We Need to Talk About Public Toilets

Policy agendas for inclusive suburbs and cities

By Katherine Webber
Churchill Fellow 2018, Queensland

Providing safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets is critical to ensure community participation in Australian suburbs and cities. Toilet planning and provision should be guided by city-wide strategies, user-responsive design principles and clear roles and responsibilities relating to toilet provision and maintenance. This approach supports individual and collective health and economic outcomes while delivering inclusive public spaces and ensuring user dignity.
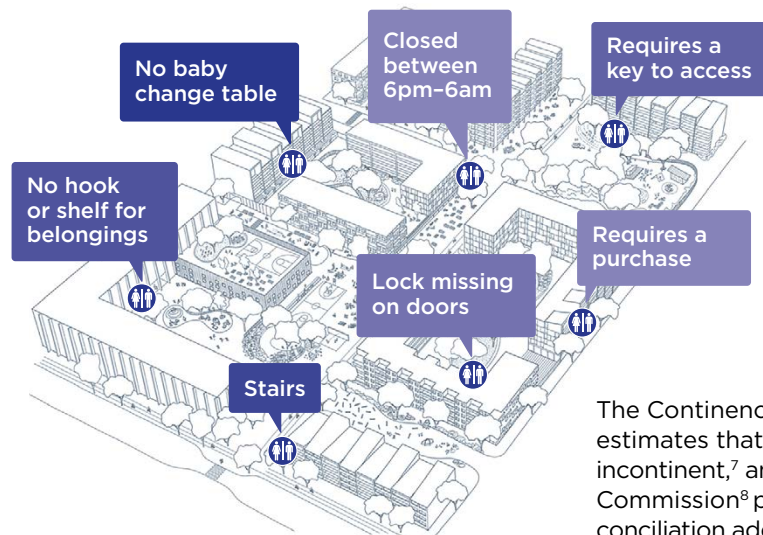
Why toilets?

Public toilets refer to any toilet located outside the home. Across Australia there are two main types of public toilets: those primarily provided by local governments located in parks and public spaces, and publicly accessible toilets provided by businesses for customers and visitors such as those located in service stations, shopping centres and food outlets. Together they create a network of public toilet infrastructure across our suburbs and cities.

While public toilets physically come in many forms, they are all, at a minimum, a private space within a larger public place that supports physical and mental health and hygiene. 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, to wash hands and attend to personal hygiene.

Due to these multiple functions, toilets are essential public services. However, despite their importance, toilets are often neglected in the planning, design, and management of public spaces.

No baby change table

Closed between 6pm–6am

Requires a key to access

No hook or shelf for belongings

Lock missing on doors

Requires a purchase

Stairs

Figure 1. A closer look at public toilets

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While there might be toilets located in an area, there can be a range of barriers to access them. *City schematic courtesy of Natalia Krysiak.*

Emerita professor of inclusive urban planning, Dr Clara Greed argues that,

"Most local planning authorities do not refer to toilet provision within their plans, even though lack of provision undermines health policies, economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability."[1]

In Australia this has resulted in a lack of coordinated access to public toilets in suburbs, urban spaces and cities due to limited provision, and the inappropriate location, design and maintenance of those facilities which are provided (**Fig 1**). These outcomes are due to several factors, including the lack of explicit assignment of responsibility to ensure equitable access to toilets across public spaces.

The impact of this failure for users can be significant, and disproportional for people living with disability or health conditions, women, parents and carers, children, and people who are trans or gender diverse. These users, in particular, need to feel confident they will be able to locate and access a toilet when they are out of their home. Lezlie Lowe, in her book, *No Place to Go: How Public Toilets Fail our Private Needs*, refers to her "toilet radar", and how,

"The first thing [she looks] for in a new environment is the closest place to pee."[2]

The Royal Society for Public Health uses the phrase 'loo leash'[3] to refer to how a lack of facilities can shape where people go or lead them to resort to reducing their food and water intake to avoid unsafe, inaccessible, uncomfortable or unhygienic public toilets.[4,5,6] This subsequently restricts their movements to known places with toilets that meet their needs and limits their full involvement in economic, social and health activities.

The Continence Foundation of Australia estimates that one in four Australians are incontinent,[7] and the Australian Human Rights Commission[8] presents numerous cases of conciliation addressing access to toilets. These cases provide a glimpse into the lack of dignity and autonomy when there are barriers to physically accessing a toilet in public spaces.

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. I travelled to the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany to explore the development and implementation of innovative solutions to support inclusive and accessible public toilets. I met with community groups, advocates and activists, academics, toilet manufacturers, government, business, social enterprise, non-government organisations, and 'toilet enthusiasts'. It was evident from these conversations that, while barriers exist to different users locating, accessing and using public toilets, there are innovative solutions to overcome them which Australia can draw on to reframe how public toilets are planned and provided.[9]

Value and benefits of public toilets

There are many benefits of supporting access to public toilets across suburbs and cities, including achieving health, economic development, and tourism outcomes. The provision of toilets is essential for people exercising in public spaces, including walking their dogs,[10] to support the night-time economy and prevention of anti-social behaviour,[11] for commuters and people using transport networks,[12] as well as supporting the local economy and tourism.[13,14] The role of toilets in tourism is being promoted by the International Tourism Toilet Award, which includes the category 'Best Economic Contributor,' acknowledging the role toilets can play when people stop to use a facility in a destination and then shop nearby, contributing to the local economy.[15]

Case study 1: Happy toilets, happy customers — Singapore

Valuing the contribution public toilets make to inclusive and active cities can increase the quality and improve the user experience of the public space. In Singapore, the Restroom Society has developed the Happy Toilet program,

"To raise the standard of public toilets throughout Singapore and promote those establishments that look after the needs of customers".[16]

The Happy Toilet program provides a star grading for public toilets, focusing on design, cleanliness, effectiveness, maintenance and user satisfaction.[17] The program promotes the provision and maintenance of high quality toilets to support 'happy customers' as,

"Happy customers will keep coming back—for more shopping, more meals and more entertainment."

To achieve a positive star rating, toilet owners focus on daily cleaning, toilet design, construction and addressing customer needs.

Case study 2: Identifying toilet needs — Wales

Wales provides an example of how the responsibility for public toilets incorporated a planning and needs assessment approach. The *Public Health (Wales) Act (2017)* specifies the role of local government to assess the need for public toilets and develop a strategy to meet gaps in provision. The legislation also stipulates that local authorities will need to coordinate to consider access to toilets along key transport routes and within cultural venues and events.[18] While the *Act* does not mandate the provision of public toilets, the strategy must include a local assessment of need and how the local authority will address the local need.

Yet instead of being seen as integral to achieving public health goals, public toilets are often seen as a liability,

"Problematised as unsafe, unclean and/or inadequate and as sites that may harbour germs, criminals and/or criminal activity."[19]

This view of public toilets can result in the service quality of public toilets being managed down to reduce usability, by removing features such as mirrors, hand soap, dryers and toilet seats. Jan Schapper argues that some vandalism in public toilets could be caused by poor design and fear of toilets and germs with people using feet to,

"avoid hand contact on any surface within the toilets."[20]

Good design and management are key to realising the benefits of public toilets.

Public toilets: roles and responsibilities

Currently in Australia, public toilet provision primarily sits within public health, asset management and compliance frameworks. At a Federal level, the Health Department manages the National Continence Program which supports the prevention and management of incontinence.[21] One element of the program is the *National Public Toilet Map* which allows users to find and locate a toilet. The online map, available via website and mobile phone app, allows users to plan a trip by providing information relating to accessibility, opening hours and facilities of over 19,000 public and publicly accessible toilets across Australia.[22]

State and territory governments also have public health provisions relating to public toilets, several of which delegate responsibility to local governments for maintaining public health and sanitation.[23] Local governments have a variety of responsibilities for public toilets, their provision and maintenance in parks and other public spaces and buildings; sewerage and water infrastructure that supports public toilets; as well as public health compliance. Yet, there is no legislative requirement in Australia for ensuring the adequate supply of public access to toilets located outside of the home.

When public toilets are provided, they must be designed and constructed to meet national standards, yet the standards do not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes. The *National Construction Code* provides guidance on the number of toilets that must be provided in buildings, based on the function and use of the building; an estimation

of the number of occupants, divided by sex; and their specific needs such as disability. The rigid application of this code contributes to long waiting lines for women, who, on average, take longer to use a toilet due to clothing, caring responsibilities, menstruation or pregnancy.[24,25,26] In addition, these national standards only apply to certain categories of buildings, and not to those in public spaces such as parks.

Australian standards relating to accessibility[27] provide the design criteria that toilets must meet. These are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in community needs and expectations. However, a result of the changing standards is that once built, facilities can quickly become outdated, and there are limitations on how an already constructed toilet can be modified to respond to changing community needs and expectations. Updating toilet facilities to stay in line with existing standards and community expectations requires substantial financial investment, yet buildings are not required to remain compliant. Clearer definition of responsibility for provision is required to ensure a coordinated network of public toilets across public spaces.

Public spaces frameworks

Opportunities to integrate public toilets into planning frameworks can harness the benefits public toilets provide to improving the activation and inclusion of public spaces.

Currently in Australia, key planning documents for the design and management of public spaces exclude toilets. The *Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019: An Assessment of Australia's Future Infrastructure Needs* only includes one reference to toilets outside of the home, and this relates to female-friendly toilets and changerooms for sporting use.[28] Other planning policies and frameworks such as state government urban design and open space guidelines, while focusing on public spaces and liveability, fail to address the importance of toilets in making public spaces inclusive and usable.[29,30,31] There are no desired standards of service for toilets in our economic centres, suburbs, parks or other outdoor places of gathering. This provides a lack of guidance to indicate how many toilets are needed or the best location to meet community needs.

User engagement

It is important for user groups to be included in the design and planning of public toilets to ensure that the facilities provided meet their needs. However, consultation can identify conflicting user needs. For example, activities to support trans and gender diverse inclusivity in toilets can create conflict with people wanting to maintain sex-segregated spaces. All groups involved want toilets to be safe spaces, and subsequently toilet providers may be required to provide a range of options.

Case study 3: A comprehensive *Toilet Concept* — Berlin, Germany

To address city-wide toilet access, the Berlin local authority developed a comprehensive plan for the provision of public toilets. The *Toilet Concept*[32] included an audit of existing toilets, spatial analysis of provision, and public engagement with senior advocacy groups, disability and tourism associations and other stakeholders, to determine the demand for public toilets and prioritisation for new facilities or upgrades. The process assessed provision in restaurants and pubs and led to a public-private partnership to deliver new automated public toilets across the city.[33]

Case study 4: A city-wide challenge — Portland, USA

To increase access to the existing network of public toilets, the Portland All User Ordinance directed existing government-provided, single-user, gender-specific restrooms to be converted into all-user restrooms. In the first year, over 600 single-stall gender-specific restrooms were converted to all-user restrooms with signs indicating what is behind the door (a urinal or toilet bowl), rather than who is allowed to use it.[34] This process was the result of significant consultation and it centred on the needs of parents with children, people with personal attendants, and trans individuals.[35,36,37]

In response to the potential for conflict due to the sensitive nature of talking about toilets, and the private needs that they serve in public spaces, consultation relating to the design and location of public toilets could use a two-phased approach as identified by Cameron and Grant-Smith to facilitate "transformative politics of difference." The first phase includes "protected arenas" for people from similar identity groups to share experiences and identify solutions, followed by a second phase of "broader participatory activities that bring together a range of groups."[38] This has the benefit of "building citizens who are knowledgeable about and are responsive to others who are different from them, and able to reflect on and reconsider their own position."[39]

Policy recommendations

To ensure that public toilets are adequately considered and provided in public spaces to support inclusion and participation, the following are recommended:

1. National public toilet principles

The adoption of national public toilet principles to prioritise the planning, design and maintenance of public toilets in public spaces across cities and suburbs in Australia. This will engage planners, architects and designers as well as chambers of commerce and businesses through articulating the value and benefits of access to public toilets.

2. Planning and provision responsibility

Define the responsibility for the planning and provision of public toilets which brings together an understanding of the stakeholders involved in the provision and maintenance of public toilets. Embed public toilets in public health legislation, including articulating clear roles and responsibilities to assess local needs across local government areas, open space and transport networks, which includes:

i.   Acknowledgement that access to toilets is a right and supports inclusion and dignity;

ii. An audit of the existing provision of toilets that can be accessed by the public, regardless of ownership or management;

iii. Community engagement to determine local needs; and

iv. Collaborative responses to the provision and maintenance of public toilets.

Stakeholder consultation

These recommendations were informed by the many conversations with diverse stakeholders as part of my Churchill Fellowship and refined based on conversations with planners in local government in Australia.

To implement policy that supports the provision of safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets across public spaces in Australia a number of stakeholders need to be engaged. At all levels of government there is a role for departments with an interest in public health outcomes, in addition to those with authority for the planning and activation for public spaces.

To increase the responsibility of planners, designers and developers in the provision of public toilets, engagement around the national public toilet principles could occur through peak bodies such as the Planning Institute of Australia, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects and the Urban Development Institute of Australia. Engagement with key user groups is also essential. The Continence Foundation of Australia and Changing Places have specific focus in relation to user needs and public toilets. However other groups promoting inclusion and diversity, including disability, parent and carer, homeless and faith-based organisations can all provide invaluable insight into user requirements. All engagement should have the goal to support individual and collective health and economic outcomes while delivering inclusive public spaces and ensuring user dignity.

Acknowledgements

Proposed National Public Toilet Principles

The adoption of national public toilet principles can prioritise the planning, design and maintenance of public toilets in public spaces across cities and suburbs in Australia. These principles articulate the value and benefits of providing access to public toilets, as well as key factors to consider in the planning, delivery and maintenance of public toilets.

These principles will ideally be required by planners, architects, and designers as well as chambers of commerce and businesses.

1 Public Life of a City

Acknowledge that access to toilets supports inclusion and participation, in addition to facilitating positive benefits and values, including physical activity, economic development and tourism.

2 Public Health & Hygiene

Individual and public health can be achieved through the provision and maintenance of public toilets, including hand washing facilities.

3 Safety & Privacy

All users want to feel safe, and have both audible and visual privacy when using a toilet as it is a private and vulnerable human function.

4 Functionality

Toilet design must facilitate a range of activities that support physical and mental health and hygiene. 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, access drinking water and to wash hands.

5 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.

6 Inclusion

Design to meet the needs of all populations, including minority groups. This includes a preference for single stall physical designs, signage that reflects all bodies and the review and enforcement of anti-discrimination policies.

7 Location & Availability

Toilets need to be easily locatable and provided in the appropriate number to respond to the number of users. This includes considering how far people need to travel to access them.

8 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, rather than separated.

9 Ease of Maintenance

Materials used in the construction need to allow for easy cleaning, resistance to vandalism and be durable while still being functional and welcoming.

10 Sustainable

Design and maintenance needs to consider the use of resources such as water and electricity.

11 Communication

Toilets need to be easy to find via signage or apps, include relevant information about operating hours and maintenance requests, and allow users to be able to determine if a stall is available or occupied from a distance.

12 Consultation

Ensure community input into public toilet location and design to ensure public toilets are meeting identified community needs, including those of minority groups.

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