



PATKAU ARCHITECTS / JAMES DOW

## WARMING HUTS: A DECADE + OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE ON ICE

Edited by Lawrence Bird, Peter Hargraves and Sharon Wohl  
(Dalhousie Architectural Press, 2021)

**REVIEW** Elsa Lam

In the winter of 1992, a skating trail opened on Winnipeg's frozen Assiniboine River, lined with discarded Christmas trees. The cleared ice eventually expanded to include hockey rinks and curling sheets, and fifteen years later, the skating trail had grown to rival Ottawa's Rideau Canal.

Around that time, a group of local architects came up with the idea of building a series of artistically designed shelters on the ice. Local firms 5468796, Sputnik, and 701 Architecture built huts alongside the skating trail the next winter. Nova Scotia architect Richard Kroeker also created a hut—and so did Antoine Predock, the architect for the Canadian Museum of Human Rights being constructed nearby.

Warming Huts would grow into an international design competition, attracting nearly 1,500 submissions to-date from around the world. The program has included invited contributions by the likes of the Patkaus, Frank Gehry, and Anish Kapoor alongside projects designed by local architecture students from the University of Manitoba. Each year, previous huts are re-installed when possible, making for a rich collection of wintertime pavilions that's earned the city bucket-list status in the *New York Times*, *Architectural Digest*, and *Fodor's*.

**ABOVE** Created for the 2011 edition of the Warming Huts festival, Patkau Architects' *Jellyfish* pavilion was made by bending thin, flexible layers of plywood to their breaking point over a timber armature.

"Over the past ten years, the Warming Huts competition has encouraged millions of people to skate the River Trail and engage with art," writes Peter Hargraves, one of the initial organizers of the initiative, and a co-editor of the new book *Warming Huts: A Decade + of Art and Architecture on Ice*. "The Warming Huts is now an integral part of [the] celebration of winter in the city."

Anishnabek writer, scholar and activist Niigaan Sinclair opens the volume, commenting on the Indigenous significance of the Warming Huts' site, a crossroads of trade, meeting and negotiation for over 6,000 years. Some of the installations—notably, invited contributions by Innu throat singer Tanya Tagaq and Métis architect Étienne Gaboury—refer to this deep history. But Sinclair sees untapped possibilities for future warming huts to connect more strongly to the Indigenous legacies of the site: "the resilience, the inclusivity, and the fact that thousands of nations and communities have been here for a very long time and created every part of the city around us."

The area—now known as The Forks—was, in pre-colonial times, "one of the most important political spaces in North America," says Cree



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IMAGE: TAZA WATER RESERVOIR AT TAZA PARK,  
PHASE 1, TSUUT'INA NATION. DESIGN BY ZEIDLER  
ARCHITECTURE. WINNER OF A 2020 CANADIAN  
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LINDSAY REID

curator Kevin Brownlee. When Europeans arrived in the 17th century, comments architect Lawrence Bird, the country's waterways continued to be a focus of development. The watery highways were critical for transporting beaver pelts, and later for moving people and goods. But with the arrival of the railway, new patterns of inhabitation came to dominate over the Prairies—a change most visible in the way that the Métis long-lot farms, oriented to the rivers, were replaced by a uniform grid to apportion land. “As Winnipeg moved into the 20th century, a cage of railway tracks, yards, and bridges was built around the Forks,” writes Bird. Eventually, as the construction of the 1968 Red River Floodway further tamed the Red and Assiniboine and residents moved to the suburbs, “the rivers became something you could ignore.”

The Warming Huts initiative is intertwined with a relatively recent reclamation of the Forks and an interest in the urban revitalization of downtown Winnipeg. Architectural professor Sharon Wohl notes how such projects, initiated in cities across North America in the mid-80s to mid-90s, have often been criticized for catering to an elite audience. The Forks is different, she writes: “Rather than providing exclusive amenities for the wealthy, the Forks’ management assures a continuous array of free events, and provides site amenities appealing to an inner-city youth population that is both at-risk and marginalized.” The Warming Huts are effective placemaking devices, adds planner Hazel Borys, “offering human-scaled civic anchors.” As architectural critic Lisa Rochon puts it, works such as the Warming Huts “reside as points of light in our vast urban galaxy.”

**ABOVE** Germany-based NAICE Architecture & Design's *Hoverbox* (2019) floats on steel supports, camouflaged by clothing. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** *Open Border* (2017) is Dutch firm Atelier ARI's vision of a wall meant to be breached; Guy Maddin's *The Temple of Lost Things* was created with Peter Hargraves and Luca Roncoroni; *Nuzzles* (2014) was created from foam noodles by Toronto-based RAW in collaboration with Kim Flynn.

For several of the essayists, the most interesting of the Warming Huts are those that have alluded to larger political and social issues. Coinciding with the 2017 election of Donald Trump, the Dutch team Atelier ARI installed *Open Border*, a skate-through double-row of soft red plastic strips spanning the river. *Cloud of Unintended Consequences*, built by University of Manitoba architecture students in collaboration with artist Eleanor Bond in 2020, presents a troubling image: a floating mass made out of plastic waste. A taxonomy of over 1,000 competition entries, compiled at the end of the book, includes dozens of additional unbuilt pavilion designs tackling political, social, and environmental issues.

Can a set of architectural installations on Winnipeg's frozen rivers make a difference, in the face of these issues? “While projects like the Warming Huts cannot solve such problems,” writes Sharon Wohl, “the building of inclusive spaces for dialogue within the framework of the city is an important step along the way.” ▲



ATELIER ARI



RAW DESIGN



GUY MADDIN