



A TASTE OF WINTER & A SIDE OF FROZEN RIVER

Winter Activation Strategy Lessons from the RAW:Almond Pop-Up Restaurant in Winnipeg, MB

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ABSTRACT

Cities all over the world are embracing what it means to be a Winter City (CBC News, 2017). Research has shown that implementing winter activation strategies benefit individuals' physical and mental wellbeing, while also contributing positively to a cities' social wellbeing.

In this case-in-point, we examine Winnipeg's RAW:Almond pop-up restaurant as a case study and best practice of a winter activation strategy. We assess RAW:Almond's success and challenges by using Andrew Macaulay's recommendations for playful winter design interventions (2019). While RAW:Almond has made significant contributions to placemaking and economic development at the Forks National Historic Site and Winnipeg as whole, there are still some challenges with the event that are reflective of pop-up experiences overall. We also identify unique factors that have contributed to RAW:Almond's success, and considerations for planners and municipalities that would like to adapt this outdoor pop-up event to their specific context.

1.0 / INTRODUCTION

From Anchorage in Alaska, to Rovaniemi in Finland, and Sapporo, Japan, cities all around the world are coming up with strategies for celebrating, embracing, and capitalizing on winter (CBC News, 2017). For example, Fort St. John, BC and Edmonton, AB (BCHC, 2020), created winter city urban design guidelines to keep people active year-round.

“Equitable access [...] lower[s] barriers and facilitate[s] residents spending more time outdoors and engaged in social interaction. These interactions, with nature and in social settings, have positive effects on mood, stress and trust levels; simultaneously encouraging positive mental and social wellness.”

— Jacob Cramer, Researcher
(BC Healthy Communities, 2020)

Winter presents many challenges to ones' wellbeing related to the shorter days and physical barriers. Research has shown the benefits of winter activation strategies on the physical, mental, and social well-being of people in cities (BCHC, 2020; Macaulay, 2019). When applied to public spaces, these benefits include increasing a sense of community, which is associated with

“improved wellbeing, increased feelings of safety and security, participation in community affairs, and civic responsibility” (as cited in Macaulay, 2019, p. 32). In his Master's practicum, Andrew Macaulay propose recommendations for playful winter design interventions to mitigate mental and physical barriers in winter by combining “playful principles” with “more traditional winter mitigation strategies” focused on pedestrian walkability and the built-form (2019, p. 42).

Winnipeg, MB is known for its frigid and snowy winters; locals affectionately call their home town “Winterpeg.” While Winnipeg does not have a formal set of winter city guidelines, there are plenty of opportunities for people to embrace winter that have been recognized internationally (Glusac, 2014). These opportunities vary in duration (from a couple weeks to permanent, year-round structures) and price (from free to pay-to-play), and include tobogganing ramps, Festival du Voyageur, The Forks and its Riverwalk, Warming Huts, and RAW:Almond.

This case-in-point examines Winnipeg's RAW:Almond pop-up dinners as a winter activation strategy case study. We provide background information on RAW:Almond and examine it as a playful winter activation strategy using Macaulay's framework (2019). Being located outdoors, as opposed to inside the Forks Marketplace or another building, RAW:Almond follows many of the recommendations that Macaulay identified (2019). However, there are still certain aspects that are not met by RAW:Almond on its own. We conclude this case-in-point by identifying considerations for planners and municipalities who are interested in facilitating similar outdoor winter pop-ups.



FIGURE 1 | Diners at a RAW:Almond pop-up dinner in Wasagaming, MB. (Source: RAW:Almond).

2.0 / BACKGROUND

The Origins & Evolution of RAW:Almond

RAW:Almond is an outdoor, pop-up, fine-dining experience held at the Forks National Historic Site, by the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Guests are typically seated at a long communal table while a roster of chefs serve up a five-course tasting menu. The event was co-founded by Mandel Hitzer, chef and owner of Deer + Almond, and Joe Kaltura, a designer and founding director RAW:Gallery. The two purposefully chose to hold the event during Winnipeg's coldest months to challenge perceptions of what can be done in winter (Martin, 2013).

The first RAW:Almond pop-up was held in 2013 over three weeks. 1,200 tickets were made available and cost \$85 per person (Martin, 2013). There were some uncertainties as to whether or not Winnipeggers would be willing to spend that amount of money to dine outside with their parkas on, however, tickets were almost sold out before the event officially opened.

Demand for tickets remains high as they typically sell out within just days, and even within hours, of being released (CBC News, 2015; Monkman, 2019). In 2019, the event took place from January 24 to February 17, and tickets ranged between \$59 for weekend brunch, \$85 for brunch and a drag show, and \$195 per person for dinner (ToDo Canada, 2019) — costs for dinner were more than double the initial seating costs during the event's first iteration. Tickets were available for purchase online and sold-out in less than two hours (Monkman, 2019).

While previous iterations primarily featured local chefs, the most recent iteration included a roster of more than 30 chefs from across Canada, the US, as well as Israel and Iceland (RAW:Almond, 2020). Some of the chefs had experience working in Michelin-starred restaurants and were visiting Winnipeg for the first time. Furthermore, the RAW:Almond team has expanded the experience to host pop-ups in Wasagaming, Gimli, Churchill, and even Tokyo, Japan (RAW:Almond, 2020), and has inspired other pop-up dining experiences in Winnipeg, like Table for 1200.

“The Forks has always been a meeting place. Over the centuries our city was built on these riverbanks. This is a way to sit on these frozen waters comfortably.”

— Mandel Hitzer, Co-founder
(Glusac, 2014)

RAW:Almond has been a consistent presence at the Forks for the last seven years since its first iteration in 2013 however, the team decided not to hold the event in 2020. Hitzer stated that this was more to do with not having enough time to prepare after hosting three other pop-ups last year, as opposed to uncertain river conditions (Frew, 2019). Together with other nearby design interventions such as the Warming Huts, RAW:Almond's successes have contributed the revitalization of the Forks National Historic Site by reframing what is possible. RAW:Almond has also fostered collaboration among Winnipeg's chefs and elevated the city's culinary scene. Though, without further research, it is difficult to separate the direct impact RAW:Almond has had from other potential determining factors.



FIGURE 2 | Diners sitting at a communal table during the first RAW:Almond Winnipeg event in 2013. The frozen river is still visible inside the tent. (Source: RAW:Almond).

3.0 / SUCCESSES

RAW:Almond meets many of Macaulay's recommendations for playful winter design (2019, p. 212), including: prioritizing placemaking, creating a micro-climate, enhancing the evening experience, concentrating playful design interventions, integrating food, building on existing successes, and connecting destinations. We discuss these aspects by touching on RAW:Almond's success as a place for gathering and play, and highlighting its placemaking and economic development contributions to the Forks and Winnipeg overall.



FIGURE 3 | Unique plating contributes to a fun and playful dining experience. (Source: RAW:Almond).

A Place for Gathering and Play

Patrons are greeted by an ample amount of opportunities for play the moment they arrive at the Forks: from the distinct character of the Forks Marketplace, to being able to rent a pair of skates and skate down the Riverwalk, to engaging with the warming huts, to finally entering RAW:Almond's structure. The concentration of other playful design interventions contributes to an overall winter experience unique to this area.

Upon entering the structure, diners are seated at a communal table and explore mystery menus prepared by local and global chefs. Communal style dining allows for more patrons to be seated in the space, while also being an effective way to foster social interactions when some sort of "social lubricant," like interesting food, is involved (Braun, 2014). Interactions extend beyond the event as diners share images they captured onto social media networks (Macaulay, 2019).

Furthermore, RAW:Almond's architectural focus ensures that even if folks are not able to attend the event, they are still able to engage with its physical structure as a public art display. The structure also provides a source of light, occasionally involving the use of colour. The evening experience of the Forks Riverwalk is thereby enhanced by a combination of pedestrian traffic generated by RAW:Almond and the structure as an art display.

"It was -30°C every day I was there and people still had huge smiles on their faces. Just the idea that people [were] embracing winter was awesome."

— Jason Barton-Browne, Calgary Chef (Lushington, 2014)

Placemaking & Economic Development

Placemaking can be used to enhance and capitalize on the unique features of a space to "attract new investment and strengthen existing businesses" (University of Delaware, n.d.). The place is marketed as an overall experience for visitors to consume and take part in — as an escape from the mundane.

Arguably, RAW:Almond has contributed to reframing what the Forks means and has allowed for the rebranding of its Marketplace as a high-quality dining experience. RAW:Almond as a pop-up event was able to test the waters for more "experiential dining" without the risk of making significant changes to their own restaurant (Aaltojärvi et al, 2017). The event has shown that Winnipeggers are willing to pay the price for a unique and memorable experience, while also redefining Winnipeg's global identity and what local food means (Aaltojärvi et al, 2017). Though, more research is needed to make a conclusive judgment on the direct impact RAW:Almond has had.



FIGURE 4 | A chef welcomes guests while people capture the experience on their cellphones. (Source: RAW:Almond).

4.0

CHALLENGES

According to Macaulay's framework (2019, p. 212), RAW:Almond does not meet the following recommendations for playful design interventions: employing a variety of playful design strategies and making use of materials unique to winter. While RAW:Almond does address the following recommendations, it does so in a limited way: increasing ease of access and accommodating a broad range of user groups. These challenges will be addressed in the following themes around physical accessibility, limitations of pop-ups, and environmental impacts and considerations.

The challenges to RAW:Almond as an individual winter activation strategy are offset by other attractions near it; RAW:Almond works as part of a broader network of design interventions at the Forks. What follows is not meant to be an overt critique of RAW:Almond. While some of what follows can be used to improve RAW:Almond as a winter activation strategy, the following challenges should instead be read as considerations for implementing similar events. This applies especially in different contexts that may not have the existing winter infrastructure and amenities found at the Forks.



FIGURE 5 | The RAW:Almond tent illuminated at night. (Source: RAW:Almond).

Physical Accessibility

RAW:Almond can be difficult for those with mobility issues to access without the assistance of others. While there is a ramp leading down to the site, the icy, frozen rivers can be a physical barrier for some people (Macaulay, 2019). The frozen rivers can be part of the experience for others, since people can skate to the venue instead of just walking.

Pop-Up Limitations

Limited supply and a "fear of missing out" are part of what make pop-up events successful, but can also create a "frenzy" of long lines (Mull, 2019). RAW:Almond controls this risk by online ticket pre-sales and its location away from residential uses.

While RAW:Almond is successful as a place for gathering and play, its reach is limited. This is partially due to the hefty cost of entry to participate in the event, the limited supply of tickets, and its short running-time. While most people accessing the Riverwalk are not able to participate in RAW:Almond as a dining experience, they can still experience it as a public art display.

RAW:Almond's reach can be improved by lowering the financial barriers of participation, and/or extending the duration of the event. However, both of these suggestions are difficult to implement. Reducing financial barriers may take away from the marketability of the event as an exclusive or special experience. Extending the event's duration is challenging since chefs involved have their own restaurants to attend to and manage.

"I see [RAW:Almond] as a hyper-experiential art piece that's very specific. The goal is to take [the participants] away from their usual routine, [to] experience a space that's never existed at any other place or time."

— Joe Kaltornyk, RAW:Almond Co-founder (Gillmor, 2018)

Environmental Impacts and Considerations

Climate change has posed some challenges for RAW:Almond, as water conditions have affected whether or not the event can be held on the frozen rivers (Frew, 2019). While the event has been moved to a historic rail bridge in the past, this detracts from patrons' experience and interaction with nature.

Since RAW:Almond is only around for three weeks, the temporary structure its held in is meant to be disassembled after the event. Earlier iterations were primarily constructed using metal. The team shifted to using wood construction starting in 2017 (RAW:Almond, 2020), while also eliminating the use of screws or nails so that the materials can be reused (Bird, 2018).

Increasingly, global chefs have been flown in as guests. RAW:Almond can help offset its environmental impacts by using the event as an opportunity to inspire broader change or stimulate dialogue on topics such as sustainability (Planetizen, 2019) or waste (Eckstein & Young, 2018).

5.0

LESSONS LEARNED

Several factors have contributed to the success of RAW:Almond and should be considered by other municipalities and organization that are looking to adapt such an event for their context. These factors are related to the location of RAW:Almond at the Forks, namely around planning regulation, and its proximity to an existing concentration of playful design interventions and other amenities. This case-in-point concludes by discussing some implications for planners and municipalities in facilitating pop-up restaurants and events similar to RAW:Almond.



FIGURE 6 | “Hygge House,” constructed in 2013, has become a staple warming hut at the Forks. (Source: Public City Architects).

Planning Regulation

The area RAW:Almond takes place on is zoned as a *Riverbank Sector*, with the main intention of providing public access to and enjoyment of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (City of Winnipeg, 2018). A variety of uses in this sector are permitted, conditional, or accessory uses to park uses, including restaurants. No residential uses are permitted in this area, which eliminates conflict between visitors and potential residents of the area. There may be some challenges with organizing a similar event in places without similar zoning or regulations.

Proximity to Amenities & Playful Design Interventions

RAW:Almond makes use of the existing infrastructure and amenities at The Forks. The site is close to public transportation routes and Main Street, Winnipeg’s main transportation corridor. There is also an ample amount of parking available for commuters in Winnipeg. For visitors of Winnipeg, there are options to stay both within the Forks, as well as within a twenty minute walk on Main Street and in the Exchange District.

There is a concentration of other playful design interventions where RAW:Almond is typically set up. The Forks Market, its Riverwalk, and the Warming Huts along it contribute to the success of RAW:Almond by providing multiple opportunities for play in the winter and for connecting with nature.

Implications for Planners

Planners can facilitate events like RAW:Almond by updating their municipal zoning by-law to include temporary structures for the purposes of pop-up events as a conditional or accessory use. These can be concentrated in areas where the City would like to focus revitalization and placemaking initiatives.

Guidelines can be created to help ensure the resulting pop-up is high-quality and contributes to the space in a positive way. The guidelines can apply to not only pop-up restaurants, but any sort of temporary installation aimed at activating a space by commercial activities or otherwise. However, the guidelines should not be too prescriptive, so as to not stifle the creativity of nor disincentivize the public from organizing such events.

Planners can play a type of organizing role in connecting local businesses to collaborate on an event. Incentives (e.g., grants, waiving fees for operating permits, or road closures) can be provided to encourage outdoor pop-up dinners and experiences in the winter. Government subsidies may also allow room for negotiating these events to be more inclusive, or for the municipality to have a say in where such an event occurs.



FIGURE 7 | Diners enjoying some drinks before entering the structure at RAW:Almond Wasagaming. (Source: RAW:Almond).

Final Thoughts

While the event is not without its challenges, RAW:Almond has made significant contributions to placemaking at the Forks and Winnipeg as a whole. When combined with other winter activation strategies, planners can facilitate outdoor pop-ups to help others embrace living in a Winter City. ♦

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Image Resources

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