What can we learn from Bitcoin and Burning Man about re-inventing money and designing better forms of self-governance?

Why are "decentralized autonomous organizations" the next great Internet disruption?

From Bitcoin to Burning Man and Beyond: The Quest for Identity and Autonomy in a Digital Society explores a new generation of digital technologies and currencies, strategies and projects that are re-imagining the very foundations of identity, governance, trust and social organization. The fifteen essays of this book stake out the foundations of a new future—a future of open Web standards and data commons, a society of decentralized autonomous organizations, a world of trustworthy digital currencies and self-organized and expressive communities like Burning Man. Among the contributors are Alex "Sandy" Pentland of the M.I.T. Human Dynamics Laboratory, former FCC Chairman Reed E. Hundt, long-time IBM strategist Irving Wladawsky-Berger, monetary system expert Bernard Lietaer, journalist Jonathan Ledgard and H-Farm cofounder Maurizio Rossi.

The essays of *From Bitcoin to Burning Man* reflect the vision of the Institute for Institutional Innovation by Data-Driven Design—ID3—a Boston-based nonprofit working in cooperation with the M.I.T. Media Lab. Cofounded by Dr. John H. Clippinger and M.I.T. Professor Alex "Sandy" Pentland, ID3 is the developer of Open Mustard Seed (OMS), a new open source platform that gives users genuine control over their identities and personal data and the means to design their own currencies and institutions. People can collect and share personal information in secure, and transparent and accountable ways, enabling authentic, trusted social and economic relationships to flourish.

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Cover design: Bruce Mau

ISBN
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CLIPPINGER • BOLLIER

FROM BITCOIN TO BURNING MAN AND BEYOND

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY IN A DIGITAL SOCIETY

EDITED BY JOHN H. CLIPPINGER AND DAVID BOLLIER

The Institute for Institutional Innovation by Data-Driven Design—ID3 – is an independent research and educational nonprofit 501(c)(3) based in Boston and affiliated with the M.I.T. Media Lab. Founded in 2011 by Dr. John Henry Clippinger and M.I.T. Professor Alex "Sandy" Pentland, ID3's mission is to develop an open data ecosystem through research, education and the support of an open source service platform, Open Mustard Seed (OMS). This endeavor seeks to address the severe infrastructural and governance limitations of existing institutions by giving individuals and groups greater control over their data, and the ability to deploy a new generation of trusted, decentralized, autonomous organizations and institutions globally.

Open Mustard Seed (OMS) is an open source platform that gives us genuine control over our own data. It lets us collect and share our personal information in a secure, transparent and accountable way, enabling authentic, trusted social and economic relationships to flourish. The system is dynamic and contextual, which means that we can share specific data at the appropriate time and place and with the people we want, and *only* them. By simply being ourselves, our data records generate unique, highly secure digital credentials—eliminating the need for passwords and repetitive log-ins. By helping us build decentralized autonomous organizations and trusted relationships, OMS enables groups to form and govern their own micro-economies—self-regulating, self-healing networks that can create their own forms of cooperation, including digital currencies, user-driven markets and social affinity groups. OMS is thus a new vehicle for us to build and scale our own interoperable communities of interest and markets – intimately, securely and at a global scale.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction x

Part I: Charting the New Ecology of Data

1. Social Physics and the Human Centric Society 3
   By Alex Pentland

2. Why Self-Sovereignty Matters 11
   By John H. Clippinger

3. The Next Great Internet Disruption: Authority and Governance 21
   By David Bollier and John H. Clippinger

4. The New Mestieri Culture of Artisans 29
   By Maurizio Rossi

5. Burning Man: The Pop-Up City of Self-Governing Individualists 36
   By Peter Hirshberg

Part II: Digital Currencies as Instruments for Social Change

6. The Internet of Money 63
   By Irving Wladawsky-Berger

7. Why Complementary Currencies Are Necessary to Financial Stability: The Scientific Evidence 73
   By Bernard Lietaer

8. Africa, Digital Identity and the Beginning of the End for Coins 92
   By Jonathan Ledgard

9. Ven and the Nature of Money.. 97
By Stan Stalnaker

10. Green Coins: Using Digital Currency to Build
the New Power Platform 104
By Reed E. Hundt, Jeffrey Schub and Joseph R. Schottenfeld

Part III: Open Architectures for an Open Society

11. Organic Governance Through
the Logic of Holonic Systems: 113
By Mihaela Ulieru

12. The Algorithmic Governance Of Common-Pool
Resources 130
By Jeremy Pitt and Ada Diaconescu

13. The ID3 Open Mustard Seed Platform........................ 143
By Thomas Hardjono, Patrick Deegan and John H. Clippinger

14. The Relational Matrix:The Free and Emergent
Organization of Digital Groups and Identities........... 160
By Patrick Deegan

15. The Necessity of Standards for the Open
Social Web.. 177
By Harry Halpin

Conclusion:
A Digital Manifesto: The Windhover Transition........ 191

Index 195

Chapter 5

Burning Man: The Pop-Up City of Self-Governing Individualists

By Peter Hirshberg

When friends first started telling me about Burning Man in the 1990s it made me nervous. This place in a harsh desert, where they wore strange clothes or perhaps none at all. Why? Whole swaths of my San Francisco community spent much of the year building massive works of art or collaborating on elaborate camps where they had to provide for every necessity. They were going to a place with no water, no electricity, no shade and no shelter. And they were completely passionate about going to this place to create a city out of nothing. To create a world they imagined – out of nothing. A world with rules, mores, traditions and principles, which they more or less made up, and then lived.

Twenty-eight years later Burning Man has emerged as a unique canvas on which to run city-scale experiments. It attracts some of the most creative and accomplished people on the planet. It's big. Sixty-eight thousand people attended in 2013. It inspires broad-based participation, imagination and play. It pushes our thinking about society: Can anyone really imagine an economy based on gifts and generosity, not on monetary transactions? If only for a week, Burning Man is a place where art, performance and radical self-expression are the most valued activities of a society. It is a place apart, with the least government and the most freedom of any place I can think of on earth. Where thousands of people self-organize into theme camps, art projects, pulsing sound villages, fire-dancing troupes, groups of performers, a department of public works, rangers to patrol the site, and a temporary airport.

Because Burning Man is a phantasmagoria of possibility, a completely dreamed-up city built from scratch each year, it's an opportunity to relax the constraints of your world, your job and your imagined "role" in the world. As Burning Man founder Larry Harvey points out, "It's about personal agency. It's about being able to create the world you live in. We make the world real through actions that open the heart."

At a time when people don't trust institutions as we once did, when what bubbles up is a lot more attractive than what trickles down, Burning Man is a fascinating place to observe the large-scale practice of self-organizing governance in action. Its quarter century history lets us look back and see what worked and what didn't. We can see which strains of political and organizational thought and city design have endured and which were cast aside. In Burning Man we can observe the constant tension between centralized organization and emergent activity on the edge. It is a lab for testing the balance of extreme liberty and community – or, to quote its self-described principles, between "radical self-expression" and "radical self-reliance" on the one hand, and "radical inclusion," "civic responsibility" and "communal effort" on the other.

Burning Man is self-organized by thousands of people and camps from all over the world, but its core directions are set by a small team of founders who curate and exercise their judgment more as Plato's philosopher-king than as leaders of a democratic state. They set the size of Burning Man, negotiate with state and federal agencies for land access rights, design the contours of the city, sell tickets, provide grants to select artists, and create a framework for education and communication for the global Burning Man community. The dialogue among participants and with the founders brings to mind Publius, author of the Federalist Papers, who argued with his peers about the proper governance principles for a new social order. The difference is that Burning Man is undertaking this inquiry as an ever-changing experiment in a swirl of costumes and music on a remote, antediluvian dried salt lakebed.

Some basic facts: Burning Man is an annual week-long event held in Nevada's Black Rock desert. It is one of the most God-forsaken environments in North America – a vast semi-arid desert with lava beds and alkali flats. Amidst 380,000 acres of wilderness arises Black Rock City, the seven-square mile temporary city that is Burning Man. When it's over, everything is gone, without a trace. Burning Man's arrangement with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, from which it leases the land, is that nothing be left behind—not a piece of paper, a shoe, a sequin.[1]

That is part of Burning Man's philosophy of radical self -reliance. You build this city as a participant, and then pack everything out. (A subtle cue: Burning Man sets out no garbage cans in its city, a reminder you'll have to handle that problem on your own.) There is no government to come clean up after you, and no one to provide lighting or a power grid. You, your friends, your camp have to solve these problems yourselves. This forces you to think about systems, resource sharing, and new approaches to self-organizing. And while the event is temporary, the experience and its insights linger long afterwards, both because the Burner community (as they call themselves) is often engaged in planning all year long, and because this freed-up way of thinking has a way of influencing peoples lives, careers, projects and civic engagement long after everyone packs up and leaves the desert.

It is said of Burning Man that people come for the art and stay for the community. In my own case, the overwhelming impression when I first arrived in 2005 was of miles and miles of fantastic vehicles and structures ringing the central core of Burning Man and extending deep into the *playa* – "beach" in Spanish. People spend countless hours creating strange vehicles and "buildings": a vehicle resembling a giant octopus with fire-spouting tentacles….a half-sunk pirate ship rising out of the desert with its sixty-foot mast….a small-town church leaping at an angle from the ground, organ blasting.

At the center of it all is The Man – a nearly hundred-foot-tall sculpture that serves as an anchor point for the city until it is burned on the penultimate night of the event. Just as the World Trade Center

towers once helped New Yorkers locate themselves in Manhattan, the Man provides an orientation point in the desert.

Burning Man has the scale and spectacle of a World's Fair, except that it's not built by companies and countries. It's built by everybody. Participation is one of the core principles of Burning Man, a belief that transformative change occurs through deeply personal involvement. This harkens back to the American tradition of barn-raising where everyone pitches in to help a farmer build his necessary structures; or to Habitat for Humanity, where the entire community is involved in building homes for those who need them.

Urbanist Jane Jacobs, in her classic book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, understood the importance of this idea when she wrote, "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." She was speaking in the context of 1960s urban renewal where city governments tried to build neighborhoods to serve residents, but without engaging them. At Burning Man, the obverse principle is honored: when you participate in building your world you are more engaged and have a sense of agency you'd never have otherwise. Jacobs would also have understood Burning Man's wonderful weirdness. In 1961 she also wrote, " By its nature, the metropolis provides what otherwise could be given only by traveling; namely, the strange."

While Burning Man is fantastic, it embodies many deeply rooted American values. It is Tocquevillian at its core – a great coming together of the most heterodox assemblage of voluntary associations, working in various groups, yet building a network of social trust in a shared city. "Association is the mother of science," said Tocqueville. "The progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made." At a time when Americans are accused of spending less time on genuine communities, Burning Man is an intensely purposeful community, a dazzling display of social capital.

From afar it may seem as if Burning Man is a magical, spontaneous creation. In fact, Burning Man works only because there is a core set of shared principles that are almost universally agreed to and self-enforced by the community. Which in turn yields the least amount

of government and the most amount of freedom. The dynamics of self-organized governance are remarkably similar to those identified by the late Elinor Ostrom – the Nobel Prize Laureate in economics in 2009 – who spent decades studying the design principles of successful commons. To manage a "common-pool resource" such as a seven-square mile piece of desert with 68,000 inhabitants in 2013, the Burners realize that they are part of a conscious community. Everyone therefore shares responsibility for monitoring each other and enforcing the rules.

In 2004 Larry Harvey published the "Ten Principles of Burning Man" to serve as guidelines for the community. As I work with cities around the world on innovation and fostering creative and maker economies, I find these are broadly applicable guidelines for conceptualizing a more sustainable, more conscious and less materialist world. They make you more self-aware of the personal commitments needed to make a great city work well.

Four of the principles are concerned with how the individual can live a more present, conscious and engaged life: Radical-Self Expression, Radical Self-Reliance, Immediacy, and Participation. Four focus on the community: Communal effort, Civic engagement, Radical Inclusion and Leave No Trace. And the final two are perhaps the most remarkable of all: Gifting and Decommodification. Burning Man's gift economy celebrates the unrequited joy of giving. It's not barter because nothing is expected in return. To keep Burning Man a celebration of the efforts of its participants, there are no brands, no sponsors, no advertising. These are the conditions for a very different, more creative world, yet reminiscent of Aristotle's vision that a good society is built on the transcendental values of truth, goodness and beauty – the core of its culture.

The Ten Principles of Burning Man

Radical Inclusion. Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

Gifting. Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

Decommodification. In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

Radical Self-reliance. Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.

Radical Self-expression. Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.

Communal Effort. Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.

Civic Responsibility. We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

Leaving No Trace. Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.

Participation. Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medi-

um of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.

Immediacy. Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience.

Today Burning Man has a global reach, with attendees from over two hundred cities and sixty-five officially affiliated events. The global influence of Burning Man stems from its large network of volunteers. For years members of the regional Burning communities have come to San Francisco for an annual conference to learn the skills of business management, fundraising for art, permit-getting, and how-to knowledge-exchange. Two years ago Burning Man reframed that gathering as "The Burning Man Global Leadership Conference." It saw its network not just as people who helped put on Burning Man, but as a global volunteer workforce that could bring Burning Man's can-do problem-solving and community-oriented work to the world.

The whole point of Burning Man, says founder Larry Harvey, is to create the world that you want to live in. We go through life operating under a defined set of rules and roles. We follow a prescribed job. We exist in a prescribed city. "Here, you get to try things you might never have tried before."[2] The stories of people who go to Burning Man are often the stories of personal transition and transformation. When my friend Steve Brown made a film about Burning Man, for example, he found that all of his characters were going through some transition. Katie, an artist, quit her job as a nanny to pursue her artistic passions. Casey Fenton came up with the idea of CouchSurfing, one of the first great projects of the "sharing economy."

Larry Harvey and the Origins of Burning Man

The Burning Man of today wasn't always a hotbed of experimentation, irreverence and community making. In 1986, Larry Harvey

started Burning Man as a modest summer-solstice fire party on Baker Beach in San Francisco. Two groups were especially influential in shaping the early Burning Man culture – the followers of anarchist Hakim Bey and the San Francisco Cacophony Society.

Bey's 1991 book, *Temporary Autonomous Zones,* is a manifesto for radical thinkers urging them to live authentically, in the present, and with complete self-expression. But to do so, said Bey, you must disengage from corporate and government authority – and not just theoretically or in your head, but in real physical space.[3] Bey suggested that there is an alternative world – a "temporary autonomous zone," or T.A.Z. – where, under the right conditions, you can create yourself. One of the best descriptions of this social phenomenon is in *Beautiful Trouble*, a contemporary manual for artists and activists that pays homage to Bey:

> A T.A.Z. is a liberated area "of land, time or imagination" where one can be for something, not just against, and where new ways of being human together can be explored and experimented with. Locating itself in the cracks and fault lines in the global grid of control and alienation, a T.A.Z. is an eruption of free culture where life is experienced at maximum intensity. It should feel like an exceptional party where for a brief moment our desires are made manifest and we all become the creators of the art of everyday life.[4]

Bey's idea of a T.A.Z. – published about the same time that Tim Berners-Lee was inventing the World Wide Web, but before it became a mass medium – was highly prescient. Bey anticipated by two decades a world of mobile everything – distributed computing, open source software, weak-tie enabled networks, social networking and distributed systems like Bitcoin and Open Mustard Seed. Bey's work seems like a manifesto for creative hacking – a way to prototype fanciful (and not so fanciful) alternatives to oppressive institutions. The idea of a T.A.Z. screams, "You've got permission, so use it!"

At the time Bey was writing, the San Francisco Cacophony Society was enacting many of the same ideas – creating street perfor-

mances, jamming culture, and showing up at events in costumes. Cacophony members started attending Burning Man when it was still a party on Baker Beach. By 1993, after seven annual parties, Burning Man was finally evicted from the beach because it had grown too big and couldn't secure the necessary permits. It was the Cacophony Society that invited Burning Man to undertake a "zone trip," an extended event that takes participants outside of their local frames of reference.

And so it came to pass that Burning Man, the Cacophony Society, and Bay Area anarchists all headed for the Black Rock desert, in Nevada, to reset Burning Man.

Although Burning Man had not been founded with any subversive or transgressive agenda, it quickly veered in that direction. In the words of founder Larry Harvey, "We were not in any way a subculture, but this new group brought with it an underground ethos." This is when [Burning Man] began to be imagined as what Hakim Bey called an "interzone" – a secret oasis for an underground, a chink in the armor of society, a place where you can get in and get out, like some artistic Viet Cong, and get away with things. Bey called this "poetic terrorism."

Those early years in the desert were free-wheeling. Anything went. Guns were common. Shooting at stuff from moving cars was a big thing. Burning Man wasn't so much of a city as a vast encampment in the middle of nowhere. The idea was to make the event tough to find, and to take pride in surviving in the hostile environment. Larry Harvey recalls:

> Our settlement began to leapfrog outward, forming a dispersed archipelago of separate campsites – a sort of gold rush in pursuit of individual autonomy. This may have seemed romantic, but it meant that drivers would come rolling into this indecipherable scatter at reckless speeds, particularly at night, and this became a public safety concern.
>
> In many ways, this secret pirate "interzone" had run amok. Just as we had hidden our city away in the depths of the desert, we

> had also hidden our gate. It was, in fact, a gate without a fence; sort of a conceptual gate, like an art installation. If you were lucky enough to find it, you would be instructed to drive so many miles north, and then turn east and drive five or six miles more.[5]

While these Dadaist radicals were dedicated to freedom and self-expression, the early Burning Man culture was not especially interested in an ordered liberty, a new sort of civil society or ecological sustainability.

Burning Man's Critical Transition

In the end, anarchy didn't work out too well.

Sometime after midnight on August 26, 1996, a speeding vehicle ran over two unmarked tents, critically injuring its occupants. At the center of Burning Man, where the theme that year was "inferno," some participants apparently took that theme as a license to play with fire without limits. People used flamethrowers in the open desert. They built multistory wooden structures made to be burned, practically immolating their creators when ignited.

This incident brought into sharp relief a question that had been reverberating among the founders: What was the purpose of Burning Man? And what was the moral intention they wanted to bring to this experiment in the desert? This conflict is captured dramatically in the documentary *Spark: A Burning Man Story* when Larry Harvey says, "It became apparent we were responsible for everybody's welfare. It was on us. We were de facto the state. Which was a conundrum for the hipsters. What does an anarchist say to that?"

On the other side of the argument was the faction of anarchists and Cacophonists who came to the Nevada desert seeking a form of absolute freedom with no bureaucracy, no vehicle restrictions, no rules about guns, and no well-defined perimeter. That position is articulated by exasperated cofounder John Law, who complained: "I didn't want to be a cop! I could see where this was going, we'd need a bureaucratic infrastructure and we'd need to spin stuff. I couldn't do that, I couldn't be part of that."[6]

It brought to the fore the question, What is the relationship between law and freedom? Does law curtail human freedom as Hobbes claimed? Or does law protect and enhance our freedom as Locke argues? Furthermore, who has the authority to make and enforce the law in a free society?"[7]

For Harvey it came down to: Should the event be a civilized affair or a repudiation of order and authority? "If it's a repudiation of order and authority," he said, "and you are the organizer and invite thousands of people, what does that say about you? What kind of a moral position is that?"

The absolutist position of the anarchists might work in small homogeneous groups. But as Burning Man grew it faced the decision all political orders face: What kind of society are we making? How do we trade liberty and security? Harvey worried that cars in the night and the rest of the no-rules world were becoming something of a Hobbsean nightmare: "Things were disconnected and radical and a bit brutal, and you couldn't rely on people for community because there was none. And in the morning there was a political decision to be made: Were we a post-apocalyptic Mad Max society or were we a civil society?"

"For those of us who marched out into the Black Rock Desert in 1990," said Harvey, "there was an underlying irony awaiting us. You see, because there was no context in the desert apart from the context we created, we actually became the Establishment, as organizers of an event. Slowly, step-by-step, circumstances drove us to invent a government. Without intending to, we'd stumbled onto the principle of Civic Responsibility. And maybe this is the essential genius of Burning Man. Out of nothing, we created everything."

For the founders of Burning Man, this was something of Federalist moment – a philosophical turning point in the evolution of this unique interzone. The founders of the United States had wrestled with the same issues – centralized authority versus distributed liberty, and how those structures would enhance or diminish equality. Now those same issues were being worked out on the *playa*.

In short order, Burning Man went from a random place in the desert to a pop-up city designed for self-expression and inclusiveness, a place where roads were marked and public spaces were created for art and communities to flourish. As Harvey recalled:

> As a result of the reforms we put into place in 1997, our city grew more civilized. Instead of driving cars at 100 miles-per-hour with the lights turned off, as was the fashion, people began to encounter one another. Once we eliminated firearms, invented the Greeters, repurposed and reorganized the Rangers, created a street grid, regulated traffic, increased population densities, and gave everyone an address, people could more freely interact. Theme camps tripled, villages thrived, entire neighborhoods began to come alive.
>
> Perhaps that is the final irony—We ended up creating a world defined by free association and communal aid, rather like that dream of social harmony envisioned by the original anarchists. This was the beginning of the modern phase of Burning Man. The nascent institutions we'd invented, sometimes half in jest, became realities. Our city, many of us felt, had acquired a soul.

The Design of a Civilized City

The self-governing phenomena that plays out at Burning Man today draws on three arenas: 1) The principles and values established by the founders; 2) The emergent activity of thousands of participants, theme camps, and art project teams that embrace these principles as a framework – and then let loose with one of the most imaginative places on earth; and 3) The design of Black Rock City itself. Getting the city right is what sets the stage for the creative explosion that is Burning Man. The city, like all great cities, is a platform for participation and creativity. In a very real sense Black Rock City knows what Jane Jacobs knew: if you get the streets right, if you get the cacophony of street life right, and if a you get scale right you will have a remarkable and flourishing society.

Following the events of 1996, Burning Man undertook a new city design, turning to landscape designer Rod Garrett for a plan. He made a list of 200 urban planning goals looking at how his design might satisfy the greatest number. The design that evolved was a c-shaped semi-circle --- with the giant Man at the center. Several defining elements took shape:

- The inner ring would be deemed the Esplanade, the main street, the boundary between the city and open space home to acres of art projects and roaming art cars, 'mutant vehicles' in the parlance of Burning Man. Camps would form in the residential zones of the outer ring, and the desert in the center would serve as stage for massive art.
- Ordinary cars were banned. Walking, and bicycling became the modes of transportation at Burning Man, with art cars (licensed by the Department of Mutant Vehicles) also serving as the closest thing to public transportation.
- One-third of the city-circle would remain open, connecting the city to the desert and a sense of transcendence. A closed circle might create a sense of constraint and oppressive density. Garrett writes, "We will never further close that arc, as it is humbling to have the vast desert and sky intrude into our self-styled small world. The open side to the circular scheme takes on spiritual and psychological importance. Instead of completely circling the wagons, we invite the natural world to intrude, to lure participants away from our settlement and into the great silence and open space."

You see these principles applied successfully in some of America's best urban experiments. The designers of Boulder, Colorado's pedestrian mall told me that the project works because the mountains in the distance work as a "form of terminus – a place where the city fades into a different environment; the mountains anchor the project as the sea does for Santa Monica's pedestrian mall."[8]

Each design decision helped define the culture. At one point Harvey was asked whether the Black Rock Rangers (volunteers who

rescue castaways and provide non-confrontational mediation when needed) ought to have a compound at the center of the city. Instead the center is home to art and civic rituals like the Lamplighters, a nightly procession that places 1,000 lanterns across the city center. Burning Man was to be an art state, not a police state.

These physical cues create a scaffolding for creativity. Your relationship to space changes when you take ownership for authoring it and don't just go to a place that the government or Disneyland makes for you. Radical self-expression and costumes usher you into experimenting with things you might not normally do – further fostering creative play and innovation.

Just as important is a sense of order that's dependable. The concentric circles of streets intersected by radial avenues create a familiar landscape where its almost impossible to get lost. Streets are named alphabetically, and avenues are laid out along the dial of a clock with the civic center (Center Camp) at noon. No matter your state of mind or the hour, if you remember you're camped at 9:30 and B, you can get home.

In 2010, shortly before his death, Garrett wrote about how this design emerged in response to the less friendly prior city:

> The new plan was to be strongly affected by our experience of the previous year and the example of 1996, with its disastrous consequence of uncontrolled sprawl. Our goal was to express and abet a sense of communal belonging, and establish population densities that would lead to social interactions. Concurrently, we were attempting to recreate some of the intimacy of our original camping circle, but on a much larger civic scale. Above all, this city needed to work. It was vital that the flow of people and supplies in, out and within were unimpeded. The layout needed to provide for basic services, and be easily comprehended and negotiated. For continuity, it should incorporate familiar features of the previous event sites, and be scalable for future expansion. It also had to facilitate the art and expression of the community, and support past traditions and the principles of Burning Man.

The designer Yves Béhar who started attending Burning Man in 2006 told the *New York Times* that Rod Garrett was a genius in creating a city that was practical, expressive and a source of inspiration, calling it "a circular temporary city plan built around the spectacle of art, music and dance: I wish all cities had such a spirit of utopia by being built around human interaction, community and participation."[9]

These ideas about urban design and life have come to infect Burners and then the real world. Tony Hsieh, a frequent Burner and founder of Zappos, the shoe company, decided to pursue a massive $350 million revitalization of downtown Las Vegas. He's using festival-inspired design and programming to engage people—and to speed up the development of a vibrant city. Container parks and art cars create liveliness and engagement where there was empty space before.

The Las Vegas Downtown Project has collaborated with Burning Man to bring fire-breathing sculptures and art cars to town; several are already delighting residents and attracting families. Hsieh subscribes to Geoffrey West's and Ed Glazer's theories on "urban collisions" – that by putting people in close quarters, creativity happens. That's one reason that Downtown Vegas is all about co-working; the goal is to get people out of the office and into coffee shops and co-working spaces so that connections might happen.

The goal is not to build a smart city but rather "a city that makes you smart," with a TED-style theater so ideas flow every night. Hsieh's team funds startups and then make sure the place is running over with visiting mentors weekly: fashion one week, food the next, tech the next, social entrepreneurs the next, every month. The point is to make the place, like Burning Man, a canvas for hundreds of experiments and reduce the friction to get things started. For example, if you want to start a retail shop, the "container park" can provide cheap short-term leases so one can prototype a pop-up store and if it works, expand it to a permanent one. Try pulling that off in San Francisco.

Art and Culture at Burning Man

"Culture is a wonderful thing to order society," Larry Harvey told *Time* magazine in 2009. "I've noticed that whenever things get tough, the city fathers bring the artists to downtown!"[10] That has certainly been the case in Black Rock City, where art plays a leading role. Each year there are over 350 art installations, not including theme camps and hundreds of wild Mutant Vehicles.

All that art accomplishes more than we might normally expect from "art." At Burning Man, the arts help forge community. They generate focal points around which teams and projects self-organize. Art projects are a principal way that Burning Man spreads its culture of permission, self-expression and agency. The art cars, sculptures, installations and other works are used to tell large-scale, immersive stories. They are a way to get 68,000 people to contemplate major social themes in a collective, almost dream-like manner. In this sense, art at Burning Man helps participants reframe their understanding of the world.

Says Harvey, "I think that art should imitate life. But I'm not happy until life starts to imitate art. Every year we try to create an overarching theme that's about the world. What good is all this if it's not about how to live the rest of your life?"

In a place as tough and unforgiving as the Black Rock Desert, it takes stubborn commitment to get things done. Say you're building a giant steel or wood structure. First there is the challenge of getting the raw materials, along with the required construction equipment, to such a remote location. Then everything has to be assembled amidst extreme temperatures and frequent dust storms. And everywhere is *playa* dust: PH 10, its alkalinity is a bit south of oven cleaner. Particle size: three microns, three times smaller than talc. At Burning Man, it's best to build and appreciate art in a particle mask.

One of the most noteworthy and largest art installations each year is The Temple. The award of the temple commission each year is one of the highest honors in the Burning Man art community, and one of the greatest responsibilities. The temple is a place for contemplation and remembering losses, where hundreds of messages and

bits of memorabilia commemorating loved ones are left by Burners each year. While the burning of The Man is always a raucous celebration, the temple burn – the last structure to burn each year – is quiet and somber.

Jess Hobbs, co-founder of Flux Foundation, an Oakland-based collaborative, led The Temple of Flux team in 2012. It was the largest temple yet at Burning Man. Three hundred people spent four months building the abstract wooden structure, which consisted of five double-curved walls that created caves and canyon-like spaces. The piece was approximately one hundred feet deep, two hundred feet wide and forty feet tall. Hobbs told me that while building the temple takes skill and experience, they also invited anyone wishing to participate in the construction to do so. "We call ourselves vision holders. We hold on to the vision. We're not dictating how people get there, we let people choose their roles. You have to remind yourself the whole time this is not your project – 'I am not the owner, I am building a gift that will never be mine, it will be a destination for 60,000 people… And then it will burn!'"

Hobbs' philosophy exemplifies how art actualizes Burning Man's values and inspires the creation of its self-forming city: "Art is a platform for permission. We've grown up in a culture where you hear, 'No' –'No, you don't have the degree for that.' 'No, we don't think you can do that.' 'No, this might not be the place for you.' The overwhelming philosophy at Flux, and the overwhelming philosophy at Burning Man," said Hobbs, "is to say 'Yes.'"[11]

In 2007, Burning Man's art theme was "Green Man," exploring "humanity's relationship to nature." Artist Karen Cusolito and Dan Das Mann created "Crude Awakening," one of the largest works of art ever at Burning Man and still its largest explosion. At the center was a 90 - foot tower styled after its namesake, the Reverend Oil Derrick. Surrounding that were nine steel sculptures of humans from cultures around the world, many thirty feet tall, all worshiping at the altar of fossil fuel, evidently disciples of the flame-throwing religion of unsustainability.

On Saturday night, the Crude Awakening team set off a massive audio-pyrotechnic finale. I was on the *playa* that year, and word spread that this would be the grandest explosion ever at Burning Man – 2,000 gallons of propane and 900 gallons of jet fuel, expertly crafted to combust in a mushroom cloud – the closest thing to an atomic explosion any of us would ever (we hope) witness. I rode my bike about a thousand yards upwind of the tower, contemplating those other Nevada test shots and having no way to gauge what was about to happen. If there was a miscalculation, this might be an excellent place for distant contemplation.

Ritual and Culture

Art here is doing exactly what art is supposed to do: Ask questions, dwell in ambiguity, look at things differently. But because this is Burning Man, it can happen at a scale that is almost impossible anywhere else.

Art and ritual help Burning Man function as a classic liminal experience – a place to get unstuck, to take a new identity and to upend preconceived notions, so that you might come back anew. British anthropologist Victor Turner, author of *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*, studied liminality in "primitive" societies, but he could have been writing about Black Rock City. Liminal experiences are ways in which people challenge familiar understandings about their society – where normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behavior are undone and where the very structure of society is "temporarily suspended. These new symbols and constructions then feed back into the 'central' economic incentives, structural models, and *raisons d'etre* of a civilization."[12]

Going up to the desert and getting liminal is useful when change is afoot in society. It's a way to suspend the traditional way of doing things, and, as if in a dream state, imagine and rehearse how things might evolve socially, economically and spiritually.

Turner asserts the whole point of such rituals is to recombine culture into "any and every possible pattern, however weird." If we limit the possible combination of factors to "conventional patterns, designs, or figurations," then we might miss what is "potentially and

in principle a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced far more readily."

John Seely Brown, an authority on tech innovation who formerly led Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), has a contemporary take on the value of art to help us reframe our world, to "regrind our conceptual lenses." At a panel discussion about Burning Man at the Aspen Institute in 2013, he told me, "Artists are not included in our debate on how we build the economy for the future. They're excluded in our nation's emphasis on innovation, which has been left to the STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] crowd. We're not thinking about designing for emergence. Innovation is about seeing the world differently. Who is better at helping us see the world differently than the artists?"[13]

Burning Man in the World

The Burning Man organization is increasingly focused on how to extend its ideas and values beyond the *playa* and into the world. It has organized 225 regional liaisons as the Burning Man Global Leadership Community. The sense of agency and permission Burners bring to the *playa* is often reflected at home, especially in San Francisco, where we use creative play and experimentation to further civic and artistic aims. The Gray Area Foundation for the Arts (where I serve as co-founder and chairman) created the Urban Prototyping Festival to build urban innovation apps and experimental projects in San Francisco, Singapore and London. This year the San Francisco Planning Commission is making citizen prototyping a formal part of city planning along two miles of Market Street. A group called Freespace started by Burner Mike Zuckerman has persuaded landlords in thirteen countries to "gift" unused space to the community as a temporary place to prototype, teach and launch projects.

Michael Yarne, a Burner, former city official and real-estate developer, got fed up with San Francisco's government and launched UP, a nonprofit to promote neighborhood-based "green benefit districts." These are a form of micro-government that allows communities to vote an assessment and have direct and transparent control over hy-

perlocal projects like mini-parks, green lighting, energy generation and even shared rainwater cisterns for irrigation. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved enabling legislation for the program, and Yarne is now looking to take the concept to other cities.

The most visible Burner influence on San Francisco is surely the Bay Lights, arguably the largest public artwork in America. Burner Ben Davis had the idea to transform 1.5 miles of the San Francisco Bay Bridge into a sculpture illuminated by 25,000 light-emitting diodes. It was an audacious act to imagine this iconic, 75-year old bridge as a canvas and then to recruit the support of three San Francisco mayors, secure all the necessary permissions, and raise over seven million dollars in just a couple of years. Artist Leo Villareal, also a Burner, designed the project. He began working with light on the *playa* in 1994 to help find his way back to camp in the vast darkness of the desert night. Today he is one of the top light sculptors in the world, his work now part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum in Kagawa, Japan.

Something all of these projects have in common: each is an Autonomous Zone as imagined by Hakim Bey, whose influence, mediated by Burning Man, has become part of our culture.

Burners Without Borders

Burning Man's most global initiative is Burners Without Borders, a disaster relief and capacity-building nonprofit that draws on the festival's unique ethos and skill set. After Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on the very first day of Burning Man in 2005, Brian Behlendorf, founder of Apache Software, recalled the surreal mood on the *playa* when people learned of the devastation and civil breakdown. A food drive and donation effort were immediately organized while groups of Burners began to self-organize treks to the Gulf Coast with heavy equipment and generators in tow.

Upon arriving in Louisiana, Burners set up their headquarters in the parking lot and built what would soon become a distribution center for Oxfam, the Red Cross and other charities. Eventually, the parking lot became a free grocery store for the community. When

word got out about what Burners Without Borders was doing, one manufacturer of industrial equipment donated a brand-new heavy loader to the group. Armed with this, Burners Without Borders were completing projects that had once taken days in a matter of hours.

With so much experience in self-organizing their own municipal infrastructure in a hostile environment, Burners are particularly skilled at functioning during chaotic crises when normal services – running water, electricity, communications channels and sanitation systems – are not available. Burners don't just survive in such an environment; they create culture, art, and community there.

BWB founder Carmen Muak told me they learned a lot about how to provide disaster relief in a sustainable manner: "You don't need trailers when you can use domes. You use local materials. You find a way to help the community through its grief." In rural Pearlington, Missisippi, they did just that, both tearing down destroyed structures and building new houses. And then they drew on their Burning Man temple experience. "There was so much beautiful debris around. People had antiques in their homes forever, handed down for generations. You'd find a huge claw-foot dining room table leg, waterlogged chairs. On Saturdays we'd make art together. At night we'd all come together silently for a Burn. It was cathartic."[14] Larry Harvey told me, "FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] would send in grief councilors. We'd create a temple burn. We found our culture had a lot to offer down there."[15]

Prototype City, Prototype Future

Burning Man the festival is really Burning Man the prototype maker city. It is a place where participants create their urban experience, infrastructure and art. Over its twenty-eight years Burning Man has evolved a balance between top-down structures and curation and a fiercely autonomous, independent community that builds the city as it sees fit. Everyone can be a Robert Moses autonomously green-lighting fanciful projects or a Jane Jacobs using art and culture to forge social capital. It works because the shared community principles work.

Burners also share a similar fear: What if this year is the last? What if this year it gets too big or loses its magic? What if it all goes bland? This sense of paranoia, that the whole thing really might be just a temporary gift, inspires a constant sense of renewal and reinvention. Two years ago my camp, Disorient, decided it was too big and downsized to recapture its culture. It was painful but it worked. When is the last time you heard of a bureaucracy voluntarily dismantling itself to build anew? Ephemeral cites have the advantage of less inertia.

Burning Man fosters great agency and responsibility – a more engaged form of citizenship not just in Black Rock City, but in the real world to which participants return. This ethic is nourished because Black Rock City embraces the prototypical and temporary – which allows for play, learning and immediacy. These are lessons that are being applied to cities around the world through projects such as Freespace, Urban Prototyping, the Bay Lights, the Downtown Porject in Las Vegas, and many other Burner-inspired projects.

Burning Man is also a place to reassess and try out *values* that may have trouble being expressed in our very commercial society. The gifting economy and decommodifcation of experience seem fantastic and redolent of a bygone hippie culture – until we realize that our modern lifestyles are based on unsustainable forms of consumption and that capitalism itself must be reinvented. Burning Man nurtures social capital to consider such challenges.

And yet Burning Man is in the end just a temporary, one-week-a-year city. It is more of a concept car than street-legal vehicle. But like a concept car, it's a collection of new ideas and odd ones ready to be adapted and applied to our world. Burning Man didn't invent the festival, the art car or the Temporary Autonomous Zone any more than Apple invented the personal computer. But like that other venturesome innovator in California, Burning Man executed the concept beautifully, and through its work is having an outsized impact on our culture – and quite possibly on our future.

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Notes

[1] Burners take pride in leaving no trace behind and know not to bring in feathers, sequins or any other "moopy-poopy" materials. See http://blog.burningman.com/2012/09/environment/moop-map-live-2012-the-day-we-fail-to-leave-no-trace.

[2] *Time* magazine video, "5 Things Cities Can Learn from Burning Man," [2009], available at http://content.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,39616455001_1921966,00.html.

[3] Hakin Bay [Peter Lamborn Wilson], T*emporary Autonomous Zones* (Autonomedia, 1991). See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temporary_autonomous_zone.

[4] Boyd, Andrew, Mitchell, Dave Oswald, *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution* (OR Books, 2012).

[5] https://blog.burningman.com/2013/11/tenprinciples/how-the-west-was-won-anarchy-vs-civic-responsibility.

[6] Interview in film, *Spark: A Burning Man Story* (Spark Pictures, 2013); see http://www.sparkpictures.com.

[7] From a dinner conversation between the author and Larry Harvey in London. Referring to the debate about "freedom" that arose after the 1996 events, he told me: "In the end Burning Man is about what is freedom. Nobody lost freedom when we put in rules to keep people from getting run over in the desert." We were discussing the fact that Hobbesean freedom is absolute whereas Lockean freedom (as outlined in his Second Treatise on Civil Government) says, "But though this be a state of *liberty*, yet it is *not* a state of *license*."

[8] Conversation with Daniel Aizenman, LEED AP at the architectural design firm Stantec ViBE, which created the Boulder shopping mall. Aizenman and I were discussing what makes spaces like these work or fail.

[9] Fred A. Bernstein, "Rod Garrett, the Urban Planner Behind 'Burning Man': Its Leadership Lessons, Its Changing Face," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/arts/rod-garrett-the-urban-planner-behind-burning-man.html.

[10] Larry Harvey quoted in *Time* magazine mini-documentary on Burning Man, 2009. Interview available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWzohQ1IwB0, see 5:40.

[11] Private conversation with the author. See also Hobbs' talk at the Catalyst Creative series in Downtown Las Vegas on March 27, 2014, an event coproduced by the Downtown Project and Burning Man. See also a talk by Karen Cusolito of American Steel.

[12] Turner, Victor, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice University Studies*, 60(3) (1974), pp. 53-92.

[13] Quoted in John Seely Brown's blog, February 2014, at http://www.johnseelybrown.com/newsletter_feb14.html.

[14] Author interview with Carmen Muak, Las Vegas, 2014.

[15] Discussion with Larry Harvey, London, February 2014.