

Planning the Powder Room

BY DENISE SCOTT BROWN

Architects, like dentists, doctors and, to some extent, lawyers, auto mechanics and TV repair men, must frequently depend on their colleagues for those very services which they normally render to others. We as architects share with the public the experience of living, working, sheltering and occasionally suffering in the handiworks of other architects. This provides us

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with a built-in feedback of experience on which to base our own design. In addition to this, we can expect some feedback from the general public. For example, I heard of an Italian architect on an inspection visit to a recently completed housing project he had designed. On the stairs he met a woman carrying a large basket of wet wash up to the roof where he had put the drying lines. "Are you the architect?" She asked threateningly. "No," he lied, and fled.



But there are some areas where, in the nature of our society, personal experience is impossible for the male architect, and feedback from the public unlikely. Such an area is the ladies' powder room. I have long had this problem in mind. As I have used these facilities in office buildings, theaters, academic buildings and drive-ins throughout the land, I have become convinced that the architect's lack of personal experience and involvement in what he is planning constitutes a real problem here—the more so since I imagine he is unaware of it. It seems that I am in a peculiar position as architect, city planner and woman to be of help to my colleagues seeking practical information on powder room design of a type not found in the Graphic Standards.

But a few preliminaries. First, this is a delicate subject. On the second day of my first office experience during the summer vacation between high school and college, my employer (it was a small office) started to initiate me in the mysteries of bathroom facilities. He had an old book with engraved illustrations of various toilet bowls (which he called "lavvies") of a type I had never seen before, with floral decorations inside and out. I formed the impression then that architects are an uninhibited but strangely old-fashioned lot. However, I shall endeavor here to combine the delicacy of a lady with the directness of a confirmed and unrecalcitrant functionalist of the 1930s type. In this I shall have as my model an elegant and honored antecedent,¹ who, writing for a different era on another aspect of the same topic, managed to combine the refinement of a gentleman with the

straight-shooting clarity, vision and sense of responsibility expected of the highest-caliber professional.

Second, I shall not be talking of esthetics. I shall not even bring up the beauties of the view of Philadelphia's City Hall and the late lamented Furness office building, which one had from the ladies' room of Burnham's Wanamaker store; nor the view of New York from the ladies' room in the Regional Plan Association offices in the Herald Tribune Building. We are dealing with sterner stuff.



Nor is our concern here the difference of cultural patterns: of the English, for example, whose toilet partitions are about 18 inches higher and 12 inches lower than those in America—leaving the visiting English woman with a strange sensation of isolated vulnerability. Or the Italian with integrated (male and female) facilities. Or the Scandinavian with, at times, no doors. Or the grim ridiculousness of the South African *apartheid* laws which require, in a public building, separate male and female facilities for each racial group. Nor the strange American custom of providing neither sign nor lock, so that American ladies, before taking possession of a toilet booth,

¹ Chic Sale *The Specialist*, Carmel California: The Specialist Publishing Company, 1929.

must either push the door or peek under it.

We shall be dealing primarily with a logistics and storage problem. The main question: what to do with the coat? And secondarily the handbag and/or gloves, book pile and shopping bag, and on occasions hat and umbrella. And the whole is aggravated by the fact that each of the sequence of operations performed in the powder room requires a different relation of a lady's possessions to her person and involves, therefore, a different storage problem.

I have nothing against the accommodations of the normal toilet booth. Those little spring-back package racks are suitable for all except the most lightweight packages (or the AIA JOURNAL—but if you took it with you, you would probably be reading it, anyway) and serve the added function of barring the door after the bolt has come off. And the hooks are adequate. But why do architects believe that that is the only spot in the ladies' room where a lady needs to hang up her coat and store her possessions? What must she do with the coat when she is washing and tidying up? Put it back on? An elementary analysis will show that there should be at least as many coat hooks *outside* the toilet booths as there are inside, and probably more. And I suggest that where there is a space shortage or a circulation problem, the *outsides* of the

ing under the top shelf at the inter-sink-niation. It is essential that the umbrella stay in sight during all powder room operations, lest some visually deprived soul mistake your \$12, stainless steel-tipped, malacca-handled Bonwit for her \$2 Woolworth.

Now we move to the mirror. This *should* involve a move, even though subsequent exit patterns (including coat-retrieval from the back of the toilet door or other suitable location) may require several extra steps and some cross-circulation. But ladies should not keep other ladies from washing their hands, while they occupy the sink to powder their noses. And face powder in the sink bowl is unesthetic.

At this point the make-up outfit, thus the handbag, must be before one, on a shelf *not less than 12 inches wide*. (Who are the sadists who provide a standard ladies' room mirror shelf 4 inches wide?) And so that one's possessions do not spread horizontally along the shelf, obscuring the view for other ladies, a second, lower shelf should be provided for the pile of books (the shopping bag, at this point, can probably stand on the floor) and beneath that, a row of hooks just for safety's sake. While we're on the subject of mirrors, this one should be long horizontally, preferably related in foot run by some yet-to-be-empirically-determined mathematical identity to the total number of sinks provided. (We architects are just going to have to learn to use the new tools and put an end to intuitive guesswork.) This should mathematically ensure that enough ladies get to see enough of themselves; but just in case the computer errs, a slight ramp up, as in a theater, should be provided, so that tall ladies can see themselves over the heads of short ladies.

Then there is need for a second mirror—a vertical one, near the exit, but with room enough for a middle-distance view. It is nothing short of cruelty to expect a lady to leave the powder room without a middle-distance, full-length view of herself. (While we are on the subject, architects who provide mirrors in elevators do a kindness to nervous ladies—and gentlemen?—going for interviews.)

So now we have covered the storage problem, and suggested that in dealing with it adequately we may aggravate the already-difficult circulation problem. But circulation is an architect's problem. I'm sure this can be dealt with by the male professional without advice from me.

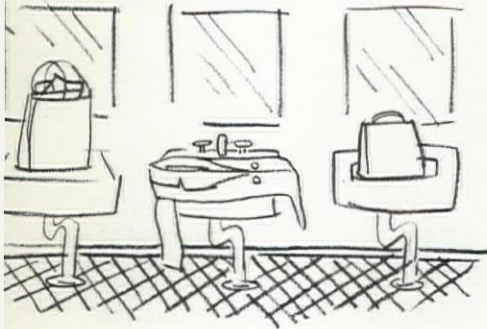
What about types of facility? I think one general rule applies (possibly to men too). The powder room is not the time or place to start exploring. In this area we are all children of tradition, and feel happiest with what we know. I am reminded of an experience I had in a public institution somewhere in the land, whose only feature to remain in my memory was its extraordinary lavatory (fr. L. *lavare*, to wash) arrangements. A circular bowl, perhaps 60 inches in diameter, with an obvious water source at its center and no visible means of activating it, stood at waist-height in the center of the room. Search finally revealed a ring footbar which, when pressed, gave rise to a ring of water jets. These at no point on their perimeter provided sufficient water to cover the palm of the hand. Was one, I wondered, intended to circulate around the bowl in order to gain the necessary supply? Visions arose in my mind of a mystic rite, a combination of Maypole celebration and Scottish sword dance, as circulating ladies perform the ritual hand-washing, alternating the while, between jumping on the footbar and over each other's possessions.

Do they, I wondered, have a similar facility in the men's room? Or have they provided something more ritually suitable, in the nature of a trough or well?

Then for the driers. Again, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. There is no way for a lady to dry her face with one of those hot-air driers without letting the water trickle down her neck. Also, rubbing your hands fast for minutes on end is boring. And if the drier breaks down and the towel supply has been abolished, there you are. Don't let anyone tell you they prevent chapping. They don't. No, the traditional paper towel is best. One function the hot-air drier can perform very well, however, is to warm up your winter boots.

Now here is a trickier matter. There is a fixture (devised, no doubt, by a lunatic scientist) called the "female urinal." I have pondered about this contraption and I cannot see its advantages. I cannot even think of a way in which a lady could use it at all, let alone with the speed and convenience which its masculine namesake affords the other half of the population.

These are, of course, personal opinions, but from a small amount of empirical research—i.e., from noting the exclamations of surprise and astonishment, and the efforts to acquire alternative traditional



toilet doors might do very well. Storage of the other pertinalia presents an even harder problem. Some you can't hang on a hook, some are precious and some you need with you. You can't balance them on the sink rim; it's too narrow, and even where sinks are of the inset type, the surrounds are usually too small and often wet. Umbrellas are even worse. A lady with an umbrella sticking out at right angles from her person as she washes is a menace. The whole problem could be neatly solved by two shelves, one above and one below the sink; and by a hook hang-

accommodations where possible, from other powder room users—I would assure you that these unfathomable objects are viewed with suspicion by womankind in general (especially those under 6 and



over 30) and I believe I can guarantee that where there is a choice, these booths will be the least-used in the room. The female urinal (and here I speak from experience of both) is somewhat less convenient than the Asian squathole.

Then there is the question of showers. In Italy they provide hot showers in the gasoline station restrooms. This helps to sell gasoline to tourists. In all schools of architecture there should be provided a hot shower in the ladies' powder room—for how can a girl be expected to charette for three days and three nights without rest if she cannot even have a shower? And this is what we expect. Failing this, and at an absolute minimum, we should provide at least one enlarged toilet booth containing a toilet and a sink with hot and cold water. This should be a standard provision in all ladies' washrooms, to allow for the sometimes necessary private ablutions of women and children.

So much for the detail arrangements of the actual powder room. Somewhere in my mind I have an uneasy feeling that perhaps this is not a problem handled by architects at all. They merely supply a certain amount of space based on a rule-of-thumb allowance per person, or possibly per sales-foot, of the order:

$$X = \int \int \int \frac{y'}{t'} \quad ij \quad m(n-1) \quad z.$$

where x is total towel-rail space, and z is the number you first thought of.

Perhaps, in other words, "they" (whoever they are—SMERSH perhaps) supply it all ready-made. Well, if that is the case, architects, where is your pride? Only by involving yourself deeply in the technico-industrial manufacturing processes of the 20th century, will you be able to keep "them" responsive to the human needs of

human beings (in this case, women). Powder rooms are for people.

There are a few other problems, perhaps of a type more innately interesting to architects, which may be dealt with in passing. The first of these is the locational problem: How do you find it? Architects should remember that this is a particular problem in the case of a lady, since she may not ask. (Yet the solution is not to make it so obvious that you cannot miss it, even when not searching. For in that case, a true lady will not use it.) I feel that in the game of hunt-the-toilet, a lady with a professional education in architecture and city planning has a distinct advantage over her sisters. For there are certain laws, which, consciously or unconsciously, designers follow. These are:

1. Functionalism—This means it's likely to be next to the men's, behind the elevators. (But if it's an International-Style house you're in, it's that thing like a ship's funnel set in the plate glass window and opening off the patio.)

2. Symmetry—If the men's is 100 yards down the corridor to the right third door on your left, then the women's is 100 yards down the corridor to the left third door on your right. Or if the men's is at the second, fourth, sixth and eighth half-landing on the escape stair, then the women's is at the third, fifth, seventh and ninth. Don't try the first floor. There won't be one. In fact, don't trust this law too implicitly, since some masculine domains have strange, undecipherable laws of symmetry such as a ladies' room for every three-and-one-third gentlemen's rooms until the fourth floor, and thereafter, one every four floors. In this case one must ask, since it would require too much walking to break the code.

3. Symbolism and affective properties—Toilets are likely to be found in places that look reticent and private, such as crannies under the stairs, behind the woodshed, or, in Italy, quite informally, off small alleyways. This too can be deceptive. If a building offers no public facility but you are sure there must be one for the staff somewhere, look in a large, public space for a small, nameless door, which can be locked from the outside and which resembles a cleaner's closet. That will be it. But it will be locked.

I am in favor of maximum use by architects of such locational communications, rather than the dependence on signs. It is so much more subtle. But, unfortunately,

they alone will not be sufficient. For example even such simple algorithms as we have outlined will not be retained in the minds of some people, notably academicians, when they have something else on their minds. So considerable confusion will occur, and difficult social situations of the "Fancy-meeting-you - here - Professor - Abernathy" sort. Hence heraldic amplification of the locational pattern is required.

Simple signs saying *Women* or *Men* are best. *Ladies* and *Gentlemen* is too "tasteful." And so is *Powder Room*, and inaccurate as well, being descriptive of only one in a sequence of operations. Shun the corny. A Latin-American friend of mine (male gender) was once faced, in a nautical London pub, with the signs "gulls" and "buoys." After puzzling a moment, he determinedly entered the "gulls." To overcome the language barrier, those little silhouettes of 18th century aristocrats which one sees tacked to the door in hamburger palaces with aspirations are inoffensive, and would be useful if there was ever a language problem.



In Europe this problem has had to be tackled really seriously. It is not necessary to learn to ask for the powder room in 15 different languages, since most nations use, in addition to their own signs, the acronym WC or the symbol 00. However, I did hear of an interesting new attempt at a simple lavatory *lingua franca*, obviously contemporary with the attempts to internationalize and standardize all European traffic signals. It consisted of a combination sign, a triangle in a circle, thus  to indicate, generically, "restrooms." Then when the prospective user has been brought closer to hand, the sign separates out for male and female. Very neat. Just what you need, I thought. A simple language of basic forms, able to be shared by everyone, no matter what tongue. Then I got to pondering. And I leave you with my puzzle: When those signs separate out, which is which? □