

Public Toilets

Meleana
Searle

**Access to public
toilets should
be considered
a basic human
right**



Photo Credit: Talling

Figure 1: An example of a public toilet built in a discreet location that is both inaccessible and poorly maintained.

Toilets and toilet behaviours are a subject that the majority of people are not overly keen on discussing. However, “public toilets are a necessary component for users of the built environment by enabling user friendly, sustainable, safe, equitable and accessible cities” (Greed, 2003, p. 3). Public toilets help to revitalize neighbourhoods by creating comfortable environments, they promote fitness and public safety and they directly contribute to overall public health (Brubaker & McCreary, 2007). In order to allow people of all ages and abilities to feel included in day-to-day life toilet facilities need to be abundant and easily accessible. **Special attention should be taken with regard to providing facilities for older adults as they are not typical able-bodied users and require additional considerations when designing for accessibility.** It can be argued that access to public facilities should be considered a basic human right, no one should have to relieve themselves in public. Creating dialogue at the community and government level surrounding the issue is critical if we wish to see more inclusive design in public planning.

Where Are All the Public Toilets?

Public toilets have long been a topic of contention, despite the fact that everyone has the need to ‘go’ at sometime. Cities and municipalities are hesitant to provide public facilities for a multitude of reasons. The most common being the initial cost of installation and the associated costs of maintenance in perpetuity. Another major issue is that in Canada major policy gaps regarding public toilets exist, making it impossible to enforce implementation. The only existing policies regarding public toilets are some provisions outlined in the Occupation Safety and Health Act (OSHA) and the National Building Code (NBC). The OSHA policy outlines rules for employers to provide toilets for employees and customers and the NBC only requires that existing public toilets meet the basic construction standards. Neither governing body outlines policy requiring stand alone facilities in public spaces. The lack of federal guidance regarding toilets leaves provincial and municipal bodies responsible for implementing their own policies, should they choose to do so. When public toilets are available they are often built in somewhat discreet and isolated locations, resulting in poor sanitation, crime, vandalism, and safety concerns (Kira, 1976, p. 217).



Figure 2: Accessible public toilets in Sydney



Figure 3: Public toilet illustrating inclusive access, large internal circulation space, and inclusive fittings and fixtures.

In addition the design and lay-outs are often overlooked making toilets inaccessible for those with mobility issues, people with small children, and those with physical and cognitive disabilities (Greed, 2003, p. 5).overlooked making toilets inaccessible for those with mobility issues, people with small children, and those with physical and cognitive disabilities (Greed, 2003, p. 5).

Health Benefits of Public Toilets

Medical studies have proven that adverse health effects can result when people are denied access to toilets when they are away from their homes or workplaces. Some of the medical issues associated with lack of public toilet facilities are; urinary tract infections (UTIs) caused by urinary retention, constipation, abdominal pain, diverticuli, and hemorrhoids (Brubaker & McCreary, 2007).

Public toilets are especially important for individuals that may need to use facilities more frequently than others, this includes but is not limited to, pregnant women, young children, those with varying medical conditions and older adults. The World Health Organization's guide, Global Age-Friendly Cities, states that adequate public toilets are "regarded as an important age-friendly feature of the built environment" (World Health Organization, 2007). Providing clean, conveniently located, well-signed, handicap accessible toilets not only benefits the health of the elderly, but all members of society.

Who's Doing Public Toilets Right?

An excellent example of public toilet policy and implementation can be found in Australia. In 1998 the Australian Government provided funding for the National Continence Management Strategy (National Toilet Map [NTM], 2014). The Strategy focused on research and development of an initiative aimed at the prevention and treatment of incontinence. As part of the National Continence Program the government created a National Public Toilet Map (NTM, 2014). The National Toilet Map, available online, shows the locations of more than 1,000 public and private toilet facilities and includes further information about

The provision of public toilets benefits the health of all community members



Figure 4: Sydney's Public Toilet Strategy 2014



Figure 2: Accessible public toilets in Sydney



Figure 3: Public toilet illustrating inclusive access, large internal circulation space, and inclusive fittings and fixtures.

In addition the design and lay-outs are often overlooked making toilets inaccessible for those with mobility issues, people with small children, and those with physical and cognitive disabilities (Greed, 2003, p. 5).overlooked making toilets inaccessible for those with mobility issues, people with small children, and those with physical and cognitive disabilities (Greed, 2003, p. 5).

Health Benefits of Public Toilets

Medical studies have proven that adverse health effects can result when people are denied access to toilets when they are away from their homes or workplaces. Some of the medical issues associated with lack of public toilet facilities are; urinary tract infections (UTIs) caused by urinary retention, constipation, abdominal pain, diverticuli, and hemorrhoids (Brubaker & McCreary, 2007).

Public toilets are especially important for individuals that may need to use facilities more frequently than others, this includes but is not limited to, pregnant women, young children, those with varying medical conditions and older adults. The World Health Organization's guide, Global Age-Friendly Cities, states that adequate public toilets are "regarded as an important age-friendly feature of the built environment" (World Health Organization, 2007). Providing clean, conveniently located, well-signed, handicap accessible toilets not only benefits the health of the elderly, but all members of society.

Who's Doing Public Toilets Right?

An excellent example of public toilet policy and implementation can be found in Australia. In 1998 the Australian Government provided funding for the National Continence Management Strategy (National Toilet Map [NTM], 2014). The Strategy focused on research and development of an initiative aimed at the prevention and treatment of incontinence. As part of the National Continence Program the government created a National Public Toilet Map (NTM, 2014). The National Toilet Map, available online, shows the locations of more than 1,000 public and private toilet facilities and includes further information about

The provision of public toilets benefits the health of all community members



Figure 4: Sydney's Public Toilet Strategy 2014

Sources:

- Brubaker, R., & McCreary, C. (Nov 1 2007). *US Public Health Mandates and the Restroom Problem in America A Call To Action*. PHLUSH. Retrieved October 13, 2014, from <http://plush.org>
- Bruin, R., Mantas, J. J., & Molenbroek, J. M. (2011). *A Friendly Rest Room: Developing Toilets of the Future for Disabled and Elderly People*. Amsterdam: IOS Press.
- City of Sydney - Council - Home. (2014). Public toilets. Retrieved October 12, 2014, from <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/explore/facilities/public-toilets>
- City of Sydney - Council - Home. (2014). Public toilets. Retrieved October 12, 2014, from http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/199816/2013-460160-02-Policy-Attachment-C-Public-Toilet-Strategy-Adopted.pdf
- Greed, C. (2003). *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*. Amsterdam: Architectural Press.
- Kira, A. (1976). *The Bathroom (New and expanded ed.)*. New York: Viking Press.
- Heiss, Oliver, Degenhart, Christine, & Ebe, Johann. (2010). *Barrier-free Design: Principles, Planning, Examples*. Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser Publishing.
- National Public Toilet Map. (2014.). About the Toilet Map. Retrieved October 14, 2014, from <https://toiletmap.gov.au/About>
- Stanwell-Smith, R. (2010). "Public toilets down the drain? Why privies are a public health concern" *wPublic Health*, 124(11), 613–616. doi:10.1016/j.puhe.2010.07.002
- Thompson, L. (2004). "Strong framework." *Nursing Standard*, 19(12), 24-24.
- World Health Organization. (2007). *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global_age_friendly_cities_Guide_English.pdf

Image Credits:

- City of Sydney. (2014). Retrieved October 21, 2014, from http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/07/199816/2013-460160-02-Policy-Attachment-C-Public-Toilet-Strategy-Adopted.pdf
- Higgins, S. Retrieved October 21, 2014, from <http://winnipegscrowpiles.com/2013/07/25/an-eco-friendly-foundation-fo-an-eco-friendly-washroom-facility/>
- National Public Toilet Map. (2014.). Retrieved October 21, 2014, from <https://toiletmap.gov.au/Find>
- Sierens, E. (August 17, 2014). Retrieved October 21, 2014, from <http://www.smh.com.au/photo-gallery/national/eye-for-the-bottom-line-20130815-2rz3s.html?aggregate>
- Talling, P. Derelict London. October 21, 2014, from <http://www.derelictlondon.com/toilets.html>