



Published by the Boston Society of Architects
52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02130
617.951.1433
bsa@architects.org
www.architectureboston.com

November/December 2006, Vol. 9 No. 6, "Winter"

"Winterscapes"

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Winterscapes

Boston has, by tradition, refused to enjoy winter. From 1659 to 1681, its Puritan government outlawed the celebration of Christmas, and anyone showing holiday spirit was fined five shillings. Our distaste for celebrating the season continues today: a recent poll of Massachusetts residents found that their number-one problem with the Commonwealth was its weather. As designers, we should consider our own attitudes toward winter, as they affect the way we build our cities. Our collective understanding of urban winters comes not only from our neighbors and weather forecasters, but also from a shared visual culture of winterscapes, especially those by well-known artists. Renoir famously asked: “Even if you can stand the cold, why paint snow? It is a blight on the face of Nature.” Other artists have been

Shaping our views of Northern cities

By Justin Crane, Assoc. AIA

able to get beyond the physical discomfort, darkness, and monotone to depict extraordinary and enjoyable aspects of the season. By looking at a tradition of urban winter scenes produced in Western Europe and the United States, we can examine some of the roots of our own prejudices and find opportunities in a season that is much maligned.

Before the Renaissance, artists rarely portrayed winter landscapes. Snow, slush, and darkness played little part in biblical and Edenic representations from the Middle Ages. Christianity’s most famous winter celebration took its December 25th date merely to incorporate the Roman festival of the Unconquered Sun (*Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*). Even if winter weather figured in Judeo-Christian myth beyond the lowest circle of Dante’s inferno, its precipitation would only have obscured the iconic subject matter. This purity of representation remains in our architectural renderings: we avoid winter scenes, as trees without leaves seem forsaken, and snow only hides our creations.

The first extant winterscape, *February* from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (page 54, right), was painted by the Limbourg Brothers relatively recently, between 1412 and 1416. Winter didn’t make regular appearances until the Dutch Renaissance, when painters used the season to symbolize the limits of mortality and morality in their 16th- and 17th-century landscapes. Dutch paintings of canals full of skaters appear benign; however, their

Right: *Harriet and Leon* (1941), Allan Rohan Crite





Late Afternoon, New York: Winter (1900), Childe Hassam

undercurrents are pernicious. An inscription on an engraving from Breughel’s study of skaters before the Gate of St. George in Antwerp reads, “*lubricitas vitae humanae*” — the “slipperiness of human life.”

This association of winter with death became more literal in 19th-century prints of Parisian winters such as H. Meyer’s *View of the boulevard Montmartre at one o’clock in the morning during the last snowstorm* (1881), in which carriages and horse carcasses are stuck in snowdrifts. Félix-Hilaire Buhot’s *Winter in Paris* (1879–1880; facing page) exemplifies the horrors of an urban winter. The dead horses, homeless people huddling around a

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burning barrel, and skeletal dogs contrast with the manicured poodle and its warmly dressed owners. Winter was menacing and feared. A 19th-century New York journalist once described St. Paul, Minnesota, as a “Siberia, unfit for habitation.” While snowplows,

heating, and the long-distance shipping of food have mitigated physical danger, we still go to great lengths to avoid the season — sometimes literally, as in Montreal’s 20 miles of underground tunnels or the West Edmonton Mall, which covers 24 city blocks. We find similar responses in Boston’s Prudential Center and its recently constructed “winter garden,” an interior glazed atrium with tropical plants that defies rather than celebrates its namesake.

The Impressionists’ winterscapes marked a shift in attitudes toward the season by presenting, even celebrating, its more sensuous qualities. This experiential aspect of Impressionism was initially obscured by the public’s preconceptions of both painting technique and winter’s atmospheric effects. Art critic Théodore Duret described how an Impressionist painter discovers winter light through observation: “He sees that, in the sunlight, the shadows on the snow are blue. Without hesitation, he paints blue shadows. So the public laughs, roars with laughter.”

The Impressionists’ keen observations also extended from capturing the physical essence of the scene to capturing the spirit of the place. Boston Impressionist Childe Hassam’s last painting



February from Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (1412–1416), Limbourg Brothers

before leaving the city, *A City Fairyland* (1886), depicts what is probably the South End. Well-dressed families, carriages, and trolleys track through fresh snow at that mercurial moment of winter dusk when spots of light from streetlamps become brighter than the diffuse winter sky. His *Late Afternoon, New York: Winter* (1900; facing page, left) also portrays a season infused with life and activity. Pedestrians move purposefully but unhurriedly through streets, falling snow reflects the soft pink blush of the setting sun, and the mass of the buildings recedes against the warm glow from the windows. Luminous highlights suggest a season of shared civic life, in which concertgoers walk together to performances, pubs beckon with warm drinks, and lights from nearby houses offer a reassuring sense of security and comfort. In the short, blustery days of winter, all impressions of life become precious. Helsinki has responded to the rareness of winter light by creating a city-wide lighting plan with 13 zoning types; the holiday lights on Boston's Commonwealth Mall now remain in place through the winter season, reinforcing the civic character of this great urban space. The value of human contact in severe weather is reflected in Boston's parallel cultural season of performances, exhibitions, and gala events, and in a strong civic life centered both on institutions such as the public library and symphony, and on myriad organizations charged with the responsibility to care for all living in our community.



Detail: *Winter in Paris* (1879–1880), Félix-Hilaire Buhot

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With Modernism came a very different presentation of winter. Rather than embracing its sensuousness, early-20th-century art took advantage of the season's striking formal qualities to neutralize its experiential qualities. Alfred Stieglitz created numerous prints of New York City during winter nights, combining a clean, severe contrast in tone with the pureness of Modernist art and design. Stieglitz's aim was to test the edge of technology, pushing photographic technique as well as capturing the spirit of the modern industrial world: "There was a tree — ice-covered, glistening — and the snow-covered sidewalk. Nothing comparable had been photographed before, under such conditions." The extreme conditions showcased technology's control over and defiance of climate, comparable to George Bellows' early-20th-century paintings of construction workers in snow-covered Manhattan.

Coatings of snow and ice gave themselves easily to minimalist abstractions, dematerializing everyday objects. Constructivist László Moholy-Nagy, well-known for his abstract photograms of household items, achieved a similar effect by taking a photo of a pathway through snow in Berlin (facing page). Sociologist Jeffrey Nash has observed in his study of parks in winter that people feel greater freedom in their use of the spaces — snow creates a blank field erasing the designer's intentions. This sense of a dematerialized winter world, and its resulting freedoms, has somewhat ironically been heightened by advances in technology that now allow us to assert unprecedented dominance over the weather: sophisticated climate-control systems, citrus flown from Florida,

and full-spectrum lighting that encourages people to forget the season as well as their locale. Winter becomes at worst an occasional inconvenience and at best an interesting graphic abstraction.

However, a few contemporary artists have returned to using the season to reveal how we think of our environment, our community, and ourselves. Allan Rohan Crite has spent the last 70 years creating portraits of everyday life in Boston's South End, with the majority

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of his work depicting the color and activity of summer. In contrast, his portrait of an African-American couple, *Harriet and Leon* (1941; page 53), puts them against a wintery backdrop. Kids still play on the street, but their play seems reserved as they respectfully watch Harriet and Leon. Neat coats of snow line the rowhouses, dressing them as finely as the couple. As he celebrates the formal qualities of winter, Crite doesn't forget the season's strong associations with

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people and place: he has stated that he painted *Harriet and Leon* to show a middle-class African-American couple defying contemporary associations with “Southern sharecroppers or jazz musicians.”

As *Harriet and Leon* suggests, our climate is our identity. More significantly, our response to our climate is also our identity. Winter in northern cities is an immutable fact and will always be a season of darkness and uncomfortable chills. But we can shape our response to winter, by better understanding the sources of age-old attitudes and by creatively finding and designing ways to exploit the season’s special qualities and experiences. Boston’s First Night is one example, an event that continuously moves us between cozy interiors and frigid exteriors, that is ruined if temperatures are too moderate to sustain ice sculptures, that rediscovers the sensuous pleasures of winter while promoting a new civic spirit. In improving our own environment, we should remember our distinctive and dignified New England responses to the climate, from efficiently packed Boston townhouses to heat-retaining box pews in colonial churches. As we reconsider the city in the context of a season that is increasingly defied by environmental technology and threatened by global warming, we should consider one simple possibility: winter is an opportunity. ■

Justin Crane, Assoc. AIA, is a designer at Cambridge Seven Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He co-chairs Common Boston, the BSA’s AIA150 community-service initiative.

From the *Radio Tower, Berlin* (1928), László Moholy-Nagy

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