How do public toilets during festive events in Maastricht reflect the city’s social structure?

Report 1

Account of the literature:
Public toilets in the context of the Maastricht Carnival

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This first report looks into the subject of public toilets and specifically, public toilets during festive events. I am interested in practical matters such as their availability and type, but also what these aspects tell us about their perception and symbolism in our society. The festive event I am researching is the Carnival in Maastricht: is there a link between the history and symbolism of this festive event and its toilet provision, and can this tell us anything about the social and political structures of the city? The outcome of the research brings an answer to the question "What impact do public toilets have on the atmosphere of festive events?" Its conclusions will hopefully feed into my design project, which is a festive bathhouse and public toilets facility located at the centre of a "public convenience network" envisioned for the whole city. I will concentrate on the socio/political and experiential side of this topic, rather than the infrastructural one.

This report focuses on the theme of toilets in public urban places, and it constitutes an initial exploration of the subject in general. Parallels with the context of festivals and Maastricht will be attempted, but this initial reading forms the theoretical basis of my research. This report presents ideas from the groundbreaking edited book on the subject, *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, and from treatise on the history and meaning of toilets by Rem Koolhas, *Elements: Toilets*. These books provide the starting point, the theoretical basis unto which I will apply the factual Maastricht information. I will also be looking at articles in journals and a BBC programme that delved into the subject. These varied sources of academic and non-academic origin were chosen because I am trying to understand the public’s perception of toilets, and to gauge the layman’s view of the subject.

The editors of *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* start by announcing the importance of public spaces to civic life. Their premise revolves around the idea that "public toilets, [...] are highly charged spaces, shaped by notions of propriety, hygiene and the binary gender division", and therefore can be seen as a canvas for social scientists, anthropologists and theoreticians to turn into a symbol of our society and its attitudes to the body, gender, sexuality, privacy, decency, and dirt. ¹

The very fact that their call for academic papers itself caused an outrage and was ridiculed by the mainstream press is proof that discussions about toilets in an academic environment can provoke and embarrass the general public, and that the toilet itself is still very taboo in a serious context:

[...] an attempt to police the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable within both academia and society at large and as an effort to ensure that certain things remain "in their place" – unspeakable.²

These attempts to silence serious debate about the topic of toilets - and keep it a private secret, concealed in the world of euphemisms or humor - reflect conservative and prudish societal attitudes. ³ Obvious parallels can be drawn here with the inherent concept of the carnival: that of a transgressive period where more is permitted and societal ills are brought out in the open in a humorous fashion. However, like toilet humor, the issues/taboo addressed in this way are not in fact properly debated or challenged, but merely laughed at, while the status-quo (of class and economic distinction during carnival; of societal discrimination through toilets) is maintained. As discussions during the Seminar shows, festive events such as the Carnival make the act of urination and defecation visible: through the installation of temporary toilets and urinals in very public spaces, through the act of public urination – on trees or street corners – and also reinforce the issue of the presence of

¹ Gershenson and Penner 2009: 2
² Gershenson and Penner 2009: 3-4
³ Stead 2009.
women in public spaces – through the lack of inadequate toilet provision. Studying public toilets in the context of the Carnival is therefore valuable in understanding the role they play in society.

The dichotomy between private and public is another aspect that interests me. Discussions with the design tutors revealed that toilets are now the only private spaces during a festival. Especially during a highly social event like the carnival, where bodies are in close proximity to each other at all times, the toilet cubicle provides the only time for pausing and loneliness. However, as the introductory text of *Ladies and Gents* suggests, shared communal toilets have existed in many cultures historically, and some still feature in developing countries like India, China or Ghana. As they explain, “private, sex-segregated lavatories were a modern and Western European invention, bound up with urbanization, the rise of sanitary reform, the privatization of the bodily functions, and the gendered ideology of the separate spheres”.  

Roman Antiquity is perhaps the most well known civilisation in which communal lavatories were an important part of the urban plan. In regards to the open and social nature of these Roman toilets, the text mentions other works in which the desire to segregate and compartmentalize was traced back to a Western sense of “civilization”. Gershenson and Penner mention a study by Dominique Laporte in which the author states that hiding the ugly smells associated with using the toilet, for example, started with the capitalist society and emerging bourgeois sensibility. This domestic containment and partitioning can also be applied to the wider city.  

I find the contrast between the festive use of toilets in antiquity and present times very interesting. If for the Romans, the festive represented civic celebrations of empire power and use of public spaces - including toilets – out present day notions of privacy and individualism highly restricts the spatial and personal boundaries of the festive in society. This is an aspect I am interesting in exploring further, possibly in my design question.

One aspect that has been widely discussed in the context of public toilets is that of gender issues. Gershenson and Penner suggest that toilets reflect the differences, and the relationship between men and women as they are the only sex-segregated spaces in our Western society: “public toilets are important and revealing sites for discussions of the construction and maintenance of gender, sexual identity, and power relations in general”. The book tackles notions of perceived gender divisions, and what happens when boundaries and differences between sexes are challenged. For example, they undertake the notion that the only unisex bathrooms to be found are those for disabled people or parents caring for children. Gender segregation is also lifted in the context of disability, as well as cramped spaces, such as trains, which make the provision of separate, gendered toilets impossible. However, as the authors suggest, when the demand for neutral, non-segregated toilets comes from gender-variant people, “anxieties about gender and sexuality” reappear. 

When suggestions of unisex bathroom were made (for example in colleges in America), they were met with objections concerning fears of diminishing traditional gender divisions and roles. I am keen to make some comparisons here with the gender symbolism of the Carnival. The two main figures of the traditional festive event are Prince Carnival (male) and the Mooswief, or vegetable lady (female). While the Prince is an active figure, represented by his charitable endeavours and events he organises (the opening of the Carnival for example), the Mooswief is a passive symbol, a papier-mache doll propped up on a pole in Vrijthof Square. Although she is an incredibly important character, representing the actual peasant women coming to the city in the morning to sell produce in the old days, during the Carnival she is reduced to a symbol of fertility, her only purpose to passively “supervise” the activities in the square from her high position. She is immobile and has no active role in the festivities. When it comes to gender divisions seen through toilets provision, a number of scholars cited in the book (like

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4 Gershenson and Penner 2009: 4-5
5 Gershenson and Penner 2009
6 Gershenson and Penner 2009: 9
7 Gershenson and Penner 2009: 7
8 www.mestreechtersteerke.nl
Taunya Lovell Banks) argue that toilet inequality represents the disapproval of the patriarchal society of women in public, outside of the domestic sphere. This inequality “institutionalizes sexism, disadvantages women, and reinforces normative notions of femininity”. Perhaps the current treatment of the only female figure of the Carnival is simply reinforcing the passive feminine role women play in society. Discussing the work of Cooper and Oldenziel from one of the following chapters, the Gershenson and Penner also explains that, with more visibility of minorities in the public sphere (for example women and racial minorities entering the workforce after WW2), there is a greater push to order and segregate the groups in an effort to constantly remind them of their differences and place in society.

[Any] changes to existing toilet arrangements are explosive because they recognize, accommodate, and, hence, legitimate the presence of a social group who customarily “make do” and remain invisible at the level of representation.\(^9\)

The editors also refer to the work of sociologist David Inglis, who argues that the separate spaces for each gender serve to emphasise the differences, and therefore accentuate constructed concept of femininity symbolized by mundane objects and acts – like the pastel colour of toilet paper. \(^10\)

The essay by Clara Greed from one of the book's chapters focuses on public toilet provision in the urban context. It starts by stating that toilets are the solution in creating sustainable, accessible, inclusive and car-free cities, and that this should be the responsibility of governments and local councils. She goes further, and suggests that the lack of toilets in cities is a greater inconvenience for women - as men tend to use facilities in bars and clubs, whereas women, especially if they are alone or with children, are put off by their unfamiliar atmosphere - or some religious group members who cannot enter premises where alcohol is served. She goes on to emphasise that women are in need to public toilets more often as they usually travel in public transportation, are more often carrying out errands during daytime and accompany children or other people in their care. Even so, female toilet supply is less than for men, and in decline. Greed also mentions a number of urinary and gynaecological problems that are linked with the lack of toilets. \(^11\) Moreover, when it comes to urban toilets as symbols of class divisions, Los Angeles’ policy of reducing the number of public toilets in order to banish the homeless and poor people from civic life is an extreme, but not so uncommon example. \(^12\) I would also argue that, in the Netherlands, the fee required to be paid before entering a public lavatory (as high as €2 in some places) is discriminatory towards many layers of society: the poor (who cannot afford it), or the groups of people who need toilets more often (women, elderly men, people suffering from various conditions). \(^13\) Greed's article paints a very bleak picture of the effects lack of toilets in public places has a big impact on the experience of cities, and I think that this urban deficiency is an indirect form of discrimination against various groups in our society.

Another issue highlighted is the promotion of the night time “party” economy in the city by local governments, which, in relation to public toilets being closed for financial reasons, increase the anti-social behaviour of street urination, especially in regards to men. To tackle this, some councils have installed open air urinals in public squares (like the ones I saw put up in London during the evening). Of course, this does not solve the overall problem and, in my opinion, is another way in which the needs of women or minorities are ignored by

\(^{9}\) Gershenson and Penner 2009: 12
\(^{10}\) Gershenson and Penner 2009: 8-9
\(^{11}\) Gershenson and Penner 2009.
\(^{12}\) Greed 2009.
\(^{13}\) Gershenson and Penner 2009.
\(^{14}\) Greed 2009.
administrations only looking to “save face” and look at the problem superficially, rather than tackle it seriously. There are parallels here to be made with the urinals provided during the carnival in Maastricht by a council faced with the problem of street urination: for every 1 portable toilet, 2 male urinals are provided. On top of this, the number of portaloos is divided between the male and female, so practically, the provision for women is even less than half of that for men, accounting for huge waiting time for women.  

Although the temporary solution offered by the Carnival organiser leaves much to be desired, it is also interesting to see that festivals can be used as a platform to experiment with new types of toilets. For example, the installation of a female urinal at the arts festival in Ghent, or the She-Pee trough urinals and P-mate devices provided at Glastonbury Festival in 2004 are inventions discussed by Barbara Penner in her chapter on female urinals. She reports the overwhelming positive feedback of these types of facilities, from the ease and improvement of hygiene, to the significant reduction of queues. The author sees Glastonbury festival as a “milestone” but bemoans the fact that these types of provisions have not branched out of the context of festivals or adventure sports and reached the mainstream and public consciousness.  

The other literary source that has proven a valuable material for historical information on toilets and society is *Elements: Toilets*, a joint effort by Rem Koolhaas, AMO and Harvard Graduate School of Design, which accompanied the Venice Biennale exhibition on the subject. The authors introduce their treatise by stating, “the toilet is at once the most private and the most political element [and] the site of cultural superimpositions”. This has not been always the case however, as the idea of a private room only started slowly being introduced from the Middle Ages, when toilets were positioned in the furthest corner of the palaces and castles. This idea of a small, separated and functional room far away from the living quarters is in contrast to the way toilets in Roman times were a public feature in the centre of the urban settlement, from where the Cloaca Maxima system of sewers would transport the waste from the communal facilities into the river – an infrastructure system lost for hundreds of years afterwards.  

An interesting precursor of the previously mentioned P-mate was the porcelain chamber pot, positioned by women under voluminous dresses to urinate in public places. The use of this device was also made easier by the fact that women did not wear any underwear under the layers of skirts and dresses. Modern constrictive clothing is another factor for the discomfort and extended time experienced by women when using toilets. This is an interesting idea when applied to the tradition of wearing a costume during the carnival: participants are finding the small cubicle of the portaloos provided difficult to manoeuvre in with elaborate costumes and layers of warm clothing on, so this is an area of temporary toilets for festivals design that could be improved, or thought about differently.  

Another very recent article in the Architectural Review by Tom Wilkinson proves that the issue of public toilets is very much in the consciousness of the architectural scene. Wilkinson shows how the Victorians used the public convenience as a way to also showcase the newest architectural designs and technologies, as well as exquisite materials and generous spaces usually only reserved for the palaces of the upper classes. He bemoans the obvious reduction in numbers of these public conveniences, as well as the loss of their architectural qualities.
and idiosyncrasies, together with their stories of illicit encounters and regular users. Wilkinson associates the disappearance of public lavatories on anxieties surrounding homosexuality (with cottaging), race, gender and class. The public toilet, as "a place where bodies are exposed in unwonted proximity and societal niceties about privacy are dangerously destabilised", is a place that has always been watched and aggressively regulated. The author also sees the disappearance of public lavatories closely linked to current political aspects like post-crisis austerity, an overly simplified concept repeated ad nauseam by neoliberal leaders. This aspect is perfectly clear in Maastricht, where there is no overall council plan or strategy for toilet provision, which is left in the responsibility of private bodies such as car parks or bars and restaurants.

The 2012 BBC programme Toilet: An Unspoken History presented by Ifor ap Glyn shows a simplified history of the toilet and how it developed through time. The first part, about Roman Antiquity, focused on the festive and social aspects of toilets, and gives the example of the facilities that survived from that time in Merida, Spain. Along with the very efficient system of containing and moving away the waste as well as minimising smell, the Romans saw the lavatories as an important part of civic life, of the urban centre and, more importantly for my topic, of festive occasions. In Merida, the public toilets, comprising 25 communal seats, were placed just behind the theatre, a gesture symbolising their connection to the festive event of theatre going. As mentioned before, they were also communal, social spaces, and probably seen as meeting and chatting areas – an extension of the public sphere and of the festive activities. As Ifor ap Glyn explains, “there was no embarrassment yet because most people have never experienced toilet privacy” yet. Perhaps the comparison here with the toilet provision during Carnival and, generally, any type of public event nowadays that provides the ubiquitous portaloos, is that in Roman Antiquity, toilets were seen as an intrinsic part of the urban and festive context, rather than something that feels like an afterthought, plonked randomly for a short period wherever there is space.

In conclusion, the literature found suggests that public toilets and the act of toileting not only reflect, but positively reinforce out-dated norms regarding gender, class, race and accessibility in Western society. Although festivals can offer a great opportunity to break these taboos and experiment with cutting-edge solutions to these problems, the Maastricht Carnival provides a very superficial solution of portaloos and temporary urinals, which, in some cases, even exacerbate the issue, for example from the point of view of women having to queue, or from costumed revellers finding the small cubicles very constrictive (their awkward manoeuvring, in turn, also adding to the queuing times). However, the history of toilet development shows that this was not always the case: the Romans saw toileting as not only a necessary bodily function but also as a chance for social gathering; later, technical and aesthetical innovations during the industrial era were made use of in the public convenience facilities installed in Europe's cities. Unfortunately though, all the authors cited observed the reduction or inappropriate provision of public toilets as a very current issue, and my own personal anecdotes and observations reinforce this depressing picture. Even so, this research has provided me with a theoretical basis for my subsequent research and with a wide range of ideas towards new ways of thinking about and designing public toilets – as well as seeing them as representative of certain groups in society.

20 Wilkinson 2017
21 www.bbc.co.uk
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