

## Burning Man's Lessons Extend Far Beyond the 2023 Mud Pit

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By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

A few years ago, pre-pandemic, we attended the AIA Colorado Practice + Design Conference in Keystone, Colorado, and we were impressed by the presentation by one of the co-founders of Burning Man. She went through a historical overview, from the initial burning in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco, through the move to the Black Rock Desert in 1990, and the subsequent organizational and city planning aspects of the event.

1997 was the “first time that Black Rock City was laid out like a real city, with planned streets, and a semblance of civic structure.” (<https://burningman.org/timeline/1997>) In 2003 the Bureau of Land Management (which yearly inspects the site after the event clean-up) said that Burning Man is the largest Leave No Trace event in the world. In 2005 “Black Rock City’s FAA-approved airport landed 92 planes with no problems or accidents.” In 2006 that number was 123, including one jet.

To read the timeline is to experience the growing pains of a small village to a city, albeit temporary, population of nearly 79,000 over the course of 30 plus years.

(<https://burningman.org/timeline/2019>) The evolution from the 1986 creation of a community, population 35, around “Harvey’s original inspiration, Let’s build a statue and burn it” to 1990, the year in which the event moved to the desert and according to the text of the flyer published on the 1990 timeline entry “Burning Man is now scheduled to perish on September 2 in the Black Rock Desert near Gerlach, Nevada. Black Rock is a desert playa – waterless, frozen in time. Participants should bring everything needed for survival; food, water, and camping equipment... We ask for a \$15 contribution to defray the cost of transporting the Man, toilet facilities, and trash removal.” As noted by Louis M Brill in the history section of the website, “This was a transitional moment for the Burning Man as the event evolved with a new location, a change of date, and the beginning of a new meaning for the celebration.”

Art Cars and art installations appear in 1991, in 1992 the “burners” realize they need to protect their community and create the “Black Rock Rangers”. A newspaper, The Black Rock Gazette, is produced. In 1994 in a newsletter published on the website’s timeline, Stuart Mangrum writes “Burning Man is one of the last places on earth where people from all walks of life, all social strata, and all points of the compass can come together and share a common and primal experience, surviving as a group in a challenging environment, creating a temporary culture of their own design, and sharing one of the most elemental experiences of our species, the awesome mystery of fire. And, on top of that, it’s also one hell of a party.” Recent articles in the mainstream media, covering the 2023 mud pit of Burning Man, have questioned whether it has become primarily a weekend playground for the wealthy.

While the “burners” characterize a large part of their philosophy as “Radical Self-reliance” from the very beginning the need to work together to create their unique, temporary community has been clear. Over the years rules and regulations have been developed to protect the community, and in 2017 they launched Project Citizenship. “The project aims to tackle trends such as an erosion of participation and rise of a consumer approach to the event; a lack of preparedness; increased vandalism, a decrease in civility; an attitude of entitlement towards Burning Man staff who are seen as being there to “serve” the needs of paying punters; and a lack of respect towards participants gifting their time and skills.” The consistent self-evaluation of the event and flexibility in developing solutions to tackle the ongoing and evolving needs of the community is something we should applaud and emulate.

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