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“Lessons for creative cities from Burning Man:

How organizations can sustain and disseminate a creative context”

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## ABSTRACT

I argue that collectivities and organizations – groups with goals and formalized structures – are crucial to supporting the development and spread of a creative context connecting individuals and groups. To identify the organizational conditions for realizing creative potential, I use a multi-year study of the organization behind Burning Man, an annual weeklong event devoted to the arts and community, and other collectivities and organizations that have adapted Burning Man principles and organizing practices in other localities. I first discuss how the Burning Man organizational form codified value and practices that relax boundaries on creative potential. I then show how with Burning Man’s support, collectivities have adapted this form to their localities, coordinating with organizations and individuals, some of whom have no prior experience with Burning Man’s values and practices. These Burning Man offshoots not only enact a creative context locally but also institutionalize unfamiliar ways of creating this context. By studying how organizations coordinate efforts and relations that sustain a creative context, we can understand how localities can stimulate creative potential.

Keywords: Organization; Burning Man; Creativity; Participation; Inclusion; Dissemination

## INTRODUCTION

Much discussion has debated the merits, implementation, and unintended consequences of Florida’s (2002) recommendation that cities revitalize by attracting creative professionals. Critics have called for more research into how to channel creativity (Scott, 2006) and how ties with others in a community can facilitate creative innovation (Cohendet et al., 2010). Contributing to this call, I argue that collectivities and organizations – groups with goals and formalized structures (e.g., Scott and Davis, 2007) – are crucial to supporting the development and spread of a creative context that connects individuals and groups. Creativity is the ability to make “useful” or ‘meaningful new forms’ by combining concepts, processes, or materials in novel ways (Florida, 2002, pp. 5, 44). Organizations coordinate efforts and relations toward specific ends, such as hosting events or facilitating civic engagement, thereby enabling creative collection action. I focus on how the codification and spread of a particular

organizational form to other localities can establish and sustain a context for such creativity.

By studying how organizations establish a context for creativity, we can understand how localities can stimulate creative potential. To identify the organizational conditions that encourage creativity, I use a multi-year study of the organization behind the Burning Man event and other collectivities and organizations that have adapted its principles and practices in other localities. Each year, Burning Man generates and dismantles a weeklong city of over 50,000 persons in the physically challenging, nearly infrastructureless Nevada Black Rock Desert. Known for its artistic self-expression and community, Burning Man attracts aficionados of various affinities, including Nevada locals, artists, anarchists, punk rockers, ravers, drag queens, Silicon Valley engineers, and academics. For the past decade, Burning Man has also encouraged the dissemination of its practices to like-minded collectivities and events around the world.

By examining the efforts of the Black Rock City Limited Liability Company, hereafter referred to as the Burning Man organization, and its offshoots, we gain insight into how organizations and collectivities can promote creative potential beyond a particular geographic and temporal confine. I first discuss how the Burning Man organizational form codified value and practices that relax boundaries on creative potential. I then show how with Burning Man's support, collectivities have adapted this form to their localities, coordinating with organizations and individuals, some of whom have no prior experience with Burning Man's values and practices. In doing so, these Burning Man offshoots not only enact a creative context locally but also institutionalize unfamiliar ways of creating this context.

## CREATING AND SUSTAINING CREATIVITY

Prior research has identified several conditions that mediate creativity in cities.

### Density and geographic proximity

As population density and proximity – dynamic density – increases, individuals have more frequent and intense contact, fostering organic solidarity or interdependence (Durkheim, [1893] 1933). In larger, more densely populated areas – namely, bigger cities, ideas and practices are more likely to cross-fertilize because of the sheer numbers of persons who can interact (Fischer, 1995, 1999). Geographic density and spaces where individuals can congregate enhance the likelihood of connections (Lloyd, 2004, 2006), while geographic proximity fosters serendipitous encounters that help people find jobs (Currid, 2007). Such ties can promote collaboration among persons, enhancing creative output and encouraging innovation rather than the replication of accepted standards (Farrell, 2001). Increased density of creative types is associated with more patenting activity (Knudsen et al., 2008); interorganizational ties and proximity to other organizations can mediate innovation (Murmann, 2003; Whittington et al., 2009).

Such research suggests that scholars should more closely examine scenes, defined as the activities and values that connect together individuals, institutions, and physical spaces (Silver et al., 2006). Researchers have documented several creative scenes, such as the art world (Becker, 1982), fashion (Currid, 2007) and music (Anderson, 2009; Grazian, 2003). However, these studies depict scenes that restrict creative processes to professionals and exclude laypersons and outsiders, suggesting the need for more research into how localities can facilitate creativity among a wider swath of persons.

### Diversity and heterogeneity

Heterogeneity of building types and diversity of persons also contribute to the vibrancy of cities (Jacobs, 1969). For example, the co-location of creative producers from different industries expedites synergistic collaborations (Hauge and Hracs, 2010). However, rather than retaining heterogeneity and diversity, some cities have branded their identities (Greenberg, 2008) and built amenities to promote consumption and tourism, such as sporting stadiums (Brash, 2011). The urban growth machine's pursuit of political and corporate interests (Logan and Molotch, 1988) can hasten the closure of affordable hang-outs (Zukin, 1991), thereby reducing heterogeneity. As rising rents, land values, and, ironically, preservation efforts displace longtime residents and amenities, the erosion of particular scenes dissipates diversity (Brown-Saracino, 2009; Hyra, 2008; Zukin, 2010). Although these changes can improve the quality of life among remaining longtime residents (Freeman, 2006), upholding multiple interests can help cities develop more equitably and help retain the diversity that fosters creativity. Diverse collectives – those that can tap different perspectives and experiences, which can include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, or class – can offer more creative solutions to challenges than homogenous groups (Page, 2008). Through community-based organizations, groups that are underrepresented in local government can participate in city planning (Hum, 2010); small local organizations support minority artists overlooked by the elite art world's star system (Ramirez, 2010).

#### Organizations enable collective action

Organizational researchers have long viewed organizations as the “building blocks” of society. In particular, cultural researchers have identified organizations as central to the production and consumption of cultural products (e.g., Hirsch, 2000; Peterson and

Anand, 2000). Recently, urban researchers have started to recognize how formal organizations shape social relations in cities (McQuarrie and Marwell, 2009). For example, interorganizational activities can forestall declines inflicted by manufacturing job loss (Safford, 2009). Individuals build ties, find jobs, and share information about resources through their involvement at workplaces, recreational activities, and service providers (Hunter, 2010; Marwell, 2007; Small, 2009). Furthermore, organizations coordinate collective action toward change – using participatory practices, voluntary associations have fostered grassroots involvement in identifying and addressing community issues (Swarts, 2008), initiating school reform (Su, 2009), and cultivating new philanthropy (Eikenberry, 2009). In community planning and preservation efforts, residents propose novel alternatives (Angotti, 2008), like preserving space for artist studios and performance venues (Shaw, 2005). By facilitating wider input into decision making, participatory practices can help connect individuals around otherwise unrecognized issues (Fung, 2006) and help organizations resist pressures to adopt practices that undercut their clients’ interests (Chen, 2009; Ostrander, 1995). However, the difficulties of creating bonds across groups and recognizing not only common interests (Wilson and Taub, 2006), but also those of marginalized groups (Strolovitch, 2007) suggest that without corrective measures, less powerful groups may be squashed. To better inform policy, we need more research into how organizations can contribute to their localities (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005); this research addresses that call by examining how organizations can foster and spread creativity among localities.

## METHODS

### The Burning Man event and organization

Burning Man started in 1986 as a summer solstice celebration on San Francisco's Baker Beach, where friends and family set afire a handmade wooden sculpture of the "Man" in a ritual that gives the event its name. In 1990, the growing event moved to Nevada for the Labor Day weekend. Currently, the event forms "Black Rock City" for a week on a National Conservation area managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Ticket sales fuel a \$12 million budget that cover expenses including the land use permit, insurance, equipment rentals, contracted medical and fire services, and organizational overhead. The event has attracted attention for its distinctive principles, including its gift economy, in which people share art, trinkets, and experiences without expecting immediate reciprocation, and prohibitions against corporate sponsorship and monetary exchange.<sup>1</sup> Event-goers are called participants to emphasize expectations that they will prosume, or simultaneously produce and consume, Burning Man (Chen forthcoming b). Attendees participate by building or patronizing theme camps where passers-by can join activities such as disclosing someone else's secrets at "Camp Fink" or finding a connection via the "Costco Soulmate Trading Outlet". Professionals and laypersons share interactive art that elicits audience involvement (Kristen, 2003, 2007). Some 2,000 persons volunteer for the event's organization, building the city's temporary infrastructure, welcoming new arrivals to the event, patrolling the event for emergencies, and undertaking other tasks that support the organization and its event.

Most studies on Burning Man have analyzed the event as a postmodern phenomenon that catalyzes individual and collective transformation (Gilmore, 2010; Hockett, 2005) or fosters communalism, self-expression, and self-transformation (Kozinets, 2002; Sherry and Kozinets, 2007). By contributing to Burning Man's gift

economy via collaborative projects, creative professionals can gain status (Turner, 2009). Other research has examined how the Burning Man organization differentiated its form from those of conventional organizations (Chen and O'Mahony, 2009) and provides sufficient organizing structure that supports rather than suppresses members' interests (Chen, 2009). Contrary to what some might assume, organizational members are not a uniform "creative class" of technologically-oriented, tolerant, and well-educated persons. In addition to professionals, volunteers and staff include self-trained artists, self-described drifters, service workers, and those who have received governmental aid. This eclectic array of backgrounds and organizational experiences can fuel conflicts over how to organize (Chen, 2009, forthcoming a).

Two features make Burning Man ideal for understanding the development and diffusion of organizations and collectivities that support creativity in other localities. First, the Burning Man organization and event have reached their third decade, affording sufficient time to examine their development. Second, Burning Man-inspired offshoots, including art projects, civic projects, and formal organizations, have also matured. These collectivities offer insight into mechanisms for fostering creativity in localities.

### Data collection

This study relies upon extensive, qualitative research of the Burning Man organization, its event, and other Burning Man-inspired collectivities. During three to eight-month-long periods each year between July 1998 and the end of January 2001, with subsequent follow-up visits, I observed daily activities at the Burning Man organization, including meetings, volunteer trainings and mixers, email lists, and other activities. I also volunteered in three departments. In 2011, I observed the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Burning Man



Regional Leadership Summit hosted by the Burning Man organization. Over 150 leaders of regionals and voluntary groups from across the US, Canada, and Europe assembled in San Francisco for a 3-day workshop on organizing local activities. I also interviewed 81 active and retired organizers and members from different departments of the Burning Man organization, as well as regional representatives. To collect data on the development of the event during its earliest years, I conducted archival research of available print and film materials. Moreover, I conducted participant observations of eleven Burning Man events between 1998 and 2010 and related events, including the “Decompression” post-Burning Man celebrations in San Francisco and New York City and gatherings hosted by theme camps, regionals (local groups affiliated with Burning Man), and other Burning Man-inspired organizations in the California Bay Area between 1998 and 2009 and in the New York City metropolitan area between 2006 and 2011. Unless otherwise noted, I use the actual names and Burning Man names of informants. The term *organizers* refers to the organization’s leaders.

## RESULTS

My findings suggest that space, proximity, and density of creative professionals are not the only conditions that can generate and spread creativity. Creativity also needs a context that encourages people, including those who might not otherwise recognize their creative potential, to create and share. For Burning Man, organizations have been crucial to establishing, sustaining, and disseminating this context beyond a specific geographical and temporal locale.

### Organizing and codifying values and practices that lift boundaries on creative potential

To generate a context that encourages creativity through collective action, the Burning Man organization codified values and practices that challenge conventions about realizing creative potential. This process involved experimentation and adaptation. According to interviewees, the earliest Burning Man events were informally organized by a tightly-knit group of self-taught and professionally-trained artists and their friends. These individuals introduced values and practices from other groups, including the Cacophony Society, which arranged experiential visits to decommissioned military bunkers and other unusual urban spaces, and performance art groups that constructed and set fire-emitting sculptures loose onto city streets. To ameliorate emergent problems, organizers clarified or added values and practices. For example, after a state representative sought to tax barter exchanges at the 2000 event, organizers replaced barter exchange with a gift economy, formalizing the latter as a principle. This principle encourages event-goers to “gift” others with their talents and interests, reinforcing other principles of participation and self-expression. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, in response to concerns about the event’s environmental impact, volunteers and the Bureau of Land Management introduced a “Leave No Trace” policy and educated event-goers on packing out their garbage and environmental conservation practices. Through meetings with volunteers, “Town Hall” forums, and email discussion lists, organizers sought feedback on problems such as inappropriately disposed waste. Conversations among those with different perspectives and experiences not only promoted creative solutions, but also helped refine values and practices (Chen, 2009, forthcoming b).

With such input, organizers codified 10 principles that currently guide Burning Man activities: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-

expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, Leaving No Trace, participation, and immediacy. As explained on the organization's website and pamphlets, event-goers must bring food, drink, and shelter; rather than "spectating" or gawking as practiced at conventional events, they should participate by volunteering, working on art projects, or running theme camps. In addition, organizers introduced a policy of welcoming all interested volunteers and placing them by their interests, rather than their expertise, and they formalized decision-making by consensus, thereby codifying participation at the event and within the organization (Chen, 2009). Whereas professional boundaries demark certain activities as the domain of the credentialed and their institutions (e.g., Abbott, 1988), Burning Man lifts these boundaries. Its emphases on expressiveness, participation, and the gift economy widen the range of possible activities, encouraging individuals to realize their creative potential by initiating or collaborating on projects.

Moreover, Burning Man's principle of inclusion stresses that all were welcome, including strangers with no prior ties to the event. Criticisms of Burning Man's seeming racial, ethnic, and class homogeneity reveal that some have interpreted inclusion as racial, ethnic, and class integration.<sup>2</sup> In practice, the principle of inclusion has supported integrating newcomers, rather than recruiting underrepresented groups.<sup>3</sup> When some event-goers used the principles of self-expression and participation to haze or heckle others as "spectators", thereby excluding and alienating them, organizers clarified appropriate activities through storytelling (Chen, 2010) and prioritized civic commitments over individual self-expression (Chen, forthcoming b; Kozinets, 2002). In doing so, Burning Man made inclusion central to its ethos and discouraged exclusionary actions that characterize groups in general. Mindful that diversity can stoke

disagreements over appropriate activities, the Burning Man organization has also trained volunteers and regional leaders in conflict resolution techniques and circulated guidelines for how to make decisions by consensus. Rather than delineating all possible and appropriate activities, Burning Man codifies *processes* by which members can decide upon appropriate activities. This approach specifies the means, or ways of carrying out activities, without specifying the ends, or outcomes. As I show later, members have used this Burning Man organizational form to adapt to their localities, spreading a creative context beyond the event.

Observations of Burning Man during the past 10 years reveal that codified principles have facilitated the spread of creativity. At Burning Man and related gatherings, art projects spark conversations that reinforce others' creative processes. Strangers swap tips about how to assemble an art project, theme camp, shelter, or costume, learning techniques and generating ideas that they could apply to later projects. Inspired by others' creativity in action, interviewees reported that they realized that they, too, could be creative, and they felt motivated by the principles of self-expression and the gift economy to share with others. Even from the briefest interactions, people learned about groups or individuals with similar art projects or interests, enhancing opportunities for connection and collaboration. For example, volunteer Eric Waterman described exploring Black Rock City as a stilt-walking flâneur. Other pedestrians told him to visit a theme camp:

... they had made a stilt bar, a 10-foot-tall bar...and they had extra stilts for people to wear...I just ended up hanging out there for a couple of hours, like talking to...some people from Seattle, some people from Denver, from Los Angeles...you just get to meet weirdoes from other cities.

Waterman noted that although large art projects drew the most attention and support, he hoped that smaller projects and venues would continue to foster connections: “It’s gotta have the little cottage industry artists...they never can plan that or organize that, that’s just all spontaneous...”

The principle of participation has incorporated those who might not otherwise realize their creative potential. Interviewed organizers and volunteer coordinators stated that approaching individuals at the event and asking them for help with art projects or other tasks was a successful strategy for powering short-term projects. Moreover, these individuals might get hooked on volunteering, especially if they connected with colleagues or learned skills that motivated them to return (Chen, 2009). The principle of participation also encouraged individuals to offer unsolicited help for even the most specialized tasks. For example, according to an artist working on Davy Normal’s Giant Flaming Anus, a 2000 performance piece in which Freud tries to help a constipated God, a person who saw the project’s plans on a website offered to stitch the parachute material on the sculpture, drawing on his work expertise from a parachute manufacturing factory.

The inclusion of laypersons, who can offer support or initiate their own projects, sustains this creative context. As Burning Man volunteer Steve Mobia emphasized, “...that’s the only thing that keeps this independent art scene going, is that people will help each other, just out of the generous sense that creative thinking and activity is important”. He cautioned, “if you don’t have that, then that whole scene dies off”. Artists facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge by offering workshops for novices in welding, soldering, and fire-spinning. Even mundane issues attract creative solutions. For example, stickers posted in the doors of portable toilets remind users that the “Pee

Funnel” theme camp distributes handmade funnels for women who do not want to hover above toilet seats. Camps have experimented with environmental conservation practices, such as evaporation ponds to reduce water left from showering and dish-washing. The Burning Man organization has reinforced such constant learning by sponsoring mixers where attendees can share tips, and they have also publicized lessons and examples via their website and electronic newsletters.

#### Organizations disseminate and institutionalize values and practices in other locales

Organizations and collectivities have disseminated Burning Man’s values and practices, enabling creative collective action around the world, even among those who had never participated in Burning Man. Unfamiliar practices and concepts of the gift economy, self-expression, and participation have cross-fertilized with existing practices and values in other localities – from Antarctic researchers to a summer camp for children with disabilities. Celebrations modeled on Burning Man have appeared in such unlikely places as the McMurdo Station, a research station in the Antarctic, where several workers “erected a snow effigy”. Likewise, one participant emailed Burning Man organizers about teaching fire spinning and stilt-walking to children and young adults with muscular dystrophy. The camp director wrote about the subsequent mania for spinning glow sticks, noting “two of the performers at the talent show were kids who were aspiring spinners and demonstrated their new skills with glow sticks”.

Those who wish to participate in Burning Man experiences on a year-round basis have formed or joined regionals and other community groups that apply Burning Man’s principles and organize local events. These collectivities introduce and adapt Burning Man’s organizational form and practices to other localities. As they familiarize and

involve others in their efforts, they institutionalize or gain acceptance of ways to sustain a context for creative collective action. The three regionals that started in 1997 are now part of over 100 regionals spread across five continents. Zac Bolan, a resident of Calgary, Alberta, explained the impetus for establishing one of the first regionals:

After returning from [Burning Man] in 1997, I felt an intense loneliness caused by my alienation from the people in my community. I began showing slides (of Burning Man) to friends.... I was able to form my own support network until a regional community came into being.... Most people I encountered knew nothing about it, so I was in a position of having to explain the culture behind the event.<sup>4</sup>

Such groups have established a growing infrastructure that enacts Burning Man principles in other localities. However, Burning Man organizers expect that these collectivities will not just replicate Burning Man in their localities but rather, adapt to their circumstances. At the 2011 Regional Leadership Summit, they cautioned, “the 10 principles are just the starter kit”. Regional leaders discussed how they identified additional principles to guide their activities locally.

Both theme camps and regionals run their own events or participate in existing events such as local parades, fostering year-round activities that extend a creative context. These activities include regular Happy Hours, art shows, fund-raiser events, and camp-outs, all of which enact Burning Man values and practices in localities other than Black Rock City. For example, the New York City regional’s weekly Happy Hour draws crowds to a local bar, where they chat about Burning Man or associated events. Some regionals organize daytime, family-friendly gatherings in parks and other venues. To collect donations to defray the costs of building theme camps or art projects at Burning Man, groups host events, typically themed costume parties with deejays spinning music,

in local venues. In the California Bay Area where such events are frequent and ubiquitous, jaded locals have joked about event and donor fatigue.

To facilitate event-planning, some regionals have formally incorporated as non- or for-profit organizations. In modeling their regionals on the Burning Man organization's practices, interviewed regional leaders reported acquiring new skills like decision-making by consensus and managing volunteers. The spread of the Internet and social networking media have aided the coordination and advertising of such events, allowing participants to build and reinforce their local networks. To help regionals and other initiatives establish and grow, the Burning Man organization offers infrastructural support, including coaching, webpages on the Burning Man website, and an annual regional leadership summit where leaders can network and share tips and experiences. Representatives at the 2011 Regional Leadership Summit viewed local groups as opportunities to apply Burning Man principles and practices to the "default world". Through local events and civic projects, attendees sought to extend Burning Man from a weeklong event to their everyday life, arguing "we don't have a geographical constraint – [let's] take it back home to us".

Their efforts require bridging boundaries with institutions and other organizations that are not yet familiar with Burning Man-inspired collectivities and projects. For example, Dave Umlas and Marrilee Ratcliffe discussed how to build relations across multiple parties, including the media and local residents. Umlas first described their excitement with winning a design competition to build and burn the "Resolution Clock", a 34-foot tall working grandfather clock, for the 2008 First Nights, a family-oriented New Year's Eve celebration, in Austin, Texas. However, the duo soon encountered several



hurdles, including securing permission to burn the sculpture in a park next to City Hall. Umlas described arriving at meetings armed with detailed plans and minutes of prior meetings and ascending the “bureaucratic machine”: “bureaucrats were passing us off. Since they can’t say no, they moved us a level up. The magic trick is don’t give them a reason to say no”. As the audience laughed at the image of a LOL kitten entangled in red tape beneath the phrase “Building synergy”, Ratcliffe cautioned, “Bureaucrats don’t set up to be bureaucrats....It’s a honest job protecting resources”. She urged the audience to view gatekeepers in a cooperative, rather than antagonistic light: “You want to partner with them”.

Just weeks before the event, officials finally approved the temporary artwork’s use of the park. Ratcliffe surmised that by addressing concerns about the event site and inviting officials to preview the project at their studio, they had built sufficient “trust” for this approval. She also recounted giving numerous radio and television interviews that invited locals to help with building the sculpture or writing their resolutions on the sculpture. Ratcliffe used these opportunities to acquaint potential stakeholders with unfamiliar values:

We wanted as many people to live it and own it because when more people own it, the harder it is to kill it. We talked about letting go of intentions [by contributing handwritten messages that would later burn]... We discussed LNT, a gift for our neighbors.

The bonfire drew an estimated 100,000 people, or the equivalent of one out of every eight Austin residents. Umlas shared examples of smaller scale projects and urged cooperation with “local community groups; it’s a chance to get the community to drink the kool-aid. We need to take the party to them”. At their presentation’s end, Umlas and Ratcliffe

avowed that such cooperation would contribute to “making it more fucking excellent”. Accompanied by an illustration of fireworks around a gorilla and shark hitting a high five, this conclusion underscored the creative synergies of seemingly impossible collaborations.

Burning Man principles and activities also disseminate through civic engagement projects that collaboratively channel efforts toward selected problems. Under the umbrella of Burners without Borders, a “community led, grassroots group that addresses gaping needs where existing cultural and societal systems are failing”,<sup>5</sup> individuals have coordinated projects targeting needy groups in their local communities. Initially started by volunteers involved in post-Hurricane Katrina rebuilding, individuals have tapped Burning Man and other networks to raise funds and collect resources for their local communities. Detroit Burners without Borders and Detroit regional contact Danielle Kaltz, aka Doxie, described how her project started with distributing extra clothing to local homeless who lived near highway ramps and bridges. Based on the suggestions of recipients and locals and with the help of donations and volunteers, her project shifted to assembling and distributing backpacks of supplies. As Chicago regional contact Chris Breedlove clarified, “This is not about disaster relief but a collaboration with communities”. Kaltz explained that smaller regionals could partner with near-by larger regionals and events to pool labor and resources. She depicted the partnership between the Detroit regional and the Chicago regional in familial terms: “Will you be my big brother”?

Similarly, Breedlove described several cooperative projects that depended upon connections created across groups within Chicago. For example, when city officials

asked for help with decreasing waste streams from building renovations, artists transformed refrigerators destined for landfill into working art; these went on display around Chicago before joining needy homes. Modeled on the Alaskan Iditarod and similar races in NYC and San Francisco, the Chiditarod fund-raiser pits teams of five who pull decorated shopping carts through Chicago streets, regardless of snow or sleet. Teams attired in matching costumes as gnomes, superheroes, Abraham Lincolns, and other characters can playfully sabotage their competitors and imbibe at checkpoints in a pub crawl, but they must cross the finish line with at least 42 pounds of food collected along the way. Breedlove reported that the 2011 Chiditarod raised “\$18,000 and 19,000 lbs of food” for the Chicago Anti-Hunger Federation, doubling their contributions from the previous year. In addition to the 146 participating teams and over 200 volunteers, the Chiditarod’s website thanks 22 non- and for-profit organizations that assisted the fund-raiser with donated food, equipment, or services, and 12 bars that served as the race checkpoints. This list indicates how a large-scale project requires coordinating an extensive network of organizations and individuals. As Breedlove cautioned, “...this will not be the world’s coolest project tomorrow...you are going to have to gain the trust of the government bureaucrat”. He and a fellow participant repeated a police officer’s comment about the Chiditarod as a “right cause, done the wrong way”. This quip illustrates how organizers must convince others, particularly gatekeepers, of the appropriateness of applying unconventional means (for Chiditarod, a wacky race) toward a familiar end (fund-raising for those in need).

Other groups have focused on disseminating Burning Man practices to their localities by creating a creative context for art’s sake. One of the most visible efforts is

FIGMENT, multi-site and multi-day events hosted by the Action Arts League, a non-profit organization whose leaders and organizers include Burning Man attendees and volunteers. The two-year-old annual event started on Governors Island, a summertime recreational area accessible by free ferries from downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most museums and commercial events, FIGMENT is free, does not rely upon corporate sponsorship, and welcomes artistic contributions from laypersons and professionally trained artists. Its costs were underwritten by local and state funds, as well as a grant from the Black Rock Arts Foundation, the non-profit arm to the Burning Man organization. During 2010, over 23,000 persons attended FIGMENT at Governors Island.<sup>7</sup> At one entrance, attendees passed by descriptions of Burning Man's 10 principles on air-brushed signs. The principles of self-expression, Leaving No Trace, and participation were most vividly demonstrated in the art installations. At one display, a sign announced that public school students had collected and decorated disposable trays to provoke reconsideration of their use in cafeterias.

When interacting with gatekeepers and organizations that are not yet familiar with Burning Man's principles, Burning Man-inspired groups must explain how their efforts lift professional boundaries to unleash more creativity. When a *New York Times* art critic questioned the artistic merit of FIGMENT's installations,<sup>8</sup> FIGMENT producer David Koren clarified that the event was not intended to satisfy "elite tastemakers" but rather to enhance a creative context for all:

[FIGMENT is] for everybody, for families, for communities, for everyday citizens who yearn for inspiration, for artists trying new things, and for connecting all of these pieces to each other in an accessible, fun, and interactive environment that encourages experimentation instead of censure.<sup>9</sup>

For 2011, organizers have planned one to three-day long FIGMENTs in NYC, Boston, Detroit, and Jackson, Mississippi. A local organization, the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, is supporting the Boston FIGMENT with space in a park. However, according to representative Peter Durand, the Boston FIGMENT needs to convince other organizations and individuals to donate funding that covers the event permit, police overtime, and other expenses. FIGMENT's experiences illustrate the hurdles of disseminating principles of participation and the gift economy to localities where government, philanthropies, and local businesses do not yet understand the creative potential of such events.

On the other hand, San Francisco's relationship with the Burning Man organization foreshadows the extent to which municipalities could view collaboration with such organizations and collectivities as beneficial. In 2011, San Francisco city officials recruited the Burning Man organization into moving its headquarters from gentrifying Bayview-Hunters Point to the edge of the Tenderloin. City officials hope that along with the near-by expansion of the social-networking company Twitter, Burning Man will help revitalize "skid row", a once thriving entertainment district in downtown San Francisco. Organizer Marian Goodell reported that other arts organizations also wish to settle near Burning Man's new headquarters, a co-location that could accelerate this neighborhood's transformation into a scene promoting creative expression. Similarly, former NYC regional leader Corey Mervis described how elected officials in her new hometown, Las Vegas, supported her Burning Man-inspired events and art projects as a way of reversing "economic decline". Localities thus may have an additional way of revitalizing that does not depend solely upon a growth machine, employment, or gentrification. By supporting

local organizations that enable creative collective action, localities may more fully realize creative potential.

## DISCUSSION

As more people enact Burning Man's principles in other geographic localities through local collectivities and organizations, they are likely to institutionalize and innovate ways of promoting creativity among a wider swath of persons. By tapping and coordinating existing creative potential, this approach capitalizes upon available latent talents and synergies with other collectives. Such an approach may mitigate concerns raised by researchers about how the strategy of attracting highly educated professionals or the moneyed pits cities in a zero-sum game (e.g., Brash, 2011). As Burning Man's emphases on inclusion and participation recognize, complex endeavors not only require creativity but also coordinating interdependent parties and individuals, including those not typically considered creative. To reinforce this point, Dave Umlas showed "a minimum list" of steps toward carrying out an art project in a locality. He noted, "design is the smallest part. You need to mobilize people". Similarly, as NYC regional co-leader Alex Kalmonofsky, aka Cinemagirl, reminded attendees at a NYC Town Hall meeting, creativity is not limited to artistic ability. She and others contributed organizing and other skills needed to channel creative output. Such collaborations can not only foster cross-fertilization across groups but also incorporate individuals who might not otherwise realize their creativity.

Research suggests that collectivities face several challenges that can curtail their efforts and in effect, suppress the spread of creativity. For example, regulations governing land use or laws that ban certain assemblies can squash thriving scenes.

Organizations can help navigate public relations landmines that might otherwise suppress creativity (Chen, 2009). In addition, if activities spread, but are not accompanied by articulated values, then these activities could lose their generative force. For example, as evidenced by the rave and punk scenes, when for-profit entrepreneurs appropriate creative groups' efforts for financial gain, such groups may go underground or disappear, choking off a creativity conduit that could otherwise invigorate the general populace (e.g., Anderson, 2009). Here, organizations can defend against exploitation (Chen, 2009), while still encouraging creativity. Moreover, just like any dynamic locality, residents' desire for authenticity may decrease tolerance for change and promote social distinctions from other individuals or groups who are deemed as unworthy (e.g., Brown-Saracino, 2009; Zukin, 2008). Such boundary-reinforcement can dampen creativity by discouraging individuals and collectivities from intermixing. Burning Man's expansion and dissemination suggest that when organizations promote inclusion and participation, they are more likely to sustain a context conducive to creativity. Continued research into the roles that such identified conditions play in either eliciting or suppressing creativity would better inform decisions about how to cultivate creative locales.

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<sup>1</sup> Organizers made exceptions for coffee and tea sold at the Center Camp Café and ice, the proceeds of which benefit a local town's organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Like schools, voluntary associations, and other institutions, Burning Man's demographic composition partly reflects larger structural conditions, such as hypersegregation (Massey and Denton, 1993) and segregated social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> However, the Burning Man organization offers scholarship tickets to low-income applicants, as well as complimentary tickets to local Nevada residents, artists and their crews, and selected volunteers.

<sup>4</sup> "Regional networks history" [http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals\\_history.html](http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals_history.html)

<sup>5</sup> "What is Burners without Borders?" <http://www.burnerswithoutborders.org/about-us>

<sup>6</sup> In 2010, FIGMENT also included the Cambridge-Boston area, which I was unable to observe.

<sup>7</sup> Population figure from Jessica Bruder, June 14, 2010, "Figment recap" <http://laughingsquid.com/figment-recap-all-aboard-the-electric-bubble-bus/>

<sup>8</sup> "Do arts at Governors Island need governing?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/17/arts/design/17governors.html?scp=6&sq=FIGMENT%20governors%20island&st=cse>

<sup>9</sup> "Art and populism" <http://newyork.figmentproject.org/art-and-populism/>