



Figure 1. Winter activities at The Forks, meeting place of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers

## River City Accessed: Lessons Learned from Edmonton’s *WinterCity* Strategy Plan to Support Winnipeg’s ‘River City’

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### 1.0 Introduction

With three major waterways running through it, Winnipeg is viewed to be a ‘River City’, serving several neighbourhoods and communities within its watershed. The term ‘River City’, as described by Choi Ho, is representative of Winnipeg’s identity and Winnipegger’s historical and current relationships with the Red, Assiniboine, and Seine Rivers (Ho, 2020). The problem - however, is the lack of inclusive and accessible means of engaging with Winnipeg’s rivers. Guided by a theoretical framework set by Choi Ho’s capstone research, and influenced by lessons from Edmonton’s *WinterCity* Strategy Plan, this Case-In-Point aims to demonstrate a set of possible recommendations that could contribute to better wayfinding to Winnipeg’s rivers.

*“...a few participants do not believe a wayfinding system focused on the Winnipeg rivers is of value for the city if access and safety to the three rivers are not tackled above the issue of wayfinding.”*  
- Choi Ho, 2020

## 2.0 Background and Context

### 1. Winnipeg

In February of 2022, The Standing Policy Committee on Water and Waste, Riverbank Management and the Environment considered the recommendation set out by the Assiniboia Community Committee, brought forward by Councillor Janice Lukes, to establish a digital map that highlights Winnipeg's public riverbank lands, and the existing access points to physically reach these lands (City of Winnipeg, 2022). The motion came as a response following the increase in people's use of parks and open spaces as a result of the pandemic. While Winnipeg offers spectacular rivers and creeks, according to Councillor Lukes, the public has limited information that facilitates their access to these water bodies (Lukes, 2022).

In 2020, two years prior to the motion, Choi Ho published a city planning capstone that proposes an envisioned possibility of a '3-Rivers wayfinding system', which is a strategy that helps pedestrians appreciate and experience Winnipeg's three rivers. The goal of Ho's research was to explore different wayfinding strategies that could strengthen Winnipeg's 'River City' character and reflect Winnipeggers' perceptions of the rivers (see Figure 2).

To support her research, Ho (2020) applied four research methods, all approached with a pedestrian lens and with the intent of grasping Winnipeggers' experiences with the three rivers. Zooming in to the studied area in Ho's research, the Wolseley and West Broadway neighbourhoods, Ho was able to get a sense of how these neighbourhoods' users experience and access the Assiniboine River.

appreciate the river. This map sums up some of the outcomes established in Ho's research, which could be summarized by the need to create more inclusive and easier to find access points to Winnipeg's rivers.

Ho concluded her research by discussing future steps which could be considered when adopting wayfinding strategies to Winnipeg's three rivers. Ho (2020) recommends that these wayfinding strategies be developed as small-scale interventions that could be implemented in real-life controlled locations. Ho also recommends exploring and learning from other Canadian cities that have pursued wayfinding strategies to their waterways.

### 2. Edmonton



Figure 3. Edmonton's *Ice on Whyte* Festival

Edmonton has been one of the leading cities that have been successfully embracing and adapting to their winter seasons.

Following the recommendations set forth by Choi Ho, sections 3 and 4 of this report will explore Edmonton's *WinterCity* Strategy Plan, with a focus on its goals that strengthen accessibility to the city's rivers. By treating the mentioned Strategy Plan as a case study, and Ho's (2020) capstone outcomes as a theoretical framework, section 5 will deduce lessons which could influence accessibility to Winnipeg's rivers.



Figure 2. Perceptions of the three rivers

Referring to Figure 4, Ho identified ten river access points that fall within a ten-minute walking range in the Wolseley and West Broadway neighbourhoods. Even though not all these access points allow people to physically reach the Assiniboine River, they still offer the public opportunities to experience and



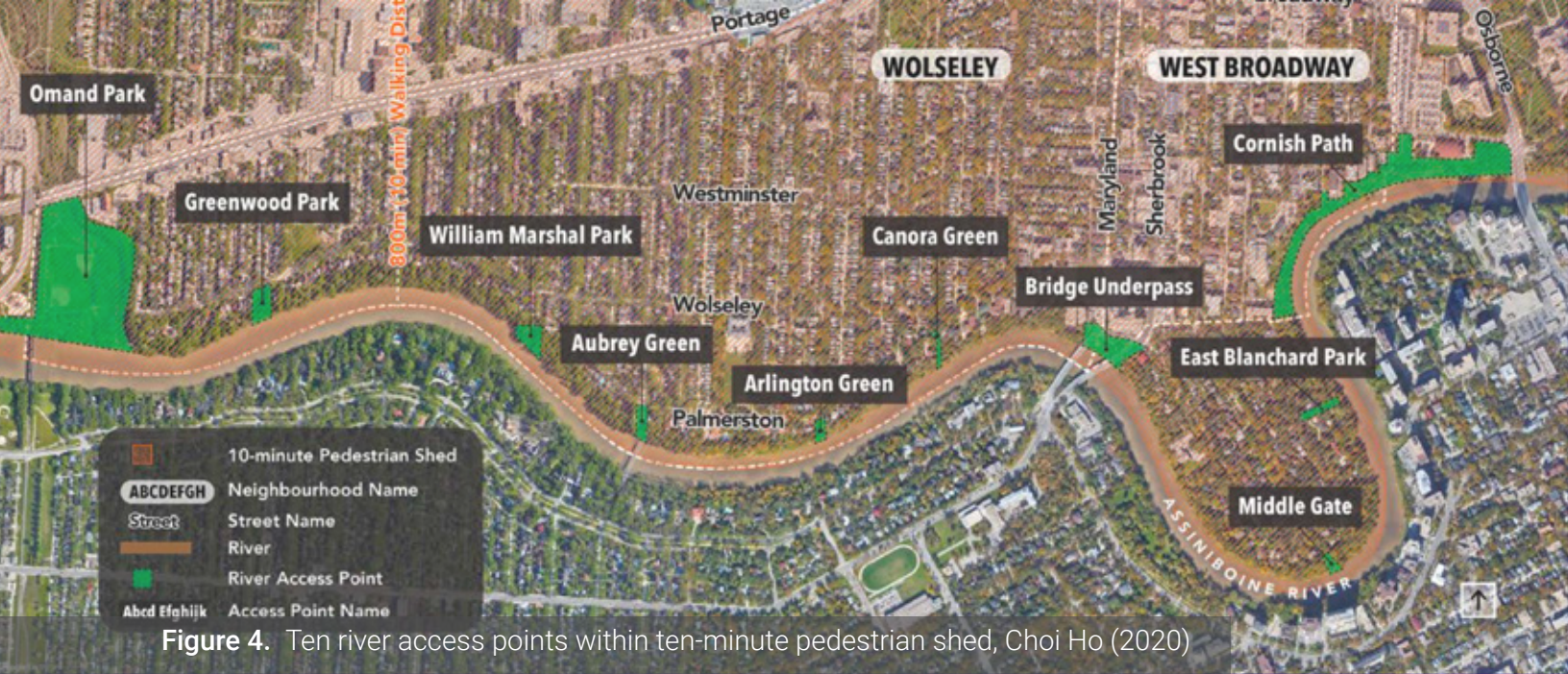


Figure 4. Ten river access points within ten-minute pedestrian shed, Choi Ho (2020)

### 3.0 Case Summary

In 2012, the City of Edmonton released a Strategy Plan (see Figure 5), *For the Love of Winter*, which aims to transform Edmonton into a 'World-Leading Winter City' (City of Edmonton, 2012). The Strategy lists ten goals that were identified through a collaborative engagement process between planners and professionals from the City and residents of Edmonton, with influence from other winter cities' successes. These ten goals, discussed below, aim to transform Edmonton into a more vibrant and inclusive city that embraces and celebrates its winter climate. To support the goals, the Strategy provides examples of actions that could be further implemented.

1. Provide more opportunities for outdoor activities
2. Improve winter transportation for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit users
3. Design communities for winter safety and comfort
4. Incorporate urban design elements for winter fun, activity, beauty, and interest
5. Increase capacity and sustainability of Edmonton's winter festivals
6. Develop a four-seasons patio culture
7. Become a world leader in innovative winter related business and industry
8. Celebrate the season and embrace daily living in a cold climate

9. Promote Edmonton's Great Northern Story locally, nationally, and internationally

10. Kickstart and lead implementation of Edmonton's *WinterCity Strategy*

The City of Edmonton recognizes that different people use outdoor spaces in different ways. The *WinterCity Strategy* (City of Edmonton, 2012) also recognizes Edmonton's rivers and river valleys to be an integral part of the winter public space network. Some of the recommendations set forth by the Strategy include, but are not limited to, piloting more innovative urban design projects that use ice and snow as a resource material, supporting the 'End to End' project, which envisions a cross-country ski trail running through the river valley, and encouraging businesses to spill-out on to patio spaces, designed to endure winter weather.

During winter seasons, the City is presented with added responsibilities, particularly to adjust the existing transportation systems to better accommodate people's winter needs, as well as to propose new and accessible ways of connecting people to outdoor spaces, such as the riverbanks, which in turn could provide opportunities for a variety of festivals and activities. The City of Edmonton, through the Strategy, realizes the economic benefits that these activities could provide to local businesses and communities.



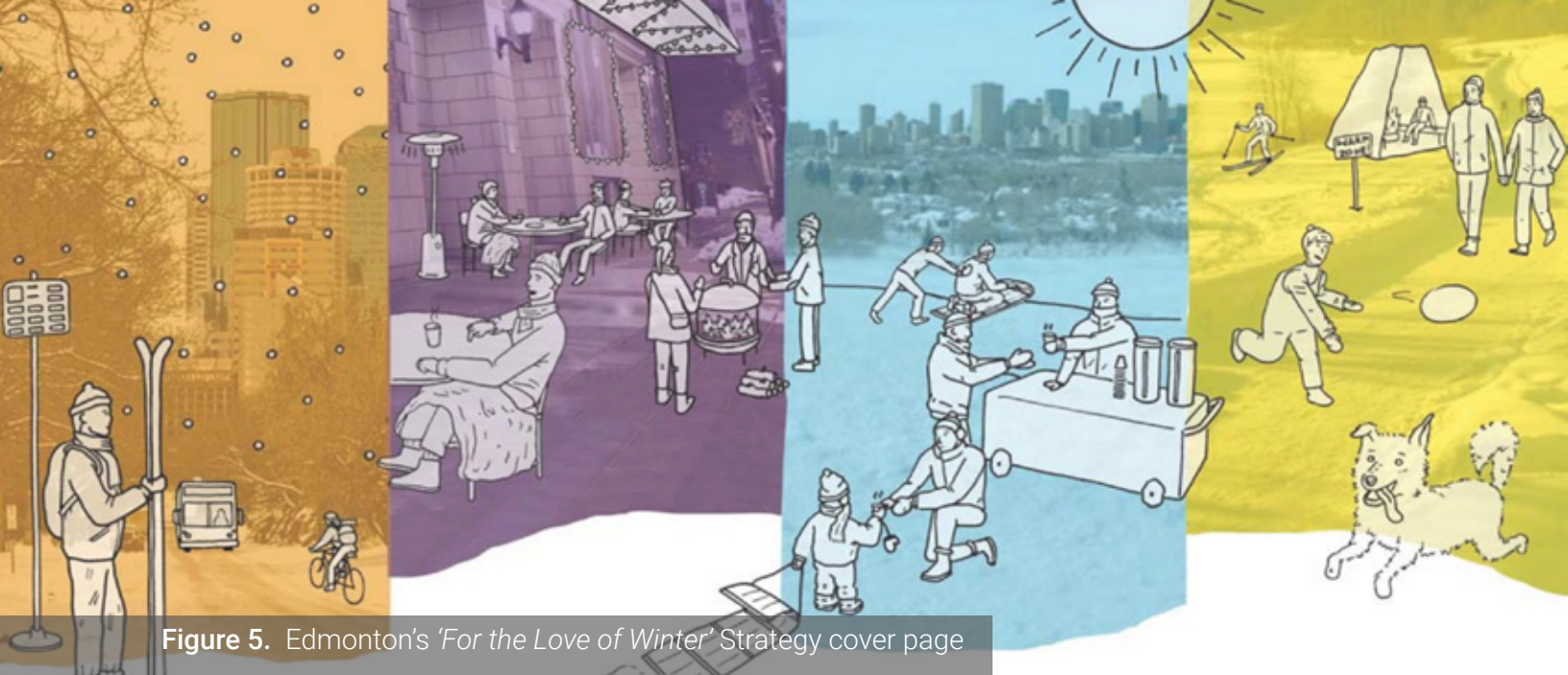


Figure 5. Edmonton's 'For the Love of Winter' Strategy cover page

## 4.0 Outcomes

To support the *WinterCity Strategy*, the City of Edmonton also released an Implementation Plan to accompany and help guide the Strategy (City of Edmonton, 2013). The Plan includes 64 actions that respond to the ten goals originally established by the 'For the Love of Winter' Strategy. All of the action plans, as well as the ten goals, fall under four pillars identified within the Strategy. These pillars offer an envisioned approach to *winter life*, *winter design*, *winter economy*, and *winter story* (City of Edmonton, 2012).

The *winter life* approach aims to create more inclusive and accessible connections to the winter outdoors, including rivers and river valleys. It also aims to establish a more efficient and enjoyable activation of these outdoor spaces. By targeting a more diverse range of users, and accompanying their different needs, this approach could improve the quality of transportation, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists, and provide easier access to their rivers.

The *winter design* approach aims to induce collaborative results between various professionals that promote for more creative uses of outdoor spaces during winter seasons. By incorporating various urban design elements, this approach has the potential of increasing accessibility to Edmonton's rivers. This could be done through different wayfinding

and placemaking strategies, and could result in safer and more inclusive outdoor spaces, celebrated all-year round.

The *winter economy* approach highlights the benefits of outdoor winter activities, such as winter festivals along the riverbanks, ice sculpture displays, and outdoor patios. This approach recognizes the many assets offered by the winter season and its amenities, and aims to reward the communities and businesses that are contributing to the successes of these assets.

The *winter story* approach intends to incorporate a winter 'lens' onto future projects and developments within the city. The City of Edmonton aspires to celebrate its local heritage and history in order to create opportunities for the public to better appreciate their winter landscapes, rivers and river valleys, and meaningfully engage with the different aspects that shape up these landscapes.

In the Discussion chapter of the 'River City Revealed' capstone, Ho (2020) identifies seven matters which could potentially influence the success of a 3-Rivers wayfinding system in Winnipeg. The next section, presented as lessons learned from Edmonton for Winnipeg, lists these matters and examines the overlap between them and the goals set forth by Edmonton's *WinterCity Strategy*.

## 5.0 Lessons Learned

### 1. Promote Local Character and Identity

Incorporating local characteristics, such as building material and native vegetation, resonates with people (Ho, 2020), and could positively affect the possibilities of a 3-River wayfinding system. One of the recommendations from Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy is to create physical and digital spaces for people to share pictures, stories, and memories relating to their experiences with winter seasons (City of Edmonton, 2012). In Winnipeg, this could translate to a series of interactive maps that highlight Winnipeg's 'River City'.

### 2. Celebrate History and Culture

Referring to Figure 2, history and culture were among the common themes identified as attributes to Winnipeg's three rivers by the participants of the postcard questionnaire (Ho, 2020). The City of Edmonton, in its Strategy, stresses the importance of history and culture specifically in their *winter story* approach, where they recommend a collaborative process that is reflective of their history. Based on Ho's research, incorporating an area's history and culture could be an added success to any river wayfinding strategies. In Winnipeg, the 3-Rivers wayfinding system ought to be heavily influenced by the Indigenous and First Nations presence, and their historic relationship with Winnipeg's rivers.



Figure 6. Edmonton's *Illuminations* Festival

### 3. Encourage Creativity and Innovation

The 3-Rivers wayfinding system envisioned in Ho's research could become more impactful if creative and innovative approaches are to

be adopted. Supported by its *Winter Design Guidelines*, the City of Edmonton encourages the inclusion of a diverse range of design elements to guide people's wayfinding and experiences around the outdoors. In Winnipeg, wayfinding to the rivers could be influenced by Edmonton's use of inclusive design materials, colours, and spaces.



Figure 7. Edmonton's *Silver Skate* Festival

### 4. Attend to Pedestrians and Walkability

With reference to the map in Figure 4, Ho (2020) illustrated a ten-minute pedestrian shed, which is representative of the area that residents of the two studied neighbourhoods circulate to reach the Assiniboine River access points. The success of a 3-Rivers wayfinding system would be dependent on its inclusivity of various users, regardless of their mobility skills. In Edmonton's *winter life* approach, collaboration with local businesses and groups to ensure that roads are kept accessible is encouraged. If this were to translate on to Winnipeg, accessibility ought to be extended to reach the three rivers.

### 5. Adapt to Weather and Seasons

Winter qualities were some of the main attributes that the questionnaire participants in Ho's research associated with Winnipeg's rivers (Ho, 2020). While the City of Edmonton's case study Strategy is already approached with a winter 'lens', some of its recommendations could be adapted to various climates. The



Strategy is ensuring that new projects create public spaces and wayfinding elements that are inviting all-year round. This guideline could be translated into a more accessible 3-Rivers wayfinding system in Winnipeg, regardless of the weather.

## 6. Improve Accessibility and Safety

Both the City of Edmonton's case study Strategy and Ho's capstone research establish safety as a main concern to wayfinding around the city's outdoors, particularly rivers. Easier access to rivers that is inclusive to a diverse range of users, and is considerate of their safety and wellbeing, is an integral matter to the 3-Rivers wayfinding system.

## 7. Enhance Connectivity and Consistency

Rivers are waterways, which means that they are continuous and not particular to one location. Ho (2020) recommends that a 3-Rivers wayfinding system should be consistent in its implementation across Winnipeg's rivers, and should be connected to the larger scope of vision. The all-year round approach that the City of Edmonton sets forth could further influence connectivity and consistency in the 3-Rivers wayfinding system.

Following recent conversations with Choi, an additional eighth matter was identified:

## 6.0 Conclusion

Celebrating its winter character, Winnipeg has been adopting several strategies to activate its riverbanks. The newly established Nestewaya River Trail along the Assiniboine River, the many placemaking strategies located within the Forks River intersection like the warming huts and light installations, and the Winter Wonderland in Wolseley are just some examples of these strategies. While the successes of these strategies could easily be identified, the problem remains with the lack of inclusive accessibility that allows 'everyone' to enjoy these events along Winnipeg's rivers. When considering a wayfinding strategy for these rivers, such as the 3-Rivers wayfinding system envisioned by

## 8. Demonstrate Interest and Investment

Promoting Winnipeg as a 'River City' could signify economical gains to the City of Winnipeg. The winter economy approach, adopted by the City of Edmonton's Strategy, capitalizes on various winter events and festivals, and ensures that the groups and communities involved in their success are financially rewarded. Edmonton's collaborative approach could translate on to the 3-Rivers wayfinding system and benefit different local, Indigenous communities and groups, while at the same time advancing the public's awareness and knowledge of Winnipeg's rivers.



Figure 8. Assiniboine River access point

Choi Ho, the lessons learned from Edmonton's *WinterCity Strategy* could be a guiding influence that helps bring these envisioned possibilities to fruition.

Choi Ho's 'River City Revealed' capstone can be found at [https://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/architecture/media/CP2020\\_CSreport\\_Ho.pdf](https://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/architecture/media/CP2020_CSreport_Ho.pdf)

and the City of Edmonton's '*For the Love of Winter*' Strategy at <https://www.edmonton.ca/sites/default/files/public-files/documents/PDF/COE-WinterCity-Love-Winter-Summary-Report.pdf>

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### Figure List

- Figure 1. Sleem, B. (2022). *Winter activities at The Forks, meeting place of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers* [Photograph].
- Figure 2. Ho, C. (2020). *Perceptions of the three rivers from the postcard questionnaire responses* [Word cloud]. NVivo. [https://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/architecture/media/CP2020\\_CSreport\\_Ho.pdf](https://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/architecture/media/CP2020_CSreport_Ho.pdf)
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