3 Event and experience design

Learning objectives

On completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

➤ Recognise the benefits and potential impact of systematic event design

➤ Explain the nature and significance of the event experience and recognise the associated challenges in terms of event design

➤ Provide an understanding of how to conceptualise an event and recognise the importance of a sound event concept

➤ Explain how an event concept is supported and reinforced by theming and other aspects of event design

➤ Provide an understanding of the key event design principles

➤ Explain the role of setting, staging and logistics

➤ Describe the link between event design and event outcomes.

Event design is an important aspect of planned events, and events have the power to transform individuals. An emerging focus in event design is the focus on meanings and event experiences (Getz & Page, 2016). Event design, a core 'domain' or function of event management offers the potential to achieve, or at least facilitate these transformations. The emergence of the so-called transformation economy has been at least partly responsible for a movement in the focus of planned events beyond extraordinary experiences towards experiences that could be regarded as transformative or even life-changing. Described as peak experiences, these transformational events have important implications for event design.

What other societal changes can you think of that support or are consistent with the emerging focus on transformational events?

The event experience

Event experiences are the essence of planned events. The potential impact of those experiences can be significant, particularly in the power of:

- Exhibitions and conventions to **spark the imagination**
- Music and entertainment festivals to **engage the senses**
- Conferences and other business events to **stimulate the intellect**
- Commemorative events to **invoke emotions**
- Sporting events to **stir passions and loyalties**
- Cultural and religious events to transform people and to **enliven the spirit.**

The key challenge for an event designer is to create or at least facilitate one or more event experiences in a way that matches or exceeds the expectations of event attendees. In this regard, the event designer may seek to provide a rich experience with which attendees can relax and enjoy or create an environment that provides the ingredients and the circumstances in which attendees can actively participate and become co-creators of that experience in a more active and meaningful way. Regardless of the approach, event design can be a crucial ingredient in the overall success of an event.

? *What type of experience is someone likely to be seeking when they attend a community cultural festival? What event elements or activities should be provided to enhance that experience and make it more memorable?*

Frameworks to guide the design of event experiences
Transforming events framework

In a recent study, Steriopoulos and Wrathall (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with event experts on how the industry is transforming post COVID-19. Based on the findings, the researchers developed a framework highlighting key priorities that influence change in industry. The key concepts that resulted from the study are:

- the need for humans to socially connect and protect the environment;
- the design of meaningful event experiences;
- the capacity to adapt to complex event situations while remaining committed to ongoing learning; and
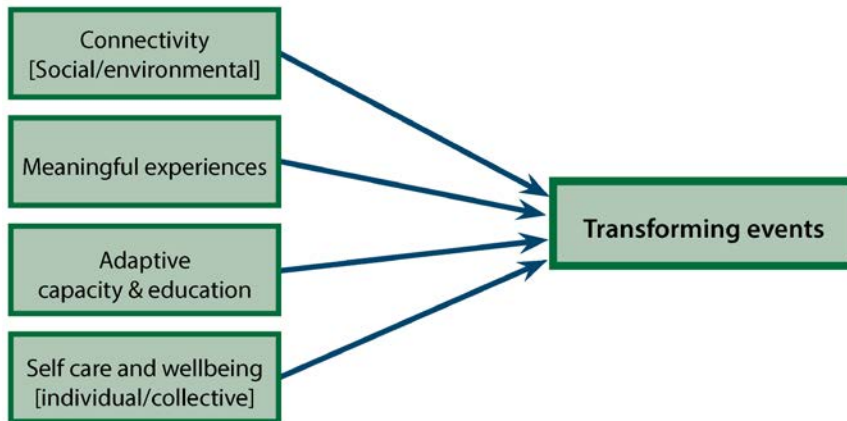- the need for professionals to look after their personal and professional wellbeing.

Figure 3.1: A conceptual framework on transforming events (Steriopoulos & Wrathall, 2021)

The PERMA Model

Crucial to the process of creating an event experience that is consistent with attendee expectations is the capacity of event designers to empathize with event attendees. Hence, an event designer needs to be able to understand what attendees want and what they don't want, what motivates them and what frustrates them. Accordingly, there is a new focus in event design which arises partly from positive psychology, emphasising well-being and the development of an engaging, purposeful, and worthwhile life. Specifically, one type of event that focuses on emotional engagement is the commemorative.

Seligman (2011) introduced the PERMA acronym to identify five elements of well-being. These are:

- *Positive emotions* such as excitement, satisfaction, and pride, that are frequently connected with positive outcomes including healthy relationships and longevity.
- *Engagement* or involvement in activities in a manner that builds on an individual's interests and allows the individual to become completely absorbed and deeply involved.
- *Relationships*, including work-related, familial, romantic, or platonic.
- *Meaning*, or the capacity to put everything, including work and relationships, into context.
- *Accomplishments* or the on-going pursuit of success and the associated feelings of pride and mastery.

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PERMA provides a potential framework or starting point for the design of transformational events. Events designed in this manner have the potential for long-term transformation at a range of levels. Of course, not all events have a transformational impact, and in fact, not all transformational events are the result of conscious, well-devised and well-thought-out design.

Case study 3.1: Transformational power of Woodstock

Events had transformational power as early as the 1960s. The 1969 Woodstock Music Festival, for example, was clearly transformational and in fact, it's probably no exaggeration to say that it was an event that defined a generation and transformed the way in which we all think about music festivals forever. Yet Woodstock certainly wasn't the result of systematic or well-thought-out design. To start with, the sheer scale of the event took organisers by surprise. They expected the concert to draw about 200,000 people, nothing like the half million or so that actually turned up. As a result, Woodstock became a 'free concert' for hundreds of thousands of rock fans and, at least partly for that reason, was a financial disaster, relying on the proceeds of the 1970 Woodstock film to pay off around $1.4 million dollars of debt. The lack of sophisticated planning and design was a key reason for the inability of organisers to make the event the financial success that they had envisaged. Furthermore, it is highly likely that conscious efforts aimed at creative and skilful event design would have enhanced outcomes and avoided the associated problems.

As the value of event design as a contributor to event success becomes more accepted, and as we look to the future of the industry following the unprecedented impact of the coronavirus crisis, it seems more likely than ever that the success of planned events will depend upon *detail* and sophisticated *event design*. For more on the history and the significance of Woodstock festival watch the video on https://youtu.be/StFhvAIv3Js