

## Event Design – An Australian Perspective

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Cultural events, rituals, ceremonies and celebrations have existed in Australia for millennia. A different range of events were seen in Australia with the arrival of Europeans just over 200 years ago. With the influx of other cultures over time there have been a range of new events and celebrations. In common, though, was that these events were designed by the communities that staged them. They were influenced by nature, by the seasons, by the communities, the people, and the world as they knew it around them.

A paradigm shift occurred for events in Australia with the increasing influence and then dominance of western culture and, perhaps more importantly, with the dominance of western economic and commercial theories and interests.

Since the 1980's events have moved away from being designed to being managed. Much of this emphasis on the development of events has come from Australian federal and state government tourism and event organisations seeing events only as a means of increasing tourist visitation, as promotional platforms and hence as a means of increasing economic development.

Smaller states and territories in Australia that have marginalized economies within a new, global marketplace still talk of an 'event led recovery'. They, with the larger states, see events as a mechanism for bringing 'new dollars' into an economy.

The South Australian government, the fifth largest state economy, for example, demands a 7:1 return on investment (ROI) for any event that it supports financially. That means, for every dollar that is invested by the government tourism body, in this case the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC) through its events bidding and management organisation, Australian Major Events (AME), they demand 7 dollars back into the state's economy. This kind of demand for economic return is mirrored across Australia. As a consequence universities such as Flinders University, where there is a specialist tourism degree and event postgraduate programs offered, are increasingly in demand to evaluate events and to come up with figures that 'prove' this return on investment. In many cases, proving such a return on investment is relatively easy, however I have seen documents from a number of events that have been more than generous with their figures in a desperate effort to prove their 'worth', exaggerating them to the point of meaninglessness.

This economic emphasis as the sole rationale for an event is, I believe, damaging events and putting the future of festivals and events – particularly those that have real social impact – at jeopardy. I refer to this process as ritual sacrifice.

And, in their rush to satisfy and mould their events to meet the demands of their 'stakeholders' (i.e. sponsors, media partners, government agencies, etc...), and, indeed, in their rush to create an event 'industry', it appears that many event managers have sacrificed the ritual element and the 'from the ground up' development of events. Many have put aside, ignored or failed to consider the conceptual development and design of their events - the very heart and soul, the *raison d'être* of any truly great event - in favour of artificially manufacturing events that try to meet the needs of 'clients' and 'stakeholders'. Events that alienate the very communities that makes up their 'target market'.

This is why event design is so important. How much more valuable to a community, a culture are events if they are conceived, developed and evaluated according to their social impact rather than solely an economic one? If events were again targeted at audiences rather than customers, where events are celebrations rather than products, where we create with and for a community that rather than for a marketplace?

Alongside this economic emphasis have come the first tentative steps towards the creation of an event industry in Australia and internationally. This second Imbizo to discuss the Event Management Body of Knowledge – or EMBOK - is part of that process.

Courses and training programs have sprung up across the globe and are working – sometimes with industry endorsement - to produce the next generation of event managers.

The majority of these courses and programs concentrate exclusively on the management processes associated with the delivery of an event product. The existing event texts in the market place are, in the main, concerned solely with the management of events. There are areas of specialization but they all revolve around the operational and logistical – sometimes strategic – planning of events. The EMBOK model itself is based on the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). They ignore completely or just mention in passing the design of events. There are a few exceptions – Julia Silvers' for one - and I note that Elsevier and Pearson are two publishers hoping to have Event Design texts out in 2006.

The notion in the majority of texts, however, is that if the event is managed well the event will be successful; it will achieve its outcomes and will perhaps be sustainable over time. The problem is that the world is littered with examples of events that have failed not because of lack of planning, but because of a lack of design.

Event managers almost always plump for the “create it to meet organisational purpose” model – this is the sacrifice of the ritual mentioned earlier - yet it is strong and appropriate event design that evidence increasingly shows us creates the best events.

Management and logistics and safety and budgets and the rest are critical to the success of a well designed event. It can be the best design in the world but if it isn't managed effectively it may well end up failing. However, events that are designed badly start out wrong and can't be made better by good management processes and a great risk management plan.

If it isn't designed well then it won't work for an audience and having the best management in the world can't fix that. It is the starting point of great events – the key to successful events.

It is time for another paradigm shift therefore, a return to events that are designed first and managed second. That are not customer, but audience orientated. That is part of the philosophical paradigm shift that seems to be occurring internationally about event design now. That we are discussing making one fifth of the Event Management Body of Knowledge concerned with Event Design bodes well for the future of festivals and events in Australia and internationally.

It is clear that there is a lack of understanding as to what exactly Event Design is. This is understandable given that it is a new concept and is not covered in any existing text. I have also observed that there is also a deal of resistance to the new, even though I would assert that Event Design is a return to an earlier paradigm.

A definition I have been playing with is:

Event Design is the creation, conceptual development and design of an event to maximise the positive and meaningful impact for the event's audience and / or participants.

I'm hopeful that we may finish the Imbizo this weekend with a more complete definition. The emphasis is clear, however, creating the event from the audience's point of view.

As Julia Silvers says in her text *Professional Event Coordination*:

“Whether they are called attendees, customers, delegates, festival-goers, guests, participants, the public, spectators, or visitors, the audience for your event is the reason your event is taking place. No audience – no event.”<sup>1</sup>

There are critical concepts necessary to understanding and working as an event designer that are different from but complimentary to those required of an event manager. Understanding these concepts makes it easy to capture the attention of the audience and keep them captured and then to deliver the message that you want that meets the goals of the event.

The audience experiences the event.

Silvers again:

“Remember that you are packaging and managing an experience. This means that you must envision that experience, from start to finish, from the guests’ point of view.”<sup>2</sup>

That approach is an Event Design approach within an event management process.

Let me give you an example...

You are managing a launch of a new product which involves a guest speaker, a lectern and microphone, perhaps a video screen behind. The Event Management approach is to think logistically and to find a venue that works operationally. You would position the lectern at this point in the room because it is close to the power supply required for the technical production.

The Event Design approach is to think how it will best work for the audience first. If that means that the lectern is now positioned over the other side of the event space then the next step, the event management step, is to find a way of effectively getting the power supply to that position. It is a matter of emphasis.

It is a creative approach and one that may event managers do work with, though perhaps not in any deliberate or articulated manner.

Linda Surbeck in *Creating Special Events* states that:

“For the purpose of staging an event, creative equals special, and the specialness and success of your event will depend in large measure on the creativity you are able to bring to it.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course events must meet organisational goals, but let’s design a great event first.

That creativity is based on the audience’s experience and the audience experiences the event through their five senses and through the layers of ritual and meaning that are enmeshed within it.

Janet Landey (quoted in Silvers) says an event environment “should have layer upon layer upon layer of imagery and details.”<sup>4</sup>

Silvers states:

“...those individual experiences add up to a collective experience...”<sup>5</sup>

So thinking about the audience as a whole is part of the approach as is thinking of the individual when designing an event.

Mark Sonder in *Event Entertainment and Production* states that:

“Engaging as many of an audience’s senses as possible makes the difference between a great event and one that has a “wow’ factor.”<sup>6</sup>

But it is not just about being creative, coming up with the next big thing, the great idea.

Sonder again:

“...it means being able to take that idea and turn it into something that is fun, exciting, and meaningful...”<sup>7</sup>

Donald Getz takes it a step further and introduces the notion of authenticity

“The essence of authenticity is its cultural meaning; the bottom line must be that host communities determine what is meaningful to them. Many events suffer from a “product orientation” – that is, they try to sell their event with little or no regard for what potential customers need, want, and will pay for.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not just about the idea, the creativity, and the involvement of the audience in a meaningful way. It is also about understanding design principles and concepts, actual techniques that can be used in an event design context to maximise the potential for success.

As an example:

We have all suffered a speaker reaching the podium, tapping a microphone, trying desperately to gain the attention of the audience who are more interested in talking amongst themselves or sipping on their free coffee or wine.

Event management has ensured that all the operational and technical requirements have been met, yet the speaker still can not be heard.

Let us look at just one of the design tools that we might use to solve the problem. We need to understand how the eye works as this is a critical sense that an audience member will use in their experiencing of the event.

The eye has 180 degree peripheral vision. In that area of vision there is a physiological response to:

- Colour, in western cultures our eyes will go to red first and see yellow/green as the brightest
- Movement
- Any change in:
  - Intensity of the light, how bright or dull it is
  - The colour of the lighting

There are also a number of psychological and / or emotional responses that we have, some that are across all cultures, some that are culture specific, that could also be used. For this example let's stay with physiological responses that are universal.

Let's use this new knowledge; these design tools, to ensure the speaker is heard.

First, let us keep the light on the podium quite low. In western cultures we would light it in blue. The area that contains the audience would be brighter lit in yellow/green or white light.

When it is time to attract the audience's attention, we would drop the light level on the audience, perhaps change it to blue and increase the brightness of the light on the stage, changing the colour away from the blue end of the spectrum.

Then, the event manager, watching the audience, waits until they have responded to these changes. They will respond. It is not a matter of choice. It is an automatic physiological response. All eyes will move to the stage if it is within an audience member's peripheral vision.

Once the eyes have started to move, the event manager taps the speaker on the shoulder and they move to the podium. Once again, the audience's eyes will be forced to follow this movement stimulus as a physiological response.

Once the speaker reaches the podium, drop the level on the audience again and increase it again on the face of the speaker. All eyes will be glued to the speaker, the room will be quiet and the speaker has already gained their attention before a word is spoken.

An event design approach.

So back to event design in Australia...

Most festivals and events in Australia are managed well. The increased awareness of event management processes, the training and educational programs that are offered, and the support for accredited event managers by funding authorities has helped, and most festivals and events in Australia are, to some extent, successful because of this.

From my review of literature and my own observations as an industry practitioner of some 30 years experience, the event creators and managers in Australia that have continued success are those that have an arts – commonly theatre - background which perhaps can be attributed to the emphasis on design and hence creativity and authenticity that is found in those industries.

Ralph Kerle, a theatre graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts working out of Melbourne has identified creative theatre processes as being essential to the delivery of successful corporate events. He has labelled his approach as “Experience Design”.

Neil Cameron, a Scotsman who has lived and worked in Australia for decades believes that it is endemic in human behaviour for structures to express meaning and that this involvement of the audience in the “peeling away of layers”<sup>9</sup> to uncover meaning is critical to the success of any event whether it be arts or cultural or a commercial product launch.

Of great interest currently, is the approach that Events Tasmania has undertaken. Tasmania is the smallest state of Australia. An island to the south of Victoria it has recognised that it is too small to compete with the major centres on the mainland, let alone major cities and markets outside of Australia. As a ‘boutique’ state, it has recognised that a “meaning making”<sup>10</sup> or event design approach will be the point of difference, the unique selling point if you will, of the events that they are involved with.

This approach has a number of identifying points:

- It is ‘bottom-up’ and involves the community at the start rather than as a stakeholder at a later date
- It involves the use of artists as animateurs, believing that artists intrinsically have an event design methodology.
- Operational and event management skills are assumed, content and creativity is the priority.
- It is solving an issue that has been driven by the competitiveness of the marketplace

Events Tasmania has been influenced by the interpretative work of American professor, Sam Ham. His work on interpretation based on cognitive theory is an area that the event industry could well investigate further.

Ham’s work on thematic interpretation discusses:

- tapping into strong, universal belief systems
- that audiences will remember a theme more than a 1,000 facts
- that audiences need connection and meaning

As Alan Rider from Events Tasmania states:

“Events are powerful, they can be the re-connector. Something that reveals something about a place that has real meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

If it is true, as Cameron asserts, that events are there not just to be consumed and that if our lives are solely filled with entertainment rather than meaningful interaction, then our culture will be 'dumbed-down', then we need to recognise that Event Design is not only essential to the success of festivals and events but to a culture that is able to sustain itself and withstand the forces of an economically driven world that, some would say, imperialistically tries to popularise, make generic the once unique aspects of our communities and societies.

It is clear that I am passionate about the topic. I am an event designer after all.

I want to make it clear, though, that I am not advocating turning away from the progress and developments that the processes of event management and event managers have brought to festivals and events and to the event industry as a whole.

As Michael Thomsett (quoted in Silvers) states:

"True creativity demands a methodical, organized approach".<sup>12</sup>

Event Design and event management go hand-in-hand. They are complimentary and one cannot exist without the other, but if successful events that are sustainable over time are what we seek then strong Event Design is clearly the starting point.

## References

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- <sup>11</sup> pers. comm. Alan Rider, Hobart, July 2005
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