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The Ladies' Room: Repetition, Exclusion and Exposure in Public Restrooms

Jenifer Watson

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"Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism"
—Judith Butler

The Public Restroom and The Ladies' Room

The public restroom is a construction within our built environment which serves as a receptacle of comfort and privacy for necessary elimination activities. We gather in these spaces for intended activities such as vomiting, urinating and defecating and other occurring activities such as crying, gossiping, reading, smoking and dozing. Given these activities, which are not dependent upon the binary division of sex, but rather the gray scale of attitudes of privacy, why are bathrooms either Mens' Rooms or Ladies' Rooms? Public restrooms are also spaces where unintended or taboo activities occur such as graffiti, violence and fornication. Given these activities, doesn't the division provide an object for the subject's act of violent elimination? Doesn't the architecture itself provide a container to isolate a victim? This paper will analyze the location, entry, size, materials and layouts of selected public restrooms to reveal them as constructions which isolate, marginalize and victimize minorities and women. It will critically evaluate the process of designing restrooms according to conventions, standards and minimums and propose alternate forms and processes to accommodate a diverse society.

Historical Divisions, Repetition and Identity

"The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production and substantializing effects - new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible." (Butler, "Gender Trouble," p.145)

Public restrooms have been segregating in other ways in the past. The controlling and humiliating subscription of Whites' restrooms and Blacks' restrooms served to identify a social attitude in the United States. We can now look back at that construction and critically evaluate its methods and results. This paper will reveal the current segregation of Mens' restrooms and Women's restrooms as unnecessary and propose alternatives. The paper will also examine the consequences of "Accessible" restrooms which conform to A.D.A requirements. Due to large space requirements, these restrooms are frequently unisex.

Other Issues

"Does not fear hide aggression, a violence that returns to its source, its sign having been inverted." (Kristeva, "Powers of Horror," p.38)

The paper will explore how issues of cleanliness and the body influence public restrooms. Using supportive photographs, the paper will describe the physical and material characteristics of public restrooms which make them spaces for acts of hostility towards minorities and women.

A Restroom

"an open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure." (Butler, "Gender Trouble," p. 16)

In conclusion, this paper will present alternative designs for public restrooms which do not reinforce constructed identities nor create an environment for hostility against women and minorities.

PRESENTER

Jenifer Watson is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the College of Architecture. She teaches design studios and seminars on issues of difference in architecture. Her research interests include exposing the constructed, exclusive nature of our built environment, the selective construction maintenance of the canon, and the inappropriate language used to make and discuss architecture. She has served on various panels, directed workshops and delivered papers at national and regional conferences. She grew up in a military family which insured skills in packing, paranoia, occupation, and a basic love for the color green. She attended Rice University for her undergraduate and professional degree, Haney Tech for her welding certificate, Philadelphia College of the Arts, Temple University and Mississippi State for graduate course work in Literature and Feminist Theory. She practices architecture and collects animal traps, school buildings, and spoons.