

BridgmanCollaborative Architecture offices
at the corner of Higgins and Main, Winnipeg.

HUMAN DIGNITY ON MAIN STREET: *Public Toilets in Canada*

by Rae Bridgman

Summary

This article zeroes in on the problems associated with public urination and defecation and the importance of public toilets for all citizenry “when nature calls”. Highlighted is how providential media coverage can stir up spirited public debate and lead to change. One of the first steps in bringing public toilets back to the public agenda is to recognize that public toilets can feature extraordinary and uplifting architecture. Public toilets represent society’s finest aspirations about responsible “civil” behaviour. A great city has great public toilets. What opportunities are there for the reincarnation of public toilets — and more to the point, well-designed public toilets — in Canadian towns and cities?

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur les problèmes associés avec les gens qui urinent et qui défèquent sur la place publique et l'importance d'avoir des toilettes publiques que l'ensemble des citoyens pourraient utiliser. On souligne le rôle de la couverture médiatique qui peut déclencher des débats publics et amener le changement. Une des premières étapes pour ramener le débat sur la place publique est de souligner que les toilettes publiques peuvent offrir une architecture extraordinaire et énergisante. Les toilettes publiques représentent les plus belles aspirations de la société en matière de comportement civil responsable. Une ville qui a du panache doit avoir des toilettes publiques qui ont du panache. Quelles sont les chances de voir réapparaître des toilettes publiques — et qui plus est, des toilettes publiques bien conçues — dans les villes canadiennes?

Public toilets should be included in the new vision of the city, as components of modern townscape, rather than being hidden where they are likely to be vandalised.¹

Think about it...

One gram of human faeces can contain:

- 10,000,000 viruses
- 1,000,000 bacteria
- 1,000 parasite cysts
- 100 parasite eggs²

This is a story about public toilets, the “common good” and dignity for the homeless in our cities. The story focuses on the problems associated with human waste and the importance of the availability of public toilets for the population “when nature calls”. We discover how media coverage can ignite spirited public debate and lead to change.

September 2008: A Winnipeg private business, BridgmanCollaborative Architecture, located at 678 Main Street, in partnership with the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone (BIZ) (see: <http://www.downtownwinnipegbiz.com>),

erects two temporary public toilets at the corner of Higgins Avenue and Main Street to address the problems caused by public urination and defecation in the area. Cost: approx. \$750 for three months, with Downtown BIZ footing the bill for the facilities, while land use and liability insurance are covered by BridgmanCollaborative Architecture.

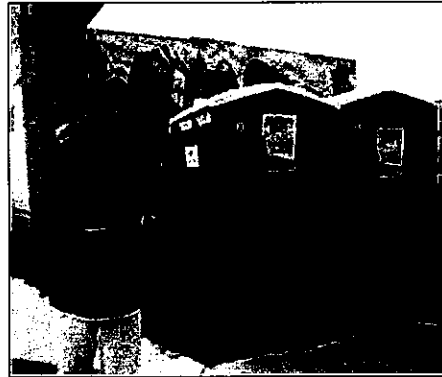
Context: The North Main neighbourhood is the oldest in Winnipeg and immigrant settlement in the area began in the late 1800s. Today, North Main is the centre of a strong Aboriginal community, and home to Thunderbird House (designed by architect Douglas Cardinal) as well as the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Métis Federation. Five of Winnipeg's eight homeless shelters are also located in the immediate area and offer various services, including overnight shelter, transitional housing and drop-ins. Many of the area's residents live at or below the poverty line and the neighbourhood along North Main has been under severe redevelopment pressures over the past several years, particularly with the construction of new headquarters for both the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) and United Way.

Flashback to October 2007: The story of the two public toilets actually begins in late October 2007 when Rae and Wins Bridgman are walking down Main Street toward their offices, and Rae remarks that all she can smell everywhere is urine. "There are no public toilets around here, and people have nowhere to go but in the alleyways, streets and doorways." Wins writes an open letter to the Mayor on November 1st, 2007: "There is a real need to provide outdoor facilities for people who do not have access to a bathroom. This situation is an insult to human dignity with the end result that there is a terrible smell of human waste throughout the area.... We propose that a temporary well-lit enclosed facility be created to house portable latrine units."

Months pass.

Summer 2008: BridgmanCollaborative proposes erecting two portable toilets as a temporary measure to offset widespread public urination and defecation. Meetings with Downtown BIZ are held, and the following letter is

drafted: "Downtown BIZ would like to take a proactive role in this issue by addressing the root cause of the problem (people need access to toilet facilities) as opposed to simply addressing the symptoms (cleaning urine on the street)."



Snapshot of architect Wins Bridgman and the two public toilets.

End of summer 2008: Two portable toilets are installed right at the corner of Higgins and Main. The Golden Girl mural at 678 Main Street forms a dramatic backdrop.

Two weeks later...

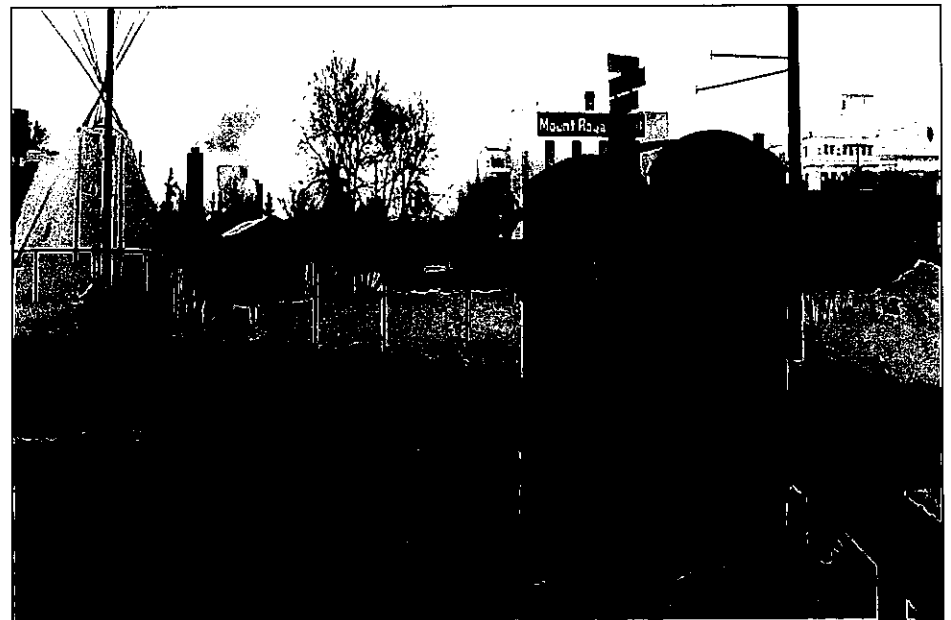
The two public toilets are being well used. Downtown BIZ keeps the area under watch throughout the day, and the toilets are locked at night. The site is in a high-traffic area with 50,000 vehicles passing through the intersection daily and there are many "eyes on the street". No "untoward incidents" are logged. The pilot project appears to be a

success — so much so that it comes to the attention of local media. Journalists, critics, bloggers and others have a field day: "hey, when you gotta go, you gotta go"; "public restrooms humane gesture"; "public privies, the shit hits the fan"; "public loos raise a stink"; "cities float in the same bowl on the matter"; "port-a-potties a great relief"; "going, going, gone... pulling the plug on public toilets...".

September 2008: City of Winnipeg officials order the toilets removed due to the lack of a city permit, and the Winnipeg Free Press reports:

Zoning officials put a lid [pun intended] on two downtown port-a-potties... after city staff were concerned that the facilities didn't look good at the downtown intersection... Terry Asepline, spokesman for the city's planning, property and development department, said the city agreed the toilets were a good idea — but placing them on a major intersection in front of a mural wasn't. Asepline acknowledged public urination is a problem, but said the city is trying to beautify Main Street and locating toilets at Higgins and Main isn't the answer.⁴

End of September 2008: The City's standing policy committee on downtown development unanimously passes a motion asking for a feasibility study concerning the installation of public toilets in Winnipeg's downtown core.⁵ Some weeks later, an alternate site in a less prominent location is



Two public toilets at new site.

chosen. The portable toilets are moved across the street, close to the Salvation Army's Booth Centre shelter. City officials and community representatives continue to discuss the merits of various approaches to the lack of public toilets – these range from cleaning the street to the use of temporary and portable toilets. Also under discussion are allowing the use of or adapting existing resources and facilities, installing automated self-cleaning public toilets (APTs), and setting up supervised public toilets or hygiene centres.

Mid-January 2009: The community-based North Main Street Advisory Committee (made up of representatives of businesses and shelters in the area) concludes: "The pilot port-a-potty program has been a success and should not only be continued but expanded... to every block if possible. The business community should be asked to buy into the program as well, by sponsoring a local toilet."⁶

Winnipeg is not alone in coming to grips with the serious public sanitation issues that cross regulatory, disciplinary and professional boundaries. Many considerations must be met, including land use planning, the safe disposal of human waste, human rights and dignity, public health and disease transmission prevention, user-friendliness and accessibility, gender issues and cultural appropriateness, as well as safety concerns and the city's image.

Cities like Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto and others have also recognized the problems caused by the lack of public washrooms. A recent report from the City of Edmonton proposes a number of possible ways to address this serious lack of facilities.⁷ These include:

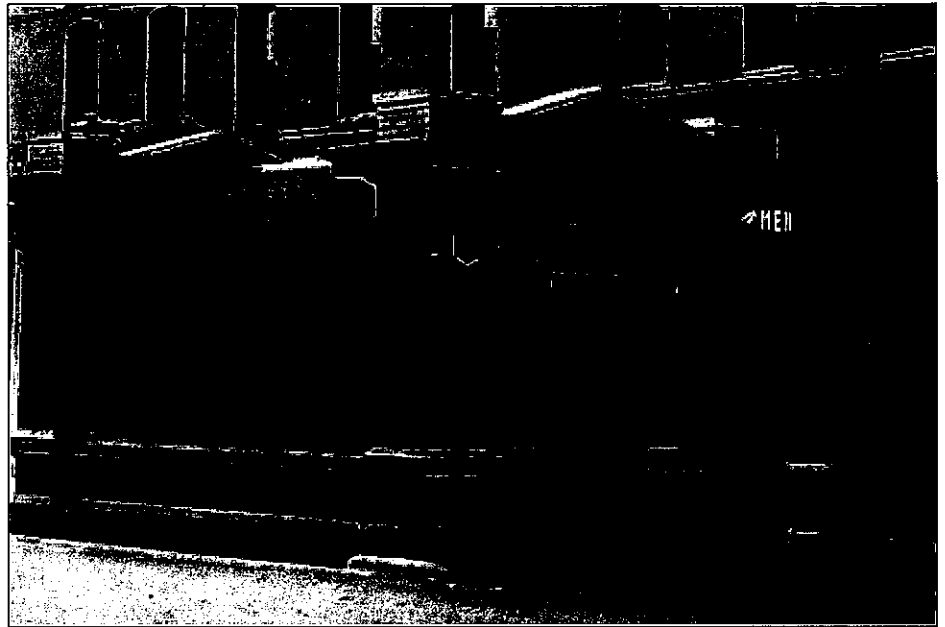
- new permanent facilities;
- attendants;
- automated public toilets (APTs);
- changes to zoning by-laws that would create incentives for businesses to build and maintain public washrooms;
- better signage to direct people to facilities (and to the nearest open facility);
- security personnel at new and current facilities;
- strategically placed temporary facilities;
- closed circuit cameras monitoring the entrance of new and existing facilities for added security;

- awareness and enforcement campaigns;
- hygienically designed facilities;
- solutions tailored to local areas;
- facilities for street people should provide a place to warm up during the winter;
- fixed retractable urinals to minimize vandalism; and
- composting toilets could be used in high traffic areas.

well-designed public toilets, in our Canadian towns and cities?

To help answer that question, I recommend three great books:

1. Greed, Clara. (2003). *Inclusive Urban Design: Public toilets*. Oxford: Elsevier Press. Provides design guidance and policy directions for public toilets, including building design, levels of provision, planning and land use



Public Lavatory from the Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg Streets N19288, 1918. Looking NE from Logan and Main Comfort Station. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/streetcar356/3193367168/>

So many public toilets in our cities have been closed and torn down over the past several decades, in part due to fears of crime, vandalism, prostitution or drug use — not to mention the costs associated with upkeep, maintenance and cleaning. Public toilets seem to have been relegated to relative oblivion in the public mind, and yet the need for them has certainly not diminished! It's really an irony that not far from the intersection of Higgins and Main in Winnipeg, there once stood a public lavatory.

It is not just the homeless who need public toilets. **WE ALL NEED PUBLIC TOILETS.** How many times have you been "caught by surprise"? How many times have you searched in vain for public facilities? Public toilets should be at the *forefront* of public consciousness.

TODAY'S CHALLENGE: What are the chances today for the reincarnation of public toilets — and more to the point,

issues, location, safety, layout, disability and accessibility. Promotes the idea that public toilets are an integral part of urban design. Also offers international examples of toilet architecture and policies with inspiring comparisons. A must-read, highly recommended.

2. Schuster, Cristina del Valle. (2005). *Public Toilet Design: From hotels, bars, restaurants, civic buildings and businesses worldwide*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books. Features more than 300 arresting photos of 80 public toilets from around the world — Boston, London, Rome, Auckland, São Paulo, Toronto, Istanbul, Amsterdam. Celebrates function, cultural creativity and innovative use of materials.
3. Black, Maggie and Fawcett, Ben. (2008). *The Last Taboo: Opening the door on the global sanitation crisis*. London: Earthscan. Draws together stories of communities all over the world working on hygienic reforms and toilet technologies.

We can also learn from other cities. Several years ago, Cambridge City Council in the UK received criticism in the press about the poor quality of its ageing public toilets. The Council responded by commissioning one of its local architectural firms, Freeland Rees Roberts, to design several new toilet blocks for Cambridge's parks and public spaces.⁸

THE RALLYING CRY: Bring Public Toilets Back to the Public Agenda — recognize that public toilets can be architecturally pleasing and an asset to the area. Public toilets represent society's finest aspirations about responsible "civil" behaviour. *A great city has great public toilets.*

[Note: At the time of writing this article, the City of Winnipeg report on public toilets is still at the draft stage and has not yet been released.] ■

Rae Bridgman, PhD, MCIP, is a Professor of City Planning at the University of Manitoba and the author of *StreetCities: Rehousing the Homeless* (University of Toronto Press, 2006) and *Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women* (Broadview Press, 2003). She is co-director with Wins Bridgman and Marcella Poirier of the Winnipeg architectural and planning firm *Bridgman Collaborative Architecture*. She can be reached at bridgman@cc.umanitoba.ca

References

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2. WaterAid International. Available at: http://www.wateraid.org/international/about_us/newsroom/6055.asp
3. Draft Terms of Reference, Downtown Public Washrooms: 678 Main Street, Winnipeg, July 2008.
4. Going, going... gone: City pulls plug on BIZ 'relief' spots. *Winnipeg Free Press*, 12 September 2008. Available at: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/historic/33055359.html>
5. Winnipeg takes another look at public toilets. *CBC News*, September 29, 2009. Available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/consumer/story/2008/09/29/wpg-toilets.html>
6. North Main Street Advisory Committee, 23 January 2009.
7. See City of Edmonton's Asset Management and Public Works Department Report 2008PW0777. Available at: <http://webdocs.edmonton.ca/OcctopusDocs/Public/Complete/Reports/JP/CSAM/2009-01-13/2008PW0777.doc>
8. See Freeland Rees Roberts Architects web site: <http://www.frrarchitects.co.uk/ProjectAreas/Localauthority/localauthority.htm>

Useful links

Canadian Toilet Organization: <http://www.canadiantoilet.org>
 German Toilet Organization: <http://www.germantoilet.org>
 World Toilet Organization: <http://www.worldtoilet.org>



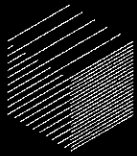
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