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Practical Applications for Designers
Gender, Design, and Stress
Kathryn H. Anthony, Ph.D., ACSA, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Visually striking lobby spaces in offices, museums, hotels, and retail establishments often feature ceremonial stairways with open risers and transparent glass steps or floors that allow passersby underneath to take a sneak peek right up the skirts of women and girls. The New Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece, which opened in 2009, is one such example. And every day, women who spend hundreds of dollars to see a blockbuster Broadway play spend the entire intermission waiting in long lines for the ladies’ room while their male companions zip in and out of the men’s room in a flash. When designers create environments like these without taking gender issues into account, certain individuals who inhabit, work in, or visit their buildings experience high levels of stress.

Although we are forced to use them every day, public restroom designs are among the most important spaces where gender concerns have all too often been overlooked. For decades, at major places of assembly such as theaters, sports venues, and transportation hubs, inadequate numbers of toilet stalls result in long lines for ladies’ rooms, disadvantaging women, girls, toddlers, and infants. These designs meet the minimum requirements dictated by building codes in effect when they were built, but these were simply not enough. Historically, most architects, contractors, engineers, building code officials, and clients rarely contacted women to learn about their restroom needs. Until recently, women were rarely employed in these male-dominated professions nor were they in a position to affect change. By contrast, through the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, persons with disabilities were successful in legislating sweeping changes in restroom design nationwide.

People of all ages—especially children, seniors, and persons with special medical conditions—face emergencies when they desperately need a restroom. Waiting to use a restroom causes both psychological and physiological stress for women and men, boys and girls. For women, routinely forced to wait, cystitis and other painful urinary tract infections may result. Waiting in line poses special problems for pregnant women who need restrooms more often than usual. The same is true for women during menstruation, which at any time affects about one quarter of all women in their child-bearing years. Waiting can also lead to constipation, abdominal pain, diverticula, and hemorrhoids. Even worse, for anyone who can’t make it on time, having an accident is embarrassing and demoralizing.

Ever since California led the way with its first “potty parity” legislation in 1987, at least 21 states and scores of municipalities have passed potty parity laws calling for greater ratios of women’s to men’s toilets and equal speed of access for women and men. Recently revised plumbing and building codes have called for greater numbers of toilet stalls for women. Yet laws and codes only apply to new construction or existing buildings where major renovations are underway, and most of the older building stock remains untouched.

The design of urinals can also pose special problems for men. “Trough” urinals and rows of urinals with minimal dividers or none at all compromise men’s privacy and can result in a medical condition called paruresis, or “shy bladder syndrome,” making it impossible for someone to urinate in public if others are within seeing or hearing distance. Some men’s room entrances are designed in such a way that when the door is open, passersby in an adjacent hallway can see men standing up to urinate, albeit from behind. This is the case at one university building whose men’s room was recently remodeled to meet updated accessibility codes. Male professors who work nearby refuse to use it.

Many men’s rooms feature at least one lower urinal, enabling young boys to use it without assistance, promoting their independence. Yet one rarely finds a women’s room with child-height toilets, forcing young daughters to depend upon their mothers and grandmothers to lift them. This presents special problems for mothers with multiple children in tow and for mothers who are pregnant. Child-height sinks are almost non-existent in both men’s and women’s rooms.

As a result of recent legislation and revised building codes, family restrooms are slowly on the rise in new or newly renovated assembly and retail spaces like shopping malls, theaters, airports, and stadiums. Family restrooms are long overdue. They provide safe spaces for parents with opposite-gender children as well as persons needing the assistance of caregivers. Many family restrooms include child-height toilets and sinks along with adult-sized fixtures.

Some innovative public restroom designs feature unisex stalls opening directly to the outdoors, creating gender equity. One of the nation’s best is an award-winning facility, Kellogg Park Comfort Station at scenic La Jolla Shores along the Pacific Ocean in San Diego, California. It opened in 2005 and receives two to three million visitors a year. Designed by resident Mary Coakley, along with local architect Dale Naegle, the new restroom and surrounding landscape responds with exceptional sensitivity to gender and family needs. Coakley, a local resident who lived across the street from the beach, spearheaded the movement to replace a deteriorating 1960s restroom plagued by vandalism, crime, and long lines for ladies. Coakley also led the effort to construct a large, artistic lichenite map adjacent to the restroom showing the nearby La Jolla Canyon underwater park and marine reserve that attracts divers from all over the world, along with an innovative playground design that teaches children about the wonders of the sea. The trio of state-of-the-art restroom design, public art, and playground has now become a popular tourist attraction, a national prototype that can be emulated elsewhere.

To learn more about gender issues in restroom design, consult the web sites of the World Toilet Organization and the American Restroom Association, along with...
WEB LINKS

The Center for Evolutionary Psychology (www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep)


Journal of Men’s Studies (www.mensstudies.com)

The Myers & Briggs Foundation, select www.humanmetrics.com to assess your own personality type (www.myersbriggs.org)

NASA, for research on gender and space, search for “interpersonal distance zones” (www.nasa.gov)

Neuromarketing (www.neurosciencemarketing.com)

Social Psychology Network (www.socialpsychology.org/cognition.htm)

The Srivastava Lab at University of Oregon, on the Big Five Inventory; select “Measuring the Big Five” (www.uoregon.edu/~sanjay)

UC Santa Barbara’s Center for Spatially Integrated Social Science (www.csiss.org/classics)


STUDIO ACTIVITY 5.1

Client Profile

Design Problem Statement
You have been asked to redesign the office of a newly elected female district attorney in her late fifties. According to Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator, she is an ESTJ. (Refer to Table 5.1.)

Directions

Step One: Identify common personality characteristics associated with a female in her late fifties with a personality type of ESTJ.

Step Two: From the profile deduce probable office design preferences, and explain why you believe that person would prefer that design.

Step Three: Translate your design ideas into one cohesive design of an office for this woman. Diagram this design with the preferences you identified from the personality profile.

Deliverable

Diagram of the design