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

Report 3

Account of the research into users, stakeholders and public toilet providers.

Ecaterina Stefanescu
4630475
ecaterina.stefanescu91@gmail.com
Interiors Buildings Cities Fall 2017
Irene Cieraad Research Seminar AR3AI 055
21.12.2017
Table of Contents

- Introduction 3
- Social and urban relevance of public toilets 4
- Public toilets at festive events 4
- Public toilet provision in Maastricht 5
- The Maastricht Carnival 10
  - History 10
  - Public toilet provision 10
- Case study: public toilet provision for festive events in Barcelona 13
- Conclusion 15
- Link to design proposal 15
- References 16
Introduction

Our graduation studio, titled "After the Party", focused on the city of Maastricht and its tradition of festive events and, more importantly, how they shape the urban situation during the festivities and afterwards. We looked at three main events (the Carnival, Heiligdomsvaart and Fashion Clash), but my research was centred on the Carnival and its rich history in Maastricht. As we were also tasked with finding our own design site and building programme, during our first trips to the city I tried to take in the atmosphere of the city and its public spaces. During my walks around the centre, one thing that has struck me was that, for such a touristic and well-kept place, Maastricht did not seem to have any public toilets! In dire need as I was, in a new city, I was forced to ask bar and cafe owners if I can use their facilities; some readily accepted, some asked for a fee, whilst in some places, where perhaps the servers looked less friendly and the embarrassment was too great, I chose instead to order something just so I can use the establishment’s loo. This situation went on whenever I subsequently visited the city, and in my frustration – having just visited Paris where public conveniences are free and abundant – I began to realise that there is a city-wide problem. At around the same time, a news story from Amsterdam popped up on my feed: a group of women were staging a protest against a judge who told a female reveller fined for urinating on the street after a night out that she should have just used one of the many male urinals found in the centre. The woman, fined €90 for ‘wildplassen’, decided to fight the decision in court, arguing that there are no toilets available for women to use. There are currently 3 fully enclosed public toilets in Amsterdam (charging €1) and a total of 35 (free) male urinals. Ignoring the discriminatory fee required only for the use of the toilet – and hence only from women – the protest focused on the judge’s opinion that there is no obligation from the council to provide more facilities for women, as there are enough open-air urinals. The women participating in the viral protest took photos of themselves trying to awkwardly contort their bodies in simulating the use of these urinals. This nationwide debate really struck a chord with me, and I decided to concentrate on this subject for my research. I believe public toilet provision is an important aspect of a successful urban centre, and influence the way people experience public spaces and, more broadly, a whole city. I also think that toilets can reflect the way our society is structured, and can be a way to eliminate discrimination - or, in the case of Amsterdam’s council, reinforce it.

At the same time, the research that I was conducting on the Carnival revealed that the social and political history of Maastricht very much influenced this festive event. I therefore wanted to know if there is a link between this history and the provision of toilets in the city. The site-specific research and assignments conducted also revealed a fascination with the topic of water and, more specifically, the two rivers in Maastricht: the Maas and the Jeker. This interest slowly became more focused on the Jeker, and a design proposal that looked into accessing this hidden water feature, and linking it with the provision of public toilet facilities, took shape.

My research methods consisted of a combinational of secondary sources – books and articles that formed the theoretical framework of my argument - and primary research, such as site observations through informal interviews and photographs, formal interviews with providers and stakeholders, and map making. The observations are of a qualitative nature, accompanied by own opinions, as the research and design project are of a very personal nature. The secondary research sources focused on the toilet provision during the carnival, however, provide factual information that corroborates the research conducted on site, too. A comparison with four case studies of public toilets during a range of events in Barcelona will provide a reference point for Maastricht. To conclude, I will explain how these findings will feed into my design proposal.

---

1 Gershenson and Penner 2009
2 Gershenson and Penner 2009
Social and urban relevance of public toilets

I want to start with an overview of the conclusions drawn from the initial literature search on the subject of public toilets. The main literary source studied is the book *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, edited by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner. This ground-breaking work suggests that public toilets and the act of toileting reflect out-dated norms regarding gender, class, race and accessibility in Western society and urban context. The book showed that the subject of toilets, especially in the academic environment, is still very much taboo, and that a frank discussion needs to be had in order for the problems regarding the provision to be tackled. They also argued that this desire to segregate, confine and control arises whenever a minority group start to become more visible, and demands proper toilet provision: racial minorities, women, and now LGBTQ people. Toilets are way to remind these groups of their place in society, to exert domination and ultimately discriminate against them by ignoring their needs in the public sphere. Moreover, the text suggests that these conservative, patriarchal ideas and attitudes, as well as the categorisation of toileting acts as very private matter, are linked to the capitalist system and the class-based society in the Western world. It has not always been like this: in Roman times, communal public toilets were an important part of the city, linked to the festive urban plan and seen as extensions of the public sphere; they were spaces for socialising, as well as with the bathhouse, as notions of privacy and embarrassment have not yet been introduced. All the literature found on the subject, however, observed how the reduction of public conveniences is an accelerating and tragic phenomenon, linked to the post-crisis political and financial situation, which creates a less sustainable and less friendly urban environment.

Public toilets at festive events

To focus my research more closely on festive events, I conducted an interview with Dr. Johan Molenbroek from the Industrial Design Engineering department at TU Delft, who is also known as the “Toilet Professor”. Molenbroek is an Associate Professor of Applied Ergonomics. His specialisations include Anthropometry, Product safety, and inclusive design, but his lifelong fascination is with public toilets. He researches and lectures on the subject, and is a member of the Dutch Toilet Organisation.

Molenbroek states that context is important for toileting: history, culture, and climate all contribute to the way toilets are used and seen in a society. However, he believes that “festivals are a special context”, and that toilet design should be considered in a holistic manner as part of the concept of a festive event. Furthermore, festivals are for him important laboratories for experimentation in the area of toileting, both in the technical and social field:

> Festivals are a place where innovation and experiment in the area of toilets can reach the public and educate, in terms of technical advancements, and socially and culturally (Molenbroek, 2017).

Innovations in high tech as well as low tech or environmental friendly design can be showcased and tried in festivals. In Holland, Pink Pop festival collaborated with a specialised company that used the hundreds of thousands litres of urine collected at the event to turn it into fertilizer, according to Molenbroek. Glastonbury is another example of a festival using their platform to trial and promote new, forward-looking toilet facilities, like a female urinal or

---

2 Gershenson and Penner 2009
3 www.bbc.co.uk/programmes
the P-mate device – which facilitates peeing whilst standing up. The professor also thinks that innovative toilet designs during festive events where young people participate are a good way to also convince investors and city councils of the viability and future of these innovations.

He agrees that the way cities are enjoyed is influenced by their toilet provision, and that it is the responsibility of the council and the city’s marketing department to raise the expectations. Unfortunately, he acknowledges that wide-scale innovation in the field of public toilets is very hard to be achieved, as, like everything, this area is also determined by the capitalist market system. He thinks this is a risky area for investors and manufacturers as mentalities surrounding toilet use are hard to combat. He offers the example of the female urinals installed a few years ago in the former Architecture building, and in that of the Civil Engineering department of TU Delft. If the ‘urinoir’ in the Architecture building became relatively well used, the Civil Engineering one proved to be a complete failure, as the female students refused to use it. There is an interesting difference of culture here even between two departments of the same university, but what this proves is that mental barriers are very powerful in rejecting innovative and experimental toilet facilities. Molenbroek believes that the only way to challenge these mentalities is with more visibility of these innovative solutions, and belief that attitudes change in time. Ultimately, Molenbroek agrees that new toilets can change society as a whole.

Public toilet provision in Maastricht

To move the discussion to the context in Maastricht, this chapter looks into the overall provision of public conveniences in the wider central area of the city. I will provide observations and photographic evidence of the toilets found whilst wandering the city, and show an overview of each facility on a map of Maastricht. For the purpose of this exercise, I ignored most of the toilets located in private places, which are reserved for client use. However, as it will be demonstrated, although some businesses explicitly forbid non-paying clients from using the toilets (or demand a fee), sometimes the line is blurred between what constitutes a client and just a wandering visitor.

I will start with the facilities found in the car park underneath Vrijthof Square, operated by Q Park. These are probably the most well-equipped public conveniences found, providing toilet use, as well as shower facilities for the (relatively) small sum of 50 cents. There was an attendant present when I visited, who was making sure the place remained clean. The facilities were well-lit, and had a new, spacious and accessible design (Figs. 1 & 2).

Figures 1 and 2: Photographs of the Vrijthof Square facilities, providing showers as well as toilets (Author’s own, 2017).

---

4 Penner 2009
The second facilities visited were actually in the Dominicanenkerk Bookshop, so not technically entirely public, but provided for the clients of the bookshop café. However, signs facing the entrance, and no direct overlooking of any shop or café worker, implied that anyone could come in and make use of the facilities without having to order something from the café or be interested in the books. In fact, I noticed a good number of people coming in just to use the toilets; some were carrying shopping bags or cameras, suggesting the "call of nature" struck when they were out visiting the city on shopping trips. As you go down the stairs to the underground level, the small facilities are very simple and not distinctive in any way, but are very clean, considering the amount of people who go there (there were short queues forming for the ladies room). The constant use of these toilets in the shopping district, however, shows that there is a need for free, simple facilities in the city centre.

Figure 3: Photograph of Dominicanenkerk showing the location of the toilet entrance, and the sign indicating to it (Author’s own, 2017)


The facilities located in the train station are also very well used when the station is busy (Fig. 4). The inconvenience arises, however, when faced with the automatic turnstile system demanding the 70 cents entrance fee. Although most people have no problem with getting past the turnstiles, they can present a daunting barrier for people with reduced mobility, for example. I also believe that the charge is relatively high, especially compared to the Vrijthof facilities that also offered showers, and a much more user-friendly design. Furthermore, because the train station is located some distance from the Maastricht centre, casual walkers cannot readily make use of its facilities. Unfortunately, I did not get to visit these toilet personally, so I cannot make observations on their size or appearance. Even so, photographs found online show very basic, and not generally inviting amenities (Fig. 5).

Another place where public toilets can be found in the city centre is the Mosae Forum shopping mall. Signs announcing their existence were placed on the ground floor, but, unfortunately, the facilities themselves were not to be found easily. Therefore I have no detailed information about their appearance, numbers or cost.

Figure 6: Photograph of the locked facilities in ‘t Bassin (Grimshaw, Matt, 2017)

An intriguing public facility was discovered in ‘t Bassin, in the north of the city centre underneath in an underground passage (Fig. 6). The signs on the outside of the place seemed to indicate the existence of public showers and toilets, but the door was locked with a key-card system and no extra information was added. The exterior design suggested these toilets were made for the public, but there was no obvious way to unlock the doors or ask for any assistance. I have no information on their state or cost, but one theory I have is that they are for the use of the boats mooring in the Bassin.

Figure 7: The new facilities at Onze Lieve Vrouewal Car Park are only used for advertising placement (Author’s own, 2017).

Figure 8: The not very subtle locking system and notice on the door (Author’s own, 2017).
Another disappointing find were the public toilets at the Onze Lieve Vrouewal underground Car Park. The facilities had a brand new appearance (in a standard corporate contemporary design, complete with nicely lit advert) and seemed generous in size (Fig. 7). However, although the car park was fairly busy, the toilets looked permanently closed, locked, with tape all over the handles and a notice on the door (Fig. 8).

One unexpectedly positive sign, however, was finding a water bottle refill station in Jeker Park, in the south of the city centre (Fig. 9). The facility was very much ignored during the cold autumn day when I conducted my research, but is no doubt very popular with tourists or locals having picnics by the river in the summer months.

These photographs show that there is an uncoordinated, wide range of types, facilities offered and designs of public toilets in Maastricht, with various degrees of cleanliness, user-friendliness, availability and status. Moreover, it does not look like there is an overriding plan for toilet provision from the Municipality, which leaves the issue in the responsibility of private bodies. The map of Maastricht public facilities reinforces this idea further: the placement of the toilets is at random – wherever a business or establishment decided to offer them to clients – and finding them can prove very tricky if you do not already know of their existence, as most places do no signal these facilities in any way (Fig. 10).

Most public toilet amenities found exist only for specific groups of people – car users – while the rest are expected to use the facilities in local drinking and eating establishments or, supposedly, hold it in. Which is what I did when I realized that the fast food restaurant where I ordered some food specifically to make use of their facilities had their only toilet closed, with a notice informing clients that the closure is due to the concern for their safety, whatever that means. As one of the only eating-places open late in the evening, I expected toilet use to come with my order, so in that situation, there were not many options left for me (in the end, after some walking around, I went into a bar and ordered a drink – and used their toilet).

In respect of this, Netherlands as a whole has a culture of paying for toilet use regardless of context or situation. The Dutch are expected to part with their change whenever they use facilities in public places. Moreover, only foreigners seem to find paying for this basic necessity unusual. According to Expatica.com:

In 2002, the Ombudsman concluded that a price clearly displayed in retailer’s toilets, deemed public areas, could oblige a customer to pay to use the WC. Two years later the same body concluded that café and restaurant owners could also charge for the use of their toilet facilities, seen as private bathrooms, although no one could
force customers to hand money over for their use (van Mulligen, 2008).\(^5\)

The practice of demanding an entrance charge, even in eating and drinking establishments and even for clients, could be seen as the extreme manifestation of a culture built on free trade and capitalism, where citizens are expected to pay for every service they require, even the most basic ones.

This research into the urban context of Maastricht shows that there is an obvious need for a comprehensive plan public toilet provision for the whole area, as well as better solutions for their design and user-friendliness.

Figure 10: Plan of Maastricht showing the public conveniences mapped out across the city. It is clear that the local council does not have an overall toilet provision plan, and instead places the burden on local businesses. (Author’s own, 2017)
The Maastricht Carnival

History

Although the Maastricht Carnival is part of the Catholic tradition, I became interested in another angle to its history, centred on economic, political and social factors. This was revealed through interviews with two members of the Carnival organising society, the Tempeleers: Paul Joosten & Benedict Persoon. According to them, in the 1900s the carnival was little more than locals going from bar to bar with small bands to celebrate the coming of spring. After the two world wars, during which Maastricht became an important industrial city, the majority of the population worked in local factories like Sphinx and Mosa. The people, however, were generally poor, as the salaries were kept low, so the industrialists and leaders of the time expanded this annual festive event and turned it into a city-wide celebration in an effort to keep the working classes motivated. In current times, these local social hierarchies have changed, with services replacing manufacturing as the dominant industry, and big companies opening branches – such as the Vodafone call centre. This shift has also seen changes in the calendar of the Carnival: the days of the party have moved from Sunday - Tuesday to Friday – Sunday, as the international companies do not respect the local tradition. However, the festive event has become incredibly popular, and has a local character. It is, nevertheless, specifically apolitical (compared to the other Carnivals in the area like Cologne or Basel). This is despite the fact that historically, the festive theme of the carnival was that of social transgression and the desire to invert the established political orders, albeit for a limited time period: in fact, the idea of ceremonially handing over the power from the Mayor to the people of Maastricht is celebrated in one of the most important moments of the festival. Moreover, the point of the costumes (like the masks in the Venice Carnival) is to hide differences between classes, the rich and the poor. In spite of this, if in the 60s and 70s the Carnival was more political, there is no political angle to the festive event now, according to the Tempeleers. One reason for this might be that the Carnival is now economically very important to the city, and seen as a business opportunity. The reasons for its political apathy, therefore, might have something to do with the capitalist ideals of the Dutch society: a business opportunity cannot be associated with inflammatory or controversial views, so these festive events are kept politically disengaged.

Public toilet provision

When it comes to temporary toilet provision, the diverse demographics of the carnival need to be taken into consideration. According to Paul Joosten, during the day there is a combination of families, elderly people and youngsters. During the evening and night the demographic changes towards more youngsters and students. To service such a wide range of participants, Joosten says that the Municipality, under whose responsibility this falls, relies on subcontractors Boels Rentals to provide the ubiquitous portaloos for the events. The map at figure 13 shows the route of the Carnival through the city and the important places of interests during the festivities, along with the placement of the temporary toilets. The council, he says, also collaborates with local bars, to allow revellers on bar crawls to use the private facilities.

A promotional video about the public toilet provision and cleaning up operation of the Carnival filmed by the Maastricht Municipality boasted these numbers: 91 portable toilet, 196 urinals, and 7 disabled access portaloos. Although the council might find them impressive, one thing that immediately strikes me is the male to female ratio (fig. 12). The number of 91 portable cubicles is divided between the male and female facilities so, in reality, the provision for women is probably even less than half of that for men. Looking at the cold numbers, however, is not the only way to identify the obvious problem: a 2011 report and questionnaire on the Carnival conducted by the Municipality also shows a range of complaints.

6 www.youtube.com
from the public about the toilet provision and suitability. The criticism can be summarised like this:

- Too few ladies toilets (plenty for men)
- Long queues (for ladies)
- Ladies toilets not suitable; too dark
- Dirty, unhygienic, not maintained
- Not well distributed; only in the large squares
- Cafes/bars toilets preferred for women and children, but long queues for them, still quite dirty
- Plenty of urinals, but street urination still a problem
- Accessible toilets not suitable; closed at 8pm
- Located too central; aesthetically displeasing
- Badly arranged / organised / lit

The report also shows that, for the question “Indicate whether you have sufficient toilet facilities during the Maastricht Carnival”, only 53% of respondents answered positively (Fig. 11). Overall, it seems that toilet provision during this festive event lacks not only in numbers, but also in quality, and this situation impacts on the overall enjoyment and atmosphere of the Carnival - especially for women having to queue, or disabled people whose access and right to participate in the festivities is restricted in the evenings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>c) toiletgebruik</th>
<th>absoluut</th>
<th>relatief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ja</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nee, omdat:*</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weet ik niet</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>totaal</strong></td>
<td><strong>690</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* zie bijlage 9 voor toelichting

Figure 11: Table and pie chart showing the respondent’s opinion on the public toilet facilities provided during the Carnival (Flycatcher Internet Research, 2011, Retrieved from http://www.onderzoeksbanklimburg.nl/)

---

7 Flycatcher Internet Research, 2011
Figure 12: The portaloos and temporary urinals being installed in Vrijthof Square (Hout Video, 2016)

Figure 13: Plan of Maastricht showing the route of the Carnival procession, its important architectural landmarks and the location of the temporary public toilets, alongside the location of the permanent public conveniences (Author’s own, 2017)
Case study: public toilet provision for festive events in Barcelona

If perhaps proving a link between the Dutch capitalist system and social hierarchies, as seen through the aspect of permanent and temporary toilet provision, seems like a stretch, it might be useful to compare the situation in Maastricht to the one in another European festive city: Barcelona. I conducted a 4-day trip there in early October, during which I attended a few festive public events of various sizes and types, and observed their approach to toilet provision. They range from informal to formal, and from very local to broader. At the end, I included a special example of forward-thinking public toilets, not in a festive context but an academic one.

1. MACBA Botellon

The Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art was designed with a wide courtyard and stepped terrace meant to be used as a public space. During the evenings, this area becomes a popular skating and ‘botellon’ place: a public space where usually young people gather in groups to drink, socialize, play music, or engage in other social activities, as an alternative to going out to bars. Although technically illegal, these informal gatherings are an important part of Spanish urban culture and lifestyle, and many councils choose to provide basic facilities so that these events stay civilized. In this case, a small building located opposite the square features public toilets, and is guarded by a friendly attendant. The functional, easy to clean design is fit for purpose, and there are a good number of cubicles – so no queues.

2. Esquerra Eixample neighbourhood party

This public event was organised for free by a local neighbourhood association in one of the blocks of the Barcelona grid. Envisioned as an informal street festival, the weekend event offered live music and a few stalls, and had a feminist theme. Perhaps because of this, the organisers took care in providing good male/female parity for their attendants, with 1 urinal with 4 places, 4 cubicles, and 1 accessible cubicle. The portable toilets were simply installed on the street, a move prompted by the lack of the spaces, but which, in my opinion, helps to de-mystify the act of toileting, and bringing it into the public sphere. Although there was no separation between the male and female facilities, queues still occasionally formed for the cubicles, as some men chose to use them instead of the open urinals. Moreover, they were free to use.
3. Palo Alto Market

Palo Alto is a popular weekend market/festival organised once a month in a disused factory, in one of the trendiest districts of Barcelona. It offered its young, creatives crowd exhibitions, food and drink trucks, stalls with art, design and fashion, DJs and live music. It had a more formal character, with an entrance fee of €4 which, although not huge, excluded certain people from the get-go. What struck me as very forward thinking was the fact that there was a map of the toilet locations at the entrance, which made finding one in the busy market very easy. The facilities themselves ranged in type from portaloos to standard indoors ones. But the amazing thing about this festival was how the toilets, and clear was they were signposted, was part of the whole graphic concept of the festival, rather than an afterthought. Although queues formed occasionally for the toilet inside the building, the good number and distribution of the provided facilities meant that you never too far from another, unoccupied toilet.

4. ETSAB Library

Finally, although not part of a festive event, the public toilets I saw in the Library of the Barcelona School of Architecture are worth a mention in my opinion. Only recently, the university introduced gender-neutral toilets, alongside their gender specific toilets, in an effort to accommodate gender-variant people. This move has proven very popular. Talking to students there, I found that they have even started disregarding the signs on the toilet doors, and freely using the facilities nearest to them, achieving a real mix. Although this experiment works very well because it is based in forward-thinking, safe university context, I also believe that it epitomizes the wider liberal attitudes of the Spanish society, especially towards the LGBTQ community. I also think that unisex bathrooms help to gradually eliminate outdated mentalities towards gender and women’s place in society.
Conclusion

To conclude, I want to reiterate the fact that toilets are political, and that they represent wider attitudes and mentalities in society. Although now the most private spaces to be found in any architectural plan, they were considered social spaces in Roman Antiquity; although there is nothing to suggest that society will move back towards that any time soon, there has been a push to break the social conventions and prudish behaviour associated with this still taboo subject. The discussion with Johan Molenbroek revealed that festivals are ideal places for experimentation in the field of toilet design because normal social and personal conventions are erased in the festive context. The provision of public toilets in Maastricht is an issue that I have identified during my research, and I think there is an indirect link between the situation in the city, and Dutch culture and society at large. I also believe there are parallels to be drawn between the attitudes of the business-minded society, the social history of the Maastricht Carnival, and the current character and themes of the festive event. Moreover, I believe that this correlation manifests itself in the sub-par toilet provision during the event; a symptom of the economic system. Furthermore, there are lessons to be learned from a city like Barcelona in how to integrate toilets in a festive event (or in the public building context) and, ultimately, help change attitudes in society.

Link to design proposal

The research conducted for the seminar shows that there is an obvious need for improvement in both the permanent and temporary toilet provision department in Maastricht. I therefore plan to design a city-wide network of public facilities which would link with my proposal for the Jeker River site. This will act as the central HQ of the network, providing extensive facilities for refreshing and changing, alongside public toilets and a small bathhouse. The network of toilet “satellites” will have the same architectural language, or very similar, to the bathhouse, and will be located in the most needed places of interests in the city centre.

The proposal will also look at experimental ways to combat gender divisions, break taboos and, perhaps, even change mentalities of what is private and what is public in the context of toilets.
References

Flycatcher Internet Research

Gershenson, Olga, and Barbara Penner (eds)

Penner, Barbara

Internet Sources

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01kxyhd (1-12-2017)


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6TNSzjjDkc&t=4s (22-11-2017)