Scratching the Surface

How an interview show became a small institution for design criticism

Scratching the Surface is an independent, English-language podcast and publishing platform concerned with design, theory, and creative practice. Founded in 2016 by the American designer, writer, and educator Jarrett Fuller, it brings designers into conversation with architects, critics, artists, curators, and scholars. Its present operating center is Fuller’s practice in Raleigh, North Carolina; its audience and subjects extend internationally. Alongside the freely available audio interviews are an episode archive, a monthly newsletter, paid supplementary interviews, and SCRATCH, a written publication. The website identifies it as a twenty-six production, referring to Fuller’s design and editorial studio.[1, 2]

By September 30, 2026, the numbered series had reached episode 293. The intervening work had changed substantially: an MFA research project became a recurring publication; a graphic-design conversation broadened toward architecture, cultural institutions, and education; listener payments moved through three different membership systems; written contributions opened an additional route into the project.[3] Across these changes, the project developed a durable arrangement around a demanding central task: getting someone to explain how their work makes sense, then giving that explanation a public life.

The institution is best understood at this intermediate scale. Fuller remains its recognizable host and editor, but the resulting resource depends on guests’ preparation and speech, contributors’ writing, subscribers’ payments, university and publishing networks, hosting services, and the continuing work of organizing an archive. Its reach exceeds its visible staff structure. That combination explains both its usefulness and its vulnerability: the accumulated interviews are available to others, while much of the judgment that makes new interviews possible still rests with one person.

[External image / 外部圖片] A red-tinted portrait of Jarrett Fuller wearing glasses.
Jarrett Fuller, the host of Scratching the Surface, in the portrait used on the podcast’s About page. Scratching the Surface / Jarrett Fuller; photographer not separately named · Site footer states CC-BY-NC-SA without a version; photograph has no separate license notice. · Image source

A thesis acquires a publishing obligation

The introductory episode, dated October 19, 2016, proposed a weekly series about the intersection of design criticism and practice. The first guest interview followed on October 26 with Rob Giampietro, then Google’s Material Design lead in New York and an

established design writer. Its published notes connected his work to essays, exhibitions, lectures, and historical references. From the beginning, the audio was accompanied by a route outward into other materials.[4, 5]

At the Maryland Institute College of Art, a podcast could count as Fuller's MFA thesis. He later identified the first twenty episodes as his submission. An educational occasion, research question, and completion requirement gave the series an initial structure before it had a proven media business.[6]

The early project was already broader than a stream of recordings. A print companion, catalogued in Fuller's portfolio under 2016, paired essays by guests with texts by critics who had influenced them. Helvetica and Times New Roman alternated between those two groups; red marked connections back to the podcast. The design made an intellectual genealogy visible. An interview could identify a practitioner, while the associated publication could show what that practitioner had read and carried into the work.[7]

A special written interview with Experimental Jetset, published on October 29, 2016, reveals another early method. Fuller had worked with the Amsterdam studio's Whitney Museum identity during an internship. Reading its monograph led to months of email exchanges, which he edited into a text edition of the show. The inquiry began with experience of an actual design system and moved toward the studio's account of writing, theory, and authorship. The guest's ideas did not have to arrive in the standard audio format to belong to the project.[8]

Continuity required a different kind of competence. In a March 2017 interview with Design Feast, Fuller described a weekly schedule and spreadsheets for organizing invitations, recording, and publication. These are small tools, but they mark the passage from having an interesting conversation to maintaining a series. Someone had to keep the next episode moving while the present one was being finished.[9]

After graduation, the original endpoint disappeared. Fuller's five-year retrospective describes a succession of provisional goals: finish the degree, reach fifty episodes, then one hundred, then two hundred. The subject also widened as his own questions changed, moving among teaching, scholarship, making, curating, and administration. He acknowledged that the archive could be read as a record of his developing interests. This is an unusually candid account of editorial selection: continuity came from a continuing inquiry, not from a stable beat assigned by an employer.[10]

The arrangement offered freedom, but also transferred the obligation to Fuller. A university could accept a completed thesis. A listening public returning every week encountered an unfinished publication, with a next installment still to make.

Research makes the apparent ease possible

In 2026, Fuller told interviewer Julia Gamolina that he researches guests' publications,

interviews, and videos, seeking an exchange that produces something previously unsaid. He passes over some famous designers when he cannot identify a worthwhile question or a personal investment in their work. Recognition alone does not settle the invitation.[11]

This approach places an important limit on the archive. Selection follows an editor's capacity to understand, prepare for, and develop a conversation. It is neither an open microphone nor a comprehensive census of the design professions. The chosen guest must become the subject of a tractable inquiry.

Fuller's March 2025 essay on interviewing makes the method more explicit. He generally does not work through a numbered questionnaire. He prepares an arc and a set of problems, then leaves room for a response to alter the direction. Research, he says, now takes longer than it once did. The casual exchange rests on an asymmetry: the interviewer has spent weeks examining the guest's work and controls which themes are pursued. Fuller relates this to teaching, where extensive preparation establishes the conditions for apparently open-ended activity.[12]

Editorial authority therefore operates before and during the encounter. Reading determines which connections become available; the opening question establishes a frame; a follow-up can test a claim, redirect a rehearsed story, or let an unexpected idea develop. The finished conversation is jointly produced, but its conditions are not equally controlled. Recognizing that asymmetry makes the work more intelligible than treating informality as an absence of structure.

The June 2026 supplementary interview with novelist and printer Robin Sloan provides a concrete example. Its public opening states that the conversation took place over Zoom and was edited for clarity. Fuller had compared changing descriptions on Sloan's website, from media inventor to writer, printer, manufacturer, and creative industrialist. He turned that sequence into an opening question about changing kinds of work. The method is visible even without access to the paid remainder: preparation converts a small documentary observation into a question that lets the subject interpret a transition.[13]

The standard of inquiry has also shifted. The early show often reconstructed a guest's formation; by 2026 Fuller described it as increasingly concerned with ideas and the work's passage into the world.[14] That change helps explain why a design interview series could become interested in provosts, museum directors, and publishers. Their decisions shape the conditions under which other people design.

The work surrounding the recording

Making the encounter available involves tasks that do not appear in the guest's answer. Fuller's April 2018 membership announcement lists recording, editing, writing show notes, posting on social media, scheduling, and approaching guests. At that point he described an entirely self-funded, one-person operation, paying for web services and recording equipment and fitting the show around teaching and client work. The cost was

also the paying work displaced by these activities.[15]

Current descriptions continue to place Fuller at the editorial center. He is named as host and producer, while his professional site identifies him as the person commissioning and editing written pieces. Interviewing and written publishing remain connected through the same editor.[16, 17]

Publication and recording need not happen in the same week. In a 2020 update, Fuller reported continuing to record while he already had episodes lined up through July. Such a buffer allows a recurring release schedule to survive the uneven availability of guests and the host's other work.[18]

The rhythm has changed over time. The 2016 introduction promised weekly releases; an April 2021 newsletter described a temporary weekly run through June. By September 2026, new episodes were scheduled every other Wednesday during the fall, following summer rebroadcasts. This is a working calendar with periods of reuse and renewal, rather than uninterrupted growth in new production.[19, 20, 21]

Live work offers another production arrangement. A conversation with landscape designer and author Julia Watson was recorded at the 2020 AIGA Design Conference; the show's website subsequently listed the video as a subscriber benefit. The professional association supplied an event setting, while the publication gave the encounter a further life beyond the event.[22]

Transcription has had a less straightforward history. In late 2019, Fuller announced a website rebuilt with Jekyll and hosted on GitHub, alongside a plan to bring transcripts to the archive. The 2021 membership page instead specified transcripts beginning with episode 180, with older episodes available on request. Transcription had become both an archival project and a membership benefit.[23, 24]

That distinction matters. Audio can circulate freely while remaining difficult to search, quote, translate, or use for someone who cannot hear it. A show note supplies references; a transcript makes the exchange itself available to a reader. Producing and checking that text is additional editorial work, with consequences for both accessibility and the kinds of research the archive can support.

Distribution is similarly layered. The main website embeds SoundCloud audio and offers an RSS subscription alongside links to listening services. Apple Podcasts carries current episodes and explicitly identified rebroadcasts.[25, 26] The institution maintains its own editorial address while relying on other systems to store or deliver recordings, collect payments, and reach listeners. Maintaining an episode archive at a separate address gives the work a continuing home as membership services change.

An archive that teaches through connections

The episode page is a small editorial object: a number, a date, a guest description, a player

or listening links, a summary, and a bibliography of sorts. Consider the April 2018 interview with media scholar Shannon Mattern. Its links connect media theorists, the Seattle Central Library, other scholars, Mattern's writing in Places, and an earlier interview with designer Anne Burdick. A listener can leave the recording with several directions for further study.[27]

The encounter also changed the series. Introducing a follow-up interview in the July 2021 member newsletter, Fuller singled out Mattern's first appearance as an early occasion for looking beyond people conventionally identified as designers. The follow-up examined the Anthropology + Design minor she was developing at The New School. The newsletter thus returned to a past guest through a new institutional problem: how social-science methods and design education could be joined in a curriculum. A copy preserved on The New School's anthropology website also shows the interview moving outside the membership channel in which it first appeared.[28]

The November 2019 episode with book artist and scholar Johanna Drucker offers a related route. Its stated concerns include books as objects, design history, and the combination of artistic and academic practice. The notes link to Emigre, Ellen Lupton, and other episodes as well as to books. In this setting, a person is an entry point into a set of practices and references, not simply the endpoint of a biographical story.[29]

The April 2024 interview with Cynthia Davidson, cofounder of Anyone Corporation and editor of Log, moves from the work of making design to the work of publishing its arguments. Its description foregrounds the evolution of architectural publishing and the relationship between the visual form of Log and ANY and how they are read. The notes lead to Anyone, the Writing Architecture series, Jane Rendell's work, and previous conversations with designers Michael Rock and Susan Sellers. The links expose the production relationships through which intellectual content acquires a designed form.[30]

These encounters share a question without requiring the guests to share a profession: how do making, explaining, and organizing affect one another? Curator and researcher Zara Arshad's February 2022 episode approaches design canons through her work on China and South Korea; Leonard Koren's May 2024 episode approaches books and conceptual tools through a career that passed through architecture and experimental magazine publishing. Their inclusion widens the kinds of evidence a listener might accept as relevant to design.[31, 32]

There is evidence that the resource enters teaching and library systems. Wrexham Glyndŵr University's 2020 version of its Critical Thinking module specification lists the show among design resources.[33]

Library Stack catalogues individual episodes, assigning subjects and distinguishing hosts or authors from contributors. Its entries for the Andrew Lister–Matthew Stuart conversation and the Mike Pepi interview place the recordings alongside material on publishing, pedagogy, and digital media. Cataloguing makes an episode discoverable through another institution's classifications.[34, 35]

The archive's infrastructural value lies in these repeatable uses. A teacher can assign a discussion; a researcher can locate a practitioner's account; a listener can move from one guest to another through a shared reference. None requires the listener to know Fuller personally. An encounter arranged through an individual's contacts can become available beyond those contacts.

SCRATCH enlarges the circle of authors

The written publication gave the institution a way to exceed the host-and-guest pair. A February 17, 2023 newsletter announced that SCRATCH had launched a few weeks earlier. Fuller linked it to his experience at AIGA's Eye on Design and described an intention to publish across architecture, urbanism, product design, and other fields. Early material included a conversation between Minami Hirayama and Benedetta Crippa and an excerpt from Dori Tunstall's book on decolonizing design.[36]

The introduction set a deliberately loose operating rule: publish when the work was ready and capacity allowed, without a fixed schedule. It invited pitches, unfinished drafts, speculation, interviews, and fiction. Most work was intended to be free, with some reserved for supporters. This created a second editorial entrance. A contributor could arrive with a text or proposal, rather than first being chosen as the subject of a recorded interview.[37]

The expansion also carried skills from another institution. Fuller's editing record dates his Eye on Design role from July 2020 to November 2022 and explicitly says that he continues to commission and edit material for Scratching the Surface. Experience in commissioning and shaping other people's writing could now feed a publication alongside the interviews.[38]

The published objects reveal several ways of acquiring work. Gennifer Weisenfeld's April 2024 account of modern Japanese commercial design is identified as an adapted excerpt from her Letterform Archive book. The article carries an author credit, publisher connection, illustrations, and a route to the book. This gives a specialist historical argument another point of entry while openly situating it in a publication's circulation.[39]

Brian LaRossa's March 2025 short story "Good Color" arrived by a different route. An editor's note identifies its original appearance in his own fiction newsletter and explains that SCRATCH is republishing it in support of that project. Here the publication acts as a redistributor and introducer, rather than claiming every item as a new commission. Fiction also gives the program's interest in design a form that need not resolve into an argument or an interview answer.[40]

James Dyer's review of Read Frame Type Film demonstrates an additional contribution: an evaluation with reservations. Dyer attends to the book's treatment of typography as material, but questions the size and definition of its intended readership. The value of this example is its specific critical labor. A design publication can circulate books and also test what they make possible for a reader.[41]

These different routes distribute authorship more widely than the core podcast. A book excerpt brings specialist research into a new setting; a republished story introduces another writer's project; a review supplies a judgment. SCRATCH adds editorial range without requiring Fuller to conduct every exchange himself.

Paying for a public resource

The first membership offer appeared on April 4, 2018: US$5 a month or US$50 a year, using Memberful and Stripe. It promised a member newsletter and additional development while keeping the podcast free. Fuller's announcement reported nearly 100,000 downloads and listeners in more than 65 countries at that point.[42]

The central exchange was already recognizable. A subset of listeners would pay for continuation and supplementary material, leaving the principal recording accessible to others. The model relies on a willingness to support a shared resource, alongside the attraction of benefits that are unavailable to nonmembers.

In April 2021, the membership program relaunched on Patreon with monthly tiers of US$3 for students, US$5 for patrons, and US$10 for superfans. Fuller described exclusive interviews, transcripts, and one-to-one virtual coffees for students and superfans. Membership now offered access to additional work and, for some subscribers, the host's time.[43]

The transition was not frictionless. The old membership page says that subscribers could not simply be carried from Memberful to Patreon, despite their corporate connection. Annual renewals were disabled; monthly supporters had to decide whether to resubscribe; duplicate billing needed attention. The same page specified transcripts from episode 180 onward and described early listening and office-hour benefits. This is evidence of the 2021 offer and migration, not a reliable present-day price list.[44]

A further transition was announced on October 1, 2024. A republication of a Louise Sandhaus interview introduced paid Substack membership at US$5 monthly or US$50 annually, with the monthly digest remaining free and supplementary interviews reserved for subscribers. The separation changed: the digest itself had once been a paid benefit; now it could serve a broader audience and direct some readers toward paid support.[45]

The September 2026 newsletter confirms the US$50 annual tier and monthly bonus interviews. It also offers annual members a one-time 50-percent discount in Fuller's bookshop. Current benefits therefore connect the show to a wider body of editorial work and book sales. The paid subscriber supports the free audio, but also receives an additional publication and a bounded retail incentive.[46]

Sponsorship offers a different exchange: access to the audience in return for support. The advertising page proposes month-long sponsorships and partnerships, with a single host-read sponsor at the start of an episode and associated website, show-note, and social links.

It states that an accepted sponsor should fit the show's audience and aims, while leaving rates to private inquiry.[47]

The balance between membership and sponsorship income remains undisclosed. What the offers make visible is the editorial choice involved: supporters pay for the continuation of work they value, while a sponsor pays to appear before its audience. Each arrangement places different demands on the same publication.

The host's university work supplies another institutional connection. Fuller announced his move from Brooklyn to a full-time position at North Carolina State University in May 2021. The university still identifies him with the podcast in a September 2026 account of his new book.[48, 49] Its 2024–2025 annual report includes the show under work enhancing the college's reputation.[50] Academic employment and independent publication visibly reinforce one another's public standing. That connection establishes employment and recognition, rather than a documented university production subsidy.

The economic question remains how much recurring editorial work the arrangement can reliably sustain. Every added benefit can help attract support, but an interview, transcript, newsletter, and personal meeting also create another obligation. Support has to cover the time needed to fulfill those promises as well as the next public episode.

Designing a field, and recognizing its edges

Scratching the Surface's expansion belongs to an argument about design criticism. In a 2020 Eye on Design essay, Fuller questioned the habitual claim that criticism was missing. He pointed instead to its dispersal across publications, social platforms, teaching, and other forms. The problem was partly one of recognition: designers could overlook critical work because it did not resemble an older central forum. The podcast and SCRATCH can be read as practical responses to that condition, gathering otherwise dispersed arguments without requiring a single disciplinary vocabulary.[51]

External reception supports a narrower, useful version of that claim. In her Winter 2025 Oculus article, critic Anjulie Rao considered Scratching the Surface alongside The Second Studio. She distinguished the latter's range of practice-oriented formats from Fuller's concentration on interviews and ideas. Her account places both within a thinning field of architectural media and identifies a shared contribution: sustained attention to the ideas and working realities behind design. The comparison helps locate Fuller's particular editorial choice within a wider media ecology.[52]

The Fall 2026 episodes make its institutional interests particularly visible. Rathna Ramanathan's September 2 appearance concerns the restructuring of Central Saint Martins and the relationship between disciplines and education. Will Hunter's September 16 episode concerns the formation of the London School of Architecture and alternative educational arrangements.[53, 54] The series is asking how design is organized, taught, and authorized, as well as how individual objects are made.

There is a productive tension here. Inviting senior educators and directors can expose decisions that shape entire fields. It also means that institutions are often explained by people empowered to represent them. Students, contingent faculty, and publishing workers may experience those same decisions differently. The interview opens an institution through a particular participant's account, and the participant's position helps define what comes into view.

The written and supplementary programs complicate the boundaries further. Ian Lynam's August 2017 episode addressed zines, theory, and design discourse from his practice in Tokyo. A March 2025 supplementary interview returned to his history of Japanese graphic design. The relationship persists across years and formats, allowing a reader to follow a developing body of work.[55, 56] English remains the language of this mediation, shaping who can readily enter the exchange as a speaker or reader.

The same issue appears in the archive's classifications. Tags such as education, administration, publishing, theory, and expanded practice allow readers to cross conventional professional boundaries.[57] They remain editorial classifications. Work that is difficult to describe in these terms, poorly documented online, or inaccessible to the host's research methods can be harder to bring into view. The question is whose experience becomes legible enough to enter the conversation, and what the editor's methods leave harder to reach.

A final boundary concerns the overlap between the platform and Fuller's other work. In episode 293, Kathleen Sleboda of the design bookseller and publisher Draw Down interviews him about Graphic Designers After Graphic Design. The episode openly identifies his authorship and links to the book. This is a transparent convergence of intellectual inquiry, an existing publishing relationship, and promotion.[58] The host's other projects can supply material and sustain interest, but readers should be able to distinguish the series' editorial judgments from the commercial success of an associated book.

Continuity without a guaranteed successor

What has become institutional is the repeated arrangement: select a worthwhile question, prepare an encounter, finish it for publication, connect it to other material, and return to it when circumstances change. A teacher or reader can use the resulting work without participating in its production. Contributors can add to a publication larger than their own sites. Paying members help maintain an audio resource available beyond the paying group.

The accumulated archive can be used without its editor being present. Continuing the publication demands more: the judgment to choose a subject, the relationships to arrange an encounter, and the ability to bring it to completion. Those capacities remain closely associated with Fuller. A decade of publication has made the work durable without resolving how it would be handed on.

Scratching the Surface has nevertheless made a specific form of work recurrent: sustained explanations of design by people whose practices do not fit comfortably inside one professional category. Its institutional achievement is visible in the archive and in the ways other people use and extend it. Its continuing constraint is equally concrete. The next conversation still needs research, a willing guest, editorial attention, and enough time and support to become part of that public record.

Sources

All sources were consulted on October 6, 2026. Episode descriptions and show notes support claims about publication, topics, and links; they are not treated as verbatim transcripts. The separately supplied reader companion explains the principal date and access distinctions.

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