

## **Guerilla Drive-In: Creating community, one empty space at a time**

**by Lisa Ferguson**

AN EMPTY PARKING LOT, AT DUSK

They come alone, in pairs, in groups. Some remain in their vehicles, but it's still warm enough on this early October evening in Victoria, BC, for others to hang around outside. A woman in a Viking costume serves "guerill'd" cheese sandwiches and, in honour of the Dude, White Russians. At 7:30 all tune their radios to an unused channel and focus their attention on a concrete wall, where the Dude, a.k.a. Jeffrey Lebowski, is about to be parted from a valued rug. Welcome to Guerilla Drive-In.

Drive in, drive out. Leave no trace. That's the whole idea behind Guerilla Drive-In (GDI). With a portable projection system consisting of a low-power radio transmitter, a generator, a laptop, and a digital projector, the Guerilla Drive-In Victoria appears, temporarily transforming an otherwise unused, empty urban space into a place for entertainment, for community. Anywhere can be their theatre. And Guerilla Drive-In is, and always will be, free.

"Guerilla Drive-In is a gift," says Steve, one of the organizers and a pretty swell guy for a guerilla. "Very often that gift gives back to us tenfold, never in a financial sense, but in a personal sense. We get a lot of satisfaction from the people we meet and interact with."

Steve and his fellow guerillas started GDI Victoria three years ago, inspired by his Burning Man friends Rico and Sean, who started their brand of cinematic social activism in Santa Cruz, California, in Spring 2002. They called it Guerilla Drive-In. When Rico did a web search, he found another guy in West Chester, Pennsylvania, who had unknowingly shared the same idea, also calling it Guerilla Drive-In.

Blame it on zeitgeist, Steve says, that two GDIs sprang up in two different places around the same time unbeknown to the people behind them. Such chance occurrences are virtually inevitable, he says, when the right combination of technological developments and social-will dovetail. "I think we've reached a point in our social development where a lot of us feel our entertainment and our lives are very governed by commerce, everything we do involves us throwing money out, everything we do is an act of consumption. We're inspired by providing a place where people can interact in a more meaningful way."

FADE TO:

THE PARKING LOT, NOW LIVELY

As the evening cools, more and more people retreat to the warmth of their vehicles. I have only a bicycle, so Brian, a first-timer, invites me to keep him company in his car. Guerilla James, keeping an eye on the projector while leaning against a car in front of us, provides us with a visible laugh track, doubling over before throwing his

head back with every outrageous line in *The Big Lebowski*. The Dude just wants his rug back.

I was a GDI virgin, and I was a little nervous showing up to ask for an interview. I mean, it's not like you would have just strolled into a Che Guevara camp and expected them to be all warm and fuzzy. But this guerilla gathering is welcoming. Steve says a big part of GDI is "trying to create more human connection."

Human connection is how many people find GDI in the first place, hearing of it through friends or by just happening to wander by a screening. And it is enabled at screenings by encouraging participants to bring food or a copy of a short film they have made to share with their friends and neighbours. "It's about creating community," Steve says, "and bringing to life spaces that are dead and empty, bringing culture, ideas, and people to them."

"I really enjoy the idea of changing the way people think about space," Steve says. To him, every back alley, every parking lot, every field is an opportunity. He recalls walking around downtown one day with his mother, suddenly abandoning her to check out an alley. "She didn't know where I went — because she couldn't see it. Because her brain had been trained to ignore these spaces. Because why would you think of this space? This is a useless space, this is a dead space, this is a meaningless space. But by doing [GDI] suddenly they are enlivened with potential." And does Mom know he's a guerilla? "Absolutely!"

Steve tells me that one screening was held next to a Tim Hortons. "So the police officers are driving by to get their donuts. They came in and there's a whole bunch of people sitting in front of cars. We said hello and offered them some popcorn. They were cracking up, enjoying it. It was great because they got it, they understood what it was about." And great considering that GDI is technically, ahem, not so legal.

Guerillas don't bother themselves with such formalities as copyright permissions and special event permits. They do, however, take care to not attract complaints. While some other GDIs throughout North America bring their own sound systems, GDI Victoria quietly broadcasts only to their audiences (who have to bring radios to hear the audio on an unused FM channel); they're not interfering with radio stations. They don't screen near residences or anywhere else where someone might be bothered. They bring their own power. They leave the venues clean. "[The space] is just a blank canvas that we project onto, but when the lights go out there's nothing left," Steve says. Good guerillas leave no trace behind.

In 2005 a screening in a city park in Santa Cruz was shut down by a half dozen police officers because the viewers were violating "park hours." Steve explains that in other parts of the world, it's "an understood social agreement" that spaces like parks and parking lots will be used at night. In Asia, there are night markets. In Europe, parks are where people go at night. "But our culture is deathly afraid of anyone doing anything with a space that isn't specifically what it's built for. It's perceived as criminal and dangerous, I think partly because we live in a litigious culture," he says. "That's the real fear, I guess — people are not trusted in our society to be accountable, to be responsible. But if they're not then they have no reason to be." That's another motivation behind GDI Victoria: to show that people can be trusted with spaces. "We can be more free if we're also willing to be responsible and accountable for ourselves."

"We're all about this being an involvement in the temporary," Steve says. "We bring life and entertainment and interactivity to a space and then leave and leave nothing behind. We take a strong sense of personal responsibility." And they promote responsibility within their audiences by asking them to be responsible by, for example, cleaning up after themselves — leaving garbage behind would jeopardize any goodwill they may have with landowners, security guards, and police. "They have a new kind of relationship with [the space], so they have more accountability for it," Steve says.

Steve sees a problem with the social concept of property ownership and private space. "We've allowed disconnections between what is emotionally profitable and physically profitable to govern how space is used. It's inherently anti-human. And an extremely selfish point of view. It promotes the idea that the community has no say in how the spaces within its borders are used. And I think that's a mistake socially." But even public spaces become circumscribed, he says, especially when they're not used. Guerilla Drive-In uses these spaces and involves the community, all with no harm done.

"How do you steal space?" Steve asks me. "You can't! And why can't we show a movie in an empty space?"

ON THE LAST WORD WE FADE TO:

THE PARKING LOT, A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER

As the credits roll, we gather again in front of the vehicles to thank James and Steve and say goodbyes. Cam, a long-time GDI regular, hugs me. When I express surprise, Steve says, "That's the way we roll." I'm offered rides home, but my trusty steed awaits. Steve tells me they're planning another screening in a few weeks — of the Steve Martin classic *The Jerk*, "for a friend visiting from Ontario." For a second, being from Ontario, I wonder if I should be insulted, but I think he just means his friend likes the movie.

By the time I've bundled up against the cold and unlocked my bike, the teardown and cleanup is done. Nothing is left behind. The parking lot is returned to an unused, unloved space. It's like nothing happened here tonight. Horns are tooted at me as people drive away.

And like that they were gone.

And the Dude? Well, all the Dude ever wanted was his rug back. He didn't get it, but he abides.

THE END

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