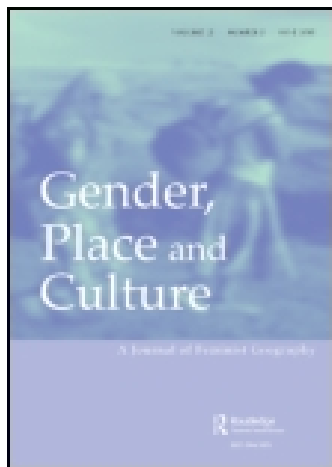


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Queering bathrooms

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This is a wide-ranging book, and I cannot do it justice within a tight word limit. Throughout the book, Cavanagh draws on Foucault's theory of panoptic power to consider how toilets are designed to apprehend gender through the use of mirrors, tiles and reflective surfaces. Although this is undoubtedly true, I would have appreciated more consideration of how reflective surfaces enable queer toilet users to appraise each other for pleasurable and sexual purposes, as well as to discipline the self and other bodies. *Queering Bathrooms* is innovative in that it extends this analysis of panoptic lines of sight with attention to the disciplinary auditory cultures of public toilets. Cavanagh devotes an entire chapter to her examination of how acoustic registers of urination are also used to apprehend gender – recognising that how one sits, squats or stands to urinate affects the sound one makes, and that these sounds are often also assessed by others to judge whether one is urinating in an appropriately gendered way.

Chapter 6 examines issues of sex in public toilets. This is well-trodden ground that has been covered by many geographers of sexuality. Cavanagh examines both the appropriation of public toilets by queers of all sexualities and genders and the tactics people employ in order not to be perceived as looking for sex in a public toilet. For example, Cavanagh uses her interview material to good effect to explain the tacit rules that men utilise when choosing which urinal to use if they want to avoid being read as a cruiser. This chapter makes some important observations about the patriarchal nature of (white) gay men's privilege to cruise public toilets. Cavanagh notes how white, cisgendered, 'straight-acting' gay men find it easier to pass as 'legitimate' toilet users and use this as a cover through which they can cruise relatively safely. Conversely, effeminate and gender queer men, as well as men from those ethnicities that are feminised by racist discourses in North America find themselves placed under greater surveillance in toilet spaces. What I found heartening in this book was its recognition that gay and bisexual men are not the only people who enjoy sex in public toilets. It was good to read narratives from queer women about their sexual encounters in toilets, as well as the testimonies of transmen who had found their gender identity validated by cruising the men's room.

In concluding her book, Cavanagh draws on the interview material to examine alternative, just and inclusive designs for public toilets. Her desire is for 'a luxurious and accessible toilet' as a humane project for the coming century. What is clear from her participants' responses is that what that toilet will look like, and whether gender-neutral toilet provision offers a solution, is still highly contested and open to debate. *Queering Bathrooms* should, however, offer many points of entry to this debate.

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Queering bathrooms

Even before I read it, I was pleased to hear about Sheila L. Cavanagh's book, *Queering Bathrooms*. It reinforced a sense I have had for some time that toilets are at last becoming a (more) legitimate subject of academic interest. In fact, there is good reason to believe that we are witnessing the birth or coalescing of a new multidisciplinary field which I shall call 'toilet studies' for lack of a more elegant term. *Queering Bathrooms* is one of a triumvirate of recent books on the subject of public toilets that includes my own co-edited

collection, *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* and *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (Gershenson and Penner 2009; Molotch and Norén 2010).¹ These publications confirm that public toilets are powerful lenses through which to analyse how space articulates and maintains social difference: differences between Ladies and Gents, White and Coloured, Western and Asian, or Christian and Muslim.

Uniting these books and toilet studies as a field of inquiry is the basic notion that granting or denying social groups access to something as basic as a toilet not only affects their mobility, but also sends them a message about their status. Provision is a powerful index of social belonging or of exclusion. Those in toilet studies thus view toilets as spaces of discipline in the sense Foucault used the term, as a tool for keeping existing social categories in place. But most are equally careful to acknowledge the subversive, even potentially liberating, power of toilet practices and behaviours.

Cavanagh's work generally follows this tradition; however, in terms of her particular contribution to the field, I would highlight two things. First, *Queering Bathrooms'* defining feature is Cavanagh's in-depth qualitative research illuminating transgender user experience. The hundred interviews that Cavanagh and her team conducted bear witness to the psychic as well as physical disturbances caused by negotiations in the toilet. These testimonials open the door to Cavanagh's sophisticated psychoanalytic reading – the book's second defining feature – in which she deploys the concept of bodily ego and bodily image to make sense of why these negotiations are so disturbing to all parties, trans and cissexual alike. As Cavanagh notes, the bathroom is a place that 'orchestrates a truth about the body, its gender, and its genitals' (9); hence, it is also the place where these supposedly stable links can come undone, thrown off by small details like 'the lack of synchronization between body sounds and body images' (111). And Cavanagh's attentiveness to sound, touch and smell, as well as vision, is one of the book's strengths.

Although not unique in studies on sexuality and gender (Browne 2004, 331–46; Skeggs 2001, 295–307), Cavanagh's use of interviews and the way she foregrounds the subjective and the psychic in her research are invaluable. This focus on the user is the key to supporting bathroom reform, which Cavanagh's work also advocates. With her call for providing public toilets that permit alternative 'modes of identification' (47), Cavanagh joins the chorus of bathroom activists – feminists, disability and transgender activists, campaigners for the aged – who have fought for more inclusive toilets, in some cases since the 1870s. Some significant victories have been scored in the last two decades, such as the passing of American and English disability legislation or American potty parity laws that mandate that there should be two female water closets provided for every one male.

Yet in spite of these positive examples, the reality is that most efforts to revamp the basics of bathroom design – for instance, attempts to introduce squat toilets or female urinals or new signage or unisex facilities – remain controversial. Indeed, for most of its short history, the public toilet has proved remarkably resistant to change; when a culprit is blamed for this state of affairs, it is often architects, seen to be in thrall to the false gods of functionalism. And it is certainly true that the current aesthetics of bathroom design, the preference for right angles and shiny hygienic surfaces, can be traced back to architectural modernism, as Cavanagh does. However, it is important to stress that the bathroom was always far more important to modernists as an icon, an emblem of the principle of 'form follows function' than as a real space serving real people.

Architects' admiration for mass-produced standard bathroom fittings actually led them to relinquish control over bathroom spaces early on. As the visionary engineer, Buckminster Fuller, complained, modernist architects never 'went back of the wall-surface to look at the plumbing ... they never enquired into the overall problem of sanitary fittings themselves ...' (Banham 1960, 326). In order to act on Cavanagh's call for action, it seems crucial that scholars recognize that the forces shaping bathroom design are just as complex as those shaping bathroom use. Even the most modest public convenience is the product of a whole constellation of actors. These include the organizations which set minimum standards for buildings and fittings; the governmental bodies which enshrine minimum standards in building and plumbing codes; architectural handbooks which prescribe minimum clearances and heights; bathroom manufacturers, plumbers, architects, developers, retailers and, last but not least, consumers. As the sociologist Molotch notes, this means that for any innovation to happen in the bathroom, 'A whole lot of stars need to be aligned' (Molotch 2010, 256), i.e. many actors need to buy into an innovation and have enough 'love' to bring it about (2010, 256).

Here, then, is the nub of the problem: encouraging 'love' for bathrooms or reaching any meaningful consensus about how best to alter their design is perhaps uniquely difficult. Few spaces are more contested or obscured by taboos and strategic silences, which Cavanagh nicely describes as a 'generative quiet' (29). Nobody can study the history of the modern bathroom without being acutely aware of the way that a strategic disinterest in the user has been inscribed into modes of practice and representation at every level. This suppression of the individual and specific bodily needs or identities should not surprise us: it is part of the bathroom's standardized logic. But what is worrying is that this suppression of users continues to be perpetuated, often unthinkingly, as actors continue to reach for standards or design tools that fail to take actual bodies, behaviours and experiences into account.

Although there will never be a fixed roadmap for change where toilets are concerned, I would like to end with an example of 'The Bathroom Reinvented', a popular video on the *Dwell* magazine website, in which designer Virginia Gardiner talks about an innovative waterless toilet she created out of horse dung and resin. In the video, Gardiner immediately upends all of the taboos that surround toilets, by making straight for her creation, laying her hands on it and informing viewers that it is 'made of poop'. By touching and remarking on the toilet's dark, textured surface (its 'softness'), she directly counters the design profession's tendency to be hands off with toilets; instead, she signals her desire to dirty design, making room for all those qualities that the hygienic imagination usually suppresses – the dark, the dusky, the fragrant, the foreign, the feminine and the queer. Above all, she implicitly acknowledges a fact that is central to Cavanagh's book: that any redesign of toilets will always necessarily involve a redesign of our own expectations and habits. This is at once the greatest challenge – and greatest opportunity – for those in the field.

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Note

1. Previously, the great 'toilet' book of the twentieth century was Alexander Kira's *The Bathroom*, published in 1966 and 1967 and revised substantially in 1976. Few publications on the subject appeared between 1970s and noughties with the important exception of Greed (2003).

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'Ladies or gents': Gender division in toilets

The purpose of this book is to investigate mainly the public toilet experiences of people who identify as 'trans-folk'. Whereas in Britain public toilets usually refer to on-street local authority facilities, there is no equivalent in Toronto and Cavanagh concentrates on toilets to which the public have access within public buildings, particularly within her university. The research base is qualitative and uses a performance-related, psycho-analytic ethnographic approach based on interviewing 100 LGBTI respondents.

Whilst this book works well from a queer, and/or gay, perspective, those of us from the realms of 'toiletology' found considerable difficulties with the study. In fairness, this is not 'a toilet book'; rather the design and provision of toilets are used as a lens to investigate wider queer issues, especially relating to trans and homophobia in public space. Unfortunately, and possibly due to publishing overlaps, the study had not been able to engage with current toilet literature and academic research, especially those researching sexuality and toilet issues in North America (Molotch and Noren 2010). There was little reference to some of the more 'classic' studies of the role of male public toilets in queer culture (Humphries 1970; Brunton 2005). There was a generalised condemnation of the cultural mainstream being maintained by toilet designers and providers for creating facilities strictly segregated by the binary genders of ladies and gents. Yet, its North American perspective did not engage with UK approaches which incorporate a more inclusive and unisex perspective in which the promotion of an 'in-between zone' attempts to meet the needs of all those who do not 'fit' into standard gender and ability stereotyped provision, including people with disabilities, piss-shy men, parents with small children (Hanson Bichard and Greed 2007), as well as those considered visually and sexually unwelcome in conventional toilets (Penner and Gershenson 2009). It remains a challenge