

Spring / 2004

Public Toilets in the Boston Common

Private Acts in Public Spaces

Preface

Public toilets are difficult if not impossible to find in America's urban centers for a variety of reasons. Stated and un-stated concerns about hygiene, maintenance public safety, illicit activities, and lack of public funding have all contributed to limited access to public toilets. Yet, there is a real need for such facilities by all members of society, from the homeless to Boston's business elite. Instead, public buildings such as the public library are over-burdened by the needs of homeless and our public parks and leftover public spaces (such as highway overpasses) become de-facto public restrooms.

Boston's Mayor has taken an initiative to address this problem by soliciting design proposals for new public toilets from the City's pool of emerging design talent. The first facility is to be built close to the Park Street subway entrance in the Boston Common. The mayor is assuming that the project will be managed by the City's Parks and Recreation Department, and that City employees will clean and service the facilities daily. Never the less the Mayor must be consciousness of economic and budgeting issues, and asks all designers to consider the use of durable materials and easy maintenance.

Program Elements:

Design toilet facilities for at least four individuals (2 male and 2 female) - i.e. provide at least 4 fixtures (very loosely defined) and means for washing hands, etc. Your design can take on a variety of configurations. It can be composed of one building with separate male and female spaces, or one building with shared male and female facilities. Spaces to wash your hands can be shared or separated by sex. The Mayor is completely open to your suggestions regarding how the spaces are organized.

The facility should be covered to protect users from the elements. Walls, however, can take on a variety of shapes and sizes and be clad in a wide range of materials from opaque to more transparent surfaces.

Site Selection:

You are free to propose a range of sites within the area defined on the master plan, i.e. any site that is on the Common Proper contained within the bounds of the 1/16th plan provided. You may place your structure at grade, below grade or above grade provided that you adequately consider handicap access issues. In choosing your site, you should consider the relationship of your structure(s) to the existing structures, artifacts and pathways that define the Common. Think about how your structures are perceived by individuals who approach your structure from different paths.

Should your structure(s) be highly visible or tucked away and out of sight?

Will you engage an existing structure like the subway entrance, or will you tie your structure to the retaining walls and landscape?

Other Considerations:

Program

You have been given a rudimentary program. The first act of design is to question and challenge the program. The decisions you make about what constitutes your program reflect your attitude about your design intentions. Consider carefully all the program elements that you wish to include and their relationship to one another.

- What is the relationship between the sexes and the spaces required by each?
- What type of fixtures will you use (off the shelf or custom designed)?
- What other items are required of the program (toilet paper dispensers, paper towels, garbage receptacles, mirrors, condom and sanitary napkin dispensers, etc.)?

Identity

Each urban structure or artifact has an identity. The meaning of an object can be explicitly identified (as in posting a sign) or its meaning can be accrued over time through repeated use (for instance, the stairs at the student center serve also as a stage and a place to sit and hang out on nice days). The meaning of a structure / object can also evolve out of its relationship to an existing typology (e.g. white clapboard New England Church with a steeple reads first as “church”).

- How will passers-by know the identity and purpose of your structure?
- Is there a sign or should there be a sign?
- Are the interior activities somehow revealed without compromising privacy?
- Is there something about the shape, form, and organization of your structure which identifies itself with a Public Bathroom Toilet “Typology”?

Public / Private

The separation between the public and private realm in our society is continually challenged. The gradation of most public spaces to most private spaces has dissipated in our culture. Think of overhearing a very private cell phone conversation spoken at high volume in a public space like a train, or airport.

- Is there a clear delineation and gradation of public and private spaces?
- Which spaces have uses or services shared by both sexes? Which are entirely private?
- How is privacy defined? Is it defined by location, controlled access, change of materials, or transparency / opacity?

Additional Constraints / Parameters:

Accessibility

The mayor wants each sex to have at least one fixture which is accessible to the handicapped. He does not however, demand that the accessibility of the unit comply with the strictest interpretations and dimensional constraints defined by the current ADA guidelines. He is willing to appeal to the Access Board for exemptions provided that the design considers handicap access issues in a fresh and innovative manner.