

Case study: Burning man — a field study in design



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Earlier this year, 2015, the Danish Design Centre had the pleasure of participating in the American art festival Burning Man. An event that gathers almost 70,000 people for a whole week in a desolate desert in the state of Nevada to build a temporary city. The result is an arena for unlimited creativity and innovation — and an incredible study in design measures.



Earlier this year Danish Design Center had the pleasure of participating in the American art festival Burning Man. The festival is an annual event that gathers almost 70,000 people for a whole week in a desolate desert in the state of Nevada. Here the participants build a temporary city based on a series of principles such as gifting economy, radical self-expression and a very high degree of self-reliance. The latter is particularly essential in the rough desert environment, where the temperature often pass 40 degrees Celcius and sand storms roll in over the area many times daily. The result is not only an amazing experience to take part in, but just as much an arena for unlimited creativity and innovation — and an incredible study in design.

Design permeates everything at Burning Man: The way in which the city is planned and built by the tens of thousands of participants; the culture which shapes the event; the premise for how participant interaction is put together and last, but not least the inspiration which you're bound to take home with you. Let's put on the design-glasses and look at how all this plays out in practice at the world famous event.

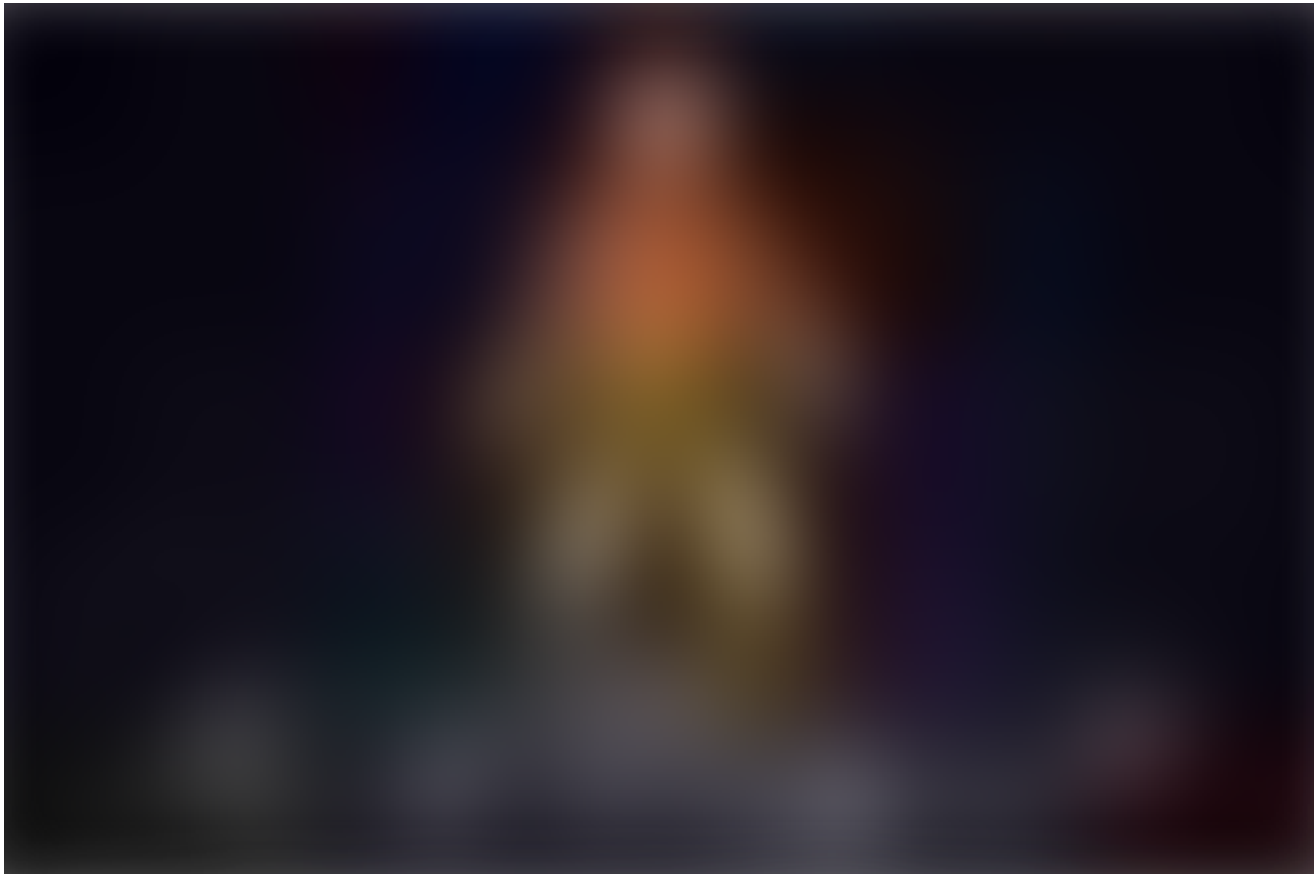


To build a city — and remove it — in one week

Burning Man takes place in Black Rock City in Nevada's Black Rock Desert: A city which only exists 7 days a year. The rest of the year there is no trace of the phenomenon. Population-wise the city is a bit bigger than Denmark's Roskilde, and speaking of Roskilde, let's compare for a bit with the world-famous Roskilde Festival, which has roughly the same number of participants. Based on that you would expect the two festivals to be somewhat similar. That is however far from the case, because even if they're both cultural events which inspire people to get together and socialise, there are several factors which puts Burning Man in a league of its own. This is not to criticise our own fantastic Roskilde Festival, but simply to emphasise the entirely unique fabric that makes up Burning Man.

One of the biggest differences is that Burning Man doesn't have any officially curated program. The organisers ensure the basic infrastructure such as lavatories, first aid stations, ranger corps and a few facilities for press and other similar bodies. Despite this lack of organized content creation there are still thousands of concerts (some with big international bands and DJ's, although you never know that until you're there), a

gigantic selection of artworks (some small, some the size of high-rise buildings), theatre plays, performance art, exhibitions and thousands of talks, workshops and panel discussions. All topics are allowed, somewhat like what we in Denmark have in “Folkemødet” (The People’s Gathering) on the island Bornholm every summer. In other words, programming at Burning Man is done by those participating that given year, many of whom spend months and months preparing and often put quite a lot of money into their project. All as part of the gifting economy (we’ll come back to that).



The city vanishes just as swiftly as it takes shape. This is possible partly because most of the housing arrangements and structures are non-permanent (for example tents and mobile homes), but just as much because the festival is built on a principle which takes its name very literally: All firm structures and art pieces are burning to the ground during the festival. It all leads up to a natural crescendo of burning the Man itself; a 30 meter tall wooden statue in the center of the festival area. On the second to last day of the festival the effigy is ritually put on fire with all of the festival’s participants there to watch. The underlying idea is — and this is once again a brilliant design tactic — that we as humans need to learn to let go of our material possessions and realize that physical objects are ephemeral, while ideas live forever. The result is that nothing is left

when the festival is over.



Leave no trace

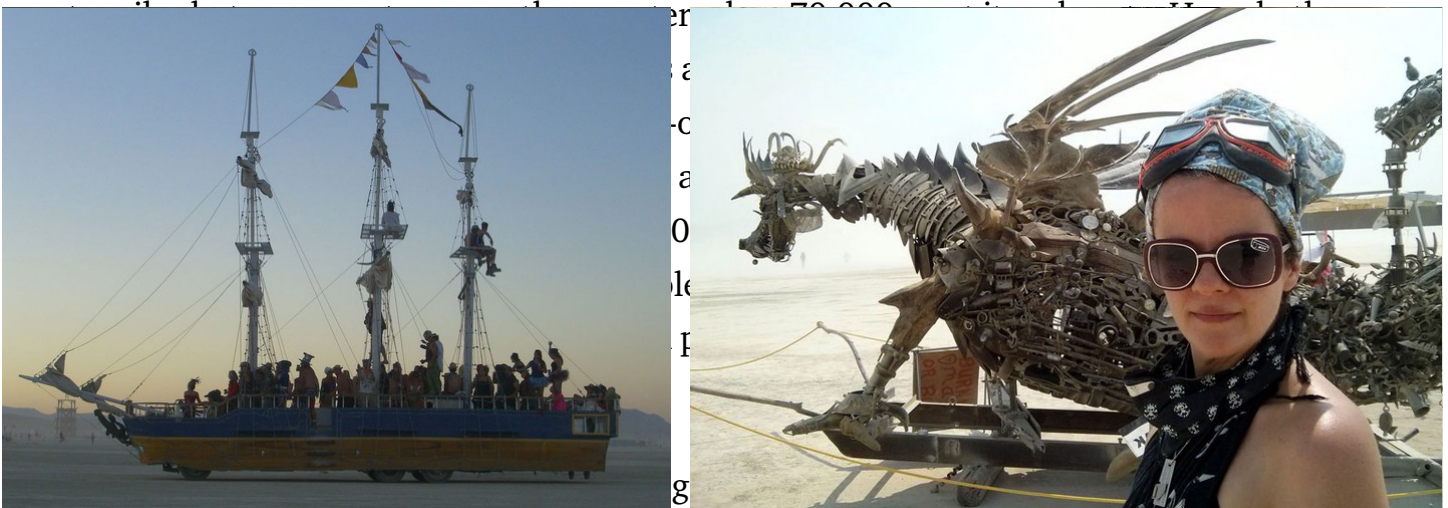
The fact that nothing can remain when the festival is over is also a foundational design measure. Concretely the festival has instated a inescapable “Leave no trace”-principle, which for the first time attendee will likely be the most curious feat of the festival: Burning Man has no trash bins. All participants collect their own trash and takes it with them back home in their cars. All the way down to cigaret butts, beer caps and wooden splinters. Once again it’s worth comparing with Roskilde Festival (and all other music festivals) after-the-fact, which looks mostly like an abandoned war zone: Most people become really sceptical when you tell them about Burning Man’s Leave No Trace principle: That instead it’s up all participants to pick up after themselves. Does it work? 100%. Do you have to see it to believe it? Probably. It was my third time at Burning Man and I’m still flabbergasted by seeing this work so well in practice. With the right social design you actually can get all people — yes, all people — to take responsibility and clean up after themselves, even during festival antics of the scale seen at Burning Man. And without any need for enforcement.

The Mecca of the gifting economy

I think a large part of the explanation of why this astonishing degree of responsibility in people come from a gratitude which is subconsciously installed in the participants. A gratitude which is orchestrated via brilliant design measures by the festival founders and organisers. It inspires trust in everyone.

Black Rock City also contains thousands of bars and eating spots. All are organised by the participants themselves, and many of them are based on a pop-up principle, where they only exist a few hours before vanishing again. A common denominator for all bars and restaurants is, however, that none of them accepts money. Everything is free and unlimited. Money is banned in Black Rock City. The same goes for advertising and logos. Yes, that's right: When the ticket is paid for (390 US Dollars, approximately 2,500 Danish Kroner), you can leave your wallet in the car until you leave Burning Man. Any attempt to advertise, promote or sell products will give you a warning from the festival and, in the worst case, you'll be banned from the event. Black Rock City is money-free zone.

Many bars even stay open day and night all week, and you can only imagine how many



creations. From the participants costumes and both big and small art pieces (which as mentioned all get burned) to the artistic vehicles being made: “Mutant vehicles”, or as they are generally referred to: “Art Cars”, which number in the hundreds and drive all around the desert in and around the festival. Cars, busses, trucks and even yachts (put on wheels) have been refurbished by participants to become dragons, fable creatures and other creative designs — often with fire-breathing heads, giant sound systems, DJ and in many cases also a well-assorted bar. These vessels work as public transportation,



simple: A set of meticulously designed principles. Similar to the 10 Commandments, if you will, which have shaped the culture which Burning Man is built on. A culture which you as an impressed and grateful participant automatically grow loyal to as you set foot in the desert.

The 10 Principles somehow hard-code themselves in all participants and they shape your behaviour. It sounds religious, but it certainly is not. It's rather common sense. Put into system. It's a design which pushes all the right buttons inside us; the buttons which we suppress (or forget, even) in our hectic daily lives back home. The 10 Principles celebrate communality, creativity and last, but not least, freedom with responsibility, and that brings out the best in us. Seen through this prism it is clear how Burning Man is a unique example of what social design can lead to if done right: An almost utopian society, which in many ways represent a sort of existence which we all dream about. Except maybe for the 40 degrees and the sandstorms. Yet in Black Rock City, believe it or not, you even become grateful for those.

Read more about the [10 principles](#) and Burning Man on the [official website](#).

Burning Man Design Field Study Leave No Trace Case Study

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