

when design leaves the showroom

Dirty Furniture



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plus fatbergs, shitting monarchs
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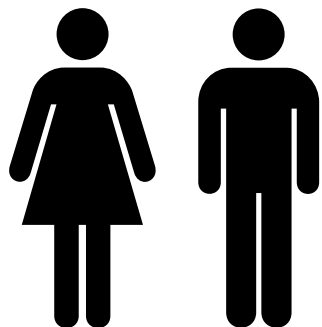


Photo by Sander de Wilde © Corbis via Getty Images

Two gay men dressed as women pee against a wall during the Belgian Pride Parade, 2013

A Piss-Poor Performance

What does it take to design a truly gender-neutral toilet? With debates raging across the US, artist *Alex Schweder* stands up for women who do the same.



Let's begin with married couple Heike and Bill (not their real names) who are German and American respectively. German men, according to Heike, are less concerned than their American counterparts about acting out a masculine persona at home. Bill, however, associates feeling free to do what he wants in the bathroom with a sense of being at home; he likes standing up at the toilet to pee. This disgusts Heike. She says that every time she hears Bill using the toilet in this way, she has the image of herself down on her knees cleaning up his piss; this is not the kind of woman she is or wants to be. Bill defends himself by pointing out that he cleans the bathroom often. The tension between them mounts and she tersely retorts that while he maybe cleans the bathroom once a week, he splashes the toilet with his urine several times a day. The question arises as to why Bill doesn't just sit down to urinate, to which he answers that he feels like a sissy doing that, and with all the nagging by Heike, he would feel 'pussy whipped' were he to give in to what he saw as her demands. With the emotional temperature rising, Heike replies that his feeling like a sissy while sitting to pee is ridiculous. 'That is silly, I don't feel like a man when I pee standing in the shower!' she snaps. Bill's face turns ashen; he had no idea that Heike peed in the shower. 'I don't pee in the shower. That's disgusting,' he says. 'You get up earlier than I do which means that I stand in your piss when I shower after you.' 'Well that's how I feel when I use your splashed-on toilet,' she rebukes, 'and besides, the shower water cleans it all away, which is more than you do.'

Seven years ago I began an architectural practice whereby I renovate people's homes by changing the ways they use, discuss, and think about them rather than through any material change.

As part of this practice, I meet with people in my studio for an hour-long conversation about their homes. The success of this discursive branch of what I call performance architecture has led me to establish SOAP (Schweder's Office for Architectural Performances). The above exchange occurred when Heike and Bill came to me with a specific renovation in mind. From the altercation, it is clear that the toilet – and the way men and women use it – is a flashpoint and site of struggle for both our gender identity and also the way women and men relate to one another.

Human beings have designed this thing – the toilet – a place where our corporeal interior is externalised, where our bodies become not our bodies. Yet at or on the toilet we are more than just animals that stand or sit.

Of course, whether we choose to stand or sit is not engrained but learned. 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,' Simone de Beauvoir famously declared in *The Second Sex* (1973). The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan also saw gender differences as illusory. For him, the segregation of men's and women's restrooms are the culmination of 'laws of urinary segregation'; these are enforced when little children are toilet-trained, when boys and girls are taught to adopt specific postures in order to pee.

Design also figures in the performance of gender, and public restrooms perhaps provide the clearest example of how gender identity is constructed through design. In their introduction to the

Anxieties about gender lie just below the bathroom's glossy white surface

book *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* (2009), Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner write, 'Public toilets are among the last openly sex-segregated spaces that remain in our society and, crucially, among the last spaces that people *expect* to be sex-segregated.' Conventional segregated bathrooms draw clear lines. Not only do they separate men and women from one another, but also men from men and women from women. Toilet and urinal partitions prevent bodily mingling of same sex occupants through either gaze or touch. Sound and smell are permeable but these unpleasant emissions might further serve to stop bodies gravitating towards one another. Conventional restrooms are theatres in which binary gender identities are performed, witnessed and reinforced. By passing through gendered doors we choose which role we will play.



Photo by Brandon Hillier

Students stage a 'shit-in' protest in 2015 at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada to advocate for gender-inclusive bathrooms.

You only need to mark what happens when a man walks into the ladies' or a woman into the men's to know that objections arise when people choose the 'wrong' door; anxieties about gender lie just below the bathroom's glossy white surface. That any transgression of this binary equation – that man equals male and woman equals female – creates social anxieties is evidenced by events in the USA this year. In March 2016, North Carolina became the first US state to pass a law, the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act (or 'bathroom bill' as it's come to be known), requiring that transgender people use only bathrooms that match their biological – rather than identified – gender. Several other states considered similar action, including Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, Mississippi, South Dakota and Tennessee. In May, the Obama administration issued a directive to all schools receiving federal funds, that they must protect the freedom of students to choose which bathroom to use regardless of their sex or gender identity. Eleven state-filed lawsuits contesting this executive advocacy shortly followed. 'Shit-in' protests demanding gender-neutral toilets followed at various universities – but they didn't have the desired effect. In August, Texas and another twelve states asked a federal judge to halt the Obama administration's directive.

On one level there is little architectural difference between the ladies' and gents' rooms: their finishes are the same, the toilets themselves are identical, and both sexes go in for the same reason. The most pronounced distinction between the two spaces is the addition of the urinal. This tangible addition prescribes a specific posture so that through it we have come to associate peeing upright with the enactment of masculinity while thinking of seated relief as feminine. For de Beauvoir this very process marks the decline into sexual oppression, when girls are taught to crouch in a subordinate position while boys are encouraged to stand proud and produce the perfect arc.

Philosopher Judith Butler, whose seminal contribution to gender theory is her concept of 'performativity', insists that people's agency in their own gender comes when they change the way that they perform it. They can do this by subverting the norms of the society into which they are born. A good example of this is the transgender person passing through a bathroom door.

For the man or woman who identifies with the opposite gender from which their biology is usually associated – or with both the choice of toilet door represents a calibration of priorities: should they, when going to the bathroom, privilege their biology or their gender identity? The preference for standing or sitting could also be important to their sense of gender identity and its enactment. The choice of toilet door then – and whether one chooses to stand or sit – can be a complex issue.

Given this, perhaps the key to a truly gender-neutral toilet – and to its widespread acceptance – will involve a thorough reconsideration of how we all *use* the toilet. If we become more aware of design's complicity in the performance of certain gender roles and social mores – urinals, toilets, and in fact the whole of our bathroom environment are props that assist us in this performance – how could design make space for or entertain the possibility of other performances? Sometimes this could involve changing the object and sometimes it could involve changing the story around the object, as will be the case when we return to Heike and Bill.

Many who advocate for men's seated evacuation, for example, cite health benefits, cleanliness, etiquette and empathy towards their female counterparts as reasons. However, none of these are at the heart of the matter and to shift male behaviour from standing to sitting, the performance of masculinity is what needs to be addressed. Similarly, to shift female behaviour from sitting to standing, the performance of femininity needs to be addressed. Towards this, there are three strategies that can be pursued: make it possible for women to perform femininity



Kim Dickey, *Lady J Series*, 1994–1999

standing, design the urinal in such a way that it becomes problematic to perform a macho persona, and make sitting on the toilet to pee more masculine than standing.

The belief that only men can stand and pee is supported by over a century of public practice. Between 1994 and 1999, however, ceramic artist Kim Dickey challenged this presumption by developing a vitreous china prosthetic that allows women to urinate while erect. Made from the same material as the toilet itself, her *Lady J Series* takes its name from another plastic device advertised for use when camping. Dickey's small china spout is held between a woman's legs and directs her urine as a penis would. Unlike the pure functionalism of the original Lady J – or of the cardboard P-Mate distributed to women at Glastonbury Festival in 2004 – Dickey's recasting of this object introduced play, pleasure, humour and theatre to the act of peeing. She referenced a number of gendered and non-gendered forms such as uncircumcised penises, breasts, codpieces, Renaissance multi-spout fountains, watering cans, and bear claws in her designs.

In contrast, architect Yolande Daniels addressed the design of the urinal itself and its entrenched association with masculinity, in her work. Her *FEMMEpissaire* (1996) augmented the urinal with typically feminine accoutrements while also enabling a woman to pee in a different posture. While female urinals were put into production half a century earlier, Daniels's was the first female urinal to allow its user to observe her body evacuating itself of urine. Daniels achieved this by attaching

stirrups to the sides of the pissoire, which cup and support the user's upper legs (the stirrups also reference the hygienic familiarity of a doctor's office). Rather than squatting, the stirrups enable a woman to lean back, face forward, and project her pee. Daniels addressed the practical concern of soiled clothing by also designing special pants with a zipper that reveals the entirety of a woman's crotch. She also placed a mirror above the toilet bowl at face height with a lipstick holder at its base. The convergence of the urinal with these conventionally feminine accoutrements cues a hybrid performance, both masculine and feminine. If, as is suggested by Daniels's design, women en masse begin using urinals and the urinal becomes, like the toilet, a post-gender or gender-neutral object, then perhaps in the future the urinal will be able to shed these feminising limbs. The hope is that serial enactment could lead to a new normal.

While the previous two works imposed feminine performance onto masculine practices, another strategy is to multiply the masculinities invested in an object by queering the urinal. Inspired by both Daniels and Dickey, in 2001 I undertook a residency at the ceramics factory of the Kohler sanitary-ware company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. I used my time at Kohler to produce the *Bi-Bardon* urinal, a plumbing fixture named after the Kohler product line from which this conjoined urinal was made. The birth defect of disambiguation that this urinal references invites a defiance of the conventional bathroom etiquette associated with urinals; that is, to ignore your neighbour. Partitions between urinals consolidate this behaviour, but the fixture I designed places the men using it much closer to one another. Here they enact conjoined twins, see one another's genitals and have to confront any perceived or real attraction to one another. The conjoined urinal suggests a different kind of masculinity – not the kind most men are comfortable with – from that which is normalised by most bathroom design.

While fully functional, all three of these speculative alternative gender performances involving the toilet only exist in the space of the exhibition. Any of them could be put into production were there popular desire for them. But in truth, the clamour for objects that prompt other performances of gender is not coming from the mainstream, but from queer minorities. Bringing a product to market is expensive and time-consuming with no guarantee of success, which is why I put forward a third way of recasting gender enactment in relation to the toilet: changing the stories about who we are in relation to them.

This strategy for multiplying the possible performances of gender in the bathroom requires reshaping the perspective we often have of men who sit to pee from emasculating to



Photo by Michael Moran from Sarah Bonnefaison and Ronit Eisenbach, *Installations by Architects: Experiments in Building and Design*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2009.

Yolande Daniels, *FEMMEpissoire*, 1996



Alex Schweder, *Bi-Bardon Urinal*, 2001

Courtesy of Kinky Boots on Broadway



Earlier this year the cast of Broadway musical *Kinky Boots* released a song, *Just Pee* in support of transgender bathroom rights.

empowering. Let's return then to Heike and Bill, who we left entrenched and angry over the splashing of urine in both the shower and on the toilet seat. An analysis of their exchange reveals that what each wanted had less to do with an idea of gender than it did with control. Bill felt his power compromised – for many men power is associated with masculinity, making it hard to disentangle the two – if he let Heike control him through how he pees. Heike on the other hand felt coerced into the performance of a femininity she did not like. Their architectural renovation was to give them each a say in how the other used the bathroom to pee. Both expressed disgust at the perceived filth of the other, and both could influence the other by changing the ways they themselves behaved. In the end, both dropped their guns simultaneously: each agreed to stop peeing standing up when at home. For that we should give them both a seated ovation.