

[MAIN INTRODUCTORY TEXT PANEL]

City of Dust: The Evolution of Burning Man

For the first time ever, *City of Dust: The Evolution of Burning Man*, begins to explore the story of how the legendary Nevada gathering evolved through collaborative ritual from humble countercultural roots on San Francisco's Baker Beach into the world-famous desert convergence it is today.

Borrowing methods from anthropology and archaeology, this exhibition relies on primary source materials, such as archives, artifacts, journals, sketches and notebooks. These historical items allow us to trace the civic growth and development of Burning Man's temporary city that arises annually in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. The exhibition also acknowledges Burning Man's global impact and touches on what the future may hold for the Burning Man Project, a recently-established nonprofit organization.

While some of the materials on view are on loan from private collections, most are drawn from the Archive Collections of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art. Home to the largest publicly-held collection of Burning Man archives anywhere, researchers travel from around the world to study these materials while seeking to better understand Burning Man's legacy. This exhibition only begins to unravel the story.

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Countercultural Roots in the San Francisco Bay Area

The origins of Burning Man cannot be considered without acknowledging California's social, political, and cultural fabric of the 1980s: the Cold War lingered, Ronald Reagan was elected to a second term as U.S. President, and the AIDS epidemic was at an all-time high. Although the height of the hippie subculture had long passed, the time was ripe for a new, alternative, social movement to satisfy the desires of those who wished to pursue experiences beyond mainstream society.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, this countercultural trend manifested itself in two related groups: the Suicide Club and the Cacophony Society. Both with Dadaist roots and anarchic tendencies, the organizations traced their lineage to Communiversity, a free alternative school started at San Francisco State University in 1969. The Suicide Club, first organized by Gary Warne in 1977, encouraged adult play, urban exploration and challenging one's fears. A decade later this subculture evolved into the core membership of the Cacophony Society. Artists, performers, outsiders, and non-conformists joined the ranks of Cacophony—anyone could become a member. The group championed collaborative play, good-spirited pranks, and costumed gatherings. Through group outings—known as “Zone Trips”—organizers encouraged subversive engagement with mainstream society, espoused a leave-no-trace philosophy, discouraged spectators, and were committed to ethical behavior.

If these activities and foundational values sound familiar to those of Burning Man, it is no coincidence. When the first Burning Man gatherings took place on San Francisco's Baker Beach, it was Cacophony Society members who joined the festivities. When the Burning Man gathering moved to Nevada in 1990, it was the Cacophony Society who named the event *Zone Trip #4—Bad Day at Black Rock*, and made the trek to the desert. The adventurous, fun-loving, countercultural spirit of these groups lives on in the Burning Man we know today.

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Baker Beach, 1986-1989

One day in 1986, Larry Harvey phoned his friend, Jerry James, and proposed they build a man and burn him on the beach. Jerry asked him to repeat that statement. Later that day, when Harvey, James, and a handful of friends burned an 8-foot wooden effigy of a man on San Francisco's Baker Beach, their bonfire beach party catalyzed what would eventually become known as Burning Man.

Neither Harvey nor James remembers precisely when they made the decision to return to Baker Beach the following year, but they did. Another wooden figure, crudely built from scrap lumber in a friend's basement garage, was constructed. People gathered to help transport and erect the sculpture. Crowds on the beach swelled. T-shirts were designed to memorialize the gatherings held between 1986 and 1989. The assemblies became an annual ritual, and a community was created. "The Bohemians have a kind of erotic sense of property," Harvey has said of these early gatherings. "We didn't worry about getting a venue or asking permission. We were guerilla. We were illegal, going down to the beach to burn this thing. And we depended on our own communal efforts undertaken together."

Everything changed, however, in 1990, when the police put an end to the beach burns due to the increased risks of public safety. While participants were allowed to erect the now-forty-foot-tall Man sculpture on Baker Beach one last time on Memorial Day weekend in 1990, they were not authorized to burn it. They would need to find an alternative venue, and so the decision was made to gather in Nevada's Black Rock Desert later that summer over the Labor Day holiday.

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Zone Trip #4: Bad Day at Black Rock, 1990

Burning Man was held on San Francisco's Baker Beach from 1986 to 1989 before it was forced to relocate after law enforcement shut down the gathering due to concern for public safety in 1990. An alternative venue was needed, and it was Nevada's Black Rock Desert—approximately six hours east of San Francisco—that would become the new destination. Located in the northwestern Great Basin, the Black Rock Desert boasts a 400-square-mile alkali flat, or *playa*, (the Spanish word for beach), that had played host to various recreational activities and cultural events for decades. In short, it was the perfect site to burn a large-scale wooden effigy of The Man.

The San Francisco-based countercultural group known as the Cacophony Society was instrumental to the first Nevada Burning Man event. Having attended many of the Baker Beach burns, and with a track record for organizing gatherings they referred to as Zone Trips, members dubbed the 1990 outing to Nevada: *Zone Trip #4—Bad Day at Black Rock*. The trip was officially announced as a Cacophony Society outing in the organization's newsletter *Rough Draft*, which outlined what to expect during the three-day excursion.

On Labor Day weekend, roughly 80 people gathered at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, to join a caravan accompanying the 40-foot sculpture of The Man in a rental truck, and embarked on the journey to Nevada. Upon arrival, longtime Cacophony Society member Michael Mikel drew a line in the desert to demarcate "The Zone," into which all would enter. With this act, Burning Man had officially relocated to Nevada. While they may not have realized it then, those who made the journey in 1990 would become the first citizens of what would eventually be known as Black Rock City.

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The Early Years, 1991-1995

Roughly 80 people gathered in Nevada's Black Rock Desert in 1990 for what might best be described as a really great party among friends. But word got out about the annual gathering, and attendance grew rapidly in the first five years. Fire, art, performance, music, dance—and of course the communal hoisting and burning of The Man—were all integral to the cultural fabric of the gathering from the very beginning. The temporary settlement grew exponentially: 600 people in 1992; 2,000 people in 1994; 4,000 people in 1995.

Although the gathering was held on federally managed public land under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (requiring an annual special recreational use permit), the nascent development of the community was not burdened by excessive government oversight. With such rapid population growth, organizers recognized a growing need for order, increased communication, and improved safety. A survival guide was drafted, a safety group formed, a newspaper and radio station founded, a schedule of activities released, and a communal center camp café established.

In 1994, Larry Harvey, John Law, and Michael Mikel drew up a partnership agreement, establishing the first legal entity of Burning Man. The following year, the trio registered the official Burning Man service mark with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office—the same year CNN interviewed Larry Harvey at the event. A gathering that had begun as an impromptu desert campout had reached a critical turning point.

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On the Edge of Anarchy

The organizers of early Burning Man gatherings encouraged safety and an atmosphere of self-governance in the mid 1990s, but still, a burgeoning Black Rock City (with a population of 8,000 in 1996) verged on the brink of anarchy. The casual use of firearms blended with high-speed driving, overindulgence, and the evolving, but imperfect layout of an ever-growing encampment were a recipe for chaos.

At the 1996 event—set against a fiery performance parody called HELCO that was based on the fictional story of satan overtaking Burning Man—a constellation of events occurred to suggest that the gathering had reached a pivotal turning point. That year, artist and attendee Michael Furey died as his motorcycle clipped a moving vehicle while on the playa enroute to the Burning Man camp. Three more attendees were seriously injured when their tents were hit in the middle of the night by a high-speed vehicle headed into the “rave camp” two miles away from the Man.

While that year’s injuries and fatality left many longtime attendees of the gathering shaken and stunned, worldwide press and media coverage continued to fuel interest in the event. The media described Burning Man as “the world’s most dangerous festival,” while at the same time sci-fi novelist Bruce Sterling touted Burning Man as “the new American Holiday” in his 1996 *WIRED* magazine cover story.

The year 1996 marked a pivotal turning point. Black Rock City needed organization and infrastructure to ensure the safety and wellbeing of its temporary citizenry, or the event could not happen again.

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Civic Design and the Birth of Black Rock City

Following a fatal accident in 1996, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) would not allow Burning Man to return to the Black Rock Desert. The organizers were forced to consider alternative locations and moved the event to private land; they chose the Hualapai Flat near the legendary Fly Geyser. Because the property was under the jurisdiction of Washoe County, a festival permit and site plan were needed to assure infrastructure, safety, public health and sustainability. To satisfy the county, Rod Garrett stepped in to configure Black Rock City's first civic design in 1997.

In 1998 the BLM was reluctant to allow the disorder and chaos of the event to return to public lands. The basic operations plan and city design created the previous year would be key to allaying the concerns of the federal agency. Working in collaboration with others, Garrett proposed a semi-circular grid with vehicle access, allowing for structured and organized navigation. Overlaid onto this framework were street names, the locations of toilets and medical services, and the designation and placement of theme camps. The designs and operating plan satisfied the BLM, and from 1998 forward Garrett, and the planning team of Larry Harvey, Harley K. Dubois and Will Roger Peterson, evolved the designs each year to satisfy the growing needs and increasing population of Black Rock City.

Further recognizing the practical need for a system of governance, improved logistics, and protection from liability, organizers established Burning Man 97 LLC and Burning Man 98 LLC. Six individuals—Harley K. Dubois, Marian Goodell, Larry Harvey, Michael Mikel, Will Roger Peterson, and Crimson Rose—finally settled on Black Rock City LLC in 1999, and from this point forward they became known as the modern-day co-founders of Burning Man. Their collective influence has shaped the evolution of Black Rock City and continues to be widely felt twenty years later.

[stacked vinyl text panels]

Safety and Well-Being: Black Rock Rangers

The Black Rock Rangers help to mediate public safety and provide information to citizens of Black Rock City. Founded by Michael Mikel, aka Danger Ranger, in 1992, the Black Rock Rangers are modeled after the Texas Rangers. The key to the organization's success is that the Rangers are not the "other" guys: they are the participant volunteers who work throughout the city and its perimeters to ensure the collective survival of the community. They respond to the ever-changing environment, and address situations within the community that would otherwise require outside intervention. By encouraging and facilitating communication, the Rangers promote awareness of potential hazards, from sunstroke to tent fires to extreme weather conditions.

Building Infrastructure: Department of Public Works

Like any major city, Black Rock City is built, managed, and maintained by a Department of Public Works (DPW). Since 1997, the DPW crew has been responsible for planning, surveying, building, and de-installing the basic infrastructure of Black Rock City. Not only is the DPW responsible for constructing The Man each year, they also carry on the tradition of the Golden Spike Ceremony. About a month before most people step foot on the desert, a small crew gathers to strike the center point of the city so that surveying its layout can begin. This ritual begins the annual transformation of the Black Rock Desert into Black Rock City. Hundreds of individuals—including painters, carpenters, mechanics, truck drivers, plumbers, welders, electricians, riggers, and designers—come together each year as part of the DPW crew, and many work year-round in preparation for the event.

[TEXT PANEL]

The Fabric of Black Rock City

What makes Black Rock City unique is not just its remote desert location or its annual designation as one of the largest cities in the state of Nevada for one week each year. Like all cities, Black Rock City's civic identity is shaped in large part due to shared traditions and rituals, and the embrace of a distinctive community ethos and culture.

The civic design and circular layout of Black Rock City encourages networks of communication and interaction among citizens, while also making space for communal gathering places and traditional ritual sites. Participants come together at a centrally-located structure called Center Camp Café, and mingle in Plazas and on a main walkway called the Esplanade. The Man rises from the city's center—an iconic civic touchstone for those who encircle it each year to watch it burn. The Temple serves as the spiritual heart of the city, a solemn and sacred place where people gather to express grief, cathartic transformation, and renewal.

Central to Black Rock City's cultural identity are the shared values expressed by what are known as the Ten Principles. While in some ways they resemble civic laws, they were not intended as rules of conduct dictating how people should act. Rather, they reflect the core values that have organically evolved since the earliest days of the event.

[TEXT PANEL]

The Man

The large wooden effigy—referred to fondly as the Man—is recognized around the world as the icon of Burning Man. Situated at what has been referred to as the *axis mundi* of Black Rock City, the Man sculpture is elevated and visible from all corners of the community. Since 1986, people have come together to partake in the communal ritual of burning the Man, and yet it is not easy to pinpoint its symbolic meaning. According to the Burning Man organization, “The figure represents nothing expressed or explicable, yet it is a physical and ethical guidepost...during at least one week of the year.” The fire rituals and performances associated with burning the Man have grown more elaborate over the years and are now vital to honoring and celebrating the Man during the final days of the gathering.

THE TEMPLE

If the Man is the iconic center of Black Rock City, the Temple is the City's most sacred gathering place. The Temple is where citizens come together in quiet contemplation to reflect, grieve, and rest in a process of cathartic transformation. A respectful silence often pervades the atmosphere in and around the Temple, as visitors embrace, shed tears, and leave handwritten notes or other mementos in memory of lost loved ones. At the end of the Burning Man event, the Temple is burned—a much quieter communal ritual than the celebratory incineration of the Man that occurs the night prior.

A dynamic group of volunteers come together each year and dedicate their time to building the Temple. Since 2000, seventeen different Temples have been sited on the playa—many of them designated with a theme selected by the artists who design and create it. Since 2000, California-based artist David Best has designed and overseen the creation of nine Burning Man Temples—his last and final Temple contribution was in 2016.

Art on the Playa and Beyond

Time and again, it has been said that a city's commitment to arts and culture is a sound indicator of its civic and community health. Art has always been integral to the cultural experience of Black Rock City. The year 1992 marked the first time that artists were formally invited to participate in what was, at the time, called the Black Rock Arts Festival and Burning Man Project. That same year a simultaneous desert art gathering called Desert SiteWorks was held at nearby Black Rock Hot Springs; many of its participants also made artworks at Burning Man.

By 1995, creative production and artist participation were officially acknowledged in a published art and installation program, and in 1996, the first formal Call to Artists was issued by Project Director Larry Harvey, and Arts Coordinator Crimson Rose. Considerable time and effort went into the preparation of art for the playa, and for this reason work parties, fundraisers, and gallery exhibitions were held throughout the San Francisco Bay Area in advance of the annual gathering. It wasn't until 1997 that a camp was established specifically to support artists and inform artwork placement on the playa. These early efforts evolved into the Art Department, with the organization offering financial and logistical support for the creation and transportation of artworks to Burning Man. Eventually, the Art Department grew to oversee financial and technical support of ever-larger art projects. As of 2017 the budget for competitive Honoraria was close to \$1.3 million in direct support to artists.

Starting in 2001, the Burning Man organization worked to bring interactive, civic-minded artwork to the world outside of Black Rock City through the establishment of the Black Rock Arts Foundation (BRAAF). Through their efforts, the Global Art Grants Program has given over \$750,000 in support of 164 projects in 34 states and 24 countries to date. In 2007, the Nevada Museum of Art became the first art museum in the world to purchase an artwork first created for Burning Man. BRAAF joined with Black Rock City's Art Department to form Burning Man Arts in 2014, which supports the creation of impactful, interactive artwork around the world and in Black Rock City. Through this process, community is born and civic mindedness is inspired. The mission of Burning Man Arts is to change the paradigm of art from a commodified object to an interactive, participatory, shared experience of creative expression.

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Burning Man's Global Reach: The Spread of a Cultural Ethos

Seventy thousand people now come together as citizens of Black Rock City in Nevada each year, and thousands more cannot obtain the coveted tickets needed to gain access. The population of Black Rock City has outgrown the civic boundaries of its ancestral desert home. It is fair to say that Burning Man has become a global cultural movement seeking to create a more creative and connected world. The culture is spreading like wildfire around the globe, ensuring that the fire of Burning Man never goes out.

[INTERIOR CASE LABEL]

Powering Nevada: 10 Years of Black Rock Solar

The birth of the nonprofit organization known as Black Rock Solar occurred in 2007; the same year that Burning Man's art theme was dubbed "The Green Man." That year a group of volunteers installed a 30-kilowatt solar array on the playa to power the Man Pavilion and the Man's neon.

Following the event that year, the solar array was installed to provide power to the elementary, middle, and high schools in Gerlach, Nevada—a small town located adjacent to the Black Rock Desert. Over the next 10 years, Black Rock Solar became a fixture in Nevada's green energy industry—installing over 100 solar projects at low or no cost for schools, hospitals, Native American tribes, homeless shelters, and other nonprofits statewide.

In May 2017, due to changes in how solar incentives are apportioned, Black Rock Solar transitioned into Black Rock Labs, a nonprofit that will use Burning Man cultural principles to focus on alternative power and sustainability efforts. As Black Rock Labs further develops its vision and mission, it will also play a role in the future program for Fly Ranch.

[WALL TEXT]

Into the future: An organization evolves

Since 1999, the Burning Man event held in Nevada, and all of its affiliated programs, have been managed through a limited liability corporation known as Black Rock City LLC 1999. That legal entity was established by six individuals—Harley K. Dubois, Marian Goodell, Larry Harvey, Michael Mikel, Will Roger Peterson, and Crimson Rose—who have steered the growth and maturation of the organization over the past 18 years. In 2008, through collective self-reflection, they recognized the need to change the organization’s structure to keep the culture alive beyond the lifetimes of the founders and began discussing the possibility of transitioning to a nonprofit organization.

It took over three years to navigate the process of drafting nonprofit bylaws, selecting board members, and negotiating the business deal to convert the LLC to the nonprofit. The organization is now overseen by a Board of seventeen Directors, who named Marian Goodell as its first CEO in 2013. The Board is comprised of professionals drawn from a range of backgrounds, who have all been impacted by Burning Man culture.

The establishment of Burning Man Project paved the way for the growth of the organization’s next chapter. In 2016, through philanthropic gifts from the Burning Man community, Burning Man Project purchased a 3,800-acre property known as Fly Ranch, located twenty-one miles north of Gerlach in Washoe County, Nevada. While discussions are still underway regarding the future of Fly Ranch, Burning Man Project hopes it will become a place with the potential to amplify Burning Man’s cultural impact beyond Black Rock City.