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Festival Design and Programming

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After reading this chapter you should:

- Understand what is involved in designing a festival
- Recognise the importance of having a clear vision and rationale for your festival
- Know the possibilities in festival design available to you
- Understand the importance of designing experiences into your festival
- Gain an insight into the relationship between branding and festival design
- Understand the key aspects of festival programming

Introduction

In this chapter we set out the principles, the possibilities, the processes and the practicalities of designing your festival. We start from the principle that festival design is first and foremost the artistic creation of the event, mentally and physically. That is, first the festival is conceived in the designers' mind: it is imagined, reflected on and desired. Second, the designer works through the possibilities and practicalities of what they want to do, including the key area of programming, before moving on to the process of festival production. As we shall see the increasing necessity of designing a good festival 'experience' is all important. There is, however, no shirking the many physical and practical considerations, such as venue size, utilities, and duration, all of which have to be considered at this design stage. This chapter assumes you are starting from scratch, because that ensures we cover all of the bases. If you are designing or redesigning a festival that already exists, the main difference is that you will need to know what your audiences and other stakeholders value about the festival's current design so you don't alienate them.

This chapter defines what festival design includes and stresses the importance of being clear on why you want to produce a festival. It looks at the central factors that sustain a festival. What is the festival's rationale? What is its vision? What makes for a good programme? You may already have a clear idea of what you want to do and why, in which case this chapter will

be a good means of testing it. Alternately you may know you want to stage a festival but may not be clear on the theme or rationale. This chapter will help you focus on that.

Finally, festivals are a combination of vision and detail. It is often easiest to start with the details such as logo design or decor, but don't let that distract you from the core questions of why you want to undertake this difficult, tiring and risky project, and who you are producing it for. The chapter starts with the vision and rationale as this will inform the all-important detail that will follow. You don't build a house without first laying the foundations. Festival design can involve a wide range of rationales and motivations. These can include personal motivators including beliefs and philosophy, aesthetic and artistic rationale, place and spatial issues and of course finances. We will examine all of them in this chapter.

The principles

Why 'design'?

The term design can be interpreted in a micro and a macro way. The micro application is the physical, graphical or digital look and feel of the outcome; its aesthetic qualities, and those are of course important. In building terms, the design is the iconic aspect of the construction. Visual design is what is most memorable about places like Sydney Opera House, the Eden Project in Cornwall and the Pyramid Stage at *Glastonbury*.

In contrast, the macro way of planning a festival starts not with the detail of aesthetic design, but with your festival's overall rationale. What is the purpose of your festival? This is a crucially important aspect of design. How will it function? Does your proposal work to achieve what you set out to do, your purpose? A building that looks beautiful, but doesn't meet the functional requirements of the people who use it will be deemed a failure. The same is true of your festival.

Sometimes the function of a festival is extremely clear. A key part of the mantra of *Burning Man* in America's Nevada Desert, alongside 'no spectators', is 'leave no trace'. *Burning Man* attracts thousands of people to a pristine *Wilderness* where it creates a memorable nine-days of 'immersive environmental theatre' in which all sorts of extraordinary human-made activities take place (see Bowditch, 2016). It then departs leaving no trace. That is festival design in action: the form, a sustainable participatory festival, follows the function, to create and celebrate a community of environmentally concerned activists. Much as aesthetics form an important part of it, *Burning Man* is about much more than just aesthetics. It is the mix of location, activity, experience and a concern for the environment.

Festival design incorporates a number of aspects such as festival function, festival objectives, festival mission. All of those are applicable. But assume for a moment that you are starting with a blank sheet of paper. Things like function, objectives and missions are inanimate until you define, coordinate and produce them. Festival design is a conscious and focused activity that synthesises and energises the component parts into a coherent whole; and you, the festival instigator, are the festival designer.

Design can be a big and rather intimidating word. But your initial festival design can be quite modest. When Michael Eavis started the *Pilton Pop, Blues & Folk Festival* in 1970 he wanted to put on good music and support his family farm. What he ended up designing (or creating) became a world-famous festival, *Glastonbury*. There was certainly a form of festival design when he started but it is doubtful he envisaged then just how it was to grow. But if you do want to start big or dream big don't let anything prevent you.

Why?

It's worth pausing here to introduce an important and memorable concept that will help you with both your budget and other aspects of the festival. We call it 'Kipling', after Rudyard Kipling, the one that wrote *The Jungle Book* and *The Just So Stories*. One of those Just So Stories, 'The Elephant's Child' (1902) contains the following short poem:

"I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who." (Kipling, 2007)

Memorise those six honest serving men, for in your festival planning they will serve you well and are the basis for all festival design. *Who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *how* are relatively easy to define and apply. *Why* is harder, but festivals that can't answer this question have something missing: they are less attractive and less memorable.

Why is at the heart of your event or activity. It's not just about the event. It's about you and your commitment and beliefs. If you don't believe in the event then why should others? If you cannot define why you are investing hours of time and energy in planning and delivering it or what makes your festival important and distinctive, then why should others get enthusiastic about it?

The why is not just important for devising and planning festivals, it's important to all businesses. As author and organisational consultant Sinek (2009) argues, the biggest problem facing most companies is customer loyalty. Most companies try and retain customers through some form of manipulation which could include price incentives, special promotions or even fear