

The Event Designer's Toolbox

In a world of split-second attention spans, designers are rising to the challenge of making lasting memories with mind-bending technology, sensory immersion, even nostalgia with a twist.

BY ANNETTE BURDEN

Mozart used notes. Da Vinci used paint. Faulkner used words. Baryshnikov used movement. But event designers have a whole toolbox of elements to deliver their art to the world. While taking a holistic approach to decor, lighting, technology, food and beverage, entertainment, and branding, today's designers are stretching the boundaries of design further than ever. And it's all aimed to meet the needs of demanding clients—and attendees who think they've seen it all.



A scale model of the U.S. Capitol anchors a tented affair designed by Mary Carvotta-Trexler on the roof of a San Francisco parking structure.



PHOTO COURTESY ACCESS NORTHERN CALIFORNIA.



Above: Shelley Pigéon's wide choice of venues in New Orleans includes the versatile Sugar Mill on Convention Center Boulevard. Below and opposite: For Mardi Gras-themed events, she sets the mood with stage-worthy lighting and eye-popping color.

THE PROPER BACKDROP

“For the kind of celebrations that we do, with thousands of guests, an event has to have something for everybody,” says Mary Carvotta-Trexler, chief creative officer of Access Destination Services and owner of its Northern California branch. Her clients include some of the largest and most influential tech, entertainment, and social media companies in the world.

In every case, she says, group size and the client’s objectives dictate the venue. But what’s especially hot in the San Francisco area right now are vast, abandoned warehouses—broken windows and all. “They’re not pretty,” she says

with a laugh, “but that’s the point; they’re ‘authentic.’ And, in some ways, they’re like the companies’ work environments—large open spaces set up for interaction.”

Within these cavernous spaces, Carvotta-Trexler and her crew bring in everything from the tables and chairs to the walls, ceilings, and floor coverings, creating separate areas for different interests and personalities. “There might be one area for karaoke, for instance, and another for dancing to great DJs,” she says, “and another with a string quartet. And then there might be game tables, tied into the theme, of course, and a few quiet areas for the introverts and others to catch their breath.”

For one upcoming event, she proposed a whole wall of drawers, each filled with a different kind of food. “We’re always going for an element of surprise,” she says. “We don’t want a guest to think, oh, I saw that last year or last month.” And where do these ideas come from? “Everywhere. Fashion, concerts—everything,” she says. “Someone recently sent me a link to a video about a cool city festival in Sydney, Australia, and it gave me lots of ideas for lighting. We watch for what’s new, and then reach for one-up.”

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

“For us, lighting is the last thing to cut in a budget,” Carvotta-Trexler says unequivocally.







THIS PAGE: ANDREW SHAFER VISUALS. OPPOSITE: FROM TOP: COURTESY ACCESS NEW ORLEANS, MULTI IMAGE GROUP.

“It’s essential.” She’s currently wild about video mapping, a projection technology used to turn anything from buildings to small indoor objects into display surfaces for video. It not only contributes to the lighting, “it makes the walls come to life.”

Barry Ross Rinehart, executive creative director of the Boca Raton, Florida-based Multi Image Group (MIG), goes a step further. “It stops people in their tracks,” he says. He cites the impact of seeing the exterior of San Diego’s Hard Rock Hotel lit up by moving multistory images. What’s more, attendees of the rooftop party MIG designed for DealerSocket’s User Summit soon discovered they could control the movement with their cheers.

Rinehart, whose company produces events for clients like DealerSocket, Sprint, and Nissan, insists that because people experience life through the senses, triggering emotions through multisensory experiences leaves the most lasting impression. He means this literally, pointing to scientific research that links sensory input to the longevity of memories in the brain.

To illustrate another use of this principle, he mentions an event designed for Citibank in Austin, Texas. “We used drones to shoot a field of Texas bluebonnets,” he says, “and projected the images on a 100-foot screen behind the stage.” At the same time, scent machines wafted the subtle scent of the Texans’ beloved state flower over the audience. “We have to be master mixologists to trigger those neurotransmitters,” he says. What’s next? For the near future, Rinehart predicts 3-D holographic images that react to touch. “It’s happening,” he says.

WHEN PAST IS PRESENT

Shelley Pigeon, managing partner and creative director of Access New Orleans, sees a trend back to tradition for events in her city. She believes that tradition can lend a sense of timelessness and authenticity to a brand’s message, if that’s the goal. Her examples range



from transportation via horse-drawn carriages, Mardi Gras floats, and second-line parades to venues like Mardi Gras World, Musée Conti, and other richly evocative settings in the French Quarter.

For Zurich Insurance, one of her large, international clients, she transformed the ballroom at the historic Roosevelt New Orleans, a Waldorf Astoria Hotel into a virtual swamp for a Cajun-style fais-do-do party last year. The year before that, the theme was more general—Mad About Art combined with Mad About Golf.

To illustrate another successful old-is-new-again idea, Pigeon recalls one of a trio

Opposite: The tropical air, lights, dancers, bars, DJ booth, and projected videos and graphics trigger all the senses at an Elite Meetings Alliance party at Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancún. Above: To celebrate a client’s sponsorship of a PGA tournament, Shelley Pigeon’s Hole in One’derland theme brightens every corner of the Crescent City Ballroom. Below: A backdrop of wide-open spaces created by Multi Image Group (MIG) inspires attendees at a Citibank event.





Above: Video mapping by MIG brings the Bud Light Hotel's facade to life during Super Bowl. Above right: A "ceiling" of lights defines one intimate space within a cavernous warehouse transformed by Mary Carvotta-Trexler. Opposite: Hot meets cold at a Fire & Ice event designed by Shelley Pigeon.

of trade show after-parties recently designed by her team. It dared to use a real camera and printed photos, instead of a photo booth, to snap images of guests—and the guests loved it.

But whether the theme looks backward, forward, or sideways, the goal is to come up with new ways to engage the senses and evoke positive emotions—and use technology to do so. Pigeon, for instance, used video to create a timeline of a company's 100-year history and set it dancing around the walls of the firm's centennial celebration. Carvotta-Trexler used a faux-organic grassy floor covering that emitted a slight electrical charge. MIG created a holiday installation complete with custom Santa-themed video game and video-driven activities like dress the snowman and scatter the elves, all incorporating the client's logo throughout.

THE ART OF SEDUCTION

"What we do is help companies create or solidify relationships," Rinehart says. "It starts by listening very closely to the client. Then it's our job to take the thing the client wants to be memorable and make it come alive."

The ultimate goal: immersive environments that engage, inspire—or even rock guests' world. Rinehart likens the process of creating a successful event to dating. It begins with a carefully crafted first impression, when

the invitee first hears about the event, and goes on to build attraction and anticipation through follow-up. That's marketing. Then, he believes, the journey from outside the event to inside needs to start triggering the senses and emotions right away, followed by total immersion inside and ending with a memorable good-bye.

"The action has to be paced correctly," Carvotta-Trexler says. "It can't be stagnant. You have to keep it going. People are always asking, what's next?" She recently answered that question with a 360-degree video booth that looked like a jail cell inside. Designed to promote the season premier of a prison-themed TV series, it tipped and revolved slowly, allowing its subjects to appear to be climbing the walls and walking on the ceiling. The experience made for a record-breaking success as people rushed to post their videos on social media. At another recent event, virtual-reality goggles transported guests to other worlds—and nearly stole the show.

"We all want experiences we'll remember for a lifetime," Rinehart says. "And some events will never be over because of the memories an event designer can give us. It's what Maya Angelou said: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.'" **EW**

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: COURTESY MULTI IMAGE GROUP, ACCESS NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. OPPOSITE: COURTESY ACCESS NEW ORLEANS.

7 Takeaways for Memorable Events

1 Select a theme that plays into the message you need to relay from the event's sponsors to the guests. Once you have the theme, use every possible touch point along the way to support the message and drive it home.

2 Find the right venue based on the size and profile of the guest list. Large or small, the location should have the right character for the time, place, and theme—whether traditional in New Orleans or postdystopian in Silicon Valley.

3 Provide something to engage everyone, no matter how diverse the group may be. As a cautionary tale, Shelley Pigéon cites one client's dinner-and-show that failed miserably. Despite the multigenerational guest list, the boss insisted on showcasing a fabulously famous (and highly paid) 1940s-style jazz singer. Sadly, only a handful of old-school jazz fans showed up.

4 Aim for elements of surprise. Make a habit of keeping your eyes and ears out for pop and cultural trends and innovations, then play one-up to keep it fun and fresh.

5 Don't skimp on lighting. No matter how lean the budget, make room for the lights.

6 Appeal to the senses and emotions in everything from the decor and food and beverage to entertainment—even layer the sensory input when you can. Barry Ross Rinehart recalls a fund-raising event that invited guests into a room full of puppies—next door to a casino room with buckets for charity. The puppies, rescued from a shelter, were there for the sheer pleasure of petting and playing with them—but also the possibility that hearts opened by puppies might feel motivated to give more to the sponsor's cause.

7 Pace activities so attendees never have to ask what's next—because there it is. And be sure to trigger those sense memories and emotions from the first hello to the final farewell. Add strategic pacing to your toolbox, and every event will be like a bestselling page-turner, a personal story to remember and cherish for a lifetime.

