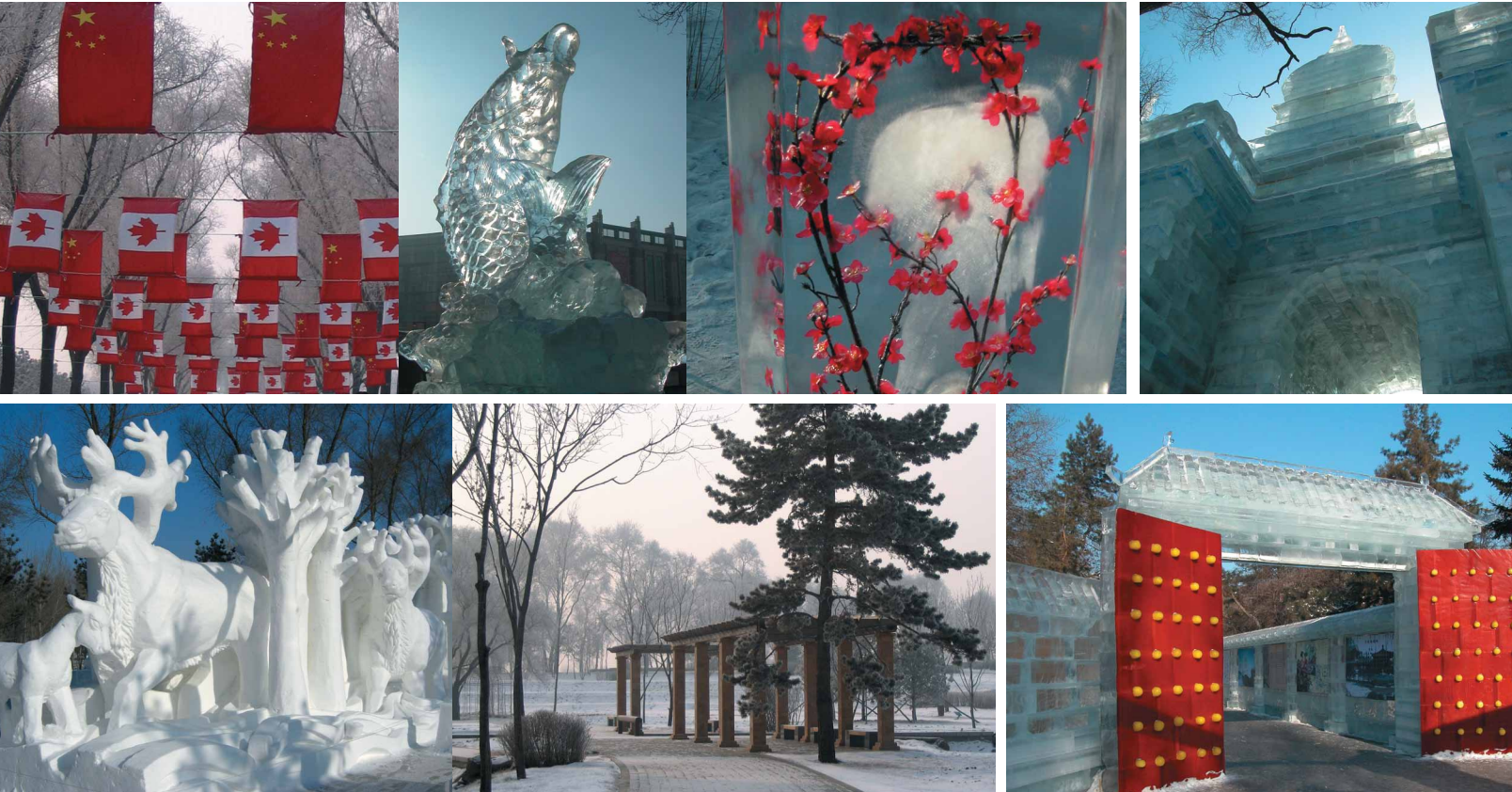


MALAKA ACKAOU

CELEBRATING WINTER

HARBIN-STYLE



THE MAGIC OF ICE, WHITENESS AND LIGHT

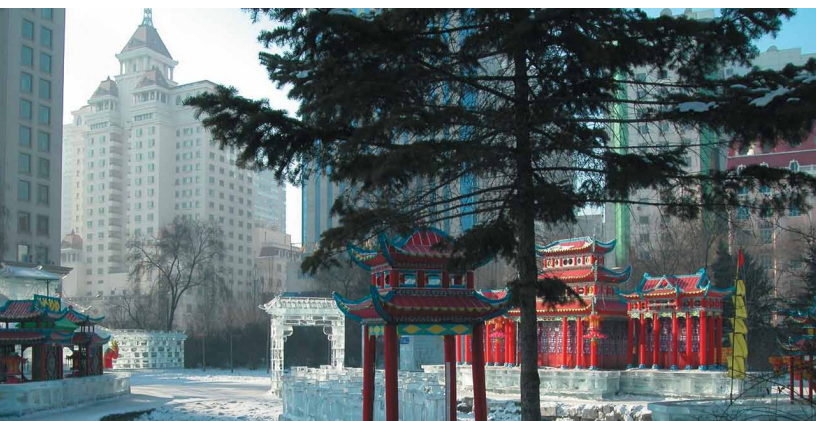
Once an unremarkable provincial city, Harbin has successfully turned its long, cold winters into an attraction. Thanks to a Winter Festival started in 1985 with a focus on monumental ice and snow sculptures, this northern Chinese city – closer to Siberia than it is to Beijing – is now a major tourist destination for thousands of Chinese and foreign visitors. Working from photographs, local artisans re-create the buildings and landmarks of a featured country or city. The enormous works present special challenges for landscape architects, because their weight tends to damage underlying greenery needed during the city's short, hot summers. Certain key park spaces have been redesigned with the massive sculptures in mind, sparing local authorities the annual chore of repairing or replanting grass and other greenery.

www.csla.ca

WHILE MOST CITIES show off images of their spring or summer landscapes, Harbin is an exception, taking great pride in its winter face, and enjoying a tourism bonanza as a result. Like Montreal, Harbin is a high-latitude city, above 44 degrees north. The capital of Heilongjiang province, Harbin is closer to Siberia than it is to Beijing. Its winters are long and cold, its summers short and hot. Once a resort town catering to Russians, Harbin's Soviet history is still visible in the Byzantine style of some of its architectural monuments, in the collections of Russian dolls and other souvenirs seen in shops, and in local restaurant menus.

Harbin residents are proud of their winter festival. Started in 1985, the festival attracts tourists from all over China who want a taste of winter fun. The city, bisected by the Songhua River, is also known for Sun Island (Taiyang Dao), which is the subject of the well-known song, "On Sun Island". Even Canadians like us can't help humming while strolling the paths of Taiyang Dao. The song's words paint an image of a bucolic Harbin, and have left millions of Chinese

*Harbin residents appreciate the monumental
...les Harbinois aiment la grandeur.*



with the impression that this northern city is among the country's most beautiful places. In summer people sing, dance and fly kites along the riverbank and in parks, and in winter the city becomes a sprawling museum of snow and ice.

BRILLIANT LIGHTS

Chinese people like to enjoy life, and always seem to be smiling despite any problems. Even in bitter cold, they go outside into public spaces to have fun, dancing and singing. Every year, during the two months of the winter festival, the city's parks are transformed into ice- and snow-sculpture galleries. The themes change every year, as do the sculpture competitions. By day, city parks boast magnificent icy landscapes, as sunshine refracts through the crystalline sculptures, giving them a magical air. Still, these daytime landscapes are muted in comparison to the nights, when brilliant multi-coloured lights enchant people of all ages, who converge on the larger-than-life castles lit up with bright colours. The city of Harbin is dotted with giant slides and transparent sculptures, and has a winter amusement park known as

Ice and Snow World, whose giant buildings are made from blocks of ice taken from the Songhua River.

SUN ISLAND CLAD IN WHITE

Meanwhile, Taiyang Dao is clad in immaculate white. Here, the sculptures are often made of snow rather than ice. Meticulous artists toil on the exhibition for weeks before the festival opens, and they stay at work for the festival's duration. Thanks to climate change, these capable artisans must frequently update their works to restore details melted by the sun.

HARBIN SUN ISLAND 2006: EVERY YEAR, TAIYANG DAO ASKS A DIFFERENT COUNTRY TO TAKE PART IN THE FESTIVAL. CANADA'S TURN CAME IN 2006-2007 WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON QUEBEC CITY.

PHOTOS WAA - WILLIAMS, ASSELIN, ACKAQUI ET ASSOCIÉS INC.



This winter journey is characterized by harmonies in white... | Ce voyage hivernal...se caractérise par l'harmonie du blanc.

THE WEIGHT OF 3,400 M³ OF SNOW

While managing and building these ice and snow monuments is an impressive feat in itself, we cannot underestimate the effects on the landscape of this intense seasonal land use. One of the important challenges we faced while developing the Taiyang Dao revitalization project was to design a permanent space for the snow sculptures. The site would have to be capable of supporting substantial pressure from the weight of the enormous sculptures. The managers of Taiyang Dao were tired of the annual chore of replacing grass and other greenery damaged by the weight of the winter sculptures. And since it gets relatively cold in Harbin, the winter space had to be designed to allow tourists to see the entire exhibition efficiently. In summer, the same space needed to accommodate children's games, thematic areas and rest areas.

Separate re-design plans for Taiyang Dao had to be drawn and presented for the extremes of winter and summer, in order to illustrate both the bucolic summer park and

the open-air winter museum. Because the most giant of the snow sculptures could not be built without damaging gardens, it was sited on the lake. We should note that Harbin residents have a particular fondness for grandiose works. It thus comes as no surprise that Harbin won the Guinness World Record for largest snow sculpture in 2007 for "Romantic Feeling." The sculpture was 200 metres long and 35 metres high, with a volume of nearly 3,400 m³ of snow. A team of more than 600 sculptors from 40 countries made the piece.

HARMONY IN WHITE

Every year, Taiyang Dao's managers approach a different country or city to partner for the festival. The idea is to give Chinese festival goers the opportunity to "travel" to another culture and country without actually going there. Despite the Chinese taste for flamboyant exhibits, the winter journey through snow sculpture is notable for the works' harmonious whiteness. For example, when Russia was featured, ballet dancers performed in front of a giant snow Kremlin, and only the colourful costumes and blue sky contrasted with the immaculate white landscape. During Japan's year, visitors could admire temples and monuments such as the Imperial Palace. Several Scandinavian nations and Italy are among previously featured countries.

In the 2006-2007 season, it was Canada's turn, with special focus on Quebec City. Our participation in that edition of the Harbin Winter Festival taught us about the dynamics behind the event. The experienced artists have no need for blueprints. Once equipped with traditional stories and legends, and photos of the featured country's cities and tourist attractions, the Harbin artisans can get to work. While the final product may be marked by a certain amount of cultural mixing or occasional mislabelling placing a landmark in the wrong region or city, no one seems to mind these small errors, because for the virtual tourist, the mental image of the country is paramount.

IMAGINATION MATTERS

Once an unremarkable provincial city, Harbin has successfully created a niche and put the city on the map, not only in China but around the world. Thanks to its leaders' perseverance, vision and drive, Harbin is gaining prominence every winter. The next time you plan a winter trip to China, put Harbin on your itinerary for a wonderful immersion in magical ice, whiteness and light.

Mackaoui@waa-ap.com

See Harbin 2011: www.facebook.com/WAAinternational