

GROUND CENTRAL STATION AT THE BOOM FESTIVAL: CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR WORKING WITH PSYCHEDELIC CRISES

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Over the last few years, there have been ever-increasing numbers of young people attending large music events, raves and trance festivals around the world. This global emergence of events, although mostly focused on music and the arts, has also seen an increase in the use of psychoactive substances. Progressive promoters are beginning to respond by including harm reduction elements in the organization of their events, such as chill-out rooms for dancers to rest and safe spaces for those undergoing psychedelic crises.

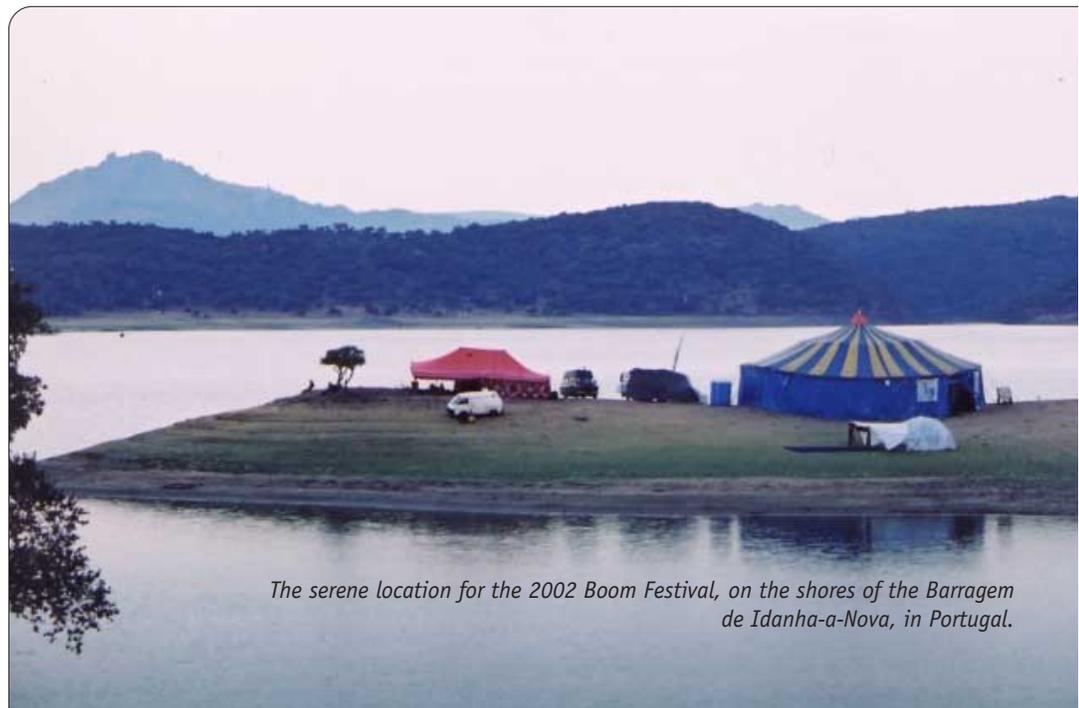
“Ground Central Station was set inside a 16-foot diameter geodesic dome covered by white parachutes and decorated to be a cozy and inviting environment.”

With the support of MAPS and festival promoters, we have been creating a model for services which reflects the needs of those who choose to use drugs at these events, thereby, directly meeting users “where they are.” Our intent is to provide spaces in which people can safely allow their psychedelic experiences to unfold, as well to provide central and reliable sources of information for those who seek to deepen their awareness of altered states. This is one of the emerging faces of harm reduction being put into practice.

The Boom Festival

During the August 2002 full moon in Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, the Boom Festival was a 5-day, 12,000 person, psychedelic trance festival. It was set up as a temporary autonomous zone for an intentional gathering of the global trance/dance community.

The organizers created an environment in which to explore the music, dance, time-as-art mindframe, and the ever evolving and changing culture born out of the psychonautic experience. An excerpt from the promotional material stated: “Every culture is expressed by its Art. It emanates through the many expressions and shapes it assumes. A cultural event as an expression does not just focus on one of the aspects of the Art, but in the whole.” This statement



The serene location for the 2002 Boom Festival, on the shores of the Barragem de Idanha-a-Nova, in Portugal.

helped to create the general mindset of those participating, to become involved in the event as a co-created space in which to explore the many potentials inherent within a community focused on creating art to express itself.

Aspects of the festival included the main stage, an Ambient Garden chill-out area, a Psy-art gallery, a Dreamspell/Mayan calendar workshop dome, Psynema (showing movies and video from the psytrance community during the evenings), a market, chai tents, and an interactive daytime conference area known as the Dynamic Mythologies Tent. Organized by InVisible Productions, the Dynamic Mythologies Tent was intended to generate dialogue with festival participants on the nature, implications and integration of the psychedelic experience. Hosting presentations, workshops, and discussions over the course of the festival with the exploration of such themes as: consciousness and the nature of reality; resacralization of space and time; textures of hyperspace and visionary art; earth stewardship; shamanism and the Gaian mind; chaos and ecology; culture building and the integration of the psychedelic landscape into everyday life. Presentations and workshops from such notable psychedelic visionaries as Erik Davis, Jon Hanna, Alex Grey, Wilbert Alix, Zoe Seven, Charles Hayes, Morgan Brent and next-generation neuronaut linguists Sijay and Delvin made for a very interesting, interactive experience unlike any other offered at a music festival.

Ground Central Station

The creation of a safe space for Boom Festival participants was an excellent foresight of the Good Mood Productions team, organizers of the Boom Festival. It was named "Ground Central Station" to give it the sense of an easily accessible, welcoming space to which Boom participants could come to 'ground' themselves if needed. Ground Central Station was intentionally created to be a place to which those undergoing difficult psychedelic experiences could come if they required solace from the constant stimulus and continuous

trance music of the festival.

Hosted by experienced volunteer facilitators from the Higher Knowledge Network and a certified Holotropic Breathwork practitioner and underground psychedelic therapist, the project's aim was to facilitate journeyers while minimizing interference with the flow of the user's experience. In May of 2002 MAPS hosted a similar space called the Serenity Tent at the Hookahville festival in Columbus, Ohio, which I also helped to facilitate. (For details see the article written by Brandy Doyle in the fall edition 2001 of the MAPS Bulletin or <http://www.maps.org/ritesofpassage/difficultexperiences.html>)

Ground Central Station was set inside a 16-foot diameter geodesic dome covered by white parachutes and decorated to be a cozy and inviting environment. It was supplied with information about MAPS, including articles about how to treat difficult psychedelic experiences (see www.maps.org/ritesofpassage/another.html), the Psychedelic Crises FAQ from Erowid.org (www.erowid.org/psychoactives/faqs/psychedelic_crises_faq.shtml), and drug info from a Portuguese harm reduction organization called *Conversas Da Rua* (Street Talk). This provided an opportunity for people to inform themselves as well as find a safe space for challenging psychedelic mind states.

The space was designed to operate not only as a safe zone, but also as an interactive exploratory dimension for interested trippers. It included art supplies for nonverbal expression, bottled water, fresh fruit and other snacks, as well as a collective altar space for objects which represent the Sacred, including galactic trading cards provided by Dew Press, aromatherapy oils, and incense. These elements made the environment more interactive and helped to create an atmosphere of comfort and grounding.

The Role of the Facilitators: "Response-abilities"

While the job of assessing physical emergencies remained in the hands of the medic team, it

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was our job to deal with crises situations of a more psychological nature. We worked in conjunction with the medics, security, and festival organizers, and whenever anyone was found needing our assistance, we were instantly contacted by radio handset. People came to the tent under the supervision of festival staff, some were brought in by friends, and some wandered in on their own.

Those who did experience difficulties with their trips almost immediately calmed down once inside the tent and were often able to enjoy their experiences afterward. Some retreated to an internal state to reflect upon their journey and take time to integrate whatever it was that they were feeling and experiencing. Others seemed to appreciate the support we had to offer and many engaging discussions were generated about the nature of the psychedelic states being explored. All in all, the benefits of creating this space were readily apparent and many of those who had had need of the service affirmed it by coming back at a later time to say thanks.

A part of our job as facilitators was to walk around the festival grounds to see if we could find anyone needing help. On the fifth day of the festival, I found a young man seated on the ground in the blazing sun. He looked disoriented, dehydrated and seemed to be talking aloud to himself. I ap-

proached him calmly and offered him some water to drink. I sat there with him trying to establish rapport, and when we did begin to communicate, he seemed very comfortable with me. He told me he had taken LSD for the first time in years along with a little MDMA. He said he was “pretty high” but that he was enjoying his experience. He explained to me that he had been addicted to heroin for a few years and that he and his girlfriend were trying to kick the habit together. They had come to the Boom Festival to get away from their usual scene and to try to have some fun while going through the harsh withdrawals together. He was quite proud that they hadn’t used in the last two weeks on their trip there, and was really glad to have an opportunity to be at an event like the Boom Festival. He felt the LSD and MDMA were helping him that day to work through the issues he had around his addiction, such as; his reasons for using heroin, his family life, the pressure he placed on himself, and issues with physical pain.



A mural in spray paint at the 2002 Boom Fest

As we walked around the festival we had an opportunity to discuss the insights that he felt he was gaining from the experience and what he communicated to me was indeed a testament to the potential therapeutic benefits of consciously used psychedelics and entheogens.

For reasons I can only guess, we only had a small number of people come in for assistance. It was amazing to see that at a festival of 12,000 people, the majority of the participants had very few problems with psychedelic usage. It may be because the population was mostly made up of experienced trippers who knew the effects, quality, choices, and combinations of the substances they were taking (such as hash, LSD, 2C-B, Mushrooms, MDMA, Mescaline, DMT, and Cocaine). However, the well-organized set & setting of the event itself probably had a positive effect as well.

As a facilitator of the Ground Central Station tent, my experience at the Boom festival has had a very positive effect on my life. I not only got to make many new friends, but also had yet another opportunity to witness the powerful effects that psychedelics can have on us. I gained skills that enable me to be a better facilitator, listener and friend. It opened me up to the patterns involved in the process of communication as well as in the content, and to using the skills of intuition, empathy, respect and understanding that I had become more attuned to through personal use of psychedelics and entheogens in the past.

The experience of facilitating gave me the chance to explore and recognize that each individual's reality or model of the world enables us to cherish, rather than judge or fear, the differences that make us unique, and made me more aware of the amazing and wonderful diversity of humanity.

The Next Level...

The Ground Central Station project was a great success in that all those who participated in or used the services felt it was a beneficial and rewarding experience. I can only speculate as to what would've become of those who needed help if we

hadn't been there. Nobody should ever have to go through a difficult psychedelic journey without knowing that support can be found if needed.

The potentials for a project like this are vast and multifaceted. The Serenity tent / Ground Central Station model can be adapted to each event depending on its specific needs and situations. Factors influencing this might be location, type of event, age / demographic of participants, and availability of substances. Some events will require more focus on crisis situations, others may involve more detailed information booths and others may require something more interactive and play oriented. Pill testing would also be an extremely valuable function of this project. The task of designing an overall safe space and environment would be a benefit to any gathering where people are involved in psychedelic exploration.

It would be of great value if every music festival and event promoter /organizational team were to take this safe space model into consideration in their future planned events. It shows great dedication to the spirit of community and demonstrates a shared response-ability to look out for and take care of each other.

Perhaps in the future, through education, support and other opportunities to learn and communicate about this vast landscape of the psychedelic experience, the benefits and healing that can result from psychonautic exploration will be common knowledge. Until then, addressing and reducing the potential harms associated with the uninformed use of drugs is an important step to take. Ground Central Station offers an excellent model to move the culture in that direction, and in the meantime, offers those who choose to use psychoactives the support they need in times of crises. ■