1. You are an event design practitioner and also a research academic that has just completed a PhD on event design. What is the definition of event design?

- Event design is the development of an event concept and then the application of event design techniques to create a positive and meaningful experience for the event’s audience while maximising the effectiveness of communication with them.

- We know that if we design an event using what we know about event design techniques we can make the experience more engaging and satisfying for the audience on a whole range of different levels while increasing the effectiveness of getting our message across to them.

- We can increase the likelihood of an event having the ‘wow’ factor and, for events with a commercial or cultural objective ensure that the message is delivered much more effectively.

2. Your thesis Event Design: Creating and Staging the Event Experience documents the emerging paradigm of event design. How widespread is this trend away from an exclusively event management approach to an overall event design approach?

- As you say it is an emerging paradigm but when we started teaching event design at Flinders University in the late 1990s we were the only ones doing so and the only texts available concentrated almost exclusively on event management.

- Since that time more and more event programs internationally include event or experience design as part of the curriculum and there are a number of specialist texts devoted to event design. There are certainly many practitioners who call themselves event designers and who specialise in this field.

- One example of the acceptance within the research community is that the leading international research journal – Event Management – is devoting a special issue to event design later this year.

3. This is quite a paradigm shift for the festivals and events industry. Has there been any resistance to it?

- Initially there was some resistance from those who perceived themselves to be solely event managers. Whether this was a defence of their territory or wariness to a change, a new approach I don't know. What has happened over time though has been an increasing understanding that event design doesn’t replace event management it is in addition to how an event is created and staged.

- Obviously every event must be well managed to be successful. But there are many events that are well-managed that don’t truly engage an audience, that don't have that ‘wow’ Factor. Event design provides that.

- It is the integration and synthesis of the two parts – design and management – that is at the heart of every truly successful event.

4. You discuss an audience-centric approach for event designers. How does that change your approach as an event designer?

- There is a difference between designing and managing an event and project managing, say, a building site. What we are doing is creating and staging an experience for a human being.

- Even the language is changing. We talk about audiences who are experiencing our events. They are not consumers of a product.

- As an event designer the key is to get inside the mind of your audience. We are all physiologically and psychologically similar. We have cultural differences but there are consistent observable responses from humans to certain stimuli and if we allow ourselves to think and to feel like our audiences – be audience-centric – in all that we do then our designs will work that much more effectively for our audiences.
5. You discuss a number of event design principles – shape, focus, build amongst others – how are these applied to the design of an event?

- Once the core values of an event are determined and the initial concept is developed the event designer looks at ways of positively impacting on the audience using the various event design techniques.

- As an example I know that the use of certain shapes or colours or particular movements will capture the attention of an audience and make them look where I want them to look. The audience has no choice. The will physiologically or psychologically respond in a subconscious, automatic way. So an event designer uses the techniques to ensure an audience looks where the designer wants the audience to look rather than leave it to chance.

- Once their attention is captured the event designer can use other event design techniques to keep the audience’s attention focused and to increase the potential for the audience to have an optimal experience at the event.

6. So is creating a sensational experience for an audience - designing to impact on the five senses of the audience - the major component of an event design?

- Certainly using the five senses is very important. It is how the audience experiences the event after all, but there are important event design techniques that are more in the realm of cognitive psychology than the reaction to sensational stimuli. A strong narrative in the event – telling a story through either concrete or abstract means – has a similarly strong affect on an audience. Audiences also respond positively to events that they perceive as authentic. This is matched in a lot of tourism research and in the field of site interpretation.

- As more research is done in this field I expect that we will discover even more event design techniques. Of course, all of these, too, are experienced via the five senses so are all part of the sensational experience we are designing for.

7. Do you think that there will now be specialist event designers working alongside event managers or is it the same task or role undertaken from a different philosophical point of view?

- There are already a growing number of practitioners internationally who work exclusively as event or experience designers. Ideally an event would be resourced to the extent where there were specialists in every component of creating and staging of the event, but the reality is that for the majority of events the design and management will be done by the one person.

- It is important to understand that everyone working on the event understands and buys in to the event design approach for the design to be effectively implemented for the benefit of the audience and the event’s objectives.

- On my own events my crew are part of the event design team whether they are driving a forklift or putting up a stage. They understand the approach and it underpins – is the overarching principle – for everything that they do.

8. What is the difference between a well-managed event and a well-designed one?

- An event must be well-managed. No event will be successful without a strong foundation of effective event management. Many an event has failed because of poor logistical planning and implementation.

- Audiences can leave a well-managed event saying “Well, that was pretty good!” If we are happy for that to be the pinnacle of what we do then just a well-managed event might be enough. But I want my audiences to leave moved, engaged, connected, fascinated, thrilled, captured, convinced, saddened, delighted, elated. That can only happen with a well-designed event.

9. Designing an event is one thing but how do you measure the impact of an event design on an audience?
This is where some really exciting work is just starting to be seen. One project I'm working on with researchers at both Flinders University and Mid-Sweden University is the tracking of audiences on event sites using GPS and satellite mapping while recording live the audience members’ bio-metrics – pulse, galvanic skin response, and so on – giving us hard data about the level of the arousal rate or peak experience of the audience member. This combined with face-to-face surveying will reveal how the audience member has been affected by the event environment created for them and their response to the element programmed within the event.

As the research develops we will have a body of work that will add to the observational research that has been undertaken by event design practitioners for the last decade or so.

10. What is the future for event design?

I think we will gain a more complete understanding of how audiences respond to event design techniques – essentially what makes an audience member ‘tick’ and what hard-wired physiological, psychological and cultural responses they bring with them to an event.

Knowing that and understanding the event design approach we will see many more events that effectively communicate with their audiences and which provide more complete experiences for them.