

Building and Burning The Temple of Transition

**Bruce & Jiljai Anderson
Burning Man, Rites of Passage
Black Rock Desert, Nevada
August, 2011**



The TEMPLE *of*
TRANSITION

Unlike the renowned cathedrals and temples of history, the Temple serves not as Black Rock City's seat of divine authority or civic power, but rather as a decentralized, collective, and participatory nexus of creation and destruction, intimacy and spectacle, love and death. Through the physical inscription of memories on the Temple's walls, and in turn through reading the inscriptions of others, participants are able to share, ritualize, and transform private grief into public expression in ways that are generally unavailable to many contemporary Americans. Finally, on the festival's final night, the Temple and its tokens are ultimately offered up in flame, dust, and ashes as thousands look on in reverential silence.

*Lee Gilmore
The Temple: Sacred Heart of Black Rock City*

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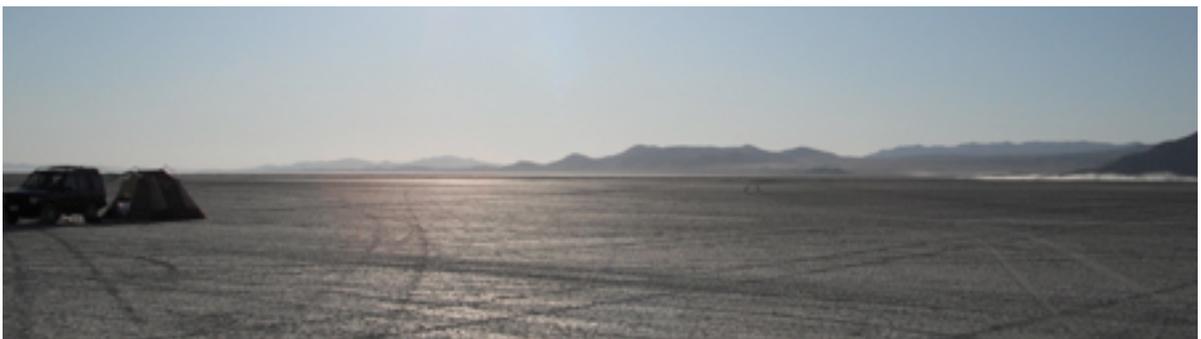


When I first arrived at the Temple site on August 16th, it felt like some frontier outpost. Only four structures had been erected. All around stretched the empty playa. Black Rock City itself hardly existed. There

were about thirty of the Temple crew at the site, and for some time to come that was the largest settlement at Burning Man. I felt a little dismayed at the starkness of the place I'd be living and working in. And I felt quite intimidated by the energy of the crew, who were all working 12 to 14 hours per day in the heat and the dust. I



truly wondered what I had gotten myself into. And yet within two days I had been swept up in the whole effort, and I was working as hard as everybody else.



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The Temple of Transition was the vision of Kiwi and his colleagues in the International Arts Megacrew. Kiwi had helped build Megatropolis the previous year, and when that effort was over, the IAM decided to attempt something even more ambitious. They imagined a plan for a temple that would be truly fantastic, larger and more complex than anything anyone had attempted so far. The Temple

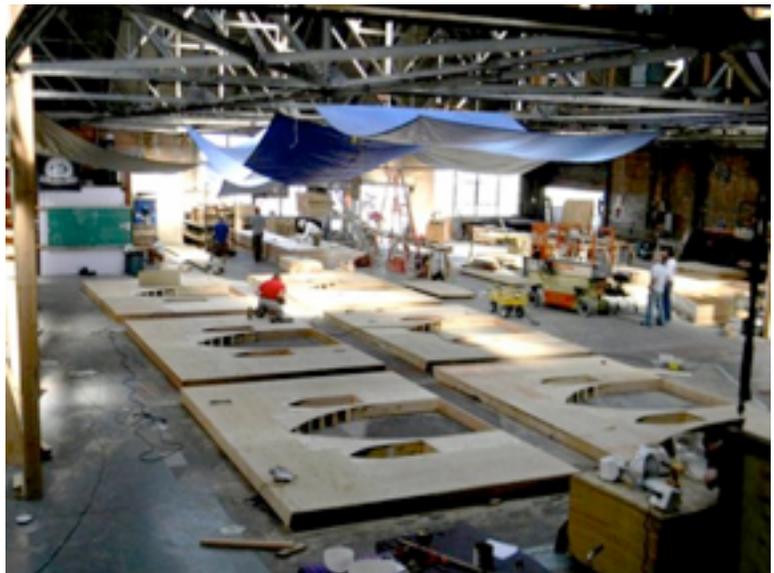


would consist of five towers, each 58 feet high, surrounding a central spire that would rise 12 stories above the playa.

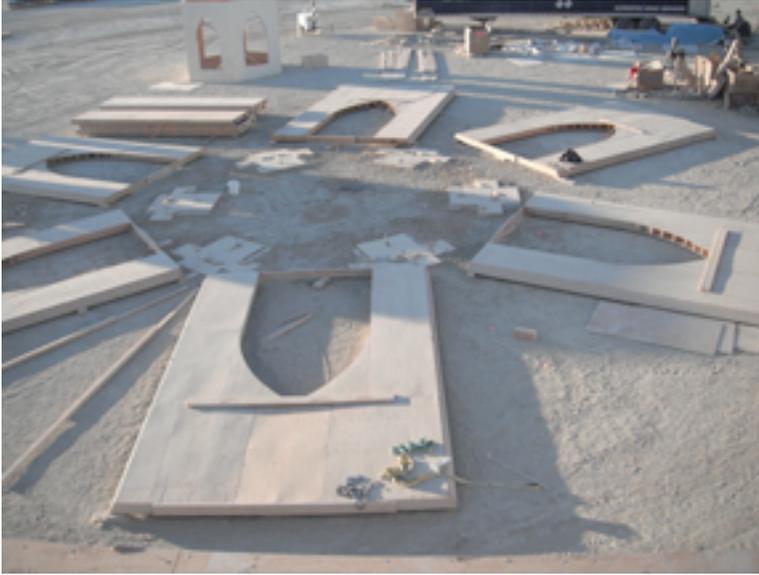
The genius of the design was that the parts would be premanufactured off-site in Hobson Square, in Reno, and trucked to the site ready to be assembled.



The Temple would be built in hexagonal structures of different heights and diameters. The smaller structures would be stacked upon the larger ones to create the towers.



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Creating these structures in the desert was quite a task. The components were laid out with their feet together, so to speak, in a circle around the temporary foundation. Then they were lifted and set in place, and braced until they were all fastened together. Then diaphragms and wing walls were installed to hold up the smaller structures that would be placed above.



I wound up helping set up one of the largest of these structures, like the one seen above, in the small hours of the morning, in a storm of wind and dust. That was truly an adventure. I worked 18 hours that day, and stirred up some pain in my recently repaired shoulder using a sledgehammer to set the braces. Not too smart, but as I said, you get caught up in it all.



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The most interesting part of the build was the installation of the largest section of the central spire. The section was some 40 feet high, and setting it on the base required a crane that could lift 190 tons.

I watched this happen from the ground. Note the relative sizes of the people working on it



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You'll note in the picture above that there are decorative panels on the edges of each side of the structure. There were hundreds of these panels, and they were affixed to every section of each tower. The panels were lovely. They were created based on designs from people from all over the world, and executed by a computer controlled routing machine.



They were very intricate and varied.

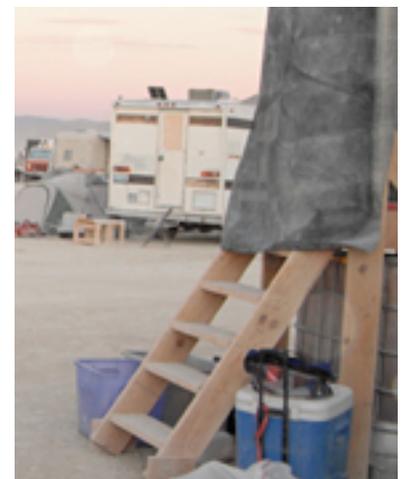


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The experience of building the Temple grew even more rigorous as time moved on, and we were continually reminded of how much we had left to do. Our facilities were pretty Spartan, consisting of four porta-potties and a mess tent, which perforce became our home away from home. (Particularly for those living in tents!)

I had prepared for the ordeal by building a rear wall for my U Haul truck, including an opening for an air conditioner. Unfortunately, the brand new air conditioner didn't work, and there was no power for it if it had worked. It was very hot every day, and some days temperatures were as high as 112 degrees in the shade.



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I worked all night and napped during the day, getting about 4-5 hours sleep per day/night.



Mealtimes were respite, entertainment and sustenance. There was an extra meal, "middens", for those working all night. I grew to look forward to middens a lot.

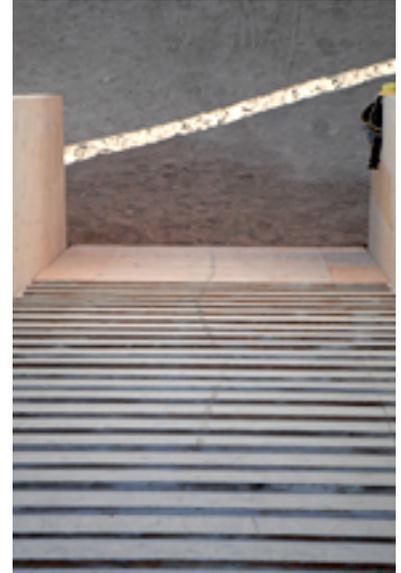
As time went on I became acclimated to the harsh environment and the constant pressure. It started to seem very normal. I learned that exhaustion was only a state of mind, and that I could simply work through it until dawn, or a meal, or some other respite. This sense of normality eventually caught up with me.

I had seemingly re-injured my shoulder during the night of wind and dust described above, and I went out two days later to get two other crew members lined out on what I had been doing since. The "pick" of the largest section with the crane had happened the day before, and nothing much had got done afterwards that day. I had gotten pretty



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anxious about how much remained to be done, and I went out in the heat. I had been dealing with the heat by keeping my shirt wet. (This is a very good way to air condition yourself, even in full sun, with the non-existent humidity in the Black Rock Desert--as long as there's a breeze!) I let my shirt dry out too much, and I was in the full sun in a windless area, halfway up a very steep ramp. I started to feel kind of stupid, and I noticed that I was slurring my words. I said to the others, "This can't be good," and got myself down the ramp to the shade under one of the towers. One of the "fluffers" (crew members who supported the workers with drinks and snacks and love) took a look at me and told me I was done



for the day. She led me to the medical tent, and I found myself staggering. I was eventually sent to the clinic at Black Rock City. I had become the first official heat casualty of Burning Man 2011. They talked about shipping me to Reno, but eventually decided that two liters of intravenous fluids were enough to stabilize me.

That was the end of my heavy-duty experience at the build. I put my bags on a couple of times, but the world started spinning around me, and it didn't seem like a good idea to go out onto the worksite. I was disappointed, but the disappointment was tempered by the arrival of my wife JaiJai and my friend Dog, who had gotten early on to the playa, but had some time to spend on the Temple. JaiJai worked most of four days, and Dog borrowed my bags to go out and spend some time framing. JaiJai and I got to work the last night of the build, and we actually helped set the last panels in place as the Burning Man management was breathing down our necks to get out before the event opened.

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It was all worth it. It was so worth it. We had helped create something truly fantastical. The Temple was so high and so big, so finely detailed and creatively designed. It often



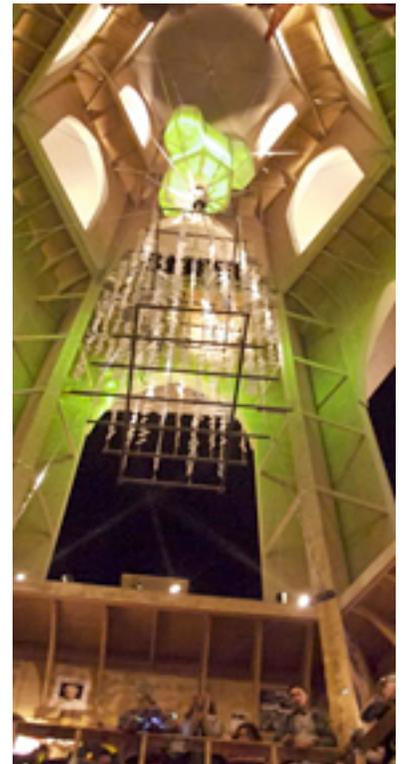
seemed to float on the playa landscape like a dream, or a vision out of legend, a castle out of the Arabian Nights or the Arthurian tales.

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At night the Temple was even more dreamlike.

The central spire housed an exotic musical contraption, a set of gongs of different sizes and tones, controlled by a computer program. The music was sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but it had a uniformly nature-like quality, like the sound of wind or water, somewhat weird but not displeasing, and ultimately hypnotic. JaiJai and I looked over the second floor railing inside the central spire and gasped--the entire floor of the spire was covered with people lying in the playa dust, gazing upward and listening to the gongs. Some of them were there for hours. Later in the Burn we and our peeps had some very intense energy experiences there, in the center of the center.



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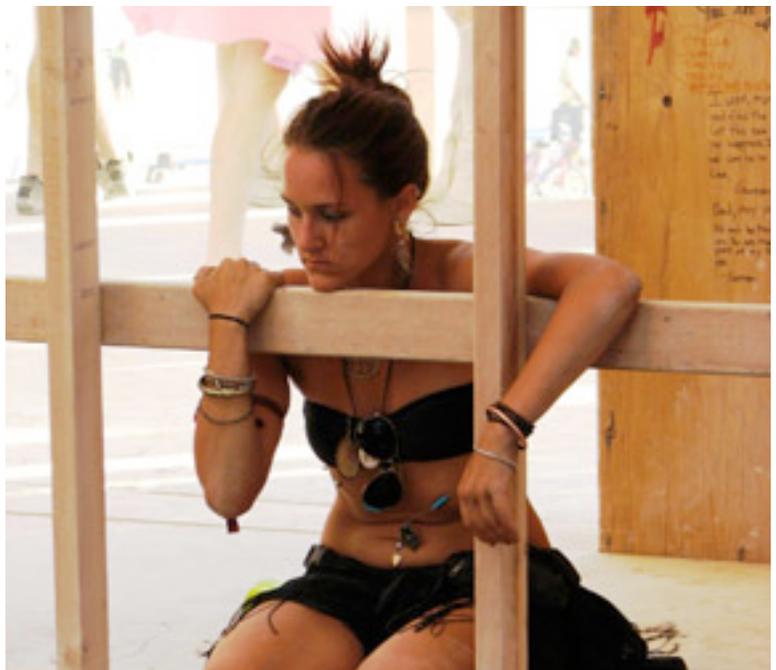
As the days of the Burn went on, thousands upon thousands of people visited the Temple.



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Many of them had deeply moving experiences.



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At the end, virtually every square inch of the Temple that people could reach was covered by messages written on the walls, pictures, arrangements of memorabilia.

The Temple had an internal logic which was part of the design from the first. It was named the Temple of Transition, and it was built to reflect and embody the process of change that makes up human life. The subsidiary towers had names and themes—they were the Temples of Birth, Growth, Union, Decay and Death. The central spire was the Temple of



Gratitude, of thankfulness for the beauty and completeness of the cycle of life. We had seen those themes in the evolution of the Temple itself. It had been born, it had grown, it had come to completeness and fruition. And on the last day of the Burn, it would pass into decay and finally die, as we knew it would from the beginning. As we know life will, from the beginning.



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On Sunday, the last day of the Burn, JaíJaí and I joined the crew to prepare the Temple for burning. The Temple was passing into the stage of Decay.

We sawed into the walls, our saw blades cutting through the messages. We tore the pictures, tumbled the arrangements of memorabilia to the floor, to make room for air and fire to rise through the Temple walls. We closed in the openings to store the heat for burning, and made huge piles of scrap and firewood on the floors. This was Decay: we destroyed the order of the messages, changed their form, left them in a state



of destruction. But we kept the intention. Nothing was taken away. There were no souvenirs. The soul of the messages, their internal logic, their intent, remained sealed in the structures we readied for burning.

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And then it was time for Death. The Temple would die, would be burned to the ground, destroyed utterly. The buildings, already surreal, had a ghostly quality. Figures moved in the shadows. Forty thousand people waited silently. And then there was light, flickering flames in the base of the central spire. Within seconds, fire had risen through the spire. In a few seconds more, fire blasted out the top.



The fire was white hot, and it roared like a rocket engine, rising a hundred feet above the top of the central tower. The hills around the playa were illuminated. The radiant heat was cooking us, and not gently; JaiJai lay down flat and I hid behind my hat from the heat. Then the smaller towers began to burn, and the whole Temple was engulfed in flames.

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The fire burned until all the towers fell to the ground.



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We waited until the Temple Guardians allowed people to approach. At that moment, thousands of people surged toward the fire.

We waited again for a while, while the crowds moved. Then we too approached the fires, and we saw what remained of the Temple--a bed of embers. It seemed too small. It didn't seem appropriate. The magnificence of the Temple, reduced to this little heap of still-burning wood?



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The next night we went out on an art car to visit the burn sites. What we saw at the Temple site was more disappointing yet. The crew was still working, combing the ashes for steel and fasteners. They had a

magnetic rake, and they'd been able to recover a very large bag of screws and nails. There were twisted piles of rebar and structural steel straps, and other fittings. The big cable anchors were too deeply emplaced to be removed without machinery (though they would be, soon), and the



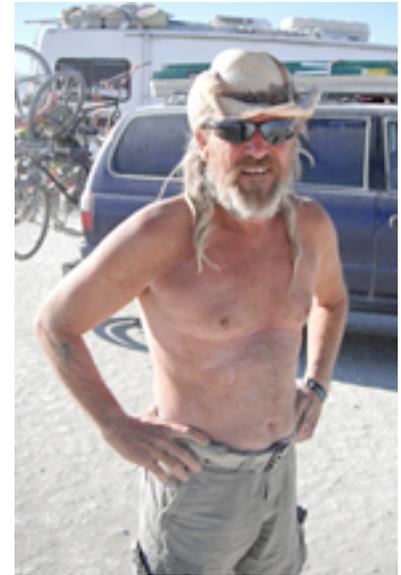
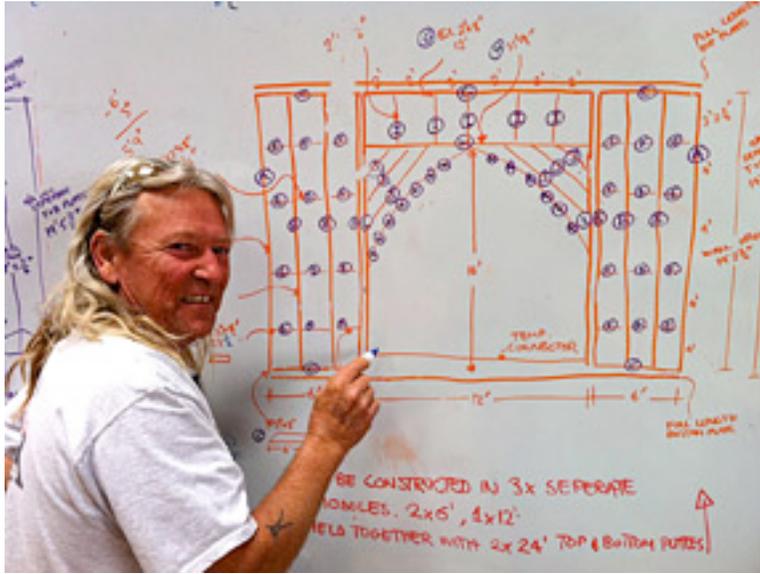
big steel plates that were the foundation of the central tower were simply too heavy to move by hand. Everything else was stacked neatly, ready to be put on a truck. There was one small fire of embers. When that burned out, all the remnants would be removed. The Temple would leave no trace. This was Death, and beyond Death. Everything we had worked for, everything that we had built with our blood and our sweat, was utterly gone.



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Our leader was Kíwi.

Kíwi led us gently, easily, by example, with an open hand. He conceived the Temple, and made it real. I was wondering what I would say about him, how I could understand him. He was a builder, a man who could direct large projects, make big buildings that would stand for a long time. I've known those



men in my life. But thinking about him in those terms seemed inadequate, not apt, not descriptive of what he truly was, and his role in this effort. Then I had a realization.

Kíwi is not only a builder. He is a teacher. He knows what it is to create a lesson, an experience that when it is over will live only in the minds of those who shared the experience. With the Temple he created one of the most profound lessons I have ever seen. He showed us that life is a cycle, from birth to death, and that it's meaning is to be found in the way it is done. The Temple was born in an idea. It grew by the efforts of the crew that volunteered their time and their love to create it. It reached its flowering, its zenith, during a week on the playa where it touched the lives of tens of thousands of people. And then it grew grey and gaunt, and died in a night of flame. The lesson was that impermanence is the reality of life, and that love is what gives it meaning.



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Kiwi said to me, "We gave people a Temple."



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I appreciate so much the time and effort and endurance and pure life force that he and the other members of the crew gave to the effort to build the Temple. And I'm so glad that JaiJai and I and Dog got to be a part of that giving.



Bruce and JaiJai Anderson
Santa Barbara, CA
Fall 2011

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Credits

All of the words and most of the pictures in this work are ours. However, many of the images are from other photographers who have shared their work on the web, asking only for recognition of their ownership of their pictures. We are grateful to the following sources for sharing their work. They have enriched not only this reflection, but also our experience by allowing us to see the Temple from an outsider's perspective.

Burning Blog (<http://blog.burningman.com/2011>)

pg 2: Temple of Transition logo; pg 4: Kiwi

Danger Ranger (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/10111/5931785087/>)

pg 21: Kiwi at the whiteboard

International Arts Megacrew (<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1098029929/the-temple-of-transition-burning-man-2011>)

pg 21: group picture

International Business Times (<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/207306/20110901/burningman-nevada.htm>)

pg 12, people on tower floor, lower left; pg 22: horse and heart prayers, woman with purple wings, gargoyle with offerings

ItsBooyah (<http://itsbooyah.tumblr.com/post/9909710895/what-a-burn-wow>)

pg 12: view upwards

Lorene Flaming (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/13127602@N00/sets/72157627495005821/>)

pg 8: mess tent; pg 9: fluffer lounge; pgs 13-14: all (Lorene was part of the Temple crew.)

Michael Holden (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/michaelholden/sets/72157627529205924/>)

pg 11: woman in red; pg 12: Temple at night; pg 17 fire starts; pg 19: crowd panorama

Mr. Nightshade (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/carnivillain/sets/72157627455514811/>)

pg 18: crowd at burn

Odd Stuff Magazine (<http://oddstuffmagazine.com/burning-man-festival-2011.html>)

pg 18: collapsing towers; pg 22: two pictures of couples in top row, row of watchers at bottom

Scott London (<http://www.scottlondon.com/photo/burningman2011>)

pg 11: large Temple picture

Reuters (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2033540/Spectacular-pictures-50-000-party-weekend-away-Burning-Man-festival.html>)

pg 17: spectacular burn; pg 22: weeping woman (Christy Lynn)

Wired (<http://www.wired.com/underwire/2011/09/burning-man/?pid=4826&viewall=true>)

pg 12: central tower floor from above

Others aren't ours, but we've lost the source:

pg 4: drawing; pg 5: standing first wall; pg 6: pick from the air; pg 8: mess line