

Pecha Kucha: Exchanging Ideas Through Visual Chit-Chat

by Cynthia Close

Pecha Kucha (pronounced Peh-Chock-Cha) has come to Burlington, Vermont. But don't worry: Your children will not have to be inoculated against it. It will not add to the algae bloom in Lake Champlain, nor will it replace Zumba in your exercise regimen.

This worldwide phenomenon arrived in Vermont about five years ago. It was founded in Japan in 2003 by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham, two very creative architects with the Tokyo firm of Klein-Dytham Architecture. They were looking for a process that would allow a wide range of people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in a creative dialogue. Pecha Kucha is a Japanese term literally meaning "chit-chat." It's a vehicle for anyone who wants to share a design, experience, project, concept, or idea with an audience in an informal, friendly, and supportive setting.

The unique Pecha Kucha format requires each participant to distill his or her presentation to fit a 20-by-20 framework—that is, 20 slides, each held on the projection screen for 20 seconds, making for a total performance of approximately six and a half minutes. The challenge for each participant is to choose images that effectively tell a story and to time his or her delivery to coincide with the automated slideshow as it advances on the screen at 20-second intervals. There's no opportunity to say "oops" and go back once a slide has been shown.

Pecha Kucha Comes to Burlington

In 2010, the folks at TruexCullins, a Vermont-based architecture firm, provided the impetus to bring the first Pecha Kucha Night (PKN) to Burlington. Lorna K. Peal, founder of LK Peal Consulting and a supporter of all things cultural, was also enthusiastic about the idea. The TruexCullins folks were confident that Burlington, with its built-in creative community, could provide both the presenters and the audience necessary to make this experience successful. They approached Janie Cohen, director of the Fleming Museum at UVM, asking the museum to host the event. She agreed in part because Pecha Kucha reflects her institution's mission: "The Robert Hull Fleming Museum serves as a gateway for active cultural exchange and critical thinking in our communities and an essential learning resource for the University of Vermont. Through the experience of our diverse collection, dynamic exhibition schedule, and innovative educational programming, people of all ages are inspired to discover the arts and cultures of the world."

The event has been a hit in the community right from the start, drawing overflow crowds, usually between 150 and 200, which literally fill the staircase in the Fleming's beautiful Marble Court. The space is set up like an informal café, with tables and chairs scattered about, free snacks, and a cash bar. Although there is no limit on the number of participants and performers per event, it seems that 10 presenters is the ideal number. This allows for five presentations, starting at 6 p.m., with an intermission for people to

mingle, followed by the remaining five presenters. There are no advance tickets sold, but a five-dollar donation at the door is encouraged.

Putting It Together

For the past four years, Chris Dissinger, head of public relations and marketing at the Fleming, has helped to facilitate the program by creating a master plan to guide presenters. He encourages presenters to use either Microsoft PowerPoint or Apple Keynote in preparing their slides and reminds them that the projection screen is oriented horizontally and that the slides must be submitted in the order that they will be shown. Dissinger uploads the slides in their proper sequence and checks that the images are of sufficient resolution to look their best. His role is crucial in making for a smooth-flowing, enjoyable program with a minimum of technical glitches.

I was surprised to learn that little curatorial control is exercised in deciding who gets to present at a PKN. I had assumed that there was some criteria, a competitive selection process, but this is not the case. It is egalitarian, and there are no upper or lower age limits for presenters. However, it should not be confused with an open mic event, where anything goes, or an elevator pitch, where someone is trying to sell you something. Cohen and Dissinger made it clear that the “passion, not the pitch” governs who gets to present. Each presenter’s power lies in the strength of his or her narrative. The process is completely open to anyone who has a story to tell, particularly a story that can be told using a visual component.

Dissinger is also the point person in the negotiation of the annual contractual agreement with the founders of Pecha Kucha. Although no money is exchanged for the privilege of hosting a PKN, there are requirements. The host organization must agree to hold a minimum of four PKN events each year, and as it is a nonprofit event, the series must be run in that spirit. Participants are not paid to present, and the event cannot be used as a fundraiser. The PKN logos and graphics are trademarked, and any changes to the shape, word order, or format are not allowed.

Get Real with Pecha Kucha

Collaboration is one of the hallmarks of the Vermont cultural scene. As a result, in 2015, Pecha Kucha Night Burlington was presented not only by the Fleming Museum but also Burlington City Arts, the Shelburne Museum, and Echo Lake Aquarium and Science Center. Media services were provided by the local educational television station, RETN, which recorded the events. You can visit the RETN website to see past PKN presentations.

All PKN evenings are numbered, like PKN BTV Volume 18, held at the Shelburne Museum’s Pizzagalli Center. This particular night was also built around a theme. All the presenters were artists whose work was related to the *Eyes on the Land* exhibition held at the museum from October to January 3, 2016.

But PKN is not designed specifically to showcase visual artists. Sometimes the most exciting presentations take the form of a revealing life story, a memoir-like trajectory, or a discovery. It might be a funny story about a family vacation gone awry, or a heart-warming story of survival against all odds. Pecha Kucha now takes place in over 800 cities around the world. In January 2016 alone, there were 36 official Pecha Kucha events scheduled internationally. Ten of these were in the United States, from Portland, Oregon, in the west to Waterville, Maine, in the east, and Cincinnati, Ohio, in between.

The Pecha Kucha website (www.pechakucha.org) is informative and full of great photos from past events. They say the key to a great presentation is to share something you love. They also state, “We believe there is nothing social about online social networks, so get out from behind your screen and get to a live event, with real people, real communication, real beer, and real creative fun. So in a sense, we are in fact a “real” social network.”

If you're intrigued by the Pecha Kucha concept, are toying with the idea of being a presenter, and have not had the opportunity to participate in a Pecha Kucha Night, now's your chance to educate yourself and join in the fun. You should first attend one to see what it's all about. The next PKN event will be at ECHO on Thursday March 10, 2016, at 7 p.m. Following this, the Fleming Museum will be hosting again on Thursday, May 12, at 6 p.m.

If you have been to a PKN event and have a story you want to tell, this is a wonderful opportunity to be a presenter. Please contact Chris Dissinger to express your interest. You may reach him by e-mail at cdissing@uvm.edu or give him a call at 802-656-8582. He would love to hear from you.