PechaKucha presenters rocked Nautica at Cuyahoga 50 'Waterways' event

Updated Jun 21, 2019;Posted Jun 21, 2019

Oberlin College graduate Sadhu Johnston, city manager of Vancouver, CA, returned to Cleveland Thursday to make a presentation at the PechaKucha waterways event, part of the Cuyahoga 50 celebration. Johnston previously served as chief environmental officer of Chicago and deputy chief of staff to former mayor Richard M. Daley and as executive director of the Cleveland Green Building Coalition. Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The skies opened, and rain poured down Thursday night on a swollen, turbulent Cuyahoga River, stained brown with silt washed down from upstream.

But organizers of the free “Global PechaKucha Night: Waterways” event at Jacobs Pavilion at Nautica, on the west bank of the Flats, didn’t care. They thought the conditions were perfect for a discussion about rivers and waterfronts worldwide.

The weather didn’t bother an audience of 1,000, either. Members of the crowd whooped and cheered during 10 high-speed slide presentations by a dozen architects, activists and an Ojibwa “water walker" from Minnesota, who chanted and sang an ode to fresh water in her native tongue.

Funded by the Cleveland Foundation, the event was part of the second day of festivities and events organized to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River, which sparked America’s environmental movement.

“I’m actually pleased it’s raining tonight, because it brings home the point about what water is,” said Mark Dytham, the Tokyo-based British architect who founded PechaKucha in 2003.

Tokyo-based British architect Michael Dytham, founder of the global PechaKucha Nights event series, spoke Thursday during the "Waterways" PechaKucha at Nautica in Cleveland, funded by the Cleveland Foundation. Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

He explained that PechaKucha (pronounced with the accent on the second syllable) is an onomatopoetic term in Japanese that means what it sounds like: chitchat.

He created the events to give young architects in Tokyo a chance to network with peers in bars and other informal settings. And he imposed the rule that no presentation could be longer than 20 images shown for 20 seconds apiece.

“There’s a problem with architects — they all talk too much!" he said.

PechaKucha nights are now held in 1,160 cities, encompassing storytellers and presenters from all creative professions. Cleveland architect Michael Christoff, who emceed Thursday’s event, co-founded the local PechaKucha series in 2008.

The presentations Thursday touched on freshwater issues and solutions from Detroit and Cleveland to Kampala, Uganda.

It was a brainy and emotional affair, ranging from politics to poetry, and from images of pristine rivers and lakes to channelized industrial waterways stained red with pollution

Sharon Day of Minneapolis, the Ojibwa water walker, came to Thursday’s event fresh from a 100-mile walk from the headwaters of the Cuyahoga to its mouth.

Applause during Thursday's PechaKucha waterways event at Nautica, part of the Cuyahoga 50 festivities this week. Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

Such walks — which Day has conducted across North America — are intended to focus attention on the health of free-flowing waters for current and future generations.

“If we can slow down, walk quietly, speak silently to the spirit of the river, if we can participate in ceremony daily, it becomes part of our being,” she said.

In a fiery presentation, Detroit activist Monica Lewis-Patrick used detailed graphics and data to document inequities in the city’s water system. Color-coded maps illustrated rising shut-off rates that are disproportionately hitting low-income black communities.

“We have the human right to drink water that is clean, safe and affordable," she said. “We will not be denied that right in the Great Lakes and the great city of Detroit."

In separate presentations, Taraneh Meshkani, an assistant professor of architecture at Kent State University, and Adib Dada, an architect in Beirut, Lebanon, documented the sorry state of the Beirut River.

Their slides showed how the river has been straightened, channelized, polluted and now hidden under arrays of solar panels. They called for solutions including public access to riverbanks and reforestation of adjacent lands.

Cousins Cordell and Chuck Stokes, the son of former Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes and U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes, respectively, told how their fathers fought for the environmental recovery of the Cuyahoga River after the 1969 fire.

And Oberlin College graduate Sadhu Johnston, city manager of Vancouver, Canada, returned to Cleveland, where he previously served as executive director of the Cleveland Green Building Coalition.

Vancouver may have a stellar image as a green city today, but that hasn’t always been the case, he said. His slides documented abusive treatment of the city’s Native inhabitants and early 20th-century industries that left behind massive brownfields.

In recent decades, however, Vancouver’s waters have recovered to the point where pods of orcas have been spotted in the city’s harbor.

He encouraged Clevelanders to continue fighting for cleaner waters as a way to encourage growth at a time when climate change is scorching the Sun Belt.

“With climate change, I guarantee you, people are going to want to come back to Cleveland,” he said. “They’re going to be coming from the South. You’re on a journey, and I hope you continue it.”