

The Temples at Burning Man

Lori Van Meter

Abstract: There are many descriptions of the Burning Man project, all of which seem true but incomplete: an art festival, a circus, a camp-out, a sociological experiment, a rave, a ritual, a Bacchanalia, druid puke. Amid this enigmatic occurrence stands a temple, solemn and serious, dedicated to the memory of the deceased. Every year, thousands of people at Burning Man find a way to intertwine an unusual celebration of life with an unusual commemoration of death. This paper examines the roots, traditions, and meaning behind the annual creation and destruction of the temples at Burning Man.

Key Words: Temples, Burning Man, memorial art, dedicate, grief, mourning, communal, healing, widow

This Thing Called Burning Man

To fully appreciate the temples at Burning Man, one must consider their setting. These elaborate shrines are built entirely by volunteers in a city that does not really exist, and then are purposely destroyed by fire just before the city itself disappears again. The populace witnesses, even anticipates the burning, yet nobody acts to save the beloved structures. Dedicated to the memory of the deceased, these temples serve this strange civic entity in much the same way that traditional temples have served traditional communities for millennia - except, maybe, for the burning.

The Burning Man project originated within the San Francisco Bay Area's eclectic counterculture during the early 1980's. Free-loving hippies from the East Bay, affluent yuppies from the North Bay, and inventive techies from the South Bay converged on Baker Beach in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. One particular woman held annual solstice parties, and built driftwood sculptures that would become firewood when dinnertime approached. In 1986, she did not arrange such a gathering, so Larry Harvey did. He enlisted a friend to build a sculpture (arbitrarily choosing the human figure), then they took it to the beach for the party. About 20 friends showed up. Some beachcombers stopped by who had nothing to contribute except for a song, which they offered as a gift to the party. As the eight-foot wooden Man began to burn, a nearby woman ran up to hold his hand. Through the spontaneous participation of these and other strangers, the small group of friends grew larger, and closer, than ever before. It was natural to want to do it again the following summer.

Their burn-parties persisted at Baker Beach until 1990, by which time the crowd had grown to nearly 800 people and the Man to almost 40 feet tall. Police decided that burning the sculpture on the public beach was no longer safe, so Larry stored the Man until some friends told him about the Black Rock Desert.

In northern Nevada, less than a day's drive from the bay area, rests a dry ancient lakebed 4000 feet above sea level - a playa nearly devoid of plant or animal life. The weather there on a summer day might offer searing heat, abrasive dust clouds, hail and thunderstorms, or all of them in turn. It was already an alternative playground for some imaginative and self-reliant campers: yuppies played giant croquet games using their monster-trucks as mallets, techies designed and operated flame-throwing artillery, and hippies bathed nude in the nearby hot springs. That August, about a hundred adventurous people trekked to the Black Rock Desert for Burning Man, toting everything they might need to sustain and entertain themselves.¹

The annual party on the playa evolved over the next several years, eventually becoming a full-fledged (if ephemeral) city with named boulevards, streetlamps, suburbs, nightclubs and eateries, art galleries, charity drives, peacekeepers, a motor vehicle registry, a Department of Public Works, an official U.S. Post Office, and even taxation (in the form of ticketed admission). Organizing the event has become a year-round job for a small corporate staff, but otherwise volunteers create virtually every part of Burning Man. The infrastructure, the services, the entertainment, and the art are all gifts from the attendees (the citizens) to each other. This "gift economy" comes to fruition every August, and then the participants disperse back into the default world.² The phenomenon known as Black Rock City boasted a population of nearly 40,000 "citizens" in 2006, and was the fifth largest city in Nevada during that week. The Black Rock Rangers are a voluntary team that provide services such as peacekeeping and search-and-rescue. One of the original Rangers, Michael Michael (known on the playa as Danger Ranger) explains the city this way:

There's nothing here except what we bring to it, and in this barren place we build a community - a city. And then after we experience it, we wipe the slate clean. There's nothing left, physically. There's nothing left except information... and the experiences of the people who have been here.³

Much of people's experiences at Burning Man are influenced by the organizers' ten guiding principles:

- ◆ Inclusion (the welcoming of strangers, without prerequisites)
- ◆ Gifting (without expectation of credit or exchange)

-
- ◆ De-commodification (no sponsorship, advertising, or vending)
 - ◆ Self-reliance (depending upon one's inner resources)
 - ◆ Self-expression (the unique gifts of an individual or group)
 - ◆ Communal effort (cooperation and collaboration)
 - ◆ Civic responsibility (safety and sensibility)
 - ◆ Leaving no trace (pack it in, pack it out)
 - ◆ Participation (being more than a spectator)
 - ◆ Immediacy (paying attention to "here and now")⁴

These principles have fostered, among other trends, a flourishing art scene in Black Rock City. Professional and amateur artists from around the world carry ponderous quantities of materials to this city where they cannot sell their work, and where most of them will burn whatever they create there. Though select pieces will escape the flames to be permanently installed elsewhere, most of the art exhibited at Burning Man is forever inaccessible to the default world. This purposeful destruction of significant contemporary art is anathema to collectors, since their approach is rooted in holding on to all things valuable. However, the Burning Man approach is rooted in letting go.

The Temples

Memorial art appears everywhere among the innumerable installations presented by the Black Rock citizenry. Widely varied individual and collaborative sculptures, shrines, and temples offer tribute to public tragedies, private loss, and many facets of grief and recovery. A nationwide group of volunteers simply called "The Temple Crew" builds the most prominent temples on the playa. At every stage, from each temple's conception to its fiery demise, the Temple Crew uses Burning Man's changing annual theme to explore questions about death and dying.

The crew did not originally intend for their first structure in 2000 to be a memorial piece. They had conceived it as just another art installation on the playa. David Best, a professional artist, was designing the Temple of the Mind, a pagoda made from the by-product of a toy company in Washington State. The toymakers cut the pieces for their model-making kits from standard four-foot by eight-foot plywood sheets. The riddled sheets, when no longer usable to the toymaker, were a valuable raw material for the artist.

Best and his friends were less than two weeks away from installing their pagoda at the festival when a close friend, Michael Hefflin, tragically died in a motorcycle crash. The group was devastated, and almost cancelled their plans to attend Burning Man that year. However, as artists, they saw an opportunity to express their grief by dedicating the Temple of the Mind to Michael and offering it to others who grieved also.⁵

Using the salvaged plywood negatives, the bereaved group built their memorial temple on the open plain that occupies the centre of the donut-shaped city. This span is over $\frac{3}{4}$ mile wide (1.3 km), a distance that insulated the temple from the noise and revelry of the city. The cutouts in the wood made the building appear as if constructed of lace, filtering the sun and dappling everything inside. The crew gave it another title, The Mausoleum, placing Michael Hefflin's photograph on an altar inside and writing messages for him on the smooth wood surfaces. They encouraged visitors to leave their own dedications too. Thousands of small scrap-wood blocks were available, intended for use as extra writing pads. Mourners inscribed messages to dead people and pets, declarations of forgiveness, admissions of regret, existential questions, and even comic relief. In the nooks and crannies, they placed mementoes: photographs, flowers, prayer flags, paintings, letters, lyrics, and possessions of the dearly departed. All of it would burn with the temple.

On the night that the pyre was lit, people instinctually gathered in a wide circle around it, watching as the smoke and flames consumed their personal dedications. Each also saw, beyond the blaze, the flickering faces of so many like themselves, as grief's isolation melted away from them. It was the last stage in a metamorphosis from private grief to public mourning to shared release.

David Best was moved by the profound experiences people had at The Mausoleum. The "serious art" that he produced in the default world was among the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, yet that professional success felt less significant than helping to heal thousands of souls on the playa. "Thirty years of working and your piece is in the basement [of the museum]. Build a structure in the desert where someone has a 'spiritual experience' and it's not going to get put in a basement." Ironically, the very destruction of the temples often secures their permanence in the mind of someone who mourns there, according to Best. "It's a truly moving experience for that person, so that part of my work in the desert is, I think, more permanent than the object."⁶

Thus inspired, the circle of friends returned to the playa in 2001 to build the Temple of Tears. This title accorded with Burning Man's theme that year, *The Seven Ages*. The Burning Man theme drew upon a Shakespearian soliloquy about man's seven predictable ages.⁷ Our last age is not unlike our first: at death, as at birth, we are helpless, afraid, and tearful. The Temple of Tears was more elaborate than The Mausoleum, with decorated buttresses, upswept eaves, and a high central spire. The layout included a detached structure housing another artist's work, which was a life-size coffin fabricated from flattened donated firearms. This intricate piece was a powerful symbol, especially for those whose bereavement involved gun-related death.

Best was realizing how his work impacted people at Burning Man. “It dawned on me: what I’m asking people to do is take the heaviest burden in their life... drag it out into the desert, and drop it on this temple.” He also noted that people were not just releasing emotions, but that they brought tangible symbols to burn. “It’s not spiritual; it’s physical. People are actually physically dumping something.”⁸ They were bringing items that had belonged to the deceased as well as art they had made during their grieving process, the burning of which meant truly letting go.

The Temple of Joy was David Best’s idea for 2002. The Burning Man theme that year was *The Floating World*, alluding to Joseph Conrad’s description of a perilous voyage through a dark and stormy night: “In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails flutter invisible above your head”.⁹ So it is with life and death. Our course seems unpredictable, our vessel guided by a mysterious helmsman. Fittingly, the Temple of Joy looked like an ark floating on the playa, tall and stout, with high round openings that resembled giant portholes. Best described it as “an embarkation place for voyages to the Great Unknown”.¹⁰

To create the huge memorial ship, a nationwide team of 4,000 volunteers had worked throughout the winter carving the wood. It had taken two weeks for another team of one hundred volunteers to assemble the parts on the playa. Collectively, they had become “The Temple Crew” and their growing multitude testified to the projects’ magnetism. Most of the volunteers wanted to give back, or pass along, the gift they had received from the preceding Crew.

The next year, 2003, the Burning Man theme was *Beyond Belief*, an invitation to reach beyond traditional belief systems. David Best and the Temple Crew produced the soaring Temple of Honor, the turrets of which seemed suspended by skyward moorings. Its construction utilized many patterns of black and white paper over a wood and cardboard frame, instead of the familiar cut-out plywood. The Temple of Honor was “a place to honor each other, the earth, our families, ancestors and communities”. There was also a space for dishonour. “Just as we need a place to honor those things and people we hold most high, so too we need a space to deal with those people and ideals we have dishonored, including ourselves”.¹¹

Inside all of David Best’s temples, the central altar has been devoted to suicide. As Best explained, “It’s one of the harder things for a lot of people to figure out how to resolve, or to forgive, or understand.” This altar took on even greater significance for Best when someone left an old suicide note there. “Imagine having a suicide letter in your drawer for years... and putting it in a temple where people read it. And then... it’s burned.”¹²

The more intensely people responded to the temples, the more vigorously the Temple Crew responded to the people. Returning in 2004 with the familiar cut-out plywood material, David Best offered the Temple of

Stars. Both the temple's name and the Burning Man theme, the *Vault of Heaven*, referenced a Thomas Hardy writing about the infinite size of the universe:

There is a size at which dignity begins... further on there is a size at which grandeur begins... a size at which solemnity begins... a size at which awfulness begins; further on, a size at which ghastliness begins. That size faintly approaches the size of the stellar universe.¹³

The Temple of Stars stretched unbelievably up and out: from the 100-foot tower, walkways extended ¼-mile onto the playa, like the arms of a galaxy. There were seemingly infinite places to leave messages and mementoes. A massive temple stretching into the vast playa beneath an endless sky perfectly suggested Hardy's description.

The task had been enormous, and David Best needed a break. But what would become of the Temple Crew? They were familial by then, and a very competent working team as well. The cohesion of the group was of utmost importance, and Best wondered who else might lead the crew. While out on the playa that year, he spotted an artist building miniature Japanese-style pagodas. That artist, Mark Grieve, still remembers David's words to him: "Mark, do you want to increase your scale?" Thus tempted, Grieve worked with the crew on the Temple of Stars. Like all the other Temple Crew members, he returned to the default world having exhausted both his body and his funds, but having rejuvenated his spirit. He was honoured by the opportunity to give back so much to society by participating in the project.¹⁴

So, in 2005, Mark Grieve designed the Temple of Dreams for the Burning Man theme of *Psyche*. This theme explored the ability of our minds to both seek the truth and obscure it from ourselves. We wonder (cautiously) about a bigger reality that we know *of* but do not *know*. In dreams, we can reunite with our lost loved ones without the limitations of common consciousness. The *Temple of Dreams* provided a place in waking life for such reunions. It was a grouping of pagoda-style buildings, with various sized shrines arranged around a larger central temple. His layout was more horizontal than vertical, and the overall aesthetic was serene - a departure from the visual exuberance of David Best's designs. The similarity was in the way people used the space: they still wrote, drew, and otherwise deposited their burdens there, then watched them burn.

Grieve returned in 2006 with the Temple of Hope, in response to the Burning Man theme *Hope and Fear: the Future*. This design had a similar horizontal layout, consisting of many towers varying from five to thirty feet high, surrounding a Buddhist-type stupa (a raised platform) in a large central courtyard. Some towers were made of whitewashed wood panels and others

of soft white jersey stretched over skeletal wooden frames. As usual, there were boxes filled with scrap-wood pieces for people to use. Visitors reached the central courtyard by threading through the encircling towers, “creating a feeling [of] density and furthering the illusion that you have taken an adventure into another land”.¹⁵ For people enduring the throes of grief, it can indeed feel like being in a strange land. This author crossed into that unfamiliar territory in the midsummer of 2006, when my husband died in an accident.

One Widow’s Perspective

Previously I had never even heard of the temples, though I had heard of Burning Man itself. My scarce knowledge of the event was limited to the more festive aspects, thus it was odd to receive an invitation to it while at my husband’s funeral. On the other hand, everything in my life seemed odd at that time. Moreover, the 2006 Burning Man theme beckoned, evoking my personal hopes and fears for the future.

When I first saw the temple, it was early in the week. There was still space between individual dedications, and thus differentiated, each begged for consideration. I wandered among them, feeling slightly voyeuristic but somewhat liberated by the commonality of our angst. Still, I hesitated to leave myself so emotionally exposed by writing there. What eventually emboldened me was knowing that I had received a gift, and that I might return it in kind: I had come to the temple feeling alone and confused, but had realized that death bewilders us all, and that my confusion was a densely populated state. Perhaps I could help someone else realize it too.


Equipped with a pocket full of felt pens, I began by leaving questions about where dead people go and whether they remember us, then by offering prayers for help on their journeys and ours. I bared my greatest hope and fear on the side of a tower: “I hope I can go on without you. I fear that I will.” Finally, I drew my husband’s new logo on a scrap of wood and laid it atop the central platform.¹⁶

Before I left, something happened which exemplifies the profundity of the temples’ effect on people. As I stared at a poster that portrayed someone else’s story of loss, I felt a man embrace me from behind. I didn’t even look to see who it was, because the very gesture stunned me. The come-from-behind hug was one of my husband’s usual ways of greeting me, so for a moment I thought I was back at our kitchen sink and not memorializing him at a desert shrine. Upon recovering from my flashback, I turned to face the hugger expecting to see some familiar friend. Instead, it was one of the Temple Crew who simply had seen that I could use a hug. *He* was thanking *me*, explaining that what he received from the temples was whatever he could

give, and that to lighten someone's burden was why he joined the crew. Lightening accomplished.

Countless fires were sparked that week, both mentally and materially. With the burning of the Man on Saturday, there had been all-out merriment for everyone. In contrast, when the Temple burned on Sunday night the crowd was smaller and more sombre. As in any city, not everybody follows the art scene, so not everybody even knows that the Temple exists. Some relocate back to the default world right after Saturday night's festivities. But in those people who stayed, a noticeable change had occurred. We, who only Saturday had loudly celebrated Man's impermanence, mourned the same idea in near silence on Sunday. Both times, we were letting go.

Notes

- ¹ B Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, BenBella, Dallas, 2006, p. 19-81.
- ² Citizens of Black Rock City use the term "default world" to describe place and time outside of Burning Man.
- ³ R Roberts (Director), *Gifting It: a Burning Embrace of Gift Economy*, R3 Productions, 2002.
- ⁴ *The Burning Man Project*, Black Rock City, LLC, 12 May 2007, <<http://www.burningman.com/>>.
- ⁵ D Glynn and A Blake (Directors), *The Temple Builder*, Purple Productions / Gone Off Deep Productions, 2006.
- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ W Shakespeare *As You Like It*, Act II scene 7.
- ⁸ Glynn, *op. cit.*
- ⁹ J Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, Part 1 chapter 1.
- ¹⁰ *The Burning Man Project*, *op. cit.*
- ¹¹ *ibid.*
- ¹² Glynn, *op. cit.*
- ¹³ T Hardy, *Two on a Tower*, Chapter 4.
- ¹⁴ M Grieve, Interview with author, California, June 2007.
- ¹⁵ *The Burning Man Project*, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ John's flight-instructor logo consisted of a single footprint with wings. When he and his tandem student, Travis, died together in a paragliding accident, I changed the logo to two footprints with wings ().

Bibliography

-
- Brown, D (director). *Burning Man: Beyond Black Rock*. Gone Off Deep Productions, 2005.
The Burning Man Project. <<http://www.burningman.com>>.
- Conrad, J. *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, Part 1 chapter 1.
- Doherty, B. *This Is Burning Man*, Benbella, Dallas, 2006.
- Glynn, D and A Blake (directors). *The Temple Builder*. Purple Productions / Gone Off Deep Productions, 2006.
- Grieve, M. Interview with author, California, June 2007.
- Hardy, T. *Two on a Tower*, Chapter 4.
- Roberts, R (director). *Gifting It: a Burning Embrace of Gift Economy*. R3 Productions, 2002.
- Shakespeare, W. *As You Like It*, Act II scene 7.

The author, Lori Van Meter, lives in California and is currently pursuing an Associate of Arts degree. Thanks are due to the Temple Crew for their help with this work, which is dedicated to John and Travis.