

Design a Better World Case Study  
Burning Man  
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At Design a Better World (<https://Design-a-Better.World>), we promote designs that improve the world by drawing on one or more of the moral principles advocated in the book “How You Can Make the World a Better Place: Design with Passion, Purpose, and Values”. Burning Man is known worldwide as the iconic art, musical, and cultural festival that happens each year in the northern Nevada desert. But it is so much more. With this case study, I want to try to capture the Burning Man experience (very difficult to do) and tell you why I think it’s a design that contributes to a better world.

**Creating a Collaborative Culture of Moral Design:  
Burning Man**

My playa name is “Wisdom Seeker”. I attended Burning Man in 2012. It was a life-changing experience.

Burning Man started very modestly in 1986 with a Larry Harvey and Jerry James collecting a group of people on a beach in San Francisco with no particular purpose other than to party among friends. But it has since become an annual convocation of over 70,000 who come together to share art, music, and experience, organized around a set of guiding principles. The transition from one to the other is a compelling story of how community, art, technology, and values can combine to create one of the world’s major social events and cultural movements.

**The Experience**

It’s hard to describe a Burning Man experience to someone who hasn’t been there. It is different for everyone and at the same time the shared experience of having been there creates a common bond among “Burners”. This description is based on my own experience in 2012 but others who have been there are likely to relate to it. The experience evokes a fantastical mix of emotions—frustration, impatience, excitement, comradery, awe—that is unlike any other event you’ve experienced and makes the week unforgettable.

Obtaining tickets is the first frustrating challenge. Getting there is the second. By 1990, the event got so large it moved to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada and the specific spot for the event is named Black Rock City. Black Rock City is 15 miles from the small town of Gerlach but the drive between the two can take five hours, or more, as you crawl along, with thousands of other cars, in stop and go traffic, in the sweltering sun.

However, once you pass the gate, lying out in front of you is an expansive, white, salt-flat playa, with mountains on each side. It is breathtakingly beautiful. The weather can be spectacular or brutal or both. The sky can be crystal blue. The sun can be intense with temperatures reaching into the 100s. The wind can whip up a blinding sand storm that coats everything. And if it rains, it can turn the playa into a gooey, slippery mess that cakes your shoes and makes it difficult to walk. But we were lucky. The day we arrived was spectacular and not too hot.

Driving on, you come to a fully planned city that grew up out of the barren desert over the previous weeks. The city is laid out in a circular, clock-like pattern, nearly 2 miles in diameter. We were lucky enough to be with a group at in Center Camp, at the heart of Black Rock City. Surrounding us was a city of 65,000 Burners of all types: young and old; males, females and non-binary; skilled crafts people, artists and technicians; people from all walks of life. People came with a range of accommodations, from sleeping bags, to tents, to RVs to temporary structures, some quite elaborate, constructed just days before. You bring everything you need for the week: food, water, other drinks, clothes, costumes, toys, gifts, bicycles. You will need to take everything out with you, not leaving a trace that you have been there. Once you unpack your car, you must drive it to an outer area and leave it for the week. Driving around the city is not permitted; bicycles are the best mode of transportation.

Walking out into The Playa we were greeted by 360 incredible pieces of art, much of it monumental, that had been brought in from all over the world and installed days before. It would take days for us to see them all. At the very center of The Playa was The Man, a 40-foot tall statue on top of a 53-foot, 3-story, wooden pavilion for an overall, imposing height of 93 feet. It too had been assembled the previous week, designed and fabricated over the months



by teams of volunteers. At the far end of The Playa, a 40-minute walk or 10-minute bike ride from our camp, was the colossal Temple of Juno, towering above us. It is an ornate wooden structure reminiscent of Indonesian temples.

It, also, had be designed and fabricated by volunteers and assembled just days ago.

The week after the event, the desert is again pristine; not one structure, not one piece of art, not one nail or bolt is left behind. All is cleared again by volunteers.

But it is at night, when the temperature cools down, that the City really comes alive. Colored lights, strobing and blinking everywhere, light up the night sky. Bands were beginning to play at the music shells. Walking by camps, where parties are starting, food or mixed drinks are available for passersby, gifts that camps brought as their community offering. People may come up to you and spontaneously offer gifts—a hand-crafted trinket, a pair of earrings or a personal performance by someone juggling balls or spinning a fiery hula hoop. You have your own gifts, ready to be offered at some point—it is a culture of sharing. People are out in fantastical costumes or nothing but a head dress or body paint. They are riding around on their decorated bikes, heading for the band shell or visiting the playa art. Much of the art is lit up, as well and much of it is interactive and playful. Music fills the air, thumping, rhythmically. Bazar-looking “Mutant Vehicles” drive by, some spewing flames; some flashing lights; some stopping to offer a ride. They were designed by individuals and teams with their own creativity, skill, and resources. They are the only vehicles allowed to drive on the playa.

The frenzy of activity goes through the night and into the early morning when people return to their camp, exhausted.

On Friday night, two nights before the end of the event, many of the art installations are set on fire. People gather around to watch. The party goes on. On Saturday night, the Man is burned. People watch in silence and reflect on their experience. The next day people start to leave, waiting again for hours as thousands of cars head toward the exit. On the final night, the Temple is burned. The remaining people watch solemnly. Some cry.



The next day, people back home clean their cars and clothes of playa dust. It will take many washings. Back at Black Rock City, volunteer crews disassemble the infrastructure, pick up debris and comb the sand for anything left behind. When they leave, nothing remains except the natural beauty of the desert. There is no trace that 65,000 people have had one of the most profound experiences of their lives. And leaders start to plan for next year’s Burn.

### The Art

Art has always been an important part of Burning Man<sup>1</sup>. The Man, itself, has evolved from a crude effigy in 1986 through various artistic incarnations. Other art works were spontaneously added over the years and the event became a full-blown arts festival. In 2002, 46 installations appeared on the Playa. And in 2014, the number of installations grew to over 350. The art

works often combined technical and aesthetic aspects. Much of the art is interactive and invites climbing, moving, or entering. Many of the pieces are electronic. Most are monumental in size. And all the art must meet the rigors of both extreme weather and constant play. The purpose of art at Burning Man has come to be not just an expression of community but an enactment of it: while there is a specific artist associated with a work, the community is engaged in the artistic process from conception to construction and to its use on the playa.

## The Culture

Throughout its years, Burning Man community organically evolved from an event-based group to a community and ethos. As Burning Man Project CEO, Marian Goodell, described it at a TEDx session, “Burning Man is more than an event. It actually is a way of life. And it is a way of looking at yourself in the world. Burning Man changes people. It causes a cultural shift in the way we communicate and the way we relate to each other.”<sup>2</sup> I know it changed me.

Co-founder Larry Harvey captured this evolution of this ethos in 2004 with the 10 Principles that lay out the philosophy and values of Burning Man<sup>3</sup>. Among the principles are radical Inclusion, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, gifting, de-commodification, participation, and civic responsibility. These principles are articulated and practiced during the event. And they are meant to reflect the values of the community, as they have organically emerged, and serve as a way to engage the community in an ongoing, reflective discussion about what Burning Man is and what it means to be a Burner.<sup>4</sup>

While the Burning Man event lasts a week, the culture thrives year-around. Some of the culture is maintained by formal organizations. In 2001, Black Rock Arts Foundation was established to take the culture beyond the Playa and change the paradigm of art from a commodified object to an interactive, participatory, shared experience of creative expression. Between 2001 and 2014, the Foundation funded 149 projects worldwide, providing more than \$2,500,000 in grants and support to artists. In 2011, Black Rock City morphed into a nonprofit organization, called Burning Man Project, to spread the Burning Man philosophy in words and actions.<sup>5</sup> Burners Without Borders was started in 2005 by Burners who volunteered to help with disaster relief in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and they turned into a formal organization, drawing on the experience of setting up city facilities quickly and on the Burning Man principles to help in other disaster areas in the U.S. and other countries<sup>6</sup>. There are now 225 regional groups in 28 countries that are recognized as Burning Man affiliates.<sup>7</sup> And there have been regional Burns in Australia, New Zealand, England, The Netherlands, Japan, Israel and South Africa, among other countries.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the culture is maintained by these formal organizations but the real Burning Man culture is the tens-of-thousands of Burners whose life has been altered by the event. They come to Burning Man ready to share experiences and share gifts. They leave the event influenced by their experiences and the principles of radical Inclusion, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, de-commodification, participation, and civic responsibility. They are

ready to volunteer their time and participate in collective activities to create art, to build the next city, to help people in distress.

All designs are moral artifacts, whether they are products, services, projects, events, or, in this case, a culture. And design is not merely a technical process. It is also an emotional, rational and moral one. In designing Burning Man in the way they have and surrounding it with supportive organizational structures, Burning Man organizers have created a culture in which values and perpetuates creative design, design guided by values. Within this culture, a wide range of people draw their skill sets—carpentry, metalwork, computer programming, music, art—and their passion to create a magical world that brings joy to others.

Specifically related to the moral principles in “How You Can Make the World a Better Place”, Burners Without Borders reduces draws on their skills to reduce harm in communities impacted by disasters such as catastrophic fires or hurricanes. Practices around Burning Man’s principle of radical self-reliance in the harsh Nevada desert advance personal agency. Radical inclusiveness promotes equality. And, perhaps most of all, principles related to gifting, participation, and civic responsibility create supportive, compassionate relationships and a sense of community. Together, these principles and the self-expression during the Burning Man event, amidst its art and music, create a profound sense of happiness and well-being that is often life changing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journal.burningman.org/2014/07/news/official-announcements/black-rock-arts-foundation-joins-burning-man-organization/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://youtu.be/OofYn1asJ0Y>

<sup>3</sup> <https://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://journal.burningman.org/category/philosophical-center/tenprinciples/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://burningman.org/culture/history/brc-history/afterburn/2013-2/related/burning-man-project/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.burnerswithoutborders.org>

<sup>7</sup> <https://youtu.be/OofYn1asJ0Y>

<sup>8</sup> <https://journal.burningman.org/2016/03/global-network/regionals/glc-2016-calling-out-around-the-world/>