

# Planning Burning Man: The Black Rock City Mirage

Kerry Rohrmeier and Scott Bassett  
University of Nevada, Reno

## Abstract

Burning Man has evolved from a spontaneous solstice celebration into the world's largest intentional community. Principle discourse philosophically implores participants to radically challenge society through internal ephemeral city creation, negotiation, and deconstruction. Applying garden city infrastructure as a regional-scale framework might seem ironic, given the chosen site's desert geography, but basic order allows participant masses to effectively collaborate in a fleeting instant city comprising varied structures, monuments, and volunteer-based public services. Pragmatic innovation occurs largely *do-ocratically* in villages and at themed camps, allowing most participants to engage in creative communal construction free from prescribed regulatory codes or administrative oversight. While the environment is annually *rebuilt*, each version is original in mocking, reversing, and reconceptualizing permanent American-style city landscapes. Field observations, however, reveal ideological rifts exist at camp scales, where spatial privatization is demonstrated through elite and isolating turnkey residential camping experiences. Burning Man Project, as an organization, adaptively mitigates these potentially critical suburbanization impacts without limiting principled self-expression. Yet, added population demands and expense for dwelling at Black Rock City are furthering it along the utopian garden city path upon which it is theoretically modeled.

**Key words:** Burning Man, Black Rock City, Garden City, and Radical Planning

## Planning Burning Man: The Black Rock City Mirage

*"Burning Man is an incredible canvas for self-expression, but don't limit yourself. The place where you are right now is even more hungry for creativity, joy and change."* —Julian Cash<sup>1</sup>

INSTANT CITIES ARE as historically diverse as the motivated, self-reliant settlers who fought wilds and wilderness to build them. Isolation and greed at fervent pace sparked the flourish of a truly unique permanent city—San Francisco—a seaport growing from just 400 inhabitants to several thousand within months of Sierra Nevada gold discovery. San Francisco's success relied, in part, upon disparate immigrants im-

mediately forming new and blended cultural traditions until wealth, technology, and creativity established a mature, distinct society.<sup>2</sup> As with most rapidly expanding autonomous places, it evolved organically—chaotically budding and spreading atop its rolling contours until forming a bay-bounded compact metropolis. Burning Man, a historically San Francisco phenomenon, now forms its annual ephemeral city in Nevada's Black Rock country but represents unexpectedly strong opposition aspects, and paradoxical cases, to the natural trend toward disorder in urban form. Currently in its second decade since relocating to the remote desert site, an exploration of "Black Rock City" (a toponym dubbed by event participants) has origins, functions, and purposes that reveal ideological transformations and physical manifestations similar to the original suburban garden city as proposed by Ebenezer Howard at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Fanatical demand for Black Rock City's gated utopia makes relevant a reexamination of the link between urban theory and workable design, generating debate over that which is unplanned and anarchistic versus the ordered, engineered city. Given that visionary ideology dictates experimentation within physical constraints, the regional result is fundamentally akin to Letchworth Garden City with a bohemian San Francisco flavor. As planning moved progressively toward equitable inclusivity, it remains important to remember that its former tradition held steadfast in the idea that what is built would, in turn, shape behavior. With this important paradigmatic leap forward, planning in practice has generally replaced promoting a conceptual "ideal" with greater procedural regulatory compliance. In contrast, as an organization, the Burning Man Project operates as a private nonprofit entity free from public-process entanglements within its gates, and is able to more easily implement modernist-era infrastructure as a tool to promote safe interactions with the harsh physical site, while still simultaneously encouraging city development into diverse theme camps, communal villages, and magnificent artworks. Yet, findings from a six-year longitudinal participant-observation and ethnography suggest the city is a mirage of theoretical fissures between communal ideology and elite residential manifestations. These visible examples, coupled with escalating ticket prices and increased population pressures, fuel exclusivity no longer representative of multicultural San Francisco, and have the Burning Man Project organization scrambling to mitigate erosive negative perceptions about community along with endeavoring in a long-term rechanneling of growth. This aspiration toward global cultural movement is an acceptance networked by year-round virtual forums and punctuated by active non/sanctioned regional event gatherings, thus allowing Burning Man to grow well beyond current city population

limits. Growth shortfalls and failures are felt universally by cities, and preserving ideology (particularly at highly localized scales) can be hard-fought battles for intentional places. In reviewing the Utopian planning tradition, struggles at Black Rock City—with its strong theoretical ties to the model Garden City—appear emblematic of a typified suburban trajectory.

### Burning Man

Burning Man began in 1986 as a spontaneous summer solstice gathering among friends, led by Larry Harvey and Jerry James, at Baker Beach, San Francisco. With no official purpose, their symbolic "Man" burn, which intended to be cathartic, proved personally meaningful enough to attendees to become annual tradition-worthy. Drawing subsequent exponential increases in attendance meant that within only four years, the capacity for public fire safety was exceeded, and so organizers began a search for a feasible alternate site suitable for multistory wooden effigy immolation (Figure 1). John Law of San Francisco's Cacophony Society introduced Harvey and James to the Black Rock Desert during an anarchic "zone trip" during Labor Day weekend. Proving suitable, the vast, flat alkali playa was selected as Burning Man's new annual home.<sup>4</sup> This shift was significant, and in essence enacted a secular pilgrimage from everyday life to challenge participants to survive in unrelenting exposure to extreme temperature variations and corrosive dust storm conditions over eight days each year. While inhabiting this place,



Figure 1.—Cargo Cult Man effigy burn, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2013.  
Source: Francine Melia.

Burning Man participants found sufficient time and impetus to generate a vibrant heterotopian city climaxed by two ritual burns. Twenty-five years at the desert in total have revealed massive increases in popularity, with 2013's Cargo Cult theme drawing a record 69,613 participants. Yet irrelevant of population size historically, the City remains a successful expression of an avant-garde aesthetic completely forming anew from and vanishing back into dust.

Burning Man is a philosophical paradox.<sup>5</sup> Fundamentally, it is a postmodern experiment where participants independently and autonomously shape their immediate environments, per aspirational and operational community ethos codified as the "Ten Principles," yet the larger bounded city is constructed by an organization having a greater social purpose that is implemented in modernist form. Where every participant at Black Rock City is considered to be a citizen, arrival grants rights not found in "default world" cities (those permanent places existing outside Black Rock City fences). Assuming participants vertically interpret the principal responsibilities as outlined in the preparatory *Survival Guide* distributed to each ticketholder, these intentions are then (re)distributed horizontally about the community for wholesale acceptance, reinterpretation, reframing, or contestation,<sup>6</sup> thus allowing varied manifestations of Burning Man's guidance for radical inclusion, self-reliance, self-expression, immediacy, participation, decommodification, gifting, civic responsibility, communal effort, and leave no trace to blend the event's three basic tenets—city, community, and art.<sup>7</sup>

Principles describe and suggest, not enforce, behavior and generally dispute individualist American society by intermingling and uniting divergent heterodoxic tendencies.<sup>8</sup> Through chance encounter and creativity, participants use space to play out and perform alternative experiences, identities, and spiritualities.<sup>9</sup> While seemingly able to achieve a purer democracy, the organization known as Burning Man Project instills top-down, consensus-based decisions via its Board of Directors; yet, field successes rely on a liberal "do-ocratic" and cooperative approach for formation of Black Rock City by empowering participants to select and execute roles and responsibilities for themselves, thus infusing the residential and artistic landscape as grassroots-style development. It is important to recognize that, unlike permanent "default world" cities, here ticket-purchased citizenship guarantees no decision-making stake in larger city planning efforts.

"You have to do something. If you see a civic need, and begin doing something to supply it, you get incorporated into the project—the project is different from the event—you get incorporated into our or-

ganization. We absorb resources that way. And when that happens, at every level of this endeavor, we work by consensus. That means you have a voice, and if you know what you're talking about, and you actually do something, then you will acquire an authentic voice. If you accomplish much, then you'll gain a greater voice."<sup>10</sup>

In "doing" individual participants, theme campers, and village residents engage in creative communal construction free from bureaucratic limitations and cumulatively manifest founder Larry Harvey's vision for the world's largest intentional community.

### Garden City Replica

Larry Harvey is hardly the first man to achieve lofty urban ideological aspirations; Ebenezer Howard devoted much of his life a century prior to making his garden city vision a reality. In creating one of the first modern new towns, an antidote to industrialized London tenements, Howard aimed for humanist reform of London's contemporary social disorder through balanced utopianism and pragmatism.<sup>11</sup> In a time before planning legislation or professionals existed, Howard reasoned inductively. Upon returning to London, Howard adapted a morally virtuous yet deterministic City Beautiful plan to marry urban employment opportunities with pristine rural beauty and healthful living conditions. With grand axes and inspiring monumental foci, Howard envisioned the springing up of a new civilization.<sup>12</sup> *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Reform* (1898) synthesizes more than a century of literature and experimentation on urban ideology and design practice, which culminates in a comprehensive reformist Garden City to be rooted in rural place and strong community values.<sup>13</sup>

The Garden City, as theorized, prioritized social processes over physical form but relied on meticulously sited concentric rings for efficient, accessible transportation and a complementary heterogeneous land-use schema. Considered to be one of the earliest modernist intentional zoning trials, population parameters were set at a maximum 32,000 persons clustered in a 1,000-acre plot buffered by 5,000 acres of cultivated agriculture and green belts.<sup>14</sup> Important public facilities were focused at the core and surrounded by a Grand Avenue with sizable plaza. Encapsulated by radiating inner rings that prioritized the public realm—this core served as a community hub, marketplace, and educational demonstration facility. Midway streets provided varying residential densities and typologies connected by cooperative kitchens. Heavier industrial uses were reserved for the outermost periphery, where multi-modal linkages connected the garden city to the

larger world beyond. Perimeter green belts functioned not only to bound growth and maintain isolation but also to concentrate and intensify community life within.

Garden cities, originally designed as cooperatives, required philanthropic land speculation to fund initial construction, though community governance was reserved for a local, bipartisan, resident-elected board. As proposed, rental revenue generated from increasing land values was intended to repay original absentee investors until residents earned sufficient wages while working farms, factories, shops, or in public service positions to collectively own their land. Howard idealized a self-sufficient economy, having a high quality of life attributable to short commute distances and a preserved countryside.

Black Rock City may offer a derivative vision, but Burning Man Project maintains a similar mission, “to produce positive change in the world,” by designing an alternative space, albeit temporary, that fosters its grand objective—something that has been historically challenging to intentional places.<sup>15</sup> While the Burning Man Project’s official website details city history, little record is available surrounding which influential Utopian model should be credited for inspiring Black Rock City’s regional design—though it is clearly visible, given that the degree of order is highly geometric.<sup>16</sup> Produced originally to satisfy commercial, profit-earning recreational activity Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Special Event Permit requirements, the official site plan was the brainchild of Rod Garrett, Larry Harvey’s long-time friend and a professional architect/planner. In drafting a simplistic schematic reflecting the first temporary autonomous desert zone trip, Garrett’s “rounding the campfire” design demarcated centralized gathering and camping hubs and outlined basic transportation routes (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> In striking contrast to its anarchistic foundations, submitting an official plan codified an innately protective circular form and represented a marked leap toward today’s highly organized contemporary Black Rock City.

Tragic accidents, followed by lawsuits, one involving a motorcyclist and another an injury related to a motor vehicle running into an occupied tent during 1996’s Inferno-themed event, fostered greater BLM regulatory oversight. Organizers not only added a printed “limitation of liability” disclaimer to each Burning Man ticket, but also chose to pedestrianize and control camp densities rather than continue allowing automobile-connected campsite sprawl.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the following year ushered in a one-time experiment with alternative form held on a privately owned parcel (Figure 3).

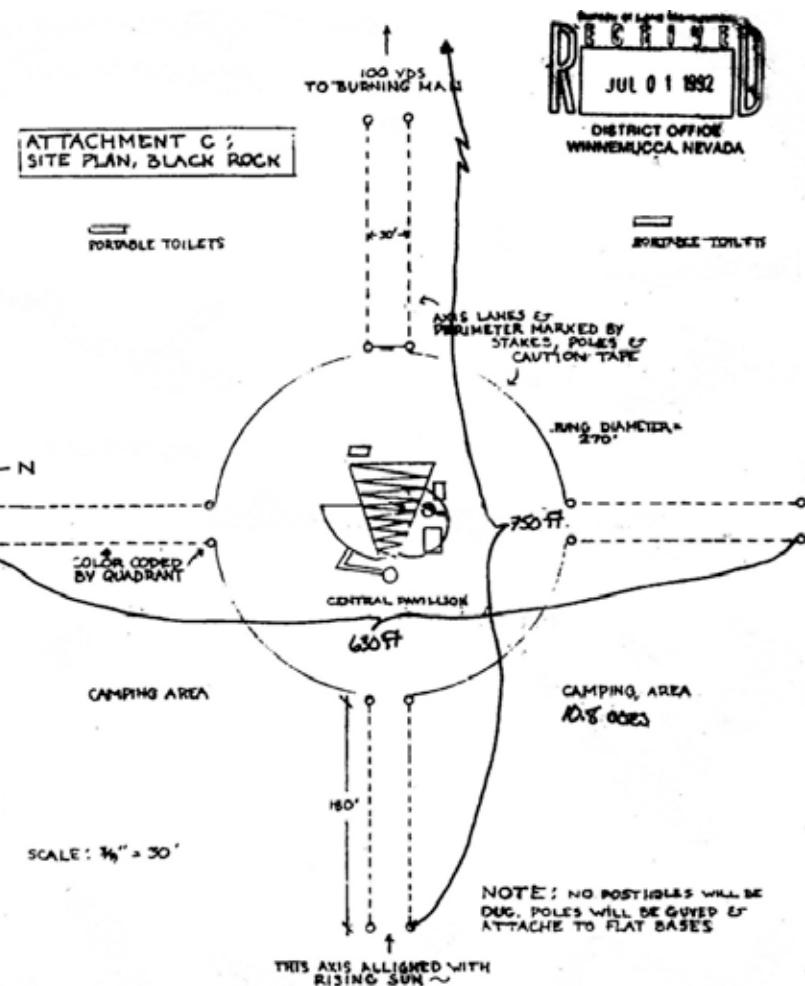


Figure 2.—BLM-required Burning Man site plan, Pershing County, Nevada 1992.  
Source: Burning Man Project.

This newly engineered design with five bisected arced streets created city blocks (a Washoe County, Nevada, Community Development Department requirement for navigable emergency access) that faced outward onto a large, open public plaza centered around the nondescript “Man” symbol. The effigy, as a monument, has always been paramount and is granted the centermost and highest prominence in the city, regardless of design trials. These lessons have served as a significant intermediate step forward toward the currently adopted form, and with return to the Black Rock, Garrett applied his concentric ring morphology—similar to the garden city layout,

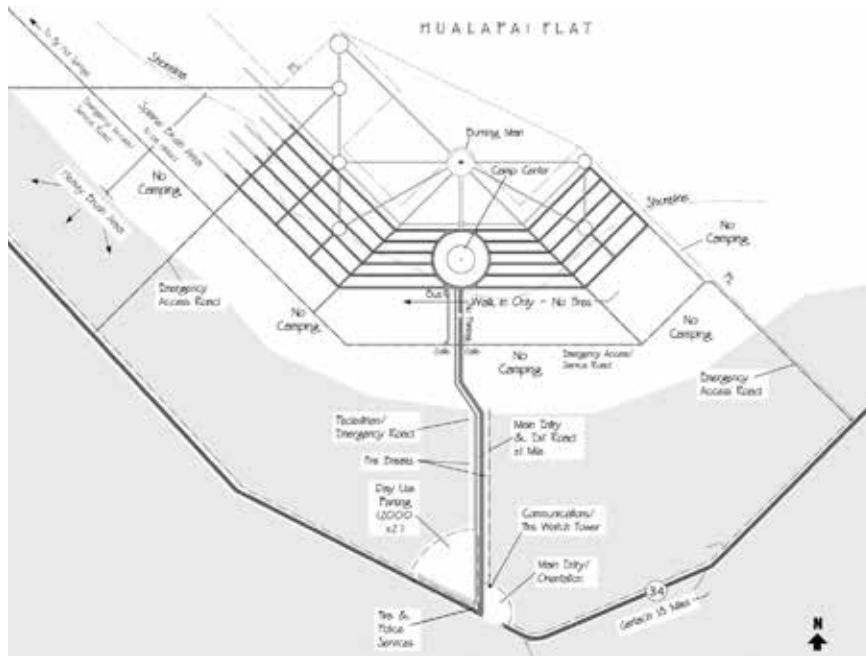


Figure 3.—Black Rock City site plan, Washoe County 1997. Source: Burning Man Project.

and it has since remained intact—with only slight modifications by Burning Man Project each year to accommodate population growth (Figure 4).

The current plan consists of thirteen curvilinear streets (named alphabetically), bisected by wide radial boulevards located at thirty-minute axes, a safe clock-like wayfinding feature that funnels participants toward the Man's plinth. Street life is vibrant at Black Rock City, with the innermost Esplanade best described as a reversed Main Street lined by a leisure-oriented land-use mix continuously occupied by pedestrians, bicyclists, and “mutant vehicles” (also referred to as “artcars,” these elaborately ornamented motorized vehicles no longer resemble their original automobile bases) (Figure 5).

Black Rock City is peppered with notable, yet less visible, planning achievements. Optional zoning now takes place via the “Placement” process, akin to a Community Services Department charged to locate campsites by pre-application review and approval. Geared toward registered themed camps and agglomerative villages, assignments are based upon proposed land uses, space needs, and demonstrable principle contributions. Partly a social engineering tool, placement aims to site complementary uses in a manner that fosters diversity and social interaction but also mitigates sound impacts

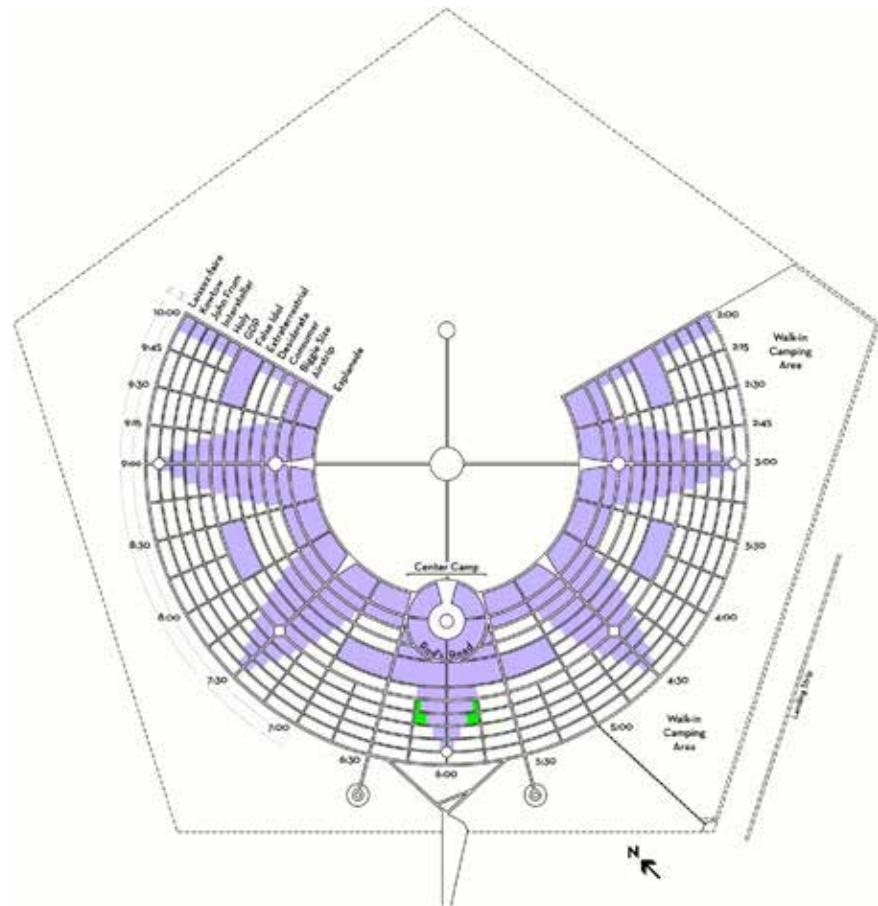


Figure 4.—Black Rock City site plan, Pershing County, Nevada 2013. Source: Burning Man Project.

and separates adult activities from family-friendly camps. Altogether, this residential urban core becomes a densely clustered, 1.5-square-mile, urban experiment within the larger 5.5-square-mile city limits contained within 9 lineal miles of T-Bar and nylon web fencing. At its peak, the city appears as a stark contrast against its 440 square miles of isolated, rugged mountain Black Rock wilderness backdrop.

Center Camp, located at 6:00 and Rod’s Road, named to commemorate Black Rock City’s passing city architect/planner, is a recursive space (a reduced replication of the larger event) and notable official community hub (Figure 6). In close proximity to the Esplanade, Center Camp remains set back so as to accommodate pedestrian and bicycle congestion plus ample room to access health and human services—where, according to Burning



Figure 5.—Mutant vehicle at Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2011. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.



Figure 6.—Inside Center Camp, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2013. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

Man Project, medical care and emergency response times are faster than those found in default cities and are provided at no additional cost to participants. The city center showcases offshoot community services such as Black Rock Solar (clean energy), Black Rock Arts Foundation (public art), and Burners without Borders (disaster relief); all mission-based outreach non-profits formed from or by Burning Man participants in response to perceived default world shortfalls.

Just beyond the core, longitudinal blocks reveal a decreasing population-density gradient from Esplanade outward toward the perimeter Gate Road. While the entire landscape is predominantly composed of single-story developments, higher camp population densities and even a few high-rise style buildings (Figure 7) are observable between Esplanade and the mid city ("G" Street) and along multinucleated sectors along the 3:00 and 9:00 Boulevards, after which blocks shorten from 400+ feet down to 200 feet, and have lower residential densities, neighborhood pocket parks, and small public plazas. In place of infill, growth has been historically accommodated through additional new ring roads found at the periphery. While theoretically possible, purposely contemporary Black Rock City is not a complete circle because functionally, the notched opening allows for passing westerly



Figure 7.—High-rise camping, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2011. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

winds but also represents a metaphorical opening for “Deep Playa” [sculpture garden] exploration (Figure 8). Larry Harvey sees this as reforming default social insularity:

“We’ve told people: okay, you’ve got your tight little world of your mates and your friends, and you’re bonded together—that’s like a lot of sub-cultures in our world—but we’ve said don’t close the circle. You cannot close the circle. You’ve got to leave it open so you can bridge out to a larger world, so that you can credit the world outside your circle with as much reality as you see in those around you. And, indeed, so that you can feel that the great world has the same reality, the same sense of inner reality that you feel in yourself.”<sup>19</sup>



Figure 8.—*Truth in Beauty* sculpture, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2013. Source: Francine Melia.

## Black Rock Garden City

Black Rock City, like Howard’s model garden city, has been durable in adapting to changing geographic and temporal circumstances. In part,

34

The California Geographer ■ Volume 54, 2015

due to near-identical physical form, the garden city model now serves as a slightly smaller version of contemporary Black Rock City (Figure 9). Black Rock City has a larger populace but is still physically smaller in diameter.

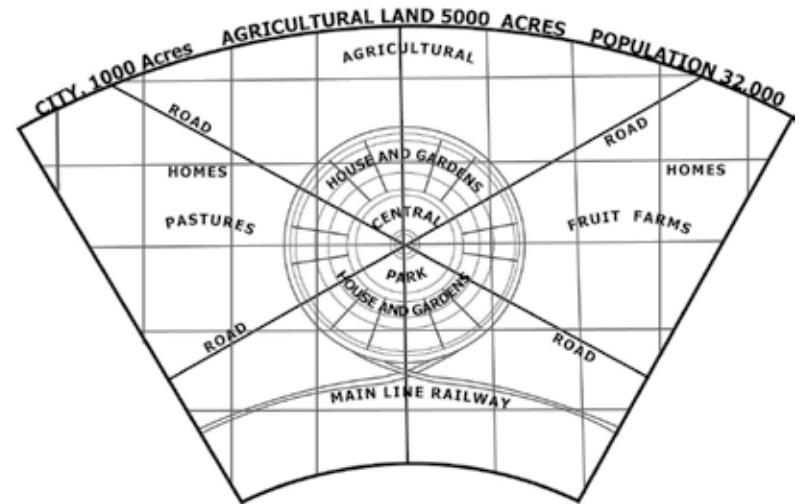
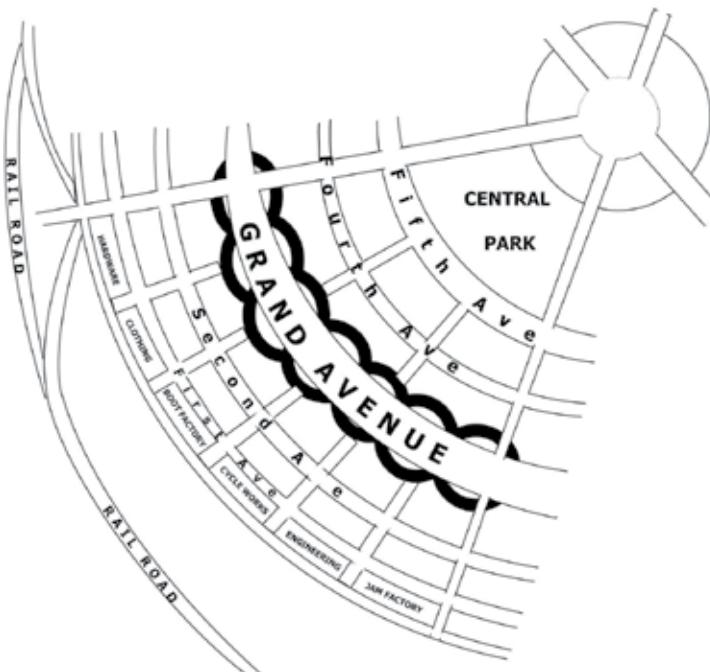


Figure 9.—Ebenezer Howard garden city concept, recreated from To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Reform, 1898.

Drafted prior to the motor age, Howard’s boulevards serve as a good plan for Black Rock City’s automobile restrictions by providing radial corridors expanding out from the center. This divides the entire area into equal wards from which more distinct neighborhoods have developed with return trips (Figure 10). Beyond superficial similarities, both examples maintain town centers and community hubs. Expressing self-sufficient ideals, these interior cores function for market transactions even though they are non-monetarily gifted at Burning Man (with ice stations and Center Camp Café’s coffee and tea offerings as exceptions) proceeds from the sale of goods benefit the local Gerlach Elementary School. Economically, both Black Rock City and Howard’s garden city are distributivist experiments with cooperation as the dominant moral imperative. In addition, community-based political aspirations remain unique in that charitable arms were responsible for managing and granting city functions, such as the Black Rock Arts Foundation selection and [partial] grant funding of many large, on-site installations. Howard feared too much commercial activity and relegated limited land-use availability to commerce, thereby constricting competition and reinforcing communalism. Benefiting from impermanence, Burning Man attempts a further radicalized market approach by declaring decommodification and gifting principles, wherein persuasive advertising or exploitation is subverted and monetary

Rohrmeier and Bassett: Planning Burning Man: The Black Rock City Mirage 35



*Figure 10.—Ebenezer Howard's street network, recreated from To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Reform, 1898.*

exchanges are condemned.<sup>21</sup> Black Rock City provides participants space to practice radical self-expression reflected through productive property, not land ownership, in an effort to form creative capital to be later burned or disassembled.<sup>22</sup> By practicing heterodoxy, garden city residents, like “burners” (a nickname given to Burning Man participants) were mocked in the popular press as “a whole colony of eccentrics making an exhibition of themselves.”<sup>23</sup>

While no constructed garden city matches Ebenezer Howard's complete concept, the first built—Letchworth Garden City, North Hertfordshire—came nearest to ideal.<sup>24</sup> As an effective promoter, Howard was able to assemble an initial thousand permanent residents (many of whom were artists) to relocate there based on cooperative community fundamentals. In addition, manufacturers followed because of lower taxes and rental rates, combined with opportunities for additional floor space—a growth tactic still employed in planning practice at the suburban periphery. Skeptical of intentional failings, Howard defied development norms by devising rent-rate financing, with land to be held collectively in a trust for the common good upon debt payoff, in an effort to deter capitalist land speculation and urban sprawl.<sup>25</sup>

Letchworth as an urban experiment ultimately failed because population shortfalls lacked profits required to reinvest in necessary physical infrastructure and basic intentional programming, along with perceived citizen over-involvement in political realms. Issues were compounded by unaffordable, family-sized housing options, and by blue-collar manufacturing employees being largely excluded to fragmented slum dwellings located beyond city limits. This inadvertently created a homogeneous elite of skilled, middle-class professionals dependent on high wages available only back in London.<sup>26</sup> At the expense of inclusive social goals, early growth plateaued, and after a quarter century, fewer than half of the required 30,000 persons resided there.<sup>27</sup> Legal and business tensions led to Howard's early removal from the Letchworth decision-making processes, which allowed political will to shift away from the founding vision. By no longer stressing self-containment as important, the ideal was quickly dismantled. Usable model components, predominantly residential site-planning and zoning tools, instead gave rise to the eponymous garden suburb—an intermediate satellite city emphasizing regional design without communality or industry. In time, open spaces were subdivided and backfilled, reshaping the once-buffered Letchworth to become a victim of suburban continuity. Outside professional planning, garden suburbs devolved to be a generic term synonymous with any residential development promoting generous greenbelt allocations, such as those pervasive in most American cities.<sup>28</sup>

Planners and architects might never immediately realize their actions, but with time, professionals become well versed in the negative societal and environmental consequences associated with poorly planned suburbanization. Only by parsing out usable smart-growth lessons from Howard's original model—or, more specifically, its compact regional form—do urban disciplines now widely understand why promoting higher-density mixed uses within an efficient transportation network can encourage pedestrian, bicycle, and transit modalities. When combined with large residential populations living in close proximity, overall gains in public safety and social interaction can be achieved.<sup>29</sup> Black Rock City has no doubt benefited from implementation of these best practices, but Burning Man's greatest asset surpasses Howard's vision in attempting to create a larger intentional society, not just a model environment, by promoting diversity, compactness, sustainability, civic involvement, and communality—meaning, Black Rock City in theory serves as a culturally unique approach to twenty-first century garden city planning.

## Canary in the Coal Mine

Black Rock City's built environment can best be described as dynamic, changing from event to event, but always rooted in utilitarian foundations.<sup>30</sup> Comfortable protection from the harsh desert climate drives a basic need for portable shelter, whether primitive tent, prefab dwelling, or shaded monumental sculptures. Evolving from participatory habitus, practical experiences, experimentation and creativity, interactivity, function, and intent dictate manifested forms and facilitate art becoming architecture and architecture becoming art (Figure 11).<sup>31</sup>

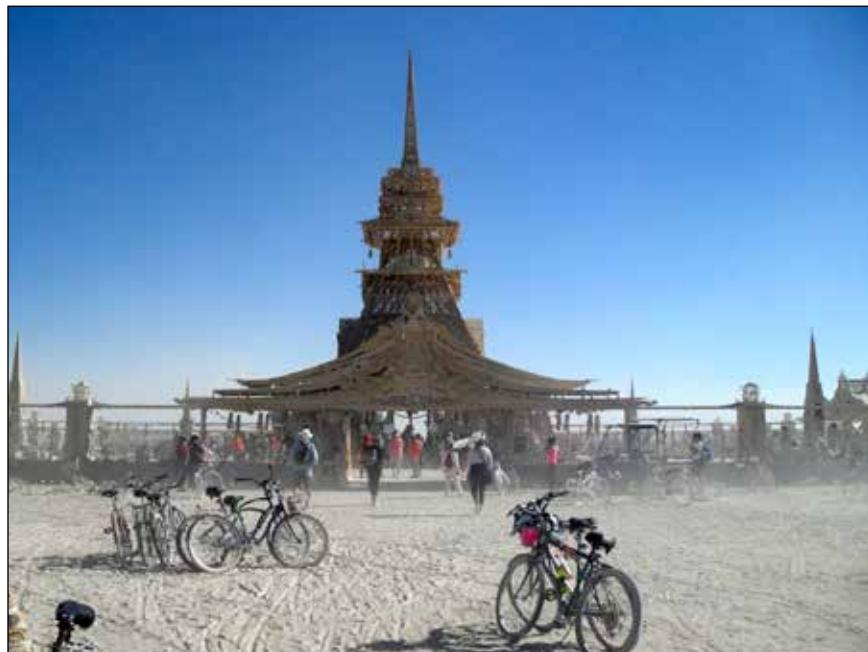


Figure 11.—Temple of Juno by David Best, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2012. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

While core urban settlement exemplifies a “desirable” historic downtown location, much of the city comprises single-level developments, instilling intrinsic egalitarian value to any selected campsite. Yet, when participants are out interacting with the public realm—artwork and the temple as examples—they carry even fewer material ties (Figure 12).

Since installation of Christmas Camp, the first “theme camp” that appeared at Black Rock in 1993, sparked a dramatic shift in participant dwelling preference, nearly half (48 percent) of all participants now organize themselves into whimsical or specialized motif theme camps and larger multi-



Figure 12.—La Llorona Art on the Plaza, Black Rock City, Nevada, September 2012. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

theme camp “villages” (those having 150+ participants, a mayoral point of contact, and a defined mission statement).<sup>32</sup> Completely optional, pre-placed theme camps and villages are also granted beneficial early arrival for select members. Variety in the built environment has prompted Larry Harvey to select an annual Burning Man theme to more cohesively tie the cultural landscape, yet recurring camp names often reflect status or group interests—such as “Silicon Village” or “Martini Village”—that tether their members to an elevated social strata.<sup>33</sup> Anonymity and identity experimentation are fostered when participants adopt “playonyms” in place of their given names and are encouraged to dress in eccentric logo-free fashions. Further enacted decommodification and gifting principles aim to create equality among participants. While residential architecture is still predominantly composed of tents, yurts, geodesic domes, or other creatively pieced-together imported materials, there is a growing economic contrast with those residing in motor homes or recreational vehicle dwellings.<sup>34</sup> Housing types can range from basic walk-in tent camps and simplistic tarp lean-to shelters up to million-dollar recreational vehicles (termed “land yachts”). In recent years, minimal-cost, easy-to-transport-and-assemble, prefabricated, folding hexayurts appear to be the emerging, single-family housing trend (Figure 13). These shelters are constructed by taping together Tuff-R or R-Max insulation sheets and can be outfitted using battery-powered, evaporative coolers.<sup>35</sup>

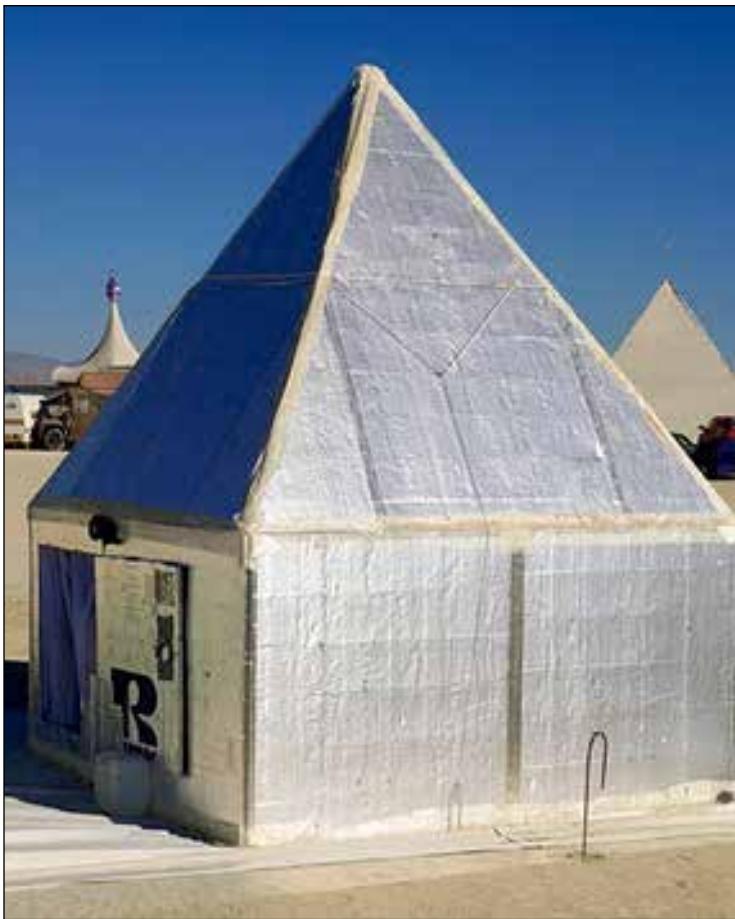


Figure 13.—Hexayurt with evaporative cooling, Black Rock City, September 2012. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

For the nocturnal participants interviewed, this dark dwelling type is considered to be particularly advantageous.

Visible social strata nearly vanish beyond camp boundaries, but challenges exist as the city and camps continue to grow, because participant space requirements necessitate residing near the periphery. Here people prefer to spend their daylight hours near camp homes rather than venturing out to see other neighborhoods. In this way, these suburbanites reserve their commute energies (whether on foot, by bicycle, or riding mutant vehicle) for travel into the city center as an evening and nighttime entertainment destination. Unlike most default cities whose cores grew blighted and dangerous as residents decentralized,

contemporary Black Rock City maintains a twenty-four-hour vibrant downtown by providing a highly engaging, interactive public sphere.

At the edge, participants manifest varied built environments leading to juxtaposed opposing opinions toward residential suburbanization. Some hearken Burning Man's early culture-jamming influences (as witnessed during the Metropolis-themed event) where camps satirized mass-produced, artificially ornamented single-family tract homes (Figure 14).<sup>36</sup> Still, numerous others continue to embrace its easy, comfortable appeal, thereby plotting along a typified postwar American city trajectory where distance from the center reveals marginal lands lacking control where it is most frequently needed.



Figure 14.—Mocked tract house near Black Rock City periphery, August 2012. Source: Francine Melia.

Camps arranged with long, unarticulated street façades provide limited connection to surrounding public spaces. Social interactions are reserved for private gatherings held inside private spaces or in a secured courtyard. This orientation creates a dead corner affecting the larger neighborhood and is not strictly limited to residences but also commercial uses (Figure 15).

In light of this, Burning Man Project issued its first and only design guideline specifically targeting "turnkey" (also referred to as "plug-n-play") vendors, who develop pre-constructed suburbanized camps to break up featureless recreational-vehicle street fronts and "endeavor to provide passersby with some form of public amenity, especially at intersections, which are traditionally highly interactive gathering places. Everyone desires privacy, but providing others with attractive public space is considered good etiquette"



Figure 15.—Strip-style Corner Coffee Shop, Black Rock City, Nevada, August 2012.  
Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.

(Figure 16).<sup>37</sup> Yet, these same camp placements and orientations were observed following policy implementation, revealing vendor/participant disregard for philosophical ideology and changing residential preference, most likely tied to greater affluence.



Figure 16.—Tract home development (left) compared with suburban camp near Black Rock City periphery (below), August 2011. Source: Kerry Rohrmeier.



It is not surprising to find examples of suburbanization, given that BLM now restricts city population size, along with Burning Man Project's technology-based ticket distribution mechanism and the significant preparation costs,

all of which are steep entry barriers that fuel greater exclusivity (diametrically opposed to intentional inclusive principles). Yet, ideological radical self-expression means anyone is free to live how s/he chooses at Black Rock City, and there is no “right” way to participate. Perceived self-reliance and communal effort dilution associated with turnkey camping is contentious among the Burning Man participant community, and it is also difficult to restrict, given its variety. Some vendors are also participants who offer just basic infrastructure services necessary, so that fellow campers’ time can be spent focusing on beneficial, interactive art projects or larger community offerings. Other vendors are tour operators developing profitable business models based on commodifying opulent experiences that provide the space and setup of motorhomes, port-a-potties, outdoor showers, meals, electricity, and potable water but also contain elaborate provisions and amenities such as shuttled transportation (via private airplane or helicopter), gourmet chefs and staff, security, live performances, decorated bicycles, costumes, satellite communications, and pre-registered mutant vehicles. Turnkey camping differentiates class among participants and erodes egalitarian efforts. Burning Man Project is actively involved in an ongoing dialog with vendors to minimize community impacts, but increased turnkey volumes are placing additional demand on the organization’s Departments of Public Works, Gate & Perimeter, and Placement volunteer resources by requiring added planning and coordination efforts year-round. This in turn reinforces the greater regulation and oversight, design intervention, and accompanying fees, only further perpetuating looming equity issues.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The ideological and regional design linkages between Black Rock City and Ebenezer Howard’s garden city remain clear. While the first garden city ultimately lacked profit and suburbanized after failing to attract the population and heterogeneous economic conditions necessary to maintain basic, intentional community tenets, Black Rock City has the good fortune that these conditions do not apply because of ephemerality and increased participant demand. The success of Black Rock City provides an unexpected case for revisiting good city form, and has developed at a time when cohesive, modernist planning approaches are professionally unpopular and instead evince discontinuity and fragmented landscapes.<sup>39</sup> With an efficient, compact, easy-to-negotiate plan, replicating order allows for public safety at a harsh physical site and will likely allow the accommodation of well over 70,000 future participants with minimal revision, and thus continue to rank as Nevada’s tenth largest city, albeit fleeting. Threats to the city exist, as temporal morphological trends reveal a gradual evolution toward Rohrmeier and Bassett: Planning Burning Man: The Black Rock City Mirage 43

suburbanization found at the periphery, though Burning Man Project maintains it is more concerned with creating a social movement than enacting a visual design exercise. In recent years, steep entry barriers have further fueled exclusivity, and an influx of greater affluence has increased pressure for turnkey experiences, which visibly can, though not all do, signal a loss of larger-city intentions. Left unmitigated, these factors may accelerate an expected garden city trajectory from distributivist experiment to controlled, planned development.

Perhaps knowing whether Burning Man touches participants in a meaningful way, or if just being there simply fills an intrinsic desire to belong, should no longer matter, but rather the fact that tens of thousands of participants each year continue to want to dwell in Black Rock City, even if principle failings provide early warnings of an unappealing intentional-city fate. As an organization somewhat hindered by its own ideals, Burning Man, under direction of its original visionary, recognizes this threat and pays significant consideration to annual planning endeavors, aiming to transition itself well beyond playa limits to several smaller, regionally sanctioned events, and to continued online social community growth. Whatever the future holds, Black Rock City remains a historically powerful contemporary cultural artifact and a reminder not to underestimate the unlikely few whose ideas have shaped the cities of many.

## Endnotes

- 1 Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).
- 2 Kerry Rohrmeier and Paul Starrs, "The Paradoxical Black Rock City: All Cities are Mad," *Geographical Review* (forthcoming).
- 3 Debra Spitulnik, "The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6 no. 2 (2008): 161–187.
- 4 Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Selcuk Balamir, "More Than Dust: The Burning Man Festival" unpublished manuscript (2011).
- 5 Rachel Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man* (London: Seagull Books, 2010); Brian Doherty, *This is Burning Man: The Rise of the New American Underground* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2004); and Matt Wray, "Burning Man and the Rituals of Capitalism," *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life* 21 (September 2005): online.
- 6 Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

- 7 Larry Harvey, "La Vie Boehme—A History of Burning Man." Lecture at The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February 24, 2000.
- 8 Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* 3rd ed (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002); Peter Hall and Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1998); Edgar Bonham-Carter, "Planning and Development of Letchworth Garden City," *Town Planning Review* 21 no. 4 (1951): 262; Peter Batchelor, "Origin of the Garden City Concept of Urban Form," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 28 no. 3 (1969): 184–200; and Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999).
- 9 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (London, 1902). Reprinted, ed. with preface by F. J. Osborn and Introductory Essay by Lewis Mumford (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1965).
- 10 Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977).
- 11 Stephen V. Ward, *The Garden City: Past, Present and Future* (Oxon, UK: Spoon Press, 1999).
- 12 Burning Man, 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 13 Metropol Blog, 2010. <http://blog.burningman.com/category/metropol>
- 14 Katherine Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Burning Man 2012–2016 Special Recreation Permit Preliminary Environmental Assessment, 2012.
- 15 Burning Man, 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 16 Metropol Blog, 2010. <http://blog.burningman.com/category/metropol>
- 17 Katherine Chen, *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Burning Man 2012–2016 Special Recreation Permit Preliminary Environmental Assessment, 2012.
- 18 Katherine Chen, "Community in the Nevada Desert" Environmental Design Research Proceedings (2003): 56–61; Rachel Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).
- 19 Larry Harvey, "La Vie Boehme—A History of Burning Man." Lecture at The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February 24, 2000.
- 20 D. S. Black, "Burning Man as Ephemropolis and the Refusal of Meaning," 1998 paper presented at North American Interdisciplinary Conference on Environment and Community, University of Nevada, Reno, 2010.
- 21 Robert V. Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man." *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 no. 1 (2002): 20–38.
- 22 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays of Art and Literature* (London: Blackwell, 1993); Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (London: Routledge, 2004)

- 23 Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).
- 24 Denis Hardy, "Garden Cities: Practical Concept, Elusive Reality," *Journal of Planning History* 4 no. 4 (2005): 383–391.
- 25 Stephen V. Ward, *The Garden City: Past, Present and Future* (Oxon, UK: Spoon Press, 1999).
- 26 Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 27 Alan March, Democratic Dilemmas, Planning and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City," *Planning Perspectives* 19 no. 4 (2004): 409–433.
- 28 Denis Hardy, "Garden Cities: Practical Concept, Elusive Reality," *Journal of Planning History* 4 no. 4 (2005): 383–391.
- 29 Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1965).
- 30 Jack Hawkins, AIA. Personal interview. Black Rock City, Nevada, August 31, 2012.
- 31 Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, *Afterburn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 32 Burning Man. 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 33 Earl Shidler, AIA. Personal interview. Black Rock City, Nevada, August 31, 2012.
- 34 Burning Man. 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 35 Phillip Glade. *Black Rock City, NV: The Ephemeral Architecture of Burning Man* (San Francisco: Real Paper Books, 2011).
- 36 Rachel Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).
- 37 Burning Man, 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 38 Burning Man, 2013. <http://www.burningman.com>
- 39 David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Emily Talen and Cliff Elis, "Beyond Relativism: Reclaiming the Search for Good City Form" *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 22 no. 1 (2002): 36–49.