# Winter Downtown Activation Strategies: A Conversation with Max Musicant of The Musicant Group

**The ADRR's Series of Discussions with Authors of ADRR Articles: September 24, 2020**

Shortly after publishing the Fall 2020 issue the first in a series of E-Conversations was held on The ADRR's LinkedIn page to discuss the article "Winter Downtown Activation Strategies" by Max Musicant. What ensued was a dynamic conversation along with active networking and researching on principles and ideas that make Downtowns great places to be in the Winter.

The following is a direct transcription from the event with only minor formatting done to represent the most accurate conversation flow since this was a live conversation.

Participants: N. David Milder (DM), Max Musicant (MM), Andrew Manshel (AM), Isaac Kremer (IK), Mike Frederick (MF), Errin Welty (EW), Andrew Dane (AD), and Jaime Izurieta-Varea (JIV).

Organized and Transcribed by Mike Frederick

***Intro by DM:*** *Welcome to an e-conversation with Max Musicant, of The Musicant Group, to discuss his insightful article, Winter Downtown Activation Strategies, that appears in the current issue of The ADRR. (https://lnkd.in/drw9bPG). While strongly activating their downtowns during the colder months has long been a serious challenge for many of their leaders, the need to do so has increased almost exponentially as we try to recover from the adverse impacts of the pandemic on restaurants and merchants. Max's article is filled with a lot of very useful guidance and examples. I've asked Andrew Manshel, the author of Learning From Bryant Park, to pose the first question to Max. Andy, take it away…*

**AM: Thanks David! Let's start off by asking Max, if you have a budget of $500 to improve a northern city in the winter, how would you spend it?**

**IK:** You could buy one of these. https://www.bbqguys.com/solaira/alpha-series-electric-16-3-4-inch-patio-heater-h1-1500-watts-120v-silver

**MM:** Getting back to this question, I love the heater, but with my $500 I would buy a fire pit, s'more supplies, skewers, a kubb set, and some string lights. Right there we have: things to do, warmth, visual contrasts of light/dark, and visibility.

**IK:** Max Musicant right. Great opportunity to tie in with hardware store/appliance store, delis, home furnishing stores, etc.

One of my favorites was the Citi Holiday Lounge in NYC. Heaters, food, and seating were all part of the offering. Wondering if Mr. Manshel knows whether they are returning this to Union Square again this year? https://isaackremer.com/citi-holiday-lounge-new-york-city-new-york/

**MF:** If we're talking food and heat, a pig roast/BBQ would be perfect. It offers commingling while the pit gets set up, BBQ takes hours of cook time that requires constant attention (thus a personal presence), plenty of residual heat, and it pays for itself. Plus, local restaurants can be including in making accompanying dishes and drink offerings. Plenty of BBQ places already have the traveling equipment to be able to set up right on Main Street.

**MM:** Mike Frederick That's a great idea. I think that could be extended to lobster boils, or the smoking of any sort of meat/fish. Roasted corn is a big thing here in Minnesota in the summer and lends itself well to wintertime. I think the combo of heat, food, and aroma is spot on.

**AM:** Isaac D. Kremer Thanks for the question. I don't know.

**DM: Max, what's the most important ingredient to creating a successful downtown experience in winter?**

**IK:** Personally I like the suggestion of roaming musicians, choirs and carolers, fire performers, and holiday characters. We have done them all - including these guys who were on our Town Plaza in 2017.

**MM:** Great question. Isaac D. Kremer I love all those and they add so much life to a space. In my experience though, the most important and first ingredient is a community's attitude towards itself and winter: 1) it has to embrace the season as an opportunity, 2) have the pride in itself that it deserves great spaces/experiences, and finally, 3) it has to believe in its own capacity and ability to make something happen and not wait around for others to do the work for them

**IK:** Yes, your "opportunity or constraint mindset" line is spot on. Is there a source you have that or just accumulated experience in the work. That is the part of the piece that resonated with me the most professionally.

**DM:** Max Musicant how can the local leaders be helped to find that attitude, or would that require a long-term effort quite independent of trying to create any winter activation program?

**MM:** Isaac D. Kremer I would say both. I think an opportunity mindset has been shown in so many environments to be an essential ingredient for success. In working with dozens of communities, it has been my experience as well. Resources flow to places with the right attitude not vice versa.

**IK:** Max Musicant right. Or as I often say money follows vision.

**EW:** Isaac D. Kremer It also requires buy-in from municipalities that might have to up their game in the snow removal and salting department. We helped one of our communities fight their public works for two months to find somewhere else to pile snow than in the main downtown parking

lot, and making downtown sidewalks the last thing cleared after a snow sends a certain message.

**IK:** Errin Welty, CEcD, EDFP one of our restaurants yesterday told me he will form a snow shovel patrol with servers if needed

**IK: I read the article but what I didn't see is how to adapt to unique concerns related to COVID-19 and large gatherings of people. There is a deep reluctance to do anything that attracts a crowd. Additionally, retail visits and retail spending are way down at brick and mortar stores. Some as much as 80%. So the question I have is how do we do activations that also manage the flow and gathering of people in a responsible way, while also making cash registers ring?**

**MM:** Great question - I think the key is to spread things out, both spatially, but also temporally. Communities should translate their pique events that happened over a day or weekend and have elements of those occur over weeks or even months. Lots of small good things, rather than one big experience. I think this season also will push folks to re-examine January-March, which are often low points in the year, but when people most desperate for something to do and retailers could similarly use a boost. Finally, really leaning into the community connections of small businesses and downtowns will be essential to driving sales to them instead of to big box or online-only channels.

**DM:** Max Musicant Yes, Max, I think the post Xmas doldrum months are when I think the most stress on downtown small merchants will be revealed.

**MM:** I think another strategy is to create itineraries, passports, and guided trips to offer a more compelling visitor experience downtown that can be done at any time and thus reduce the risk of crowding.

A third strategy would be to tie into winter exercise and wellness: winter biking, outdoor yoga, cross country skiing, winter running, hockey, ice skating etc. These offer smaller but more regular traffic. The trick is to locate these features close to downtowns, or create partnership, discounts and promotions that attract these folks pre or post exercise.

**EW:** Max Musicant the self-guided options are so important always, especially in small communities where there might not always be businesses open. If you can at least be guaranteed something to do at all hours, it won't be a terrible experience.

We are also seeing the spreading out of events - HalloWeek, and week-long wine walks with tickets for a specific day only.

**DM:** Max Musicant Some of these activities can be in the downtown, no?

**EW:** Osceola WI sponsored meet up groups for fat biking, snowshoeing, etc. to bring like minded people together (there are lots of transplants) and provide instruction/rental for those looking to try.

**MM:** Errin Welty, CEcD, EDFP And I think with that, making sure there are consistent promotable hours for those activities. Something you know well and I know have

worked on a lot for smaller communities in particular

**AD: Great article and excellent comments. I am particularly taken by the creative use of light in winter. It can feel very magical and intimate especially when combined with fire. Throw in some ice and you are good to go!**

**DM:** Sounds like a light cocktail! Stirred, not shaken?

**MM:** Thanks Andrew Dane - it's all about seeing the opportunity that is there in the perceived constraint of darkness: i.e. , that light makes SUCH an impact

**JIV: Hey Max thanks for your time and insight. When looking at strategies, what is your opinion of thinking of long-term solutions that would require design guidelines. I'm thinking of portals or loggia as they exist in several Italian cities as a sheltering element to protect from precipitation and wind, not so much from the cold. For short term we could be discussing temporary solutions like installation of removable structures from the curb toward the building line, and more long term as guidelines for actual construction. Thinking that the shift in how we use sidewalks and public spaces may have changed forever after COVID, does this even seem like something feasible or reasonable to think of?**

**MM:** Great question Jamie. I think your mention of wind protection is key - it's rarely the cold on its own that is difficult, it's the windchill. I think there are building scale solutions like smaller nooks/setbacks on the ground level (That still have good visibility and lighting in them) that would make a difference. Unfortunately in the US, I have mostly seen bad examples of arcades and loggias - they are so often dark, banal, and the columns overly large so that they are too cut off from the sidewalk. On a planning scale, I think the investigation of wind tunnels, especially in our office-block dominated downtowns, would be welcome and not something I've seen done. A former planning professor of mine told me the streets of Mykonos, Greece were laid out to protect the inhabitants from the constant wind from the sea. Not sure if that is actually true, but that sort of thinking would be very helpful for winter cities. Finally, the City of Edmonton has done some great work on Winter Cities and has developed a useful guide. Of note is the focus on creating comfortable micro climates: https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/pdf/wintercitydesignguidelines_draft.pdf

**JIV:** Max Musicant yes! Edmonton has a lot of good ideas. Definitely will look into Mykonos. Prof. Besim Hakim came up with sort of a reversed engineered code for Mediterranean cities and protection from the elements is high up in the considerations for making streets narrow and introducing bridges, arcades and nooks. If it's a design problem in arcades and loggias that could be solved with better research as you mention. I'd be very interested to follow up with that. Thanks for your answer.

**DM:** Oct 2nd: Jaime, you and Isaac did a great presentation on winter activation that

others can access at https://www.downtownnj.com/forum-recap-2020-10-02/

**MF: Max, There are a lot of sports teams in and around Minneapolis, do you have any experience with holding events with players? This might prove to be especially popular with most sporting events still off limits to in-person attendance. Events like Meet-and-Greets, skirmish matches, small informal matches with the players themselves, come to mind.**

**MM:** That's a great concept. We are a sports crazy town here and I think there is a pent up desire for more sports (or sports related) activities now, with so much less happening now due to COVID. If fans can't go to the stadium, bringing the players and activities to the people in a COVID safe way would be a big draw. Though something like the Pope-mobile may be needed for big stars!

**AM:** Max Musicant do you want to talk about the insane downhill skating event in St. Paul? Huge crowds!

**MM:** Yes, that is an 100k attendance event to watch people ice skate down an ice track that descends several hundred feet from the door step of a Cathedral to downtown St. Paul - it's insane, and it's funded by Red Bull

**DM: Max Musicant where do communities most often slip up when trying to produce a winter activation?**

**MM:** I think the biggest mistake that communities make is having their social activities and events too far from the commercial cores and downtowns. The perception of distance in wintertime is greatly expanded. If a one block walk was no big deal in the summer, it can be prohibitive distance for many in the winter. While parks often serve as event staging grounds, it's usually worth trying to shoe-horn activities into less space that's within your downtown. Keeping things as close to each other as possible is crucial (though COVID makes it more challenging). In general, it gets back to the "why" of your event or activation. If it's to support your downtown, do it there!

Another mistake I see is not providing warm up space. When groups of people make a trip, it just takes one of the members to get cold to force everyone else to leave. Communities need to provide places to warm up. This doesn't mean every inch is heated, but that there are indoor, wind protected, and/or heated spaces for people to reset their body warmth and bide time while others are still outdoors. In turn, these spaces should be programmed with food, music, art, vendors, etc.

**AM:** Max Musicant a critical mass of activity is absolutely essential. One offs and far flung activities tend to have little impact. It's the secondary effects that you're trying to produce -- activity taking on a life of its own.

**DM: Max, how does the size of a downtown or its town/city impact on what kinds of activation can be done. I guess I'm trying to get at what likely differences in**

**resources on one hand and potential participants on the other will make on the types of feasible activations? More specifically, what difference will a lot of downtown residents make on the design of an activation program? or a lot of office workers? or hordes of tourists? If different downtown organizations have budgets for activation of say $5,000, $15,000 and $25,000 would the differences in the programs just be that of scale or would they also differ fundamentally, for want of a better term, by TYPE?**

**MM:** Great question. In general, I like to think of more money as allowing for more control over what happens, but not dictating quality per se. Small communities or downtowns still have the potential to create really rich experiences, but they will be more reliant on existing facilities and the voluntary contributions of the broader community. More resources allow communities to dictate exactly what they want, especially if they don't already have them, especially those that are more capital intensive: ice rinks, curling, outdoor markets, larger performances, etc. I think that in general, there is usually more benefit derived from investing in activities that can foster habits and routines, rather than one-time impacts. As for downtowns with residents vs. non - I think those that have larger populations will do better than those that have relied on office workers (for sure), hordes (definitely), and tourists (only slightly). Those communities that are within an hour of major metropolitan areas may do quite well as they serve as easy to access novelty in an overly confined world. Both regional tourists and downtown residents also provide more consistent traffic that also limits risks of unsafe crowding during COVID.

Towards your last sub question, I think that the fundamental difference would be that smaller communities would/should focus around a central hub, rather than have several pillars. I.e., invest 75% of resources in an ice rink and then modest amounts to do programming around it. Alternatively, light installations, a COVID safe market, outdoor music series, etc. Create a single tent pole and then hang other small activations off of it.