

# FAILURE IN THE FROSTBELT THE CITY IN WINTER

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**Canada**



Figure 1. The Blizzard.

## The Urban Winter

The Urban Winter sits firmly within the frozen grasp of existing bodies of literature, namely Winter Cities and Visual Studies, and is a subject of contested, enchanted and contextually specific cultural signification. Moving beyond the boundaries of Winter Cities and Visual Studies, the Urban Winter cuts a path through the fallen snow and identifies key organizing elements of contemporary winter. The Urban Winter teases out the character of contemporary urban life under the influence of snow and melts away the layers of collective practice to reveal the subtleties of everyday life during a season replete with connotations of failure and death.

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In an age without culture that is, our own – forces have become fragmented and the power of an individual man is used up in overcoming opposing forces and frictional resistances; it does not show in the distance he travels but in the heat he generates in overcoming friction.

Safran, 1985: 26

I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields,  
That it kisses them so gently?  
And then it covers them up so snug,  
You know, with a white quilt;  
And perhaps it says,  
“Go to sleep darlings, till summer comes again.”

Lewis Carrol, 1865

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INTRODUCTION: GENERATING HEAT

1

“As the weather changes we do not see different things, but we do see the same things differently... the weather is not what we have a perception of; it is rather what we perceive in. For if weather is an experience of light, then to see in the light is to see in the weather. It is not so much an object as a medium of perception” (Ingold 2005: 102). A bus stop shelter is only a bus stop shelter in spring, summer and fall, but that same shelter in winter is a place where bodies wait with intent, huddled together in an effort to escape the winter wind. Winter shifts meaning from shelter to social diorama. This is of course an idealization; the now common experience is one chilled by cold winds and the icy stare of even colder shoulders. At one time a bus stop shelter could host warmth, artificial or otherwise, but no longer. Today these same spaces host contempt and contention, individuality has widened the

distance between individuals. The result of a culture rigidly atomized by individual autonomy has meant that even winter's icy chill has not prompted a spirit of collective gathering amongst citizens. Instead, the contemporary urban winter is marked as a repeatedly failed attempt at obliterating a fear of death. The chapters that follow depict an unbridled, poetico-sociological rendering of four common winter forms or objects; the themes of failure and death have become underpaintings upon which all else has taken shape.

The winter wind motivates this endeavor. Winter obscures and confuses my location here in northwestern Ontario. Thunder Bay suffers the fierce breath and cruelty of lake-speed gusts. In Thunder Bay folks consider bracing for winter a necessary step to ensure survival, and they close their camps. Boards are nailed to window and door frames. Summer is carefully put away and protected. Through winter I expel layered subjectivity, layers snugly woven with Canadian urban malaise. This project studies culture through artifacts and forms: a process of experientially broadening my own 'understanding' of a specific culture of people and places (Rossman & Rallis 2003: 94).

Urban winter is the culture that I have been drawn into. Winter Cities falls within the discourse of the urban winter and from this the following discussions will depart. The usual definition of Winter Cities includes those metropolises on and north of the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel, though some exceptions are made (Gappert 1987: 35).

In terms of a structure of analysis I have employed a loose ethnographic model upon which to build an interpretive understanding of the urban winter. This self-directed analysis and process of data collection has been largely informed by a

reflexive practice of visual studies. A visual project was my original intent balanced with written text of equal proportion. However I have chosen to use only a few images, most of which are borrowed and carry with them a plethora of signs that reach past the scope of this project. Images fuel interpretation, a method consonant with philosophical, poetic and theoretic writing.

Phenomenologically, visual references justify my own experiences and self-reflexive actions as a legitimate method under the current regime of post-positivistic social science. Visualizing brings forth ‘background,’ especially in built environments, and as a ‘medium of perception’ in the form of seasons and weather. Social science shifts the common focus “away from the professional and commodified arts, into the realm of amateur, the ordinary and the marginal” (Becker 2002: 342). Thunder Bay is my main visual tableau. I actively proclaim the amateur, the ordinary and the marginality of the place. These are vital to the signification of urban winter in everyday life. A critical motif can be found in the majority of images. In a few instances images may be borrowed from the commodified arts because they provide key examples and openly invite subjective readings.

## SNOW FALL

In order to provide a sense of direction for the coming chapters, please consider the following clips as chapter prefaces. The text that follows this section is meant as a layered pre-reading and contextualization for these four distinct elements.

1) Shoveling snow reveals a particularly comical approach to a simple cultural tool. Death themes surround the shovel, a death of painting, and less abstractly, an

allusion to injury. Warnings abound in the media literature belching out new rounds of winter wisdom. Sadistic headlines filled with ‘death by snow shovel’ sell a lot more papers than mundane stories about sound winter preparedness.

2) The convolutions of Victoriaville Mall in Thunder Bay’s south side generates narratives that expand exponentially and in unexpected directions. At first glance, the Mall represents modernist tendencies as winter design employs a vain attempt to counter the winter wind. However, the mall now stands as a marker of economic failure. In addition, the narrative of the mall contains a discussion of marginalized populations, the elderly and First Nations people.

3) In order to explore the physical demands of winter, I consider the ways in which the body is adorned, as protection, and for decoration, against the elements of winter. Winter clothing provides a unique challenge. A bundled balance must be struck in order to reach a comfortable stasis.

4) The winter festival thrives on collective enthusiasm and radiates with luminous potential. Bound by group determination, the winter festival seamlessly blends ice, cold, darkness and snow. Historically, winter provides the perfect occasion to foster the festival, yet today’s urban winter festivals have managed to pass into a mediocre malaise, or commercialism, cartoon mascots, and ethnic stereotypes.

## VISUAL STUDIES

Visual culture is the core element of this project. Visual studies offer the ‘sighted’ viewer an illustrative fragment (Phillips 1982: 36). Images as synthetic

simulations, miniatures in a world of miniatures; artifacts that, with the passage of time, “come unstuck. [They] drift away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading” (Sontag 1973: 71). The *kind of reading* is an integral point of contention, and the kind I have employed within these frames focuses on urban winter. Urban winter as I have come to understand is not a static mark, rather it appears as fluid and is liable to come unstuck. I refer to the perusal of old photo albums as visual artifacts that are tangible, yet as signifiers their meanings are always slipping, especially when those represented are unknown. However, I recognize that those same snapshots could equally be said to anchor meaning for the subjects who view them. It is the slippage that interests me. Working with images and visual memories and interconnecting them with literary narratives and text is my method of choice in terms of illustrating and challenging some existing winter thematics.

## VISUAL...

From the outset, photography and sociology share approximately the same birth date: “if you count sociology’s birth as the publication of Comte’s work which gave it its name and photography’s birth as a date in 1839 when Daguerre made public his method for fixing an image on a metal plate” (Becker 1974: 3). Throughout the years following 1839 both sociology and photography played flirtatiously with one another as photography was quickly co-opted in part as a scientific method. For *hard science* the speed and accuracy of photography and its ability to capture a likeness of authenticity quickly replaced other available forms of visual reproduction such as painting and drawing. The camera became a

commonplace tool for certain institutions such as the police for crime scene investigations. Detectives photographed the undisturbed 'scene' to gather clues and evidence in a way that preserved the scene for later scrutiny.

Still, "there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings" (Sontag 1973: 7). From an art-historical perspective Sontag refers to the singularity of photographic images; like a painter the photographer's individuality shines through the process and outcome.

But as the authenticity of radio was sufficiently destroyed by Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast of the farce 'War of the Worlds,' so too was the perceived objective truth of photography overturned. In a rudimentary manner, the camera's power is its sensitivity to light that differs from sight itself. Thus when the time came for sociology and the positivist school to claim their right to a place among the hierarchy of the fields of science, an ephemeral and easily faked method such as photography was abandoned.

Throughout the 1930's, with a significant note being the opening of the Museum of Modern Art, "photography received the museum's nodding as one branch of modernist practice" (Phillips 1982: 32); photography became relegated and bracketed as a bourgeois practice. For it was within those hallowed halls that "the educational role of art museums had been sharply distinguished from that of history or science museums. Rather than provide useful information or technical instruction, the art museum was increasingly directed toward the service of 'joy not knowledge'" (Ibid 1982: 32). Within this hegemonically structured discourse of photography as

reified by American art institutions “the works of art photographers Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams... [virtually comprised] the exploitation of photography’s denotative function – in crisply rendered pristine prints whose predominant quality is their faithful rendering of reality” (Cousineau-Levine 2003: 33). These icons are known within the literature as canonical, and thus ‘important’ artists.

As photography and sociology proceeded along split paths, sociology claiming a more scientific method and photography a more artistic direction, the two amorphous bodies have continued in a conceptually similar direction, that of social exploration. It would not be until the second half of the last century that photography began once again to make its presence known within sociology. For Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the photographic image began to rematerialize into a justifiable and worthy area of study for critical theorists and philosophers. In the 1970’s, Marshall McLuhan, John Berger and Roland Barthes made substantial contributions to the theorizing of visual culture. Due to the efforts of cultural theorists, an image based sociology slowly emerged.

Beyond photography’s own history, it is also necessary to pose philosophical questions regarding visual practices. Concerning knowing and understanding, Sontag writes: “[photography] implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no” (1973: 23). Sontag continues by saying that no one ever understands anything from a photograph, but photographs do help to fill in a mental

image, even if it is just a fraction. Springing from Sontag's valorization of suspicion, of course it could be said that for each image focused on an object, the 'no' comes from the ability to deny an image's singularity by way of imagining any number of interpretive angles. For example, from one angle it appears to be a hospital, from another it is a military target. In simple terms, I intend to use visual practices and images as forms with fluid meanings throughout this thesis.

My purpose in exploring the texts of visual studies is to gain insight into the methodology of looking-practices within a sociological frame.

## WINTER CITIES

A wide range of perspectives punctuates winter cities discourse. Norman Pressman served as founding president of the Livable Winter Cities Association (LWCA). Together with a band of architects and planners, Pressman contributed greatly to the establishment of winter cities as a body of work steeped in critical design and northern perspectives. The existing literature refers often to the utopian notion of the genius loci. The genius loci: "[a] guiding principal, to grasp the essence of place in order to understand the underlying spiritual qualities" (Pressman 1995: xiii).

Winter cities literature reached its height in the mid 1980's. This was a period marked by: a rapidly expanding consumer industry, advanced research in regards to technical outerwear, as well as a time when urban, downtown, shopping was often usurped by suburban malls. Winter cities fervor was at its height. Conferences and committees, as well the founding of abovementioned Livable Winter Cities



Association by John C. Royal (Gappert 1987: 37) took place. The LWCA focused its energies on generating ideas to improve the quality of life for city dwellers facing the winter in the northern hemisphere. A lack of daylight hours buffering the December 21 solstice, define some winter cities. In other cases, winter cities signal “snow-bound cities with an average of 40 to over 120 snow-cover days, which approximates to the 40° latitude in the United States with a dip southward to include Taos, New Mexico, and the southern tip of the Rockies... [other cities] experience little snow, but have substantial winter wetness such as Reykjavik, Iceland and Oslo, Norway” (Gappert 1987: 35); all are respectively referred to as winter cities due to the seasonal variations that result in cities facing a portion of the year under cold temperatures.

In 1983, founding LWCA president Norman Pressman wrote a manifesto-like call to action: “to gain deeper and more meaningful insights into winter and its associated activity systems which are manifested in both urban and non-urban settings... The Association will seek to develop strategies and devices whereby cities and communities can be designed and managed in more lively and enjoyable ways thereby promoting a positive frost belt view and mentality” (Pressman 1983, 2003: 6). Pressman, the largest contributor of winter cities texts, has dealt with an expansive range of topics from historical implications to future planning. All the while Pressman has ensured that his winter frames have been maintained, meaning that he has managed to contribute a life’s work to the study and expansion of the city in winter: he added not a new notch but a new belt: neither sun, nor rust, but frost.

In 1988, while a professor of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg, Pressman published a document titled “Images of the North: Cultural Interpretations

of Winter.” With a title like that how could I let it slip away, for it seemed to be rooted in the same specific areas of interest that I have come to outline in my own project. In the text, he breaks down the amorphous body of winter into five specific areas.

Pressman’s model of winter analysis follows as such: winter terminology, cultural dimensions of winter, perceptions of winter, Inuit visions of winter, and climate and place. Definitions of winter abound, first snow, first frost, winter solstice, these terms all signal winter. I especially like Pressman’s simple and visually fractional description of *where* winter cities are located: he states that winter cities reside in the top quarter of the globe or the northern half of the northern hemisphere. As a cultural signifier, winter and Canada seem to be routinely matched; where surviving, enduring and adapting to winter compose the cultural fabric.

These five areas maintain a common thread throughout the majority of winter cities literature with a few exceptions. In Sacks, Palumbo and Ross’s article titled “The Cold City,” the trio argue that their inability to annex surrounding land leads to failure; these are old cities like New York and Boston. In comparison, places like Houston and Phoenix have been able to expand and thus attract a viable population. However compelling their arguments appear, they seem to miss the mark in their generalisability, especially when considering places such as Thunder Bay or Edmonton, which have by virtue of location managed to *fail* as far as winter cities philosophy goes. Edmonton and Thunder Bay have prospered as supply stations for the surrounding hinterlands, occasionally hinting at urban development though all too often suffocated by a bulging girth of suburbanization.

Canadian architects continue to look toward Mediterranean designs, often ignoring the elements of winter. Often design is simply borrowed instead of locally brewed in a way sensitive to the significance of place. The results of this borrowed architectural method are often catastrophic and leave buildings and people in opposition to each other. Instead of a harmonious blend of space, place and people the disconnect results in insurmountable tensions and incongruence. An out-of-place building often shelters or is adopted by a population of folks who embody low-mobility. A castaway ship for a castaway people. My exploration of the Victoriaville Mall in Thunder Bay will address issues of built environments, ill-fit design and emerging populations.

## WINTER

As an element of specificity attuned to Thunder Bay and its Finnish community, the Sauna has become recognizable as “essentially a place not only in which one is cleansed but also in which one may seek warmth in a very cold climate” (Pressman 1988: 8). The sauna is defined by what it is not (cold); it is a refuge for exiles and not a wintry place in its own right. It is not closed away but opens its doors to the snow and ice, to the experiences of the human ‘polar bears’ who explore the difference between the heat and the ice.

Even the word winter is enough to conjure and stir the mind and release memories of an expansive sort. Expressions of winter vary and stretch widely; memories and emotions revive experiences played out between two poles. Under the heading *perceptions of winter* a layered mosaic of phrases, images and meanings can

be found. From cold, darkness, blizzards, gloom, death, frost, fire, long nights, grace, cloud, joy, footprints, moon, snow, shovel, hibernate, boots, the list goes on. Often the tendency for negativity is close at hand in metaphor:

“Winter is a disease” – Alfred Musset

“Every mile is two in winter” – Outlandish proverbs by George Herbert

“Summer in Minnesota is the two weeks when ice skating is lousy” –

Anonymous

“One month before fall, winter comes” – George Dugas (St. Boniface), 1890

Pressman’s reaction is that even though winter has many beautiful aspects, it has been under constant attack as something to be *feared*.

To call upon the artists, in a speech entitled “Canadian Art” in 1925 A.Y. Jackson of Group of Seven fame said:

In Summer it was green, raw greens all in a tangle; in autumn it flamed with red and gold; in winter it was wrapped in a blanket of dazzling snow; and in springtime it roared with running waters and surged with new life, and our artists were advised to go to Europe and paint *smelly canals* (Cited in Pressman 1988: 6).

Seasonal aesthetic diversity with a tinge of nationalistic fervor fought an uphill battle against the Eurocentrism of the Canadian artistic establishment.

## NORMAN PRESSMAN

Pressman’s discussion of the Inuit vision of winter follows a somewhat routine formula that touches upon the twenty-nine or so words that are used for ice and twenty or so words that are used to describe snow. Regarding the twenty-nine or so words for snow, let us recall Franz Boas’s 1911 work “Handbook of North

American Indians” (Pullman 1991: 159-171). Boas dismantles the myth and claims scholarly sloppiness in the form of the perpetuation of uncritical myths. In addition and of significance beyond linguistic measure is the fact that the Inuit of the Arctic regions of the globe have come to embody an understanding of the north in a way that is utterly beyond our comprehension. The Inuit are regarded as a slim minority of ‘others’ living in a way that contradicts the tenets of modernity. Pressman follows suit with a proposed Northern awareness, advocating cross-cultural comparisons with the objective of developing a healthier balance between technology, nature and lifestyle. In doing so he has managed to propagate his ideas around the globe as well as make some glaring blunders.

One of my criticisms of Pressman is that he has highlighted the Victoriaville Centre in Thunder Bay as a great success. In his 1988 book *Cities Designed for Winter* he refers to the covered sidewalks, the interior mall and the 800-space parking garage as markers of intuitive planning and successful winter design. In this instance Pressman is plainly wrong, though he is correct in saying that these places were built with winter in mind; but they are markers of distinction that are widely known as economic and social failures. By ‘winterizing’ the place, or in the specific case of Victoriaville, by doming over an entire intersection, design failed by crushing the vernacular character of the place. Victoriaville has long been recognized as an economic failure, however it has gradually become a site of gathering and community for a growing population of elderly and First Nations people. Thus, instead of the kind of success Pressman attributes to Victoriaville, it has come to embody failure.

There is, however, cause for celebration in the resignification of Victoriaville, even if this is a little desperate.

The final area of analysis for Pressman is climate and place. Pressman maps out some of the marked variations that reflect cultural difference and winter aptitude or attitude. A level of identification with the natural landscape through the means of built environments has been achieved in some places and not in others. For instance, the wood shakes of the slightly sloped roofs in Chamonix have been designed to maximize the winter efficiency by way of a thick layer of insulating snow instead of steep slippery roofs that would cause the snow to slide off. In addition to design functionality other variations are imbedded within customary cultural practices and a general humanism. For instance, in Norway “one is permitted to ‘break into’ cottages in the mountains or forests to obtain shelter, warmth and food under conditions of extreme duress. This habit obliges one to notify the police as soon as possible afterwards and to pay for the breakage and food” (Pressman 1988: 18).

Pressman reminds us that “it is primordially important to emphasize ‘natural’ and ‘naturally-derived’ solutions to problems of winter living” (Ibid: 20). I’m a romantic at heart and tend to agree with most of Pressman’s suggestions and interpretations. Still, I do find his arguments ill advised at times. Fortunately, I have been able to find a sufficient depth and breadth of literature regarding winter cities that expands beyond the work of one author. Others tend to fall into one of two camps: either winter is a force to be heartily stood against, or design must shelter bodies for survival.

Since it is no longer the 1980's and the optimism of winter cities design is largely deflated, others have taken on suggesting new approaches to city revitalization. Although revitalization is not specifically a winter trope, it is a central tenet of Winter Cities theory suggesting that design that is responsive to climate shall bring community together.

In terms of more recent economically based city-center building the belief that the technocrati, or for pop theorists like Richard Florida, the creative upper class, will save downtowns has been a growing movement. The belief is that if 'creative' folks could be successfully lured into living and operating in the downtown cores of cities, then economic development would be sure to follow and thus save urban culture (2002). I should mention that city mayors across North America have hailed Florida's ideas as definitive formulas to success. Even Edmonton's current Mayor Stephen Mendel returned from a Christmas vacation heralding "The Rise of the Creative Class" by Florida an eye-opening concept, one that he would be eager to start acting upon. It may be evident that Florida is another white coat, watching his theories play out as dramas. As a writer, instead of a mayor, he is free to evade any direct negative recompense.

In opposition to any of the 'one style fits all sentiments' I offer the words of Andrew Pickering. He writes, "around machines, we act like machines," in that the repetitive "performativity" of a machine demands its users to participate in a 'standardized sequence of gestures and manipulations'" (1995: 16). From this we may theorize that as with machine repetition, suburban expansion, and city nucleus

reinvention, no *single* model, especially one that hinges upon a sameness of available resources can succeed.

## METHOD

To paraphrase Rossman and Rallis (2003), authors of a widely used guide to qualitative research methods, this project seeks to understand a culture of a people in a place: using multiple and flexible techniques, by investigating how people's beliefs and values guide their actions and their understandings, and how the actions and beliefs of one group affect the beliefs and actions of another, often marginalized group. I am living in a winter city and experience has revealed that neglect fuses winter to city. Winter is a factor that the urban built environment either attempts to ignore or gain mastery over. Of paramount importance are the points of great tension where discontent has fueled controversy, such as the closed commercial passage built on the site of a major intersection, that is, Victoriaville Mall.

In terms of methodology, I observe “contextual dependency, working understandings, subjective experience, comparative logic ... interpretive analysis of data, and data in the form of words” (Rossman & Rallis 2003: 39). In terms of perspective, my goal is to situate myself as the researcher of specific circumstances. The circumstance at hand is winter within the built environment. The project's nuts and bolts include the use of published materials and photography. I intend to use the techniques of conscious looking and self-reflexivity to arrive at some conclusions that may lead to a critical revisitation or a check-up on those dynamic elements of winter cities rhetoric. I use photography as an analytical device that will allow for clear and



precise comparison and contrast with the ideals, actions and resignifications of many ‘great ideas’ of the past. I want to tease out the failures of the past and formulate a new discourse that focuses on the resignification of those built environments turned away from their original ends. I work in the fissures of failure and of fear (of winter). Failure in the frostbelt.

## ANALYTIC

Analysis need not be a finite end, rather, it is an ongoing process. As an ongoing process I have chosen to operationalize a holistic method that functions like a series of distinct narratives while speaking directly of winter cities. In doing so the objective here is to create an interconnected tissue of discursive trends and cultural objects. By using winter and winter cities as a semi-static foil I am afforded a starting place.

The brass tacks are that this project comprises three operational elements: “participant observation data (captured in extensive field notes), interview data (informal), and material artifacts” (Rossman & Rallis 2003: 276). My intent is to use participant observation and field notes, such as in the case of the ‘Victoriaville’ chapter to analyze material artifacts. The focus of the ‘bundled body’ and ‘shoveling snow’ chapters is on the cultural meaning making of habitual practices. This project has been a process requiring immersion into a culture, though the job of uncovering and recognizing themes has required detailed attention to an array of analytical tools and texts (snow clearing equipment, policy documents, popular press, secondary

literatures, etc.). Hopefully, I have not used these tools to keep winter at bay but instead readied myself for winter's grip.

My goal was to begin with a simple tool or artifact, and work to erect cultural scaffolding that supports the original object. I begin with a snow shovel and build around it associative materials. For instance Dadaist Marcel Duchamp resignified the shovel as a ready-made object, on the shaft of the shovel he wrote "in advance of a broken arm." In another manner we may recognize the gendered division of labour through the works of children's fiction and stories of fathers and their sons engaging in the act of shoveling snow together. In another sense we may recognize an informal economy, one that arises in direct relation to the dynamic of snow and shovels. Neighborhood kids make their way door to door presenting themselves as small businesses: "shovel your walk for a few dollars." More savvy and business oriented youth may parlay their good relations with neighbors into a slightly larger scale operation employing a few friends. Further along this course we come to the pick-up truck, winterized with a shovel. The truck and shovel become one unit otherwise known as a seasonal commercial endeavor. The investigation of these associative relations around the most basic of winter tools opens the object to the social and economic relations that forms its associational field of meaning.

## AN ICY BREATH

The stinging bite of the winter wind, the thunderous fury of a blizzard, the layers of constriction felt as we move through the streets like walking coat racks, this is the urban winter. Winter embodies the festival, the joy and emotionality of

gatherings large and small whether riding sleds or denying the cold while huddled in a sauna. The urban signification of winter necessitates and employs the frosted lens, a way of looking, a method grounded in the practices of visual studies. In short there are two distinct literatures. The first discourse is visual studies; this body of work represents the major counterpoint or benchmark against which all else is measured. As a point of specificity in the spectral continuum of art, photography is my method of choice. This exercise represents a textual account of my desire and closeness with the visual through written text.

In departure from photography as a specific focus, I turned to the literature of the winter cities, and largely the work of Norman Pressman. Pressman illustrated a range of interconnected themes that focus specifically on the interactions between people and the environments that they traverse. Pressman was a major contributor to the success of the winter cities discourse, simultaneously attacking the problem of winter from a socio-architectural background in which the built environment should be pleasing, functional and attuned to the natural environment. As well Pressman marketed his brand of ideas and propositions of the Livable Winter Cities Association to widespread gaggles of somewhat shortsighted city planners. In the wake of these propositions we are left with plus-fifteen pedways, underground shopping plazas and failed multi-use spaces. Living with winter in an urban setting is still framed as a problem in much of the writing I have uncovered.

The focal points of the following text have been carefully selected. In each case the chapters compliment each other with a certain rhythmic syncopation, a way of speaking to the reader on levels of overt clarity as well as rewarding those who

choose to interact with the text with an intersubjective practice of reflective value.

‘Failure in the frostbelt: the city in winter’ illuminates even the darkest recesses of winter’s cold grasp. Step carefully; the terrain is treacherous.

## SHOVELING SNOW

# 2

Everyday life insists on everyday actions mediated by everyday objects. The snow shovel puts people in a new relationship with winter by rendering snow malleable. The shovel acts as a wedge between the body and winter. As a tool, the snow shovel facilitates civic, domestic and an entrepreneurial duty. The same shovel also facilitates movement, of the body and of snow. The snow shovel beckons us outside, to get active and to spend time with family. The danger lays in the possibility of overexertion. A heart attack, strained muscles, a bad fall and even death may be caused through our interaction with the snow shovel. With the snow shovel those of us living in winter cities bear witness through our shoveling to the demands of our environments. Through our actions we produce culture as we are

forced to act or have someone else act on our behalf. Shoveling is a matter of life and death, as battle's are waged on snow covered walkways and stairs.

## TALES FROM RUSSIA: SHOVEL OF LIFE

Note\* the following section recounts a conversation with a shovel-interested individual whose childhood was spent in Russia.

Welcome to Novosibirsk, the third largest city in Russia after Moscow and St. Petersburg. The city sits at roughly the same latitude as Edmonton experiencing similar weather patterns.

*... When I was just a little girl growing up in Russia all of the children would make their way to school carrying toy shovels over their shoulders; they would look like a row of miners marching in unison to work. At recess all of the children would run outside, shovels in hand, and start digging, trying desperately to recreate snow-made playgrounds that our parents built for us on weekends. With as much determination and fervor as children can muster we dug the snow, moved the snow and piled the snow, vainly making our best efforts to build forts and slides and frozen winter playthings.*

*Those stupid shovels were only wooden toys. They broke all the time. Eventually, my mother, frustrated with my constant nagging for another new shovel, told me that I wasn't getting another one. Of course I was sad, but in the end all the shovels would break and we would turn to using our hands.*

*On weekends, parks were divided by children's ages. Neighborhood parks were filled with the spirit of competition and competed for the most*

*elaborate and decorative snow made playgrounds. Our parent's full sized shovels had the strength to carry their determination. The big shovels were simply too heavy for most of us, besides, competition between parents often went beyond the realm of child's play.*

*The shovel was not only a winter tool; instead, it shifted its use with the change of seasons. In springtime the main job was to till the soil, turn it over and loosen it up. Of course this was done with shovel in hand, how else, there were no machines, everybody worked, everybody that could helped out. When the soil had been tilled and rows etched out of the company plots of land, the seeds would be sown – potatoes, what else?*

*In the summer, or when needed, the men formed troops to help each other dig cellars. I would walk with my father once a week out to our family's cellar; recognizable only by the strangeness of its appearance. White tubes with mushroom shaped tops marked the area. Ventilation from the ground cellars marked the individual catacombs. I never knew which was ours but somehow my father always did. These small rooms seemed big to me as a child, storehouses of a whole winter's supply of sustenance. Caved in cellars were regular occurrences, since the plots of land harbored more underground domains than the surface could sustain. Following a cave in, the harvest yield would be dug up and dispersed amongst neighboring cellars for safekeeping.*

*No matter the time of year, the shovel consistently formed the cornerstone of work, play, and community. Today, it is a different place,*

*nobody wants to plant their own potatoes anymore, and nobody wants to live their life bent over a shovel. The spirit of camaraderie and community is almost lost...*

The shovel has lost its power as a tool for bridging communities. Community spirit through shovel-labour has faded. The very idea of shovel-work causes fear, memories of broken backs. The shovel has been relegated to the dusty corners of tool sheds and closets, activated at first sign of snow, put to rest at winter's end, and illuminated as the staff of benediction in the fight for winter survival.

In addition to this reading of the shovel's place in a former Russia, let us briefly turn to a more theoretical interpretation. Holey spaces, a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's concept, seem firmly embedded in the characteristic nodes that marked the potato cellars. The cellars actualize a space that allows for strangeness. These spaces broke the strict binarity characterized by urban/rural – what Deleuze and Guattari call holey space. To refer to winter, these holes seemed to deterritorialize space so that “alertness [could] be converted into a variety of actions: revolution, betrayal, or simply a return to slumber” (Jenemann 2002: 78).

In terms of the Communist rule of the time one could postulate that holey space afforded common people a defined space, cellars used for storage as well as personal reprieve. Here we find a distinct similarity between potato cellars and other subterranean spaces. Across a winter spectrum the possibility of snow-banks harboring warm bodies huddled together, along with snow caves, crevices and to lesser extent igloos, anchors the prospect of holes amidst a frozen landscape that reveals nothing of their subterraneity except for the tiny passages of rodents. These spaces are not subordinate, merely subterranean, but different from the “sedentary assemblages and



State apparatuses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 415).

The impetus for re-organizing space ensured that the plots of land holding a winter’s supply of vegetables were not subject to the abstract coordinates of space-time (latitude, longitude, plottable by GPS systems in a globally striated chronogeography). Instead, the open and buried space of the cellars gave way to nonspatiotemporal connections (Mount 2002: 148). Connections that not only afforded a population with safe storage of food throughout the winter, but required a collective body of individuals to work together. Additionally, interaction with the space itself may have been regulated by seasonal variations and crop production.

Let us take our leave from the theoretic and return to a more poetic interpretation. The initial narrative offered a glimpse into a culture that once valorized the shovel as the productive and necessary means to an end. However, with the acceleration of mechanization throughout the globe, manual labour and tools requiring raw force have declined, especially in locations where expendable incomes have increased. In the West we have enjoyed freedom from the oppressive nature of manual labour to an increasingly large extent. We have come to fear work done by hands; and in doing so we direct that fear towards an end reflective of minimal imagination – a fear of death.

VERDI: DIES IRAE (music for a funeral)

The snow shovel sings a song of death. I look towards French artist Marcel Duchamp, who shook the art world as a provocateur of Dadaism and Surrealism. Beginning with Duchamp’s shovel, I am struck by a multi-part movement, one

characterized by separate, though related shovels. The themes of death, survival, injury, stewardship, and finally ‘life’ are expounded through the shovel. Regarding the dangers and high physical demands of shoveling (especially for the elderly), the city of Calgary has started a program called ‘snow angels’ (The City of Calgary. 2007). Children and others volunteer as Snow Angels for folks who need help to clear their own walkways. To combat the dangers of shoveling, others have attempted to scientifically examine the best-fit options regarding snow shovel choice and technique. One late modern shovel claims salvation as a giver of life. The Wovel now joins the ranks of defensive mechanisms that aim to keep a person from accidentally digging their own grave.

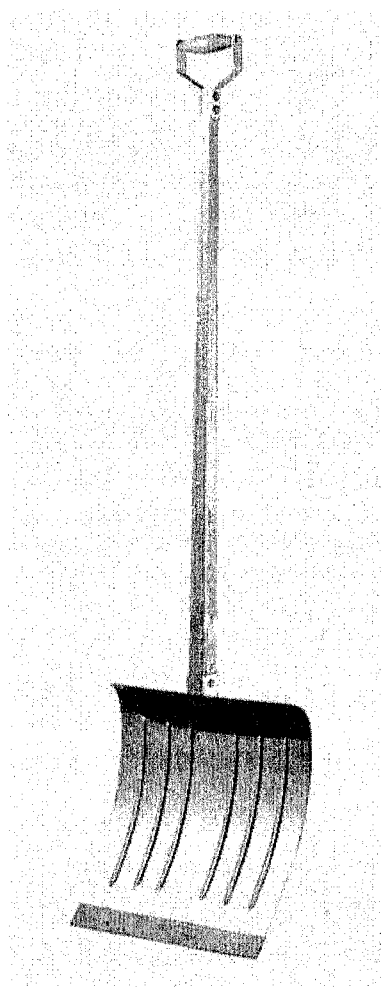


Figure 2. In Advance of a Broken Arm.

“In advance of a broken arm”: Marcel Duchamp inscribed these words on a common ready-made shovel, a manufactured good, indistinguishable from countless other shovels. For the Dadaists, this phrase “declared negatively that painting could survive its own death only by recognizing the cause of it. And it declared this positively by being an industrial object: industrialization, which had assassinated all the crafts, had assassinated the craft of painting as well” (Duve 1991: 157). The thematic of death weighs heavy. Duchamp’s heavy shovel takes us down a by-way, a winterized version of a path leading to death.

Let us plot the path of Duchamp’s allusion; to collect the documentary evidence that sweats out a cultural residue of winter while it smugly warms up in the sauna. Within this frame we embark upon the shovel, a key element necessary to understand winter and the built environment. The shovel uncovers a thick discourse like freshly fallen snow, affecting and being affected in symbiosis, at once absorbing, melting, piling and being a cultured object. Within the discourse of snow-shoveling is the ever present danger of that which lurks beneath the snow, or rather that which may result in an attempt to get there.

One scoop forward and we bear witness to a media barrage that serves to inform the masses of a constantly ‘updated’ ‘winter survival knowledge.’ The headline reads “Winter’s almost here – can you dig it?” (Active Edmonton. 2007). The reference to the 1960’s cliché seems to come off as a comical approach to a serious matter within winter survival rhetoric. The evidence, culled from newspapers, magazines, television and radio, presents a stratified array of winter survival rhetoric. The range of material attempts to provide a trusted voice that recommends clothing,

shovel choice and shoveling tips. Back safety, cardiac arrest and death underlie all manner of preventative and ‘recommended’ measures. These have all been piled up so as to *warn* seasonal novices, those still living in the autumn, in denial, who may even have had a difficult time locating their shovels, about snow removal and the dangers of snow shoveling: the exterminating shovel. One may recall the ‘voice of authority’ projected over the crisp airwaves of winter, a beacon of hope perhaps. The seasonal battle of winter is waged with shovel in hand; a hopeful victory of good (warmth and life) over evil (a cold death).

## SURVIVAL

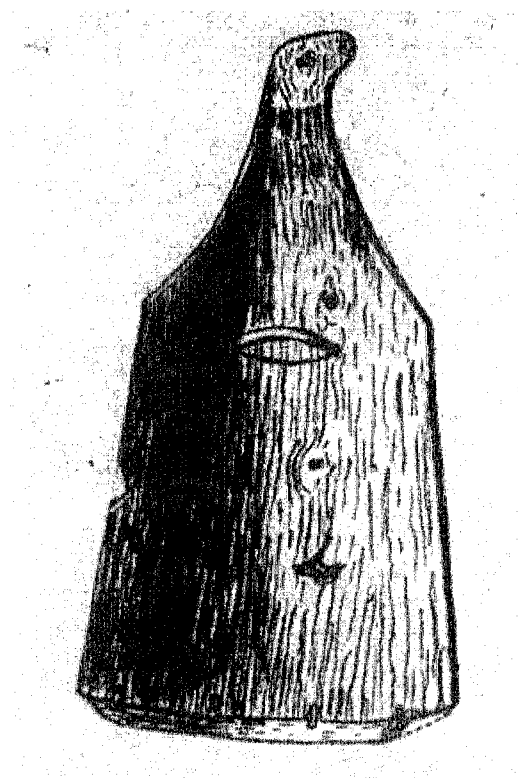


Figure 3. Snow shovel from Coronation Gulf.

In 1924 Donald Cadzow wrote of the Copper Eskimo in the vicinity of Tree river, Coronation Gulf; “[c]onsidering the fact that it is made from a single piece of

wood, it is of unusual size for an arctic implement, for it measures 41 inches in length by 20 inches in maximum width... [it] has been greased with seal-oil, in order that the snow might slip from it easily and that the wood might be strengthened and preserved” (Cadzow 1924: 150). Although this report comes from the early twentieth century, should we account for inflation, the cultural value placed on this shovel may far exceed that of any industrially manufactured shovel. A “wooden snow-shovel made from a single piece of wood is the most difficult article that the Copper Eskimo have to make. It is extremely hard for them to obtain a log large enough so that a shovel can be adzed out of it, and the labor is considerable. A good snow-shovel made from one piece of wood is worth as much as a dog or a very good sled” (Ibid: 152). It may seem incomprehensible to those living in a world without snow that a snow shovel has come to embody use value as well as a substantial monetary exchange value in some cultures. For the Inuit, the snow shovel is a tool, recognized as vitally important for survival, an appendage that is activated in the process of shelter building and maintenance.

## THE SCIENCE OF SHOVELING

What shall we do with Papa’s shovel?  
-Olson<sup>1</sup>

From an illustrated children’s book titled “Who likes the snow?” (Kanner 2006: 4) the first response comes from a man arched over fallen snow. His hands grip the stained shaft as the bright red scoop rests on the ground. To his on-looking

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Olson quoted in Ross 1986: 95.

son he proclaims, “I like the snow because I can use my new shovel.” The man is proud of his choice. This short excerpt tells us many things about the snow shovel and its cultural and scientific construction. For there are many styles of snow shovel on the market, each claiming to do the job better than the other. Also, the man and his son, rather than the Woman and her daughter, share a familial moment outside clearing the snow. We will follow the course of gender and technology in the following pages.

In the domestic sphere, men are often thought of as responsible for all things shovel. In an article about women’s experience of work and family in Canada, Meg Luxton and Ester Reiter reiterate gender divided labour while presenting the results of their study. Reinforcing the male/shovel link they write: “men tended to devote their time to activities such as outdoor maintenance... home repair and outdoor clean-up” (Luxton and Reiter 1997: 205). Meaning that men’s work, though domestic, took place out of doors. A shovel in hand being no exception. Our storybook example holds true and carries with it a familial bond characterizing fathers and sons as teachers and students.

To consider another winter implement; the snow-blower does not seem to garner a cultural currency near to that of the shovel. An article from winter 97’ in the *Iowa State Daily* reporting business traffic revealed that “True Value [Hardware] was prepared for the storm and had snow-blowers, ice melters and shovels in stock” (Canover 1997: 1). Randy Kettleon, manager of True Value noted that within hours of the seasons first snow storm “traffic was down, but the people that were out there were looking for *snow shovels*” (Canover 1997: 1). Shovels rather than garden hoses

indeed, but what about shovels rather than snow-blowers. For starters the shovel is widely available and inexpensive too. Perhaps we could read a kind of closeness, an affection that individuals may experience with the shovel as a simple tool. The shovel leads one to a hands-on activity, free from the complexity and expense of a motor driven snow-blower. The shovel is a hammer.

Let us return to the first order of business: shovel choice in an economy brimming with limitless options for winter warriors. Shovel manufacturers tend to focus on shovel strength in advertising. However if the company is selling a bent shaft shovel, the usual advertising pitch promotes a product that is “designed to take the strain from lower back” ([www.canadiantire.ca](http://www.canadiantire.ca)). Academic literature refers to shoveling as a “physically intensive manual material handling activity that requires three-dimensional trunk and arm movements” (Huang and Paquet 2001: 319). The bent shaft shovel may require one to bend forward as much as 16% less than a common straight shaft shovel. In the article by Huang and Paquet they report on their kinematical evaluation of two snow-shovel designs. Their experiments were conducted using twelve right-handed, able bodied, male participants in a closed lab using small bags of ‘loose material’ as snow. Among their findings they reported that across a three-part range of motion - scooping, lifting and throwing - “the bent-handled shovel reduced lumbar deviations, velocities and accelerations in the saggital direction... use of a bent-handled shovel, tended to result in higher discomfort ratings of the left arm” (Ibid: 328). In contrast to the straight handled shovel, the research team reported that it might be used to “reduce loading placed on the upper extremities” (Ibid: 329). Within technical literature of this kind, the common shovel

finds itself within a discourse of overexertion and ultimately death. Laboratory experiments have bolstered and emphasized the existing media rhetoric, these parties just took everyday arguments fought out on snow covered drives and moved them indoors to simulate winter conditions and record ‘accurate’ readings. In either case straight or bent the destination is the same, a path blazed by a shovel of death.

## STEWARDS OF SNOW

Snow angels. In Calgary there is a citywide campaign “that encourages Calgarians to be good neighbors and help seniors, and other neighbors in need, with snow removal this winter” (The City of Calgary 2007: 1). On the surface it appears as though this campaign has a vested interest in the well being of its elderly and disabled populations. Being a good neighbor unites the notion that you could be saving a life, an argument that is strengthened when examining reports of winter injuries. For instance “Emergency Medical Services typically sees a dramatic increase in calls for cardiac illness and arrest on days with heavy snow falls” (Ibid: 1). Media agencies like newspapers, radio, television and online sources all do their part in reporting the statistics on cardiac arrest, linking old age to the likelihood of its occurrence. Although the elderly are identified as those populations that are most at risk, it should also be noted that the change in ratio from daylight to dark hours in winter is also accompanied by a hormonal change that lowers the threshold for a cardiovascular event (WebMD 2005: 1). Therefore the elderly are at a ‘greater risk’ of injury in regards to dutifully clearing the walkway. Coupled with slippage, overexertion, mangled limbs, and back pain, one thing is certain “[w]e need to get



the message out early to the public in hope of preventing further deaths related to snow shoveling” (Access Toronto 2003: 1). Even good neighbors may succumb.

## INFORMAL ECONOMY

In response to the notion of stewardship, generosity and goodwill among people comes the oft-recognizable, informal economy. Within this distinct category, we consider any form of labour or service solicited by individuals operating outside the realm of licensed business. A child’s lemonade stand is a good example of informal economy, the mimesis of traditional market capitalism. Since regulations are stringent in Canada, the chaos found in densely populated cities like Hong Kong is not so prevalent, the informal is easily recognizable. In countries such as India, informal economies sustain entire class layers of populations. Due in part to the sterility and formality of Canadian culture, participants of informal economies are marked with a marginal status, unless the proprietor is a child. Slogans like “five cents a cup” are easily translated into “five dollars a driveway” for children with the motivation and skill of convincing or coercing a neighbor to shell out a few dollars each time they provide a service. However, there is another shift in the distinctions that mark the informal economy. When children have outgrown their playful demeanor and innocent determination, the informal economy is viewed only as a marginally acceptable form of business. For instance, in Thunder Bay, where over the past few years there has been a great decline in steady full-time jobs, it is not uncommon to see grown men making their rounds with a shovel cinched onto the grill of their truck. Seasonal renaissance men use their tools (and their toys) to clear snow.

Stewardship may be called upon as we humbly clear the way and make walkways safe for others; however, not all neighborhoods are created equal.



Figure 4. The Plow.

In terms of snow removal and the informal economy, I am referring to a layer of second-order quasi-formal business arrangements. The informal economy of snow removal is entirely contingent upon the weather, as though the motivation to act was only a realization after the fact, after snow falls. In this sense the first order businesses, those with advertising in the local yellow pages, are ready to attack at the first sign of snow. Whereas the second-order and truly informal economic practices of lesser-organized removal squads occupy marginal channels of business. With no yellow-pages advertisement, on-truck advertising, snow shovels fastened to grills and word-of-mouth encompasses the promotional range of the truly uncalculated practice of removing snow. For instance, are the calculations ever made, does income ever equate or surpass outlay? The math needs to be done on an overall cost-benefit basis;

however, the impression made is that fluxes of cash create the illusion that the job is worth it. The flux also comes to symbolize a class articulation of success, a commitment to the ignorant bliss of an unknown stratification. How much does a plow for a truck cost, how much for mounting it, and how much money does fuel for the truck cost? Is the money ever made back, is there a profit, is there ever a gleaming hope of sustainable business? No, and this is where seasonality trumps all else. Winter is temporary and so is business.

## SHOVEL OF LIFE

In the voice of an ‘as seen on T.V.’ advertisement, allow me to introduce to you “The Shovel of Life.” There is a new shovel on the block, perhaps a throwback to the design of the high-wheeler bicycles of the late 1800’s; its name is the ‘Wovel.’ The Wovel is touted as the ‘world’s safest shovel,’ a breakthrough in snow removal. In fact, the list of accolades that saturates the web page make it seem as though the Wovel is the most revolutionary tool. As is referenced among the sell sheets of the Wovel web page, an independent study by the University of Massachusetts claims “the results are quite compelling, finding the Wovel® virtually eliminated lower back stress ... ‘comparable to simply walking - representing an impressive 85% and more reduction in lower back disk compression.’” Overall exertion (which is one of the major factors in heart risk) is reduced by a factor of 3x or more. ... and with 72,000 emergency room visits annually in the U.S. attributable to shoveling, the Wovel has earned its reputation as the World's Safest Snow Shovel! (<http://www.Wovel.com/Tour/What-IS-Wovel.aspx>)

The Wovel web page is infused within a tightly knit discourse that advocates conscious and educated snow shovel choice. The web site also doles out instructions on technique, warns of the dangers of injury and overexertion, in addition to doing an impressive job reporting on the deaths caused by snow shoveling. The Wovel has become the anti-death machine, the shovel of life.

The Wovel is designed to be adjustable between six different positions depending on the height of the one shoveling and the weight of the snow. The range of adjustability seems of paramount importance. Looking at the adjustment directions on the web page reminds me of the tedium involved in thousand piece model airplane instructions. There are too many directions that need to be followed for adjustment, too many small parts and something is bound to get lost. It may seem as though the Wovel is too complicated for some consumers, though for anyone who has ever ‘assembled’ a piece of furniture from IKEA, the task may seem equal parts frustrating and rewarding.

#### A FROZEN CONCLUSION

The shovel of life claims to be the answer to our snow-shoveling question, a way to fend off death with the admission, addition and inclusion of a wheel. Although the Wovel seems a poor choice for clearing snow from stairs, perhaps we must wait for our snow angels to notice those of us who are elderly or otherwise unable to clear the snow ourselves. Occasionally the fallen snow that represents a great barrier between our dwellings and the outside is recognized as the natural solution to make-work projects. Snow-work beckons the stewards with their

generous hearts and strong backs. Shovels facilitate familial bonding time often associated though not limited to fathers and sons. Shovels, coupled with fallen snow signal the mobilization of the informal economy en-masse. The snow shovel is perhaps best recognized as an icon of death, for there are countless perils in wielding one. The snow shovel is a tool that is a symbol of winter and the necessary mediation required to survive. The seasoned warriors of winter need to be aware that clearing the path of life – meeting the challenges of survival – might also lead to death.

Isn't this part of the fabric of survival? The snow shovel acts like an anchor, an embodiment of our heritage, a tool that has allowed us to thrive in winter conditions, occasionally buried beneath the snow, in order to shape it into cultural objects; piles, mounds, forts, snowmen... . The Canadian battleground reappears each winter on sidewalks and walkways, paths, and stairs. Those who live by the shovel are destined to die by it.

## THE FABRIC OF FAILURE: VICTORIANVILLE CENTRE

3

The city itself was breaking down. Its center was already dead. Everybody shopped at the outlying malls. Heavy industry had gone bust. People were moving away.

The Planet itself was breaking down. It was going to blow itself up sooner or later anyway, if it didn't poison itself first. In a manner of speaking, it was already eating Drano (Vonnegut 1982: 1970).

## THE MARRED MONUMENT OF A FAILED RESISTANCE

In the city of Thunder Bay stands a monument to a failed resistance, a monolithic project constructed in the face of the homogenizing force of suburbanization. Victoriaville Centre stands as, and envelops, what once was an intersection between Victoria and Syndicate avenues. Victoriaville is locally known as a pink elephant, an unmentionable. Although the local idioms lean towards a ponderous negativity and spiteful disdain, there is another side to this otherwise

stillborn narrative. An organic resistance has come to the fore and stands in glaring defiance to the refrains that chant “tear down that mall.” The lifeblood of the current red veins that course through Victoriaville are most often the faceless, nameless, mass who comprise the lower level of our platform of ‘upwardly and mobile’ citizens. At the very root of the issue at hand is the notion of street. ‘Street’ belongs to a myriad of floating signs, including though not limited to a ‘public thoroughfare.’ Hence, with Victoriaville resting on a crossway and its intersecting streets, the mall has actually divested the street as the public place it once was and expropriated or transmuted open public space into a closed and manufactured space offering limited operating hours. Victoriaville interiorized what was an open intersection. It turned outdoors, indoors. Over the next pages I will attempt to illuminate some of the factors that have contributed to the present state of a weathered monument lambasted from all sides. Victoriaville is a monument that has failed as a commercial centre, but by default serves to meet numerous goals and needs, other than those set out by city planners and designers over three decades ago; today, Victoriaville is a reclaimed site, a resignified place.

FEBRUARY 19, 2007

*I sit on a bench in the mall. I gaze down long hallways lit by fluorescents and dotted with patrons. I can hear a barrage of syncopated footsteps. The hall fills with a repetitious echo. Depressions in boot soles filled with sand and salt mash themselves into the hard-faced glossy brick floor. A man’s quick footsteps halt abruptly, his foot presses hard on the terrazzo as he does a 90 degree turn, faces the glass of a window looking into the fire hose mounted in the recessed cupboard of the*

*wall, and, with the finesse of a New York stylist, proceeds with a controlled grace to tame his long hair. The sound of his foot turning, screeching and scratching on the floor forces me to pause with pen on paper to observe the spectacle.*

*The day dwindles and I hear boots worn by children, the kind that never hug the ankles with enough force or tension to keep the heels from constantly dragging on the floor. The boots rub a rhythm that pays compliment to the feet of the one that holds the child's hand. The 'devil in disguise' scratches through the speaker system, its AM band coarseness channels the sounds of a seamlessly blended mix of songs from the 50's and 60's.*

## EXTINGUISHING CITY CENTRE

Roland Barthes writes, “[t]o go downtown or to the center-city is to encounter the social ‘truth,’ to participate in the proud plenitude of reality” (Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*: 1982 trans: 30). I like the saturation of urban splendor that Barthes evokes, of course he is writing of Tokyo, but I feel that he establishes a perspective from which we generally look upon the city centre with social favour. We look to the fullness, the gathering and the condensed array of languages, styles and merchandise. We look forward to immersing ourselves in the hyper-real saturation of capitalist modernity. With any luck we aim to capture, through memory, image, and consumer goods, some reassurance of our own subjectivity.

With all the promise of an encounter with the social truth to look forward to my question is: what sort of ‘truth’ does the Victoriaville Centre provide? To begin with that which is most visible, the mall is simply the roofed over intersection of



Syndicate and Victoria avenues. Flow has been constricted; the covered roof denies the essential quality of the intersection.

Once upon a time these streets and the adjacent plaza parking lot, known as ‘the square,’ were the centre of 50’s, 60’s and 70’s youth culture (Dunk: 2007). Cultural smothering followed the construction of 1978 (Facca 1988: 19). The place to buy pot, hash, booze from the liquor store at the time, as well as gather in groups, ogle cars and the opposite sex, and find out the latest party news had been eliminated with the prospect of luring consumers to a place that feigns the glamour of upper class elegance. Coupled with an economic downturn in the area, the out migration of youth has steadily been an issue of concern for many residents of Thunder Bay. Devalued social groups are continuously harassed. The initial failure to grasp the spending power of youth precipitated a domino effect of misrecognition.

Victoriaville constantly faces calls for re-evaluation and revitalization (Ministry of Municipal Affairs 1987: 4.1). To refer back to Barthes, in the case of Victoriaville, a “[participation] in the proud plentitude of ‘reality’” (Barthes 1982: 30) becomes the antithesis of the possibility of successful revitalization. Victoriaville suffers like the victim of an urban vivisection, repeatedly subject to a battery of tests and experiments, each time the goals ring with the chimes of revitalization. In this sense Victoriaville has become a centre of distinction but of the wrong kind: it has become *a laboratory of failure*.

## WINTER CITIES AND REVITALIZATION

It was within the Winter Cities literature that I came across a segment that spoke explicitly about Thunder Bay and the Victoriaville Centre. In 1988, Norman Pressman wrote of Victoriaville: “The climate controlled pedestrian mall, situated precisely at the intersection of the city’s two major shopping streets was viewed as a strategy for revitalizing the retail and commercial area” (1988: 51). Pressman valorized the design of Victoriaville, a kind of architectural currency and recognition bestowed upon the mall as a major player in neighborhood revitalization through mall construction, with ample parking. However, no matter the glowing reviews or references to Thunder Bay or Victoriaville, Pressman neglected the overt failure of the mall as a functioning nexus for consumption. Victoriaville Centre, as a success, reflects Pressman’s overzealousness and needs a careful re-evaluation.

What is meant by revitalization? The term refers “to the process of enhancing and highlighting specific elements of a sight or a structure in order to inject it with a new aesthetic, economic and social vitality. Whether applied to a specific historic site or to an entire downtown area, the definition remains the same” (Kalyaniwalla quoted in Facca 1988: 6). Revitalization is a discourse of salvation:

In summary the benefits of revitalization projects are the reversal of core decline and possible core growth. The main goals of revitalization are economic salvation of a decaying core, preservation of the historical legacy of existing structures, maximum separation of vehicles and pedestrians, creation of comfortable, attractive core environment and finally to create accessibility to the core for consumers such as improved transit access and an expanded road network (Facca 1988: 14).

The goals of revitalization are usurped by the inherent nature of the place, the intersection. From here on, the term revitalization shall be thought of as an experiment, a test in social planning and structural manipulation.

## RESISTANCE

Resistance marks Thunder Bay's south downtown core. In an article, *The Landscape of the Livable Winter City*, Walter H. Kehm posits that each environment has its strengths and its weaknesses. Kehm also refers to 'downtown' as a place to flee, as though the 'cores' of cities exist only by default. To commuters, single parent families, the elderly, and a peripheral population: downtown is a place to be avoided at all costs (Kehm 1985: 55). Kehm also refers to Canadian urban planning as non-innovative, a system that continues to use the same tired standards. Standards that use designations and zoning by-laws that are not at all sensitive to the needs of Canadian cities, often culled from an amalgam of sources from abroad (Ibid 58).

FEBRUARY 21, 2007

*This centre caters to traffic of a different kind. At a comfortable distance from the noise of cars, the sounds of familiarity and tone echo with footsteps, wheelchairs, canes, crutches and walkers. Victoriaville moves at its own speed: it shuffles, saunters, and struggles.*

There is no simple answer to the question of why Victoriaville Centre failed to attract the commercial attention that was hoped. Today Victoriaville meets its goal,

as a place for people. However socio-economic values and cultural incongruence have led to a disjunction between what may be deemed successful and what ultimately remains a failed project. Victoriaville reveals a paradox – failure as success – bringing together a population of people with low cultural capital: homeless, low income, disabled, and psychiatric survivors.

## HISTORIC MOMENTS

In 1968, the combined population of the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William sat at approximately 97,000. In effect, there were not only *two cities*, but there were *two* of every municipal faction including, newspaper, police, fire, transit, and of course, two mayors. “For as long as anyone could remember, Fort William and Port Arthur had existed side by side, cheek by jowl and fang to fang – the friendliest of enemies” (Mauro 1981:363). On April 16, 1968, in a lecture hall at Lakehead University, one hundred and fifty area residents heard Provincial Municipal Affairs Minister Darcey McKeough outline major recommendations contained in a report by Lakehead Government-review-report-commissioner Eric Hardy. The number-one recommendation in the report urged that “Fort William, Port Arthur and adjacent territories from the Municipalities of Shuniah and Neebing be joined to form a single Lakehead city... the atmosphere of calm enquiry, rational consideration and quiet acceptance lasted only as long as the initial meeting” (ibid. 363). In 1968-69, Bill-118 was filed, the Act to incorporate the city of The Lakehead. The ratifications of the convergence named Fort William’s City Hall the municipal headquarters (Ibid. 363).

Four years after amalgamation, city council bandied the idea of relocating City Hall. However, in defense of the threat to the integrity and stability of Fort William as an important centre of commerce and government, there came a new movement.

Prospects for a domed city enchanted Fort William residents. However, the dome proved perilous in the following years. Historically, Buckminster Fuller achieved the patent for geodesic domes in 1954. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckminster\\_Fuller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckminster_Fuller)). Through popular culture and media, the idea of the domed city gained popularity even if it has never been made a reality. The timely inclusion of Buckminster Fuller's words in a local Thunder Bay newsletter served to excite city planners. Consider this: "Quetico Centre -News for Friends" – June 17, 1974:

Why not place a dome over the city? A domed city (or district or street) will not only be practical, but pretty. Covered streets will have outdoor restaurants and exhibits. Windows may be open all-year round. There'll be a dust free atmosphere. It's an idea not to be sneezed at.

With a great north star upon which to cast one's gaze, the gesture of environmental advancement as suggested by one of the twentieth century's honored environmental architect/inventors began to gleam. The idea of a roof supports a discussion of the failings of Fort William's downtown core. The roof became an elixir-like solution to the woes of business and bureaucrats alike.

Local newspapers quickly disseminated fear of the potential loss of city hall. "The Southward businessman's association feels that a new city hall elsewhere 'could signal the advent of a new third-core business district. This happenstance would

inevitably reflect unfavorably on the fortunes of the present south core business district” (*The Chronicle Journal* Thunder Bay– Saturday August 10, 1974). In response to the fear of loss, the roofed shopping mall held a new promise.

The prevailing themes of the time include: “[by enclosing] large urban rooms – streets and squares - in [glass]... we achieve a new urban room with a new climate. Here there will be no wind or rain, and the cold is reduced considerably as is the heat” (Broberg quoted in Pressman 1985: 7). The themes of urban rooms and managed climates captured the attention of Fort William businesses and bureaucrats alike.

My research for this section included poring over documents originally held by the City Clerk’s office. Presently, these historical materials are held by the Thunder Bay City Archives. While searching through documents related to decisions made in terms of Victoriaville, pre- and post-construction, I noticed an overwhelming amount of architectural and urban design literature. Architectural planning, shopping and the environment, and downtown design were equally bolstered by accompanying and diverse international literature. Architecture and design literature dominated the documents preceding 1980. There is evidence of a percolation of ideas. Borrowed ideas and non-local schemes made up the bulk of the new ideas. Such borrowed ideas include: pedestrian/vehicle separation, views into shops, uninterrupted views, plenty of space above the head, simulation of an open site and the warding off of climactic experience, namely winter (Wright L. 1973).

The Fort William Downtown Core Revitalization Team was established in 1974. Subsequent growth resulted in six mini-teams, each responsible for a different dynamic of this expansive project. The teams included mayoral and council

representatives.<sup>2</sup> Of the entire Revitalization Team, Alderman Paul Inksetter held the only council seat. The prospect of using an existing street in order to establish a new covered mall excited Inksetter, as well as others. Their excitement generated a council resolution to “inspect the closed street Mall constructed in the City of Québec and to report on the practicality of it in respect to the Fort William Ward Core area, and that their expenses be paid” (April 8, 1975 The Corporation of the City of Thunder Bay). A town council resolution pushed forward the motion to pay the expenses of those chosen to go research the Québec City mall. This shows the local fervor and investment willing to be made in creating a ‘closed’ winter city.

Needless to say, the trip to Québec City to investigate the St. Joseph’s Mall was a complete success, and the team returned bearing ‘good news:’ photographs, positive financial statements and most importantly construction cost figures. Images taken in Québec played an important role at various planning meetings in order to show the similarities between the St. Joseph’s Street Mall and Ft. William’s consumer core (Minutes from May 7, 1975). Reports of glowing and increasing sales reports whet the appetites of Ft. William’s business and council members who wanted to bask in the light of a re-birth of the turn of the century success extinguished long ago. The reports stated that in Québec an outdoor mall operated unsuccessfully for three years. Enclosing the street, however, proved to be a grand success. The impetus from the visit to Québec solidified the idea of enclosing an existing commercial shopping street. Enclosing the street overrode the idea of demolishing the area

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<sup>2</sup> W. M. Assef held the position of Mayor for the years between 1973 and 1981, save for 1979 wherein Dusty Miller presided. For a detailed listing of yearly records displaying the names of the Mayor and councillors between 1884 (Pt. Arthur) and 1892 (Ft. William) to 1981 see: *A History of Thunder Bay* by Joseph M. Mauro.

entirely. Relocation to an undeveloped piece of land also proved unlikely. In the official report on the visit to St Joseph's Street Mall drafted by City Engineer Thomas Fell, he outlined a series of three factors that shone light on the prospect of a similar plan's potential success in Thunder Bay. Fell wrote that "if a street can be roofed over in Québec there is no conceivable reason why the same thing cannot be done in Thunder Bay" (p 7); St Joseph Street Mall "was conceived as an attempt to resist the shift in retail activity from the established city core area to outlying shopping centers" (p 9); and "an enclosed mall [could] answer climatic conditions and provide a controlled environment attractive to shoppers" (p 9). In a sense, the forward momentum of the Victoriaville Mall was deeply invested in the belief that if they can do it so can we.

FEBRUARY 22, 2007

*It's only 9:15 in the morning and already the place is teeming with people. Those who join the gathering have done so by passing through a bone chilling cold outside. Through pairs of double doors the actors take their places, line up for coffee and muffins, take a seat in a familiar chair and greet those who follow. There is distinct warmth generated beneath the reflective low-ceilinged food court. These bodies huddle close, a mass with its own gravity. Newcomers are welcomed with smiles and greetings. Beyond the glass the world seems far from inviting, the biting cold does little to entice one to leave the precious comfort of this heated room.*



Along with the rhetoric and excited tone of this new project came a number of considerations. The Fort William team needed to prove that they were worthy of the support required to act in the interest of the core's 'health':

[W]ith our inheritance of two downtowns... it can be said that we function much like the two lungs of a man. One of the lungs is now functioning healthy and is supportive of its immediate society in the north ward. The other lung in the south ward is not functioning healthily and is a depressant on its part of the civic body... Both of these municipal lungs must be in healthy balance for the social well-being of the entire city (Brief for presentation to special cabinet meeting of government of Ontario in Thunder Bay, May 14, 1975: 1).

Fitted with anatomical references, the point is made about social balance and good health. Glowing facts and figures borrowed from St Joseph's in Québec filled core team meetings throughout 1975/76. Proposal talk included every manner of numerical figures as well as social and economic reviews of Fort William.

The Fort William teams aimed to employ all the good of St. Joseph in order to combat potential failure. For instance, Ft. William teams applauded St Joseph's use of municipal plain clothed police as security. Additionally, a massive parking garage that could accommodate over eight thousand cars per day in two thousand spaces reflected potential success. The Fort William team also considered the cost of heating, reviewing a figure of ten thousand dollars, plus another two thousand per month to melt snow off the roof in winter.

From the minutes of the seventh meeting held in September of '75' Alderman Inksetter reported that the "mini-team faced two problems, not being committed as of yet to any specific design, and because no decision had yet been made, no steps towards progress have logistically been taken" (Minutes of the Seventh Meeting, September 24, 1975). Inksetter made a list of objectives for the new mall including:

meeting place, people place, safety, comfort, convergence of new and old buildings, parking availability, access for all (special consideration for disabled people to all facilities) efficient traffic flow and uniqueness. Inksetter also suggested that the residential population of the area needed to be increased. The logistics are never fully explained. By November of 1976 Mayor Assef wrote a letter to the Provincial Minister of Housing John R. Rhodes submitting an application on behalf of Thunder Bay. The letter stated that the covered street scheme had full approval from the community and unanimous adoption by the city council. The city simply needed endorsement of the application and approval for funding “to relieve the problems” (Letter, November 12, 1976).

In 1977 a local document titled “Why Downtown Revitalization?” turned the focus away from construction costs and business promotion and onto accessibility: “In many cities the poor and the elderly locate in transitional areas which may be peripheral to the central core. Allowing commercial or other facilities to relocate elsewhere makes it difficult for those people to use the facilities.” Access and mobility caused major concern. The goal of an easily accessible meeting place for all began to take hold.

“South ward renewal closer to reality,” read *The Chronicle Journal* headline on May 13, 1977. Council announced the name Victoria Avenue Mall. The newspaper article revealed the details of a three or four storey office complex, several retail outlets, another retail/office building, and a parking garage between the Bank of Montreal and Centennial Square Plaza. Although the plans had been conditionally approved, details were still being worked out. The original parking plan was for a

garage that started on the ground floor and would house five hundred cars at a cost of about 2.5 million. Subsequently, after two outside architectural firms were consulted, the plan evolved into a garage that started on the second floor, allowing for commercial space on the ground floor and would now cost 3.5 million (Letter from Thunder Bay Parking Authority, 1977). Close proximity, as well as passage into the mall via sheltered corridors, appeared prominently in early plans.

Construction began in 1978. It was a staged process in which only the first of three phases was ever completed, a situation that the St. Joseph's street Mall in Québec strategically avoided by doing all the construction in one burst. However, due to the budget, Victoriaville Centre struggled for air from the beginning. Mall development mirrored a historical pattern that led to the decline of the South Core where "commercial expansion took place in a linear fashion along the old streetcar routes. The result... has been a loosely structured core area which does not make optimum use of the land resources available" (Letter from Thunder Bay Parking Authority, 1977). The new covered street mall had to face competition from suburban and peripheral malls, with their ample parking and accessible convenience. At the time Victoriaville appeared like the best use of available land, merging the old with the new. Sadly, hindsight has revealed the obvious failings of the mall. The mall restricts the flows of capital, it blocks the street, facilitating stoppages and solidification.

One of the teams worked to promote the mall, "establish the name 'Victoriaville' and to educate the public towards recognizing and associating the name with the entire south core shopping and business area" (Minutes of Meeting:

October 30, 1979). Promoting the mall proved difficult even after its opening. The mall's opening failed to attract the attention of the Premier of Ontario, William G. Davis. Premier Davis replied to an invitation from Fred Fucile, the chairman of the Victoriaville advisory committee, with regret that due to a 'prior commitment' he would be unable to participate in the official opening (May 24, 1980). That letter was the beginning of the end as support for the project, long touted as a redemptive complex with a "positive impact on the future of [a] vital and progressive city" (Ibid), revealed the monument in its quasi-completed glory to be crowned by deception.

The failure of Victoriaville was no secret even at an early stage. Consider these words from the Victoriaville Advisory Committee, Second Annual Report, Chairman Fred Fucile, Report for January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> 1981:

My first report dated December 15<sup>th</sup> 1980... We were headed in a positive and well directed successful future for Victoriaville in the beginning...

It is in my opinion, based on my very many visits to a great number of attractions and shopping centres in North America, confirms that Victoriaville has a great future and I suppose it can be said that it presently is at its lowest market attraction for shoppers from other parts of the city, remains therefore that it can and needs the support and introduction of many new and novel planning and attractive shops which will engender and make Victoriaville the most attractive and desirable shopping centre in the Northwest... a fast food court and restaurant be leased at once... However, it may be said that at this juncture that the existing management concept has been a dismal failure and has contributed largely to the many problems which have arisen too numerous, to comment upon categorically.

Although Fucile reports specifically that the management concept has been a dismal failure, he does not simply refer to poor management, but also to the distinct differences between the street as it once was, and the covered street in its reincarnated form.

## TRACKS OF DEVELOPMENT

Some say Victoriaville Mall is a failure, that it should be torn down. To counter the negativity one must recast Victoriaville Centre as a different place from what was originally intended. To gaze back upon available records, in 1893 the Hudson's Bay Company land development plan operationalized Victoria Avenue as the centre of business and the heart of Fort William's downtown core (South Core Committee 1993: 24). The effect of the railway and building boom of the 1890's impacted Canadian urban development decades down the line. Rail lines often "established a shoreline corridor effectively cutting off the downtown from the waterfront" (Ibid: 25). Railways eager to meet the goals of expansion, and neglectful of local patterns of movement, problematized issues of mobility.

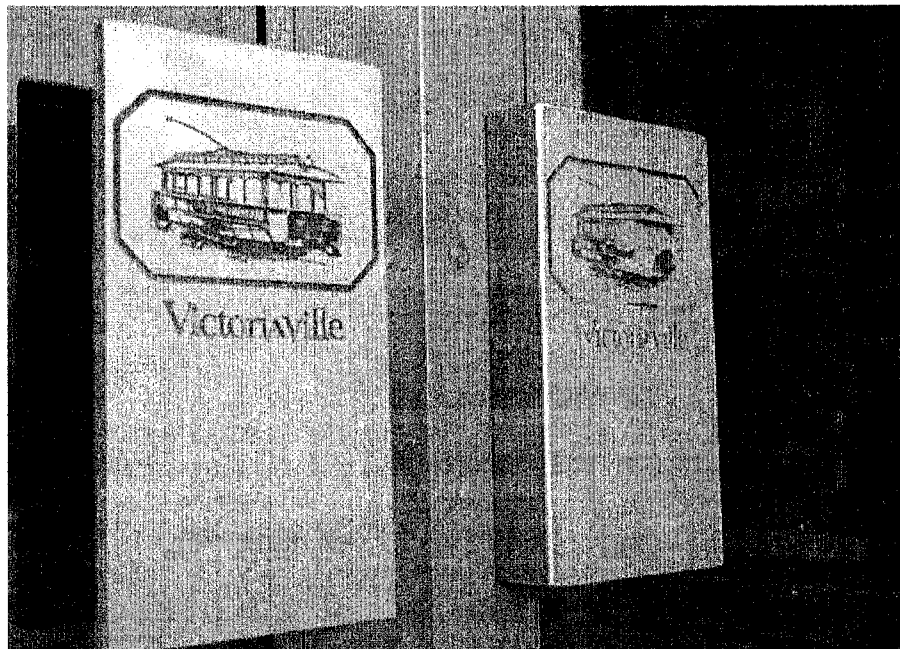


Figure 5. Arrested Vehicularity.

Today, the non-passenger railway is intact, trains are ceaselessly departing, arriving or passing through; those passing through do so under the disdainful gazes of grain handlers who see work being shipped elsewhere. Industrial decline is plainly evident as limited jobs attract a surplus of labour. Only the youthful choose to defect and head to the 'last best west.' Even Victoriaville's logo, signifies failure and fracture: a brass miniaturization of the trolley cars that once serviced the area link rail to place. Within walking distance to the mall resides another weathered monument, a Via rail car, signalling the loss of passenger rail service to Thunder Bay. Perhaps the disservice should be counted as the fact that the trolley cars allude to movement and freedom, a 'roll' reversal has been enacted as the trolley logo now stands for a mall that isn't going anywhere.

#### ONE FILLING STATION TOO MANY

Since 1970, a number of problems have confronted the South Core. These include: a gradual deterioration; loss of retail sales; lack of quality office space; underutilized and vacant lands; lack of parking; poor access; and increasing competition from suburban malls. In the early 1980's, Thunder Bay was home to three malls. Since then, the northward mall has been largely demolished leaving a classic Eaton's building to house a call centre on the main floor and an artist run centre in the corner of a largely empty basement. Victoriaville Mall has sat unaffected by economic development; however, a resignification is underway. The third mall is perhaps the arsenic in the tri-nodal structure: "Intercity mall opened in

1983” (Municipal Affairs 1987: 4.5). Intercity is widely accepted as the major reason for the re-routing of consumers propelled by automobiles. Consumer culture of the 1980’s moved away from downtown malls favouring tract-land shopping centres in developing areas.

Intercity, as the name suggests, is located at the mid-point between the two original towns, a veritable free-space, perpetually locked in development afforded by previous un-development. The area has become littered and overgrown, sprouting an adjacent powercentre: “Powercentres [are] built at spectacular dimensions of up to a million square feet, [they] have replaced the shopping mall. There are currently 275 power centres in Canada” (Rochon 2005: 46). Unrestricted vehicular mobility attracts Walmart, Staples, Home Depot and Indigo, big box stores. The big box stores that make up powercentres operate like open warehouses for specific goods. Powercentres require customers to arrive by vehicle, and even on a store to store basis, driving is the preferred mode of transport due to the vast distance from one to the next.

In comparison, centre based malls like Victoriaville cater to a different kind of movement. Victoriaville’s design fosters pedestrian access and stacks parking vertically in a central place. Victoriaville is relatively wheelchair accessible, especially when compared to the level of mobility required to get to and shop at a powercentre. Resignification begins with Victoriaville’s marginal and devalued population.

When compared with a downtown centre that is rife with traffic problems and a handful of shops carrying niche market boutique-like offerings, it takes little

imagination to see why Powercentres have become the places of greatest consumption outstripping the ability of small shops to compete on price and even on ambience, as Starbucks outlets proliferate in the corners of big boxes. One significant unintended consequence is that Thunder Bay's South downtown now serves as a site dedicated to those who use the mall in exactly the 'communal' manner for which it was partially hoped, and a little feared. Victoriaville is a necessary and successful alternative to other malls located further away, and an antidote to grazing in large-scale warehouses. Victoriaville moves and shakes to its own beat, operating with disregard for outside norms and mores. Like Chinatowns that mark their territorial entry with elegant gates and flanking dragons, Victoriaville Centre ought to be marked with equal significance and splendour, but how would the devalued populations choose to mark their territory?

FEBRUARY 23, 2007

*My arrival was met with a smile. An elderly man wearing a fedora and a three-piece suit laid a throaty "good morning" on me. His overcoat slung over one arm, and his other hand was tucked neatly into his pocket. I had seen this man before. Other days we simply crossed paths and made short glances with only a hint of eye contact or a slight nod of the head. I could tell by his level hat, referring to cowboy lore, that his greeting was meant in earnest. As our crossing came to a close I replied, "good day sir." Smiles were all around. In opposite directions we made our way.*



## FAILURE TO THE CORE

“The mall officially opened Saturday, May 24, 1980 with fifteen shops and services” (Facca 1988: 22). Al Crowper, Victoriaville’s first manager, hailed that the opening meant *variety* for consumers. Crowper’s words provide a reflection of optimism and a foil for me: “aside from the retail outlets that exist there now, I expect some sixty or so new stores to come into the enclosed part of the project... People will be able to do much of their shopping protected from the weather and unpleasant surroundings” (Crowper quoted in Facca, 1980: 22). However, high costs and slow progress translated into minimal success. Local merchants were not impressed: “One 1979 advertisement from the bookshop at 605 Victoria Ave stated, “We’re celebrating our second year under construction in Victoriaville – a monument to quick planning and little progress” (Chronicle Journal, 1979). Some businesses complained that sales were down as much as fifty percent. “Bankrupt Alley” (Facca 1988:27) chimed others. Others viewed the mall construction as a “Berlin Wall” (Ibid: 27). Chapples, the department store, closed its doors October 2, 1981 shortly after the opening of the mall. The death of the Fort William Downtown as a capitalist venture proved imminent once the anchor store closed.

At one point in October 1983, city council considered selling Victoriaville or tearing it down, but no action was taken. Instead, they built another mall. Consider this:

In 1970, the former City of Fort William amalgamated with Port Arthur to form the City of Thunder Bay. Prior to amalgamation, Port Arthur had received funding for a redevelopment under the former Urban Renewal Program. Fort William was in the process of seeking redevelopment assistance, but this ended with the termination of the program in 1968. Following amalgamation, the new City of Thunder Bay adopted policies to

continue to promote the two former downtowns. The intercity Mall opened in 1983. The intercity site already contained freestanding Woolworth's, Sears and Loblaws stores, and was zoned for shopping center use (Evaluation of the Ontario Downtown Revitalization Program (ODRP) report completed by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs: November 25, 1987).

By 1985 just under half of the total retail space in Victoriaville Centre, including the added kiosks, was vacant. Today, the mall is still burdened with vacancies. I am reminded of a line from *Left & Leaving* by the Weakerthans: John K. Samson sings of his hometown, Winnipeg, "buildings gone missing like teeth" (2000). The difference here is that the mall has always hosted vacancy, in this case, the feeling of loss is for what could have been, and not for what was. Many of the stores on the ground floor of the car park have never been occupied. The Chapples Department Store has remained vacant virtually since the mall opened.

## REPORTING THE DAMAGE

In 1987 the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs published an evaluation report on Victoriaville. The Ministry included a section titled 'social impacts,' in which they published comments from 'key informants.' They wrote, "[a] number of those interviewed indicated that because the mall is sheltered from Thunder Bay's severe winter, it has become a major facility for the elderly and disabled to socialize in (especially in the common food areas)" (Municipal Affairs 1987: 4.17). From my own observations, a week of repeat visits, I noted that tidy nuclear families, middle class adults, and business class elite did not make up the majority of individuals at the mall. Rather the grounds are traversed and support a web of interconnectivity managed by socially devalued populations, the elderly and First Nations people. The

clientele has shifted. A new language is spoken within the walls of the mall. First Nations and elderly people congregate, forming a dynamic situation, an intersection of social fervour. Victoriaville as meeting place trumps the dead dreams of core revitalization and upward mobility. These folks have managed to slip under the radar, their occupancy does not equal economic success. Victoriaville as physical space embodies a social reappointment. Those who claim this space as their own actively take part in resignifying it to meet their needs and desires.

Many view 'downtown' as an inappropriate place for certain people. The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and American Institute of Architects note: children are not found in great numbers and "people are reluctant to remain downtown after work hours, or to make a special trip downtown, unless they have a very specific goal or destination; downtown is associated with... the presence of the 'wrong' sorts of people (RAIC/AIA 1986: 9). "There are those who use a downtown regularly... because there is nowhere else in the city they fit: the indigent, poor, chemically-dependent individuals and the homeless. Though none of the other users want to recognize this group..."(RAIC/AIA 1986: 10).

Elderly, disabled and First Nations communities are often seen, or rather unseen because of their social devaluation. They are not the 'right kind' of mall patrons. Early assessments of the Mall's viability revealed that businesspersons and key informants cite the existence of "undesirables" as a problem in the Victoriaville Mall. Note that these documents never clearly identified potential 'desirables' and only focused on undesirability.

## NOTHING FIXED

I must admit that upon my first passes by the exterior of this mall, I had imagined a place of utmost negligence; from this point of entry I have made two realizations. The first: architectural characteristics are drawn from a myriad of diverse roots and elements. The high ceilings and frosted passive light panels of the angular roof signal a reference to passenger train stations of Europe. Passenger train stations facilitate the interaction and movement of people, and Victoriaville caters to stoppage. Recall the Victoriaville trolley car logo, another example of mobility halted.

The name, Victoriaville, was selected from over eight hundred entries in a “Name the Mall” contest. The winner of the contest received a prize of five hundred dollars from the Downtown Business Association. A second contest for the mall logo took place at the same time and the streetcar emblem was picked. Despite its transportation lore, Victoriaville has not gone anywhere. Once a proud emblem of the Canadian Car & Foundry (CC& F) in Fort William, the trolley car was permanently parked in an emblem and its vehicularity arrested.

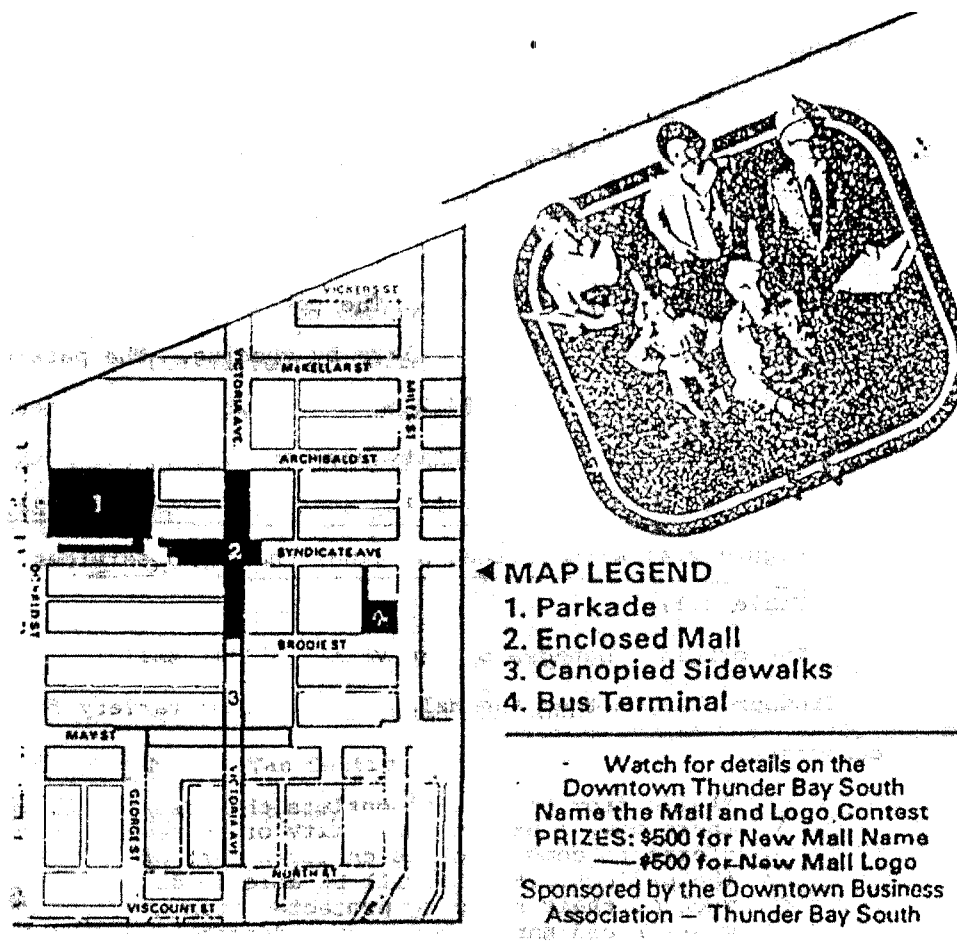


Figure 6. Name the Mall.

The second realization is social. In spite of constant re-evaluation and appraisal, the mall has grown in an organic way, and has done so with great success.

Economically, Victoriaville has never amounted to much. Rather, Victoriaville has successfully allowed for a re-appropriation of space against the grain of consumerist homogenization. A new distinction must be made, one that allows for the success of multiply devalued persons. However, scrutiny and complaints aimed at Victoriaville, and the social gallery, will continue.

## BRICK BY BRICK

The *Chronicle Journal* published the following letter in February of 2007:

“Demolish Victoriaville Mall, get the south core moving again... The feelings of insecurity in the area stem from the lack of daily economic activity. Those grand turn-of-the-century commercial structures are obsolete for the purposes of modern retailing; big-box format stores deliver goods and services in a manner much more efficient than would be possible from the small retail spaces along Victoria Avenue.

The heart of Fort William is an island of stagnation, ringed by traffic. Victoriaville Mall, a legacy of our proto-socialist past, sits largely empty and unused, a monument to deficit financing and the megalomaniacal ambitions of planners. People drive around the core on their way to other destinations. By stopping the flow of traffic, the lifeblood of any commercial street, Victoriaville Mall has accelerated urban decline. The normal recycling of buildings has stopped and property values have collapsed. All that remains are the empty spaces from which insecurity stems: few eyes on the streets breed social pathologies.

Stagnation can only be flushed away through the movement of traffic - both pedestrian and vehicular - throughout the area. It is time that we recognize that the South Core urban redevelopments have failed; the economic marketplace of the street has defeated the schemes of government fiat, funded by taxpayer largess. The malaise of socialism, whether contained behind the Berlin Wall or along the length of Victoria Avenue, will only be swept aside through movement and openness.

New life has returned to Eastern Europe now that the Wall has been destroyed; security and economic life can only return to the South Core if we do the same to Victoriaville Mall. To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, speaking in Berlin during those heady days 20 years ago, ‘Mayor Peterson, tear down that mall!’”

-Carmine David Minnella

The invocation of the Berlin Wall - the second time - may seem excessive. In fact, it is too grand for Victoriaville to bear and in no way stands for the social and economic climate of a divided Germany before November 9, 1989. Rather, we have an entirely different kind of situation. The situation in place from the outset is failure,

due to the slow speed and high cost of construction; sub-par shopping traffic and thirdly, those who have come to fill the mall with energy and lifeblood are marked as undesirable. The elderly, the disabled, First Nations and more recently psychiatric patients, fill the mall. The people using the mall are woven into a fabric of failure. Any petition to remove the mall, to destroy the covered blocks of the street, may be read as a direct attack upon typically marginalized and devalued populations in our society. Their presence signals a different kind of place than originally imagined. Even as the Victoriaville mall succeeds as an important meeting and trading place for First Nations, hosting Nishinawbe Aski Nation offices and the site of weekend artisanal fairs, featuring First Nations vendors, as well as a social centre for local elderly persons, it can never be seen as a success. This is why we see newspaper editorials championing the destruction of the mall, because failure is inscribed upon those who use the mall and conversely the mall is labeled by their presence. It is hard to imagine the smashing of the Victoriaville ‘wall’ – nothing to carry away, and no vital flows to release because by definition, the mall is about stoppages and holding patterns and a slow settling into place. A broken Victoriaville would not be coupled with flow, but rather it would be fragmented, and the failure that has been woven into the mall would be forced to dissipate into the surrounding areas. The force released would be a dissipation of negativity, not an economic revitalization.

To those that say the Victoriaville mall is dead, I say how can it be dead when it is teeming with people, ready to move, ready to mingle, ready. With the allusion to death, one might think of a place that is quiet, un-moving and inactive. There is, however, a true movement of individuals, an unmistakable complexity of

interactivity. There is a social buzz happening there, a community, freedom, greetings and salutations. The mall is a place where conversations are constantly bracketed with kind and personalized hello's, markers of familial bonds, enacted through a closeness, a tarrying in the place among friends and acquaintances, features that were structurally and specifically engineered out of safe suburban malls and the more recent Powercentres built for efficiency, turnover, and circulation. Somehow these features have found a place in Victoriaville's resignification and the refashioning of a sociality against the grain of automotives and capital driven by a demographic that has long since left the scene. Even though I see a certain kind of success in the mall's contemporary social character, it has never counted for much in the economic and political balance sheets of the city in decline.



## THE BUNDLED BODY

# 4

Clothing is a bundle of cultural symbols that has been dealt with somewhat eclectically and indiscriminately in the anthropological wash (Kuper 1973: 348).

What is important, and remains so in every cultural-psychological study of human dress, is that in so far as its purpose is concerned all dress appears to be motivated primarily by the environment (Harms 1938: 241).

## LIMINAL DISTINCTION

For those of us living in a cold climate, winter offers the body a frozen experience like no other. Those familiar with winter may laugh at an analysis of winter layers, and may simply exclaim that winter is ‘hell on earth’ (never mind the hot and cold play on words). Others may not share the pessimistic view and regard

winter as a brisk, clean, and refreshing delight for the senses. Winter signals an unavoidable time of negotiated survival; only the prepared survive.

The layers we adorn our bodies with constitute the bundled body. Bundled bodies traverse daunting terrain, amidst razor sharp wind freezing the skin. Blustering snow veils the eyes and eclipses visibility.

When days are short and the air is cold, bodies vulnerably succumb to the liminal winter experience. Liminal because, like the ship that does not dive beneath the surface, bundling arms the body from complete cold air immersion. The liminality of winter should be considered as a band of experience, elastic, malleable. Along this continuum the experience may be pleasant, for others resistance may be marked by frustration and discontent. For instance, those of us who must adorn our eyes with corrective lenses in order to see clearly suffer an obscured view, perhaps an impossibly foggy view, or no view of winter at all. Wearing glasses hinders functionality in the volatile winter survival zone. Layers and styles reflect individual experiences with conditions, and temperatures. Like snowflakes, the shapes and styles of the bundle are temporary.

## CULTURE EMBODIED

*I speak through my clothes* (Eco 1973).

The body is a vessel, a tightly woven cohesion of biological, psychological and social concepts. Sociology of the body speaks to a range of interconnected layers of discourse, often intersected with interdisciplinary methods. A bundled body is shrouded in the robes of protection, sealed off from the winds of winter. It is an

obscured body, facing the challenge of winter. The bundled body is rife with cultural symbols, meanings and dialogues, a site of constant evolution and reinvention. My task is to unwrap the bundled body.

## UNWRAPPING

Bryan Turner, a key sociologist of the body, writes, “[t]he body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location and of my personal enselfment and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment” (1996: 43). The bundled body aims to trouble the social self in winter.

I have come across many writings about systems of fashion. From the anthropological literature I found classifications grounded in hierarchical stratifications involving clothing like uniforms and costumes. I also found many articles that recorded, and decoded, class distinction within various cultures. From a slightly different bent, early psychological determinates of clothing spoke in terms of adornment, and beauty. For the psychologist, adornment was influenced by intelligence.

I want to return to winter and the insight that “all dress appears to be motivated primarily by the environment” (Harms 1938: 241). The *bundled body* translates into a vague shape, a multiplicity of layers, armor protecting the vulnerable body from winter. The bundled body crystallizes a winter bound typology of dress and anchors itself through social space as a “moving, thinking, feeling, pulsing, body” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Williams 2006: 10).

## A GOOD THERMAL LAYER

The bundled body is framed within the context of winter, and winter will be framed as that *solid* season that stretches itself out like tightly woven weaves of cumulus clouds as they funnel fierce winds bringing with them snow and ice. From where I sit at the northwest corner of Lake Superior, winter, and the necessity to be bundled, extends far beyond the longest night, December 21, and the Vernal Equinox, March 21.

Mainstream media has gained considerable momentum in what has become a seemingly lucrative business, as entire television channels and throngs of websites are dedicated solely on the prediction, meteorology, and reporting of weather. Often the single most definitive sign of the weather outside is the temperature. The continuous rhetoric of weather reports serve to reify a fear of death. From a travel website titled [Escapeartist.com](http://Escapeartist.com) I bring you a revealing sprig of text that commands the citizen, the traveler, the body, to be aware of the immanent danger that lurks when one steps outside:

Check the weather forecast and road reports before going outdoors or traveling. Pay particular attention to wind-chill, which can create dangerously cold conditions. Bring along extra clothing in case there is a sudden weather change. Dress warmly in layers, preferably with a wind and waterproof outer layer. Look for outerwear (hats, boots and gloves) containing Thinsulate Insulation. Thin layers of loose fitting clothing (fleece) will trap your body heat while aiding air circulation. Outer clothing should preferably be hooded, tightly woven, and repel water. Mittens are warmer than gloves (O'Connor 2007).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thelma O'Connor runs Canada Wise, a settlement and information service for newcomers.

Bulletins warn people to protect themselves from the weather. In general, check the weather before you go outside. I can't even count the number of frosted mornings that I recall my mother sternly quieting my brother and I with 'shhhh!' as we chewed loudly on our toast. She merely wanted to 'hear the weather;' I always told her to look outside, or better yet, open the door. We still disagree, but now she uses a computer. Simply put, the culture of cold places advocates protection and preparedness.

## FROZEN PIPES

The title *Frozen Pipes* comes loaded with musical innuendo and bears reference to the bundled and *immobilized* body. A small end piece by M. Sayer in a 1975 issue of *The Musical Times* reported a low standard in the public performance of church music, apparently accepted as normal. "The organ, thoroughly tuned the week before the heating expired, became desperately out of tune, and the damp put several stops out of action. Playing the organ in a duffle coat *restricts* movement; and I soon became aware of a loss of aural sensitivity when surrounded by both a low temperature and heavy clothing. And the choirmen took to appearing in overcoats" (Sayer 1975: 340). Sayer's description illustrates a body incapacitated by bundling. No happy medium was found for those singing songs of praise in a cold, damp church.

There is rhetoric of negativity surrounding the collision of the body and winter. There is also a brand of sociological writing that recognizes winter as a time

of much social fervor. Under the apparent influence of Durkheim, Horace Sutton writes:

...amid the flakes and the gusts, [the] shoppers hustle, [s]tores burgeon into brightly lit bazaars... The cities in winter are nurtured by the warmth of the café, nourished by the expectant bubble of audiences before curtain rise. Museums burst effervescently into flower. Ancient civilizations creep from storages and assemble in galleries like fragments of far-flung clans called to convention by tribal drums heard only by the membership (Sutton quoted in Tuan 1978: 7).

From that description, I can almost feel the warmth and the hustle as the body becomes a bundled body politic or if Bourdieu and Wacquant permit, “human beings make meaningful the world which makes them” (Bourdieu and Wacquant quoted in Haimés 2003: 26). Winter’s halting increases social cohesion and flow. To be bundled is to be prepared, ready to participate in the heightened festivity of the season. Since the advent of widespread electricity, the city now “defies cold, snow and long dark nights by becoming a glittering, magical world of culture and entertainment” (Tuan 1978: 6). Heightened urban zeal is an immaculate conception, it rewards the privileged and severely punishes those enwrapped in the discarded wrappings of a city.

I want to counter the image of the city as a glittering, magical world of culture and entertainment. I point to the city frozen by winds wrought with malice.



Figure 7. What is a blizzard?

## BLIZZARD

The blizzard is commonplace, a storm of variable frequency in any given winter. Where the urban has erected steel and concrete it has also raised the level of determinism where wind is concerned. The city plays a definitive role in crafting and shaping storms. Design has created many shelters, as well as places of total exposure.



Figure 8. The Blizzard.

The rural image alludes to necessitated movement, involving a level of dependency. William Kurelek's image above comes bundled with a memoir from childhood:

There was at least one blizzard every winter, and this winter it came unexpectedly... The next morning, all outside was a howling whiteness that took his breath away when he stepped out. There would be no school for sure, because children had been known to lose their way and freeze to death in such a blizzard. Farmyard chores were kept to a minimum, but some had to be done. William raised his mackinaw collar as high as possible, shielded his face with his hand, and plunged through the snow to the chicken coop to gather eggs and give the chickens water (1973).

Invoking an image of a dive into water, one plunges into the drifting snow and through the density of the blowing atmosphere; through which the bundled body



attempts to *pass*. The plunge may also refer to the angle at which the body must proceed. Winters fierce winds demand an angled approach.

A body under attack is uncomfortable and on the verge of collapse. The wind howls fierce and ravages the exposed flesh, freezing it with an icy breath. Frostbite, as it is commonly known, forms a hermetic seal, temporary organic hardening, a risky option. These images, the urban and the rural, depict the bundled body as it tries to move.

For the privileged, winter in the city means that interior spaces and shelter will protect one from the elements. The body is free to remain minimally bundled, unless of course one *must* venture into the storm. To venture outside means that layers are added, wrappings are mounted, and the sealant of scarves, hats and mitts protect the extremities. In final preparation, the collar is turned upwards. Once beyond the threshold of the doorway, an embrace of storm by body and body by storm is met, the sinuous relationship becomes enmeshed and inseparable. Survivalist mentality and a return to Maslovian materialist base principals of shelter kick in. The bundled body leans into the wind.

The underprivileged face a much harsher reality. Huddled in the spaces that at best offer residual heat, these bodies attempt to deny winter's wrath. Hypothermia stalks its prey: frozen fingers, toes, legs and arms.

## WINTER WISDOM

The existing rhetoric surrounding the elderly body and winter highlights: greater stress in winter, increased incidence of pneumonia, infectious disease,

hypothermia, poor nutrition and falls leading to injury (Verdon & Gryfe 1989: 4). For older generations, concern quickly translates into fear (of death). Aged bodies often struggle against a prevailing normalization of mass consumerism. Those wrapped in furs and skins strike a stark contrast next to a youthful snowbound adventurer clothed in the latest space age fashions. The jury is still out on which is empirically superior.

E.B. Biggar reported on Canada's woolen mills in 1908 and stated that for "clothing our bodies, the climate of Canada makes it necessary that we should have wool or fur as the raw material. Of these two materials wool is only available for general use; but unfortunately the production of wool in Canada has for many years been declining" (1908: 4). At the time Canadian industry was rapidly evolving from the export of textiles towards being a major producer of food, steel and iron. The crux of the matter, as the 1908 report suggests is that natural textiles are required to survive Canadian winters. However, the demands of an industrial economy quickly surpassed fur and wool availability.

Military research efforts established a comprehensive clothing science. Military design fashioned the concept of "clothing units" in relation to temperature, emphasizing a "new type of warm, light and non-bulky garment... the elderly must dress properly when they go out, even if only for a moment" (Hamelin 1989: 12). Notice the marked shift from a bundled body wrapped in natural fibers, with emphasis on thickness and weight, towards a system of nesting-doll-like layers of thin insulation and coverings.



Figure 9. Pioneer Ukrainians en route to Alberta.

I am reminded of my late grandmother's belongings, among them a collection of jackets, a kind I am not intimately familiar with. They were not neon, nylon, or polyester filled bomber coats from The Bay; on the contrary, they were the equivalent of skinned bears and buffalos. Images do not suffice; my memory recalls the smell of rot and decomposition. A testament from my grandparents about the robes is equally unavailable. Perhaps they were kept as reminders of the places from whence they came. Perhaps like many of their generation they were kept because everything was

kept, just in case. When I think of these coats, too heavy for me to even lift, the challenge issued by “The National Advisory Council on Aging” comes to mind as wholly inappropriate:

A comparison of the many new synthetic materials available in all colours and styles will indicate the best choice for various outdoor activities... The heavy old fur coats were very tiring to wear, to move any distance, and especially to be active in for any length of time. The new light-weight comfortable varieties of quilted winter coats and ski suits are the best for sitting outside on sunny and moderately cold days. Some of the new fabrics are expensive, but several thinner, additional layers will achieve almost the same level of warmth (Pepper 1989: 4).

I wonder how often the elderly embrace the ideas and or technology of the new? An attempt to separate my grandmother from her coats in winter steals away all of the value of heaviness, and animality. The heavy bundle of natural fibers, and animal skins, now serves to trigger memories of my grandparents, a forgotten wisdom perhaps.

## THERMOREGULATION: A TACTICAL APPROACH

Literature on the body and the military often reflects cyborgian interdependence (Gray 2003), reaffirming the need for a suit. Military research has widely influenced clothing and winter is no exception. Military research has pressed winter clothing through many fibrous changes throughout the last century. The question remains the same: how does one dress appropriately for the weather?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I find it quite telling that throughout my literature search for material, scholarly and otherwise for this chapter, the majority of sources are dated pre 1990's. I believe that the momentum and intensity of consumer driven capitalism has lifted the 'burden' of much research into the area of technical apparel away from government agencies and military researchers. The increased privatization of public services, i.e., medical care and education, has somehow managed to convince and assure both

Let's examine the Canadian military and environment ministry model:

Man is able to respond to thermally demanding environments in three ways:

1. he can simply move away (migrate) from them;
2. he can balance excessive or insufficient rates of heat transfer by altering metabolic activity;
3. he can impose an insulating layer between his body and the immediate surroundings (Environment Canada 1973: 1).

It is the third point that we are most concerned with: the *layer* of insulation separating the body and the environment.

Let's examine the another military statement:

We must look at that clothing as an integrated whole in terms of the complex functions it is expected to perform... This system of protection embraces three areas: protection against the environment, concealment from observation and protection against enemy munition (Kennedy 1954: 573).

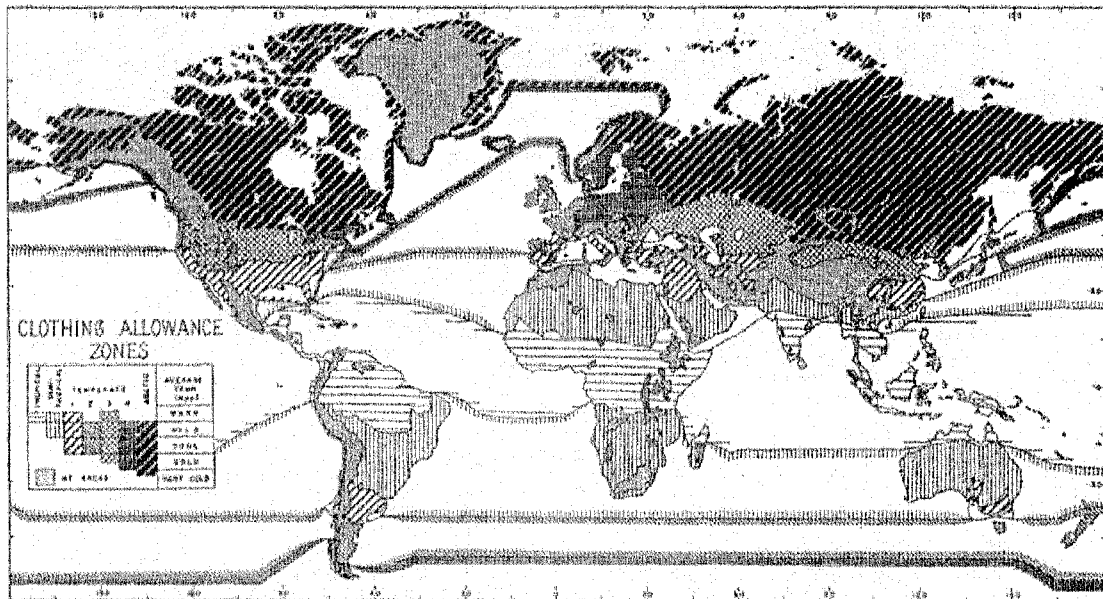


Figure 10. Clothing Allowance Zones.

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governments and citizens that technology and science, funded by private sources will grant salvation. Unfortunately...

The literature goes on to describe layers not as inherently warm, but rather as good insulators and poor conductors of heat. The military system of layering claims a design based on “[t]he thermal resistance of clothing to heat transfer by conduction is very largely the function of the amount of still air held on the surface of the clothing, in its substance, and between successive layers” (Lee and Lemons 1949: 195). Military intelligence has also divulged that in cases of extreme cold, such as Northern Minnesota, clothing must also be wind proof though it must meet the demands of concealment and not fall-back on high gloss materials at the risk of being too reflective and thus ineffective.

In 1949 Lee and Lemons published an article in the *Geographical Review* titled “Clothing for Global Man.” The document attempted to paint a picture of global clothing recommendations for soldiers. They specifically focused on climate, geography and appropriate attire. Lee and Lemons included a map titled “Clothing Allowance Zones” in which Canada and the expansive body of land formerly known as the U.S.S.R. are labeled ‘arctic.’ The article provided a benchmark for what to expect and what soldiers would need to remain camouflaged, comfortable and alive.



Figure 11. Camouflaged Soviet Troops Attack, Winter 1941-41.

The above image depicts Siberian troops attacking the shivering Germans near Moscow in 1941 (Chew 1981). The soldiers in motion, dressed in their padded snowsuits, fur boots, mitts and hats, are shrouded in the dynamic layers of their attack clothing. The drooping layers provide dynamic insulation to maintain a ‘survivable’ body temperature. The white suits camouflage the bodies as they charge as a unit.

## BRICOLAGE: SCIENCE OF THE CONCRETE

According to Terrence Hawkes:

[Bricolage] refers to the means by which the non-literate, non-technical mind of the so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the world around him. The process involves a ‘science of the concrete’ (as opposed to our ‘civilized’ science of the ‘abstract’) which far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the *minutiae* of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a ‘logic’ which is not our own... (Hawkes quoted in Hebdige 1977)

What is a ‘science of the concrete’ in the context of a frigid pole? Better to recommend a science of the frozen. Populations that deal with great transitions between darkness and light must be recognized for their investment in concrete productions of living with winter. Urban centers in the West are often criticized in the winter cities literature for neglecting winter which states that cities and dwellings ought to be accountable to the natural habitat and environment. Places ought to be built holistically in order to attempt to live in harmony with winter.

Let’s consider the bundled body and First Nations people in pre-colonial Canada. In these communities, hunters supply the winter clothing. Caribou skins – are indispensable and incomparably the best garment and blanket for Arctic life (Munn 1922: 269). Ideals like the use of natural fibers, hunting only what one needs, and the using entire carcass, sound strange to urban dwellers. Urban life has bled us dry of survival skills. Layers of hyper-processed textiles offer static protection. ‘Smart’ fibers (and products) represent another effort to replace organic fibers. The quest to manufacture the perfect outdoor suit has long dominated the textile industry. Smartwool is touted as “intelligence that is cost-effective, planner-responsible, user-friendly, and unerringly obedient to its programmer’s design” (Ross in Bender and



Druckrey. Eds. 1994: 331). Smartwool and other high-design textiles like Goretex carry the promise of *effective* seasonal clothing. Automated intelligence or smartness is built into sport and recreation clothing. Ross states that smartness creates an “obedient, scruple free, non-neurotic, and anatomically correct form of intelligence” (Ibid: 332). The only requirement is adornment. However, survival cannot be guaranteed, no matter the amount of intelligence built into the clothing. There is no magic pill.

Military wisdom suggests that a thin layer system is most effective. Similarly, Arctic peoples have traditionally used a layered system of skins to bundle up. For example, the Nganasan of the remote Taymyr Peninsula in Siberia continue to live a traditional life of hunting, herding and traveling (Oakes and Riewe 1998: 62):

Nganasan and Enets wear an inner parka made from two layers sewn together. Both layers are constructed from reindeer skins with very short hair or from skins that have been dehaired... In extremely cold conditions, such as when riding on sleds, people also wear an outer reindeer skin parka made from fall skins, which have much warmer fur. During extremely cold weather, a third parka is worn. These overcoats, which have loose hoods and full sleeves gather at the wrists, extend down to the knees. (Ibid, 65 and 140).



Figure 12. Chukchi Fabric Shells.

The image above depicts long sleeves and bulky layers of animal fur and wool. Arctic survival depends heavily on animals for food and clothing. Appropriate arctic garments reflect local knowledge of the physical environment:

The importance of these skins for winter clothing cannot be too strongly emphasized... No white man's clothing is even a tolerable substitute for these admirable skins (Munn 1922: 271).

This previous quote serves to dethrone scientification and militarization of winter apparel. Traditions of the Far North are rooted in oral histories and experiential knowledge that fundamentally challenges the urban attitude of superiority. Controlled environments give us a false sense of mastery. Beyond the glass and closed doorways, nature is still king. The bundled bodies of Hebdige and Hawkes' so-called bricoleurs display a logic of materialized layers produced from and for a winterized world. The logic is not urban, not abstract.

## A SENSORY DELIGHT

The sound of feet rolling on hard dry snow on a cold day, the crushing squeak is a winter experience. Fluffy snow muffles sound. Noises that usually echo loudly are dampened. To relate back to the choirmen in overcoats, again we note the invocation of dampened sounds. The bundled body in winter is open to an audible experience that is particular to the season.

An upturned hood encompassing the head limits vision as well as filtering incoming sounds. The hood also demands that the wearer learn to turn the entire upper body if one wishes to see sideways. A scarf worn around the neck keeps the chill out. A scarf worn over the mouth and nose helps protect the lungs and soft tissues. The high scarf also leads to unavoidable frosting for those wearing glasses.

In winter, we wager against the odds and huddle to keep warm in hope that our salvation may come before long. Spring is the only force that has the power to fend off the cold grips of winter's icy death. It is this contrast, this passing, that allows the winter warrior to shed the restrictive layers of the shell and step into a re-birth of the lightly adorned body in harmony with nature. Only spring can grant ease as it banishes the old man. Flesh is released and exposed in ways that are unimaginable in the dense cold of winter. The bundle can only be unwrapped in spring.

"I told you to go to the washroom before!"

I crouch in the hallway and rummage through the box of mitts, hats, scarves, jackets and boots. The big box of winter wear is a seasonal one, a box that I like to

put away as soon as possible. The first signs of spring send me dashing to the closet and checking under radiators for dry goods. I know the chance of a blizzard still exists in May, but I'm crossing my fingers that it doesn't come. I hang the jackets and pants, those made to insulate my body on the coldest of days. The scarves get folded and the hats piled high, into the box they go, away for a time. Even in May, on my mother's birthday, my uncle reminds us that winter is on its way. I take his coat and my senses go on alert. This heavy object requires no less than three hangers to support it. At twenty-five degrees outside, and a coat that could withstand the coldest of days, I wonder – is it just me, or is seasonality a myth?

Sociology of the body is not a set of hard rules. The bundle shrouds the body in function and fashion, an enculturated means of survival in specific seasonal terrain. The bundled body is muffled from the inside out and back again. The real failure of the bundle is that it never gets a chance to fight for itself. The enclosed buildings and spaces we frequent in the city eliminate the need to struggle. Thus, the bundle has not solved anything, city dwellers do not live outside. The bundled body in an urban winter is a fictitious amalgam of consumer and activity (health) based promotion.

## THE WINTER FESTIVAL

# 5

### THE TRIBES OF SNOW

If “...the festival involves a battle against the environment” (Sadler 1969: 14) then let us draw our attention to the *winter* festival. As we plod along icy paths and down dangerous stairs, let us pause for a moment. These pages tell a story of festival forms past and present. The festival challenges readers to contest their own beliefs. The festival presents yet another cultural artifact of winter in decline.

Does a community face peril and hardship with the prospect of a winter gathering? To answer this question requires a review of popular winter festival forms. These festival forms serve well to polarize even the specific category of ‘winter festivals’ as ideals. Distinct festival forms fall between pagan influenced

gatherings and incarnations of modern festivals. Between the two, traditional and contemporary, specific festivals may go so far as to invoke a temporary obligation to invert the restrictions of social values and profane time. Or the festival may nestle piously in a routine of hollow ideals. When routine becomes the *modus operandi*, the outcome represents a culture's loss of ability to fully enjoy and participate in the festival (Sadler 1969: 2). The latter inability means that instead of a translocation from the world of the profane to the sacred (Caillois 2001: 19), via the increasing intensity of collective effervescence leading towards the unleashing of torrential passions (Durkheim 1995: 218), we arrive at a period fearful of the return to innocence. "For our culture (call it western culture, call it modern culture) has proven itself inhospitable to the festival in its completeness... We have... dispensed with festivals" (Sadler 1969: 2). Save for Halloween, when children are permitted to engage in the fanciful innocence of festival rites. By exalting the spirits of the dead through costumed enthusiasm, the modern festival honors the origins of the sacrificial assembly. Within the monoculture of consumerism, we have spitefully disavowed the traditions of our ancestors and forgotten the meaning of sacrificial giving. We have also lost the ability to permit and succumb to the immersion necessary to lead a whole and multifold existence that posits the profane and the sacred as two halves of a necessary whole.

The name 'festival' is recognized and used throughout various seasons, religious times and holidays. Today's 'festival' has been diluted beyond recognition. We are deluded to think that a long-weekend, and a yearly family attendance at a religious ceremony, followed by a bout of overeating, and a quick return to a state of

individuality (to devote special care to our newly acquired goods), is in fact a festival. It's not! Our society, oriented towards commercial enterprise and work resonates clearly with Dickens's Scrooge. The festival – sacrifice and transcendence – requires special events. There is a transformative property necessary for true festival ascension. Individuality of person, family, clan and congregation must disappear and give way to the convergence of the totality of the society as one ebb and flow (Mauss 1979: 59). This is seldom the case anymore. Instead, we offer hollow simulacra of transformative collective experiences.

The final note of this introduction comes from Japan. This brief poem signals the alienation that is widely shared in regards to peopled gatherings:

*Festivals*

Curiously enough  
I like  
The aftermath of a festival.  
In the midst of the festival  
In the throng of people,  
I seldom lose myself.  
I look on-  
I only look on...

- Fuyuhiko Kitagawa

## MODALITIES OF THE WINTER FESTIVAL

Existing literature on festivals and forms speaks to a range of themes and distinctions within which localized forms are studied. Both Emile Durkheim and Roger Caillois explore festival forms through the analysis of primitive and simple

(Durkheim 1994: 102) religious organization. Their arguments pertain heavily to discussions of the profane and the sacred, the necessary balance of pure and impure (Caillois 2001: 33). Their work provides distinctions between everyday life, *the profane*, and time outside of recorded time when disorder is permitted, when excess and good cheer are had, and when a robustness of life represents a reinvigoration and powerful cleansing of waste, in preparation for the coming year posited as *sacred*. I also draw from the work of Marcel Mauss, specifically *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*<sup>5</sup>. Referring to the Inuit, Mauss cultivates ideal images of a winter festival filled with a concentrated societal convergence of living arrangements (1979: 76). For Mauss, the Inuit winter is viewed as one long celebration. Once completed the cycle leads back to the necessary world of the profane where families restructure into small units living in near isolation; this an inversion of the winter organization. As a fourth and final theorist regarding the festival, I chose Georges Bataille who provides a more poetic view of the festival and its forms in his *Theory of Religion*.

We live in a state of poverty regarding the festival. Our modern/western/capitalist culture discourages traversing the lines of commercial safety. Marketing campaigns propel insatiable consumer trends and provide key insights into why Bataille suggests the flow of organic life can exist only under certain conditions (1989: 20). As a culture invested in the production and consumption of goods with the intention of building personal and independent wealth, ‘organic flow’ must be re-evaluated. However, there is a danger. Commercial flow,

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<sup>5</sup> Marcel Mauss used the term ‘Eskimo’ as was customary during the early part of the twentieth century. The term ‘Inuit’ reflects a more updated version that more closely reflects a population’s chosen title.



although entropically present, does not synchronize with what Bataille calls organic flow. Organic flow leads to the possibility of collective effervescence.

The acceptable deviance (Turley 2005: 172) that has long been the *modus operandi* of the festival in various forms will increasingly be emptied if we continue to passively surrender our rights and freedoms through consumerism. Still, winter supports, however diluted, the promise of festivals. Even though we have libraries full of the positive organic life and collective transformation we once engaged in, there can be no substitute or simulacrum for the impassioned exhaustion in a truly festive experience.

#### DURKHEIM: A SIDE OF LIFE

To understand Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, imagine an urban winter festival post 1880, such as those in Sapporo and Québec City. These are well known and widely attended festivals capitalizing on established ideals of winter festivals (Shibata 1986: 61, Bonin 1986: 64). Norman Pressman, our faithful contributor to winter cities literature, has described the winter festival as a way for the collective body of any given society to come together to appreciate and celebrate winter (2004: 7). Short days and long nights, coupled with very cold temperatures, often result in individual isolation and an 'only when necessary' attitude towards spending time out of doors. The festivals of winter stand in glaring defiance to the *dead of winter* isolationist attitude. Occasionally, winter festivals become prosperous yearly events that draw thousands of tourists to quiet towns like Saranac Lake, buried in the Adirondacks of upstate New York (Sadler 1969: 15). The winter festival is

traditionally a manifestation of the great desire to take full advantage of the cold and dark season at its most uncompromising. As events, festivals draw participants from near and far. However, the reality of success measured by dollar signs represents the razor that a festival must walk to survive. Pressman, on the other hand, suggests that winter festivals are for appreciation and celebration of winter. So, how does one account for the success of an event? There is no simple formula to answer this question. Rather, it may prove more useful to return to Durkheim who provides a thoroughly subjective technique to deepening the experience of an ephemeral traversal of collective life – otherwise known as the *festival*.

Durkheim writes “[w]hen we find ourselves at the heart of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become capable of sentiments and actions of which we are not capable when we are reduced to our own efforts; and when the assembly breaks up, when we are once more on our own and return to our normal level, we can measure the extent to which we were lifted above ourselves” (1994: 128). During winter festivals, individual events represent parts of a whole that converge towards a highly charged final event. For instance, the winter festival at Saranac Lake boasts “sled derbies, skating races, snow shoe races, a wood chopping contest, an under-the-ice treasure hunt for the hardy scuba fanciers and a greased pig contest... the highlight of the three-day carnival is the storming of the ice palace, and fireworks display: a struggle against the cold, a dispelling of night” (Sadler 1969: 15). The night holds key importance, not only for the festival finale, but also for Durkheim who wrote of the hyper excitement that comes with night, bringing on a physical and mental exhaustion that cannot be borne for very long (1995: 218). The night

represents a time when the imagination is heightened as snow and ice reflect the light of fires, and shadows dance to their own rhythms. Once collective energy reaches the height of elation, it pauses momentarily, before swiftly degenerating into exhaustion. Only then the festival diffuses as its participants plod along snow packed paths back to their dormitories. A fear of death delays the final act of succumbing to sleep, for winter does not permit the spent bodies to remain on the ground in a heap of exhaustion.

For Durkheim, festivals are propelled by a society's need to strengthen collective sentiments at regular intervals, which in turn constitute its unity and personality (1994: 156). The regulated rhythm of the calendar year weaves waves of excitement and stillness. Stillness is noted as profane and real, the ebb to the flow. In classical examples, as the flow gains momentum time is overcome by a shift, the addition of the sacred to the real; “[led] by an external power... transported into a special world entirely different from the one in which he ordinarily lives” (1995: 220). The participant and the collective body now occupy a sacred space, different from the ordinary. Regardless of lofty aspirations, modern winter festivals essentially point to excess. The active participation in overeating, overdrinking and intense competition through sport is the new pinnacle of collective effort and engagement. However these events are minor dramas of tradition. These current traditions lack the out of time commitment required for transcendence to be made available. Instead we follow patterns of regimented and restricted time, careful to observe the artificial rhythms and constant introduction of limits and in doing so we never allow the chance for something truly phenomenal to take place.

## CAILLOIS: SACRED FESTIVAL

“The spirits only appear in winter, that is, between two periods of profane labor, outside of ordinary times. Winter is the season for festivals...” (Caillois 2001: 111). The following section explores abundance in the winter fete. First we must locate Christmas within a festival season. During time outside of ordinary time, rules are relaxed and repetitious mediocrity is dutifully avoided for the sake of an insipid and apathetic engagement. For example, during a modern secularized Christmas celebration, eating to exhaustion, adults pouring alcoholic beverages for children and among other things the over compensatory giving of gifts have come to signal the aspiration of a minor transcendence. Christmas in a largely secular or seasonally Christian society comes yearly as a perilous and futile marriage of capitalism and tradition. I choose Christmas because it is the popular form I am familiar with.

Modern versions of Christmas are deeply rooted in pagan symbolism and traditions such as holly, ivy, mistletoe, decorated evergreen trees and the giving of gifts. However, secular Christmas celebrations have become a generic stamp for a simulated ascension, the height of the year. For Caillois, and the *festival season*, Christmas takes place near the Winter Solstice, the veritable North Star to which a plethora of distinct cultural and historical festivals have been logically aligned. *Osiris* was entombed in ancient Egypt and soon arose as a new babe; ancient Rome celebrated *Saturnalia* the feast of Saturn, often lasting a full week; *Yule* is celebrated in Neopaganism in direct conjunction with winter solstice and is a time of introspection and preparation for the coming year; in Iran *Shabe-Yalda* is celebrated

as the rebirth of the sun; *Bodhi Day* aka *Rohatsu* for the Buddhists symbolizes the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment by way of the eightfold path ([www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)).

These are a few examples of deeply rooted festivals that fall within the bounds of winter and tend to cluster around the solstice. These examples reaffirm the widely celebrated importance of the winter solstice that is often argued as a strictly Christian celebration. Following Caillois let us employ a critical view. Caillois made the festival a recognizable form in and of itself. Caillois' exposé of the festival bares many similarities to my own Christmas experience: for "excess and good cheer" (2001: 97) are implicit, recalling the former and awaiting the next festival (Ibid: 98). During the ordinary year, festivals litter conversations that rival the banality and frequency of weather-talk. Although "gift exchange results in producing an abundance of wealth" (Ibid: 121), modern celebrations cultivate greed, avarice, desire, depression, disappointment and anger rather than a genuine spirit of altruism. In colonized societies where close bonds have been trampled in the wake of divisions and expansions "festivals everywhere still fulfill an analogous function. They constitute an interruption to the obligation of work, a release from the limitations and servitude of the human condition" (Ibid: 126).

My mother recalls that during her childhood she would go out with her father on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas day by the Gregorian calendar, drive to an unmanned Christmas tree lot in an unpopulated shopping plaza parking lot, and liberate a tree. Her family followed the Julian calendar and would benefit annually from the deflated surplus of the mainstream celebration. Even in the early 60's, tempered solace could

still be found out in the streets. Shops closed and most folks would be spending time with family and friends, although we must account for emergency service workers as well as pharmacists eating cold turkey and mashed potatoes behind shelves of pharmaceuticals. Additionally, we must count those not engaged in any kind of festival gatherings, such as the homeless and those of other beliefs. In the past, work obligations were temporarily suspended; a historical diorama, a memoir of a world when the adage ‘time is money,’ had the flexibility to pause for a moment of modesty.

To critically consider the modern urban festival form, recognize that the markers regarding earlier writings of the festival at a transformative level have been largely shorn away. Winter is the festival time, cradling many variations of festivals. The primacy of consumerism, especially during Christmas, has resignified the winter festival as a fragile and hollow shell. The remains are a plastic chorus singing a manufactured tune in the name of an amorphous ‘holiday season.’ The accumulation of goods in an economy kept afloat by credit has eliminated the possibility of a balance between the sacred and profane worlds.

#### MAUSS AND THE MALL: THE PERPETUAL FESTIVAL

In the following section I will begin with a contextualization and move towards a synthesis. In 1950, Mauss published his classic study *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*. Mauss wrote of Inuit social life based on a twofold morphology that encompassed the transitional ebb and flow between summer and winter modes. Summer is when “social bonds are relaxed; fewer relationships are formed, and there

are fewer people with whom to make them; and thus psychologically, life slackens its pace” (1979: 77). In contrast, winter is the “season when Eskimo society is highly concentrated and in a state of continual excitement and hyperactivity. Because individuals are brought into close contact with one another, their social interactions become more frequent, more continuous and more coherent; ideas are exchanged; feelings are mutually revived and reinforced” (Ibid: 76). Inuit life is shaped by forces of nature, specifically the seasons. Winter means that many families share a single dwelling, each occupying a section of the larger domain. Winter also means that living at close quarters generates rapid exchanges of emotion and thought. This is contrary to Inuit life in summer when social forms assume greater atomistic independence, individual families head out separately to exist in close self-sufficient units. In winter resources are pooled and the group gathers over an extended period, a mark of distinction in Mauss’ analysis. Mauss claims “the winter settlement lives in a state of continuous religious exaltation. This is the time when myths and legends are transmitted from generation to generation...the individuality of families and of their particular houses disappears; they all merge in the totality of the society” (Ibid: 58). Stratifications dissolve and the group unifies.

The former distinctions sharply contrast contemporary urban society. Urban life demands closed environments, i.e., West Edmonton Mall, but fails to reproduce the active bonding referred to by Mauss.

Mauss’ urban distinctions follow: summer is characterized by a period of sustained languor otherwise known as the vacation, whereas winter reflects a time of steady increase, pointedly focused on the June labour drop-off. For rural societies,

summer means an intense increase of work, and winter is when the countryside is “plunged into a kind of torpor...this is the time of dispersion” (Ibid: 78). The urban and rural function as relative inversions.

The collective intensity and industriousness of the urban results in a possibility for sustained joviality, celebration, bonding and learning. Instead we have malls. To return to the aforementioned West Edmonton Mall (WEM), let's clarify this artifact of vulgarity, its “interior-design grab bag of submarines and palm trees, baby tigers and skating rinks” (Williamson 1992: 216). Even winter cities literature criticizes malls for squandering precious land and for being located some distance from any semblance of centrality. The WEM is a curious site. On one hand, it fits with Mauss' western urban model of a communal location as private/public place that has the capacity to host a body of people, however to what ends are an entirely different matter. The second and contrary note of distinction is that, being located on the prairies, West Edmonton Mall is a receptive space that also hosts the solitary rural dweller searching for stimulation. Even the loose description of the interior design of WEM signals a site grounded in simulation and stimulation. West Edmonton Mall is a place that has been carved out or perhaps has rotted out a myriad of distinctions. It is an urban place that has the potential to host though cannot fully sustain life. It is a rural dwellers getaway. It is a place that hosts the amassing of crowds. However, the unifying principle of the crowd's mentality is to consume, meaning that camaraderie is trumped by competition. The mall is also a vessel of escapism, a place to become lost rather than cohere with the crowd. Inside WEM the effects of the changing seasons are muted. Although masses of people assemble on any given day, the



effervescence of rummaging bodies endlessly searching for great bargains can never amount to anything more than the impoverished self-satisfaction of consumer culture.

The mall is regularly subject to a dressing up of sorts, often in correspondence with 'festive' times, most notably Christmas. The moment that Halloween passes the mall begins to charge electrically with the buzz of shoppers and the swipes of magnetic strips. A transformation occurs out of step with the ordinary year and ordinary time. However, instead of a time outside of recorded time as Durkheim suggests, time falls under increased pressure, suffering the burden of its own weight. Instead there is overtime, perhaps in keeping with WEM's permanent ice rink. The transformation comes in the form of festive attire as lights are hung and decorations displayed, with an endless assortment of brightly colored hollow boxes. Dressing-up spreads throughout the mall as a store-by-store practice, as well as on a grand scheme. Santa *still* commands from a central location, usually in one of the large atrium spaces. I say *still* because *Christmas* themes dominate. Baby Jesus and the three Wise Men play second-fiddle to Santa and Frosty. The generic holiday or festival season attempts to celebrate a range of cultural beliefs through practices of consumption. Mainstream media pushes monocultural consumption throughout December and into the New Year. These practices result in a dilution of previous cultural/religious celebrations/festivals that once had great influence. The bottom line for the mall is to provide a neutral space of comfort and safety for as many people as possible in order to generate the highest profits possible.

Not only is West Edmonton Mall a vulgar and amorphous manifestation of capitalist consumer culture, the manufactured production of a Festival season ought to

be disavowed for its treasonous mutation of genuine festival fervor. Wait! West Edmonton Mall is not the sole culprit in this manipulative and underhanded scandal. Rather the mall has simply provided me with a legible and recognizable foil to the possibility of a modern festive season. Due to increased spending during festive times it may be said that the festive season is artificially sustained year-round. Even if the brightly colored decorations are tucked away for part of the year, they exist within a continuous cycle of seasonally specific decorative artifacts. Besides it's only fifty-one days between Christmas and Valentine's Day.

#### BATAILLE: THE FUSION OF HUMAN LIFE

In his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille wrote:

The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking loose, that is into violence. It constantly threatens to break the dikes, to confront productive activity with the precipitate and contagious movement of purely glorious consumption. The sacred is exactly comparable to the flame that destroys the wood by consuming it. It is that opposite of a thing which an unlimited fire is; it spreads, it radiates heat and light, it suddenly inflames and blinds in turn (1989: 52).

Flames, fire, heat, light are the central characteristics of the festival; regarding the winter festival, these active ingredients tend to consume even more voraciously. Winter festivals that follow the patterned predictability of lunar cycles and seasonal variations are counted among the majority of the yearly festival season. They arrest productive activity. The winter festival holds within it a capacity like wood to be burnt and a measure of intensity and outwardly radiant power to illuminate and blind.

But consumption is not shopping. It is destruction. It is violent. Of course this is not permitted in a mall.

Internationally, winter festivals have rooted themselves within cultures as rituals aligned with the momentum of seasonality, and Canada is no exception. Festivals are revered as events with the ability to interrupt everyday life, but in a timely and expected manner. On an international scale winter festivals attempt to operate within a currency that usurps traditional and modern forms of exchange, and aim to transport participants to an abundant but limited situation of unconscious necessity, also known as *the sacred*.

Festivals are often born out of grassroots motivation geared towards community building. On a larger scale governmentally funded winter festivals often grow beyond their limits, surpass their height of popularity and become failures worthy of note. Large festivals are often guilty of siphoning energy from dedicated volunteers and replacing it with the hollow rhetoric of more funding, not to mention 'tourism.'

Winterlude in Ottawa "has been named by travel industry associations among the top one hundred tourist attractions in North America" (Bonin 1986: 64). In short, prestigious winter festivals have been translated into the language of tourism. To this end, unless finitely bound and contained, the festival as a tourist destination may face an unfortunate extinction and decimation by overextension. Even though Winterlude has "promoted winter as an essential experience of our Canadian heritage" (Bonin 1986: 65) the boundaries of this transformative event ought not to be conflated with the winter identity of a northern Canadian experience. Traditionally, the festival

signals fusion, a concentration of sacrifice (Bataille 1989: 53) that cannot be stimulated beyond a measured portion. In haste a measured portion of energy must be expended and deflated in preparation for a return to the profane. The cycle provides more than a series of highs and lows; it fulfils a wholistic and transcendental component of existence. Winterlude is said to be an essential experience of our Canadian heritage. However, Winterlude seems far off from the vigorous agitation of a festival form that manifests an unbound letting loose. Contemporary profane life is too reserved, and essential experience is buried deeply within the folds of time.

While searching for a winter festival propelled by a centripetal force capable of the divine spirit of collective effervescence, I have mentioned the Sapporo Snow in passing. Known as one of the largest winter festivals in Japan, it drew nearly two million visitors to the celebrations held during one week in 2007 ([www.snowfes.com](http://www.snowfes.com)). The internationally attended festival honoring snow began with six high school students building snow statues in 1950. The city's slogan reads: "blessed by snow." "The objective of the [Sapporo] festival is to encourage people to actively enjoy outdoor recreational activities, instead of hibernating at home" (Shibata 1986: 61). Sapporo aims to take full advantage of winter (Pressman 2004: 5), getting folks out of their homes and into the streets like a frozen version of the fluid nature of summer gatherings. In 1972, once the snow festival had been well established Sapporo attracted global attention by enthusiastically hosting the Olympic Winter Games (Shibata 1986: 62). The snow festival and the Olympics were cleverly held at the same time. Together with the excitement of the games the spirit of intensive collectivity must have been widespread. This is not to say that the intensity

or the potential of a successful festival is based solely on the weight of the amount of people participating. Rather the simultaneous celebration of all things winter may have led to a *momentary* glimpse of the sacred.

The sudden inflammation and blinding of light, the liminal moment, is considered the height of any festival. Festival participants are free to disperse only after the collective energy has reached its apex. Collective effervescence may never reach climax during ill-focused gatherings. A sacred balance can only be struck where dedication, synchronicity, and fluidity of nature are deeply imbedded, otherwise the imbalance causes shameful pride without purpose.

Brightly colored bows on brightly colored boxes and distended bellies filled with too much food and drink pass through a profane existence never knowing the full potential of a balanced state of equilibrium. The sacred is forever misplaced like a lost glove.

#### BURIED BY SNOW

Contemporary festivals are an impoverished attempt at repetitious simulation for the purpose of ceremonial drama. Dead festivals are unable to activate a collective potential and cannot bear witness to an effervescence carried by means of unity and its frenzies. The writings of Durkheim, Caillois and Mauss dealt with cultures and religions labeled as ‘simple.’ However, it is obvious that present day festivals cannot compare to the simplicity of former times. Again, we see another winter trope, the festival, resignified and destined to fail.

The final question is what comes after the festival? Without a differentiation of events and time, there can be no discussion of before, during and after. First we must acknowledge the significance of seasonal variation as a mark of distinction. Durkheim writes “[once] we have fulfilled our ritual duties, we return to profane life with more energy and enthusiasm, not only because we have placed ourselves in contact with a higher source of energy but also because our own capacities have been replenished through living, for a few moments, a life that is less tense, more at ease and freer” (1995: 386). At times it seems as though Durkheim writes of a mythical place enchanted with unicorns and centaurs, a place where life *is* less tense during the festival, free from the restrictions of profane life. In fact, he refers to a simple time, or place, where one could express emotionality to a greater extent (think, funerals and mourning). Perhaps *the age* of technology does not permit these expressive deviations as 1’s and 0’s leave no room for essential qualities of life. No breath, no touch, no sound, no spirit can be extracted from a web woven with perfect equations. Our current situation offers compartmentalized units of happiness, measured and accounted for like the weeks of vacation.

The *festival* means: to walk into the fire, to be witness, to rejoice and to return rejuvenated, the blood of the sacred courses through the veins of aspirants as they traverse the profane world. The festival signals an opportunity for balance, a requisite for spiritual cultivation and transcendence. The harmonic movement of the journey reverberates between two forms of life, the sacred and the profane. Collective gatherings offer and facilitate the necessary transformations and provide much needed sacred energy required by profane life.

In terms of the urban winter it seems as though true festivals have dissolved and only traces of the sacred remain. Consumerism's demanding presence has snuffed out the past and traded the ashes for shiny plastic toys. Urban life seems to be incapable of nurturing rituals that carry the contagion for explosive and combustible effervescences of life. The margins are too narrow, the columns too straight to permit a free life, if even for a moment. I shudder to conclude that winter festivals and festivals in general have lost the ability to offer participants a gateway to a balanced life.

## THE CITY IN WINTER: FAILURE AND DEATH

# 6

The urban winter has come to pass through the shovel, the mall, the bundled body and the festival. I suggest that the urban winter is a prism and as it rotates in light, shines new colors. Of course, new colors and new angles are always on the horizon and as each subsequent winter comes and goes, a new reading is made available. This project is not a static reflection on a culturally embedded winter. Rather, it concerns the icy components of urban winter.

In winter, one must deal with the elements by employing or embracing them in order to facilitate a survivalist, capitalist or celebrationist attitude towards the season. A shift towards post-industrialization is in effect for contemporary western culture. By examining the pre-industrialized modes of action we gain perspective for troubling the transition.



The urban winter hinges upon a series of balances because death awaits those who fail. The fear of death resonates and filters throughout the pores of winter's dense compaction, reminding one of heaps of blackened snow that haunt our springtimes.

Chapter two tells of a shovel that can kill, by heart attack, by falling on ice, by overexertion: shovel fear is now a news staple. News media fills time with winterized survival techniques. Recommendations for snow shovels plaster printed pages, radio and T.V.. Inventions like snow-blowers and Wovels make lofty claims to make jobs easier, faster and 'safer.'

In chapter three, death sinks its teeth into the structures of winter. In defense, Victoriaville attempted revitalization. However, decline and waste from a previous era rendered the area economically unviable. Reversing the decline proved an impossible task with detrimental results, for only zombies result from governmentally driven revitalization. Instead of reaching its goals, Victoriaville came to a halt. Victoriaville Centre is marked with a new distinction. However, even in resignification the likelihood of surviving failure to reveal something else is difficult – especially when success is repeatedly identified as the 'wrong kind.'

Chapter four, features a fear of death that shadows the body as layers of winter clothing are wrapped with care. The bundle represents a kind of armour that shields the body from premature death. For the bourgeois there is a constant barrage of 'new' technology designed to keep the body comfortable. Millions of dollars are spent by military and commercial institutions to develop new advanced

textiles to do the job that leather and fur have been doing for thousands of years. Movement is often slowed and limited when heavy layers pad the body.

The fifth chapter, the festival, is where death and failure embody a heightened state. Through perpetual repetition of failed festivals wrought with constriction and an inability to let go, winter festivals only serve to distort rather than balance life. Waking hours are spent in a constant haze of consumption and entertainment, so much so that the out of time experience once enabled through the collective effervescence of the festival has vanished. The *festival* promotes an out of time experience that elevates one towards an experience of transcendence and thus completes an evolutionary rite of passage. Modern everyday life promotes an out of time experience that focuses only on a single dimensional model of being, leading to an impoverished spirit incapable of complete expressive value. Festivals intrinsically hold the potential for feverous community spirit leading towards a cultivation of balance. However, only through the de-volution of human autonomy will we activate the balance required to overtake the current culture of death. Our walls have become too high and we have invested much in them, only through their dismantling will the festival once again prove to be a vehicle for freedom in unity.

## THE SHOVEL

The shovel is a common tool of winter. It is a simple tool, a personal device once crafted by hand and later reproduced by machines. Industrialization made it possible for everyone on the block to own one and the same shovel. In the same breath, industrialization propelled society through winter at a speed that had been

previously unknown. The industrial revolution created discord where traditional society once operated sympathetically with the seasons. Winter has since been managed through the use of snow blowers and plows. Fleets of plows and shovels work in unison as they wage war against winter.

In Thunder Bay, industrial street snow removal protocol has remained largely unchanged since the 1970's. The documents show a detailed description of requisite conditions: snowfall measured in hours, snow depth, time of deployment of large snow removal vehicles, priority of main streets, secondary streets, alleyways and bus lanes (City Of Thunder Bay 1978: 63-66). In addition, the protocol outlines the average time required to complete the job as well as sanding and salting procedures. Large-scale snow removal carries a huge expense. The city crews dare not stop until even the sidewalks are cleared. In Thunder Bay, once the streets are clear, upright bombardier track cats with sidewalk width plows manage the walkways. The sheer overuse of sand and salt is staggering, turning the distinctly virginal look of white snow into a carpet of black and brown.



Figure 13. Sand and Snow.

Often roads and walkways resemble beachfront property, sand is spread through an industrial process that perpetuates the cycle of make-work projects for city workers. These city scale projects represent a definitive counterpoint to winter, the soot, sand, tar and oil create 'used' snow. Frozen sand bars flank city streets near sewer grates as dirty water carries away the waste of the city. Water treatment plants run on overload as they attempt to extract the pure essence from the poisoned snow. Once spring has come and the last of the snow has run-off, we are left with scattered blackness and localized, piled dirt. Large parking lots tend to reveal their true worth as huge mounds of sand, dirt and trash occupy their corners.

The shovel lives nostalgically. Crisp evenings spent with shovel in hand infuse the mind and body with a virulent rush of oxygenated blood. Remember that those who live by the shovel will also die by it.

## THE MALL

Even heavy governmental intervention in the form of a mall could not counter the economic downturn of Fort William. Every effort was made to increase traffic and rebuild a commercial district, but to no avail since the desired shoppers simply stayed away.

Division and discord mark Victoriaville as a non-place. In the years following the lackluster grand opening, Victoriaville was largely abandoned. More recently, it has been adopted by many of the city's devalued citizens. Although too often referred to as dead, Victoriaville has become just the opposite. Today, it palpates new lifeblood. Instead of shopping, people come to gather. Victoriaville has been resignified as a meeting place.

During my visits to the mall, I witnessed a flowing and gathering of individuals. Most bodies bore smiles and threadbare clothes. The smell of coffee emanated from not one but two adjacent Robin's Doughnut shops. Cigarette smoke drifted past double doors as teams of smokers made their way in and out to quell their cravings. Various groups populated the mall on a daily basis, and operationalized the space as their own. The gathering, in Barthes terms, resembled the 'proud plenitude of reality.'

The recent assembly of inter-ethnic and intergenerational groups, repeatedly face attacks that call for the demolition of the mall. Even before the letter of Victoriaville (pg. 62) the devalued populations that made it their own were vilified. In the early years, youth culture suffered severely and was forced out to make room

for 'real consumers.' The displacement of car crazy youth followed construction. When the 'hoped for' customers never arrived, decline and dereliction followed. Victoriaville became a site of highly refined demise, with ample parking. Revitalization resulted in abject failure.

Perhaps due to years of governmental negligence, the Thunder Bay Municipal offices have moved into remodeled spaces within the mall. The recent trend has seen an abundance of dry-wall closing in vacant shops for the construction of office space. Instead of a shopping mall there are long hallways. Pathways serve to transport people past and through the mall, a prelude to the removal of any unwanted populations.

Contested space is Victoriaville's leitmotif. In this latest case we see the possibility of cohabitation between governmental factions and the presence of a substantial population of marginalized persons. There is a constant battle for space. The real failure on the part of the city is in not recognizing the success of an organic resignification and the remarkable results of unplanned occupation.

## THE BODY

The body in winter is burdened with a problematic of immobility. Danger awaits those who step unprepared into an environment that can rapidly shift from luminous and cheerful to dark and dangerous. Winter is known for cold temperatures, wind, and darkness. Together these elements are lethal.

The bundled bodies that ramble from car door to building are usually not at risk. Neither is the cross-country skier who does a daily tour of the lakefront. Instead

the winter wind and its compatriots seek out the weak. Those at risk are stuck in a ditch on the side of a lonely stretch of highway; homeless huddled near heating vents; the outdoor explorer who ventures too far, collapsing from exhaustion, swallowed by the chill of the evening air; and those unfortunate ones who have been falsely arrested by police and left out in frozen fields<sup>6</sup> with only a bare minimum of clothing and no footwear. In these instances, the body is defenseless, even a rapid palpitation of the heart will not resuscitate life. Winter never mourns the loss.

In winter, the body confronts its own mortality. In the post-industrial climate much of winter's fury is happily observed from a heated room behind two panes of glass. The burden of layers now includes domestic domains and large institutions. Winter is kept at a distance; like the West Edmonton Mall, the seasons are muted. Truth seems buried beneath the fact that, rather than spend time outside, we stay indoors. The winter wind waits patiently for our next move.

## THE FESTIVAL

The festival's fundamental failure is an unacknowledged death. Cartoonish mascots symbolizing life and light uphold an illusion.

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<sup>6</sup> "In the early morning hours of November 25, 1990, [Neil] Stonechild died of cold exposure in a field in the northwest Industrial area of Saskatoon" (Commission of inquiry Into Matters Relating to the Death of Neil Stonechild. Part 6 - *Summary of Findings*: 212).



Figure 14. Bonhomme.

We are denied the full spectrum of existence; we operate within a fraction of potential consciousness, our materiality has clouded our inherent nature as full spectral beings. In winter and beyond, we choose the path of least resistance. The odors of death are masked by a blended ether of euphoria, carried by an obsession with time. Collective effervescence cannot come to fruition as a mere hallucination. Instead, the participants must be pure of heart, unbound by the restrictions of



definitive time and duties of profane life. The conditions for success require a generous freedom of movement, an ebb and flow of unrestricted experiential delight.

If the winter festival simply means satisfaction in a communal gathering of weathered solidarity, then perhaps we *have* achieved a great success. However, this diluted form of passivity cannot overcome the seduction of ‘consumer festivals.’ Instead what we need to do is push the “paradox to the limit” (Baudrillard 2001: 290) and find the point of collapse: “The pact with the devil is no less consecrating than divine grace. The one who has signed it and the one burdened by it are equally separated forever from the common lot and, by the prestige of their destiny, trouble the dreams of the timid and the jaded, who have not attempted to plum the depths” (Caillois 2001: 59). Strike out in the snowy night – there is no other way to be sacred.

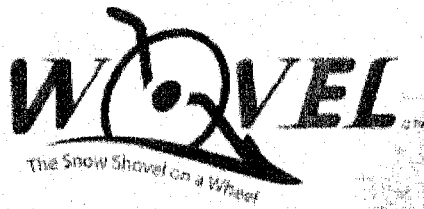
## FINAL BREATH

I have often heard artists remark that in summer they paint winter scenes, because the colors of summer allow them to brighten the paleness of a winter palette. However, I have written this winter thesis during summer, against the tendency for it to be positively brightened. Respite from the summer sun was the encouragement to face failure and death.

Failure in the frostbelt: the city in winter, shines from the rotating light of an industrial snowplow. As snow falls, a myriad of cultural distinctions like the shovel, the covered shopping mall, the bundles and the festival exercise winter’s drama. The actors take their places, frozen players perform all manner of winter distinctions.

Winter warriors welcome the advent of winter. Those armed with skis and snowshoes and skates revel in the joys of winter. Simple objects help to overcome and elevate the dreary possibility of snow filled boots and wet feet. Weather reports of snow and ice conditions remind us that the seasonality of winter carries with it a chest of treasures and failures, a few of which have been offered in the chapters of this thesis.

APPENDIX



**CLEAR AWAY SNOW 3 TIMES FASTER THAN SHOVELING...  
WITH HALF THE EFFORT AND LESS RISK OF INJURY**

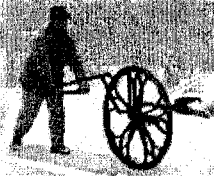
The Wowel® (rhymes with shove!) is the safe alternative to shoveling. Now, with virtually no effort, you can throw snow without twisting or lifting. Designed to greatly reduce physical strain and the risks of back and heart injuries associated with shoveling, the Wowel® revolutionizes the mechanics of shoveling.



IT'S FAST...



IT'S SAFE...



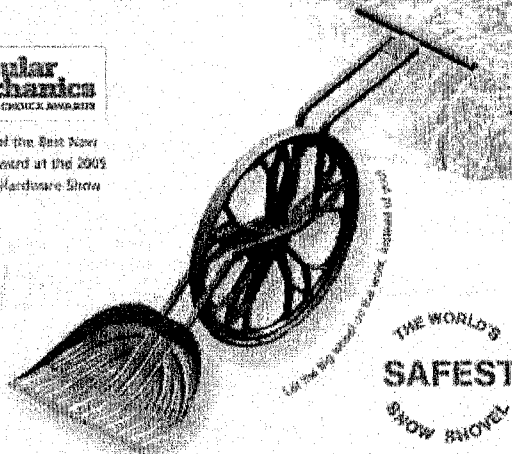
IT'S EASY...

Outperforms snow blowers without the expense, fumes, maintenance, or noise. Anyone can use it. Easily adjusts to body size and strength. Maneuvers with ease. Throws snow exactly where you want it. Works well in all snow conditions, without straining, twisting, or lifting. Cleans down to the pavement without harming stonework or landscaping. Simple assembly and storage.

"I PURCHASED A WOWEL® LAST WINTER AND WAS TOTALLY BLOWN AWAY BY THE EASE AND SPEED WITH WHICH I CLEARED MY DRIVEWAY. WHAT NORMALLY WOULD TAKE ME 2 HOURS TO CLEAR WAS DONE IN 20 MINUTES - WITH NO BACK STRAIN! LEVERAGE IS THE KEY. WHAT A GREAT PRODUCT!"  
ALAN S., STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT



Winner of the Best Snow Product Award at the 2005 National Hardware Show



Let the big wheel do the work. Instead of you.

THE WORLD'S  
**SAFEST**  
SNOW SHOVEL

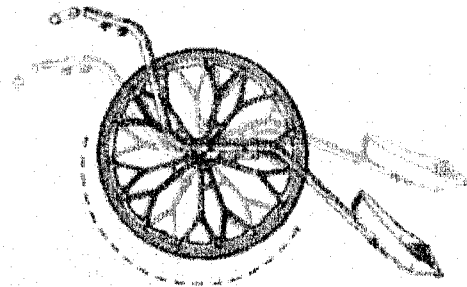
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## THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE WOVEL™

At first glance, the Wovel™ might appear to the layperson to be a novel-looking device counterintuitive to effective snow removal. In fact, the Wovel™ is an elegant and efficient design based on two of the oldest and most commonplace scientific principles ever put into use: the wheel and the lever.

The Wovel™ acts as a lever, using its wheel's axis as a fulcrum. Its wheel size, handle height, overall length, and the double-width blade are all perfectly proportioned to maximize the lever action and to capture the greatest amount of snow in one pass.

Maximizing leverage is critical to reducing the amount of work that a body must perform to do a job. In short, the Wovel™ does all of the heavy lifting and throwing for you — dramatically reducing the strain on your body and saving you a whole lot of time and energy. Body friendly, environment friendly, and even fun to use, the Wovel™ is the perfect snow removal solution.



## GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR WOVEL™ WITH THESE HANDY ACCESSORIES

The Wovel™ Accessories Pack includes four Wovel™ accessories designed to provide extra comfort, convenience, and durability when using your Wovel™. All four attach in just a few minutes or less.



**PAIR OF FOAM GRIPS**  
Insulated foam grips add extra warmth and comfort along with extra gripping power under the toughest conditions.

### GRAVEL WHEELS

Provides additional clearance between the Wovel™ blade and the ground for smooth, more efficient maneuvering of snow removal on gravel or uneven pavement. With the Gravel Wheels attached, the Wovel™ blade glides over loose or bumpy snow-covered pavement.



### CHIPPER PLATE

The force of a chipping edge added to the Wovel's™ powerful blade action to makes it even easier to remove hard-packed snow and ice. Easily attaches to the underside of the blade.



### WEAR STRIP

Attaches quickly and easily to the front edge of the Wovel™ blade for maximum blade protection and to extend the life of the blade, especially under intense, frequent use and harsh conditions.

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Figure 15. Wovel Sell Sheet.

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