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Toilet troubles worsened by COVID crisis

Public bathrooms are perfect virus spreaders. Strangers gather in the smallest space possible to perform functions that are rendered into vortexes of airborne contamination, thanks to flushing toilets, and blasted through the room by hand dryers.

By [Neil Steinberg](#) Jul 30, 2020, 4:54pm CDT



Closing off urinals is one way to ensure social distancing, even in public restrooms. *AFP/Getty Images*

Tim Pyle, executive director of the American Restroom Association, recently got an urgent email from Wichita alerting him that the bathroom at the bus station downtown was closed to the public; could the ARA help?

While the Baltimore-based group is not intended to address individual shuttered toilets across this great land, Pyle responded sympathetically.

“Municipalities and governments have dropped the ball in the past 20 years, and have abdicated their responsibilities to store owners, gas stations, and eateries,” he wrote. “Now that COVID has hit, it is more important than ever for ‘public’ facilities to do their part and keep them open.”

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Which is separate from the issue of whether people should even go into public restrooms that are open. Public bathrooms are perfect virus spreaders. Strangers gather in the smallest space possible. They perform functions that are then rendered into whirling vortexes of airborne contamination, thanks to flushing toilets, and blasted through the room by hand dryers.

Two related problems then: keeping bathrooms open, and improving their safety.

“When you think about delivery drivers, folks on the road, if there aren’t bathrooms available because everything is closed, where are they supposed to go?” Pyle said. “What COVID has done is highlighted weaknesses in the restroom infrastructure.”

Well, that, along with highlighting the fault lines spider-webbing through every aspect of American society: health care, government, the economy, as well as the cracks latticing the heads of many of our fellow citizens, who can’t seem to grasp the whole wash-your-hands-and-wear-a-mask thing until they themselves are, you know, dying. The psychology of bathrooms adds another layer of difficulty.

Our darkest, Freudian, toddler fears seem to congregate in bathrooms. Think about the transgender issue — an enormous cultural change that caused boggled right-wingers to suddenly worry about signs on toilet doors. What is it about bathrooms?

“They’ve long been focal points for unrest and anxiety,” said Kathryn Anthony, ACSA Distinguished Professor at the University of Illinois’ School of Architecture at Urbana-Champaign. “Public restrooms historically have been settings for privileging one group and discriminating against another, settings for social controversies and power struggles. But COVID-19 now shines a spotlight on underlying problems with public restrooms.”

CBS Sunday Morning ran a report last week where American Standard — which has a dog in this race — explains how public toilets can be redesigned to not create COVID mini-tornadoes every time they’re flushed. Stalls should be floor-to-ceiling.

In an ideal world. But I have to ask the TV folks: Have you ever *been* in a bathroom? Particularly in a city like Chicago? Half the time the toilets in the Loop seem relics of the 1933 Century of Progress, those sternum-to-toe urinals crackled with age like raku pottery. Floor-to-ceiling stalls will quickly become the tiniest Motel 6’s ever.

What to do? Fixes run from immediate and cheap — blocking every other urinal with yellow hazard tape — to long term and pricey: redoing entire restrooms.

“Most businesses look at problems from a low cost, medium cost, high cost solutions” standpoint, said Pyle. “The high cost is, ‘Let’s redesign and renovate our restrooms, taking into account what we learned.’ The medium cost is, ‘Can we change the fixtures so they’re more

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motion activated, anti-microbial?’ The low cost is, ‘Wash your hands and wear a mask, everybody.’”

This being America, low cost seems the hardest.

“Ideally, we need a new generation of public restroom design — and hopefully we will start seeing that in the near future,” said Anthony, who’s also vice president of the ARA. “I would really like to see some of those federal stimulus funds directed towards rebuilding our nation’s public restroom infrastructure and bringing them up to the 21st century.”

Doing my due diligence on the ARA, I looked at their board — cynic that I am, I figured it must be a front for Kohler and World Dryer to push costly bathroom products. It’s not. Much of the ARA’s backing is from groups concerned about incontinence and paruresis — a new term for me, too: bladder shyness. Inability to go when others are around. A bigger problem than I had heretofore imagined.

And one that has to get in line in this era when our troubles seem to be everything, everywhere, all at once. Though if you can find a bathroom and use it, well, that itself is reason to be grateful. Because not everyone can do that, either.

CS★T