

Everyone, everywhere, everyday: A case for expanding universal design to public toilets

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Abstract Public toilets are spaces that can benefit from the application of universal design processes. Research conducted as part of a Churchill Fellowship found that the current design and provision of public toilets are failing many different population groups. A range of barriers means that people's access to toilets can be restricted, which impacts how and when they can use the public spaces that the toilets are located in. Centring the needs of a diverse range of user groups in the design and delivery of public toilets can support access and inclusion. This article proposes that applying the 'Public Toilet Design Principles', would expand universal design to public toilets in Australia.

Keywords: Public toilets, Design, Planning, Public Space, Accessibility, Inclusion

"Public bathrooms are hard to get right. And no wonder. They are mired in cultural baggage, struck in the fixedness of fixtures, and bound by massive, often ancient infrastructure." (Lowe 2018: 49)

Public toilets are a necessary component of public infrastructure. Yet in Australia, and around the world, if they are provided, public toilets are spaces that are too often poorly designed or located. This results in toilets being avoided if possible, perceived as dangerous, and are removed rather than improved because they are regarded as an expenditure and liability rather than a right. If a person or a group of people is unable to locate, access or use a public toilet, their use of and participation in that public space is also limited, therefore restricting their full involvement as a citizen. If universal design aims to be inclusive and support access, then often public toilets do not deliver.

In 2018 I was awarded the Rodney Warmington Churchill Fellowship to increase accessibility and inclusion in public toilets by researching taboos, design, policy and legal barriers. Between March and May 2019, I travelled to the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, The Netherlands and Germany to explore the development and implementation of innovative solutions to support inclusive and accessible public toilets. I had 28 meetings with community groups, community representatives, advocates and activists, academics, toilet manufacturers, government, business, social enterprise, non-government organisations, library staff and 'toilet enthusiasts'. It was evident from the conversations in each city that barriers exist to different users in locating, accessing and using public toilets demonstrating the need for a wider application of universal design in public toilet design and provision.

Public toilets

"Varying social pressures exist within different types of public toilets, such as the powerful peer pressure of school toilets, the relative anonymity of street toilets, or the uncomfortable intimacy of workplace toilets. Private toilets within homes are often

bound by similar unwritten rules if the bathroom is not one's own." (Pascoe 2015: 235)

In this paper, public toilets refer to toilets that are located outside of the private home. They may be provided by a government authority or business and located in places such as a park, city centre, shopping centre, recreation venue, place of employment or government building. Alternative terminology includes restroom, amenity, facility, bathroom, or water closet.

Toilets are essential for basic individual health and wellbeing and public health and sanitation systems.

Whilst public toilets physically come in in many forms, they are all, at a minimum, a private space within a larger public place. Toilets are where people expose their most vulnerable body parts in an effort to achieve health outcomes. In addition to eliminating bodily waste, people use toilets to administer essential medication, manage menstruation, care for young children, support others to use the facilities, find a quiet place to rest, breastfeed infants, access drinking water and for hand washing and hygiene.

A wide range of professions are involved in public toilet provision, accessibility, inclusion and operation. This includes operational staff, architects and urban designers, public health officers, police and ambulance services, disability services and academics. This paper focuses on the processes involved in the design and provision of public toilets. Design relates to the processes to identify the location, type and number of toilets in public spaces, the layout and the inclusion of amenities such as circulation space, urinals, toilet bowls, handrails, shelves, hooks, sinks, mirrors and change facilities.

Everyone, Everywhere, Everyday?

Whilst travelling and researching as part of the Churchill Fellowship people generously shared their personal experiences with me and there were some similarities and differences across cities, countries and continents. The range of different barriers identified to inclusive access of public toilets by everyone, everywhere, everyday are categorised in three broad categories: taboos, design, and policy and legal.

- Taboos relate to the social norms around toilet use, such as who can use what space, how, what for and when. In some countries these norms are entrenched within legislation and policed, whilst in other countries these may not be legislated but are enforced by popular culture
- Design includes the physical location, signage, and what activities are catered for based on the features provided
- Policy and legal relates to the legislation, strategies and standards that influence public toilet design, construction, operation and maintenance

Individually or combined, these barriers can impact on an individual's or group of people's access to public toilets. In response to limited access to public toilets people can resort to reducing their food and water intake, or limiting their mobility to avoid unsafe, inaccessible, uncomfortable or unhygienic public toilets. This subsequently impacts the access to the places that the toilets are in, whether it be a place of work, educational facility, entertainment venue, park or open space, shopping centre or government building.

Across the many conversations the following examples of how different needs are often not addressed or considered in public toilet design and provision were shared.

- Wheelchair users shared frustration of not being able to close a toilet door, turn around in toilets or take their children to the toilet
- Trans and gender diverse people can experience fear of choosing a gendered toilet. One person stated, it is the choice of “having to choose between being a ‘poof’ or a ‘pervert’.”
- Women complained about queues but also the sense of solidarity that they can experience with other women waiting in a queue. Women are more frequent users and can take longer due to caring responsibilities, menstruation, pregnancy, menopause and clothing
- Homeless or unhoused people shared examples of being refused access to customer toilets when no other toilets were readily available and highlighted the need for storage for their belongings as well as showering and laundry facilities
- Migrant and refugee women in emergency situations are at higher risk of physical and sexual assault. Emergency situations create additional challenges for menstruation, pregnancy and caring responsibilities
- People with physical or intellectual disability have different needs that may be met by additional space and assistance provisions. Support animals also have toilet requirements to be catered for. Accessible toilets are often clinical spaces without the aesthetic considerations of standard toilets
- People with invisible disability may require quick access and are often shamed or ridiculed when using specified accessible toilets. “Those with invisible impairments spoke about the suspicion and harassment that they had faced when using an accessible toilet” even when they had a RADAR key to facilitate access.
- Parents and carers require changing tables suitable for the person they are caring for. They might also be a different gender to the person caring for. Rarely are baby changing tables provided in male toilets
- People of size shared the challenges when a cubical is not adequately designed for their needs, and the ‘ick-factor’ of when a body part touches a sanitary bin or toilet roll holder placed next to the toilet bowl
- Parents told me stories of small children picking up the urinal puck in public toilets or of children afraid of the hand dryer noise. When toilets are not provided in parks that children like to play in, the bushes are often the only option
- Needing to pay to access public toilets or have the correct change can be a barrier, especially if you need frequent or urgent access, have a group that needs to go (such as group of school children) or have limited money
- People who exercise or walk dogs indicated having public toilets locked after dark was a hindrance and could create significant inconveniences
- Safety and perceptions of vulnerability were raised by multiple individuals as were questionable hygiene and unclean toilets
- Men using continence pads or menstruating identified the lack of rubbish bins in male toilets

These are not exhaustive or universal examples, however they demonstrate the diversity of needs to be addressed in the provision of public toilets. If these needs are not addressed, they impact on an individual’s or group of people’s mobility, participation in employment, access to education, and inclusion in social and community activities.

Universal Design processes in design and provision of public toilets

“Universal design is a process that enables and empowers a diverse population by improving human performance, health and wellness, and social participation ... Universal design makes, life easier, healthier, and friendlier. This process involved continuous improvement, based on the resources available, towards the ultimate goal of full inclusion.” (Steinfeld and Maisel 2012:29)

I propose that the application of universal design processes are not only relevant to the design and provision of public toilets, but essential to improve the accessibility and inclusion of public toilets. Holmes (2018) in her book *Mismatch* explores how the lived experience and assumptions of designers can lead to exclusion through design, which can have gendered, ability and sexuality impacts and implications. Holmes also explores how design can remedy exclusion through inclusive design methods, which can create solutions that work for many users.

In Australia standards exist that focus on physical disability and visual impairment and provide guidance on access and mobility in the design processes. Yet anecdotal evidence indicates that standards are not meeting the varied needs of different users. Standards do not apply to existing buildings, and the number of toilets to be provided is not mandated. Standards also do not address existing social norms, nor are they able to reflect the gamut of human experience, or even respond to the variety of wheelchair users.

Drawing on the definition above by Steinfeld and Maisel (2012), for universal design to be applied to public toilet design a ‘process that enables and empowers a diverse population’ is required. This involves ascertaining user needs and requirements through consultation and open conversations. By centralising a diverse range of user experiences in the design and provision of public toilets, the process of empowerment can commence. This may result in subtle or significant design changes but have wider implications for individual and public health and social participation.

Public Toilet Design Principles

‘Ease of access to restrooms: Bathrooms that are easy to locate allow families with children, people with disabilities, and older adults to readily use facilities that everyone needs. Placing bathrooms near streets and along major pathways of parks makes locating restrooms easier if the need arises. Restrooms should be clearly indicated on multi-sensory signage throughout parks and plazas.’ (ASLA)

There are different elements in public toilet design and provision that could be made more responsive to user needs and requirements. However, there is no one toilet design that will meet the needs of all users. Therefore, public toilets should respond to the local context and identified needs. To centralise users experiences key topics to be addressed are included in the following Public Toilets Design Principles. These were first developed through the conversations I conducted as part of the Churchill Fellowship and were collated as part my report (Webber 2019) and have been expanded through further conversation with planners in local government and as part of Policy Impact Program (Webber 2020). This list was initially informed by Design Principles for Public Restrooms in the PHLUSH (n.d) *Public Advocacy Toolkit* and seven criteria for a needs-based provision of public toilets in the *Berlin Toilet Concept* (TSPA 2017).

Public Toilet Design Principles

- **Public Life of a City** - Acknowledge that access to toilets support inclusion and participation, in addition to facilitating positive benefits and values including physical activity, economic development and tourism
- **Public Health & Hygiene** - Individual and public health can be achieved through the provision and maintenance of public toilets, including hand washing facilities
- **Safety & Privacy** - All users want to feel safe, and have both audible and visual privacy, when using a toilet as it is private and vulnerable human function
- **Functionality** - Toilets need to be designed to facilitate a range of uses including eliminating bodily waste, people use toilets to administer essential medication, menstrual management, caring for young children, supporting others to use the facilities, finding a quiet place to rest, breastfeeding, accessing drinking water and hand washing.
- **Accessibility** - Design must meet the specific user needs including minimal standards for physical accessibility. This also includes circulation spaces, handles and height of fixtures and features
- **Inclusion** - Design to meet the needs of all populations, including minority groups. This includes a preference to single stall physical designs, signage that reflects all bodies and the review and enforcement of anti-discrimination policies
- **Location & Availability** - Toilets need to be easily locatable and provided in the appropriate number to respond to the number of users. This includes how far people need to travel to access them
- **Attractiveness** - Aesthetics are important to make people feel comfortable. The design of the toilets should be a continuation of the place it is located in
- **Ease of Maintenance & Hygiene** - Materials used in the construction need to allow for easy cleaning, resistance to vandalism and durable while still being functional and welcoming
- **Sustainable** - Design and maintenance needs to consider the use of resources such as water and electricity
- **Communication** - Toilets need to be easy to find via signage or apps, include relevant information about operating hours and maintenance requests as well to be able to determine if a stall is available or occupied from a distance
- **Consultation** - Ensure community input into public toilet location and design to ensure public toilets are meeting identified community needs, including those of minority groups.

Conclusion

It is time to apply universal or inclusive design principles to public toilets that extend beyond those catering to some people with a physical disability. We need to broaden who is included in public toilet design to ensure that all members the community can access public toilets. By centralising a diverse range of user experiences in the design and provision of public toilets, the process of empowerment can commence. This may result in subtle or significant design changes but have wider implications for individual and public health and social participation. To address differing user needs and requirements the Public Toilet Design Principles can guide universal design processes for planning and design of public toilets so that public toilets can be used by everyone, everywhere, everyday - ensuring access and participation in social, economic and civic life.

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