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“Where Are the Bathrooms?”: Academic Library Restrooms and Student Needs

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Abstract: This article investigates bathrooms, paying specific attention to those in academic libraries. The authors describe how bathrooms have been considered in the library literature for the past century and challenges to changing the status quo. Finally, this work sets the stage for future inquiry. Research materials come from a range of sources: historical library literature, building codes, social science theory and research that address the issues around bathroom taboos, and checklists for assessing bathrooms. The authors propose librarians and library administrators reconsider all aspects of their own bathrooms: location, features, equity/inclusiveness, and maintenance in service to their patrons.

Keywords: Library space, bathrooms, restrooms, toilets, facilities, renovations, academic libraries, user-centered space design

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“Where Are the Bathrooms?”: Academic Library Restrooms and Student Needs

“Where are the bathrooms?” is a common question at reference desks--one that recurs so often that it can frustrate and dismay librarians (Pellack, 2009). In spite of our computer labs, study rooms, makerspaces, lounges, and cafes, our restrooms remain “...possibly the most asked for, and most heavily used, rooms in any library building...” (Barclay & Scott, 2011, p. 89). Nevertheless, as we shall argue, even our service-oriented profession has largely failed to include restrooms in our scholarship and one rarely hears of a library renovation that touts new-and-improved bathrooms. Our toilets are in our buildings, but not on our minds. Even when librarians answer the query “Where are the bathrooms?,” how much do we reflect on the facility our patrons will be using? Do we pause to consider that a patron’s impression of the bathroom is part of one’s overall impression of the library? Do we know what messages about status and value are communicated by library bathrooms? Though our patrons may have only one pressing question about library restrooms, we librarians should have many.

Bathrooms serve a basic human function and can be, at key times, more necessary to our patrons than the books on our shelves or the knowledgeable and friendly answers given by our staff. They are an important feature of our libraries. Bathrooms that are small, ill-equipped, infrequently cleaned, dark, covered in graffiti, or even just numbingly institutional may belie a library’s overall service ethic. When our patrons include racial, ethnic, or sexual minorities, or those with disabilities, these conditions risk reinforcing social hierarchies that libraries strive to counteract.

This article investigates library bathrooms with specific attention paid to those in college and university libraries (the sector in which both authors work). The authors first address

historical context describing how bathrooms have been considered in the literature about public and academic libraries for the past century. This discussion concludes with the contemporary move toward increasing access. Despite some progress, there are many challenges to changing the status quo, enumerated in the next section. Finally, the authors set the stage for future inquiry. Research materials used in the article necessarily come from a broad range of sources: historical library literature, building codes, social science theory and research that address the issues around bathroom taboos, and checklists for assessing bathrooms. Careful consideration of bathrooms should be a part of every library construction project or maintenance plan.

Bathrooms in the Library Literature

The library profession's relative indifference to library restrooms is the result of a long history, some of it intertwined with the history of public restrooms in the U.S. and Europe. The authors performed a review of books on library building and construction from the late nineteenth century on, looking for themes that might clarify the ideas and attitudes that shape approaches to library bathrooms today. Throughout the early literature, when a public bathroom is mentioned, it is treated as a nuisance that draws undesirable visitors and enables vandalism and inappropriate behavior. Thus, a second thread in the literature advises librarians on ways to de-emphasize or mitigate the disruptive realities of public lavatories. Tied in with the problem of vandalism is that of sanitation, which rightly occupies a good deal of attention in the literature. As a result, authors who provide recommendations for equipping bathrooms emphasize practicality and efficiency over comfort and consideration. Rather than seeing bathrooms as another opportunity to support our patrons, the message of a century of library literature is that we should treat our patron's bodily needs with caution—or even disdain and fear.

A Great Nuisance: Vandalism, Loiterers, and Sanitation

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, public restrooms were not a common feature of the urban landscape, and while private establishments such as saloons, hotels, train stations, and department stores might offer restroom facilities to customers, freedom to use them was often restricted by gender or class (Baldwin, 2014). In public libraries, lavatories were optional and librarians were far from sharing a common view of their necessity. The authors of a 1908 publication entitled *Small Library Buildings: A Collection of Plans Contributed by the League of Library Commissions*, state their position in no uncertain terms: “One objectionable feature is the public toilet room. It has invariably proven a great nuisance, and is so generally closed after short experience with it, that the expense of putting it in is considered unwise” (League of Library Commissions & Marvin, 1908, p. 15). A few years later, Soule (1912) took a less hardline approach, remaining open to the possibility of library restrooms, but suggesting that the “problem” would be solved if restrooms might instead be provided in a nearby park or public area (p. 259).

The problems caused by public toilets are myriad (Greed, 2003), and they certainly contributed to the reluctance of early and even mid-twentieth-century librarians to provide these facilities. Wheeler and Githens, writing in 1941, voice one of the major concerns: “...public toilet rooms are largely patronized by persons who come to the building for nothing else” (p. 194). In order to mitigate the nuisance of these “idlers,” some authors recommend that bathrooms be kept under lock and key (Wheeler & Githens, 1941, p. 194), that they be inconveniently located, or that they be supervised in various ways (League of Library Commissions & Marvin, 1908; Soule, 1912; Wheeler & Githens, 1941). Wheeler and Githens justify this supervisory proviso by observing: “Unless the public feel they are under control they will break off handles, steal soap dispensers; the boys will climb from one enclosure to another, and swing on any rod or brace”

(p. 391). The public librarian, in these scenarios, must prevent the senselessly destructive behavior of an unsupervised public.

Indeed, concerns about vandalism, bad behavior, and the perils of privacy persist throughout the literature on library space. This is due, no doubt, to the very real dangers that exist in public spaces that permit a degree of privacy, such as parks, enclosed stairwells, and public restrooms of all kinds (“Suspect Held in Cincinnati PL Rape Attempts,” 1999; “Police Crackdown Cleans Up Tacoma Library,” 2002). With these issues foremost, perhaps especially in the minds of public librarians, it is hardly surprising that recommendations for restroom design often emphasize measures to prevent or mitigate vandalism. Pierce (1980) suggests that “To discourage loitering, rest rooms should be no larger than necessary and materials used for them should be hard, smooth and impervious to damage and graffiti” (p. 114). Still more recently, Lushington (2002) observed “In larger libraries doorless restrooms such as are frequently seen in airports may be helpful in reducing vandalism because they offer less privacy” (p. 159), a suggestion which Barclay and Scott (2011) echo, adding the recommendation of staff walkthroughs. Writing specifically about academic libraries, Bazillion and Braun (2001) suggest installing high-quality fixtures that might be impervious to vandals.

The suggestion that librarians might thwart vandals through design often comes at the expense of aesthetic considerations. Draper’s *Interior Design for Libraries* (1979) is unapologetic in its pragmatism in this regard:

Rest rooms need a color scheme too, but this hinges more on practical considerations than aesthetics. (To put it bluntly, you're not trying to set a mood for the room). Stall dividers should be painted dark colors, mainly to make them difficult to write on, and who wouldn't like to thwart a few graffiti-writers. Rest room walls should be painted a light color to boost your poor rest room lighting (p. 45).

Barclay and Scott (2011) recognize the coldly utilitarian nature of these kinds of recommendations and temper them with the acknowledgement that although “The ideal restroom is resistant to graffiti and vandalism as well as easy to clean and maintain” it must accomplish all this “without looking as if the fixtures were ordered straight from a prison-supply catalog” (p. 89).

Despite this humorous warning, the literature also emphasizes sanitation and ease of cleaning over other considerations. And, frankly, it is hard to argue with Gerould (1932) when he stipulates that academic library bathrooms be “well ventilated and easily cleaned” (p. 59), while library patrons would likely appreciate Myller’s (1966) practical suggestions for creating lavatories that are easy to clean and resistant to damage. To be fair, perks are occasionally recommended: Wheeler and Githens (1941) suggest that “Soap, paper towels, sanitary dispensers, mirrors, a shelf for public to lay parcels on while washing” are desirable in a public library restroom (p. 391). Likewise, an appendix to *Mason on Library Buildings* (1980), provides a checklist of recommendations for bathrooms that includes coat hooks, mirrors, and a shelf (p. 320). Such features are no doubt appreciated (and are, in fact, highly advisable), but their addition would do little to address Barclay and Scott’s warning that library bathrooms resist a coldly institutional aesthetic.

Bathrooms in Today’s Libraries: Increasing Access

The past 20 years mark a change in how librarians discuss restrooms in published works. Though some authors continued to overlook library restrooms entirely (Brown, 2002; Dewe, 2006; Staines, 2012), and others give them only cursory treatment (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2007), awareness of the needs of our patrons for accessible, accommodating restrooms has increased significantly. During this period, librarians

begin to acknowledge the needs of parents and children (McCabe, 2000; Lushington, 2002; Feinberg & Keller, 2010; Woodward, 2010; Barclay & Scott, 2011), women (Lushington, 2002; McCabe, 2000; Woodward, 2010), plus-sized individuals (Smith, 2013), the disabled (Lushington & Kusack, 1991; McCabe, 2000; Bazillion & Braun, 2001; Lushington, 2002; Woodward, 2010), and transgender people (Nichols, 2016; Cottrell, 2015). A few authors even eschew the dismissive, disgruntled, or disgusted attitudes of their predecessors, instead advocating for adequate, thoughtfully designed restrooms (Woodward, 2010).

Sannwald's *Checklist of Library Building Design Considerations* (2016) is exemplary in this regard. This text, formatted literally as a checklist for libraries undergoing major renovation projects, provides several pages to aid in meeting Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines for bathroom design, as well as tips to create "plus-friendly" lavatories (p. 159), reminders about building codes and environmentally friendly toilets (p. 217-218), suggestions for the cleaning of restrooms (p. 239), and many considerations such as "Are there shelves for holding books and papers?" and "Are diaper-changing facilities available in all restrooms?" (p. 219). This remarkably thorough book, written after the Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued their 2015 "Best Practices for Transgender Restroom Access," also lists several issues to consider when providing bathroom facilities for transgender library users and employees (p. 219).

Finally, in this era, some librarians begin to consider bathrooms not just as a necessary evil, or a problem to be solved, but as a service that impacts patrons and their perceptions of the library. Woodward (2005) states her position forcefully: "Restrooms are important to everyone. If a customer encounters a disgusting one, he or she will probably not voluntarily return to that store, restaurant, or library." Manley (2004), in a column for *American Libraries*, agrees: "You

can tell me you value your patrons, but until I inspect your bathrooms, I won't believe you" (p. 184). In a later work, Woodward (2009) presents the care and maintenance of bathrooms as the responsibility of librarians, proposing that academic librarians use them, check them frequently, and work with custodians to make a reasonable cleaning schedule.

Despite some growing awareness, and a few strong voices in the field, McCabe (2000) observes that "Restrooms often are taken for granted" in library space planning, and the "librarian may overlook making suggestions that will result in a better plan" (p. 105). This article aims to raise awareness of the importance of library restrooms, help librarians understand why they may be reluctant to consider these spaces, and make suggestions for future research into this service, which is crucial to patrons' needs. Existing challenges to bathroom improvement can impede change in different ways and must be accounted for by anyone who wants to improve library restrooms.

Challenges to Bathroom Improvement

Building Codes and Campus Facilities

Building codes are standards set by a state or by a municipality's Department of Buildings (or similar entity) to ensure the safety of those who will use and inhabit the building upon its completion. The codes are legally binding and policed by building inspectors who can issue fines for violations. Codes are updated or amended in various ways, but in some cities older codes may still apply to older buildings. For example, in New York City there are sets of building codes, dated 1938, 1968, 2008, and 2014, which can apply to different buildings depending on when they were built (NYC Buildings, n.d.).

Building codes can both support and constrain the improvements we make to our bathrooms on behalf of our users. Municipal building codes determine the minimum number of restrooms in relation to the projected population of the space. For example, when Ellsworth (1960) mentions toilets, he reports the number of toilets per person required by his state building code (p. 100). Leighton and Weber (1999) note that codes can determine the layout of bathrooms (or at least provide minimum standards) as well as how many stalls are to be designated male and female, and the code often requires that these designations remain in place.

Codes are not necessarily as restrictive as they might seem at first glance; they maintain minimum requirements. Building projects can opt to build *more* than the minimum number of handicapped restrooms, for example, or make stalls that are bigger than the code requires. However, such upgrades are often considered cost-prohibitive. In other situations, those undertaking a construction project can seek variances to the building code when they feel it is merited by their project.

The recent debate about bathroom accommodations for transgender people has brought to light the importance of building codes to our day-to-day lives. While gender-neutral, single-occupancy stalls might seem a viable answer to the question of how to accommodate transgender people, such provisions are often not included in building codes (and might thus be considered an additional expense, if not a variance) or are implicitly prohibited (Brown, 2014). In practical terms, it can take a good deal of time before new building materials, research, or changing attitudes are reflected in building code modifications, although there are exceptions. In Washington, D.C., a 2013 plumbing code designates that multi-user toilet facilities must have a sign designating a specific gender, but “[s]ingle-occupancy public facilities shall be designated with gender-neutral signage” (DC & ICC, 2014, p. 5).

Since building codes are varied and responsibility for them is localized, widescale changes to our buildings are sometimes brought about by federal legislation or policies. No discussion of building codes (and their impact on public bathrooms) is complete without consideration of ADA, which was passed in 1990. As Moore explains, “Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act hopes to respond to the gap left in disability accessibility by local building codes and other federal acts. Title III requires entities that provide accommodations to the public meet certain standards of accessibility for the disabled” (1992, p. 1154). Title III, then, defines specifics of architectural and spatial accommodation requirements and dictates the deadline by which new buildings and renovations must conform to the new federal law. Eventually, these new requirements were incorporated into many local building codes as well, but the requirements of ADA supersede any local requirements.

Thus, there is a potential maze of local building codes and federal laws or policies that must be navigated by anyone who wishes to improve, expand, or install a toilet facility in a public place. In most libraries, the responsibility for understanding and adhering to these codes belongs not to a librarian, but perhaps to a municipal engineer or a campus buildings and grounds employee. Bathrooms are an example of “nonassignable spaces,” which are spaces necessary to a building’s functioning, but not available for the fulfillment of that building’s primary purpose (e.g., stairwells and HVAC systems) (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2007). As nonassignable spaces, restrooms may be designed or maintained by these entities or may seem to fall completely and irretrievably into their purview. The spaces themselves often seem to follow a standard design, perhaps fitted out with tiles and fixtures purchased for all other public restrooms in that municipality, university, or school district. Because there are special concerns related to cleanliness and ventilation, not to mention

plumbing, specialized knowledge is required to design an effective and sanitary bathroom. In short, it may seem as though librarians have little room or right to make decisions about the design of the restrooms in their libraries.

Because there is essentially no research on library restrooms, it is impossible to indicate the degree to which these circumstances prevail among libraries. How many have attempted to negotiate the planning of their restrooms, understand the applicable building code and its requirements, and otherwise affect meaningful impact on these facilities? Such questions would be a fruitful area of research which might help the profession understand its real and imagined impotence in this area of building design.

Budgets

As with all other matters related to libraries, budgets are an ever-present challenge. For those librarians planning a renovation, a limited budget may be stretched quite thin, especially as services, technologies, and students change. Each year, *American Libraries*' annual Library Design Showcase highlights the most innovative and exciting library renovations, and a review of the 2015 issue reveals the breadth of change experienced by public and academic libraries in recent years (Morehart, 2015). Libraries are creating room for innovative services like makerspaces, rooms for collaborative learning, investing in compact shelving, replacing heavy furniture with movable pieces, providing more electric outlets, and removing or remodeling outdated service areas. Others are upgrading valued but aging facilities with new infrastructure like HVAC systems and lighting, or investing in eco-friendly improvements. Upgrading a functional but uninspiring or even off-putting bathroom may well be deemed less worthy of precious funding dollars in the face of these innovations—as was the case at one of the author's libraries.

Even if a major renovation is not in the works, librarians interested in improving their bathrooms may still run into budgeting problems. Fixtures like sinks and toilets are expensive, as is any change to a building's plumbing. Adding new bathrooms or additional toilets may well incur significant costs. Renovations to a library restroom may also demand adherence to a newer building code (Brown, 2014), which can increase expenses still more. Changes in cleaning schedules can also demand greater investment in materials and services.

Compounding the problem of budgeting is the fact that bathrooms—understandably—are not typical recipients of private funding. Naming opportunities may be offered for makerspaces, reading rooms, lounges, and even individual seats, but it is rather atypical for a restroom. An exception is the donation of three men's urinals to the Van Pelt Library (University of Pennsylvania) in 2005: "Each is marked with a silver plaque stating, 'The relief you are now experiencing is made possible by a gift from Michael Zinman'" (Quick Takes, 2005, p. 19). Though librarians may not reasonably expect this degree of humor or open-mindedness from all their donors, the example is evidence that there are individuals willing to invest in improvements to restroom facilities—if we would only ask them.

However, to fully understand the impact of budget on library bathrooms requires more information. Without information on how many renovation projects included bathrooms and what these cost, or surveys on the money spent or value given to restroom upkeep, the profession cannot determine the degree to which these concerns are even valid. This is not a frivolous call for an annual, national survey of library bathrooms, but a suggestion that we might include them in our research with more frequency. The results of two Primary Research Group surveys, which were released in consecutive years, are a good case in point. *Redesigning the Public Library Building* (2013), looked into trends in public library space use and capital spending. This survey

included one question assessing the importance of expanding or “better situating” lavatories (p. 35). However, *Redesigning the College Library Building, 2013 Edition* (2012) failed to ask a similar question with regard to college libraries. In the future, such studies might include questions about spending and specific facility improvements in this area—both of which would help librarians plan and advocate for their own restroom renovations.

It’s also important to remember that we are not as hamstrung by our budgets as we may feel. In higher education, Gordon (2003) has reflected on the sense of community that was created by the small but creative and cooperative changes made to a women’s restroom at the University of Wisconsin. Even small and inexpensive improvements have the potential for a positive impact, as educators at a Melbourne, Australia, elementary school discovered (Senior, 2014). Simple improvements like painting the walls, fixing stall door locks, resealing the floor, and cleaning increased the positive attitudes of young students by 37%. Similar steps might be taken in a library, as well as others more specific to our setting, such as placing a book cart near the restroom (as is often seen in bookstores) to give patrons a place to leave their materials as they use the bathroom. Other low-budget, potentially high-impact changes might include improving directional signage, installing mirrors, fixing broken amenities, providing baby-changing stations, and painting and decorating. Understanding what improvements are possible with and without major funding is an important step in improving our restroom facilities. We plan to propose low- and high-cost improvements to library restrooms in a future article.

Taboos

Even considering the challenges presented by building codes, limited knowledge and authority, and budgets, it is difficult to account for the silence of librarians around the topic of bathrooms without considering one final factor: the bathroom taboo. As a culture, we tend to

resist thinking at any length about bathrooms (and the activities contained therein), even as we are acutely aware of their presence or absence, their cleanliness, their proper functioning, even their size and features. The attitudes we found in the library literature are reflected in the larger socio-political discussion of public restrooms. Aside from the voices of a small number of advocates, these spaces are almost universally ignored or maligned. When they are considered, some envision public restrooms as dangerous places populated by people we prefer not to think about, and whom we imagine engage in activities that range from the private to (more often) the illicit or illegal. Barcan (2010) captures some of this anxiety and vulnerability. Borrowing from cultural anthropology, she presents dirt as symbolically polluting, and thus “even the cleanest of public toilets [is], culturally speaking, a ‘dirty place’” (p. 25). She explores the challenges of planning this space further: “Our encounter with a public toilet is thus an encounter with a host of others, as we interact on a daily basis with people who may be quite different from us but who share at least some of our bodily needs” (p. 26). We see this concern about the “other” emerge again when considering that public restrooms, historically, were sites of racial segregation and discrimination (Frank, 2015; Abel, 1999). Finally, we are often uncomfortable acknowledging that not only are public restrooms used by an unfamiliar or scary “other,” but that we join their ranks when we use public restrooms.

This challenge of discussing bathrooms (or lavatories, restrooms, toilets, etc.) is built into and reflected by our language. Phrases like “potty mouth” and “bathroom humor” suggest that toilet facilities are inappropriate topics for polite company, much less academic or professional discourse. In fact, as Stead (2009) points out, our linguistic avoidance of these topics runs deeper than a few figures of speech. Plaskow (2008) traces the multifarious origins of the taboo on excretion, which she observes is “complexly over-determined” (p. 56). She points out that

attitudes about privacy, elimination, and waste disposal were far different in Western cultures before the 18th century, but changed slowly over the next 2 centuries, due to medical discoveries, urbanization, and other social and cultural changes.

This taboo does not impact only what can be said at a dinner party, in a faculty meeting, or in a presentation for capital planning. The editors of a recent work on bathrooms, Gershenson and Penner, encountered fierce resistance to very idea of discussing toilets in an academic text. As they relate in their introduction to *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* (2009), the call for papers they issued for that book provoked media coverage in major news outlets and a slew of angry (as well as many supportive) emails and FAX communications. Merely by proposing to assemble an academic book on toilets, Gershenson and Penner were violating a taboo that works to elevate scholarship to a status that is devoid of the unclean activities of the body. Thus, academic writers like Gershenson and Penner, who are perceived as enjoying a high social status, may experience the taboo on discussing bodily activities more intensely than others. This taboo, intertwined as it is with class expectations and cultural values, may explain why the library literature includes many matter-of-fact recommendations for the design of library restrooms, but no in-depth scholarly studies about toilets.

Acknowledging these truths, why should we push back against this powerful taboo? Which issues should be at the fore for those forward-thinking library administrators who choose to give their bathrooms a second, critical look? The next section will address the ways the profession can move forward in improving our library restrooms.

What Should Be Done

In this section, the authors highlight a three-part strategy: research, evaluation of bathrooms, and meeting student (or patron) needs. These three activities are closely related but will be addressed here as distinct processes. We research to determine what faculty and student needs are regarding restrooms, as well as the positive or negative impact that restrooms have on student experiences of the library. Next, librarians must take a probing look at their own spaces, considering best practices along with the unique needs of their own population of students. Finally, we must assess if our changes adequately meet students' needs now and continue to revisit this question in the future.

Research

The first and most fundamental step in determining what, if anything, should be done to improve library restrooms is to conduct research. Unfortunately, as legal scholar Case (2010) notes, "It can be almost as hard to find reliable information [about the study of public toilets] as it can be to find a public toilet when you need it" (p. 220). After combing through research on bathrooms in library spaces, the authors concur. A recent search of the databases Library and Information Science Source and Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts for (bathroom* OR rest room* OR restroom* OR lavator* OR toilet*) AND (librar*) returned only two peer-reviewed research articles that included evaluation of restroom facilities as part of their studies of user satisfaction and perceptions of library spaces (Ikolo, 2015; Kumara & Nikam, 2012). Another study evaluated bathroom accessibility under the ADA in public libraries in South Carolina (Khailova, 2005). Others generate student feedback regarding restrooms, yet fail to discuss these comments or, seemingly, to act on them (Brown-Sica, 2013; Brown-Sica, 2012).

Perhaps librarians might argue that the needs of a restroom user are well-understood and straightforward. What purpose could research serve, when we know that clean, functional toilets

and sinks, full soap and toilet-paper dispensers, and emptied trash receptacles are the only real necessities to a restroom? Such an argument turns a blind eye to the many assumptions we hold regarding public bathrooms. For example, as we've seen, books on designing library buildings frequently propose that smooth, hard surfaces are the best way to prevent vandalism. However, a recent study of college library restrooms in South Korea found that appropriate signage and well-placed mirrors helped discourage graffiti (Jin & Kyong-Mee, 2013). In contrast to the defensive building and design of the past, this research suggests a positive approach to preventing vandalism—one that treats users less like petty criminals and more like responsible adults.

Indeed, ethnographic and other qualitative research may even reveal previously unexplored student behaviors. For example, what students do when they need to use the restroom while working at a coveted computer or in a remote location in the library? Do they leave their belongings behind to maintain their claim on the space, risking theft in the process? Do they carry books, calculators, coats, and other supplies into tiny bathroom stalls? After gathering all these items, are they more likely to leave the library after their restroom break? Will they curtail drinking or eating while at the library, so they can limit trips to the restroom as much as possible? Such questions may seem trivial, but they point to the comfort, health, and safety of our users and are probably keenly felt by students.

Without research that includes restrooms among its area of enquiry, the library profession won't understand a myriad of issues such as the impact of restrooms on patron perceptions of libraries, time spent in a library with insufficient restrooms, the needs of the patrons using the facilities, how to best design comfortable and safe restrooms, and more.

Evaluate Spaces

Librarians frequently use floor counts, surveys, focus groups, and the like to assess and evaluate spaces. However, as discussed above, librarians may not be responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the space and often choose not to think about it. What's more, the taboo around bathrooms may foster a lack of respect for bathroom-related research in the scholarly conversation. In short, these spaces can be both psychologically charged *and* taken for granted. Therefore, it is helpful to bring an objective checklist to bear.

Our research has introduced us to several evaluation tools that itemize the many considerations necessary to create safe, healthy, and accessible bathrooms for individuals of all kinds, including parents, children, women, transgender people, the disabled, and caregivers (Toilet survey, 1998-9; Sannwald, 2016; National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2008). By listing factors such as availability of grab bars, width of stall doors, access to baby-changing stations, and presence of sanitary-napkin disposal bins, such checklists bring objectivity to bear in a realm that can be humorous, uncomfortable, or embarrassing.

Checklists can also raise awareness and provide objective measures for speaking with other administrators. That was the rationale of a group of students, staff, and community members at UC-Santa Barbara who called themselves People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms, or PISSAR (Chess, Kafer, Quizar, & Udora Richardson, 2008). Members of this coalition, which was deliberately inclusive, used a checklist to evaluate campus restrooms to determine, among other things, their safety for trans individuals and their accessibility for the disabled. The checklist, which generated objective data, allowed the group to overcome the bathroom taboo and “bring both the body and the bathroom into the boardroom” (p. 228). Furthermore, using the checklist to evaluate restrooms brought forth new perspectives for the

group members, including one for whom “going through the PISSAR checklist caused her to view the entire built world through different eyes” (p. 227).

In the “Increasing access” section of this article, the authors identified populations (parents and children, women, people who are plus-sized, disabled, or transgendered) and other considerations that should be included in an objective evaluation of a restroom. Research, as described in the section above, would provide opportunities to ascertain the needs of one’s particular student population that would also be appropriate to include in an evaluation tool. The authors took these factors into consideration and are currently testing a customized checklist, the results of which will be shared in future publications. We intend for our evaluation tool to be useful for other librarians but also believe that there will be much to be learned from the findings of our initial evaluation of a small sample of library restrooms.

Meet Patron Needs

Even without the kinds of research and evaluation we suggest above, librarians looking to improve their bathrooms could learn much from the recent potty-parity movement. Anthony and Dufresne (2007) define potty parity as “equal speed of access to public restrooms” and note that lack of such equity “mirrors the power structure reflected in the planning and design of restrooms that privileges men over women” (p. 268). They trace this inequality to the fact that many of the professions that have influence over restroom design—architects, engineers, contractors—are traditionally male-dominated and note that these problems have been exacerbated by an “aging building stock that has not kept pace with changing demographics of the past half century...” (p. 271). The potty-parity movement primarily called for legislative and other actions to increase the number of women’s restrooms in public buildings and assembly places. However, as Plaskow (2008) notes, in this case equity may not mean providing men and

women with the same number of restrooms, but acknowledging that women's needs are different than men's.

Librarians, too, can begin to investigate how best to provide equitable access to public toilets for males and females. As many of our institutions have become majority female, has our distribution of men's and women's rooms followed suit? We can make use of library data such as seating per floor, and institutional data on the proportion of male and female students, to reallocate restrooms as needed. We can also review our restrooms to determine if they provide a way to dispose of and purchase sanitary napkins and tampons; clean and functioning baby-changing stations; ample room in the stalls for maneuvering; a place to leave strollers; a room or other facility for lactating mothers; and a single-use restroom for those who must accompany others (children, the elderly, or the disabled) into restrooms.

Additionally, librarians can move beyond the gender binary, considering the needs of transgender people, who may not feel safe, comfortable, or welcome using a multi-use, single-gender restroom (Nichols, 2016). Some libraries have begun to address the issue of transgender individuals in building and renovation projects. Alden Library at Ohio University, for example, adapted an existing restroom to be a gender-neutral (Henry, 2016). And in New York City, where the authors work, the city and state governments have affirmed bathroom access based on one's gender identity, and a statement to that effect is posted on some college library bathrooms.

Although such issues might seem tangential to our work as librarians, it may be helpful to remember that we pledge to place our patrons' dignity at the center of our work. The American Library Association (ALA)'s Code of Ethics begins by thus affirming: "We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to

all requests.” (American Library Association, 2008). In order to appropriately serve our patrons, this article’s authors propose that we must look beyond our “usefully organized resources” and begin to address our patrons’ most fundamental needs. We must approach this by supporting the needs of our actual patrons in an ethical and dignified way.

As members of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), this article’s authors support the ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education, which indicate that the “library provides clean, inviting, and adequate space, conducive to study and research, with suitable environmental conditions and convenient hours for its services, personnel, resources, and collections” (ACRL, 2011, p. 12). What’s more, “The library’s physical and virtual spaces are informed by consultation with users” (ACRL, 2011, p. 12). In the ACRL Standards, we see that “The library commits to a user-centered approach and demonstrates the centrality of users in all aspects of service design and delivery in the physical and virtual environments” (ACRL, 2011, p.10). The authors argue, then, that considering and possibly re-imagining libraries’ bathrooms is of utmost importance to patrons’ comfort and scholarly needs and must be done with frank and sensitive conversations with users to determine their needs.

Conclusion

"As an ongoing topic for discussion library space has a dynamic feature—it continually changes in response to ideas for satisfying existing users and attracting future users" (Lin, Chen & Chang, 2010, p. 349). Our human need to relieve ourselves at regular intervals is, perhaps, one of the few factors that has remained constant throughout library history. Indeed, viewed from that perspective, it is hard to imagine that students wouldn’t identify clean, well-equipped restrooms as crucial to their comfort in a library. As Manley (2004) states, "You could have the

greatest book collection, the best computer system, and the finest team of reference librarians; but if your bathrooms are dirty, cramped, and in a state of decline, you're not meeting the needs of your end users" (p. 184). How long would a woman stay in a library if she knew from experience that toilet seats would be filthy and sanitary-napkin disposal bins overflowing and malodorous? How do students feel about the library when they're greeted by a long line at the restroom door, or when they find that the only available urinal or toilet is out of order? These questions are indelicate, to be sure, but librarians must have these uncomfortable conversations and begin to evaluate and improve their facilities accordingly.

Some concrete first steps emerge from this article. Librarians and library administrators could use a checklist to evaluate their restrooms and to identify challenges and potential improvements (Poggiali & Margolin, 2017). Conducting interviews, focus groups, and other qualitative research with students would help uncover more specific needs, such as whether restrooms include the amenities appropriate for a library's specific student population. On the other hand, some improvements are easy to identify and don't require extensive research: filthy restrooms call for an altered cleaning schedule, and those with broken locks or excessive graffiti should be repaired. Likewise, installing shelves for student to place books and other materials would be an inexpensive but noticeable improvement. The authors believe that all such efforts would not only support students' bodily needs, but would also communicate to them a message of respect and dignity. Indeed, respect for patrons is implicit in the stated values of the profession. It's time our restrooms reflected the same ideals as our collections, services, and study spaces.

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