

Public Toilets: A Gender Perspective

Katharine Bailey

Public toilets are an important design element in urban areas. Urban planning often emphasises cultural and aesthetically pleasing design, however, it is the more banal essentially elements of the streetscape that must deserve our attention to ensure a fair and equitable society for all. Urban planning often forgets the less attractive side of the built environment. Social amenities are important as they act as a base for the rest of the urban environment. The presence of basic facilities impacts directly upon those who use them most, their presence, or lack of, can have a discernible impact upon the way users interact with the built environment.

The state of public toilets can be seen as a reflection of the surrounding areas and thus they have the power to increase the social and economic viability of an area. Clara Greed (Date unknown) argues that good public toilet facilities can save money, make areas more attractive, increase urban renewal, increase tourism, and raise property values of adjacent blocks, increase sustainability and most importantly increase equality in society.

A major issue confronting society is that of gender inequality. The urban environment discriminates on a gender basis, and it is women who usually suffer as a result of this. Construction and control of the built environment including public toilets, is most often in the hands of men thus decisions are made that are often in the best interests of men. However women are the main users of such amenities. In general, women are more likely to be running errands without a car during the day (Bounds, 2004). This ensures that they have limited access to their home base thus are more likely to use public toilets (Greed, d.u.). Moreover, women are most likely to be the main caregivers of young children and the elderly. These groups are likely to need restroom facilities and the limited number acts as a deterrent for women to go to certain places limiting their interaction with the built environment.

There is limited incentive to use public transport if there are no bathroom facilities near tram, train and bus stops and stations as it becomes impractical for women with small children to use this infrastructure (Greed, d.u.). This in turn limits the sustainability of a city and increases other problems associated with high numbers of car usage. In general, women outnumber men in many shopping centres and activity centres during the day. However bathroom provisions are not divided evenly between the genders with men receiving more facilities (generally because of the availability of cubicles and urinals) at a ratio of 70:30. This impinges of the time of women who often have time restraints. Once more this excludes women from using such facilities. Sport facilities also have a higher proportion of bathroom facilities for men. This can reduce the participation of women in physical activity by sending a message of the apparent reflection of the importance of women in sport once more limiting interaction with the surrounding environment (Greed, 1996).

There are many issues associated with safety and accessibility and public toilets. Safety in public toilets is an issue and acts as a deterrent for many women. In many areas including the CBD and Carlton, public toilets are located underground. The facilities are not inviting and the visibility whilst descending the stairs becomes a safety concern for many. Many of these toilets have limited surveillance which directly impinges upon women's safety.

Numerous issues arise from the toilets in these areas being located underground. The stairs leading into the toilets are a problem for accessibility. Those with a disability have limited access to these areas as do the elderly limiting their use of the facilities and excluding them from the options that mainstream society have to at their disposal. Moreover, access is limited for prams by the stairs that descend into these public toilets and many women then cannot use them not only for them selves but as areas for changing areas for babies. Melbourne City Council is beginning to make some changes by undertaking safety audits and constructing stand alone toilets with an emphasis on location, design, proximity and management. However, there is still more to be done to ensure that all facilities are appropriate for everyone in society (Roebuck and Dwyer, 2002).

These issues of safety and accessibility are not just limited to underground toilets in inner city areas. The majority of public toilets have limited security, visibility and lighting. Toilets in shopping centres often contain baby changing cubicles but few other public toilets contain such facilities which act a deterrent for women to utilise other areas resulting in these areas becoming less economically sustainable due to reduced usage.

Public toilets have long been seen as something that should be hidden away which has resulted in the construction of public toilets out of public view. Reducing the centrality of facilities reduces the level of safety as visibility is reduced (Greed, 1996).

By ensuring aesthetically pleasing designs, public toilets can become constructions that don't need to be hidden away; instead they can become a feature of the urban streetscape. In Japan each year they have a toilet design competition, encouraging the idea that good quality design can start from the social amenities upwards to larger scale constructions (Greed, d.u.).

The increasing presence of women in the workforce has also led to a differing pattern of public toilet usage. Many women enter the workforce doing part time work with flexible hours (Greed, d.u.). This means that many women will utilise public toilets at times outside that of a "normal" working day. Many public toilets in Melbourne are open from 7am until 6pm (Australian Government, 2006). This excludes many women from using the facilities making their operation useless.

Increasing funding cuts have resulted in the number of public toilets being reduced. This is combined with facilities becoming an increasing target for vandalism often rendering them unusable. This limits the use of public toilets and directly affects women in the process. Vandalised public toilets often act as a deterrent even if the facilities are still in use. However, there is a solution to this problem. With urban renewal becoming an important element in urban planning, it is important that basic elements such as public toilets are not overlooked. This new agenda of urban renewal is a perfect opportunity to make changes to social amenities from the bottom up. Improving social amenities such as public toilets often take a back seat to more popular agendas such as the construction of public space and public art (Greed, d.u.). However, these spaces will not be used if the areas are not suitable for all members of society. Improving public toilet facilities can have profound and lasting effects on equality between the genders and ensures that women won't become disenfranchised and can utilise the urban space to its full capacity.

Planners must take care to ensure that basic aspects of society are met to ensure social equity for all. Although planning facilities such as public toilets are the less glamorous side of planning they are never the less an important one. By addressing simple design issues such as public toilets, planners can have a marked effect on societal structure. Less people will utilise the built environment if the basic social amenities are not present, the main group that will suffer because inappropriate urban design will be women.

References

- Australian Government., 2006, *National Public Toilet Map*, accessed 13 December 2006, from <<http://www.toiletmap.gov.au/default.aspx>>.
- Bounds, M 2004, *Urban Social Theory*, Oxford University Press., Australia
- Greed, C 1996, 'Planning and Toilet Provisions: a Cistern's View of Planning, *Planning Practice & Research*, vol. II, no. 1, p99-'06
- Greed, C., date unknown, *Public Toilets in the 24 Hour City*, accessed 13 December 2006, from [http://www.toilet talk.co.uk](http://www.toilettalk.co.uk).
- Roebuck, R., Dwyer, P., 2002, *City of Melbourne 's Approaches to Addressing Safety Issues in Public Toilets*, accessed 13 December 2006, from <http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/crimpre/roebuck.pdf>>.