



Public Washrooms

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Public washrooms that are clean, accessible, and safe are a basic necessity for an urban environment. They are also an important age-friendly feature of the built environment and a lack of accessible public toilets is a barrier for seniors (WHO, 2008). Not only do public washrooms **promote hygiene and improve outdoor spaces** but they also help **encourage seniors to participate in their communities**. Older people may be unwilling to leave their homes if they do not know if there is a public washroom available and this may impact their ability to engage in regular activities. It may undermine their sense of independence, increase the likelihood of social isolation, and contribute to experience feelings of fear, frustration, or embarrassment (Webber, 2018). The following sections discuss a few approaches that have been taken towards the provision of accessible public toilets.

The Portland Loo

“The first thing [she looks] for in a new environment is the closest place to pee.”

Lezlie Lowe

The Portland Loo is a **gender-neutral, wheelchair-accessible freestanding public washroom** that was designed by Madden Fabrication and the City of Portland to **prevent waste and crime in public areas**. As of 2013, over 180 units had been installed across North America and is one of the most popular options of automated public washrooms. The unit has open louvers on the top and bottom to allow for visibility to see if it is occupied, but provides privacy for users. It also uses blue light in its interior to discourage drug use and has its hand-washing features on its exterior to prevent users from lingering too long inside. However, the unit may not be suitable for communities that face harsh winters and purchasing a unit may be difficult for communities with a tight budget as each unit costs at least \$100 000 USD (Miller, 2023).



Figure 1: Portland Loo Unit

Fife Coast and Countryside Trust Rural Public Toilets

The Fife Coast and Countryside Trust Rural Public Toilets, which are located in an unserved area by walking tracks in Scotland. After doing an audit, the local authority found that the infrastructure had not been upgraded in over twenty years, was not regularly maintained, did not meet health and safety requirements, and the water source had traveled through a paddock with livestock. To **adapt their public washroom needs to a rural area with limited infrastructure and seasonal use**, the local authority developed a plan with **affordability and sustainability** in mind. This plan included replacing the hand sinks with hand sanitizer gel machines, replacing the urinal flushes with standard cleaning procedures,



Photo Credit: James Delaney

Figure 2: Fife Coast and Countryside Trust Craigmead Car Park Public Toilets



Photo Credit: Kenny Smith / DC Thomson

Figure 3: Interior of one of the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust Public Toilets

changed cleaning products to be compatible with septic systems, and included more detailed signage (Webber, 2018). While this type of public washroom may not be successful for a high-use urban environment, the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust Public Toilets are a strong example of an accessible public washroom that was able to adapt to the infrastructure that was available in a rural environment.

Community Toilet Schemes

Community Toilet Schemes (CTS) is an initiative that was implemented by some local governments in the UK where **local businesses are partnered with and paid by the government to make their toilets accessible to the public** during their operating hours. Development on this initiative began in the 1990's after the local government of Richmond noticed that the budget towards public washroom infrastructure was being wasted as the public was reluctant to use those facilities (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008). As a result, the government looked for other ways to allocate their resources for more accessible and flexible options of toilet provisions. The government provides signs that the businesses can place in their windows to indicate they had a washroom and run an interactive digital map that displayed which businesses were participating and where they are located (City of London, 2022). Some benefits of this initiative included the government **not needing to spend as much on building new infrastructure, promotion of local businesses and increased traffic in businesses**. However, some challenges presented by the CTS included **no standard operating hours or level of accessibility and some people may not be comfortable entering certain establishments**. An example of this includes:

“a CTS being provided in a pub may be unsuitable for a non-drinker, someone with children, or if it does not meet accessibility standards of a wheelchair user” (Webber, 2018, p. 44).

Berlin's City-wide Toilet Strategy

In 2018, the local authority of Berlin developed a public toilet provision

“Public bathrooms are hard to get right. And no wonder. They are mired in cultural baggage, stuck in the fixedness of fixtures, and bound by massive, often ancient infrastructure.”

Lezlie Lowe



Photo Credit: TripAdvisor

Figure 4: CTS Street Sign

“Given the almost universal presence of restaurants and pubs in Berlin, the promotion of cooperation is desirable.”

City of Berlin



Figure 6: Berliner Toilets



Figure 5: Nette Toilette Partnership Sign on a Business' Storefront

strategy to evaluate whether the city was meeting the needs of its public for public washrooms. Their strategy involved an audit and **inventory analysis** of the city's public washrooms, **spatial analysis** of existing toilet provisions, and **collaboration** with senior advocacy groups, non-profit organizations and other stakeholders to figure out the demand for new facilities and upgrades (City of Berlin, n.d.; Webber, 2018). Based on their findings, they believed a **provision partnership model** similar to CTS and the German alternative, Nette Toilettes, would be successful. However, they found that this model alone did not guarantee access to public washrooms all the time and would also need to build city-owned infrastructure. As they further developed their strategy, it led to a **public-private partnership** with WallGmbH to implement the Berliner Toilet, an automated freestanding public washroom, and build new washroom infrastructure across the city (Webber, 2018).

Final Thoughts

Based on these precedents, there are **multiple ways of provisioning public washrooms** that can be applied to an age-friendly community, but one solution does not fit all. One of the strongest examples that communities to consider is **partnering with local businesses** that already have their own washroom facilities. Communities can save more money as they can allocate less resources towards building and upgrading infrastructure. Not only does it make washrooms more accessible but also allow for economic growth and build a stronger sense of community. However, it hinges on having available infrastructure and local businesses willing to partner. Some solutions may only be applicable and suitable for certain scenarios and environments.

As mentioned above, **one solution does not fit all** and planners need to **understand the context of the community** they are working with. Communities may find themselves using a **combination of strategies**, similar to the city of Berlin. Planners should also understand that communities may be limited due to budget, and may not be able to sustain freestanding washrooms due to the cost of maintenance over time. As a result, planners should **be creative with their approach** towards the provision of public toilets and look for **strategies that are accessible, innovative, affordable and sustainable**.

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