

THE IMPLICATIONS OF POOR RESTROOM DESIGN

By

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The state of our public restrooms is a subject that can be embarrassing to talk about, yet is of great importance to each of us and to American society and culture as a whole. Proof of this importance can be gleaned from a national survey of 12,500 Americans taken by IKEA, the Swedish furniture retailer. The survey dealt with reasons for working at home. "By a wide majority, the 12,500 respondents' minds are firmly stuck in the office toilet: Sixty-eight percent listed the appeal of their private privy as the main attraction of working at home, citing everything from dissatisfaction with the office brand of toilet tissue to social discomfort over communal restroom sound effects."

The issues are many, ranging from Sanitation to Mental Health, but there is little doubt that the state of our public restrooms is on the minds of many. This paper will attempt to explore the problems and their effect on us individually and as a Society.

Restrooms as an Indication of Culture

The following is taken from the Korean "Vision for Restroom Improvement"

"The...structure of public restrooms helps us guess their architectural aspect and hygienic level in terms of applied science. In the perspective of the facility, the degree to how much restroom design considers neglected people like the disabled, the weak and foreigners tells us the level of human rights of the given country. The users' manners and etiquettes are the slice of the people's morality and the spiritual culture of that country. Managing restrooms to keep them pleasant and convenient can be valued high since it indicates the given nation's high level of hygiene administration."

Although American restrooms often have a decent level of sanitation and basic construction, the lack of privacy and other amenities can have a negative effect on the users and on our culture as a whole. As an example, take this comment from a European who visited the US.

"I just got back from a two week-vacation in the US and what a difference there is between Europe and the US considering restrooms!! Your stalls are just so...OPEN!! Here, stalls are completely closed rooms just like your bathroom at home. If there was someone in the next stall in your country. I couldn't go...I could see his feet while he was sitting in the toilet!! Have your authorities ever heard of PRIVACY?!?! Is it some kind of cutting of costs not to build respectable bathrooms or something??"

This visitor received a bad impression of our country from these experiences. It can be assumed that many other Europeans have similar experiences, although there are very few forums for lodging such complaints.

American cities have a reputation as difficult places to find public facilities. New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and many others have very few clean and well designed restrooms to service their millions of visitors and residents. This is shameful in an advanced and civilized country such as the USA. Perhaps capitalism has run amok when it's easy to buy everything under the sun, but difficult to heed the call of nature. Surely we must take action and bring together interested parties in order to improve our restroom standards.

Poor Restroom Design Causes Lifelong Problems for Many

It is well established that School toilets can be places where bullying starts. This unfortunate introduction to the perils of public restrooms has caused problems for many mild mannered schoolchildren. Forcing children of vastly different ages and physical size to use exposed and unsupervised facilities is unwise. Some boys immediately become a target for bullying merely by entering a toilet cubicle - the reason being that they are perceived as not being "manly" due to their failure to stand at the urinal.

The result of this bullying can become lifelong problems stemming from the feelings of powerlessness and the intrusion of others into what we are often taught is our personal space. Some targets of this bullying find it difficult to use public restrooms even when they are adults. The resulting problems are costly to their personal lives, our economy and the society.

The major problems with restroom design can be broken down as follows:

Mens Rooms

1. Urinals - Lack of privacy and dividers
2. Stalls - lack of sufficient number, and lack of floor to ceiling privacy in same.
3. Odors - Restrooms should smell and appear clean.
4. Noise Levels - A restroom with piped in music is a much more comfortable space for the public

Womens Rooms

1. Stalls - lack of sufficient number, and lack of floor to ceiling privacy and sound proofing in same.
2. Odors - Restrooms should smell and appear clean.
3. Noise Levels - A restroom with piped in music is a much more comfortable space for the public

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of these issues in depth. However, the issue of privacy is one that seems pervasive throughout the publics' complaints about modern toilet facilities. For instance, strangers from any and all walks of life often have to use adjacent urinals, with no protection from the sounds, sights and even smells which accompany urination. Although this may seem normal to people conditioned to use these urinals, many think it strange that they must come into such a close and personal proximity to complete strangers. The same goes for women when using relatively open stalls in public toilets. Many women find the "toilet sounds" distasteful and few would deny that they'd rather be listening to soft music or some other background noise. In Japan, this problem has been solved by installing push button electronic noisemakers inside the womens room stalls. These devices make the sound of a loud flushing toilet when pressed. Formerly, Japanese women were known to flush the toilet as many as three times to provide covering sounds, resulting in a great waste of water.

People appear to have varying tolerances as to how close they want to be to others, and most public places allow for these differences. For instance, when waiting in the airport gate, you can usually find a number of free seats which will allow you not to sit next to strangers. However, most public restrooms allow no such privacy. Whether young, old, strong or feeble the public is forced to carry out their private business in communal restrooms where their neighbor can even hear them breathe.

It is obvious that the need for privacy in such matters follows a typical Bell Curve, with a few folks not caring at all where and how they urinate, the majority caring somewhat for privacy and a minority at the other end who cannot even use facilities without extreme privacy. However, the privacy issue is relatively easy to solve because **NO ONE LOSES WHEN BETTER RESTROOM DESIGN PROVIDES MAXIMUM PRIVACY.**

The details of proper restroom design will be discussed in a future paper, but preliminary studies show that privacy can be built into restrooms with very little increase in price. In fact, one design that we have been shown is claimed to cost less than traditional restroom design.

The modern American restroom renaissance is already underway. Newer restrooms are being built with improved designs and often offer increased privacy. The codes in many states now require the availability of "family" (lockable) single restrooms as an alternative to the communal restrooms in airports and sports stadiums. Although these efforts represent a step forward, there remains a lack of information about the proper design of restrooms to achieve 100% customer satisfaction. The IPA RIP (Restroom Improvement Project) intends, through extensive research, to provide such a body of information to the trade and the public.

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