

CASE-IN-POINT 2017



PLANNING FOR A WINTER MINDSET

The Role of Urban Interventionism at Winnipeg's Forks International Historic Site.

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ABSTRACT

Winnipeg is often stereotyped for its cold, unbearable winters where locals spend the season confined indoors awaiting warmer weather. However, in recent years, efforts have been made to make the most of Winnipeg's winter identity. So much so, that Winnipeg has attracted the attention of major publications such as National Geographic and New York Times. This media showcases the city as a top tourist destination, and has economically benefited the city from worldwide visitors. The city's airport could even end this year with numbers that show more travellers this year than ever before¹. However, how much of this attention can be attributed to the city's Winter Programming? The Forks Historic National Site is a top destination when it comes to tourists visiting Winnipeg. From a record breaking skating trail, to internationally recognized warming huts, and a unique restaurant on ice, The Forks has become a worldwide attraction and winter hub of activity. This case-in-point examines the ways in which urban interventionism has been utilized to enhance winter programming at The Forks, making the colder season more enjoyable for locals and tourists. The research also identifies lessons from Winnipeg that can be applied to other cities, as well as the potential challenges in planning for social engagement in a Winter City⁶.

1.0 / INTRODUCTION

A Growth Mindset is the belief that particular traits can be developed through sustained effort over time. This mindset often leads to greater success than a fixed mindset, which is the belief that individual qualities are set for life. However, it is argued that those with a fixed mindset can move forward towards a growth mindset.



FIGURE 01 | Winter programming at the The Forks

Mindsets can be constructive or destructive for a city. In Winnipeg's case, how can we measure positive or negative mindset towards Winter?⁸ Having a positive mindset towards winter can directly correlate to an increased quality of life and sense of well-being. Urban interventionism responds to the social community as well as the built environment, and these spatial elements have the power to create new experiences⁹. For years, many northern cities did not think much about designing a city for the Winter months, or including urban interventionism in planning in order to get people outdoors all year long¹². However, this is something that Winnipeg has recently made a priority. This research explores the role of urban interventionism and planning in supporting a growth mindset towards winter cities³.



FIGURE 02 | "Ha(y)ven" 2011 Warming Hut by New York architects



FIGURE 03 | The Forks International Historic Site, located at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers

2.0 / BACKGROUND

Located at the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers, The Forks National Historic site has been a gathering site for people for over 6,000 years. During the 1870s, the Forks transformed into an urban industrial site, and with rapid industrial expansion of the 1900s, the area no longer served any access to the waterfront.

The Forks is now a 56-acre waterfront redevelopment project, which has been on going since the 1970s. In 1986, the development mandate for The Forks Renewal Corporation was approved by the federal and provincial governments, as well as the City of Winnipeg. The City's efforts included gearing the site towards creating public access to the scenic and historic Riverfront¹¹.

Today, this access to the waterfront has created a successful attraction for both locals and visitors. What has become even more apparent, it's success throughout Winnipeg's Winter season. By providing people with access to the river(s) all year round, the Forks has created an opportunity for urban interventionism that brings people outdoors in even the coldest months.

3.0 / PROGRAMMING

Winter programming is a major key element in the planning and design of the Forks Historic Site today. According to the Forks Annual Report (2016), the Winter months have consistently seen a jump in attendance, with door counts (used to track attendance) in recent years being similar to those seen in the months of July and August. Twenty years ago, the Forks would not see many visitors during the cold winter months. However, in February 2016, 324,000 people attended The Forks, close to the 341,000 that attended in June¹⁰. This jump in winter attendance is likely due to the success of recent urban interventions that inspire community engagement at the Forks.

There is currently a major focus on marketing The Forks as a winter destination, and making the Red River Mutual Trail the main attraction. The strategy behind this approach is that the skating trail would be considered the 'canvas from which everything else is painted on'. Upon its opening in the winter season, locals and visitors jump at the opportunity to skate (or walk) along the Frozen Red River, the world's longest naturally frozen skating trail¹⁰. From there, different layers of attractions are applied to engage the community.

Warming Huts on Ice

The Warming Huts international design competition of art and architecture began in 2009, when an architect decided that Winnipeggers would need warmth in the winter when they embarked on the skating trail at The Forks. He saw this as a unique opportunity to create a local architectural design competition that would soon become a global attraction. Today, designers from over the globe submit entries to be featured on Winnipeg's frozen river trail⁷. Big names that have designed entries over the years include Frank Gehry, for his 2012 igloo submission, as well as this year's entry, 'Stackhouse' designed by world-renowned sculpture Anish Kapoor². Visitors now come to the Forks with the intention of skating the trail to view the architecture, which changes every year based on the competition winners.

"This truly proves that something as simple and basic as a warming hut, created in sub-zero conditions, on shoe string budgets, can amount to internationally recognized architecture⁵."

- Paul Jordan, The Forks CEO.



FIGURE 04 | RAW: Almond Restaurant on Ice

RAW: Almond

The success of the warming huts inspired a second pop up on the river, RAW: Almond, a restaurant built on the ice that offers nightly dinner seating's from the January to February winter months. The restaurant was inspired by The Forks and its history as a meeting place, creating a way for the city to sit on the frozen waters comfortably, and to celebrate the Winter season⁷. This event has now become so popular that tickets typically sell out within a few hours.

Crockicurl

This year, two Winnipeg architects came up with an idea to design a life size game that combines two Canadian pastimes: crokinole and curling. This installation is the first of its kind, and the game is free for anyone to play. Its creativity and uniqueness has attracted visitors to the forks, who want to experience the game for themselves. The game is designed to engage people as much as possible by creating new sorts of social infrastructure where people can interact with each other. The installation has not only gained attention in Winnipeg but across the country, and could become a continuous winter pastime in Winnipeg as well as in other cities⁴.



FIGURE 05 | Crockicurl match at The Forks Plaza



FIGURE 06 | Skating on the River Trail

3.0 / WINTER SUCCESS

These winter events have attracted millions of people to the Forks, benefitting the site both socially and economically. Retailers at the Forks now make as much profit in the winter months as they do in the summer, and the City of Winnipeg is an increasingly enthusiastic supporter of The Forks, realizing its potential to market the city. Of particular notice in The Forks annual report (2016), is the recent jump in attendance of younger people as well as new Canadians who haven't yet experienced winter, out at the Forks enjoying the outdoor attractions. Newcomers get the opportunity to experience this type of climate for the first time, and are presented with winter programming that give them a positive first impression. These attractions have been published in many news articles and world-renowned magazines. But how much of this attention can be attributed to Winter programming? The following recent publications highlight not only the Forks in Winnipeg, but focus on it's winter events:

Vogue Magazine - In 2016, Vogue Magazine made a statement to clear the cliches of the prairies 'long, frigid winters' and focused on highlighting and praising local Winnipeg Gems.

National Geographic - In November 2015, National Geographic named Winnipeg one of the best places to visit on earth, not only highlighting summer events, but winter programming such as ice skating and tobogganing.

New York Times - In 2014, The New York Times featured Winnipeg, highlighting its river skating trail and architecturally distinct warming huts, which "doubles as a sculpture park".

Arch Daily - In 2015, Arch Daily's article highlighted the Red River Mutual trail and it's Warming Huts attracting world wide recognition, as well as RAW Almond, a highly acclaimed pop up restaurant.

4.0 / CHALLENGES

Although Winnipeg has managed attracted more visitors to the city through urban interventionism in the winter, it does come with it's own challenges.

One obvious challenge tied with winter programming is that these attractions are dependent on cold weather. Recently, unreliable weather has caused much uncertainty for winter activities. This year, the Red River Mutual Trail was forced to shut down early, as the ice was no longer safe to skate on. Anish Kapoor's Stackhouse sculpture, constructed entirely of ice, only lasted about a week post-completion before it began to melt due to warm weather. In 2016, RAW Almond: the restaurant 'on ice' was in fact no longer situated on ice, as it had to be relocated to the foot bridge due to issues with uncertain weather conditions.

Considering the uncertainty that comes with temperature fluctuations, this does not seem to stop visitors from coming out in the Winter. In fact, 2017 was the best year yet for winter attendance at The Forks, despite all weather related issues. However, it is important to consider that unpredictable weather could also become an increasingly prominent challenge in the future, due to the implications of climate change. Planning for these types of weather fluctuations is an important factor in maintaining the success of these winter attractions.

Another challenge with planning for Winter at The Forks involves how to monetize these activities so that they can be invested back into more Winter projects. Although free winter programming such as the skating trail, warming huts, and crockikurl have lead to an increase in visitors to The Forks, there will always the question of how to create value that can be used to further enhance the winter experience in the future⁴. Another issue then, is if these activities can be monetized, will they be equitable? RAW Almond is often critiqued as it is does not necessarily provide access for those who cannot afford it, generating the question of; who are winter cities being planned for?

Lastly, a challenge in planning for enhanced winter engagement is figuring out how winter success can be measured. Whether it be through number of tourists/ attendees, number of sales, businesses that pop-up, or number of warming huts installed, if the goal is to have people buy into winter, planning for a growth mindset towards winter requires measuring and an evaluation of critical indicators.

5.0 / LESSONS

Just recently, Lesson's from Winnipeg's Winters were shared at Edmonton's Urban Design Conference, titled "The Winter City Shakeup". The conference showcases how different cities have made winter more enjoyable. Highlights from Winnipeg included the Forks Warming Huts as well as the Red River Mutual Trail, and how this programming contributed to an increase in both social and economic benefit for the city.

A major lesson from Winnipeg's Forks Historic Site for other Winter Cities is that **winter activities aren't top-down ideas**. When they aren't sure what to do, most cities spend more time 'planning' than 'doing'. Winter programming at The Forks has focused on facilitating ideas that come directly from people in the city. The Warming Huts Art and Architecture competition, RAW: Almond and Crockicurl were all ideas that came from citizens, and have proven to be successful projects for Winnipeg³. Public engagement has long been a key process in the development of The Forks Historic site. In the early phases, its redevelopment has been supported by public consultation, which stimulated the desired activities that would be held at the gathering places throughout the site¹¹. Today, the Forks continue to plan through building off of local ideas and incorporating them into the planning for Winter Programming. By taking on the role of the facilitator, rather than the lead, the Forks is able to provide programming that is tactical, flexible and inspirational.



FIGURE 07 | "Open Boarder" Warming Hut 2017 Winner by Rotterdam's Altelier ARI

Another lesson for other winter cities is that **successful winter interventions don't need to be expensive**. The warming huts art and architecture building is a good example of what kind of impact can be made on a small budget. Most of the installations are simple and use minimal materials with essentially no technology, as they are required to be easy to install and remove on the river trail. As a result, a common critique of the Warming Huts is that they are not actually designed to be warm. However, people do not visit the river trail to sit inactively in warming huts. They visit them to learn and engage with the designs, and with each other. The ultimate goal here is to use maximum social engagement as a tool for warmth, another lesson for winter design in other cities. Creative design that brings people together through physical interaction, such as a game of Crockicurl, is what is intended to instill the feeling of warmth.

Lastly, a lesson for other cities from winter programming at the forks is to **maximize the use of existing resources**. The Forks Historic Site is iconic for being the place where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet, providing an opportunity to harness this history. The Forks utilizes the rivers as a platform to host different types of attractions that engage the people of the city and connect them with history. Attractions such as RAW Almond have become so popular because people want to be a part of this experience that is so unique to their city, and will go out of their way to attend. Some even use the frozen river trail to get to work, or other parts of the city that can be accessed via the river. It is clear through winter seasons at The Forks, that people have an appetite to reconnect with the river.



FIGURE 08 | "Stackhouse" by Anish Kapoor. Designed out of ice frozen from the river.

6.0 / CONCLUSION

Previously, it seemed as though Winnipeg viewed wintertime as something that they got through, on their way to a warmer and happier season. However, programming at The Forks has shown that planning for winter focused interventions can hold unique opportunities, both recreationally and economically⁸. More specifically, the ideas that come directly from citizens have proven to be the most successful in attracting more visitors during the winter season.

The City of Winnipeg has discovered the great potentials the winter season can offer in terms of social engagement for residents and visitors. Just recently, Economic Development Winnipeg and the City of Winnipeg announced that the city is officially a member of the World Winter Cities Association for Mayors, an international association of over 20 northern cities dedicated to promoting the beautiful season that is winter⁴. This could provide more opportunity for the city to instill a growth mindset towards winter, that the quality of life can be as good as it is in the summer seasons.

How can we measure positive or negative mindset towards Winter? The importance of the growth model is often overlooked in the discussion about winter city planning, yet changing dialogue is just as important as urban interventionism. When the warming huts were removed from the river, people enjoyed them at the market plaza instead. When the RAW Almond was relocated to the footbridge, the event still sold out within an hour. And when Anish Kapoor's intricate sculpture melted away in the sun, people enjoyed watching it disappear elegantly back into its natural state. Due to the community building role of these bottom-up winter initiatives, the city is beginning to embody the kind of mindset that celebrates the colder months of the year, even despite its challenges.

“There are a lot of people that love winter. Go down to The Forks in January or February on a weekend and you're going to see 100,000 people down there, skating on the river trails, getting hot chocolate, enjoying what winter has to offer,” - Dayna Spiring, president and CEO of Economic Development Winnipeg. (CBC News, 2017).

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