

Celebrating Winter in the Public Realm:

A case study of four winter design interventions in Canadian cities

Reasons for Research

Winter is seen as the season of introversion. Therefore, it is important to have spaces and interventions that encourage and support people's outdoor movements, activities, and comfort during colder months. That is why, winter design interventions are used in public and semi-public spaces to fix the placelessness of urban design. This research explores four physical projects that address the challenges of winter through creative solutions and identifies lessons learned from the precedents.

Winter Design Intervention:

Any project that adds meaning and function to an under-utilized space in an urban area and increases an individual's time spent outdoors during the winter months.

Research Question

1. What winter design interventions have cities implemented in downtown areas?
2. Have policies, regulations, pilot projects, or initiatives, supported the creation of these winter design interventions?
3. What are some lessons learned from how cities have carried out winter design interventions?

Research Methods

Eligibility Criteria

- The intervention must encourage outdoor activity.
- The intervention must be a physical project or infrastructure.
- The intervention explored must be temporary in design.
- The intervention must be in urban cores.

Media Scan

- Publications and news articles on urban planning, landscape architecture, architecture, and urban design were scanned for potential projects.

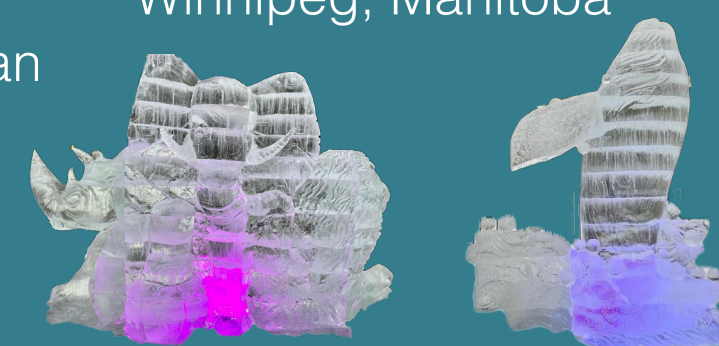
Semi-Structured Interviews

- 6 semi-structured interviews gathered first-hand knowledge from individuals who had experience implementing winter design interventions.
- The findings were grouped into 4 themes: the project's objectives; key actors; challenges faced; and policies, initiatives, and other supports.

Summary of Findings



Eh Frame
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



Winter Wanderland
Winnipeg, Manitoba



Chinook-ery
Calgary, Alberta



The Bentway
Toronto, Ontario

Project's Objectives

	Eh Frame	Winter Wanderland	Chinook-ery	The Bentway
Activating Space for Winter Use	To create a free area for socialization	To activate the public spaces along Graham Ave. and increase foot traffic downtown	To activate Barb Scott Park and make the park more comfortable during the winter	To activate the space under the Gardiner Expressway
Shifting the Mindset of Winter	To start a conversation about winter design and infrastructure in Saskatoon	To shift the negative perceptions of Downtown	-	To continue the conversation about public realm spaces
Response to COVID-19	To provide an outdoor relief space during the COVID-19 pandemic	-	-	-

Key Actors

	Eh Frame	Winter Wanderland	Chinook-ery	The Bentway
Key Actors	Private Sector Community Organization Government Agency	Private Sector Non-Profit Organization	Private Sector Government Agency	Non-Profit Organization Other

Challenges

	Eh Frame	Winter Wanderland	Chinook-ery	The Bentway
Limited Resources	The small grant from the City of Saskatoon was not enough to support the full project	The project budget was limited because the community organization solely funded it	The short timeline to develop, design, and create the installation	Multiple crews were required during the installation and staff turnover meant site-specific knowledge was lost
Unpredictable Weather Conditions	The snow on the site melted quickly because of warmer temperatures	Fluctuating temperatures control the ice sculpture's lifespan	-	Extreme temperatures can make installation and maintenance a hazard
Varying Interests/Needs	The low-income neighbourhood vs. cafes and boutiques	The vulnerable population, downtown businesses, private property owners in the area all have different needs	-	-
Appropriate Design	Preventing vandalism, theft, and regular cleaning of the space	Preventing vandalism	Designing an installation that reduces harm	-

Policies, Initiatives, and Other Supports

	Eh Frame	Winter Wanderland	Chinook-ery	The Bentway
Plans, Policies, and Strategies	☑	✗	☑	✗
Financial Support	☑	✗	☑	☑
Direct Communication with the Local Government	☑	☑	☑	✗
Precedent	✗	☑	☑	✗
Other	☑	✗	☑	☑

Lessons Learned

Relationships are important:

Established and new relationships play an important role in the creation of winter design interventions. In fact, projects with multiple organizations collaborating increased capacity and project outcomes.

Continuously test ideas and interventions:

Winter design interventions should use an iterative approach that does not last only one season. Additionally, collecting data and measuring success can improve the project year after year.

Consider the local community's needs:

The literature and research identify that the Winter Cities Movement tends to focus on making winters more liveable for certain groups by incorporating more aesthetic and art-based projects. Context-specific winter design interventions should also be considered.

Local government support is crucial:

A good working relationship with the municipality goes a long way. Having a point of contact, limiting 'red tape', and grant/funding options were all mentioned during the interview as supports for the precedents.

Conclusion

There are many ways to plan for winter. This research identified that partnerships with different sectors are vital and common in precedents across Canada. Most notably, the working relationship with the local government and their level of involvement were also found to be important to streamline the planning processes and overcome capacity barriers. By creating interventions cities that are more responsive to the needs of all the residents and more adaptable to winter conditions, we can create a better future for all.