

Winter Culture and Celebration

Winter tends to be a season that dwellers of cold regions try vehemently to resist. The arrival of the first snow and intense cold is usually greeted with despair and a 'rejection mentality' is triggered among the population-at-large (children being an exception to the rule). Recent studies undertaken in 2003 by Prof. M. Enai at Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan) indicate that most public school children are fascinated by winter and enjoy the opportunities provided by ice and snow – unlike the Japanese adult population residing in Hokkaido. Often, public behaviour reflects this disdain for winter by appearing to ignore its presence. If we are to respect, appreciate, and celebrate winter, we shall have to improve livability in cities during this lengthy and sometimes harsh season in a way that can help us enjoy its beneficial qualities.

One of the various ways in which winter has been appreciated and celebrated has been through the winter carnival. Many of these carnivals – especially throughout Europe – have been rooted in pagan-based rituals dating back to the Middle Ages. Although, today, they assume a more commercial and touristic flavour, they have usually had distinct cultural derivations and meaning. Examples abound, for instance, in Switzerland, where Carnival period extends from Epiphany in early January until Ash Wednesday, the commencement of Lent – a time of fasting in Catholic regions. One famous festivity is the "Roitschäggätä" held in the Lötschental Valley of the Canton Valais in the villages of Ferden, Kippel, Wiler and Blatten on the Thursday preceding Shrove Tuesday. Here, people wearing masks with huge

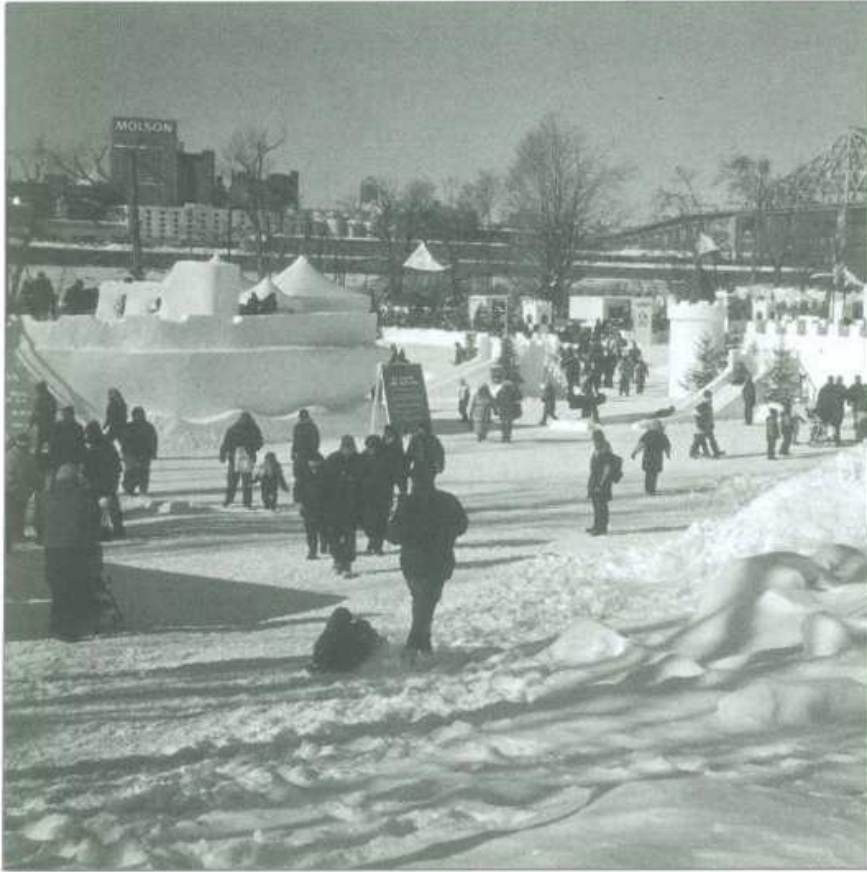
protruding teeth and long hair, burlap sacks and furs – often carrying cowbells – do their best to frighten everyone in the surrounding villages. This is a tradition based on ancient beliefs in evil spirits living in chimneys.

In the spring, Zurich celebrates the “Sechseläuten” dating from the 14th century guilds. This normally occurs on the third Monday in April with members of all the ancient guilds marching, in historical costumes, throughout the city. At 6:00 p.m. sharp, they congregate at a public square near the lake and burn the “Böögg”, a snowman made of wadding, symbolic of winter. Its burning marks the end of winter and the arrival of a long-awaited spring.

A unique element of winter celebration has been the “ice palace”. Although these have been constructed and recorded as early as the 18th century, they seemed to have reached their peak of development during the 1880s and 1890s most notably in Montreal, Québec City, and Ottawa (in Canada) and in St. Paul, Minnesota and Leadville, Colorado in the United States.

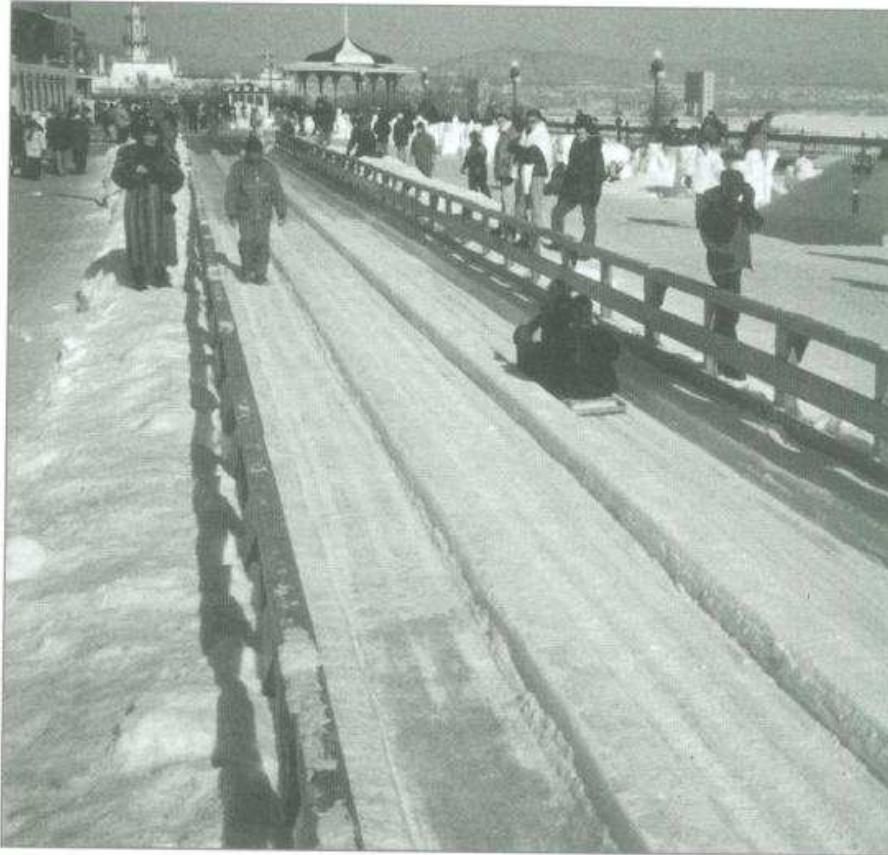
In a contemporary setting, it could be said that the City of Sapporo on the island of Hokkaido, Japan, organized the first modern Snow Festival in 1950. It is renowned for its many full-scale, exquisite snow buildings and sculptures. Since Sapporo receives such an abundance of snow, it has used this resource of nature most creatively and celebrates what is arguably the most impressive Snow Festival anywhere. Furthermore, in housing projects, covered walkways (known as ‘gangi’) are normally built – to reduce snow accumulation where pedestrian movement occurs. Heating beneath roads and sidewalks is also a common practice and very effective.

Five years later, in 1955, the Québec City Winter Carnival was established as an annual event even though it first started in 1894, with a jovial snowman – Bonhomme – symbolizing the festivity. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a host of other Canadian cities such as Sault Ste. Marie, Gatineau (Hull), Ottawa, Winnipeg, and St. Boniface followed suit, as did American cities in extreme winter conditions, such as Anchorage, Alaska, and Nordic towns



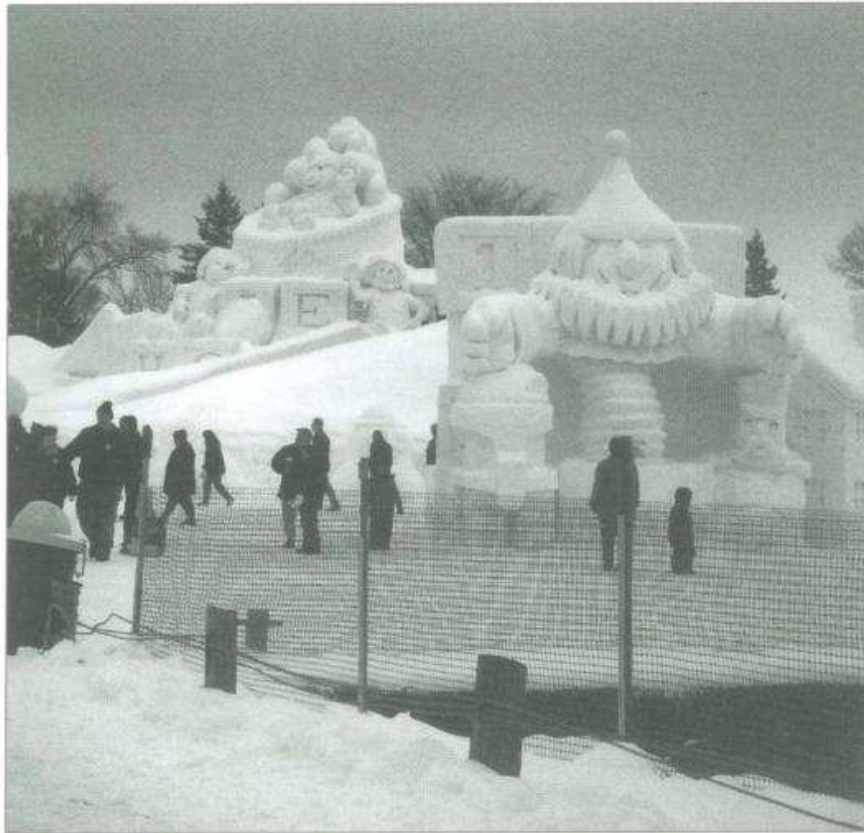
Above: Fete des Neiges – enjoying winter on Ile Ste. Hélène,
Montréal, Québec.

(Photo: Norman Pressman)



Above: The Glissade (Toboggan Run), Québec City, where winter is celebrated annually.

[Photo: Norman Pressman]



Above: Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario – Bon Soo Winter Carnival 2003
– Ice Sculptures.
(Photo: Norman Pressman)

like Nuuk, Tromsø, Kiruna, and Oulu located respectively in Greenland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The world-famous *Iditarod* race from Anchorage to Nome, in Alaska, attracts mushers from a multitude of nations, who relentlessly drive their dog sleds through some of the harshest wilderness imaginable. To Alaskans, this mid-winter challenge is as exciting as world-series baseball or a world-soccer cup event.

The economic impact of winter carnivals and festivals on cities and their regions can be significant. It has been estimated that the Sapporo Snow Festival generates up to US\$50 million, and that visitors to the Anchorage Fur Rendez-vous spend about US\$20 million. The Bal de Neige/Winterlude held in the Capital Region of Gatineau/Ottawa has been going strong for over 20 years and nets significant tourist dollars for the regional economy. Perhaps, even more importantly, these festivals have helped to induce positive images and attitudes toward winter, especially in harsh areas where remaining indoors, for lengthy periods, is a common practice.

The ephemeral aspect of urban spaces in winter can possess magic, inspiring joy and giving way to diverse festivities; open-air figure skating shows, ice sculpting demonstrations, torchlight parades, carnivalesque games, snow festivals (Sapporo Snow Festival; Harbin Festival; Moscow ice Castles; Winterlude/Bal de neige: North America's largest winter celebration with about 1 million participants per year and annual revenues of US\$40 million; Montreal Fête des neiges; Québec City Carnival). In Québec, the town of Saint-Félicien has shown innovation in recently re-designing its open-air zoological park to allow visitors the observation of animals in their winter habitats. This being such a success, the city decided to extend the awareness (or education) of winter by sponsoring thematic decoration of streets throughout the season, involving the entire population and turning (banal) winter into a seasonal celebration.

For some, winter being white, cold and lengthy is not necessarily synonymous with a cumbersome, drab or uninteresting existence. Like dance, music and poetry, winter has its own

vocabulary and structural rules that have to be emphasized in order to value and appreciate, in one's mind, the positive aspects of seasonal beauty.

For urban design professionals, winter is a time of both inspiration and conception, in the sense that designs will have to offer safe, welcoming, comfortable and surprising places for life to thrive in the city. Wherever humans are in contact with nature – security, practicality, integration with built and natural environments, harmonious appearance, and aesthetics, must be concerns of landscape architects and designers in cold countries. Many winter activities occur within planned frameworks: ski trails, dog sleigh riding, ice fishing, snowmobile driving, photography hiking, wildlife trekking . . . all well serviced with rest-refuges, catering halts, directional signs and orientational lighting.

Winter and its complementary seasons play a significant role in the lives of northern dwellers. Indeed, inspiration springing from contact with winter elements edifies the aesthetics to which communities refer and define themselves. From these influences, innovations emerge such as festivities, artistic events and various social expressions. If we can understand, respect and appreciate the beauty inherent in seasonal variation, then we might be capable of celebrating this pivotal season of the north.