

GOING PUBLIC

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BENZ

Are public toilets the last frontiers between the sophisticated urbanite and his primitive self? **Peter Benz** flushes out the truth about the public loo.



Urinol Lisbon



Shanghai



Yoro Falls



Saigon Street



Nagoya

“And the toilet is the perfect place to listen to the chirping of the insects or the song of the birds, to view the moon, or to enjoy any of those poignant moments that mark the change of the seasons.”

– Jun’ichiro Tanizaki,
In Praise of Shadows

Some years ago I visited the home of a fairly well known Japanese architect, also a faculty member of the architecture department of a rather distinguished university. As part of his personal practice, this professor was building a new house for his family and himself. And as a good sample to his students he basically used this project to try out all the things he had always wanted to try, but never had the commission to do so.

At the time of my visit the project had been going on for three years already, which probably wouldn’t have been a great deal of a problem if the new building wasn’t being built under, over and onto the old family residence *while* the family was still living in it.

So for three years they had been living with a series of holes in the surfaces of their nice traditional Japanese house

through which the bright orange support structure of the new building would enter their home: one new column and some bracing proudly stood where the living-room couch used to be, a constant reminder of the architectural greatness that would be the future – if it ever came. For the moment being however, there was no heating in the winter, no AC in the summer, the constant noise of the builders, the ridicule of the neighbours, the other principal problems that come along with any experiment – failures, mistakes, surprise results ...

However, this was what really upset the family most: for three years there hadn’t been a toilet in the house as another

bright orange column had replaced it. According to the family-head, that shouldn’t be a big issue as there was a perfectly good public toilet only fifty metres down the little suburban road. As expected, his family disagreed and by now emotions were running high.

No matter whose side one is to take in this dispute, the remarkable fact remains that the idea of not having a private toilet was even considered a possibility for a normal middle-class family in an otherwise rather normal upper middle-class neighbourhood. This is even more interesting if you come from a background where a public toilet is usually only considered by

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Wachenheim



Fotan



Ping Shek

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drug-addicts for shooting up an overdose – as memorably acted out by Ewan McGregor in Danny Boyle’s movie *Trainspotting* (1996).

Not taking into consideration obvious tourist-only facilities at sightseeing hotspots, it seems that only in East Asia is there still a certain tradition of going public. As a result, public toilets can be found also in more obscure places like middle-class suburbs, rural villages or industrial quarters, where they are frequented by locals only. On my daily ride to work, the mini-bus passes no less than four standalone public toilets on a five hundred metre stretch.

As they are of a common public interest, these facilities are not only generally better maintained, but also

more carefully planned – functionally as well as aesthetically. Sometimes this is almost to the point of ridiculousness: in Saga, a remote town on Kyushu Island, Japan, I once found a set of sculptures by British artist Barbara Hepworth displayed in the small courtyard of a public toilet pavilion next to the town’s cultural centre.

I am very sure it is possible to sketch the development of contemporary architecture through the designs of public toilets. I would not even be surprised if public toilets were ahead of their times – architecturally speaking – as they are usually small projects, obscure enough to allow also a more daring approach.

The beauty of the public toilet however, does not lie in its

architectural distinction; its merits are far more sublime. After all, there are few occasions in our everyday lives as simple, trivial and private as going to the loo.

In contemporary city life, public toilets present the rare opportunity in which we are thrown back onto our human self and reminded of our basic earthly needs. There is a strong tendency today to eliminate any experience deemed “unpleasant,” “dirty” or “intimate.” Every public space has to conform to a notion of hygienic necessity, functional convenience and sensual neutrality to the point of becoming entirely sterile and accordingly arbitrary.

As public toilets usually have to be low-maintenance facilities – basic (technical) equipment only, natural ventilation, easy cleaning – they alone withstand this tendency and become the last remaining spaces of sensual experience.

Admittedly the experience is far from pleasant sometimes: you see, hear and smell things in public facilities that you’d usually rather not see, hear or smell. Sometimes it simply does really stink and there is no point in arguing that. Yet – and you may not agree to this – there has to be a place for exposure also to such truths.

Just outside the Castle of São Jorge in Lisbon one can find the *urinol*, which basically consists of a metal-sheet attached to one of the castle’s buttresses, providing a narrow space behind it; no walls, no doors, no design whatsoever. Also, no particular privacy; in fact one can see the legs – and occasionally the heads – of the users protruding under – and over – the simple screen any time. Casually relieving oneself against the ancient castle wall in the orange glow of the warm Portuguese afternoon sun is as romantic as any experience of space one can ever get. ■



Mannheim



Beijing Forbidden City