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Event-Places in North America: City Meaning and Making

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Every Saturday evening, rain or shine, spring through fall, the torches appear. The flames are passed, sometimes this way sometimes that, to dark figures in a waiting boat that moves out onto the river. Tracing a ritual circle, they light bonfires on the water, over a hundred of them stretching a kilometer under bridges and past buildings, as music gradually fills the space. Opera, Gregorian chants, a Himalayan folk song set the mood and the pace. And people come — a few, or tens of thousands — to watch the sparks, walk, talk, feel the heat, smell the wood, and be together in the city.

This event and place, "WaterFire," is transforming the image and sense of Providence, R.I., into something much different than it was. But so are a growing number of other events and places in North America and Europe — some traditional, others newly invented. In Lyons, France, lights and projected images wash the streets, facades and air of the city, some controlled by participants thousands of miles away. In Calgary, Canada, chuckwagons serve breakfast in the streets downtown then compete in a hell-bent stampede before a hundred thousand spectators. For a time each year in Girona, Spain, flowers are meticulously arranged to fill every private and public architectural space. Even in Washington, D.C., amidst the monuments, the National Mall is transformed each summer into the setting for the sounds of different cultures, celebrating the diversity of American life.[1]

Questioning Values across Disciplines

Scholars and social anthropologists have long studied traditional festivals and events as a window into culture. In the same manner, architects and urban designers have studied the shape of public spaces to understand how they perform. But little work has been done on the intersection of civic events, their places and communities. To fill this gap, collaborators

at Spain's Universitat Polytechnica de Catalunya and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have been examining "event-places" which make powerful linkages between physical and social phenomena.

The interdisciplinary research team was curious about three critical questions: What are the links between successful events and successful places and communities? How do events

Above and Opposite: WaterFire in Providence, RI, is typical of the new event-places in North American cities that are once again giving residents and visitors cause for celebration. The map shows its central location on the Providence River. The view at left is from the north across the central basin to downtown. Photograph: Barnaby Evans, Waterfire Providence.

shape a sense of place and give it meaning? What role can they play in city design?

In seeking answers across two continents, it is now becoming clear that event-places embody far more than entertainment or an urban design frill. They are contributing to the identity, livability and economics of cities. They can help attract new residents and investment. Most importantly, they are evolving in scope and significance and will become, we predict, an ever more powerful rationale for shaping urban places and development in the future. This is a particularly meaningful trend in the North American context, where event-places are reaffirming the value of shared experiences and spaces in the city, contradicting the popular notion that we are losing our civic life.[2]

Understanding American Event-Places

One only has to think of some of the world's great festivals to realize how inseparable such events are from their spatial settings. Think of the Palio on the Campo in Siena or Mardis Gras in New Orleans. Intuitively, one realizes there is a deep and meaningful dialogue between such events and their settings. But how does the relationship between events and places really operate? And are there lessons that designers, event planners, and city officials can learn from studying it?

As the MIT team began to address these issues, we began to discover some shared characteristics among North American event-places that differed from their European counterparts. These characteristics, reflective of a different culture and urban experience, also provided insight into the general nature and workings of event-places.

Originality. The urban history of North America is obviously rather brief. Thus, many American events are not the product of ancient traditions, but have been more recently invented.[3]

Providence's WaterFire is perhaps the best example of an art piece with no antecedent, invented to celebrate a new physical setting. However, when events do connect to older traditions, such as Philadelphia's Mummers Parade, most have been thoroughly reinterpreted in the American setting. Once initiated, few North American event-places of any kind have remained static. Most have undergone continual change and evolution.

Inclusive Themes. North American event-places tend to involve broad cultural and place themes. By avoiding narratives that relate to a specific religion, or moral allegories of good and evil, such themes appeal to multiple groups.[4]

The Bangor National Folk Festival and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which celebrate American cultural diversity, are good examples. So is the Calgary Stampede, which commemorates values and traditions associated with settling "the western frontier," a heritage shared by a huge region. WaterFire achieves broad cultural inclusion through the embrace of universal symbolic archetypes.

Expanding Scale. Given their inclusive themes, most North American event-places attract broad audiences and have tended to grow in physical size and attendance. The Calgary Stampede and Smithsonian Folklife Festival involve over a million participants and vast sites. Of course, many small-scale local events survive, and new ones are invented every year; but as with many things in America, there is a tendency to measure success by popularity.
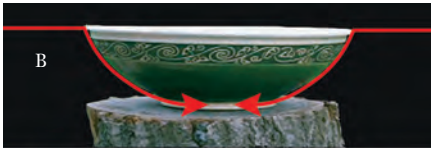
When events outgrow their locations, difficulties can arise. In Calgary, Stampede Park has swallowed large pieces of the surrounding neighborhood causing negative impacts on homes and businesses. In New York City, the Halloween Parade has grown from a children's procession through Greenwich Village into an extravaganza down Sixth Avenue involving 30,000 participants and two million spectators. In the process, the original idea of the parade — that everyone could participate — has been lost.

Development Role. In Europe, many events emerged out of their communities, commemorating past happenings

Above: Lessons for design and planning. A) Good event-places allow dialogue between people and their setting. B) Compressing space into a bowl and allowing participants to share the stage are two ways to create intimacy. C) Galveston's Mardis Gras gates create the sense of event territory.

or reenacting important rituals and stories that celebrate and sustain local culture. In North America, many cities have used such events proactively to attract new residents, visitors, and investment. Successful event-places can benefit a city financially, while enhancing its image, livability, and cultural status.

The power of events to build communities is illustrated by the National Folk Festival in Bangor, which has shown the viability of the waterfront as a people-oriented destination, reviving prospects for private development there. WaterFire is credited with enhancing the image of Providence as a livable city, attracting new business, residents, and real estate development. The Calgary Stampede contributes almost $140 million a year to the local economy.

Professional Management. As North American events have grown and taken on new roles, they have generally become more professionally organized, advertised, and commercialized than their European counterparts. Beginning as informal private initiatives, successful projects may evolve into nonprofit corporations to more effectively organize volunteers, raise funds, and seek sponsorships. Eventually, many retain permanent staff to manage the event. Cities support the effort with services and parking and often substantial physical improvements to accommodate the event.

Virtually all of the major cases we studied involved corporate sponsors of one kind or another, from local banks to national brands. But sponsors were viewed as problematic once advertising became so pervasive that it began to detract from the theme of the event.

Case Study:
National Folk Festival,
Bangor, Maine

Lessons for Design and Planning

It became clear from the research that successful event-places offer many benefits to communities. But, as we were coming to see, not all event-places were trouble free. In many communities event-places were a source of problems as well as opportunities.

Our attempt to understand these phenomena eventually led to a series of lessons regarding how to better design and plan for them.

1. Interweave Form and Activity

Good event-places support a dialog between people and their physical setting; one is incomplete without the other; and a change in one creates a change in the other — be it in mood, shape, tempo, color, scale, or some other quality. Across cases, we observed several powerful patterns of interwoven activity and physical form that energized places and their associated events. These patterns could form the basis for guidelines to design and program future event-places:

Territory. Event-places demarcate a special phenomenon that is set off from everyday life. The ability to create this sense of separation is closely related to location within the physical fabric of a community. Good territories have defined edges, and can be separated in space or time from the common terrain.

Urban waterfronts can make good event-places, because they typically have distinctive character and strong edges. The Mall in Washington, D.C., is ideal territory for an event of national prominence like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, since it is contained by the museums and monuments at its edges.

But event territories may also be created out of common spaces, like a neighborhood street, by using

This three-day event is held each August to celebrate traditional music, folk arts, and culture from across the U.S., with a particular focus on the state of Maine. Initiated in 2002, the event is being sponsored for its first three years by the National Council for the Traditional Arts, with the expectation that it will continue on its own after that (when national sponsorship will move on to another location). Attracting more than 100,000 people in its first two years, this "dispersed" event occupies tents and temporary structures located in underutilized spaces along the Penobscot River waterfront in downtown Bangor — a former industrial area the city would like to see transformed into active use. Five key venues, linked by a path paralleling the water, provide space for performances, workshops, an arts marketplace, food, and support activities. So far the Folk Festival has succeeded in bringing people back to downtown Bangor, demonstrating the potential of its waterfront, and energizing efforts toward redevelopment.

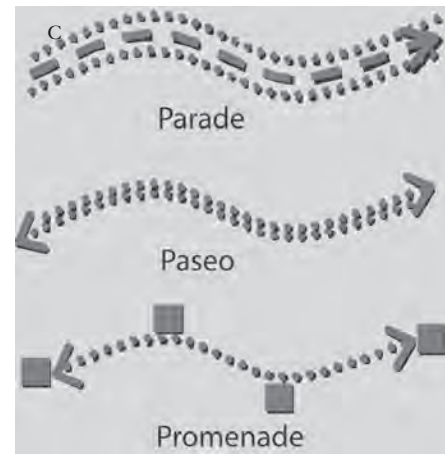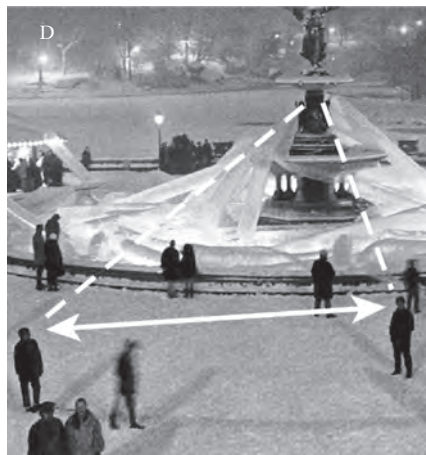Photograph courtesy of Bangor National Folk Festival.

darkness or decorations. The original Halloween Parade in Greenwich Village is a good example. The Galveston Mardi Gras, where the event-place has been marked off by spectacular gates, is another.

Creating territory in these ways allows people to separate themselves emotionally from everyday life and give themselves over to the event. This process may be reinforced in traditional festivals by what Falazzi calls "valorization" — rites that "purify the setting, delimit its boundaries, and forbid its use for everyday purposes."[5]

Intimacy. Good event-places create a social and emotional bond between the event and the individuals involved. Space can facilitate intimacy by providing a sense of enclosure and limit to the event, and by compressing activity and people together. We called this the "bowl effect" because a sloping topography may be particularly effective in allowing people to survey a scene as they are gently pulled to its center.

Another approach to intimacy is "sharing the stage," allowing performers and participants to occupy the same space. In this way, event-places contrast to theaters and auditoriums with their deliberate separation of performer and audience. Finally, intimacy can be facilitated by focus, where attention and views are directed by landmarks, lighting or circulation towards others participating in the event.

Granularity. Good event-places accommodate multiple nodes of activity and groups. Events are not monolithic; and one should be able to experience them at many levels. Barnaby Evans, creator of WaterFire,

Above: Lessons for design and planning.
A) Granularity; B) Movement (Photograph: J. Mark Schuster); C) Types of movement; D) Triangulation (Photograph: Karin Bacon Events).

has used the term "granularity" to describe a layering of potentials for interaction both within the space and throughout the event: from personal interaction with the content and sensation of the event, to civic interaction with the larger urban setting and the crowd.

Granularity can be aided by designing the event-place as a nesting of spaces or a series of experiences. At WaterFire, for example, there are small spaces low to the river with limited views where individuals or small groups can sit and feel the heat of the fires, and there are large spaces father back and higher up where groups can dance, eat, or shop, with the fires below and the city skyline above.

Similar granularity was offered by the original route of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade down Broad Street, where parade-goers sitting on the curb were brushed by individual

costumed figures, while others on stairs or balconies could take in the whole scene. Indeed, the lack of such granularity on Market Street, with its sterile, widely spaced commercial buildings, was one reason that route was less successful.

Triangulation. William H. Whyte observed that interaction, or a sense of community, between two strangers in a public space is encouraged by a third activity or object they can both share.[6] This might be a fountain, a performance, or even music they can both hear; but "triangulation" is an essential feature of all good event-places.

As events grow in size, triangulation can become more difficult to achieve, precisely because the third apex can be overwhelmed by the crowds. One challenge to event-place designers is to keep the focus in view. This is not a problem at the Smithsonian Folk Festival, where the

Case Study: WaterFire, Providence, Rhode Island

Washington Monument provides a constant point of reference. The fires of WaterFire provide both an intimate point of focus for couples and spectators and a broader transformative experience for a larger crowd.

Movement. An essential difference between event-places and other types of public activity — performances or convocations — is that the participants are free to move about. Good event-places are dynamic. They facilitate, and even promote, movement and participation.

The cases illustrate several common types of movement, each with their own physical and programmatic demands. In a Parade, stationary observers watch moving performers. Although, as at the Mummers and Stampede parades, observers may join in or move from one vantage point to another. In a Paseo, such as WaterFire, observers become the performers, watching each other as they stroll through the place encountering both social diversity and spatial variety. In a Promenade, participants move from one stationary activity to the next along a defined path, such as at the Bangor and Smithsonian Folk Festivals.

Scale. Good event-places balance the size of the event and the place. When events get too large for their place, intimacy, granularity and triangulation can be lost. The typical response of event planners is to move to a bigger venue to accommodate more people. In North America, this is often mistaken for a mark of success, but it usually isn't. Changing physical scale and setting can dramatically change an event and destroy the very qualities that made it popular.

The effect of this miscalculation can be seen in Philadelphia and Greenwich Village. One might also mention Chicago, where the St. Patrick's Day parade, and many other such celebrations, were recently

The three rivers that converge in downtown Providence provide the setting for WaterFire. For much of the twentieth century, the rivers were covered over and forgotten, but in the late 1980s roadways and parking lots were removed and a new, pedestrian-oriented waterfront was designed and built. The new setting inspired artist Barnaby Evans to conceive of WaterFire in 1994. During the event, bonfires are lit within steel braziers over the water and music fills the new public spaces along the riverfront. A linear event, boats move from bonfire to bonfire feeding wood to the flames as people sit and watch or stroll along the riverfront paths. Since its inception, WaterFire has grown enormously. Currently, the event takes place most Saturdays throughout the summer and into the spring and fall, with more than one hundred bonfires being lit along two-thirds of a mile of river. A typical performance begins at sundown and continues until 1 AM, and may attract as many as 70,000 people. WaterFire has become synonymous with the rebirth of Providence and has helped to rejuvenate the once-abandoned core of the city with new private development and support activities.

Photograph: Thomas Payne, WaterFire Providence.

moved from their traditional routes to Columbus Drive — a broad, clean thoroughfare where there are no confining buildings, the access is great, policing is efficient, and crowds have lots of room; but where the individual character of the events has diminished. Fortunately, an effort is now afoot to bring the parades back to their original, more intimate places.

When attendance grows, communities should resist the impulse to move an event. It is often better to reconceive an event in place — by redesigning the event-place but retaining its scale. At WaterFire and in Calgary subsidiary venues and activities were created to draw off some of the people and provide variety in newly created spaces. Alternatively, the event may be repeated to accommodate demand, like the famous Palio around the Campo in Siena, which is held twice each summer. WaterFire has also been increased in frequency to reduce crowd density.

Sensuality. Good event-places are fundamentally sensual. They artfully engage all of the senses: the feel of movement through space, warmth, or cold; the sound of music reverberating off a wall; the smell of burning wood; the taste of food; the sight of costumes and color, blended by the imagination into an unusual experience.

Such sensations appeal to us as individuals. But, more importantly, they are magnified by groups into a shared sense of community. The strength of these merged sensations can transform a place and change the emotional resonance of participants with the site.

2. Build Social Capital

Place-based events are affirmations of community and can help sustain and build communities. Indeed, the highest-quality, most enduring celebrations are of the space and the place.
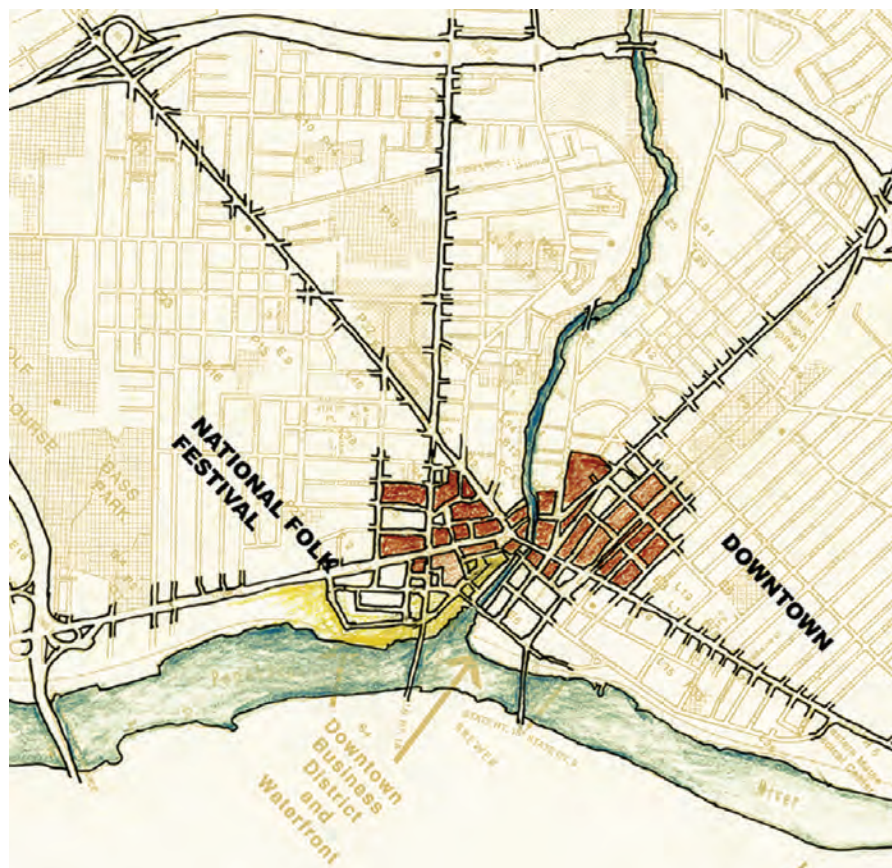
Such events validate both participants and places, helping to build social capital. This is because urban communities and neighborhoods do not exist as abstract groups of people; they are strongly defined by their place.

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, defines social capital as "connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." And he argues that social networks are breaking down in America weakening communities and shared values. We suggest that an antidote to this is to build new venues for public interaction. "Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric."[7]

Bridging and bonding are essential to the development of social capital.

Case Study: Mummers Parade, Philadelphia

All of the cases we studied bridge gender, age, and social class, bringing together different groups to share and claim a common place. In this way, events can help redefine how we feel about our community, or assert the presence of a community some people may have forgotten.

The success of an event in building social capital also depends upon the ability of its organizers to nurture and tap local volunteers. These people may range from high school kids to bank presidents, but the commitment of volunteers helps to bind together a diverse community.

Cities that are highly unionized seem to be difficult to plant the legacy of a festival in, for example, because labor is organized and paid. The same can be said for commercialization, where outside sponsors pay for an event in return for advertising. Both of these circumstances discourage volunteers and can disassociate the event from the community.

The depth of volunteer effort is a good measure of local social capital. In Bangor, for example, the Folk Festival is reinvesting people in the riverfront, giving impetus to improving it but in different ways than previously imagined. In Providence, WaterFire volunteers have expanded their efforts to include park and river maintenance and outreach projects involving many new communities in the city including the mentally and physically disabled and minority groups. In other cases, event organizers have morphed into community development corporations who not only produce events but also build places and facilities to support them. By engaging people and committing them to their place, events have transformative power. They are

Above: Event-places have caused a rethinking of space use in both Bangor, Maine (above), and at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (below).

This famous parade originated in early Swedish and German settlements, where parties of men welcomed the New Year by walking from door to door wearing face paint and ringing bells. The tradition blossomed in the immigrant, working-class area of South Philadelphia in the late nineteenth century when clubs of "Mummers" competed for prizes with ever-more-elaborate costumes and performances. In 1901 previously dispersed events were organized into a parade along Broad Street, an axis leading through its neighborhoods to City Hall. For eight or more hours "Comic Clubs," "Fancy Clubs," "Fancy Brigades," and "String Bands" enter the route at different points, strutting to their particular music, stopping at key locations to perform, and finishing by walking past the judging platform at City Hall. From a peak of more than 2 million attendants in the 1940s, the parade declined as older ethnic minorities moved from South Philadelphia to be replaced by a newer group of black, Asian, and Latino residents. Several years ago, the parade was moved to Philadelphia's main commercial thoroughfare, Market Street, in an attempt to appeal to a more "regional" audience. But that effort largely failed, and now the Mummers, 12,000 strong, have returned to Broad Street, vowing to involve local residents and rebuild their tradition.

3. Evoke Memory and Continuity

None of the event-places we studied were anonymous. All connected in some way to the shared heritage, culture, and experience of the place, providing a common thread among attendees. Good event-places gain additional meaning in this way by being agents of collective memory.

Many event-places achieve these qualities through their themes, replaying traditions and icons of local heritage. The Calgary Stampede is a good example. Here the costumes, characters, and folkways of the old rural west provide a touchstone for the modern city.

Such a western theme has been claimed by many places, but it is played out in Calgary in a distinctive way, as the highlight of the ten-day event is a series of chuckwagon races, celebrated throughout the city with pancake breakfasts served on the streets from the back of roving wagons. Meanwhile, the Stampede grounds, themselves, while filled with modern facilities, are kept deliberately rough and ready, recalling their humble origins.

Memories can also be preserved

the rites and rituals of community that assert community.

People seem to be seeking this kind of community affirmation across North America, if the growth in civic events is any indication. Some communities, lacking volunteers or capacity, are even hiring events. One of the more interesting developments we uncovered is that the Disney Corporation is now making a business of packaging local events and parades featuring Mickey Mouse and Disney characters. While this kind of commercialization may call attention to

a town, it will not build community. Rather than bind people together, such packaged events tend to focus on a single group or target market, and in effect they treat a town's own residents as tourists at their own festival.

We would argue that in the long run, such packaged events are unsustainable. As more and more places have the same event or theme, they will lose value. In the end, successful events are of a place, and they communicate with its people. If you design for the citizens of a place, tourists and investment will follow.

Case Study: Calgary Stampede, Alberta

in stories associated with a place or its people. These are most clearly seen in the American tradition of reenactments. At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, key scenes in the pivotal battle of the American Civil War are replayed every year. To facilitate the reenactment, large pieces of the 17,000-acre battlefield have been restored to their precise configuration on July 1-3, 1863.

Narrative event-places can bridge time and space. In Brooklyn, the Giglio celebrates an event that took place in the town of Nola, Italy, in 409 AD: when the young men of town were miraculously returned from captivity, they were greeted by the townspeople bearing lilies, giglio, on top of fantastic towers. Today, the community of immigrants who brought the event to New York is largely gone; the Italian church that sponsored it is gone; and the neighborhood has been split in half by an elevated expressway. But the Giglio lives on — with a new meaning. Today it symbolically reknits the community, as crowds pushing towers move from either end of the neighborhood to meet under the expressway.

Such themes and stories can be magnified by physical qualities of place. Thus, in Providence, the new waterfront was not designed as an anonymous space, but with voluptuous details and qualities reminiscent of Renaissance piazzas in Italy. And such connections can be reinforced by the event, as for example, in Philadelphia where marchers stop and perform in front of longstanding community institutions like the "Mummers Hospital."

Opposite Left: Dye is used to turn the Chicago River green on St. Patrick's Day. Photograph courtesy of J. Mark Schuster.
Opposite Right: The Giglio festival was transplanted from Italy to Brooklyn.

Beginning in 1884, the Stampede has grown with the city of Calgary, reflecting and promoting its frontier heritage and values. It now attracts more than a million people over eleven days each July and bills itself as "The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth!" The event begins with a 2.8-mile "stampede" parade through the city streets comprising horses, cattle, cowboys, Native Americans, wagons, antique cars, floats, and finally Stampede and rodeo queens. Approximately 4,000 people and 800 horses participate. Activities then move to Stampede Park, where exhibitions, musical performances, rodeos, chuck wagon races, and other competitions are held over the next ten days. A 137-acre complex on the Elbow River near to the heart of the city, the park includes exhibition halls, corrals, a grandstand and track, the Saddledome arena, an Indian village, and many other facilities. As the Stampede has grown over the years, Stampede Park has expanded, encroaching on the surrounding neighborhood. One of the most depressed areas of the city, it is now filled with parking lots and abandoned buildings. The city is currently seeking ways to share the major economic benefits of the Stampede with the surrounding community, while making better use of Park facilities as year-round cultural and entertainment venues.
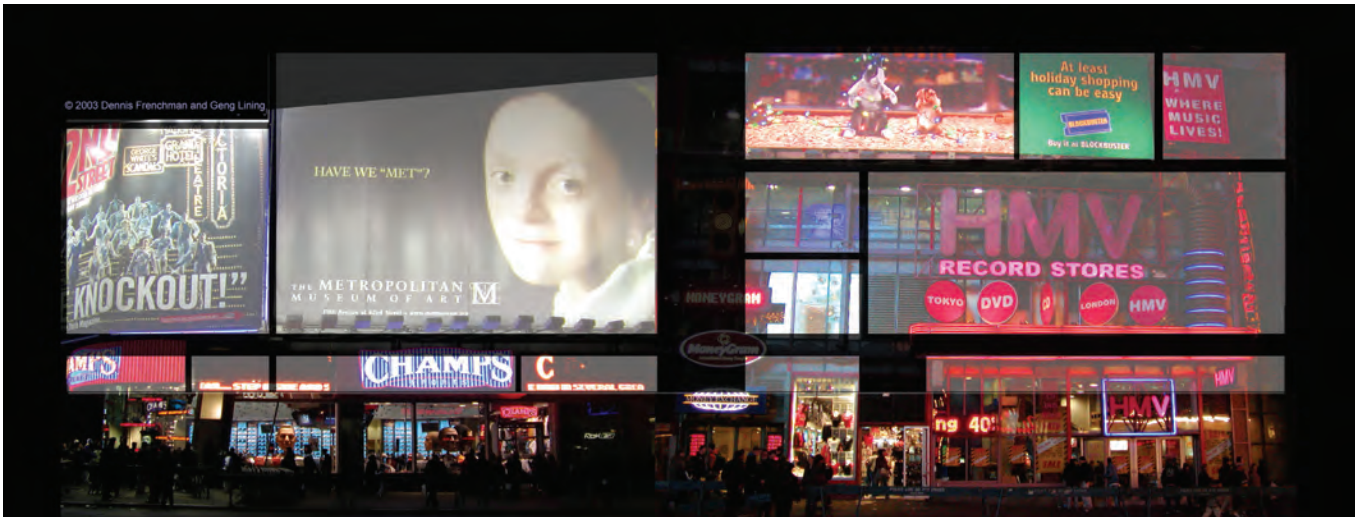
Finally, events are ephemeral; places are not. Thus, places may retain evidence of an event even when the event is over. In WaterFire, the braziers remain in the river, gently rocking with the waves the morning after the fires, or caught in ice during the winter.

Physical evidence of recurring events in the cityscape triggers both memories and anticipation, bridging the gap between performances. It also adds detail and a layer of meaning to the everyday use of the space, enhancing the urban experience. Such evidence may be embedded in the peculiar shape of a space, in sculpture, graphics, pavement, or common elements like light fixtures that change and come alive during an event.

Some event-places never rest, but expand and contact to match the rhythm of the event. In Philadelphia, for example, the Mummers are evident not only on Broad Street, but also on Second Street, where many of their clubhouses are concentrated. On the day of the parade the groups emerge from their clubhouses, assemble in the street, and travel along various routes to join the parade at their appointed spot. After the parade the clubs retreat to Second Street, where they can be seen all year round, practicing, making ready costumes, and building new floats for the next parade.

4. Resonate with the City

Good event-places are more than local; a greater community embraces them. Cheryl Hughes, Director of Program Development for the Mayor's office in Chicago, argues that such resonance is the most important benefit of event-places. They can build "civic morale" — a sense of belonging, and a stake in a city, region, or even nation.

Many government officials don't understand this connection between event-places and the growth of their cities. Thus event-places often lose support when budgets are tight. Based on our research, we would argue that good event-places are not frills, but part of the core fabric of a good city. They are also one of the most effective means to attract and retain people, businesses, and investment. And the more that people and groups from across the city are involved in sustaining an event-place, the more powerful its benefit will be.

Achieving such resonance and connection between the local and a wider context is one of the greatest challenges of event-place making.

Above: Programmable signage in Seoul's Digital Media City. The rise of event-places has been paralleled by a renaissance of sorts in the public environment fueled by advanced media and communications technology. Photographs courtesy of Dennis Frenchman and Lining Geng.

Case Study:
Smithsonian Folklife Festival,
Washington, D.C.

The struggle to meet this challenge was evident in each of the key cases we studied.

WaterFire has brought national acclaim to Providence, which in turn should help to sustain the event in the face of a weak economy and competing demands for public and private financial resources.

The National Folk Festival has brought new life to an abandoned area of the Bangor and a voice to Maine culture. The challenge now is to grow the city around the event, creating a permanent event-place on the waterfront.

Over the years, the Mummers Parade lost its local base in Philadelphia, along with much of its resonance in the city and region. But now that the parade has been returned to Broad Street, a serious effort is needed to connect it to new constituencies.

In Calgary, the Stampede grew in scale with its city, but this led to its consuming the very community around it. The challenge now is to make this event-place serve the community again — by getting more out of the event-place throughout the year.

In Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has now reached beyond the Mall to resonate across the country. As expressed by director Richard Kurin: "The Festival is tied to our freedom. It is both a vehicle as well as an indicator of an open national cultural conversation…. The festival is a symbol of our ability as a nation to find strength in our diversity rather than insist on a homogeneous, singular nation, or yet worse, human culture."[8] But there are challenges to make the event more relevant to local culture as well.

The use of the National Mall for the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival epitomizes the evolution of American event-places. In his original plan for the city, Pierre-Charles L'Enfant conceived of the Mall as a passive view corridor linking Capitol Hill to the Potomac River. However, when the Smithsonian Institution moved to its southern edge in 1846, the Mall was reconceived as a horticultural exhibit and park. Then, in the early twentieth century, with the completion of the Lincoln Memorial at the river end, it became a formal public space, and gradually, its edges were lined with major public buildings. More and more, as the Mall has come to symbolize American life and culture,

it has also become an event-place of national significance. This accelerated in the 1960s, when it served as the site of major civil-rights demonstrations, and in 1967 the Smithsonian initiated its annual Folklife Festival there, celebrating American cultural diversity. The event takes place over a two-week period around July 4th, as the Mall is transformed to hold temporary structures housing musical performances, interactive programs, crafts, visual arts, storytelling, cooking shows, and dancing that attract some one million visitors. During this time adjacent museums also open their doors to offer special programs, events and exhibits.

Photograph courtesy of Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

A Final Word

In the final analysis, we concluded that good event-place-making represents more than successful urban design or civic boosterism. It is a powerful means of city building that is being employed by more and more cities across North America. In part, this is because event-places create both social and physical capital and can contribute to the local economy. But these benefits don't wholly explain the growing number and scale of North American event-places. We suspect their popularity has more to do with a search for meaning in American public life and a yearning for community. After a generation of increased alienation, perhaps we are tired of "bowling alone."

As the momentum for event-places accelerates, so will the desire for new forms. Already, we have seen advanced communications and digital media being integrated into traditional events and spaces. These will provide new ways of expressing mood and message and connecting people to place. At the same time, more flexible venues are being created that can accommodate sequential or simultaneous events using combinations of public and private space. Such innovations are changing the nature of the pubic realm. For designers, they represent the opportunity for a new civic art, which can build communities through more powerful and effective event-places.

Above: Braziers in the frozen Providence river recall WaterFire performances of the previous summer and remind residents of their return in the spring. Such installations, even when inactive, can provide powerful symbols of continuity. Photograph courtesy of the *Providence Journal*.

Exploring Event-Places

Dennis Frenchman

Notes

1. The events referred to include respectively: Water-Fire, Providence, R.I; Lumière Festival of Lights, Lyons, France; Calgary Stampede, Calgary, Canada; Temps de Flors, Girona, Spain; and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Washington, D.C.

2. A longer version of this article was presented as a paper at the conference "From Event-Places to Cultural Landscapes," Barcelona and Terrassa, Catalunya, January 23-25, 2004, and appeared in the project final report, "Event-places," MIT-UPC, September, 2004. It is based on a collaborative research effort between the City Design and Development Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Department d'Urbanisme i Ordenacio del Territori at the Universitat Polytechnica de Catalunya. The work was sponsored by a grant from the Generalitat de Catalunya and support from the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the MIT Council on the Arts.

3. Some European ones were invented also. See, for example, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

4. Note, though, that some event-places, such as Philadelphia's Mummers parade, can be racially divisive. A 2004 MCP thesis at MIT (Annis Whitlow, "The Racial Politics of Urban Celebrations: A Comparative Study of Philadelphia's Mummers Parade and Odunde Festival") makes this point cogently.

5. Alessandro Falazzi, *Time Out of Time: Essay on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

6. William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 1980).

7. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

8. Richard Kurin, *Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Culture of, by, and for the People* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 1998).

To study the phenomena of event-places in Europe and North America, research teams were established at both the Universitat Polytechnica de Catalunya and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At MIT, work began with an initial scan of almost one hundred North American events and festivals. The team eventually focused on a shortlist of ten key cases, of which five are summarized here.

The team was interested in neither events nor places, per se, but what we came to call "event-places," where one aspect is synonymous with the other. The cases were chosen to provide a cross-section of different scales and kinds of event-place, including three basic typologies: nodal — where the majority of activity takes place in a single location; linear — where activity focuses on a procession or movement; and dispersed — where activity involves multiple locations connected by a theme. Investigations were supplemented by a semester-long set of activities held in the City Design and Development Group, including an Event-Places Forum (a series of public lectures by leading event producers, designers, and scholars in the United States), and an Event-Places Seminar

(a graduate-level course involving discussions and papers on the event-place theme).

The MIT work was paralleled by similar studies in Europe, culminating in an international conference on the urban role of event-places, held in Barcelona in January 2004, sponsored by UPC and the Architectural Association of Catalunya.

One problem with the study of event-places is that it cross-cuts many disciplines — event management, urban design, public policy, anthropology, the arts, and media, among others. As a result, at MIT we had trouble finding a language of event-place-making that could be shared by, for example, festival planners (who typically have little concept of scale or space) and architects and urban designers (who typically receive no training in the staging of public activities or the importance of cultural expression). Our solution was to organize the research group from a cross-section of disciplines: festival planner, artist, cultural-policy planner, and architect/urban designers. Together, we began to build a common vocabulary, and ultimately we came to understand the physical and social qualities that make a successful event-place.

The MIT research team was directed by Dennis Frenchman, Professor of the Practice of Urban Design, and J. Mark Schuster, Professor of Urban Cultural Policy. The team also included Cheryl Hughes, Director of Program Development for the mayor's office in Chicago; Barnaby Evans, Producer of WaterFire and MIT Artist-in-Residence; and research associates Lining Geng, Kelly Houston, Susanne Seitinger, and Karla Solheim. The UPC team was directed by Joaquim Sabate i Bel, Professor of Town and Regional Planning.