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FROM LOS ANGELES TO THE LOWER NINTH WARD

Sometimes a job is more than a job. Sometimes it's a turning point. Ask Stefan Beese.

By: David Barbour

Many people in this industry are freelancers, moving from job to job in a never-ending round of changing circumstances. But what happens if you take a job and it alters your life? Consider the case of Stefan Beese, whose production-design career has led him from Germany to Los Angeles to New Orleans, where he has become deeply embedded in the cultural life of that embattled city, lending his talents to the effort of restoring its economic and cultural vitality.

Trained in both architecture and production design in his native Germany—among other things, he is a certified member of the German Chamber of Handicrafts—Beese emigrated to the United States in 1999. He went to Los Angeles, where he set up his own firm, Beesign. He quickly picked up work as a production designer for independent films and videos; he also began working on projects with the architecture firm Graft. (Readers of this magazine will recall the booth design he executed, on assignment from Graft, for the Sci-Fi Channel at the annual Comic-Con convention in San Diego.) It was through Graft that Beese got that life-altering gig. It all happened when the actor Brad Pitt approached Graft about something called The Pink Project.

The city of hope

In 2006-7, Pitt was in New Orleans shooting the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*; like so many others, the actor was shocked at the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, and the lack of any coordinated attempt at rebuilding those sections of the city that were destroyed by the storm. In particular, he focused his attention on the Lower Ninth Ward, the largely black neighborhood that was in danger of being erased forever.

Pitt has long had an interest in architecture; in response to what he saw, he began working with the ecological organization Global Green to sponsor a design competition to spur sustainable building in the area. This effort led him to start the Make it Right Foundation New Orleans; according to the organization's website, it was created to act as "a catalyst for redevelopment of the Lower Ninth Ward, by building a neighborhood comprised of safe and healthy homes that are inspired by Cradle to Cradle thinking, with an emphasis on a high quality of design, while preserving the spirit of the community's culture." (This is a concept popularized by the architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Baumgart in their 2002 book, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*; it mandates the use of

materials than can degrade organically over time, returning to the earth rather than taking up space in a landfill.)

Graft was one of the team of experts assembled by Pitt for this effort. Together, they came up with the concept of The Pink Project, an audacious visual statement designed to focus attention on the plight of the Lower Ninth Ward, and to raise money for the rebuilding effort. Beese served as the executive producer. "Basically, I always take on the more temporary jobs for Graft—exhibits, production designs, art-direction jobs," says Beese. "When Graft was asked by Brad about taking part in the Pink Project, I immediately raised my hand and said I wanted to do it."

The idea for The Pink Project came when Pitt noticed a house, swathed in pink fabric, on the *Benjamin Button* set; it was essentially acting as a placeholder for another structure, which would later be added to the film through the use of CGI effects. Struck by the contrast between the pink structure and its stark surroundings, he conceived the idea of creating a temporary landscape of similar buildings as a potent visual metaphor for a rebuilt neighborhood.

The concept called for 150 pink full-size tent structures, assembled out of 450 base shapes (cubes and triangles) to be put up on 14 city blocks

between December 3, 2007 and January 7, 2008. The completion of each house signified that another \$150,000 had been raised for the rebuilding effort. “During the six weeks of the project, we would erect the houses on the lot, adding a cube and a rooftop so they resembled a Monopoly house—that was the signal that we had raised another \$150,000,” says Beese.

At night, the tents, lit from inside, created a ghostly pink landscape, reminding onlookers of what had been lost and what might still be recovered. The lighting for the project was by Hervé Descottes, of the design firm L’Observatoire. “By the end,” says Beese, “we had nearly 90 houses put up. That was a big achievement in a short time frame.”

Beese worked closely with the Pink Project’s co-producers, Nina Killeen and Steven Rehage, both of them New Orleans natives who worked in media and entertainment. “Without them, I would have had no chance,” he says, “because they knew all the local resources and how to make your way through the city.” It was his relationship with Rehage that was to prove crucial. “When I presented Stephen Rehage with the idea of the 450 base shapes needed to make up the 150 pink structures appearing overnight in the Lower Ninth Ward, he looked at me and said, ‘That’s crazy. I’m in!’”

Neither knew it, but a long-term partnership was being born.

Designing Essence

Rehage is the founder of the event production company Rehage Entertainment, which, he says, “has spent the last 16 years making an art form of public assembly.” Among other things, he is the originator, producer, and owner of the Voodoo Music Experience, which is, nowadays, one of the few independently owned large music festivals in the country. “Steve donated his time to the Pink Project,” says Beese. “When we wrapped it up in January, 2008, he became producer of the *Essence* Music Festival. He asked me if I would be interested in working on that, and I said, ‘Absolutely.’”

The *Essence* Music Festival, held in July, is a long-running New Orleans ritual, a music event sponsored by *Essence*, the lifestyle magazine for African-American women. The only year that the festival was not held in New Orleans was in 2006, when the city was still suffering from the aftermath of Katrina. For 2008, Rehage was asked to give the event, and its marketing, a new look.

Beese’s decision to work on the *Essence* Festival reveals how his time in New Orleans had left a deep impression on him. “During pre-production of the Pink Project, I

remember sitting with my wife on the basement floor of Stephen’s house, listening to a jam session with the Neville Brothers and other locals,” he says. “It was then I realized that this would be the beginning of a great new adventure for me.”

The music portion of the *Essence* Festival takes place in the Superdome, while other events, including an arts-and-crafts fair and a food marketplace, are held in the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. Performers at the 2008 festival included Kanye West, Rihanna, Mary J. Blige, and Chris Rock. Beese says, “The work on the *Essence* Festival consisted of three major areas that needed to be revamped: the ground map for the Superdome, highlighting traffic flow and production and artist compounds; the convention center, with its empowerment seminars, sponsors and arts-and-crafts market, and the new *Essence* Stage in the Superdome.

“When Stephen asked me to design a new look for the festival,” he continues, “I immediately thought of utilizing LED screens in a large format. The idea was to give each performer a playground of screens and lights, while keeping the appearance of the *Essence* stage consistent through all three days. The curved LED towers, at stage left and stage right, functioned as huge digital billboards, highlighting announcements and text messages



Scenes from Pink Project: At night, the tents, lit from within, created an eerily glowing landscape.

Photos: Left page: Left: Ricky Ridecos Right: Stefan Beese Right page: Left: Courtesy of Stefan Beese Right: Andrew Goetz



Left: Beese at the *Essence Music Festival*. Right: The designer gave the festival an exciting new look, using LED panels.

throughout the set changes and continuously featuring *Essence* graphics. The stage-left curved horizontal LED tower also housed the festival's DJ, integrating her with in the set design. Instead of using a stage curtain that would drop down with each set change, I decided to lower the LED screen that, during performances, was hung above stage center." A set of Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast LED strips built in the deck, running upstage to downstage and covered with acrylic glass, created what the designer calls "a landing-strip effect." A set of vertical Barco MiSTRIP LED elements, curved at their bottoms, were placed in front of the 60'-wide Element Labs' Stealth LED wall upstage. Content was spread over the various LED elements, which, with their differing resolutions and sizes, created a broad array of visual effects. IMAG was provided by Barco S10 panels. Content was delivered by Catalyt media servers.

The lighting package for the event included 29 Vari*Lite VL3000 Profiles, 14 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Wash units, eight Martin Atomic 3000 strobes, five 8-lite Molefay units, four Syncrolite MX3s, 32 High End Systems Studio Beams, PGP moving light trust, and 18 one-ton hoists. Control was provided by two MA Lighting grandMA consoles.

"A dazzling stage worthy of Times Square announced the *Essence Music*

Festival's new era Friday in the Superdome," wrote reviewer Keith Spera in the *Times-Picayune*. "Gone were the old *Essence* logo, curtain, and gauzy decor, replaced by flashing vertical and horizontal LED screens and local DJ Soul Sister spinning old-school vinyl between acts."

The spell of voodoo

By now, it was clear that Beese and Rehage worked well together, so Beese came onboard for the Voodoo Music Experience, which, for ten years, has been Rehage's signature project in New Orleans. It's a three-day outdoor music fest, blending national and local acts, held the weekend before Halloween in New Orleans' City Park. It started as a one-day concert in 1999, for an audience of 8,000, with a lineup that included Wyclef Jean, The Fugees, and Dr. John. By 2007, it had expanded to three days and an audience of more than 100,000.

It played a crucial role in the city's post-Katrina history, when, in October 2005, it became the first large-scale event to be held there since the hurricane. "We came back 50 days after Katrina," says Rehage. "It was free to the public; the acts [including Nine Inch Nails, Queens of the Stone Age, and The New York Dolls] came on down and went right from their tour buses to the stages. Our site was 11' under water, so we found a place that hadn't been hit—a green pasture—and

we used it." It was, he notes, a very strange experience: "We had a lot of National Guardsmen there, with their machine guns. He adds, laughing, "I said, 'We can let the security staff go; the audience has machine guns!'"

"The Voodoo Music Experience is a non-genre musical festival, a kind of grandfather to many other new music festivals," says Rehage. "It started the same year as Coachella, but it's specific to this city—it really is New Orleans on acid. You get traditional jazz and Rage Against the Machine, all at the same time. The event covers three days, from 11am to 11pm, with seven stages and events all over the city."

The festival is held on a campus of tents and outdoor stages. "There are three smaller festivals in the overall festival," adds Rehage, describing a layout that was established in 2006. "Le Ritual is the big rock-star event. Next is Le Flambeaux, which carries the torch of New Orleans music, to tell its story and explore where it goes next. The third component is Le Carnival, which relates to Mardi Gras." Completing the area is a number of sponsored stages; a Playstation Experience; Preservation Hall, presented by Louisiana Tourism; merchandise stands; and various places to eat.

Keith Spera, in his roundup of the event in the *Times Picayune*, cites The Bingo! Parlour as his favorite spot at the festival. He describes it as "a full-size, yellow-and-wine-colored



Above: Crowds at the Voodoo Music Experience. Right: Michael Stipe appears at the festival.

big-top tent rented from a Florida circus. Bubble machines whirled away outside; inside, red curtains framed the stage and a working trapeze swung overhead. Tellingly, the Fellini-esque junkyard marching band, done up in red, black, and white uniforms trimmed with skulls and crossbones, was not even the most bizarre act to appear.”

“If you haven’t been there, it doesn’t really compare to any other regional festival,” says Rehage. “It’s a little like the Burning Man Festival, with people making their own experience.” Beese adds, “Because it is so close to Halloween, a lot of guests come in costumes. You almost have the feeling of being at Comic-Con. It’s a combination of the usual festival-goers mingling with people who are a little more extreme in their enthusiasms.”

Speaking of his design for the Tenth Ritual, the name for the Voodoo Music Experience’s tenth edition in 2008, Beese describes it as a kind urban planning project, driven by issues of infrastructure and traffic flow. “Stephen and I attacked the site layout as if we were planning a small city, referring to things like a ‘bank’ instead of an ‘ATM,’ and ‘stores,’ instead of merchandising vendors. Following these principles of ‘city planning,’ we pretty much built out own little village. The point was to incorporate the beauty of the park, with its old oak trees and

bayous into the festival experience.

“Using the learning curve from the 2007 Voodoo Experience layout, we wanted to improve the layout for the Tenth Ritual,” he adds. “Because of this, I needed to take on the perspective of the festival visitor by walking the inner parameters of the festival site during the design process. A major change for the Tenth Ritual was the reverse placement of the main Voodoo stage and the second Playstation stage; this helped us improve the movement of the artists to and from the stage, providing a shorter and safer corridor leading back to the artists’ compound. We used Ted Gormley Stadium [also in City Park] to house the production and artists’ compound; this gave us a structure already in place to accommodate all our needs.”

He adds, “In housing the lounge and dressing rooms in existing locker rooms of this 1937 structure, I felt like I was witnessing gladiators leaving their compound each time an artist left for the stage. It’s really a very bizarre setting— normally, you would use it for production purposes.”

This plan allowed him to place the Loa Lounge, the official VIP area, in a central position. “City Park has several beautiful old oak trees, with a grandiose tree that offers a great viewing angle off stage right,” says Beese, adding that

it became the site of the Loa Lounge. “This is a perfect ‘natural’ location, where anyone would want to experience a concert. Normally, VIP areas are secluded, as the guests are looking for a private retreat and the opportunity to be among themselves. I chose to create a ring of tents with transparent back walls, allowing you to see your neighbor’s deck, creating a community feeling. Surprisingly, the guests loved the feeling of an inner courtyard under the tree, allowing them to retreat into their tents if they needed to.

“I also chose to use transparent tops for the tents, pushing them right up under the tree,” he adds. “This way, the guests always had a view into the branches of this beautiful tree. It gave you the feeling of laying in the grass on a nice summer afternoon, basking in the shade of a big old tree, enjoying the music and atmosphere. In the evening, the clear rooftop partitions held a chandelier, which was in synch with the lights that illuminated the large tree. These LED spots changed color ever so slightly, casting soft lights through the area, giving it a defining atmosphere.”

For the stage lighting, Beese and Rehage worked with the gear suppliers, PGP and Screenworks, to come up with rep plots for each stage, incorporating input from the lighting designers associated with various acts.

For the Voodoo stage, the lighting

package included 24 Martin Mac 2000 Profiles, and 30 Mac 2000 Wash units, seven Atomic 3000 strobes, six ETC Source Fours, six 8-lite Moles, and 14 PAR64s. For the Playstation Stage, the package included 24 High End Systems x.Spot Xtremes, six 5K Fresnels, five 4-lite Moles, six lekos, nine High End Studio Beams, and four ACL bars. Video consisted of 15mm Toshiba LED panels.

The lineup for the 2008 show included Stone Temple Pilots, TV on

A new home

Beese and Rehage are forming a new production and design company, Re:Be:, specializing in the architecture of entertainment by combining production experience and award-winning design expertise to create a one-stop shop for the entertainment and related industries. Dedicated to the exploration of innovations in entertainment design and production, Re:Be: creates and executes live-based entertainment properties and media events, from

Graft on special projects.)

He also spent the fall and winter house-hunting in New Orleans with his wife, as they prepared to relocate there. "It's a big change," he says, "but it's very refreshing, something I'm looking forward to. It's a new city to explore, a new work environment. My wife, who is from California, and I have the same thought: We see it as an opportunity to start something new." He adds that they can also expect to spend time in New York, where

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the Radio, Erykah Badu, Joss Stone, Wyclef Jean, Nine Inch Nails, Lil Wayne, Mars Volta, R.E.M., Panic at the Disco, and Dashboard Confessional, along with many local acts, such as Irvin Mayfield and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, New Orleans Jazz Vipers, Marc Broussard, Dr. Michael White Jazz Band, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, and the Hot Club of New Orleans. "No festival outside New Orleans could present as much quality local music on the same bill with Nine Inch Nails, Stone Temple Pilots and R.E.M.," writes Keith Spera in his review of the event.

concept to design, through to execution and marketing—including theatre, events, festivals, music, TV, commercials, feature film productions, temporary structures, exhibit design and architecture. (Among other things, Rehage is behind the Revlon Breast Cancer Walk, which finishes in Times Square each year.) Looking to the future, Beese hopes to give the *Essence* Festival more of a visual throughline, which links the disparate aspects of the event more closely. And he's already thinking about how the Eleventh Ritual will look next fall. (He adds that he will continue to work with

Rehage also has offices. Beese and his wife also have a new son, Tristan, who turned one in December. "He came three-and-a-half months early, during the first week of the Pink Project installation," the designer says. "It was a personal achievement to finish that job well and also to deal with this.

"We fell in love with this city," Beese concludes. "We have a lot of friends here now. Being from Europe, I can say this city is very European. And we are ready for a change right now." Indeed, the New Orleans chapter of his career is just beginning. 📶



Left: The Voodoo Music Experience at night. Right: Beese's drawing for the VIP area at the festival; you can see a photo of it on page 62.