment in the biopic which is so on the nose as to why the person did a thing that you know they did later. And it's so just—it's just painful. Like, it's cliché. It's hard to watch. And I just wanted to always make it about the idea.

And there's great characters in there. Like, you know, the curb cuts episode, you know, wouldn't have happened without Ed Roberts. And Ed Roberts is a real character. But it's about things that are not just him, but about all these things around him. And I just think that's a more fun story to tell.

00:10:00 Jesse Host

Tell me a little bit—we haven't even given an example of a 99% *Invisible* story. So, let's take that curb cuts episode. What was the design that that episode was about?

00:10:13 Roman Guest

It was really about those little, tiny, four-inch ramps that make it so that a sidewalk doesn't come to a cliff. You know, when it reaches the street. And makes it so that it's accessible to people in wheelchairs but also makes it more pleasant for all kinds of people who don't wanna, like—who have a hard time stepping or for people who are pushing a stroller or any type of mobility that's different from a completely healthy young person. And it's about those and about the fact that they really do symbolize this movement that Ed Roberts was a huge part of. He was the first quadriplegic to be accepted to UC Berkeley and UC Berkeley you know grudgingly sort of made accommodations for him and he always pushed for it and pushed for other people. And these curb cuts became the symbol of making a more accessible world—which led to the ADA and all kinds of progression and all kinds of progressive advancements, in terms of people with different abilities.

00:11:18 Jesse Host

I don't think it ever would have occurred to me that sidewalks existed without curb cuts. And it feels like a big part of the show and a big part of the book is revealing the iceberg under the surface of the water behind things that you might not have considered—like curb cuts. You know, you might have just walked up them your whole life and it never occurred to you that they made sidewalks without them, as it probably wouldn't have to me. And there's this whole story underneath there.

00:11:49 Roman Guest

Yeah, I mean that's what the name is—99% *Invisible*. It's that the physical object is just 1% of the story and the history behind that thing. And what I love about it is, in the 10 years we've done the show and with the book and as it's being introduced to new people—is that there are these stories everywhere and they're really gratifying when you find them in the most mundane things. Like you notice them for the first time even though you've passed them all the time and you notice this richness there. And then you begin to, you know, have a little bit more fanciful, interesting day because you know, "Well, there must be more stories about this other stuff. And maybe I'll look that up. Or maybe there's something like about that in the book."

And that's the part I love about it. It's really fun to give people the sort of permission and a little bit of the prompt and the guide to help them find stories and delight right outside their door.

00:12:48 Jesse Host

You've always been a guy, in my experience, who really loves learning about something. And I think all the time of this origin story you told me about how you became a public radio person, which—you know, I mean I guess 99% *Invisible* is no longer technically a

public radio program, but certainly remains deeply rooted in public radio.

00:13:09 Roman Guest Yeah, in spirit for sure.
00:13:11 Jesse Host And *[chuckling]* it was basically—you were getting a PhD in genetics studying corn.

[Roman agrees with a chuckle.]

And you were listening to *Talk of the Nation* when the great Ray Suarez was the host of that show. And you thought, *[laughing]* “Well, I don’t think I could do what Ray Suarez does, but I can probably be the guy that looks it up and puts it on a piece of paper and hands it to him.”

00:13:34 Roman Guest *[Laughs.]* That’s exactly what I thought. I didn’t know what that job was, but I was like, “Somebody reads the books and helps him be so good on the air and I would be really good at that job.” That’s what I felt like I could do. And so that’s what I went to pursue.

00:13:49 Jesse Host So, what was the thing that made you feel like you could be good at that job but that you didn’t want to be a professional scientist, that you were—you know, you almost—you were very close to getting your—I mean, you were 21 or some *Doogie Houser* age, but you were very close to getting your PhD at the time. So, what let you to think, “I would better at that than at being a scientist, a job that also involves looking stuff up a lot.”

00:14:17 Roman Guest *[Laughs.]* Well, I think to be a scientist—and I didn’t know this, because I was very good at studying science, but I didn’t really have the experience of being an actual scientist—and there’s a real difference in the type of—I don’t, it’s not—it’s like ego, but I don’t mean that in any pejorative sense, that you’re driven by the thing you want to discover so much. Like, you wanna be the first that does it, you wanna devote all this time and I just was like, “Well, I just kind of wanna know things.” And it’s—it’s a whole lot easier just to read about things other people discovered *[laughs]* if you just wanna know things. And because I kind of knew I was wired that way and I was a very poor bench scientist—like, in terms of, like, pipetting things into tubes, I was extremely lazy and bad at it. *[Chuckles.]*

And all those sort of things together realized that I just really liked the pursuit of knowledge and I thought that graduate school was just gonna be a continuation of being in college, which is what I really wanted to do. And so, I just thought that this job of being a radio producer was kind of like being in college forever. And it turned out it kinda was, actually. *[Laughs.]* I write papers every week. I study things. You know. It’s kind of just undergrad. I just never left Oberland.

00:15:31 Jesse Host I’m very grateful for the help that I have making this show. Kevin’s on the line right now, so I wanted to—my producer—so I wanted to make sure I said that out loud.

[Roman laughs.]

But I—you and I share the experience of having—and it’s an unusual experience—of having made a public radio show by ourselves.

[They laugh.]

Um. I made this show by myself for many years and you made *Invisible Ink* by yourself and for a long time you made *99% Invisible* by yourself, as well. Although, you know, you had—you had people contributing here and there, in the early days. What did you learn from having to go on the air once a week, by yourself, without any *[chuckles]* without anyone to check if what you were doing was good and without anyone to see how they were reacting to it? I mean, that's one of the specific radio things, is it's such a vacuum.

[Roman agrees.]

00:16:36 Roman Guest

What did you learn from generating that much stuff that regularly? I mean, I think you learn a couple of things and they're kind of almost the opposite things. Which is, like, you learn to have a certain amount of self-discipline and to listen to yourself and listen to your work to the point where you're so done with it that you're sure it's good enough. And then you also learn if it isn't great or isn't perfect, it's okay. *[Chuckles.]* It ain't that big a deal. There's a new thing out—you have to put something out next week and it'll be fine. And I think that those two things helped me as a podcaster, because I think one of the issues with podcasting in general is people get into it and they love it, and they love it, and they love to be producing stuff and they love to be talking and connecting with people and all kinds of other things. But they didn't have that time where they had to discipline themselves in terms of the radio clock and how to fit stuff into time and how to not waste your audience's time. And I think that the work kind of suffers because of that. And so, I'm glad I had a period of time where I was, like, a meticulous self-editor, because it made me better today.

But I'm pretty loose when it comes to that stuff. Like, my team—you know—13 people work on the show now, including me, and they work in difference capacities, but you know, they'll pick out little things to pull out or to change or to you know, like, have me retake something. And I'm just like, "Ah, that's fine. I don't know why you're complaining." Like—!

[They chuckle.]

00:18:17 Jesse Host

And I think that's just from doing it for 20 years and they're still in that stage where you have to do it perfectly, but they'll get—they'll get to where I am eventually. *[Laughs.]*

I think that is a—such an essential and underrated lesson, though. And it's like such a classic drama of the gifted child—

[Roman laughs.]

—lesson to have to learn. Like, I see it with my kids right now and I certainly—it's something that I can relate to, which is—you know, for much of my life, certainly my childhood and adolescence, my only solution to my perfectionism was just not to try and do anything!

[They laugh and Roman agrees.]

And... and I think that one of the reasons that, you know, stage performance and going on the radio once a week was appealing to me was that you have to do it and when it's done, it's done. You can't worry about whether it was—you know, 'cause you gotta work on the next one.

00:19:07 Roman Guest

Totally. I think it's—I think it's an important lesson. I think it's really good. I remember I was—you know, I know a lot of people in public radio 'cause of how I came up, and so I was once, you know, like visiting WHYY, in Philadelphia, and watching Terry Gross do her show live and she kind of puts it together live, even though there's some stuff that's pre-recorded. And I'm sitting in the back with their director, Roberta Shorrock, as she's training a new director. And we're just like chitchatting and stuff and I'm like, "Do you have to pay attention, here?" *[Laughs.]*

And she was like—

[Jesse laughs.]

"Nah, he's got it. He's doing a good job. Besides, it's not brain surgery. It's radio. If you mess up, it'll be fine." And I just remember I took so much heart in that, 'cause it's totally true. Like, we're—like I want it to be good, I have a contract with my audience to make something valuable to them and not waste their time. And then, beyond that, you know like—the story of the show is something that is a ten-year story. It's not—it's never encapsulated into one episode. And so, you have to kind of let some of that go. You know, while still maintaining like a quality that you're proud of. And I think we do that each week, but it's good to let some of it go.

00:20:14 Jesse Host

When you go to a new city in times when traveling to new cities is possible or advisable, what is the first place you go or the first thing you look for or the first thing you ask about?

00:20:27 Roman Guest

I mean, what I think fun now is if I'm—if I'm feeling in the mood for it—and it takes a specific mood, so I kind of let people know if I'm gonna go someplace. If I'm—if I'm doing this best way, I—people know I'm coming to Pittsburg or coming to DC. And then they'll like say, "Oh, I can let you into the top of this building," or something like that. And that's sort of like—that's the privilege of having, like, a show about designing and architecture, is people will like give you secret tours to things.

You know, I like to walk a lot and so I look for places where I can walk and experience the city that way. But each city's really, you know, really different. And so, it's kind of hard to generalize, but I—you know, I do museums. I like a—I like a good, tiny museum. Like a weird, specific, tiny museum is a—is like always a—

00:21:17 Jesse Host

I went to a museum called MODO, in Mexico City, last summer. Which is the Museum of Everyday Objects—Museo. My Spanish isn't strong. My memory is Objeto del Objeto?

[Roman chuckles.]

Something along those lines. And man, *[laughing]* it was so great! I loved it!

00:21:39 Roman Guest I—you know, the postal museum in DC—like, you can go to all these other—

00:21:42 Jesse Host Oh, shout out to Owney, the postal service dog!

00:21:45 Roman Guest *[Laughs.]* Yep. There's nothing like it. Totally.

00:21:49 Jesse Host This is a taxidermy dog that wears a vest covered in postal medals that's at the postal museum.

00:21:55 Roman Guest Heavy with postal medals. And you're like, "Poor dog."

00:21:58 Jesse Host They had to give him a new vest because he had too many medals on the first vest.

[They laugh.]

00:22:11 Roman Guest But he rode postal trains and postal inspectors, and postal employees would give him medals at each post office he went to. Yeah. It's great—it's a great story. Like, I like a good—if there's a chance for taxidermy at a museum, like all that—*[breaks into laughter]*. Especially weird taxidermy.

00:22:24 Jesse Host Well, I mean, I also think that there are places that reveal themselves more easily than others. Like, you know, you lived in Chicago. I visited Chicago a number of times. I've taken that architectural tour that you described. But I think you would be hard-pressed to walk around downtown Chicago and not appreciate it.

[Roman agrees several times.]

00:23:02 Roman Guest It's—it is beautiful. Like, spectacularly beautiful. Whereas I live here in Los Angeles and, you know, Los Angeles is every bit the great city Chicago is, but you know. There's a lot—I'm not gonna lie, there's a lot of ugly in LA. And a lot of the best stuff in LA, somebody's gotta tell you about 'cause it's—and it's a whole hassle to get there.

00:23:50 Jesse Host Yeah, and that—and that's why, like, either I talk to someone who was like a friend or I let people know who don't know me but know me through the show. And you need a guide for most cities. Like, you're totally right. Like, Chicago lays itself out for you. Like, it is there to be appreciated. *[Chuckles.]* You know? Like they—and they focus on that. But LA is a place where you are told about a place that takes 45 minutes to drive there and it's like a great hotdog stand or whatever and food is a good way to sort of get you in a lot of different directions, which is another way I like to navigate a city, is through food. And that's a great way to experience a city. And I do—I do like those cities where somebody, you know, has to be your guide. And it—they're just kind of harder, for sure. But they're worth it.

00:24:05 Roman Guest What are some things, when you are walking around in Oakland, California—where you live—and you see that you might—your eyes might not have landed on and appreciated before you did this show?

00:24:05 Roman Guest Oh yeah. Well, this show really opened my eyes in lots of ways. So, I love sidewalk stamps. Often, the construction company who laid the sidewalk, if they did a building and then it tore up whatever sidewalk there was if there was a sidewalk, and then they laid another one down—and they often put an imprint of the company on the sidewalk. And those are all over the Bay Area. And you can even see, like, the evolution of a company. There was one—like a Shneour Pavement. And then there was Shneour and Sons and

then Shneur Brothers and you can see, like, the evolution of like—of like, okay, bringing the kid into the business. And then dad retires. *[Laughing.]* You know, like—and if you walk around Berkeley streets, you can see these stamps and they have so much history in them that I think is really amazing.

And I love the different, like, easement markers that are like... these little, tiny, imbedded plaques that are like, “This space is not dedicated,” or something like that. Which are—which are basically markers because the—part of the sidewalk is often owned by the person who owns the building, not by the city. But they’re giving permission for the sidewalk to be there, in order to sort of avoid adverse possession, meaning that the city just takes over because they’ve had it for so long. They have to put these markers around to say, “Well, no, I own this property. I’m gonna let you use it for now, but I own it.” And I love the kind of weird, like, legal, strangely bureaucratic information layer on the city.

And I think that those things—because they’re so mundane and because they have this legalese language, I think they’re easy to not appreciate or not really think about. But I think about all the stuff that came before it and the cool kind of story there and I kind of like its awkward bureaucraticness and I don’t think I ever would have found beauty in that before this show.

00:25:47 Jesse Host

There’s one of those sidewalk stamps outside my house that’s relatively old for Los Angeles. I live in a relatively old neighborhood for LA. And then it’s dated 1923 and maybe 50, 100 feet past that sidewalk stamp, the road ends. There is, in fact, not a sidewalk. It’s just a narrow concrete road. And it turns into dirt. And whenever I see that 1923, I think, “That is almost 100 years that they have not finished this road.”

[They laugh.]

Like, 97 years ago, they were like, “Yeah, we’re about three quarters done.”

00:26:26 Roman Guest
00:26:28 Jesse Host

[Laughing.] We’ll get there.
And then they just bailed!

[They laugh.]

00:26:33 Roman Guest

There’s a story there. I don’t know what it is, but there’s definitely a story there.

00:26:37 Jesse Host

We’ll finish up with Roman Mars in just a bit. After the break, we’ll talk about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the design of cities and which of those changes might become permanent. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:26:52 Music Transition
00:26:54 Jesse Promo

Bright, chiming music.

This message comes from NPR sponsor, Microsoft Teams. Now, there are more ways to be a team with Microsoft Teams! Bring everyone together in one space with a new, virtual room. Collaborate live. Drawing, sharing, and building ideas with everyone on the same page. And make sure more of your team is seen and heard with up to 49 people onscreen at once. Learn more about all the newest Teams features at Microsoft.com/teams.

[Music fades out.]

00:27:25	Promo	Clip	<p>Music: Fun, jaunty, upbeat music.</p> <p>Renee Colvert: Well, hello. I'm Renee Colvert.</p> <p>Alexis Preston: Hi, I'm Alexis Preston. And we're the hosts of <i>Can I Pet Your Dog</i>.</p> <p>Renee: And we got breaking news. We got an expose! All the beans have been spilled, via... an Apple Podcast review that said, "This show isn't well researched."</p> <p><i>[Alexis gasps.]</i></p> <p>Renee: Well, yeah, no duh. Of course, it's not! Not since the day we started has it been well researched! Guessing and anthropomorphizing dogs is what we do.</p> <p>Alexis: The Can I Pet Your Dog promise is that we will never do more than ten seconds of research before telling you, excitedly, about any dog we see.</p> <p>Renee: I'm gonna come atcha with top-ten enthusiasm, minimal facts.</p> <p>Alexis: <i>[Chuckling.]</i> We're here for a good time, not an educated time.</p> <p>Renee: So, if you love dogs and you don't love research—</p> <p><i>[Alexis cackles.]</i></p> <p>Renee: Well, you know what. Come on in to Can I Pet Your Dog podcast, every Tuesday on Maximum Fun network.</p>
00:28:12	Promo	Clip	<p><i>[Alexis giggles as the music ends.]</i></p> <p>Music: Peaceful, cheerful music.</p> <p>Manoush Zomorodi: Writer Baratunde Thurston says, "This democracy experiment requires more than just voting."</p> <p>Baratunde Thurston: This incumbent on all of us. It takes two. Right? <i>[Laughing.]</i> It takes two to make a thing go right. It takes two to knock it outta sight! And both parties, in our national level discourse—both sides have to still remain committed.</p> <p>Manoush: How to be a good citizen. That's on the TED Radio Hour, from NPR.</p>
00:28:33	Jesse	Promo	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p>Hey all. Jesse here again with a reminder. We're getting to the end of the year. Now is a great time to support shows like <i>Bullseye</i> by supporting your local public radio station. They do so much for you and they're only asking for a little in return. Give what you can and do it now. Go to Donate.NPR.org/bullseye. And thanks.</p>
00:28:54	Music	Transition	Laid back music.

00:28:59 Jesse Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Roman Mars. He's the founder of the podcast network Radiotopia and the host and creator of the design podcast *99% Invisible*. He just released a new book based on that podcast. It's called *The 99% Invisible City*. It's available now. Let's get back into our conversation.

So, one of the stories about design that's often investigated on *99% Invisible* is the tension between the world as it is designed by designers and the world as it is used by users.

[Roman agrees.]

You know, the classic example being a park with paths—concrete pavers or whatever. And then all the corners have diagonal dirt paths through the grass because people don't wanna make 90 degree turns to get—to take diagonal routes.

[Roman agrees and chuckles.]

And I feel like, living in a pandemic, we are seeing design as it is practiced flourishing around us—simply because it was something that was not planned for and something that we don't have enough understanding of, necessarily, to make perfect plans about. What do you see around you, in terms of design, that is a response to the pandemic?

00:30:24 Roman Guest

Well... I mean, that's what I love most about cities, is I think that the city is this ongoing conversation between top-down design and bottom-up intervention. And that's where all the stories come from. In fact, if I could boil down the show, that's kind of what the show is about in the end. And so, desire paths is a perfect example of that. And what I noticed, you know, like in response to the pandemic was—what I first noticed was how quickly everything happened. Like, that the tape on the floor and the plexiglass and all that stuff like went up so fast and I was sort of bowled over by the ingenuity of everyone affixing plexiglass to *[chuckling]* like counters in ways. And like, you know, having like a two-by-four and then an eyehook and then a string and then plexiglass hanging and then it being bolted to the—

I just was sort of amazed by how quickly all that stuff came up and you know some of it's super kludgy and some of it's, you know, not very fun to navigate, but—I mean, one of the things that I noticed about the pandemic was how it's illustrating how ad hoc and haphazard the evolution of a city is. And it's always been this way, it's just that we're seeing it in real time as we're dealing with the pandemic. And that is super fascinating—the parts that they can take on, on their own. And then there was a whole response during the summer with all the protests and you know, like, plywood coming up and then how people kind of respond to, like—especially in Oakland, you know? Like, sort of trying to like express solidarity. And they're like, you know, please don't smash *[laughing]* this, 'cause I have this Oscar Grant poster up. You know. Or something like that. Or George Floyd mural. And there's that response where people are like trying to express themselves. Or, you know, say like, "Oh, we're part of this too. And we're expressing our support."

And that conversation is a—makes a city interesting and that's the stuff I like to look at. And what would be interesting to see is what stays. You know. Like I've noticed that the tape on the floor has turned into design decals, where they have little footprints and they have a little statement on them that say, you know, "Social distancing, six feet" or something like that. Whereas it used to just be blue painters' tape or something. And you know, maybe that stuff will stick. Maybe it won't. Maybe the sidewalk cafes will and the parklets and all that stuff that people were experimenting with will stay. You know, it's hard to—it's hard to say.

00:32:49 Jesse Host

This is very personal to you because you lost your father to COVID very recently.

00:32:54 Roman Guest

Yeah. I did. Yeah.

00:32:56 Jesse Host

And I saw that one of your first reactions to it, publicly, was upset over the system.

[Roman agrees.]

And not, you know—not necessarily the system in the, you know, rage against the machine sense, but that if someone had been at the wheel doing some designing and thinking systemically, that maybe your father would still be alive.

00:33:25 Roman Guest

Yeah. I was... it was one of the big, like... almost overriding emotions. Like, when it came to him and his sickness and death. One of the things I felt a ton of was just how unnecessary his illness was, because it was a thing that the federal government, you know, just didn't take on and it became a political thing. And you know, he died unnecessarily for dumb politics, because somebody couldn't get out of their way enough to just, like, to care about the citizenry. And this is what governments are for, you know. This is—and I'm a believer in government. So, like I'm—I live on the opposite spectrum of so many things when it comes to Donald Trump, but one of them, with him and a lot of his republican compatriots, is that I believe in government. I believe that government is a representation of the things we do that we can't do alone and that we work together to create a better world together and we do that, and we call that government. And that's not something to be ashamed of or to be dismissed or something that needs to be made so small as to be nonexistent.

And this is the time when we need it, because an individual's response—like, there's nothing that my father could do. Like, he caught COVID in the hospital. Like, he was undergoing another procedure for—he had some vascular disease. Like, he was not a healthy man, and so that made him susceptible to COVID. But you know, he did the things that you're supposed to do. At least, I hope—in terms of, you know, keeping him safe from corona virus. But he caught it anyway, because there was a health system, you know, in Ohio just overwhelmed with COVID cases. And that—there'd be no one with COVID cases—is something that we could have stopped, and it makes me mad that we didn't stop it.

It makes me sad that we didn't stop it. It's a tragedy that we didn't stop it. And we're still not stopping it. We're still, like, having fights about the politics of masks and staying home when, you know,

there's real things at stake here and they seem abstract to people, but they're not abstract. You know. There's—a quarter of a million have died. And this requires system thinking. It requires us thinking about the whole, because the little parts of these sacrifices and the little parts of things we have to do—you know, like, it is—I understand that they don't seem that important because you live your life a certain way and you're healthy in a certain way.

But the totality of these choices, they have to be thought of as a design system. And if they're not, the response is, and the result is. People like my father die. You know. I am... I was really uncomfortable with the single day that I had put that on Twitter and, like, 70,000 people, like, shared it or liked or something like that. I was really overwhelmed by being the center of people's like emotions for that day. That's not a place I love to be. But I do think it's important for people to share those experiences. Yeah.

00:36:38	Jesse	Host	Well thank you for taking this time and thanks for... your great work. I've loved your show for so long and I've been—I loved the book and I'm very grateful to consider you a friend. So. Thanks, Roman.
00:36:52	Roman	Guest	Thank you so much. I'm so grateful. I mean, I should let people know that, like, you telling people to listen to the show, <i>99% Invisible</i> , was one of the first ways we got an audience. So, I'm grateful for you.
00:37:05	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> Well, you helped <u>invent</u> this show. So.
00:37:09	Roman	Guest	<i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:37:12	Jesse	Host	Yeah, do people know that? That I named <i>Bullseye</i> ? <i>[Laughs.]</i>
			Yeah, you named it. Roman Mars, it was great to talk to you about your great book and your great show. Thanks for coming on <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:37:20	Roman	Guest	Oh, it was my pleasure. Thanks for having me.
00:37:22	Jesse	Host	Roman Mars. <i>The 99% Invisible City</i> is available to buy now. You can get it from your local bookshop or on the <i>99% Invisible</i> website.
00:37:31	Music	Transition	Elegant transition music.
00:37:34	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, you know, they say red tape prevents you from building homes, here in Los Angeles. But they sure are building one right across from my living room. So. You know. Sorry if you've heard it!

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We also get some help from Casey O'Brien and Kristen Bennett. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

If you wanna hear the latest about what we are up to, you can keep up with the show on Twitter, [@Bullseye](#). On Facebook, at [Facebook.com/bullseyewithjessethorn](#). And on YouTube, just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. We post all of our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:38:37 Promo

Promo

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]