

**Submission
No 38**

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

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To: The Chair
Dr Amanda Cohn, MLC
Portfolio Committee No.8 - Customer Service - Inquiry into public toilets
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Submission from:

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I am the former Director of Industrial Design and the Co-convenor of the People & Place Research Cluster. My publications include *peer reviewed journal articles, book chapters* and articles in *The Conversation*, as well as numerous *ABC Radio National* Interviews related to public toilets, BBQ's and public and urban spaces, environmental health and well- being.

General points for consideration

A public toilet, due to serving an essential urgent human need, goes to the heart of what a city provides for its inhabitants. Through them it sets the tone for public behaviour, expectations and conduct.

The public toilets appearance and design influences whether we feel cared for, trusted and appreciated. Public toilets communicate social values and expectations, they communicate to visitors how we provide for our citizens and what we expect of them in return.

Therefore, public toilets also have a social role and contribute towards shaping the relationship between citizens, not only because they provide a place of relief for our urgent bodily needs, but because in them we are equal humans and hierarchies are largely removed.

International context

Compared to many other countries, public toilets in Sydney and Australia in general, are of a high standard, clean, relatively plentiful and most cater for universal access.

In **Germany** (my birth place), for example public toilets are hard to find and if they are found they generally require payment to access them. This is clearly not a good model as it discriminates,

makes access more difficult and therefore deflects use to adjoining parks and other public spaces. It also does not ensure that they are cleaner or better serviced.

Singapore Airport on the other hand is an absolute **excellent example** of how to provide a comfortable, refreshing and enjoyable environment that contributes to a feeling of wellness, care and appreciation.

Tokyo's Toilet Project is another example of elevating the common public facility to a level where they become **desired destinations** instead of least favoured options of last resort.

Broader context

A public toilet is **more than a place to fulfil a basic bodily need** outside the home. It is a critically important piece of public infrastructure beyond its **assumed singular function**.

A brief look at the **broader context** of the meaning of Toilet, it:

- denotes the process of washing oneself, dressing, and attending to one's appearance. ...their toilet completed, they finally went back downstairs...
- In the 19th century the word came to denote a dressing room, and, in the US, one with washing facilities; hence, a lavatory (early 20th century).

Clearly today our public toilets have entirely lost these **broader** earlier connotations. When entering a public toilet today, subconsciously we are drawing in a sharp breath, holding it in, avoiding touching any surface or putting anything down, and getting out as quickly as possible. And when we emerge feel relieved but also slightly uneasy.

Public toilets feel nearly completely devoid of any humanity, machine like, they feel impersonal, inhospitable, sterile, uninviting and often are a place of last resort.

Yet, public toilets could feel **welcoming, inviting, calming, caring, comforting and safe**. They could be **desired and sought out** environments that offer reprieve from the multi layered intensity and sensory demands that being in public can entail, and provide a **place of refuge, respite and rest to refresh and regroup**, before re-emerging into the public hustle and bustle.

This facility communicates how the public is cared for by their elected representatives. What matters and what is important. The design is generally an unrealised, valuable lost opportunity to send a message of appreciation and respect to the public through the way these facilities are designed and fitted out. A purely maintenance focussed approach denigrates the toilets, their use and their users to merely a facility that needs to be managed, maintained and in which the

humans using it are causing an expense of time and money, and without whom they would be so much easier to operate.

For example blue lights can make visitors feel like they are a suspected drug user. It does not provide an environment of care. It communicates a crime reduction, public health, maintenance and cost driven approach. These are obviously important aspects but should not dominate but be integrated subtly into a more user centred, softer and perhaps more domestic style setting.

I'm suggesting the following points for the committee's consideration:

1. External access to water and power

1.1. Not every trip to the toilet requires the use of a cubicle or urinal.

Consider the provision on the outside of a carefully designed basin/sink that can be used for washing hands, filling up water bottles, washing fruit or rinsing out a container, activities that are not really appealing do inside a toilet.

It can allow the users not to bring their bags, cases, etc.. into the toilet and in some instances to maintain a sightline to their things on a bench, and therefore making those spaces more safe and conducive for public use.

1.2. Powerpoint/ usb ports

Digital devices are virtually indispensable today and we rely on them for navigating the city and being in touch, yet being able to charge them in public is not easy. The provision of free public power points and free charging stations go hand in hand with the essential basic need the toilet is providing.

1.3. The provision of services located on the outside of the facility provides a more outward looking aspect to what is otherwise a predominately inward focussed design and less transparent, inviting and approachable.

2. Internal design

2.1. Internal layout

Provide a **rest area**, an area that feels private and safe and provides a sense of reprieve in the sense of the word 'restroom'. A space to take a rest while being in public, providing a facility to sit down, chair, bench, etc... to rest, take the weight of the feet and place one's things down safely, but not on the floor.

2.1.1. Having a **dry space** to place things while washing hands, applying make up, freshening up. A small shelf for keeping a ring, bracelet, phone or glasses for example.

2.1.2. The **provision of a restful**, safe environment that affords a sense of privacy and safety, to take a break, refresh - a place that can be sought out for this purpose -

rather than a place of absolute last resort.

The public presents a big range of abilities, neurodiverse, elderly, frail, new to the city, etc... Being in public can be demanding, stressful, overbearing, and not everyone can 'rest' in a commercial setting like a coffee shop or shopping centre.

The way public toilets are perceived deeply influences our way of being in the city, making us feeling welcome or alienated, respected or barely tolerated.

2.2. Sinks, water access and hand hygiene

Taps are used for more than just washing hands. They often provide the only regulated access to clean water. Yet, at times the distance between the tap and the sink is so close to make filling up a water bottle impossible. Why the emphasis on being so restrictive?

2.2.1. **Water temperature** at times pre-set to warm, not a pleasant drinking temperature.

2.2.2. **Soap dispensers** are notorious for being empty or not working.

2.2.3. **Air forced hand drying** while efficient and arguably more sustainable than paper towels, is often associated with loud operating noise, offering the option of paper towels would be an ideal scenario.

2.3. Cubicles

A cubicle is not only used for its primary conceived purpose. It might also be a place to change clothes, deal with a spill, stain or mishap. It should provide for those important activities to take place because it is the only private and safe space in public.

Therefore the cubicle size should consider different body sizes, the wearing of coats, carrying bags, shopping bags, briefcases, roller cases, handbags, etc... and be large enough to accommodate those day to day accessories of the commuter and pedestrian.

The provision of plenty of hooks and small shelves to place items like a phone and to make this a more conducive space by considering a bigger range of additional activities and provide a range of accessories to accommodate these.

2.4. Materials

Soften the appearance through material selection and surface treatments that provide some form of decorative (domestic) style elements. Hygiene and ease of cleaning does not mean stark white tiles and harsh lighting. Colour, Material and Finishes, can be carefully selected to provide a more welcoming and softer environment.

2.5. Lighting, natural light

Current lighting is often harsh and basic. It creates a predominant institutional and functional feel centred around crime prevention, safety and aiming to denote hygiene.

More considered lighting that is employed to create an atmosphere, a sense of

environment that is carefully considered and designed to delight and create a feeling of being welcome, safe, protected, comfortable and at ease.

2.6. **Airflow, ventilation**

obviously a critical consideration in an environment such as a toilet, yet most often this aspect is not addressed successfully. And if it is sometimes at the cost of mitigating prevailing outside temperatures. The Urban Heat Island effect does not mean that all public toilets should from now on be well tempered and air-conditioned but it should be considered more comprehensively.

2.7. **General look and feel**

The current look and feel is one of bare necessity, extremely function focussed, has an overriding crime prevention feel and communicates distrust in the user (public) and therefore it requires such a robust vandal resistant fit out.

These objectives can all be achieved with a softer more domestic or decorated look that goes beyond white tiles and stark lighting. A more refined material palette with decorative surface finishes are options should be explored. These could be in reference to the specific location, its history, current population mix or other relevant factors.

3. **The accessible/universal bathroom**

3.1. Being larger and offering more space inside these facilities are conducive to many of the points raised above, f.e. changing clothes, taking off or putting on an extra layer or attending to a spill or mishap. However their design is just as devoid of the affordances described above. Besides the larger space, they are not offering more utility and they lack hooks, small shelves and seating affordances.

3.2. The larger space makes them more suited to providing a sense of refuge and therefore they offer a slightly more comfortable experience.

I thank you for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts about the opportunities for better public toilet designs with you. I'm happy to contribute further, if so desired.

Yours sincerely

Dr Christian Tietz