
Sometimes it isn’t the actual city or physical space that draws people to a place. It can be an event that is so unique, so iconic, that it becomes synonymous with the geographic point where it happens.

Interestingly enough, while these events are usually expressions of art and culture, they’re rarely the product of our formal arts and cultural institutions. These iconic special events are often the result of years of dedicated effort by countless numbers of passionate organizers and participants.

That phenomenon is one of the lessons that planners, community development experts, and local leaders are now learning about creative placemaking.

From the Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit, planning, design, and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities, “Why do these cultural centers physically remove culture from the public realm and plop it on a curated, often ‘visionary’ pedestal instead of providing a venue for promoting more interaction among the people who create it? ‘Big Cultural Centers–think of Lincoln Center in Manhattan–they need to turn themselves inside-out and become about culture for all instead of culture for a few,’ says PPS CEO Fred Kent. ‘Elitism is a big part of what’s going on in some of these places. They exude a subtle sense of who ‘should’ and ‘should not’ be there.’”

Special events are one way to do that, bringing arts and culture out to the streets–literally–and into the hearts and minds of the people, where they can be shared and celebrated by all.

(ENDNOTES)


CHAPTER PHOTO CREDITS:
DANTE STELLA
FRANCIS GRUNOW
MICHIGAN MUNICIPAL LEAGUE
MYRA KLARMAN
a foolish idea

Bringing Random Art to the Streets of Ann Arbor
Imagine a city street that’s come to life with bizarre and fanciful dreams, plucked like magic from the minds of its citizens. Children stroll along in the dark with brightly colored glowing fish bobbing above their heads. A giant angry ice cream cone chases its sweet-toothed eaters with a cartoon baseball bat. Alice’s White Rabbit bobbles his head above a Salvador Dali clock, while an army of tiny toy robots march in mechanical step with shiny CD eyes.

It’s April Fools in Ann Arbor: the one place to be for the Foolish, on a day unlike any other, anywhere else on earth.

As far back as the Roman festival of “Hilaria” and the Medieval “Feast of Fools,” people have made mischief and merriment a cause for celebration. While no one is certain of its actual origins – it might have been Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales – the first of April somehow became the official date for practical jokes and playful pranks, hijinks and shenanigans.

But until now, no one has laid claim to this oddest of holidays. There are no Hallmark cards to commemorate it, no formal rituals to observe it, no particular place to be when the madness and mayhem begin.

That is, until a University of Michigan art teacher came up with a Foolish idea.

**AN ARTIST’S EYE**

Mark Tucker grew up in Rutland, Vermont. But instead of hiking and skiing the Green Mountains, he amused himself by riding a unicycle, juggling, and performing magic and ventriloquism. After receiving his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Art at Ohio Wesleyan University and a Master of Fine Arts in Painting at the University of Michigan, Tucker began his artistic career by answering a blind ad to build parade floats for the Michigan Thanksgiving Parade, a major and time-honored event which takes place each fall on Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit. While serving as the parade’s art director, Tucker traveled to Europe to learn the fine art of carta pesta (papier-mâché) from the world famous float builders of Viareggio, Italy.

In Viareggio, the tradition of a carnival celebration with floats began with a parade on Shrove Tuesday in 1873. The massive floats for the annual carnival were originally built by Viareggio’s ship builders: highly skilled carpenters and iron workers whose renowned and rugged ships were made to sail the world’s high seas. In 1925, papier-mâché replaced the original shipbuilding materials. As a result, the still-strong but now lightweight floats became even larger and more elaborate. Some reach as high as the rooftops of the five-story buildings lining the streets of the parade, with moving parts and puppets manipulated by people inside the float using an ingenious system of weights and levers. Today’s floats are planned and worked on year-round, with the papier-mâché puppets satirizing public and political figures and topical news events. The largest floats can carry as many as 200 costumed people dancing, singing, and throwing confetti.  

Tucker later moved to Boston and worked as a
freelance scenic painter for ten years, painting sets for opera, ballet, television, TV commercials, and movies. When he returned to Michigan with his wife and three sons, he began teaching art to mostly non-art majors within the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program (LHSP) at the University of Michigan. LHSP is a living-learning program focused on writing and the arts, where first- and second-year students live in a close-knit community together, and take small writing and studio arts classes with highly specialized faculty. Events are an intrinsic part of the experience: photography exhibits, theater performances, live concerts, even poetry slams. The program is built on the premise that learning and living together encourages personal and intellectual development.

In 2006, Tucker was searching for a novel way to bring his LHSP students together with community members to create something unique and exciting for his “Art in Public Spaces” course. The result was the Street Theater Art (START) Project.

“What one course do you teach if that is going to be their only art course? That became the challenge,” said Tucker. “I was teaching drawing and painting for these non-art majors but I didn’t feel comfortable. It didn’t seem like enough. These people are going to go out and be the movers and shakers in the world. I wanted them to feel and understand the impact that arts can have in a community.”

As serendipity would have it, at about the same time Tucker was helping a friend design sets for a neighborhood theater group, the Burns Park Players.

“We were doing Fiddler on the Roof and we made these two puppets that came down the aisle for the dream sequence. So the ghost of Fruma-Sarah came down and she was so scary that kids ran out of the theater, including my own three-year-old;” said Tucker, laughing. “Then we got to thinking that wow, this was really effective. Okay, what would 50 of these puppets look like on the street instead of two in the theater?”

Just a few years earlier, theater director Julie Taymor had blown away Broadway audiences with the innovative costume designs for the theatrical version of The Lion King. The incredible life-size animal puppets of The War Horse were also in the process of being born.

All those things began to come together in Tucker’s imagination.

“There had been this reemergence of puppetry as a legitimate theatrical pursuit. So what would happen if we had a whole class of students who made these giant puppets that were too big for them to actually complete themselves, so they would require community help? We’d have this community engagement aspect built right into the piece.”

The idea became the first START project: a student puppet-making workshop assisted by community volunteers which would culminate at the semester’s end with a public celebration in downtown Ann Arbor. To make it happen, he teamed up with then-graduate student Shoshana Hurand, a former LHSP student who was equally excited at the prospect of a hands-on public art project. They started with a class of 20 non-art majors, and invited in any community members interested in taking part in their creative venture.

“We decided to call it FestiFools because April Fools’ Day just happened to work with the academic calendar as the end of the semester,” said Tucker.

That first year was little more than an act of inspired and orchestrated chaos.

“We sort of just did it. We didn’t go and get all the right permissions in all the right ways at first. We
just rented a garage down on Felch Street. Someone from OSHA found out about us because a student had called them trying to get a free first aid kit for us. They came and saw our setup which was cold water, no sump pump, no bathrooms for the students. Voilà, the next year the university moved us into here,” said Tucker, grinning impishly as he gestured around at the 2,500-square-foot workspace that now houses the FestiFools studio inside a campus warehouse.

The next step was finding a place to stage the performance itself. What better venue for street theater than Main Street USA? Tucker approached two city council members who were part of his Burns Park neighborhood theater group.

“We were very fortunate with the city of Ann Arbor. I lived in Boston for 10 years and I thought I knew what community was, but then we moved here into the Burns Park neighborhood and I started helping out with the theater and suddenly I know and I mean know 100 people that I’ve spent time arguing and crying and laughing and partying with. Two of them happened to be on the city council.”

They encouraged him to start by seeking the support of the downtown business community.

“We talked with the Main Street Area Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Convention and Visitors Bureau. We went to all of these business association meetings and stuff, getting up there trying to explain this thing that was still pretty much just an idea on a napkin. We didn’t really even know if we could deliver what we were saying we were going to deliver.”

But one business owner, Dennis Serras of Main Street Ventures, offered more than just his okay for a Main Street event.

“He gave us our first $1,000 check and I thought this is going to be easy. All of them are just going to write $1,000 checks and all we need are 20 of these and we’ll be on our way,” said Tucker, shaking his head and laughing. “It was the last $1,000 we saw for quite some time other than some in-kind stuff.”

Ann Arbor City Council Member Margie Teall, and Main Street Area Association leads Ellie Serras and Maura Thomson, were also among those first visionaries who saw the potential of Tucker’s Foolish idea.

“The contributions of private citizens have played an even more important role,” said Tucker. “Even with support from the business community, getting a project like FestiFools off the ground and keeping it afloat, year and year after, often boils down to the generosity of just a handful of private citizens. Sometimes, even just one dedicated supporter can make all the difference.”

“We really couldn’t have done any of this without the tremendous support of our angel donors, Jeri Rosenberg and Vic Strecher. From day one, their ongoing support has been our financial rock that’s made it possible for us to do this in the first place,” said Tucker. “Vic and Jeri have contributed well over $100k just to keep us afloat, and they offered and have sustained an annual pledge to us even before we received any other funding. It would be disingenuous for us to suggest that we accomplish what we do on a sustained level without folks understanding that we’ve been very lucky to have these two really dedicated, unbelievably generous supporters in our pocket.”

At this point, they now had in hand the necessary approvals from the city and downtown businesses, and solid financial backing from the
community. They were ready to get the project started.

But in order to get enough puppets to actually make the event work, Tucker also needed a bigger workforce than he had at hand. He quickly engaged Nick Tobier, a friend and associate professor at the University of Michigan Stamps School of Art and Design, who offered to bring in 150 freshmen from a class focused on art history and social consciousness.

“Instead of doing a final exam with them, for two weeks he’d group these students into smaller groups and they each would make a puppet at their own facility up on North Campus. So along with the 25 puppets we were making, he was bringing another 25 or so,” said Tucker. “Just in terms of the scale of the street we needed a certain critical mass of these just to make it work. But it was also the theater of it. They didn’t know what we were making and we didn’t know what they were making. It’s pretty amazing to see the way the puppets interact when they see each other for the first time out there on the street. It’s like puppet love or puppet hate.”

Another Stamps professor, Holly Hughes, also joined in with her students, along with Kelly Quinn’s College of Urban Planning students.

On April 1, 2007, the first FestiFools burst onto Main Street in downtown Ann Arbor with a colorful army of huge papier-mâché creations, the cumulative effort of more than 200 students and countless community members, to the amazed delight of hundreds of spectators lining the street. It was unlike anything any of them had ever seen.

Among them was Shary Brown, who was then the executive director of the original Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, established in 1960 as the first of what is now a group of four award-winning art fairs taking place together each summer in Ann Arbor.

“That first year my husband and I got there more than an hour early because I was so excited and wanted to be sure we got a front row spot,” said Brown. “I just fell in love with it. It was an art event that was so freshly Ann Arbor.”

Brown wasn’t the only fan. The first FestiFools event was enthusiastically praised by the Ann Arbor News editorial board, and Mayor John Hieftje presented FestiFools with a Golden Paintbrush Award for excellence in public art, with the promise that FestiFools would return in 2008 as an annual Ann Arbor tradition.

When Tucker heard Brown was retiring from the art fair, he immediately called to recruit her expert help to keep his new event going beyond that first year. He didn’t have to ask twice.

“It was a perfect linkage to have had the honor of the stewardship of what is really an Ann Arbor signature event, and then to be invited to join this whole new take on a community art event,” said Brown.

She was also drawn to the exciting feeling of “spontaneous combustion” that surrounded FestiFools.

“It’s the community-built part of it. Our responsibility as organizers is to provide the platform. We create the stage. If you contrast it with events like the art fairs or summer festival, it’s the same concept
of public art, but they’re curated productions and this is community built, inspired and created. We literally don’t know what we’re going to get until it comes.”

Still, it’s not as random and rogue an event as it might appear on the surface.

“Here in Ann Arbor we’re a highly educated community and our curated events are really top notch. So there’s an expectation of quality that I think also translates to FestiFools,” said Brown. “Plus there’s been a community engagement component since the beginning. That’s what the studio community time has done. There’s a real attitude of community investment in it.”

BEYOND THE MERRIMENT

Thanks to all those factors, that original Foolish idea has blossomed in wonderful and unexpected ways over the past seven years. One of those has been Fools in Schools, a unique form of educational outreach that brings arts enrichment to underserved youth populations in inner city schools.

“We have this great resource here which is called college students. So we took 15 of them a few years ago and we worked in two elementary schools in Detroit,” said Tucker. “We worked on a mini FestiFools project with the kids. The idea was they could create it however they wanted, it could be about whatever they wanted, they could have it on whatever day they wanted, but it had to involve the kids and their caregivers and community folks.”

“These schools hadn’t had arts programming for six or seven years at that point. The idea was at least we could start an event and if they liked it, then maybe, just maybe—just the same way we have to keep making this thing every year whether we want to or not—then maybe that would happen there and then they would have to have some arts programming in their schools even if it wasn’t mandated by Detroit Public Schools.”

It was also meant to be an enrichment experience for the college students, funded by a University of Michigan program called Global Intercultural Experience for Undergraduates (GIEU).

“The idea is for students to go out into the world. Well, we could go 45 minutes away and be out in the world,” said Tucker. “But I didn’t want our students at five o’clock to be able to say ‘ok I can go home now.’ So we brought our sleeping bags and lived there, stayed right there in the building for 10 days, ate the lunch and reduced price breakfast right along with the kids. They never had anyone do that before. It cost us $20,000 just to pay for security. That was the only way they were going to let us do that.”

Immediately after the Detroit experience, Tucker took the same group of students to a small rural town in northern Italy, where they spent the next three weeks working in a similar program started by a group from New York City’s Village Halloween Parade, an annual event which draws an estimated two million visitors to the city’s Greenwich Village each October 31st.

“The people had essentially abandoned this town a mile up in the Alps so it was like four people in the winter and in the summer it swelled to maybe 20. So we knew we could do a lot.”

Besides helping them with the festival project,
the students worked to clear hiking trails and helped in the annual harvest of an alpine flower used to make a special local liqueur.

“It was similar issues, similar problems, but different communities completely. There, you had schools really depressed because everyone was moving out of the rural areas, so you didn’t have enough students to keep the schools alive and people had to take their kids two hours away. It was all these sorts of interesting parallels going on, so it was really powerful.”

Today, the little Alpine village’s annual festival has helped make it a popular agritourism destination for hikers and cyclists, and many of its former inhabitants are now reclaiming their ancestral homes as summer places or vacation rentals.

The Village Halloween Parade group now also comes to Ann Arbor each March to help out in the FestiFools studios.

“They have been working with their parade for 20 years so this is their craft, this is their business, this is what they know how to do. So some of the techniques we use we learned from them,” said Tucker. “It’s a great partnership.”

Sadly, the Detroit elementary school where the students worked has since burnt down, with students and staff dispersed to other schools. But Tucker hopes to get another grant to do a similar educational outreach project next year.

“That’s the great thing about it all. Before I was teaching a drawing and painting class and students were putting their stuff in their little drawers or taking them home. This way they spend weeks on making something, and then they give it up. We hang it up here and they give it up to the community by going out and performing it that day for one hour. And we’ve never produced a professional puppet maker from this class, you know what I mean? So what is the intrinsic value of this? At the end they have to write a paper where they have to reflect on that. Why did I take this class? What am I learning here?”

Beth Johnson, an art history major, is one of the students in the 2014 FestiFools class.

“Growing up in Ann Arbor, I’ve always been interested in public art and community art events. Being in the class allows me to be a part of putting on an event that is really special,” said Johnson. “I’m interested in bringing the community and university together both as a member of the Ann Arbor community and as a student. It’s a reminder that we are in the community of Ann Arbor, not just on our own little island campus.”

**BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON**

By 2011, FestiFools had become so popular that a second event was added: FoolMoon, a nighttime luminary festival that takes place on the Friday night immediately before the Sunday FestiFools celebration.

The idea began when Tucker’s crew was asked to create lighted paper sculptures for a local production of Peter and the Wolf. The commissioned project fell through, but the unused luminaries sparked another brilliantly Foolish idea.

“We thought ‘Let’s just not just trash it. They’re so much fun to make, don’t you think people in the community would want to make them?’ Because we got all kinds of calls from people wanting to make the papier-mâché puppets and they do come help us do that. But they really want to make their own and they don’t realize these things take two months to make. The luminaries
“I like the free-form nature of this parade, the carnival-esque way that it includes the crowd. It’s like a moving collage... it empowers the artist and it empowers the audience.”

are much simpler with smaller materials and less of an investment time-wise. Of course, some people do put a tremendous amount of time and imagination into these too, but you don’t have to. You could walk away two or three hours later with one of these. So the entry point is a little more do-able.”

They hired Michigan Thanksgiving Parade float designer Jimmie Thompson to oversee the free luminary workshops held each Sunday in March leading up to the event. “The workshops are an integral part of the shared public art experience,” said Tucker.

“There’s this whole culture and life that goes on in the process of this. The two events combined are just a few hours long but it is the process leading up that is the real meat holding it together. We recognized that the community wanted not just to make something at their house but to work with people who knew how to make things. So what we did was create these community workshops with artists to teach and help people build their own luminaries,” said Tucker. “I’d have Jimmie here every day if I could afford it. You can’t underestimate the value that professional artists bring. As much as you can do with volunteers and students, you have to have some people who actually can come in and teach others. But that is a luxury. This time I got a grant from the university to get him here a month early so we’re back in the game again. That’s the way it is every year: one more year of scrappy funding to see if we can do it again.”

For Thompson, FestiFools and FoolMoon provide a fun change of pace from his regular job working in the more traditional style of a large-scale commercial event like the Michigan Thanksgiving Parade.

“I like the free-form nature of this parade, the carnival-esque way that it includes the crowd in. It’s like a moving collage, things coming up and moving in from
all over the place, rather than that traditional military line down the street,” said Thompson. “It empowers the artist and it empowers the audience.”

The free luminary workshop space is provided by Workantile, a nontraditional work community located inside a remodeled storefront on Main Street in downtown Ann Arbor.

An outgrowth of the new “shared economy” culture, Workantile is an innovative shared workspace for independent, self-employed workers whose membership dues allow them to work in a social setting within an attractive, professional environment they probably couldn’t have afforded on their own. Opening their space to community events like the FoolMoon luminary workshops is part of Workantile’s mission as a member of the downtown business community.

“It’s turned out to be a very positive, mutually beneficial relationship that has allowed FestiFools access to a temporary space that already exists in the community,” said Brown.

“It’s a terrifically interesting group of people who don’t use their space much on Sundays and, at the same time, we provide some visibility for them by bringing in a lot of people who might never have heard about them otherwise. So it meets some of their needs and our needs at the same time,” she said.

The workshops are a happy mass of organized madness, like an adult-sized kindergarten art class. Men, women, teens and kids all crowd the long work tables side by side, up to their elbows in mounds of wire and packing tape, fashioning giant wire-and-cellophane lovebirds and butterflies, unicorns and stars. Up in the front window, others are busily slopping white craft glue onto their constructions, then covering them with scraps of colored tissue paper. Some of the workers have even spilled out onto the sidewalk, hanging their creations to dry from the light poles and bike racks outside.

One of them is Eric Bassey, a professional event producer and database developer who’s created a giant rabbit for this year’s “moonagerie” theme.

“A lot of my adult life I’ve spent working in the arts, primarily theater, so I really like the theatricality of it. It really takes performance and art out of the gallery and theater and into the open, out on the street where everybody can see it without going out of their way. It is truly art in a public space,” said Bassey. “Things like FestiFools and FoolMoon are really giving the impetus back to art for art’s sake. It makes life more enjoyable and vibrant. Ann Arbor is definitely one of the communities willing to lead in that direction, among places like Austin and San Francisco and Madison, Wisconsin.”

Bassey, 44, grew up in Michigan but went to school and lived in New York until 1991. Ann Arbor’s reputation as a center for arts and culture was the main reason he chose to relocate there, he said.

“When I moved here I didn’t have a particular field yet to claim as my own, so I had the ability to pick a place where I wanted to be and where I knew people, which was another primary draw,” he said. “FestiFools and FoolMoon have become part of the cultural identity of the city. That really becomes an attractive element. People know this is something that happens in this city, and that makes this city a more attractive and interesting place to live. It really has the potential to draw people who are able to take into consideration these types of things when making a choice.”

FoolMoon was an instant hit, engaging people of all ages in an eclectic, electric community art pageant that has in some ways become even bigger than the
original Sunday spectacle. After weeks of preparation in the public workshops, the moonlight event starts in the late afternoon at the Grizzly Peak Brew tent with live music and FoolBrew, the event’s signature beer. As the sun sets, the merrymakers head to one of three official starting points around the city core. The enormous processions of hand-made illuminated sculptures thread their way along the streets to coalesce in the heart of downtown Ann Arbor, where the merriment continues with candlelit treats, shimmering shadow puppet performances, innovative music, building-sized experimental film projections, and more.

“The crazy thing about it is it’s really 99% community built,” said Tucker. “We thought it was just going to be an adult event because it happens after dark. But people bring their kids and they all stay until 11 at night.”

FoolMoon also fills a critical economic need for the group. As the project has grown increasingly into a public endeavor and the university’s administrative and financial support has diminished, Tucker’s band of merrymakers have had to explore new ways to keep the concept financially viable.

“We needed to raise funds to keep going with this, but we didn’t want to sell out FestiFools. Part of its charm and allure, whether people realize it or not, is that it’s completely commercial free,” said Tucker. “If you want to do something political that’s fine but you can’t do it on a sign. We will come out and reeducate you on that day. We don’t want people handing out stuff, we don’t want companies coming and saying ‘I’ll put my name on this one, not that one.’ So we started FoolMoon saying this will be our event that brings in the money that supports both the events.”

Even so, FoolMoon hasn’t compromised their artistic integrity. In fact, just the opposite: it’s challenged them to come up with advertising methods that are true to the aesthetics of the event.

“We found clever ways and are always looking for new clever ways to show off our sponsors where it’s not just hanging up a banner,” said Tucker. “Like we make these little gobo lanterns where we cut out their name and my students will run around and shine them on buildings and people and stuff like a little Batman Bat-Signal.”

A WONDERFOOL FUTURE

WonderFool Productions became a registered Michigan nonprofit in December of 2012 and applied for 501c3 status in June of 2013. The group’s nonprofit status was officially accepted by the Internal Revenue Service in June of 2014.

“We can’t overemphasize the importance of the role the university has played in starting this event as a university course, and providing a lot of the administrative support services that we’re now taking over;” said Brown. “Now we’re growing into a new phase. Our progress into the future would be more rapid if we had fulltime staff. We’re still largely volunteer-driven which is wonderful but it’s also inefficient when you are relying on people to juggle their lives and priorities to make sure their volunteer commitments rise to a priority in their lives, and the 10,000 are going to come whether you’re ready or not.”

For 2014, the group was able to hire a part-time administrative assistant to perform vital but time-consuming tasks like getting bids on sound and power equipment for FoolMoon’s deejay display, and ordering the event tee shirts that generate a significant share of funds each year.
new challenges also continue to arise. For example, the seven-year relationship with the Stamps students ended this year when the class was moved to the fall semester in 2014.

“That was a huge loss for us, 150 students that were making 25 pieces on North Campus. We’ll miss that,” said Tucker, who is scrambling to make up the loss by scavenging parts from past puppets hanging in the studio rafters. “Up until this year, the idea was to never bring out a puppet twice. Part of the magic is if you don’t come, you don’t see it and the next year it’s going to be all new. But this year we’re in emergency mode so we’re pulling down some of the old ones to retrofit.”

Thankfully, other puppet “recruits” are starting to show up to fill out the ranks as the event’s fame slowly spreads.

“I’d say maybe 30 percent now is folks coming from other places. We’ve had calls this year from a group in Syracuse, New York, and there’s always a group from Toledo, and another from southern Indiana. So that’s a trend we hope grows because it makes our job easier. We just put on the event and they come,” said Tucker.

“So far, ‘quality control’ hasn’t been a problem,” Tucker said.

“They see our stuff online or have come to past events and get the aesthetic of it. It’s hard to tell now what’s theirs and what’s ours. But it’s a balancing act. I personally don’t want it to devolve into a Halloween parade with the goofy hat you bought at Target. I really want it to be about handmade art. I don’t care how badly handmade but I want you to have invested something in it. And hopefully, we’ll have different artists come in and raise the bar so that there is always a striving for quality rather than dumbing down the event.”

WonderFool Productions’ five-member board
recently defined a three-pronged mission that is raising the bar on their own ambitions for the future: educational outreach, community engagement, and the establishment of a physical space that could become a shared creativity center for many local community groups.

“One of the benefits in having a small board, particularly at the beginning of an organization when you’re planning for the future, is that our communication is finer tuned. It’s easier to get us together and make time commitments to do the planning we need to do,” said Brown. “We’ve got some very thoughtful people in this group with disparate skills with just enough cohesion. So last year we took a look at the future together over a two-day period, and we came up with these three initiatives or goals that we thought were possible and plausible.”

Fools in Schools will hopefully, continue the work that Tucker started in 2010 in Detroit, and perhaps eventually expand into other school systems around the state.

“We really want to get in at the system level but we’re too small. We haven’t proved ourselves. We think we know we could do something exciting but we don’t have that 10 years of data and proof yet to go into a school system. So we’re doing this ad hoc, one school, one art teacher, one principal at a time, and that’s exhausting,” said Tucker. “But for me, it’s a creative quest and it’s an educational tool like none other.”

In 2013, they expanded their community engagement efforts beyond Ann Arbor, taking a version of FoolMoon to ArtPrize in Grand Rapids.

This year they’ve been invited back to host luminary workshops during ArtPrize 2014.

“If creativity is the core of what we do, there are many ways to support and encourage creativity in others,” said Brown.

“ArtPrize is just a first step in that process,” said Tucker.

“We are testing out if this really is an event we could package and put in a box and send to a small town that is trying to revitalize. Is there a way that we could make this not very expensive for them to do, cost-effective for us to put together, and maybe still benefit our nonprofit so we could then keep doing these things for other towns? We know we’ve just hit the tip of the iceberg.”

But financing all that continues to be a challenge.

“If you include some of the in-kind things we’d have to pay for if they were not donated, I think you could look at about $60,000 bare bones to do this, not including the building space, which the university has provided,” said Brown. “As we evolve away from the university, one of the huge pieces we will need to provide ourselves is studio space. One of the things we’ll have to do over time is figure out maybe some nontraditional ways to find and use space.”

Still, even with all its popularity and ever-growing fame, the future for FestiFools is not guaranteed, especially as the university’s support role diminishes.

“That’s why we started the nonprofit. If we don’t build another ship to put this on in the community, I can see this not happening in a year or two. That’s how quickly things can change,” said Tucker. “But we’re going to figure this thing out, we’re going to come up with creative solutions. That’s part and parcel of doing this thing. It’s just like the weather. It’s going to be great that day or it’s going to be lousy, and we’re still going to be
out there doing it.”

And in a perfect world where anything is possible? Tucker points to Viareggio, Italy, and the festival where he found his initial inspiration.

Each February, hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the world flock to the tiny seaside resort town, packing the streets as far as the eye can see around the incredible spectacle that is Carnevale di Viareggio.

“Here, everyone comes to our free event and we’re picking on the same nice businesses and the same nice people who are giving so much year after year and maybe not getting that much back out of it. Viareggio would be the other model, where they close off all the streets and all these people have paid 20 Euros to get in. But that’s what’s afforded them to create an event unlike anything we’ve ever seen in the United States, and it’s allowed for a whole culture of artists who’ve moved there to work on these year-round and who get paid just like your dentist gets paid. And this is a town that’s no bigger than Ann Arbor, probably smaller. We could have that kind of thing here 130 years from now. But that’s a vision that takes a lot of people coming together.”

He’s not the only one to see the potential. The Ann Arbor Convention and Visitors Bureau features both events prominently on its website and in its marketing materials as two of the city’s signature events and tourist attractions.

“They would love for this to be a whole weekend event. Right now we’ve got FoolMoon on Friday night and FestiFools on Sunday so we’ve got these two pieces of bread but we’ve never put the filling inside. But it becomes a problem of scale and funding at that point just to add one more event on Saturday. We just can’t ask the same funders and volunteers over and over to do all this work. So it’s really challenging.”

But for now, in this particular place and time, this band of merrymakers is happy just to keep doing what they’ve learned to do best: making art into a living, breathing communal experience that can be shared by literally everyone.

And what advice would Tucker give to anyone else seeking to replicate his Foolish idea?

“To be honest, if I had realized everything that goes on behind the scenes I don’t know that I would have started. And with the way the economy went, I think if we’d started it a year later it wouldn’t have gotten off the ground. I don’t think there would’ve been the support. So we were lucky,” said Tucker. “But now with social media so much better than it was eight years ago, you can essentially just do something like this.

“I would say just find a place that’s not illegal to do it and do not get too much permission beforehand. I can’t tell you how many people we tried to explain to them what we were going to do, and scared more of them than we convinced.

“Just do it. People will see it and love it. And then you can keep on doing it.”

(Endnotes)


STUDY

Marche du Nain Rouge

Detroit, Michigan – Pop. 713,777
The first Marche du Nain Rouge started with an intriguingly simple question: “What would Detroit’s version of Mardi Gras look like if it happened today?” Detroit is actually older than New Orleans, has some of the same traditions of great roots, music, and culture, and was also founded by the French. The city’s name originates from the French phrase le détroit du lac Érié, or the strait of Lake Erie, which links Lake Huron and Lake Erie. But unlike its southernmost French cousin, the tradition of Mardi Gras never really took hold in Detroit.

So in the fall of 2009, a small group of Detroiters decided to change all that, and began to plan the city’s first bona fide Mardi Gras celebration, to be held in March 2010.

Of course, the Marche du Nain Rouge is not Mardi Gras, but it is designed to have some of the same feel, using art, culture, history, and creative expression to give folks a reason to rejoice in the spring and let loose.

The Nain Rouge (Red Dwarf or Red Gnome in French) is entrenched in 300 years of Detroit urban legend. The Nain was said to have bumped heads with Detroit’s first white settler, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, back in 1701. Cadillac lost his fortune and died penniless back home in France. Forever after, the Nain was said to have appeared at various times in the city’s history as a harbinger of bad fortune. So each spring, Detroiters celebrate the season and the city’s rebirth by banishing the evil spirit from the city for another year. Parade participants and spectators are encouraged to wear costumes so that when the Nain Rouge next returns, he will not recognize the people who once again ousted him from the city limits, and thus will not be able to seek personal vengeance.

The Marche itself lasts about 90 minutes, beginning in Midtown near Wayne State University, and parades about a mile through the area known as the Lower Cass Corridor, which centers on Cass Avenue, running parallel with Woodward Avenue, a main Detroit artery running north towards suburban neighborhoods. The route ends at Cass Park (a U.S. Historic district in Midtown) and the Masonic Temple (the world’s largest Masonic temple, built in 1922). The Nain appears at the beginning to taunt Detroiters, then challenges them to follow him to Cass Park, where he performs another ritual round of raucous taunting before the celebrants rise up against him and he disappears for another year.

The Marche du Nain Rouge has grown over the course of the past five years. The first year, the founders were just surprised people came out for such a crazy thing. The second year, they secured Cass Park again, but expanded the scope of the offerings to include vendors and staged music. Since the third year, they have shifted the opening ceremony to a larger parking lot and have ended at the Masonic Temple, right across from Cass Park, in order to accommodate the growing crowd.

From the start, the one-day festival/parade has been shepherded by a small planning committee of essentially the same core group of 6–10 people, who begin planning each fall for the next spring’s event.

Over the last several years, they have also worked to expand partner events. For the last two years, Tour deTroit has offered the Run du Nain Rouge, a costumed 5K fun run that immediately precedes the Marche. In 2014, Eagle Rock Yacht Club hosted a Nain Rouge dodgeball tournament to benefit a local recreation center. Since the second year, they have worked with a variety of small businesses, both as sponsors...
and as partners, to develop and promote events and merchandise that are Nain Rouge themed to help grow the event into more of an extended festival.

In a very short span of time, the event has become an iconic symbol of Detroit’s growing allure as a post-industrial age phoenix and a mecca for those seeking a vibrant and creative urban lifestyle, and the chance to help make the city’s future whatever they choose. The 2013 Marche even caught the eye of The Huffington Post, which lauded the festival’s placemaking power by playfully asserting that “centuries from now, historians will sing the praises of the brave...Detroiter who swarmed the Cass Corridor last Sunday in legion to banish the Nain Rouge away once again.”

**INVESTMENT**

**>>** The first Marche cost about $1,000, which came completely out of the planners’ pockets to pay for the city’s fire and parade permits and for costumes and props. About 250 people showed up.

**>>** By the second year, the costs had grown along with the festival itself. Planning begins in the prior fall, when the first permit application goes to the city. As of 2014, the committee has decided to start meeting throughout the year.

**>>** An event chair is appointed to be a main point of communication between the committee, the city, and the various other interested parties. This chair also makes sure that regular committee meetings start in earnest after the New Year holiday. In January and February, the committee meets biweekly, and in March
they meet weekly to ensure coordination. As the event has grown, a greater need for planning and coordination has become apparent, and the continuing ability to produce the event on a completely volunteer basis is now questionable.

One of the group’s fundamental beliefs from the beginning has been to work in partnership with the city. They get an official parade permit every year from Detroit City Council, and work with the health department to allow the festival to offer food and beer. They also procure fire effects permits from the fire department. Every year the Detroit Police Department helps with public safety. For the last two years, they have closed the entire route to vehicle traffic.

The strongest partner to date has been Midtown Detroit, Inc., a local nonprofit planning and development organization that supports the physical maintenance and revitalization of the Midtown Detroit neighborhood, while working to enhance public awareness, appreciation, and use of the district. Midtown Detroit, Inc. has supported the event financially since the second year.

They have also partnered with both Midtown Detroit, Inc. and Cityscape Detroit, another nonprofit, to act as fiduciaries for the event. In 2014, they received a generous grant from the Knight Foundation.

Another of the organizers’ fundamental beliefs is to engage and celebrate the small businesses along the route and throughout the city. A portion of the Marche’s costs are covered by small businesses and individuals who see the Marche as a positive boon to the neighborhood and Detroit in general.

Socioeconomic Impact

As an intrinsic aspect of the event, the district’s assets, public spaces, small businesses, shops, restaurants, and bars are also featured as a way of further building community. Many local businesses host events and have special offers during that week, from offering exclusive themed tee shirt designs, to food and drink specials in honor of the Marche, such as the “El Diablito” pizza, the “Sangre Del Nain” drink, Creole beans and rice, and an annual crawfish boil.

In its grant application to the Knight Foundation, the Marche du Nain Rouge committee offered this as part of its stated purpose and impact: “Bringing people together for the Marche, and having them move through a neighborhood bolsters not just street life, but also the local economy in significant ways. During a few hours on an otherwise quiet Sunday afternoon, upwards of $50,000 is spent at more than two dozen local establishments along the route, as parade-goers patronize bars, shops, and restaurants. In the past few years, sponsorship has also grown beyond the Cass Corridor neighborhood to adjacent area establishments that view the Marche as a way to grow business, awareness, and authentic community identity.”

Since the beginning, the Marche has been a family-friendly event celebrating Detroit’s diversity and rich cultural heritage, helping to reinforce the city’s growing sense of community pride.

“Like similar events encouraging people to experience a neighborhood or city, the Marche du Nain Rouge creates a positive sense of place in Detroit, by connecting people through art and the city’s history
to an historic neighborhood, the Cass Corridor,” said committee member Francis Grunow.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

>> Don’t let “no” stop you from doing something. Just because there is no precedent doesn’t mean it can’t be done. That being said, if the event is to be done on a repeated basis, getting official buy-in early is important. Working with the city as a partner is vital to the longevity of the Marche. There have been hiccups and compromise along the way, but the overall goal of producing a positive event to benefit the city has allowed the Marche to continue.

>> While leadership is vital to a project’s success, it is just as important to understand what a committee is capable of and committed to early on in the process. If there is not a shared sense of commitment to an outcome, then there’s a problem.

>> Figure out how to make a project or event fit into modules so that if not enough volunteer effort or resources are procured, the event can be scaled appropriately. Conversely, if the event can grow over the years, figuring out which elements can be built up in the future can help with sustainability.

>> Partner with a nonprofit to allow funders and supporters to make tax-deductible donations. However, expectations between entities should be made crystal clear from the outset, ideally in the form of a memorandum of understanding, or something similar.
Understand your audience, but also allow them to help shape the event. One of the more interesting aspects of the Marche is that the parade is the audience. It is a fun way of getting maximum amount of creativity with a relatively modest amount of investment.

(ENDNOTES)

Moving Placemaking Forward Through Special Events
• The Michigan Festivals and Events Association (MFEA) is a statewide nonprofit organization serving communities, events, festivals, fairs, businesses, and volunteers throughout Michigan. They promote local events, festivals, and destinations, and provide technical assistance, training, and education to members. MFEA marketing efforts to promote members include a statewide distributed brochure listing Festival & Event Members by month, an e-version Membership Directory, and Buyers’ Guide featuring MFEA Vendors that is given to all members. Their website at www.michiganfun.com lists all members by category and is available to the public.1

• The International Festivals Association provides worldwide resources for festival and event planners with global affiliates including IFEA North America.2

• The International Town-Gown Association provides a network of resources to assist civic leaders, university officials, faculty, residents, and students to collaborate on common services, programs, academic research, and citizen issues, creating an improved quality of life for all.3

(ENDNOTES)