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Artists push their own snow festival

City officials, residents give cordial, if cool, reception to alternative to famed Sapporo event

By ROB GILHOOLY
 Special to The Japan Times

Among the intricately carved sculptures at the Sapporo Snow Festival this year, three Dutch artists and a polar bear could be seen luring passersby with ribbon-wrapped blocks of compacted snow in an attempt to promote an alternative festival that makes better use of the city's most prominent resource.

"Every year thousands of tons of snow are shipped into Sapporo for the festival, but also thousands of people, machines and logistics are involved in the mass removal of snow from the city, and this serves no purpose other than mere displacement," said conceptual artist Kamiel Verschuren, who initiated the "Sapporo II Snow" project. "Our aim is to create a platform whereby the creative potential of snow can be explored by people, artists and cultural producers in the community."

Snow has long been used for such creative means during the annual snow festival, which has gained international acclaim since its inception in 1950, but "Sapporo II" organizers say there is limited grassroots involvement in the event, since the Self-Defense Forces play a major role.

While citizen sculptors were at the heart of the earliest festivals, since 1955 the Ground Self-Defense Force has been charged with creating the majority of the sculptures.

In this year's event, held from Feb. 5 to



Kamiel Verschuren and Mami Odai (in a polar bear outfit) hand out a block of compacted snow to a young passerby during the Sapporo Snow Festival in Sapporo on Feb.5. (Below) A couple has their photo taken in front of a sculpture of well-known anime character Chibi Maruko-chan and her friends during the snow festival. ROB GILHOOLY PHOTO



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11, those sculptures were made from some 32,500 tons of snow that SDF troops trucked in from several locations, including parks and cemeteries, on the outskirts of the city or beyond.

"Today there are no local artists or architects involved, just the local authorities, the military and a handful of local residents," said Verschuren.

"The role of Japan's military is changing and it's not difficult to imagine a time when it will be charged with more befitting work, so we are preparing for the time when the festival will be returned to the local community."

"Sapporo II" organizers hope to inaugurate an annual two-day holiday after the season's first snowfall during which the city's 1.9 million residents will be encouraged by employers and schools to take a break from study and work to create their own sculptures from the city's snow alone.

During the second day, residents can wander around to admire their neighbors' creations, thus continuing the festival spirit while at the same time clearing the streets and parks of snow.

"What is striking is that the Sapporo Snow Festival has become a commercial festival rather than a cultural one," said Sapporo II's Mami Odai, the artist inside the polar bear outfit. "Sapporo II" would be a cultural festival that allows people to express themselves as the annual festival itself once did. It would be a festival that is less polluting, more durable and less money-driven."

Local authorities have voiced support for the project, though only as an alternative to the main event.

"I think it's a good idea, but I don't think it would attract the same attention as the current festival," said Jun Kitamura of the Sapporo Snow Festival organizing committee. "People come from far and wide to see the dynamic sculptures made from pure white snow by trained sculptors, not small ones made by amateurs from the dirty stuff that gathers in the city."

The city also gave "Sapporo II" tacit approval at this year's snow festival by allocating Team Holland — whose members are all part of the "Sapporo II" project — a place in this year's International Snow Statue Contest.

Their "entry" consisted of thousands of blocks of compacted snow each bound by a ribbon on which was printed the concept behind "Sapporo II."

"We decided it was time to infiltrate the festival and pass on our message directly to the people," said Verschuren, who started developing the project along with a number of local artists, architects and creative professionals in 2005.

Passersby who received the symbolic "melting gift" expressed mixed views on both the current and proposed festivals.

"I think the Sapporo Snow Festival is great because it brings so many people to the city," said office worker Miyuki Saito. "Although it's right on the doorstep, I think many local residents don't bother going, so an alternative festival that actually gets local people, especially young children, involved would be fun, but not at the expense of the main one."

"The Snow Festival has become a bit too Disney for my liking," said another resident, 29, who went by the name of Yoshi. "But I don't know if I would build any sculptures myself. I mean, it's minus 9 degrees out there and I get pretty tired of all the snow here."

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- There should be no correlation between fashion styles and sports.**
- Country representatives must look professional; no exceptions.**
- What's the fuss about? He was dressed snowboarder style.**
- It's an embarrassment to Japan; he should have been sent home.**
- Japan places too much pressure on its athletes as it is.**
- So Kokubo has been scolded; let him get on with the Games.**

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Verschuren also laments the increased commercialization of the main festival, and hopes residents will see the alternative event as a more economically and environmentally viable option.

"Local authorities say that the total distance covered by SDF trucks to transport snow for the festival is 375,000 km. That's roughly the distance from here to the moon," he said. "This seems ludicrous in this day and age, especially when there is plenty of snow in the city already that is going to waste. Why not use that and have fun creating something?"

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