

# EMPOWERING INFERNO

*It's far from Nevada's Burning Man, but David Best's latest project had its own significance. Jo Caird visits a part of Northern Ireland in need of catharsis*

The crowd gasped as the steeple of the 75-foot temple finally succumbed to the flames. The sky was full of sparks, billowing in great clouds over the heads of the 15,000 people that had come together on this chilly hillside on the southern outskirts of Derry-Londonderry.

The fire had coursed through the interior of the temple in the beginning, before enveloping it entirely in flames. The intricate external panelling was the first to burn away, revealing the foundation structure, a series of red-hot lines cut out sharply against the cloud-filled sky. Security guards, firefighters and 'temple guardians' — individuals who worked with American artist David Best on the construction of this sculpture — manned a barrier around the blaze. So calm was the crowd, however, that their presence felt almost superfluous.

The people of Derry-Londonderry couldn't be more different from the hedonistic revellers that usually attend Best's temple burnings at the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada. But their reaction to this extraordinary spectacle was the same as it always is in the Black Rock Desert: hushed awe, private contemplation, an almost meditative state of fellow feeling.

Over 60,000 people had visited in the course of the week since Best and his team had completed construction on the project on 13 March. Some came just to gaze on this curiosity in their midst, some to scrawl messages of grief or hope on the timber structure, some to raise their voices in song. On the evening of the burn, most of the watchers left before the flames had died away, hurrying off out of the cold after the dramatic, cathartic collapse of the temple's tower.

## BEST LAID PLANS

Best began building temples at Burning Man in 2000, dedicating his first to a young artist friend who was killed in a motorcycle accident in the lead-up to the festival. The sculptor has returned to Black Rock many times since, juggling these epic projects with other collaborative work elsewhere in the

United States, including community temple builds in San Francisco and Detroit.

'I made a commitment when I was 60 that I would only work with teams and the public, not art galleries or museums,' Best told me back in February, en route from California to Northern Ireland to begin work on the Derry temple. We were sitting in the London offices of the Artichoke Trust, the arts organisation that has spent the last two years laying the groundwork for this project, raising around £350,000 from public and private sponsors and brokering relationships with grassroots organisations and community groups across Derry.

## MARRIAGE GUIDANCE

Helen Marriage, the trust's founder and director, hit upon the idea of bringing Best over after as part of Lumiere, a festival of light art that took place at the end of Derry's time as UK City of Culture 2013. That plan proving unworkable, Marriage set about creating the Derry temple as a project in its own right.

'I was thinking about this community and all its traditions and one of the traditions is bonfire burning, which happens over the summer,' said Marriage. 'It can be seen as a community celebration if you're into it, or it can be seen as a sort of hostile act if you're not, but it has a very mixed feeling around it and I was wondering whether there was something that we could do to look at that tradition in a new way. David's work at Burning Man is very well known and I thought it would be great to persuade him to come to Derry to continue our legacy of doing these things which are rather unexpected. He seems to me to be the perfect artist to do that tinkering with expectation and changing the debate.'

Best didn't need much persuading. 'It's a community that has traditionally had pain in it, for a long time. And the pain and resentment toward different groups...' A long pause. 'I'm not even naïve: I think building a project together with both sides creates some kind of friendship.'

Geraldine O'Donnell, a community organiser in the predominantly Republican Catholic area of



ABOVE: FLAMES ENGULF THE DERRY-LONDONDERRY TEMPLE. RIGHT: INSIDE, BEFORE THE BURNING. LEFT: THE ARTIST, DAVID BEST



Derry where the temple was built, can attest to that. Not only has the project fostered engagement between groups across the city, she said, it has 'raised expectations within the community' for future co-operation and mutual understanding.

It wasn't just the building process. Simply visiting the temple — setting foot in a part of town that has long felt off limits because of its political and religious affiliations — was significant for many. It's not often that the people of Derry stand side-by-side with individuals from outside their own communities.

At the burn, a woman with three small sons in tow remarked on how refreshing it was to be present at an event that felt 'not sectarian, but personal'. For Best, this was exactly the point. 'It's sharing, it's that communal grief,' he said. 'The Catholics are going to come up and see that someone's sad because their brother was killed. The Protestants too. Everyone's sharing: "I lost my son, you lost your uncle."'

## HEALING HEAT

The mood at the temple site on the final evening it was open to the public was jovial: people chatting, taking selfies, bumping into friends and admiring a view over the city that most of them were seeing for the first time. Inside the structure, however, the tone was more sombre, with voices kept low and the crowd shuffling carefully, respectfully around the central altar in the tightly packed space.

'People don't realise what they've come to do until they get here,' said a woman in her thirties who had made the 70-mile journey to Derry from Belfast after hearing about it on the radio. But once they arrive, she went on, they can't help but be swept up in the mood of reconciliation. 'Now is the right time. There's been a lot of healing done and now's the time to let go.'

Curtis Doherty was one of 40 or so unemployed young locals recruited to join the core crew of long-time temple building collaborators Best brought with him from the States. He's only seventeen but seems much older: calm, measured in his responses to my questions and able to comment on his involvement in the project with unexpected maturity.

'I see myself in all of it,' he said with a nod towards the temple on the day of the burn, as other members of the crew scurried to and fro packing the structure with kindling ready for the evening's event. For Doherty, the temple has provided not just a job but also a chance to process the recent deaths of two people who were near and dear to him. And having discovered an aptitude for working with wood, the teenager has signed up for a carpentry course at the local technical college, a return to education he couldn't have anticipated before the project began.

I came across him again later, at the very end of the burn, gazing into a huge patch of smouldering embers where the temple used to be. His words echoed the feelings of almost everyone I spoke to that night: 'I miss it already, even though we always knew it was going to go.'