

Creating Sustainable Attractions:

A Report from the First Themed Entertainment Sustainability Summit

by **Scott Mallwitz**



How does it feel to reach middle age? Are you thinking about the world differently?

The theme park industry, roughly 50 years old, was created through the continued development, operation and refinement of permanent entertainment facilities. As this new industry of ours grew and matured, we all became fairly adept at balancing practical business needs and financial constraints with passionate creativity and delivery of great guest experiences. We rode the wave of a rapidly expanding economy and produced some iconic and enduring entertainment products along the way.

As we look forward to the next 50 years of our industry, we now realize the game has fundamentally changed. While we enjoyed great leaps in immersive entertainment and theme park technology, some of the basic requirements for continued theme park development

have become scarce, remote or difficult to obtain. We also now find ourselves working across the globe with dynamic international markets, shifting demographics and in a constantly changing physical environment. This ever changing physical and natural environment should cause us to think differently about some very basic principles – the efficient use of land, energy, water and air. The careful management and consideration of these resources – seemingly abundant as our industry grew — now increasingly impact our daily work.

Can we design engaging themed attractions that are sensitive to the environment and responsible in the use of resources? Can we meet the entertainment needs of this generation without compromising the ability of future generations to enjoy the same facilities?

While there are many definitions of sustainability, sustainable development requires we view the earth and

its resources as a system – weighing design and planning decisions against limited resources and available space here on earth.

In many ways, the planning, design and production of location based entertainment has been focused on two aspects of sustainability – the consideration of careful financial planning (1), and the creative development of consistently delivered, engaging guest experiences (2). Our work is based on complex market analyses, estimated costs, planned revenues, projected returns, anticipated production schedules and carefully managed operational costs. Good design is delivered to the intended market on time, on budget, on scope and with understood operational impacts. This could be considered financial sustainability.

Creatively, our experiences are often designed to appeal to a target audience for an anticipated term – in some cases, the projected life of the park. While some experiences are created with shorter life spans, sound facility master planning and the continued development of attractions with enduring appeal are already highly sustainable strategies. Properly considered and developed, they require minimal yearly investment and pay dividends for years – proving that great entertainment experience can be considered both creatively and financially sustainable.

As an industry with a very high public profile, it is time for us to recognize another aspect of sustainability – our role as a consumer of significant quantities of finite global resources and materials. While we have understood financial metrics and established project development processes, our industry has not yet come together to explore the best practices and innovations that can make our work as sustainable as possible.

Until now.

Cunningham Group Architecture, P. A., with the support of the Themed Entertainment Association and global design and engineering firm ARUP, recently convened the inaugural Themed Entertainment Sustainability Summit (TESS), engaging leaders in the design and construction of themed entertainment experiences. Drawing from our existing relationships within the industry, those invited included high-level representatives of Walt Disney Imagineering, Paramount Parks, Universal Studios, Warner Brothers, and other key players in hospitality and leisure.

Leaving R&D secrets, long-term competitive strategies and proprietary intellectual property back at the office, Summit attendees enjoyed a refreshingly open dialog, focused on sincere dedication to the principles of sustainable design, re-imagining the current theme park paradigm and considering the future of our industry and its place on the global stage. The sheer volume and integrity of ideas generated at the Summit demonstrated that our industry is primed and ready for meaningful, measurable progress on this global, green imperative.

Much of the discussion at the Summit revolved around a number of key issues, some which are natural extensions of current business practices and others that may have already emerged as you examine your approach to sustainable entertainment design and delivery.

Establish Basic Criteria

Theme parks are among the most unique of built environments. Applying basic sustainable design principles to the development of rides, attractions, restaurants, shows and retail facilities can improve the overall performance and life span of the environment. While these criteria may be different for each

project, they may include considerations of efficient building and system design, improved use of the site, day lighting and consideration of appropriate, sustainable materials and finishes.

Evaluate Your Operation

Facilities designed to last more than 40 or 50 years – such as many of those created for themed entertainment – are by nature, sustainable. Understanding

(at left) The new California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco is housed in a LEED Platinum building designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Exhibits, produced by Cinnabar Inc., were sustainably created using a modular display format and recyclable materials.

(below) The new Palazzo hotel and resort on the Las Vegas Strip is LEED certified and employs green strategies such as daylight harvesting and occupant sensing to conserve energy usage while furnishing an opulent guest environment.



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the existing facility “footprint,” including the ongoing operational impact, can help inform and guide future planning. Leaders were encouraged to look carefully at the long term operational costs

of their existing facilities and design concepts, setting the stage for meaningful exploration of viable options for increased efficiency.

Think Outside the Berm

In terms of intensity of land use, theme park development can be a very sustainable form of entertainment. Introducing sustainability into the ongoing master planning effort can leverage some of the inherent advantages of density and also help guide the design team toward viable, long-term solutions. During the Summit, attendees were encouraged to explore possibilities and practices from other industries in order to gain and share knowledge that is tested and proven. For example, the lodging and hospitality industries serve a great number of people in buildings that are designed to function at a variety of levels with measurable results.

Talk About Sustainability

Themed entertainment professionals are by their very nature storytellers and a compelling narrative is central to everything we do. By developing sound sustainable theme park design criteria, designers and producers can provide owners and operators with a sustainable communication framework – the basic tenets of the project team's commitment to green, sustainable design. A shared vision of project-specific sustainability goals, developed early in the project planning, serves as a guide in formulating comprehensive sustainable strategies and delivering innovative, sustainable design – providing our clients with both talking points and appropriate, sustainable design solutions.

The first Themed Entertainment Sustainability Summit revealed industry leaders' high level of commitment to sustainable design. Quite simply,

sustainable design is good entertainment design.

Looking forward to the next Summit, attendees left energized by the free exchange of ideas and with renewed commitment to the exploration, design and realization of a new, exciting and world... which, after all, is what our industry does best. 🌟

The Participation Culture: What I Learned from The Man by George Wiktor

The bright glowing circle of fire spins in the darkness drawing me through the desert. Nearing, I see a gathering of people watching, embers washing over them. They stare into the circle of fire and sway to the rhythms of the nearby Art Car. In the inferno, logs tumble through the Firewheel. People dressed in orange coveralls tend the fire and spin the wheel. It's here that I finally make my connection with The Man.

It's been three days. I am in total overload. But I have not yet connected. I have, however, been thinking about this moment for five years. I prepared for six weeks. Read the survival guide. Surf the bulletin boards. Bought the essentials. I even have vinegar water in a spray bottle to neutralize the caustic effect of the alkaline plain we are calling home for these few days.

Now I stand in awe of this natural spectacle. A homemade fireworks display created by the most awesome yet primitive fire. Ah! The spirit of The Man.

Man? What man? Of course I'm talking about Burning Man. You may wonder what I — I, George Wiktor, a gentleman of a certain age — am doing here in the middle of a caustic Borax desert in 120-degree heat.

It's simple. In almost every brainstorming charrette that we at The Hetteema Group have staged in the last couple of years the subject of Burning Man comes up. What does it have to tell us?

For those of you who may have been living under a rock for the last 22 years, Burning Man is not any old arts festival, nor is it a Renaissance Faire for the counterculture. It is, in fact, THE art festival and a community that rises out of the Nevada desert for a week. Fifty-thousand people gather, camp in extreme conditions, and create a participatory, cross-cultural,

gifting, open society. What's going on here? Is this, perhaps a lens into the future of group entertainment? Is this the themed experience model of the future?

For several years now, we at The Hetteema Group have been immersing ourselves in exploring the intersection of the culture of today and tomorrow, and the future of entertainment. How does today's audience want to experience

George Wiktor, past president of the TEA and current chair of TEA's Thea Awards Committee, is Senior Producer at The Hetteema Group, where George, Phil Hetteema and Pat MacKay are at work on a book on The Participation Culture.



Photos copyright George Wiktor and Burning Man



shows, events and theme parks? More importantly, how does being a citizen of the digital age impact tomorrow's audience expectations? Will living in the digital age create a demand for a totally new style of entertainment? Is



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technology a key ingredient? Has there been a paradigm shift?

In order to answer those questions, we have to take a short detour to explore a world empowered by the digital. It is

creating individual personae that interact within these digital worlds.

Within the game, it is just as important to create your character as it is to play the game. Some games are



clear that today we have moved beyond technology for technology's sake into a society facilitated by technology. Technology has become a utility and a tool to achieve our continuously evolving society. Computer games, internet social networking sites, instant messaging and texting all are aids to creating personal social connections more complex and varied than ever before. Concurrently, there seems to be a growing comfort with — and possibly a necessity for —

actually nothing more than creating a character with ever increasing powers and capabilities to inhabit specific worlds. Social networking sites are not just about extending and maintaining your circle of friends: They are also about creating your own persona in your own space to attract visits from friends and others. The result? Everyone is participating in creating entertainment for everybody else.

This Participation Culture is one of the key differentiators for this new audience. Beyond technology. Beyond interactivity. Beyond clever media delivery. Beyond 4D immersive shows and environments. We now have participants in entertainment creating that entertainment for themselves. More participants means more entertainment as well as more varied entertainment.

This joy of participation is spilling into the real world. My daughter reminds me computers and mobile phones are “not the only thing we do, Dad. We like to get out there in the world. It's just that we like to bring the things we do online with us.” Burning Man is exactly that. It's the Participation Culture brought out into the physical world, a physicalization of the online world.

Burning Man has a reputation of being a free-for-all; with drugs, nudity, anarchy, and an anything-goes attitude. But seen first-hand, it turns out to be a highly structured, well-organized, law abiding, civil society: A society that encourages self expression and self reliance in an incredibly inhospitable physical environment. Commercial activity is prohibited and, refreshingly, there are no corporate sponsors. The place operates on gifting with no expectation of return.

And most importantly, participation is the key to the success of this event because participation is a form of gifting. Everyone is focused on adding to the success of everyone else's experience. Whether it be creating an art installation, volunteering in the café, building a lounge in your camp, or providing entertainment for everyone, all the participants add to the overall experience.

The Firewheel is a perfect example. A group of individuals came together to conceptualize and execute a complex art and entertainment installation.

Each night they gathered and for many hours operated this primitive and literal fireworks display. Why? Well... for no other reason than to provide visual delight to their fellow Burners, to participate on a grand scale, and to add to the overall success of this extravagant event.

Over the last 22 years, Burning Man has evolved and today it stands as one of the prime examples of the online Participation Culture now migrating into the real world. Those of us creating entertainment as well as reality-based information attractions need to understand this. As we create and develop places that look to attract today's and tomorrow's audiences, we need to focus on our audience's fundamental need to participate. We need to create infrastructure-based attractions that encourage creative participation. Such attractions change over time, as a result of the direct participation of our audience. Who knows where the participation will lead? In our world, perhaps we should be designing attractions that evolve through the course of a day. Each night they re-set to zero and the cycle of participation begins again.

It is a big risk. But if Burning Man is any indication, designing for the Participation Culture is going to be fun, unpredictable and very satisfying. 🌟

