

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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**Exploring Symbolic and Temporary Spaces in  
Urban Rituals Using Fire as their Primary  
Component**

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## **Exploring Symbolic and Temporary Spaces in Urban Rituals Using Fire as their Primary Component**

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### **Abstract**

Rituals are symbolic acts that allow individuals to connect their beliefs and values with the natural world. To establish this connection, these ceremonies often use the four primary elements of nature. Fire is one of them. In rituals, people use different forms and amounts of fire of diverse sizes. These usages of the fire formed different temporary spaces, creating symbolic meanings during the practice. This study aims to comparatively investigate the structure of these symbolic and temporary spaces in fire-based rituals in the urban space. To compare, we choose four different rituals: Hıdrellez, Anasteria, Las Fallas, and Burning Man, which occur in various locations and have different origins.

*Keywords:* Architecture, ritual, fire, urban space.

## **Exploring Symbolic and Temporary Spaces in Urban Rituals Using Fire as their Primary Component**

The control of the fire has a revolutionary effect on human history. First, fire provides a reliable light source and heat, which can be used for defense. Fire also revolutionised human eating habits. The form of the resources has changed by cooking, and many indigestible foods have become eatable (Harari, 2014). Fire thus became a fundamental element in the lives of our ancestors, with many rituals associated with fire, revealed across different parts of the world. For instance, bonfires are a common feature in many celebrations. Many processions include fire objects like torches, candles, or lanterns. Also, many rituals include bravery movements such as firewalking or jumping over the fire. In these events, space is not a static entity but is dynamic, continually altered and redefined by the changing form of fire, the movements of people and objects. In this paper, we first introduced the changing fire space and its

components, and then four examples using fire in the urban space, Hidirellez, Anaesthesia, Las Fallas, and Burning Man, are analysed.

## The Concept of Fire

Fire holds a multitude of concepts and symbolic meanings that resonate deeply with human experience. First, it is a powerful symbol of “transformation”, representing the ability to change, evolve, and grow. The bonfires lit at the end of these rituals during equinoxes, like in the fires in Newroz in Turkey or the Equinox Viking Boat Burn in the U.K., symbolise this transition. The usage of water and fire is also common in many ritual practices. In the death rituals of Hindus, for example, the cremation process offers the ashes to the water (Tiwari, 2010). According to Gough (2013), witnessing a dead body being cremated, particularly in Hindu and Balinese cultures, has cultural and ritual significance. He highlights the “transformative and cathartic” nature of the process. Usually, these ceremonies have a communal nature, which involves extended families, villages, and professional troupes, and they are a part of the grieving and “acceptance” process. In Heraclitus' philosophy of the cosmos, fire is also used as a metaphor to explain the “impermanence” of human life. Much like fire, life is not infinite, and throughout history, fire has been employed as a symbol of endings and beginnings (Herakleitos, 2009). For example, at the end of the six-day carnival Busó festivities in Mohács in southern Hungary, a coffin is burned to symbolise the death of Winter. Also, “purification” is a part of this renewal process. According to Eliade (2017), non-religious time must be eliminated to restore the world's purity. This is accomplished through symbolic rituals that symbolise the world's end, such as extinguishing fires and the return of souls. These rituals signify the regression of the cosmos to chaos, the state preceding creation. The world that has endured for a year is genuinely vanishing, as all the sins and corruptions of time are physically eradicated.

In his book *Myths of the Origin of Fire*, Frazer (2019) thoroughly explores and analyses various myths from different cultures that revolve around the concept of fire. His research reveals a recurring theme in these myths: fire is depicted as a sacred entity or a divine creation. Furthermore, the significance of fire in religious practices is evident through the incorporation of fire-related rituals, such as the symbolic act of lighting a candle, which is a powerful representation of the divine connection between humans and the ethereal element of fire.

Bachelard (1995) reinterprets these mythological stories in his book and offers a modern perspective. For instance, he suggest that “growth”, and “freedom”, is represented through the act of stealing. Owning one's fire is seen as a marker of adulthood, reflecting the capacity to make independent choices, like how humans control fire. Possessing a personal fire also grants divine power and the ability to exercise freedom.

One other reading of fire can be seen with destruction. Zografos (2019) interpreted the restoration of the burned structures and reads destruction as a part of human memory. Similarly, Yves Klein (1959) suggests that fire is a part of human memory and defines fire as the memory of nature.

In addition to these interpretations, fire is closely connected to various other ideas and emotions. It signifies physical and metaphorical "heat illumination", evoking "sensations of warmth, passion, and intensity" (Bachelard, 1995). Fire is often seen as a source of softness, as it can provide gentle light and create a cosy atmosphere. On the other hand, fire can also symbolise war and destruction, representing the immense power and devastation it can bring. So, as Klein (1973) suggested, fire has a "contradictory nature" that can simultaneously be evil and good.

Rituals often involve various intricate movements, each with nuanced meanings. Therefore, while burning may have different interpretations in different rituals, it can give rise to diverse spatial forms, enriching the overall ceremonial experience with depth and complexity. The placement of fire, preparations, and participants' movements during ritual practice influence these spatial forms.

## **The Place of Fire**

The place of fire is one of the aspects of the fire rituals. In that case, fire can emphasize the existing space with its visibility or create a space with its being the new centre.

The idea of fire as a sacred entity is similar in many cultures. So, many burning rituals happen close to or inside sacred places. This could be either a high hill detached from everyday life or an existing spiritual place in the city. For example, in Catholic churches, all lights are turned off on the Saturday night before Easter, and a new fire is kindled using traditional methods. After that, all these lights are rekindled with the use of this fire (Frazer, 1913).

Centrality is a very common feature in many rituals, including fire rituals. Schechner observes this pattern in "natural" urban settings. When an accident occurs, a crowd spontaneously circles the event. The performances of people on different occasions are the rehearsal or the repetition of that situation (Schechner, 2003). As such, when a fire is lit, people gather around it, creating a circle. The circle is both a symbol and the shape of the fire rituals. The fire is deliberately placed at the centre of many ceremonies and rituals, as explained by Schechner. Also, fire can be lit from an existing fire, so it can be reproducible. In many rituals, including Easter, many fires are lit and carried to other places (Frazer, 1913). So new centres can be created by using the same source.

Rituals unite people and often utilise city streets and squares as stages. Processions are a vital component of many rituals. As Schechner (2003) describes, processions have a fixed

route and a known goal, involving multiple stops and performances. Some spectators may join the procession as it passes by. The stops represent central events within the ritual process, while the processions serve as invitations to these events. Fire objects are often used during these parades, especially at night, to make this invitation and movement visible (Turner, 1992).

## Preparations and Performances

Unlike other elements, fire is rarely found naturally. Fire constantly needs humans to maintain its existence. Therefore, there is a constant cooperation between man and fire. The continued existence of fire depends on what people give to it (Bachelard, 1995). This situation can be seen in the movie *Howl's Moving Castle*, a 2004 Japanese animated fantasy film by Hayao Miyazaki, based on the novel by Diana Wynne Jones. In the film, a wizard deals with a fire demon and gives his heart to the fire. This union is depicted with the image of a house that can move and has become disconnected from its original location. (Miyazaki, 2004). Therefore, the hearth, a symbol of an ongoing mutual relationship, creates an everlasting fire that can have its freedom. Offerings in different sizes and methods create different symbols and performances.

One example of these offerings can be seen in bonfires. Bonfires are large fires intentionally created for specific purposes, and burning off effigies forms many bonfires. An effigy is a representation or likeness of a person or object, often made from straw, wood, or paper. Usually, hanging or burning effigies is a form of political protest involving creating and displaying symbolic figures to express dissent (Göttke, 2015). Like burning a human-like structure, touching or being inside the fire also forms a part of this human-fire relationship.

The limits of the body and the way it approaches the fire are researched during these rituals. Walking on the coal, jumping over the fire, or climbing a fire construction can be the exploration of these limits.

Lastly, fire stimulates our senses by combining it with various elements and appearing in various forms. Like fog, food, steam, coal, or the explosion sounds created by war representing fire, listening and watching all these variables are among the forms created by fire. Unlike other performances, being in the fire and watching it is an action that increases imagination (Bachelard, 1995).

## Case Studies

To better understand the concepts and rites of fire, four rituals are selected in these sections to show the differences and similarities of the fire rituals. In selecting the rituals, rituals from different locations and origins are selected.

## ***Hıdrellez***

Hıdrellez is an ancient fire ritual celebrated on May 5th and 6th in many regions such as Anatolia, the Balkans, and Central Asia. This traditional event, the seasonal time of the summer, is marked with several bonfires and fire-jumping performances (Güngör, 1956).

This celebration combines circular time with Turkish and Islamic mythology. The most well-known mythological story is the belief of Hızır and İlyas, two Saints in Islamic and Turkish mythology. According to folklore, Hızır represents fire, and İlyas represents water, and they meet on the night of Hıdrellez. This meeting ensures a fruitful year (Kapağan, 2019).

In Hıdrellez, there are both communal and individual rituals that have been practised throughout history. Hıdrellez appears as a ritual that takes place in a vast geography. Therefore, celebrating this ritual may contain some differences in each region. However, when that day comes, people usually go to the area called "Hıdırlık" where they live. This area was a gathering place for celebrations and could also house various tombs of holy persons, a mosque, a well, a fountain, and a tree, which are considered sacred. It is expected to tie votives or rags to objects in these places to accept prayers and requests (Hatipler Çibik, 2021).

Also, Hıdrellez has various practices related to fire in every region. These practices traditionally take place collectively. In the Maraş region, for example, Hıdrellez fire is lit in the house of an elderly person. Everyone in the village throws the wood they brought from their home into the fire and keeps it burning throughout the night. On the same day, young people collect supplies from house to house. Something is given to each house, and these foods are cooked and eaten collectively. When the fire goes out, the embers are taken to other houses in the village and the fire is dispersed (Aras, 2021). Another practice about fire in Hıdrellez is lighting bonfires. These fireplaces are the centres of the celebrations. Dancing and jumping over the fire are considered both popular and traditional practices. To light these fires, different materials are collected according to the beliefs of each region. For example, straw is used in Bulgaria, and juniper tree is used in Maraş (Aras, 2021; Özkan, 2020).

There are also some private practices in the Hıdrellez. One of the popular ones is to wrap a text with wishes and bury it under the rose tree on the evening of May 5th. On the morning of May 6, the notes are taken from there and left in the water (Hatipler Çibik, 2021).

The increasing growth of cities makes collective movement within the city difficult. For this reason, Hıdrellez celebrations held in cities have gradually started to turn into events organised by institutions such as municipalities and universities. Ankara Kızıcahamam and Malatya Kernek celebrations can be given as examples of this. During these celebrations, places used for different purposes, such as parks, streets, or squares, are re-evaluated for these applications (Arslan, 2013; Teke, 2016). So, the practices also change with the character of the site selection. As shown in the picture, during a Hıdrellez celebration held in Beylikdüzü,

Istanbul, people can be seen jumping over fires prepared at regular intervals on the street. It is seen that a linear place was prepared for the fire to be lit, and these lines were repeated and lined up on the road, as in obstacle jumping. Therefore, the central space has turned into a more linear structure.

### Figure 1

*Hıdrellez Celebration in Beylikdüzü*

Source: Beylikdüzü Belediyesi. (2022, May 6). *Hıdrellez Ateşi Barış İçin Yandı* (Hıdrellez fire burned for peace—News).

Beylikdüzü Belediyesi. <https://yeni.beylikduzu.istanbul/haber/1808/hidrellez-atesi-baris-icin-yandi>



Apart from the formal celebrations, we can still see some collective preparation in the cities. For example, in İzmir Bornova, during the 90s, it was mentioned in a conversation that each apartment would light its fire on Hıdrellez day. This indicates that people celebrated individually within their homes yet still maintained a sense of community by jumping over their neighbours' fires (Baş Yıldırım, personal interview, May 15, 2023).

### Anastenaria

The Anastenaria is a firewalking ritual celebrated in some villages in Greece and Bulgaria by a group of Orthodox Christian refugees known as Ketolides. The celebrations are usually held for honour of Saints Constantine and Helena (Danforth, 1989). The ritual spans more than

three days. Each village had a sacred well and a chapel housing the icons of saints and a “konaki”, a rectangular building and the main gathering place for the events. On the day of the ritual, a procession is held, led by the participants known as Anastenarides. According to Grimes (2004), the relationship between object and subject is fluid in many rituals. The object can quickly become a person and a person an object. Also, when a mundane object turns into a sacred one, the object could create a sacred place, which can be described as Hierotopy. The usage of Icons in the Anastenaria can be an example of this (Lidov, 2011). In this procession, the participants carry the icons of Saint Helen and Constantine. The procession moves towards a chapel housing to the sacred well. In this area, a ceremony of water blessing is made, and an animal is sacrificed for the honour of the saints. During the parade, the participants carry icons and banners, chanting hymns, and pray throughout the procession (Lidov, 2011; Xygalatas, 2011). Upon reaching the ritual area, a circular pit is prepared; participants walk across the hot coals while holding icons or crosses, which is one of the most well-known moments of the Anastenaria (Lidov, 2011).

The next day, another procession is made to bless the village's house by using holy icons, and incense (Lidov, 2011). So, another form of fire is also used to share the divine powers of the ritual. And lastly, the group gather in the “konaki” and dance with the icons. The participants, according to the research by Danforth (1989), believed that Saints possess them while they danced or walked on the hot coal. So, with that possession, the participant is not harmed by the fire. A feast is prepared for the whole village, food is shared, and the day ends with walks over the fire, just like the first day (Lidov, 2011).

### ***Las Fallas***

Las Fallas is one of the traditional celebrations that use fire in Spain, and it takes place in Valencia every year in March. The festival's origin goes back to the Middle Ages as a celebration of the spring of the carpenters. At that time, the surplus of the carpenter's workshop was shaped as a human and burned in these events. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these burns transformed into comical sculptures, which can be seen as critics of popular culture or politics. Nowadays, the festival consists of four main parts: La Plantà, La Ofrenda, La Mascletà, and La Cremà (Lawrence, 1992).

In La Plantà, wooden and papier-mâché sculptures, called “ninots”, are erected in the streets. Creating the ninots begins months in advance, with each neighbourhood in Valencia constructing its sculpture. These sculptures are carried with the parades, and firecrackers are added to that sculpture, creating another design called “falla”. Of those arrangements of different groups, the city is filled with coloured and comical sculptures during the festival.

Including divine figures from Christianity is very common in European rituals. In Las Fallas, all the celebrations were held in memory of Saint Joseph. Also, on the second day, a parade of traditionally clothed women makes a parade, offering flowers to the Virgin Mary sculpture. Las Fallas celebration usually spans five days. Every day at 14:00, a ritual called “Mascletàs” is held. In Mascletàs, firecrackers are set off, creating fog and noise (Lawrence, 1992). So, the city is filled with explosion sounds, and visions are blurred with the fog, creating a chaotic atmosphere as shown in the picture.

On the last day of Las Fallas, the ninots are burned in an event known as “La Cremà”. The flames engulf the sculptures as the night falls, creating a mesmerising spectacle of fire and light.

## Figure 2

### *The Changes of the Fog During the Mascletàs*

Source: Caballer, R. (2019, March 19). Fallas de València 2019, Mascletà Martes [Valencia Fallas 2019, Mascletà Tuesday]. Vivir la pirotecnia.

<https://www.vivirlapirotecnia.com/19/03/2019/fallas-de-valencia-2019-mascleta-martes-19-de-marzo-2019-pirotecnia-ricardo-caballer-ricasa/>



## Burning Man

Many rituals are nourished by different mythological stories, and the movements of the rituals are derived or interpreted from these stories. However, rituals are not read-only through mythologies. One other reading can be done through collective consciousness. Therefore, even if a movement does not have a sacred story behind it, it can turn into a ritual through its communication with the collective. Burning Man is an example of this. It began as a party originated by Larry Harvey and Jerry James,<sup>1</sup> in 1986.

In 1986 Larry Harvey and Jerry James, burned an effigy without knowing other rituals use them like Zozobra, Wicked Man or Cremation of Care. After repeating their ritual with increasing participants, the event decided to transport the Nevada desert. Every year, during

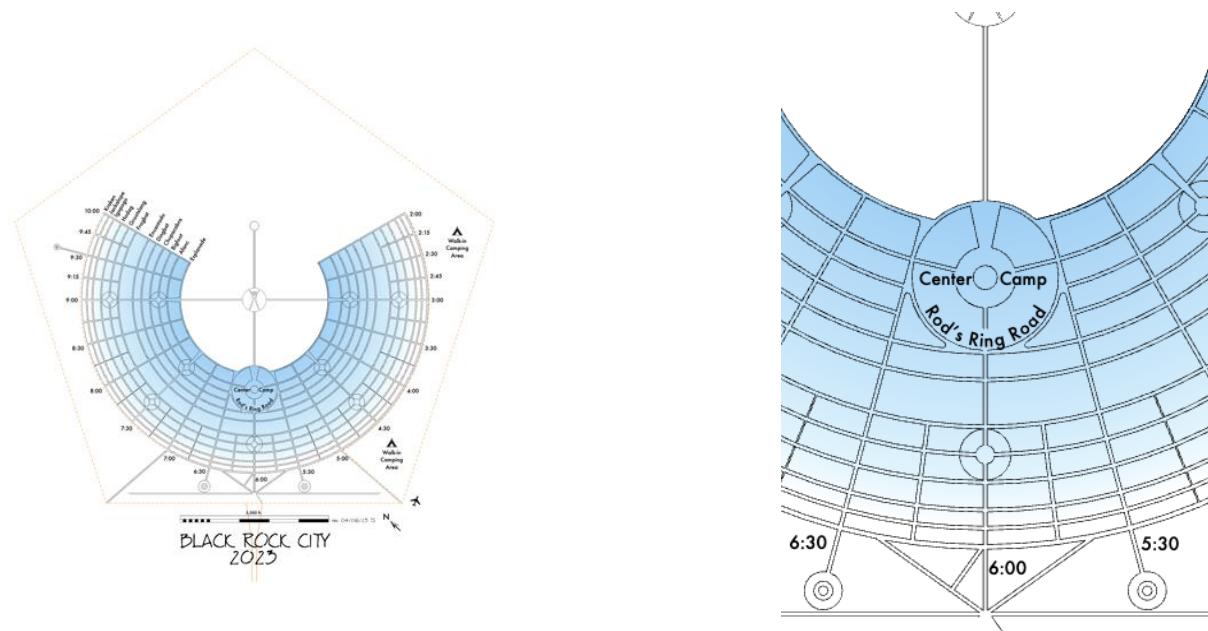
<sup>1</sup> Larry Harvey and Jerry James are the creators of Burning Man. Larry Harvey was an artist, and Jerry James was a Carpenter. In 1986, they constructed a wooden effigy to burn on San Francisco's Baker Beach with a couple of their friends. As they repeated this activity every year, this organisation grew into a well-known ritual-like activity (Gilmore, 2005).

the event, Black Rock City is built around this effigy in the desert. It is a temporary city, much like the fleeting nature of fire itself (Gilmore, 2005). The city plan undergoes subtle changes every year. The leading effigy, "Man", is placed at the centre point of this plan. So, it can be seen in every part of the city. The event spans for a week, and this effigy is burned the day before the last day. This burn is a kind of celebration with different sounds and movements of the participants. The city is shaped like a circle, which resembles a utopian plan. In the plan, some other centres are used during the event time for several artworks. So, the city has become a creative place for different design experiments and artworks.

### Figure 3

*The Site Plan of the Black Rock City*

Source: *Burning Man Project. (2023) 2023 Black Rock City Plan. Burning Man. Retrieved from <http://burningman.org/about/history/brc-history/event-archives/2023-event-archive/2023-brc-plan/>*



Each year the event has a different theme, and some subtle changes are made to adapt to this theme, such as naming the streets in the city to reflect the theme of the event. For example, in the 2023 city plan, streets are named after magical creatures from mythology and folklore, complementing the animalia art theme (Burning Man Project, 2023).

In 2000, a new structure called "The Temple" was added to the Burning Man event due to the death of a friend of David West. In contemporary times, death and mourning are often considered private events. However, within the Burning Man community, this structure serves as a communal space for individuals to process their grief and emotions (Gilmore, 2005). The Temple is not just a static structure, but a dynamic space transformed by the participants who add their personal touches, resulting in a unique environment every year. As seen in the

provided photograph (Figure 4), small mementoes and tokens of remembrance can be observed on the altar and walls inside the temple.

#### Figure 4

*The Transformation of The Temple with Personal Mementoes*

Sources: Yes. (2015, July 20). *What Does the Temple Mean to You? [Blog post]. Burn Life.* <https://www.burn.life/blog/what-does-the-temple-mean-to-you>

Hazard, K., & Guy, S. (2023, January 11). *Introducing Your 2023 Temple: Temple of the Heart. Burning Man Journal.* <https://journal.burningman.org/2023/01/black-rock-city/building-brc/introducing-temple-of-the-heart/>



The burning of The Temple on the final day of the event, Sunday, is a solemn moment when participants gather to bid farewell to the temple and its memories. It is not a time for revelry or celebration, but for reflection and remembrance.

#### Conclusion

This study presents four rituals that used fire as a main component, particularly the use of fire and the movements of the participants during the ritual practice.

One of the different features of the rituals in this study is their prevalence. Hıdrellez is a popular ritual celebrated in a vast geography. Anastenaria, on the other hand, is celebrated in a few villages as a ritual belonging only to a certain group. Meanwhile, Las Fallas is a local ritual deeply rooted in Valencia's traditional culture, and Burning Man is a contemporary art festival which can be seen as a "ritual-like" performance. These two events are closer to the concept of site-specific performance which is designed for a particular place and they both events combine historical concepts and use of fire to the current cultural or political atmospheres.

Collectivity in the making of the fire is a common feature of all these rituals. Even in Burning Man, which can be described as the newest example, it was seen that all the buildings and interiors of the city were built with a collective consciousness. Collecting things from individual people or households and returning the fire created from them to the house as objects such as embers or sticks are also seen. Therefore, the transforming feature of fire is also

emphasized. Fire is used in many forms, and these forms affect the perceptions of the environment. With the changes in the atmosphere, especially in the examples of Las Fallas and Burning Man, a new urban space is recreated with the assemblage of the fire object.

Although each ritual has similar characteristics, they differ by creating different compositions. Therefore, the rituals mentioned in this study constitute only a small example of these mixtures.

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