Future Fixtures

Event designers predict what events will look like in the next few years.

By MICHELE LAUFIK

Hosts will seek authenticity.

Many brands and companies are still looking to provide an authentic experience, with elements grounded in the past. "There are more and more requests for unknown venues or throwback spaces," van Wyck says. For a Coach event celebrating the opening night of Fashion Week in September 2014, his team chose Irving Plaza in New York because of its history as a storied rock venue. "To some it may not be seen as a cutting-edge fashion venue, but the brand embraced the character and patina of the theater into their message of timelessness and authenticity," he says.

Jes Gordon, creative director and owner of Proper Fun, echoes that sentiment, saying that there's a paradox within the industry between high-tech wizardry and a push for handmade products. The New York-based event planner also sees more clients incorporating their homes into social events—whether as a venue space or by customizing decor inspired by personal items—for that added air of realness. "You're not just planning a party [anymore]," she says. "You're planning a lifestyle."

Planners predict the price of high-tech video projections will begin to lower, allowing for greater usage at events.

Technology will be ubiquitous.

Not surprisingly, most designers forecast that event technology will get bigger and better—from holograms to *Jetsons*-style catering. "Our lives are so intertwined with technology at the moment; we can access anything at the touch of our fingers, and I can foresee that technology will be deeply implemented in all aspects of event design in the future," says Jung Lee, co-founder of Fête, an event planning and design production firm based in New York. "For example, instead of waiters coming over to take down your order, it could be a completely virtual experience—pick your menu at the touch of your fingers!"

And as technology advances, its price usually decreases—a win-win for the industry. Brian Worley of Santa Monica, California-based event production company YourBash predicts that costly equipment and services like video projection will become more affordable, making it accessible to more planners. "Projectors have been around for the while, but it has been a very expensive gag to pull off," he says. "Over the next few years, this cool, interactive element will become widely used, as the ability to create these images becomes less expensive. This will also allow event planners to create unique spaces that otherwise would not be possible or financially feasible."

In order to impress increasingly tech-savvy (and perhaps jaded) guests, planners will need to continue to push the boundaries of event design. "What can we create that hasn't been seen by the audience?" asks Bronson van Wyck of event production and experiential marketing company Van Wyck & Van Wyck in New York. "In the next 10 years, I think techniques like sensory projection, immersive video mapping, holograms, and touch screens will become commonplace."

Some companies have already started experimenting with Oculus Rift and holograms: Audi's launch around the New York International Auto Show last April featured rapper M.I.A. and R&B singer Janelle Monaé performing together on stage—but from two separate locations. "Why bother flying them to your event when they could perform remotely for your event from the comfort of their own studio?" Lee asks about the future of corporate event entertainers. "Being able to stream a live performance would allow event designers to tap into a global network of performers."

Events will shrink in size.

Smaller, more intimate events, such as at-home soirees, appear to be the wave of the future, with stuffy, formal affairs slowly disappearing. "I think that the sit-down, black-tie dinner is going to become less and less of a standard," Worley says. "I think that galas and balls will become more of an opportunity for networking and socializing rather than just an hour cocktail party at the beginning of the evening, then sit down, eat, see a presentation, and leave."

Because of this, a planner's focus (and budget) might eventually turn on its head—with the end of the night signaling the real start to the event. "The party you usually want to have is the after-party," Gordon says. "It's the 50 people who, if you were stranded on a deserted island, you'd want to be with." Not only it is more exclusive, it's also a smart marketing move. Worley explains that when he first started designing events, movie premiere parties were, well, an afterthought because members of the press weren't invited, meaning no potential media buzz. "The step-and-repeat and the press line were where a studio would get the big bang for their buck to promote the movie and the talent," he says. But now the after-party has become more relevant with interesting, interactive decor—thanks to Instagram. "Guests are becoming the press or ambassadors of the film to their friends who follow them on social media."

Guests cut their own pasta at an interactive food station.

Guests will become the chefs.

In terms of catering, expect do-it-yourself menus to evolve. And as food allergies and restrictions become more common, highly personalized catering will be a must, Worley says. "First there was the buffet, now we are dealing with the food station, but I believe that in the next few years, these food stations are going to become completely interactive," he says. "Guests will get to pick and choose all the ingredients that they will be consuming and become the chef for their own individual meals." Lee agrees, adding: "Clients are developing a much more sophisticated palate, and they're educated about food. They know that they don't have to settle for a menu set by the venue."

Designers will create floral environments, not centerpieces.

Even an organic staple—flowers—will succumb to high-tech tinkering. "When it comes to florals, we can essentially create any kind of flower we envision thanks to technology," Lee says. "Unique flowers can be bred, customized according to our hearts' desires, and housed in temperature-controlled environments until the right time." Plus, presentation will grow in new ways. "I see flowers being used in iconic ways, where it is less about the centerpiece and more about the environment you create ... [with] vertical, almost art-like installations," says Todd Fiscus, founder of Dallas-based event design firm Todd Events.

Noninvasive branding will be paramount.

As guests become increasingly valuable promoters, designers will continue to rely heavily on social media for an extra viral boost—for their events as well as themselves. "We are now being asked to really create experiences that are photo- and social-media-worthy for posting," Worley says. This is especially true for product launches and brand-centric events where the merchandise needs to be seamlessly incorporated into the decor.

This type of thoughtful, pragmatic planning will remain the cornerstone of event design, says Mircea Manea, principal at San Francisco-based event design and rental firm Blueprint Studios. "The utilization of bold color blended with a variety of mixed textures offset by accent pieces that either give purpose to their placement or serve as noninvasive branding represents a basic outline in building a successful corporate event design," he says. Plus, it makes a successful, shareable image for clients. "The saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is becoming very evident," Worley adds, "and in the next five to 10 years, as technology develops and we have more outlets for social media to be expressed, this will only become more of an important element in the design of events."

An ombré wall of blooms including cabbage roses and hydrangeas was created by Todd Fiscus for a Fort Worth wedding.

The live experience will always be key.

Despite the technological innovations and food trends, the goal of an event—bringing people together—will continue to remain. "Future events will demand more from us creatively as we will need to focus on ways that we can design environments that are inclusive and celebrate the cultural and social diversities versus isolating those with different needs or lifestyles," Manea says. Lee agrees, adding, "Regardless of what happens in five or 10 years, it is always the designer's job to continually produce creative, integrated designs [and] to create experiences that are one-of-a-kind and memorable."