

First at building a local Thursday cultural ritual



By Leigh Andrews

15 Sep 2015

One of the highlights of attending the Media24 Lifestyle Summit last week was hearing the First Thursdays South Africa backstory from founders Gareth Pearson and Michael Tymbios, who've since added [First Thursdays Joburg](#) and Museum Night CT to the mix..

The question they get asked most often is "How did you get started", especially as both have full-time jobs that pull their attention elsewhere and received little overseas help - yet they gloss over this and prove they have cracked what it takes to make these events a success, now attracting thousands of attendees each month. They joined the global movement in November 2012 with only six participating galleries in Cape Town, one of which they 'created' themselves by hiring a flower shop for the night. It's now one of the city's foremost cultural experiences.

The novel human experience



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From the beginning, when the two met while exploring their city lifestyle while cycling, the concept of a controlled area has been important as First Thursdays is all about walkability. This in itself is often a novel experience - walking around the city after hours, as we're used to driving everywhere and staying indoors after hours. It's just not something we do regularly but adding to the novelty factor is that it's not simply a case of repeating the same experience each month. First Thursdays are built around culture, so even if the same galleries appear on the map repeatedly, they're likely hosting different expos each time, offering something new. That's the key to its development, the fact that there's always a new experience to consider.

Pearson has long been interested in the idea of ritual and doing something over again as it is how your brain works. With First Thursdays, others have adopted the concept too and come to expect something 'cultural' on the fourth workday of the week.

And my, how the concept has grown. Tymbios explains that they initially did a print run of 250 A6-sized maps - they now produce 6,000 at a shot and have had to increase the map size as there's only so much small font type people will read. That's testament to how the concept has grown too, with roughly 30 participating galleries and 'experiences' per First Thursday.

Tymbios adds that First Thursdays also has a hungry online presence that needs lots of feeding and updating, so it's definitely a platform they need to give constant attention. While he acknowledges that people toss around the word 'platform' freely these days, Tymbios says this really is one as it's based on an 'open city' sub-project, where they also curate an open programme encouraging public use grassy squares. "In SA a square is generally a place to run across quickly," he says, but this project has helped us take of public spaces and reminded people that it is public property, a space for thawing out and relaxing with people we may have not met otherwise. There's an economic impact too as the city becomes a more desirable space to live and work in as it forms part of an enjoyable public experience.

All in all it's about building a Thursday culture ritual. For more on First Thursdays South Africa, visit [the website](#) or follow their [Twitter account](#) and [Instagram profile](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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