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"No Day at the Beach"

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No Day at the Beach

OK, so it's winter. Quit your grumbling, whining, whinging, and kvetching. The biggest problem with winter is not the cold and the dark, but our own bad attitude.

Mark Twain observed, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." He was wrong. In fact, lots of people do something about the weather: they move. Weather, specifically our winter, is one of the first explanations given for Boston's recent population drop. Gleeful émigrés send reports from North Carolina, Florida, Texas, and Arizona, describing low-cost housing, good jobs — and wonderful weather. (These reports are never sent in July.)

Maybe some of the folks who have moved on are the pessimists and malcontents no one wants around anyway; Anton Chekhov — who knew something about cold weather — wrote that happy people don't notice whether it's winter or summer. But we have reason to worry: a declining population has deep economic and political ramifications. We need to think about both sides of the population equation — attracting and retaining. In an era when there are few tethers tying people geographically, we need to be smart about attracting and retaining those who can make a real contribution. And if our winters are part of the problem, it's time to rethink our solutions.

One solution requires changing our attitude. Winter is a state of mind and, as contributor Norman Pressman notes, it's also a relative condition: the gorgeous gold-colored evening grosbeak on your backyard feeder has come south for the winter. For too long, the best we've been able to say about winter is that it's good for the character. Anne Bradstreet may have defined New England's relationship with its climate for generations when she wrote, "If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome." Unfortunately, character isn't playing too well in today's culture of self-esteem and immediate gratification. Today, Anne would be tasting 'tinis and blogging from South Beach.

But the New England way is not the only way. Many cultures — perhaps most notably in Scandinavia — have adapted to winter conditions far more extreme than ours and learned to embrace the season. Winter brings its own pleasures, and other societies celebrate those pleasures, establishing rituals and traditions and making accommodations that are part of their very identity. They have found reason to welcome winter.

Another solution explains why *ArchitectureBoston* has taken on the subject of winter: Let's think of winter as a design problem. We can do more than just dress for the weather — we can design for it. We can design a cityscape that responds to our climate; we can invent new traditions that celebrate it. Building technology today encourages us to ignore winter; we no longer need to huddle around the hearth in order to survive. Technology has liberated us, but it has also stripped us of the will to find innovative responses to the cold season. By looking for design inspiration in our climate, we can establish a culture that views the dark months with anticipation

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rather than dread. And by creating a city that better accommodates its climate, we can improve the lives of the homeless, the elderly, the disabled, and others for whom winter remains a threat to survival.

Boston's winters are marked by slush and mud as much as by snow and ice. Put another way, they are frequently mild and nearly always changeable; people in some parts of the world might envy us. As Henry David Thoreau, another archetypal New Englander, once recorded in his journal: "'Hear! Hear!' screamed the jay from a neighboring tree, where I had heard a tittering for some time, 'winter has a concentrated and nutty kernel, if you know where to look for it.'"

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