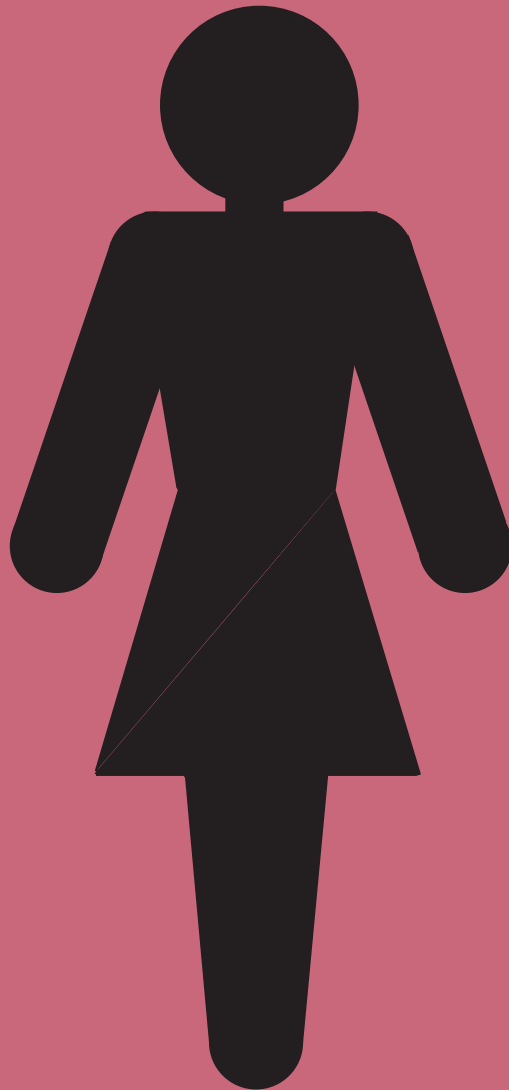


The Public Toilet: A Woman's Place

Designing Privacy into a Public Facility



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Industrial Design Engineering

9416 Words

Year of Submission: 2006

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Designing Privacy into a Public Facility

Introduction

"Where are the toilets?"

One of the world's most repeated questions, and the answer is increasingly vague. In London alone, 40% of public conveniences have closed in the last 6 years¹.

Personally, I find this frustrating. Firstly, I am a London resident, and every time that I go shopping or have a drink with friends, at least one detour is made in desperate search of a toilet.

Secondly, I have always seen the public toilet as a mini-cosmos of industrial design opportunity. There is a lot of wasted water, wasted paper, a nasty overflowing sanitary towel bin, a broken lock. There's nowhere to hang your coat, handbag and shopping, and the floor is unhygienic, so you must hold on to these items. But then consider that 85% of women hover over the toilet seat and what ensues is a delicate balancing act². A dozen women queue blocking access to the hand dryer and entrance, and systematically pass responsibility down the line for propping open the door.

This neglect by architects, engineers and designers is hardly surprising due to the social taboo that makes public toilets embarrassing and unglamorous. In any case, I do not believe that a simple make-over of existing facilities is enough to turn the public toilet into a desirable facility. In providing privacy within a public facility, the public toilet is a paradox within the urban environment. Its location and appearance aim to provide discretion, but

¹ London Assembly: Health and Public Services Committee, *An Urgent Need*, Greater London Authority, London 2006, p5

² Moore, K.H; Richmond, D.H; Sutherst, J.R; Imrie, A.H; Hutton, J.L, 'Crouching over the toilet seat, prevalence amongst British gynaecological outpatients and its effect upon micturition' *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, Vol 98, Issue 6, 1991, p569

instead induce fear and isolation. Rather than recreating the safety of the home bathroom, it attracts vandalism and the occasion for attacks.

In my dissertation I wish to discuss the reasons for these failed design intents in order to establish a better way of designing a private space within a public facility.

I begin in Chapter 1 by revealing the current state of London's facilities, and hence the current relevance of this topic. Chapter 2 then looks at the emergence of urban provisions for women beginning with the department store, the first instance of a space designed to help women feel comfortable in the city.

Chapter 3 is toilet specific. This explores the different types of privacy needed in a Ladies loo: physical isolation, a discreet location, and a mental retreat from the public sphere. Chapter 4 explores the threats to this provision, in the form of neglect, vandalism and crime, and how the current 'solutions' to these problems can conflict with the original privacy specifications. In Chapter 5, I highlight design suggestions for improving current and future facilities that are sensitive to privacy whilst discouraging negative behaviour. My dissertation ends with the idea that transformation design; designers applying their design-process to complex social problems; could be the secret to unlocking public toilets as private spaces for women in the city. This dissertation uses literature research as its foundation, but layered onto this are examples from modern society and my personal observations as an independent woman in the city.

1. Capital Conditions

London was home to the first public toilets in Britain, and some of the best and worst examples of current provisions. As an international city, the demand is at its highest and most complex, with all ages, nationalities and cultures represented.

In fact, the improvement of London's public toilets is currently a hot topic. The Greater London Authority concluded an enquiry into the state of the capital's public toilets in February 2006 with a report entitled 'An Urgent Need'. Around the same time, I won a competition called 'Westminster Innovate', where Westminster City Council called for ideas to improve the City of Westminster. My idea was a nearest toilet text service, wherein sending a text message from your location would generate a reply containing the location and facilities of the nearest toilets to you, including both public and participating semi-public facilities (pubs, restaurants). In addition, Westminster City Council is currently refitting several public toilets in the city, having recently completed a £300,000 refurbishment of facilities at Oxford Circus³.

This initiative by Westminster stands alone in a capital adrift with closed or converted toilets. Closures are currently occurring at the astonishing rate of 40% in 6 years, highlighted by the GLA's report.⁴ These closures are the result of a vicious cycle of under-funding, misuse and neglect.

The cycle begins with the Local Authorities. The power to build facilities lies here, but it is by no means a duty, merely an option. Therefore if the local authority (or borough, in London) wants more money for necessary services, they will be advised to end this optional service before having their community charge increased. One example of this is

³ City of Westminster, 'Historic Public Toilet Reopens after Anti-crime Face-lift (23/05/05)', <http://www.westminster.gov.uk/councilgovernmentanddemocracy/councils/pressoffice/news/pr-2675.cfm>, accessed 02/06/05

⁴ London Assembly: Health and Public Services Committee, *An Urgent Need*, Greater London Authority, London 2006, p.5

in Shepway and Torbay, where the Local Authority closed all of their public toilets the day after a threat was made to cap their community charge⁵.

Therefore, toilets must be operated at as low a cost as possible. Providing an attendant for the facilities becomes an expensive luxury, but when left unattended, public toilets become untidy and unhygienic. Already the public use of the facilities begins to dwindle.

Unattended facilities create opportunities for vandalism. Vandalism is ubiquitous in public toilets. Consequently, once a public toilet is damaged and underused, it becomes a cheaper solution for the local authority to close the facility than to repair it.

Any lack of use of public facilities reflects the condition of those facilities, rather than a diminishing need for such provisions. The speed and freedom of the car does mean that one can travel easily from home to the final destination, both of which provide private facilities. However, in urban centres such as London, public transport and cycling dictate the norm. Journey times are long and rarely direct. Both residents and tourists will spend full days away from home, hopping between destinations.

And in general people are becoming increasingly mobile, with more and more social groups being liberated from the home. The elderly, disabled and those with children need to have their specific needs met if they are to enjoy a basic level of public freedom. If public toilets are not available, either by not existing or by not meeting basic standards, it can seriously affect someone's quality of life, by limiting their freedom to go out, limiting the time that they can spend away from home, and by limiting their movements to places where they know that adequate facilities exist.

⁵ London Assembly: Health and Public Services Committee, *An Urgent Need*, Greater London Authority, London 2006, p.14

Figure 1: Oxford Circus. 15:56 Saturday 12th August 2006⁶

The busiest day of the week for the capital's shopping hotspot. Yet the 'state-of-the-art' historic toilet is almost empty, passed by either ignored or unnoticed. Is there more to public toilet design than is currently being considered?



⁶ Photograph from Author's own collection

2. A Woman's Place

Cleanliness and Godliness

The 1851 Great Exhibition was not only a seminal event in the history of design. It was also host to the country's first public toilets. Other privately-funded public facilities then emerged in the capital, with Local Government only rising to the challenge towards the end of the century. The 1891 Public Health Act finally gave the responsibility to Local Authorities, allowing them to use the subsoil of any road as a location for public toilets.

The Victorian era saw a great deal of work and expenditure on sanitation and public health. The observation of the time, 'Cleanliness is akin to Godliness', reflects that this was done as much for the soul as for the body. This is reflected in the work of the Revd Charles Kingsley who created the character of Tom in the 1863 book, *The Water Babies*. Tom has never washed nor heard of God. On seeing his dirty reflection in a mirror for the first time he is overcome with shame and anger⁷. The Revd Charles Kingsley was not only a religious man, but an 'eminent sanitarian' of the Victorian era, an example of this perceived link between morality and public health⁸.

Part of the motivation for providing public facilities was for the ruling middle classes to improve the souls of those considered less-fortunate. Concerning oneself with the health of the general public was a way to maintain social harmony⁹. And the distinction between the class who ruled society and the working class was kept in these early public toilets, with facilities of different quality (and corresponding charge) for gentlemen and men, and for ladies and women¹⁰.

⁷ Kingsley, Charles; 'The Water Babies', 1863 quoted in Eveleigh, David J; *Bogs, Baths and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation*, Sutton Publishing, Stroud, 2002, p61.

⁸ Reynolds, Reginald; *Cleanliness and Godliness*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1946, p94

⁹ Forty, Adrian; *Objects of Desire*, Thomas R Hudson, London 1986, p159

⁵ Greed, Clara; *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*; Architectural Press, Oxford 2003, pp 43-47

Even though Victorian practicality concerning public sanitation meant that public toilets were provided for women as well as men, some still thought that this provision was an insult to the decency of women¹¹. And it seems some women agreed, leaving facilities to experience financial woes because they were thought dangerous, distasteful or a threat to their modesty¹². Barbara Penner finds evidence of this while researching the disputed application for a women's public toilet in Camden in 1900, even revealing prejudices amongst the women fighting the cause; that women using a public convenience might be thought to be little better than prostitutes.

This certainly shows the position of women in society at that time; that the streets of London were not the habitat of the unaccompanied moral woman. On the other hand, Penner notes that at least in this case women were accepted as part of 'the Public', whereas public in other matters, such as serving on local government, only referred to men¹³.

Domesticity and the Private Sphere

Women have long been associated with what is known as the 'private sphere'. This has different connotations in different contexts, but in this discussion, the private sphere refers to domestic life, and the intimacy associated with it. This is to be compared with public life, the social yet impersonal agendas that unfold in the urban environment.

In Victorian times, the correlation between public/private and masculine/feminine worlds was more than just social theory. A woman's role was centred on the home; to attend to family and domestic life. However, the 19th Century saw the growth of the city and the move of people, in particular the middle-classes, to the suburbs. The residential zones

¹¹ Robinson, Steve; 'Public Conveniences, Policy, Planning and Provision', 2001, quoted in Greed, Clara; *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*; Architectural Press, Oxford 2003, p47

¹² Penner, Barbara; 'A World of Unmentionable Suffering: Women's Public Conveniences in Victorian London', *Journal of Design History*. Vol 14 No.1, p37

¹³ Wolff, Janet; *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*; Polity Press, 1990, p14

were now separate from business and commerce, and whilst men would travel into the city, their wives became increasingly isolated at home.

Of course this is not true of working class women who also left the home for work. But they were limited to feminine professions, such as teaching, dress-making and retail.¹⁴ As both working-class and female, they were not admitted to participate in public life. This remained male-oriented and was booming with the creation of organisations and institutions covering politics, culture and entertainment. Women's involvement was mostly non-existent. Women were not permitted to visit pubs, coffee houses or restaurants, and any woman in a public place would have to be accompanied by a man of her acquaintance or risk being viewed as a prostitute¹⁵.

Perhaps this is the reason why the 1851 Great Exhibition facilities were originally only provided for men: women's toilets were added later. This imbalance in public toilets for each sex continued through the 19th Century, for example, the toilets in Leicester Square in 1900 were built with 40 urinals or cubicles for men, but 10 for women¹⁶. This could be seen as a sexist act; a result of the absence of women in power, but could as easily be a simple reflection of the lack of women in the urban environment. Why provide toilets for those who aren't there?

But the Great Exhibition was also responsible for a shift in culture that would result in respectable women being attracted to a new aspect of city life. The exhibition's displays of well-manufactured goods helped to develop a shopping culture¹⁷. Women were looking for ways to improve their restricted domestic life, and from this initial event, the department store emerged, and women had their own place in the urban environment.

¹⁴ Wolff, Janet; *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*; Polity Press, 1990, p14

¹⁵ Wolff, Janet; *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*; Polity Press, 1990, p23

¹⁶ Greed, Clara; *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*; Architectural Press, Oxford 2003, pp42-43

¹⁷ Lancaster, Bill; *The Department Store: A Social History*, Leicester University Press, London 1995, p16

The Liberty of the Department Store

The department store began as a convenient space in which to find home goods, beginning with draperies and haberdasheries. Soon stores were being designed as public spaces for women where they would feel comfortable outside of the home. Many facilities not otherwise available to women in the city were provided within this pseudo-public space. Selfridges went to the point of giving their store a 'community centre', with 'a library and Silence Room, a First Aid Ward, a Bureau de Change, Patriotic Rooms ... Railway Steamship and Theatre Booking Offices, Parcel and Cloak Check desk ... a Post and Telegraph Office, a Savings Bank, a Luncheon Hall, a tea garden open to the sky...'

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Many women used the department store as a meeting point in the city, as Bainbridge's of Newcastle advertised¹⁹:

A Convenient Rendez-vous!

We are pleased to find that many Ladies make our Warehouse a place of meeting in 'Town'. It is very central, and in any case a place of call, and it is big enough to be private!...

Bainbridge & Co. Ltd

The last phrase, 'big enough to be private', seems like a contradiction when compared to the intimate privacy of the home. Whilst men might enjoy the anonymity of the city, an unaccompanied woman was at risk from the variety of society. In the department store, women found a sanctuary that would protect them from the city, whilst giving them the space and anonymity to conduct a life outside of the home. 'The department stores were in the public sphere, but in their very construction, architecture and aura they presented

¹⁸ Lancaster, Bill; *The Department Store: A Social History*, Leicester University Press, London 1995 p75

¹⁹ Lancaster, Bill; *The Department Store: A Social History*, Leicester University Press, London 1995 p54

themselves as part of the private sphere.²⁰ The department store's existence relied on and encouraged the emergence of women from the home and into town.

However, this new public life for women built around city shopping was still subjected to concerns for a woman's morality. Two examples are mentioned by Bill Lancaster, found in other texts²¹: the first is the urban myth that white slavers would hide in the powder rooms of department stores; the second that a woman's love of fashion was the beginning of a life destined to end in the brothel.

These notions show the level of unease still apparent in Victorian middle-class society. The second example shows the continuing fear amongst the Victorian middle-classes that an involvement in aspects of public life such as commerce could damage the female virtue. A study of Burlington Arcade, a 19th century shopping arcade, draws similar ideas. Burlington Arcade consisted of shops only of interest to women, and so attracted an almost entirely female clientele. But this carried its own risks, as the arcades became known as places in which to find women, whether it be for a wife or a prostitute²².

The first example however is of even more interest. The fear of attack in the department store does not come from the shop floor where a woman is still in her pseudo-public world. The kidnapping takes place away from the public eye, in the one place in the store that is designed to be as private as the home, but at the same time, open to any immoral stranger: the powder room.

The public toilet remains public in many senses of the word. Firstly, its emergence in the Victorian era was to serve the public good. The public toilet addressed both the physiology and morality of society. Secondly, it is public in its indiscriminate availability. Everyone and anyone may use a public toilet, the only potential segregation being separate male and female facilities. Finally, it forms part of public life. It is a toilet serving the varied population of the city.

²⁰ Andrews, Maggie; Talbot, Mary M; *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*; Cassell, London 2000, p3

²¹ Lancaster, Bill; *The Department Store: A Social History*, Leicester Univ. Press, London 1995, p178

²² Borden, Iain; Pivaro, Alicia; Rendell, Jane; *Strangely Familiar*, Routledge, London 1996 p35

However, the fundamental architectural aim of the public toilet is to provide privacy for the user. Therefore, the public toilet holds a unique position within the urban environment of a pseudo-private space. The example of the powder room within department stores shows that, whilst women have been provided with a moment's rest from the city streets, the pseudo nature of this privacy carries with it inherent threats. It is important therefore to understand both aspects of the space; the privacy desired by women in the urban environment and the stimulus behind anti-social behaviour associated with public toilets. This will be a huge step towards designing successful ladies facilities.

3. Privacy and the Public Toilet

In order to provide public toilets that can be considered successful and desirable facilities within the urban landscape, it is important to understand the nature of privacy that must be designed into the public toilet. This chapter will look at the three aspects that make up this privacy.

Firstly, the toilet cubicle must provide physical privacy for the user. Secondly, discretion is often included through careful location of the facilities. Thirdly, the public toilet should provide the occasion for mental privacy, or solitude, so that women are provided with more than just a public health facility, but a retreat from the public sphere.

Physical Privacy

Public toilets have existed for centuries, and pre-date private facilities in the home. Before the French Hygiene Edict in 1539, a major milestone in improving public health and sanitation, communal cesspools were the only purpose-designed facilities available. The Hygiene Edict saw citizens made responsible for their own waste, effectively making it illegal to urinate or defecate in the streets. When left to arrange their own facilities, people were naturally inclined to build private spaces, hidden from society²³. This marks the beginning of the need for total privacy.

However, the privacy required in home bathrooms is simpler than that in public facilities. A home suggests a group of people holding close relationships.²⁴ The home exists to provide privacy to this group as a single entity; it is not expected that they require total privacy from each other. This reduces the level of privacy required compared with a public convenience.

²³ Laporte, 'The History of Shit', 2000, quoted in Rez, Jonathan. *Flushing Out the Male Public Restroom*. College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia 2002, p8

²⁴ Kumar, Krishan; 'Home: Promise and Predicament of Private Life', in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*, ed Jeff Weintraub, Krishan Kumar; The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997. p227

Alexander Kira defines the privacy of public and private bathrooms in his much cited work 'The Bathroom'²⁵. The family bathroom provides 'privacy-for', that is, privacy for the user to perform bodily functions away from other family members. A public toilet however, must also provide 'privacy-from', a form of protection from the actions of strangers. In the public bathroom cubicle, both elements are provided: the cubicle itself provides *privacy for* the user and *privacy from* the user for others in the facility.

This may seem like a subtle distinction, but privacy-from comes into its own in more sociological situations. Kira uses the example of unisex facilities in Europe. Women must walk past urinals to reach an available cubicle. Whilst the people of that culture may be comfortable, a British woman would be lacking the 'privacy-from' men urinating.

The Twobicle



Figure 2: Twobicle²⁶ My friend told me of a ladies' toilet in The Mitre pub in Southampton. There were 3 cubicles available but in the first cubicle there were 2 toilets. Internet research reveals that this is named a 'twobicle', and has emerged since the new millennium in about a dozen pubs and clubs in the UK. Some places say this is to provide more toilets where there isn't sufficient space for more cubicles. However, most participating clubs claim that the twobicle actually attracts more customers.

*"Ladies always seem to go to the toilets in pairs... ..but if you ask them, they'll tell you what they do is talk, so we've provided an opportunity to talk".*²⁷

The situation is even more intimate than in the home. Two girls have become a single entity, choosing to have no privacy from each other to perform bodily functions. A cultural taboo has been dismissed as irrelevant, to the point where society is providing for this new way of thinking. Could awareness of this close bond between women destroy the current norm of needing total privacy even from those close to you?

²⁵ Kira, Alexander; *The Bathroom*, Penguin Books, New York 1976, pp 202-203

²⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2006/08/22/liquid_envy_nightclub_launch_feature.shtml (05/10/06)

²⁷ Rob Broadbent, Sales and Marketing Manager, Infinity Nightclub Manchester
http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_50039.html, accessed 20/06/06

A Private Location

Privacy-for is designed into public toilets to a level beyond that of the cubicle walls. The location of the facilities themselves always considers how best to provide privacy for the user. Sometimes it is the driving factor. Kira comments on a tendency for facilities and their signing to be so discreet that they become almost invisible²⁸. In London facilities are often hidden underground and with no consistency in location, for example, only 35% of tube stations have public toilets²⁹.

Underground London



Figure 3: Carnaby Street Public Toilets³⁰

In defence of underground facilities, these were not built with intentional disregard for the disabled, elderly, or those with children. When public toilet provision was put in the hands of Local Authorities following the 1891 Public Health (London) Act, Local Authorities were given the right to use the subsoil of any road for the provision of public conveniences and sewerage³¹. In the 1960s Westminster Council took to building underground public toilets, like those at Tottenham Court Road, when all they really wanted was a pedestrian underpass. Lacking the statutory authority to build underpasses, the toilets would be cunningly located in a tunnel with access from all roads³².

²⁸ Kira, Alexander; *The Bathroom*, Penguin Books, New York 1976, pp 205

²⁹ London Assembly: Health and Public Services Committee, *An Urgent Need*, Greater London Authority, London 2006, p.16

³⁰ Photograph from Author's own collection

³¹ Greed, Clara; *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*; Architectural Press, Oxford 2003 p43

³² Greed, Clara; *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*; Architectural Press, Oxford 2003 p44

London's underground facilities must also have stemmed partly from a belief that this was the most discreet solution. Barbara Penner's study of women's public toilets in Victorian London comments on one toilet proposal being disputed since it would occupy 'too public a position and ladies would not care to use it for this reason'³³, which refers back to the concerns of Victorian society mentioned in Chapter 1: there was too great an association between the public toilet and the female body and sexuality, and so women would mind a great deal if they could be seen entering one.

It would seem that in Victorian society a woman's perceived morality was in greater danger than her physical person. This is now an outdated idea. In his sarcastic discourse of 1946, Reginald Reynolds reports the observations of one anonymous author, possibly Reynolds himself, who notes that '[public conveniences] are hidden away as though... ..the authorities were bitter and shamefaced or aesthetically revolted by their own creations'.³⁴ Here the idea of embarrassment remains, but the impracticalities are beginning to show.

Over the course of the last century concerns have weakened and new problems have developed. Whilst women still like to be discreet in their toilet-goings, there is certainly no shame intrinsically linked to the Ladies' toilet. Since 1946, this hiding of public toilets has developed from a minor irritation for those in need into a physical danger to personal safety.

³³ Penner, Barbara; 'A World of Unmentionable Suffering: Women's Public Conveniences in Victorian London', *Journal of Design History*. Vol 14 No.1, p37

³⁴ Reynolds, Reginald; *Cleanliness and Godliness*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1946, p149

The Sanctuary: Mental Privacy

Although public and private spheres are less gender exclusive than in the Victorian era, it is reasonable to suggest that women feel more relaxed at home. Therefore the need for space that recreates the feeling of private life within the urban environment is as relevant today as when the first department store opened its doors. This is clear to me each time I sit in Starbucks, relaxed yet alone in its homely surroundings. Compare this with the discomfort that I feel when waiting alone in a pub. Here I seem much more 'in public', and fair game for the observation and judgement of others.

Ladies public toilets must also incorporate this feeling of sanctuary into their design, for women can view the toilet as a room with functions far beyond elimination. A Guardian article from 2000 suggests as much:

'Women... ...have fewer issues with the intimacy of bodily functions than men do: men don't even exchange eye contact in lavatories, let alone lipstick, loo paper, scandal and confidences'.³⁵

The toilet provides the freedom to think, to cry, to fix one's appearance, to confide, to gossip, and to relax. A visit to the toilet is a chance to step off the public stage.

'Bridget Jones's Diary' by Helen Fielding³⁶

Wednesday 4 January

4p.m. Office. State of emergency. Jude just rang up from her portable phone in flood of tears, and eventually managed to explain, in a sheep's voice, that she had just had to excuse herself from a board meeting (Jude is Head of Futures at Brightlings) as she was about to burst into tears and was now trapped in the ladies' with Alice Cooper eyes and no make-up bag.

³⁵ O'Farrell, Maggie; 'Why do we go to the loo in twos?' *The Guardian*, 31/8/2000

³⁶ Fielding, Helen; *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Picador, London 1996, p19

Currently this is much more commonplace in semi-public toilets. This refers to facilities in, for example, restaurants or one's place of work. For a long time women have been excusing themselves to 'powder their nose'. Not only is this a way of disguising a visit to the toilet, it is a valid use of many Ladies' toilets. I grew up in Wolverhampton, and in Beatties, the local department store, the toilets are still called the Ladies' Powder Room. Half the room consists of toilets and wash basins; the rest is dedicated to mirrors, counters and low stools in the style of a dressing table.

A woman in this environment is able to mentally distance herself from the public sphere without requiring physical isolation: she will 'fix her public appearance' whilst still in full view of other women. Sometimes the company of other women is an important part of the activity. It is often observed that women go to the toilet together. Firstly this can hide any social embarrassment since the woman who actually needs to go cannot be singled out. But a removal en masse also acts as a 'time out' from the public arena, allowing women the opportunity to relate and confide, as they would if in their own home.

The Guardian article suggests a third reason for visiting the toilets in groups, apart from the desire for discretion and discussion.

"...going in with your friend means a certain social protection when you come out: you don't want to reappear on your own to find that your friends aren't where you left them, you're now alone... ...you would be hard-pressed to find a woman who feels completely at ease in [a club] on her own."³⁷

This observation leads back to questions about the city and the public toilet. In a club or restaurant you are at least in the company of friends. You are also in a private establishment. The city streets offer a far greater level of anonymity.

"Anonymity in an urban setting is in some ways equivalent to solitude in nature... ...privacy for people who don't want to be really alone"³⁸

³⁷ O'Farrell, Maggie; 'Why do we go to the loo in twos?' *The Guardian*, 31/8/2000

³⁸ Malamud Smith, Janna, 'Privacy and Private States' in *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, ed. Peacock, Molly; Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, 2001, pp13

Whilst men are often portrayed as seeking solitude, a woman alone is rarely shown in a positive light. Instead she is 'abandoned, unattractive, isolated or lonely... or dangerous, unattached, destabilising'.³⁹ A woman alone is more likely to experience unease or even fear in certain environments.

If anonymity allows the privacy of solitude without the fear of being alone, the public toilet should allow greater mental freedom than is possible when observed by those whose opinion is important to you, or when bound by the social context of the restaurant or the familiarity of the workplace.

But as Janna Malamud Smith observes, 'Anonymity is a tentative and unsteady state of privacy.'⁴⁰ It allows us the freedom to act in ways that we would normally deem unacceptable. As seen in acts of vandalism or abuse, anonymity not only provides mental privacy but also serious problems for the public toilet.

"The Toilet" by Gcina Mhlope

A young girl finds she has several hours a day to kill and no home to go to. Instead she finds a public toilet in the park where she reads each morning before work.

'It smelled a little... the floor was painted red and the walls were cream white... The closed lid of the toilet was going to be my seat for many mornings after that.'

With her space of her own, with 'time to dream and peace of mind', she begins to write.

'The toilet was very small – the walls were wonderfully close to me – it felt like it was made to fit me alone.'

On one day finding it locked:

'I think for the first time I accepted that the toilet was not mine after all...'⁴¹

³⁹ Malamud Smith, Janna, 'Privacy and Private States' in *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, ed. Peacock, Molly; Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, 2001, pp11-12

⁴⁰ Malamud Smith, Janna, 'Privacy and Private States' in *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, ed. Peacock, Molly; Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, 2001, pp13

⁴¹ Mhlope, Gcina; 'The Toilet', 1987 quoted in Ryan, Pamela; 'Black women do not have time to dream: the Politics of Time and Space'; *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol 11, No.1, 1992, pp.100-101

4. The Threat to Privacy: Crime

This multi-layered concept of privacy suggests a clear and attainable public toilet design. However, undesirable activity soon begins to take advantage of the nature of the space. Privacy is infringed upon by different forms of social disorder: crime, perceived threats, and psychological barriers. Current methods to tackle such problems show a lack of sensitivity to the functions of the space, sometimes doing more harm than good. A preferable solution is to understand the reasons for crime and fear in order to discourage through design this negative use and association of the public toilet.

Figure 4: “Most Graffitied Toilet” ©urban75 1995-2006⁴²



Max Fish, 178 Ludlow Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan, NYC

⁴² <http://www.urban75.org/photos/newyork/ny718.html> (20/09/06)

Evidence of crime taking place in public toilets is an obvious discouragement to normal use. The most prevalent criminal activity affecting women's public toilets is vandalism and drug use. This affects the Ladies' less than the Gents' facilities, but nonetheless both are serious problems, and as men's and women's facilities are always grouped together, the degradation of one has a negative effect on the other. Both vandalism and drug use are tackled in theory and practice, the latest example coming from the newly reopened Oxford Circus facilities.

*"The red carpet was rolled out today as one of the world's oldest public toilets reopened following a £300,000 state-of-the-art refit. Champagne corks popped to celebrate the new-look Oxford Circus public convenience. Tucked under a traffic island in the heart of London's shopping district, it had been specially designed to deter criminals and anti-social behaviour."*⁴³

According to the report, design features include cubicle doors in the men's with larger gaps at top and bottom to discourage drug-taking and "lewd activity", CCTV cameras covering communal areas, and vandal-resistant surfaces. Whilst it is incredibly important to reduce criminal activity, it is vital that this is done without jeopardising the positive attributes of the facility. For example, smaller doors infringe upon the privacy needs of normal toilet users. This becomes a more significant issue the further you delve; it causes greater discomfort for people who are more sensitive about undressing in public for personal or cultural reasons and greatly affects sufferers of paruresis, a phobia of urinating in public that affects around 7% of the population, with the vast majority of sufferers being male.⁴⁴

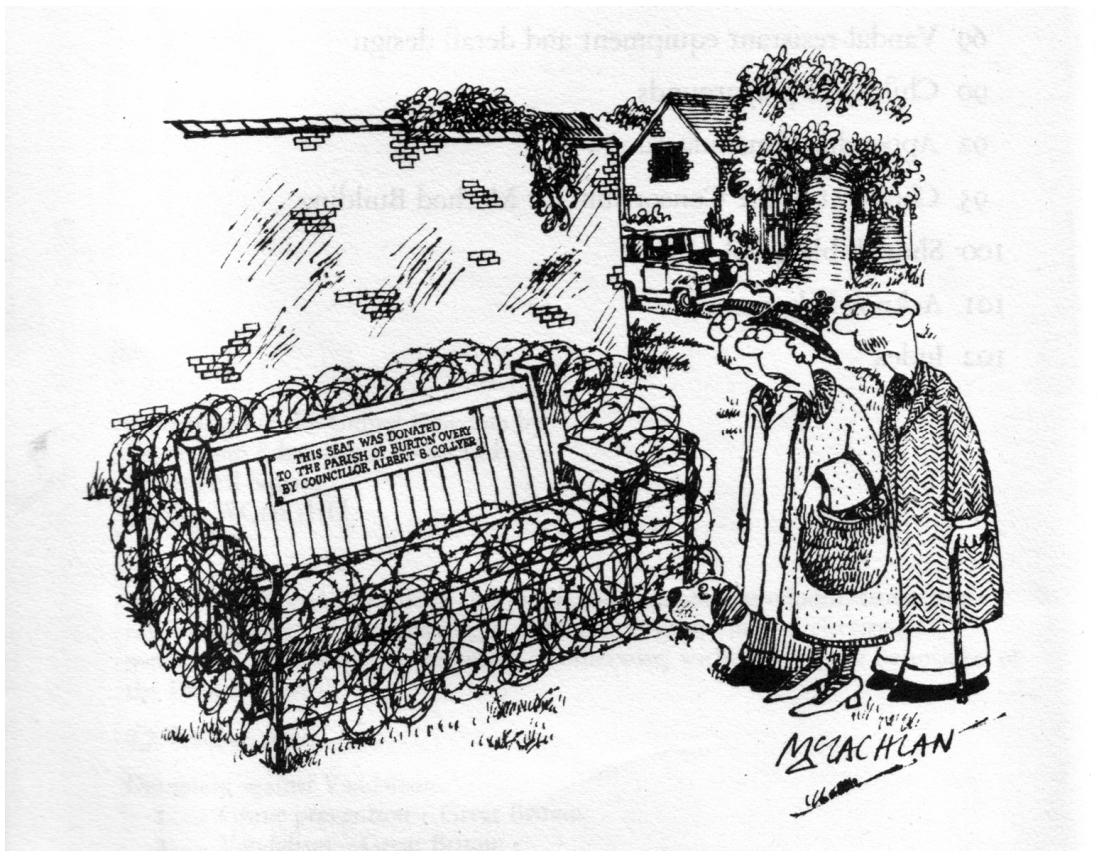
⁴³ Westminster City Council, *'Historic public toilet reopens after anti-crime facelift'*;
<http://www.westminster.gov.uk/councilgovernmentanddemocracy/councils/pressoffice/news/pr-2675.cfm>,
23/05/2005

⁴⁴ Pickering, Nancy L; *Paruresis: The Secret Bathroom Phobia*, World Toilet Organisation, 2001, p1

Vandalism

Vandal-resistant surfaces have long been the design answer to graffiti and damage in public toilets. Originally the material-du-jour was stainless steel, since this was both practical from a hygiene and cleaning aspect, and tough enough not to scratch, rip or burn. It also provided a clinical, soulless environment that was difficult to warm to. Whilst the material challenged the vandals, the atmosphere was conducive to negative behaviour. In comparison, decorative or personal features, whilst having no structural vandalism resistance, do discourage vandalism from a psychological perspective.

Figure 5: 'The Council were worried it might get vandalised'⁴⁵



⁴⁵ Cartoon by Private Eye, in *Designing against Vandalism*, ed. Sykes, Jane; The Design Council, London, 1979, p.6

“Regarding the question of comfort and aesthetic satisfaction ...a plain metal affair will be found in a district of poor shops and houses, with low rates. But brown stone or porcelain, says he, with work done by Doulton or Adamsez or Twyford’s, or Davis and Bennett, denotes a well-to-do district. Thus the theories of Karl Marx are embedded in sanitary architecture”

Reginald Reynolds, *Cleanliness and Godliness*, 1946 ⁴⁶

Aesthetic satisfaction is an important consideration. Throughout London, decorative Victorian features are still evident, not only in public toilets but in parks, tube stations and street furniture. Ornamental features such as relief tiling are rarely vandalised. Rather these features are removed because of natural degradation, which in turn lends to an unsuitable and unhygienic environment.

Decorative features give an emotional context to an environment. This has been shown to great effect in the numerous subway tunnels around town, particularly along the South Bank Thames Walkway. Decorative murals by local school children, colourful lighting and attractive depictions of the local area have all kept the spray-can at bay. A few of Westminster’s public toilets (those in highly cultural and touristy areas) also display artistic personalised tiles, such as those at Covent Garden, Carnaby Street and The Strand.



Figure 6: Ladies’ Public Toilets, The Old Bailey ⁴⁷

An example of decorative tiling in the public convenience on The Strand, London.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, Reginald; *Cleanliness and Godliness*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1946, p132

⁴⁷ Photograph from Author’s own collection

‘Vandals rarely attack property that appears to belong to someone who cares about it’⁴⁸. This is exactly what personalised and aesthetic details suggest: the appearance of someone who cares about it. This quote comes from a book of essays, ‘Designing Against Vandalism’, that goes on to note that public property is under particular threat of vandalism because it appears not to belong to anyone. It is even repaired by an unidentified ‘other’.⁴⁹ The space is available for the vandal to make their own mark of ownership. Would it not be better if an image of emotion and ownership could be created in place of an anonymous urban public, removing any contemplation of vandalism? This is a subject that I shall return to in Chapter 5.

Drug Use

Another recent example of controversial design against crime is the refurbished toilets of Torbay Council. Here the problem of intravenous drug use was tackled with two design features. The first was the introduction of sharps bins, special containers in which needles and syringes can be discarded, which addressed the problem head on and immediately solved the problem of discarded needles. This successfully tackled a safety issue, but not the criminal activity itself. The second feature was unfiltered UV lighting, which gives out blue light making it impossible for drug users to spot a blue vein.⁵⁰ This is appearing more and more around the country.

UV lighting is a controversial development for two reasons. Firstly there is the risk to the drug users, who may feel forced into less hygienic locations, or into more dangerous injecting practices. At best, the problem is merely being displaced.⁵¹ Secondly there is the effect on the general public. The blue light is dingy and makes the facilities more difficult

⁴⁸ Burrall, Paul, ‘Introduction’, in *Designing against Vandalism*, ed. Sykes, Jane; The Design Council, London, 1979, p.7

⁴⁹ Wilson, Sheena, ‘Observations on the nature of vandalism’, in *Designing against Vandalism*, ed. Sykes, Jane; The Design Council, London, 1979, p.21

⁵⁰ Torbay Council, *Designing Safety into Public Toilets*

www.torbay.gov.uk/designing_safety_into_public_toilets.htm 11/3/2006

⁵¹ Flemen, Kevin; *Blue Light Blues – The Use of Blue Lights as a deterrent to injecting* ; KFX, 2003, p4

to use, particularly for the elderly and disabled.⁵² This atmosphere also puts drug use to the forefront of everyone's mind, a problem of which many may not have been previously aware or affected by. Such a bold response shifts the environment from one of hygiene and privacy to an environment dominated by crime and fear of crime.

Public Toilets' Lighting has Wrong Effect

Coventry Evening Telegraph, 15th September 2004

'Toilets in Rugby town centre were fitted with ultra-violet lights in 2000 to discourage heroin addicts... ..but four years on, borough council bosses have revealed that users are marking their veins before entering the toilets so that they are still able to inject, while the subdued lighting is encouraging people to meet for sex. Rugby Borough Council says the lights are creating an atmosphere "conducive to sexual activity".

Another problem is that graffiti written in certain pens looks spectacular under UV lighting, while [the lighting] is off-putting to the public wishing to use the facilities.⁵³

On the other hand, such an obvious crime deterrent may reassure members of the public that a particular fear, in this case drug-use, is being addressed. The issue of drug use is still a relatively new problem, so it is perhaps better to contemplate this possibility by drawing a parallel with another public toilet installation that unnerves some people whilst comforting others: the CCTV camera.

⁵² Hamilton, Margaret; *Blue Lights in Public Toilets*, ANTA, 2000, p2

⁵³ Morgan, Annette; 'Public Toilets' Lighting has Wrong Effect' *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 15/09/2004

Surveillance

UK citizens are captured on CCTV more than the population of any other nation, in excess of 300 times a day, with figures for London expected to be far higher.⁵⁴ Every public toilet in Westminster is equipped with CCTV cameras in order to discourage criminal or anti-social activity.

This has the effect of a permanent police officer in every facility, albeit one helpless to intervene. And although it is a simple enough task for someone committing a pre-meditated act of vandalism to hide their identity, it minimises opportunistic bad behaviour, counteracting the emancipating effect of anonymity. So how do the general public react to the use of CCTV? Are surveillance cameras protecting the sanctity of a private space, or infringing personal privacy?

John E. McGrath's book, 'Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space', tackles this issue in its opening chapters. The first idea of interest here relies on what he calls 'the ideology of criminality'. The theory is that when the general public sees CCTV footage of criminal activity, they are not considering it to be footage in which they could appear. 'I am not seen by the camera because the camera sees only criminals, and *I do not look like* a criminal'.⁵⁵ This highlights the prejudice in society about what 'a criminal' looks like, but also identifies an important observation: there will always be two differing responses to a CCTV camera. Either you feel that you are the object of the camera's gaze, that you *look like* a criminal, or that you are of no interest, you are invisible, indeed you represent the public that the camera is protecting.

⁵⁴ McGrath, John E. *Loving Big Brother; Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, Routledge, London 2004, p19

⁵⁵ McGrath, John E. *Loving Big Brother; Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, Routledge, London 2004, p33

Different circumstances provoke different images of what 'a criminal' looks like. McGrath relates the story of a female lawyer friend who worries upon seeing a store security camera that some inner demon will emerge and cause her to steal.⁵⁶ My personal experiences can appreciate this: passing through a shop's security alarm system is always met with a sharp intake of breath, drawn from an irrational fear that I have subconsciously succumbed to kleptomania. McGrath suspects that the lawyer's response is because she is aware that middle-class white women are the archetypal high street shoplifter. In this circumstance, the lawyer and I cannot confidently state 'I do not look like a criminal' and consequently feel watched rather than protected.

The result of this is that anyone using a public toilet that is aware that they *could* be mistaken for a drug user, a vandal, a 'youth', will also feel under surveillance, reducing the protective feel of this pseudo-private urban space.

The CCTV camera has two main functions: to deter and to capture. It also has incidental characteristics. Although the camera was not installed for this purpose, it also allows for the secret observation of people's non-criminal lives. This feature unnerves members of the public who would never consider nor be suspected of committing a crime. It relates purely to the way in which their privacy is infringed upon, often without even being conscious of it.

Someone out there is lawfully watching what you do. You don't know where or who they are. You cannot see their response. Watching people without their knowledge creates a new concept: 'Watched space', as coined by McGrath⁵⁷. This simply requires those people to act in a way that the viewer knows they would not if they knew that they were being recorded.

⁵⁶ McGrath, John E. *Loving Big Brother; Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, Routledge, London 2004, pp31-33

⁵⁷ McGrath, John E. *Loving Big Brother; Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, Routledge, London 2004, p48

The Back of the Bus

Many London buses are now equipped with CCTV cameras that capture several viewpoints, feeding back to displays on the top and bottom decks. On one occasion I had a direct view of the top deck's display. The different views were on a loop. I sat mesmerised.

At the back of the deck was a set of seats facing away from the direction of travel. Sat here was a couple who started to kiss passionately. I know this because one of the cameras was focused on this seat.

Whilst the couple knew that they were in public, they had intentionally chosen as private a space as possible. The 3 or 4 other passengers on the top deck were all sat near the front, all facing the other way. The couple remained unaware that all the bus passengers, plus the control centre, could watch them. It was hard not to. This is a perfect example of 'watched space'. Is this an example of CCTV invading privacy?

It is almost impossible to claim a right to privacy when in the public environment. However the above example does raise difficult questions. The ubiquitous presence of surveillance violates spaces or moments of presumed privacy, and subsequently curbs private-in-public behaviour.

Of course, surveillance would not be so popular if it did not have advantages. It not only deters and captures anti-social and criminal activity; it also provides comfort and security for many members of the public. The CCTV explosion in Britain has had relatively little criticism and is thought to reduce fear of crime through its very existence.⁵⁸ In her paper based on research undertaken in Middlesbrough, *'What's the problem, girls? CCTV and the gendering of public safety'*, Sheila Brown explores the assumption that CCTV would

⁵⁸ Norris, Clive; Moran, Jade; Armstrong, Gary; *Surveillance, Closed Circuit Television and Social Control*, Ashgate, Brookfield USA, 1998, p22

improve the feeling of safety amongst women and consequently increase their use of the town centre.⁵⁹

Her conclusion was that CCTV as a tool of surveillance was very limited compared with a policeman. More worryingly, one of the main reasons that women felt uncomfortable in late-night Middlesbrough was due to the comments, glances, and other forms of subtle harassment from men. These are not things that surveillance can capture, but they are forms of abuse that CCTV can actually facilitate. If CCTV cameras are seen to be tools for displaced real-life voyeurs, then surveillance only justifies and amplifies a woman's discomfort in the city.

⁵⁹ Brown, Sheila; 'What's the problem, girls? CCTV and the gendering of public safety' in *Surveillance, Closed Circuit Television and Social Control*, ed. Norris, Clive; Moran, Jade; Armstrong, Gary; Ashgate, Brookfield USA, 1998, p207-219

5. Designing Privacy

Having seen a few of the new look Westminster public conveniences, all with the same fittings as Oxford Circus, there is no great visual distinction between this refit and that of 30 years ago. The space remains a plain and simple affair free from personal touches or personality. Are these toilets destined for the same deterioration as experienced by their predecessors?

It takes a committed vandal to attack a brand new facility; the majority of offenders only see opportunities in an already damaged property where it no longer seems to matter. The road to a neglected toilet begins with simple untidiness from the general public, but couple this with a few years of wear and tear and before too long the facility is 'fair game' where one more piece of graffiti passes unnoticed on the back of the door. These early stages of disorder are more damaging than isolated incidents of crime, for disorder represents an uncivilised society. "What people fear most is disorder, not crime."⁶⁰

If the public would take more responsibility for the upkeep of the facility, maintaining an image of care and respect, this initial trigger could be avoided. But it is anonymity again that makes this intrinsically more difficult in a public toilet. The level of anonymity between users increases from that in the private bathroom to that found at work or the local cinema, and finally to the anonymity of the public toilet. With this is a growing mistrust of the level of cleanliness of others using the facility, "goodness knows who may have used or touched something before us."⁶¹ In fact it has been suggested that the practice of women hovering over the seat is as much due to the fear of a 'social disease', as it is to genuine hygiene concerns⁶². From this emerges a diminishing responsibility for one's own tidiness.

⁶⁰ Greed, Clara, *Public Toilets in the 24 Hour City*, World Toilet Organisation, World Toilet Summit, 2003, p114

⁶¹ Kira, Alexander; *The Bathroom*, Penguin Books, New York 1976, pp 201

⁶² Kira, Alexander; *The Bathroom*, Penguin Books, New York 1976, pp 205

Whilst such behaviour would be unexpected in your own home it would be even more shocking when visiting the home of another. This would be an insult to the host. Evidence that is suggestive of private ownership not only discourages vandals but also leads to improved basic hygiene levels amongst the general public.

The Personal Touch

Drawing elements from the private bathroom is the simplest way to improve a public toilet. A successful example comes from the activities of toilet attendants. The presence of the attendant alone can make a difference on a psychological level. The toilet attendant comes to represent an owner or host; however this has a particular impact when they show signs of unusual care for the facilities.

Toilets flushed with success⁶³

BBC News 24th November 2002

A public toilet which greets users with music and fresh flowers has gained national success. Attendant Michelle Stewart, 38, was highly commended for her efforts in the Loo of the Year 2002 competition.

People using the facilities at Morpeth Bus Station in Northumberland enjoy piped music, flowers and photographs of the town on the wall. Ms Stewart even put up flags for the Queen's Golden Jubilee and every Christmas she uses tip money to pay for sniffers of whisky and sherry for people using the toilets. Local people were so impressed with her efforts, they clubbed together to buy her a TV licence, so she could watch the World Cup in her cubicle office

She said: "Four years ago they were horrendous - you would have walked in and walked back out again.... ..with a lot of hard work, a lot of cleaning, a few homely touches and what a difference... if I say so myself, they are lovely loos..."

⁶³ BBC News, *Toilets Flushed With Success*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2504509.stm> 24/11/02



Figure 7: Plant, Oxford Circus⁶⁴

Is this one of the more innovative design contributions to combating crime and fear in Westminster's public toilets?

Community Conveniences

This idea of suggested ownership as a way of discouraging negative behaviour can be taken further than the actions of toilet attendants. A more thorough solution can be found through integrated design elements that clearly position the public toilet as part of a community.

To create a feeling of community two areas must be addressed. The general public must feel welcome and they must be represented. By portraying an image of other users in the toilet, it is no longer a space occupied by strangers. Ironically, graffiti itself often achieves this function. The scribbles on the back of the cubicle door adopt the style of earlier graffiti, with comments often replying to each other and thus inviting more conversation. By reading these comments, a group of users can be identified.

One way of providing an image of users is through the provision of information that has a presumed audience. If the toilets are in a residential borough, this could be a noticeboard for communication on local events. In Westminster it should reflect the needs of the community of tourists, shoppers and workers. A large local area map, a tube map, clear and concise information on places to eat and tourist sites would all help this image of the public toilets not only knowing their customer, but satisfying their needs.

⁶⁴ Photograph from Author's own collection

A positive method of interactivity accessible by all groups in society would further facilitate communication between and representation of users. At the Issac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences, Cambridge, there is a blackboard in the toilets. This invites people to use the space to communicate, to jot down their discussions, to share with other academics displaced by time. It sends out a clear sign that the toilets may be used for more than the obvious function. Users become more conscious that others are spending time there and thus there is a greater need for hygienic facilities to be maintained. In this example not only are typical users positively identified and represented (as keen mathematics academics), they are also able to interact, and their personal needs are accommodated into the facilities.

A similar welcome could be achieved in the Ladies' by making a living area with comfortable seating, good natural light and no sense of urgency. This could be satisfactorily separated from the cubicles by mirrors and stools for make-up. The seats provide a welcome break for tired shoppers, those waiting for friends, the elderly and mothers with babies. Providing for the additional ways in which women use public toilets; to think, to fix one's appearance, to converse, to gossip, to relax; will encourage women to benefit from the public toilet as a place to take a rest in the city, away from the public gaze.

These design suggestions focus on reducing the negative consequences of anonymity in the public toilets. By giving positive images of the women who use the facility, anonymity between users reduces and disrespectful behaviour diminishes, thus helping to maintain a pleasant environment.

At the same time, the positive behaviour allowed by anonymity, that is the provision of the private sanctuary away from the public sphere, can still flourish by providing for these alternative uses of the space. This shows understanding of the needs of the average woman, and consequently is a welcoming sign for the general public.

The Perfect Location

The location of public toilets is a sensitive matter. They should not be hidden off main thoroughfares, behind bushes, underground, or anywhere else that offers no natural surveillance. Nor should they be positioned with no respect for discretion, such as in the pathway of pedestrians on the pavement. It is a delicate balance to identify a location that provides natural discretion without feelings of fear and isolation.

One of the benefits of a busy city is that it is difficult to be out of view. Although a stranger could be a potential threat, they are more likely to act as a potential witness, thus we are distantly protecting each other from the risk of attack. As the inside of a public toilet must remain private and thus hidden from the outside world, it is even more important that the entrance is positioned with good natural surveillance. If the entrance of the facilities were to face the street, already it would be more difficult for a man to enter unnoticed. A good view of the toilets up and down the street allows someone approaching the toilets to see who has entered before them. Using the benefits of natural surveillance is a good example of how community can prevent crime.

A particularly valuable position for the public toilet would be as a central facility in a city square. David Brain makes an interesting observation about such spaces:

“in Sennett’s example of the open plaza in front of a modernist downtown office building, openness and visibility create isolation rather than sociability, by defining a space through which people pass rather than a space which people inhabit...such space is isolating and atomizing since others become merely competitors for space rather than sharing a meaningful occupancy.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Brain, David; ‘Public Housing to Private Communities; The Discipline of Design and Materialisation of the Public/Private Distinction in the Built Environment’ in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Weintraub, Jeff; Kumar, Krishan, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, p242

If a public space lacks function or context then it is merely a void in the urban landscape. There are many such squares in London, developed through modern urban landscaping but more imposing than they are welcoming. Squares designed around functional local facilities, such as toilets, news kiosks, cafes and play areas, would lack neither warmth nor purpose.

Figure 8: Westbourne Park Public Toilets⁶⁶



Public Toilets designed by Piers Gough (1993).

An example of how important location can be comes from the facilities on Westbourne Grove in Notting Hill, West London. Here the benefits were not exclusive to the public toilet itself; the area benefited as well. Although quite standard on the inside, these public

⁶⁶ Photograph from Author's own collection

toilets, disguised by a flower stall, were professionally designed and critically acclaimed. House prices in the area rose shortly after their completion⁶⁷.

The public toilet may not be much discussed, but in the eyes of the general public it still represents the community. For Westbourne Grove, the obvious efforts to design elegant facilities suggested government faith in the future of the area. Similar examples exist in New York, where a marked increase in the cost of housing has occurred shortly after the installation of public conveniences⁶⁸. Well-designed public toilets are suggestive of further regeneration by the local authority.

Transformation Design

What is clear from this exploration of women's public toilets in the urban environment is that understanding the user's needs and their experience in the space is central to the redesign of facilities. It is this psychological approach that is currently undeveloped; almost non-existent; in public toilet design. One recent example of research in this area comes from the system design consultancy, Engine.

Engine was formed in 1997 by designers Oliver King and Joe Heapy⁶⁹. Whilst both were trained in product design they now work with services, helping their clients to create a better customer experience. Whilst they have made the shift from products to services, the fundamentals are the same; they are designing things that people use. Engine's design approach is also a cited example of Transformation Design⁷⁰. This new discipline has been explored extensively in the last few years by The Design Council's research group, RED. Transformation Design is the implementation of a design-led approach to solving complex problems.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Greed, Clara, *Public Toilets in the 24 Hour City*, World Toilet Organisation, World Toilet Summit, 2003, p113

⁶⁸ Greed, Clara, *Public Toilets in the 24 Hour City*, World Toilet Organisation, World Toilet Summit, 2003, p113

⁶⁹ Engine Service Design, www.enginegroup.co.uk, 03/10/06

⁷⁰ RED, *Transformation Design*, The Design Council, London, 2006, p22

⁷¹ RED, *Transformation Design*, The Design Council, London, 2006, p6

Engine were researching public toilet use for the company Ideal Standard, Europe's leading brand of washroom fixtures. Ideal Standard asked Engine to conduct design research that would change the way in which the company thought about public toilets. This would enable them to provide user experiences rather than just simple products.

As part of a project for my RCA studies I interviewed Oliver King. He commented that;

“There was an incredible lack of research into this area... ...we needed to understand fundamental things, like what are the differences between men and women and their behaviour in washrooms, and to understand the rituals that people had...”⁷²

Engine's user-centred research included male and female focus groups, in-depth interviews and job-shadowing of toilet attendants. They also looked at 'extreme' users and observed behaviour over the course of a week. Using this research they were able to propose solutions that Ideal Standard could adopt in order to improve people's experience of the public toilet⁷³.

This approach of designers working with public bodies to address sociological problems could be the answer for public toilet design. A designer's creative skills, processes and intuition would be used to gain a thorough understanding of women's needs and desires in a public toilet and how current facilities fail to deliver. Consequently, applicable and achievable solutions would be developed and proposed, progressing closer and closer towards the perfect public toilet environment.

⁷² Oliver King, Co-Founder of Engine, 03/10/06

⁷³ Engine Service Design, www.enginegroup.co.uk, 03/10/06

Conclusion

Before I began this dissertation my interest in public toilet design was firmly grounded on traditional design practice. I recognised ergonomics, usability and aesthetics as key areas of neglect that would make for a better facility.

However, research soon roused my suspicions that the problem of public toilets required a more psychological approach. It would be important to understand what the desired experience of a woman using a facility would be. This could then be contrasted with the current harsh reality of London's public toilets.

What became clear was that women had a very different attitude to public toilets compared to men. Not only did they need physical privacy for normal toilet functions, they also looked to toilets for the provision of private space. A trip to the toilets can incorporate a variety of activities, such as fixing one's appearance, conversing, confiding, or just pausing from life in general, if only the facilities are clean and safe.

However it could not currently be assumed on entering a London public toilet that the facilities would be either. Various physical design attempts have been made to reduce vandalism, including vandal-resistant surfaces and CCTV surveillance. Whilst these solutions are having a positive effect on reducing vandalism, they can also have a negative effect on the general user's experience, by compromising aesthetics, increasing expectations of crime, and invading personal privacy.

Research into the thought processes that lead to both uncleanliness and anti-social behaviour suggests that there are positive psychological design changes that could be applied in place of these traditional crime prevention techniques. These would simultaneously attract alternative views of the space by women and discourage disrespectful behaviour towards the facility.

The focus of this psychology was on reducing anonymity in the public toilet. Anonymity and familiarity make up the fundamental difference between public and semi-public

facilities. Identifying ways to create and represent a community of users in a public toilet would be an important part of future design research.

Anonymity can also have advantages.

“In a hurry to get somewhere, a neighbour, stuck behind a car dawdling at a stoplight, honked her horn angrily. A few seconds later she became embarrassed when the driver, and elderly man, turned around and recognised her,”⁷⁴

Anonymity is liberating. It is an essential characteristic of the urban environment. It can lead to mischievous or negative activity, but even so, any diminishing of this quality should be done sensitively.

This complex understanding required to resurrect urban public toilets makes it a perfect study for transformation design. Designers who can apply their creativity and design intuition to difficult social problems are more able to design a service experience around the user in question. Solutions could then be identified that would improve women’s overall use of the public toilet, and ensure that privacy is protected in all its forms. This would ensure a stable and successful future for London’s ladies’ public toilets.

⁷⁴ Malamud Smith, Janna, ‘Privacy and Private States’ in *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, ed. Peacock, Molly; Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, 2001, pp13

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Interview

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