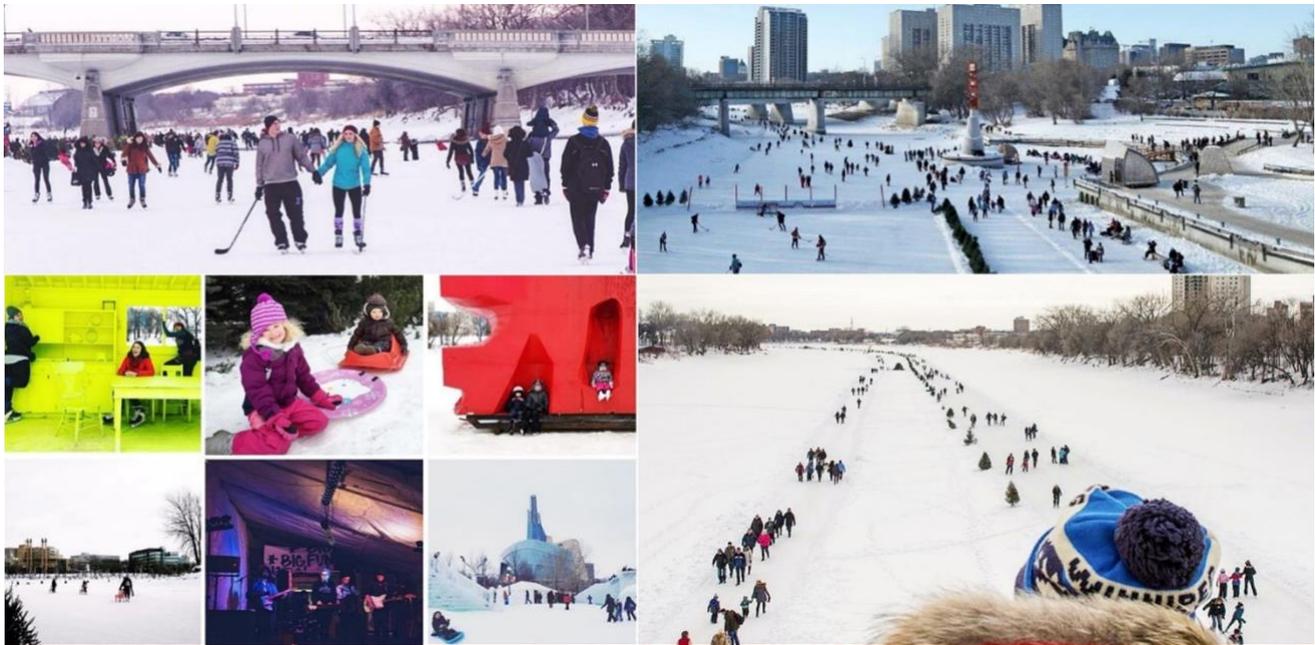




NATURVATION
cities - nature - innovation



SNAPSHOT - THE SEASONALITY OF WINNIPEG'S RIVERFRONT



KEY POINTS

- Frozen rivers demonstrate innovative urban public space use, spearheaded by a publicly owned development corporation
- In 2018, a river skating trail was over 10 km long, used by at least 700,000 people as a space for outdoor recreation, winter sports, cultural and community events
- The river trail became an empty canvas, allowing social innovators, communities, artists and entrepreneurs to flourish
- The river trails 'shrink' the city, functioning as a transport route with access points

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NATure-based URban innovATION is a 4-year project involving 14 institutions across Europe in the fields of urban development, geography, innovation studies and economics. We are creating a step-change in how we understand and use nature-based solutions for sustainable urbanisation.

This project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 730243



Sustainability challenges and opportunities

Winnipeg is a “river city”, yet public waterfront access and development have been limited by increasingly frequent and severe floods, erosion, loss of vegetation and land ownership patterns. However, over the last decade, interest in the city’s riverfronts has grown significantly. *“The city really turned its back on its rivers. We only saw the river as a problem. It was time to turn around.”¹*

Winnipeg is the capital of the Province of Manitoba, and the seventh largest city in Canada with an urban population of 705,000. The city is on a flat and very broad floodplain near the geographic centre of North America, halfway between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. Known as the “Gateway to the West”, Winnipeg is a transportation, logistics and financial centre, as well as a thriving cultural, sports, and education hub of the Prairie provinces. Winnipeg is both the coldest provincial capital – the winter is 4-5 months long and the average low temperature for January is -18°C – and the second sunniest city in Canada. Winnipeg also faces various pressing challenges, such as changing flood regimes, loss of the city’s elm and ash canopy to diseases, maintenance costs of over 4,000 hectares of parkland, eutrophication of Lake Winnipeg, car-centred development and suburban sprawl, as well as poor living conditions and food insecurity of Canada’s largest urban First Nation (Indigenous) population.

Solution story and key actors

Significant public and private investments were made along the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers, known as ‘The Forks’. Winter use of the riverfront has changed dramatically in recent years, as the frozen river was transformed into one of the world’s most vibrant and innovative public spaces in winter.

The Forks was a meeting place for First Nations for over 6,000 years, then became an industrial and logistics hub in the heart of Winnipeg. After decline and decades of abandonment in the 20th century, the revitalization of the brownfield area was led by a development corporation, The Forks North Portage Partnership (FNPP), in the 1990s. With its river walkway, multi-use green spaces, historical sites, museums, sport and cultural centres, The Forks is now regarded as the city’s most vibrant zone, and one of the top public spaces in North America, welcoming more than four million visitors every year.² To attract people and sustain commercial activities during the long winter period, FNPP began to maintain ice trails for skating and outdoor activities on the frozen river in the mid-2000s. In 2007, the ‘Red River Mutual Trail’ became the world’s longest natural skating trail, receiving a Guinness Record, as well as attracting local and international attention. In 2018, the trail was over 10 km long, used by at least 700,000 people³ for outdoor recreation (hockey, curling, skating, cross-country skiing, fat-tyre biking), community events (community-designed warming huts, cooking in fire pits), cultural events (performances, art competitions, sculptures) and festivals that offer historical and cultural connection to the rivers (Festival du Voyageur). The ice trails also provide exposure to rich urban wildlife during the winter season, and connect otherwise distant neighbourhoods, thus function as a transportation and commuting route with a variety of access points, reducing the need for motorized traffic: **“...thanks to the river trail, it’s easier to connect and access some spaces.”⁴**



Governance strategies

Although The Forks North Portage Partnership (FNPP) is publicly owned, it acts like a private development corporation of The Forks, and enjoys substantial independence.

When the river freezes it is no longer considered a navigable waterway, so neither the federal, provincial nor municipal government claims jurisdiction over it. When FNPP started to develop trails to promote winter activities, there was no opposition from the authorities, and The Forks gradually took responsibility for its management. FNPP is owned by three levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal), and governed by a Board of Directors with three members from each level and a chairperson.⁵ Conceptual and strategic decisions about The Forks require approval of the Board, and the Board appoints the CEO of FNPP. Board members from the municipal government are accountable to the Mayor, who is accountable to the City Council. The government stopped providing funding after the redevelopment of The Forks, and since FNPP is operationally successful, as well as financially sustainable, it is managed internally. As the CEO concluded: ***“The city has given us a nod that they’re just gonna stay out of it as long as we manage it well. [...] People recognized the Forks as the place to fulfil their creative desires, because they don’t get hammered with permits... so they come to us with these really interesting ideas.”***⁶



Business models

The Forks is more vibrant and has more visitors during the winter than during any other season, allowing social innovators, artists and businesses to flourish.

After a few successful years of redevelopment, the government began to scale back monetary support and currently provides only emergency services. The Forks contributes over €82 million a year to the local economy. They need to ***“run independently as a business, and they need to be self-sufficient”***⁷, while reinvesting all profit in development and programming. The Forks estimates that river trail maintenance (regular snow removal and ice maintenance) and warming huts cost around €175,000 per year. Revenue from extra parking and sales during the winter far exceeds these costs, making maintenance profitable, and allowing for further experimentation: ***“Change is constant. It’s how you self-learn, how you learn from what works and what doesn’t. We’re willing to take some risks because it often pays off, and if it doesn’t, we kill it real quick, adapt, and we try again...”***⁸

The business model of The Forks is to provide space and support for entrepreneurs and social innovators. Raw Almond, for example, is a financially self-sustaining temporary restaurant built entirely on the ice trail every year. It was initiated and financed by a local art gallery owner and a restaurant owner to attract people. As one of them emphasized: ***“It gained momentum like lighting a match. A shining beacon, utilizing the river at the hardest time of the year when people don’t want to gather. [...] Food is a common language to bring people to a public space. You have this space that you can create and curate for people to meet, share, talk, and get a different perspective while dining on a living river.”***⁹



Citizen engagement

The Red River Mutual Trail became an empty canvas with over 700,000 visitors in a winter, allowing civic, entrepreneurial and community-driven initiatives to emerge.

“The city is divided by our rivers in the summer. But in the winter there is no division anymore, you can just walk across the river. In winter you have new neighbors.”¹⁰

Several events and recreational activities on the frozen river are community-driven, because the ice forms a bridge between otherwise distant neighbourhoods. There are also several ways through which the community shapes the trail, from building snow sculptures to donating several hundred former Christmas trees to temporarily line the trail. The Forks also began to organize an annual architectural competition for the local and international community to design functional and appealing warming huts to be placed on the ice trail for the public. The competition has hundreds of entries each year from all over the world. ***“I truly believe that 10-15 years ago Winnipeg hated winter. No one embraced winter. I think they [The Forks] singlehandedly changed our perception. It changed the mind-set here in every way. [...] Mostly what they [The Forks] do now is they just help facilitate the realization of community ideas.”***¹¹



Innovation pathways

The Forks was essential to catalyse the innovative use of abandoned urban space and riverfronts in an entrepreneurial way, especially during the winter, thus demonstrating that even harsh winter climate can be a success factor in a city.

Due to the success of The Forks, Winnipeg started to turn its attention to the rest of the riverfront where other opportunities exist. The City Council’s 20-year vision ‘Go...to the Waterfront’ expands the entrepreneurial ‘Forks model’ to develop Winnipeg’s riverside areas for year round use. The Red River Mutual Trail has a strong temporal and seasonal character proving the importance of public space to urban communities all year ***“... it’s not just a nature-based solution in the six months when it’s green, it’s also a nature-based solution when it’s white.”***¹² Taking advantage of seasonality is considered an innovative future direction for Winnipeg: ***“If you can build something usable for both summer and the winter, that will surely make the city liveable on the long term. The Forks is a good example for that.”***¹³ With its innovative approach, The Forks opened up the conversation of what more could be done with the rivers, and greatly contributed to the change in quality of life during the long Winnipeg winters. As a result, the city has also been listed as one of Canada’s best winter cities. ***“The winter use is absolutely unique. There is lots of energy and momentum in Winnipeg now!”***¹⁴

^{1,7,11} Principal, Scatliff+Miller+Murray Inc., Winnipeg, 2018; ^{2,5} <https://www.theforks.com/>; ^{3,6,8} Executive Director, FNPP, Winnipeg, 2018; ⁴ Member of Board of Directors, Manitoba Cycling Association, Winnipeg, 2018; ⁹ Co-owner, Raw Almond, Winnipeg, 2018; ¹⁰ Expert, Corbett Architecture, Winnipeg, 2018; ¹² Senior Fellow, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, 2018; ¹³ Architect, Number TEN Architecture, Winnipeg, 2018; ¹⁴ Executive Director, United Way of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, 2018; Photo credit: The Forks Instagram (@theforkswinnipeg)