

The importance of the subject of public baths and wash-houses cannot be over-estimated, either on the grounds of public well-being or of political economy. Regarded as features in present day life, the public bath is an instrument of the most powerful order for elevating the masses and stimulating a desire for self-improvement. To make an habitually dirty man clean, is to create in his inmost soul—even if but temporarily—a desire to rise out of the squalor and filth with which he may be ordinarily encompassed. It is only the true public bath that can be made serviceable to this end. The house of the poor have not, and cannot well have, the benefits of properly-fitted baths; and although it is now usual to find the homes of the lower middle class provided with excellent bathing arrangements, the rank and file of the working classes have none. It is this vast mass of humanity that can only be reached by inducements held out by the cheap baths of public bathing establishments.

In well-planned baths and wash-houses there should be a good division of departments, and a compact grouping of classes; corridors should be broad and entrances spacious. There should be an endeavor to render the work of supervision of baths as easy as possible, and the entrances and pay-offices should be arranged as to economize attendance while not sacrificing the due consideration of classes.

A women's entrance and a men's entrance has been found to be the most practicable arrangement. One central pay-box will control both men and women bathers. On one side of the pay-office will be the entrance for men, and on the other side the entrance for women.

Site has much to do with the question of entrances. A side street for second-class entrances, and for access to laundry and to boilers, etc., is a very great gain. Commissioners searching for sites might well bear this in mind.

The position of the site, and the nature of the immediate neighborhood, has, or should have, much to do with the scope and style of the public baths establishment. It is evident that a bath-house suited to a district wholly inhabited by a poor class of residents will not prove suitable in a place where there is a considerable proportion of comparatively well-to-do people. Baths Commissioners should more thoroughly study this question of site and surroundings.

—Robert Owen Allsop, architect, *Public Baths and Wash-Houses* [New York: Pon and Chamberlain, 1894]

During a study of comfort station facilities in New York City, a special study was made of the saloons in the lower West Side from the Battery to Twenty-third Street. Their sanitary features were investigated and counts were made of the number of men who entered the saloon, partly at least, for the purpose of using the toilets. It was found that of the total number entering the saloons approximately 15 per cent used the toilets. These stations are provided with only cold water and with towels or soap. There are many stores and factories in this neighborhood for the workmen of which the Department of Labor requires provision of some toilet facility. If, however, there is a convenient saloon nearby to which the men may go, it has been accepted as a sufficient provision. A solution of this problem would seem to lie in the provision of small urinals situated at frequent intervals. These might be of the simple curb type, of which there are 147 in Birmingham, England, or they might be placed on docks or street islands. In foreign cities they are of cast iron construction with white glaze slabs in the stalls and are heated by ranges. If regularly painted, they are a moderately cheap and hard-wearing convenience. [...]



The result from the general sanitary survey in New York, and from the bacteriological knowledge, would indicate there should be in all public comfort stations new and old, automatic flushes on urinals, and, if possible, toilets with swing doors both inside and out. Doors with handles and locks on doors should be abolished in public comfort stations. There could be no objection, however, to a lock of the swing type, located at the bottom of the door, which could be operated with the foot. [...]

It is admitted by all that the provision of towels, either free or by automatic device, at minimum expense, and a place to wash, are essential to the protection of health in these places. Most American and foreign cities have taken steps in these directions, the prices ranging usually from one to five cents for the various facilities. Occasionally they are given free. The wider extension of these provisions is to be urgently recommended to all American municipalities if the public decency as well as the public health is to be maintained.

—Donald B. Armstrong, M.D., Acting Director,  
Department of Social Welfare, New York  
Association for Improving the Condition of  
the Poor, "Public Comfort Stations: Their  
Economy and Sanitation," *The American City*  
[August 1914]

## 1917

Certain elements are necessary to make a public comfort station a success.

Many stations have been failures in the past because they lacked these elements. A public comfort station must be more than a toilet room; it must be a rest room or a waiting room with toilet accommodations. Such a building is shown in the ideal layout of the National Highways public comfort stations, which can be erected at transfer points on street railway lines and other points of assemblage or travel. The "American Plan" provides roadside stations along all highways where they pass thru cities, and public comfort stations at all points where crowds congregate or throngs pass by. The idea is to standardize the façade of the National Highways Association station, so that wherever a building of this design is seen, it will be recognized as a public comfort station. This building can be built of local materials, using anything from whole brick to cut granite, and still retain its distinctive outline.

—J.J. Cosgrove, Director, Public Comfort  
Station Bureau, "The Comfort Station as a  
Public Utility," *The American City* [1917]

## 1919

Municipal officials thruout this country must awake to the new problem confronting them. With the abolishment of the saloons, which have provided most of the comfort stations for the men of the American community, there comes a great need for the immediate and general installation of such accommodations. There should be no such delay as in the case of one comfort station in New York City, which was built to serve a district at least a mile square with many thousands of people. This station was fourteen months in building, and four months more elapsed before it was opened to the public.

—No author,  
"More Municipal Comfort Stations Needed,"  
*The American City* [1919]



*Objectionable Types:* Before taking up the description of approved types of comfort stations, a few words should be said about undesirable or objectionable types. The primitive, unscreened, or imperfectly shielded places, which may be seen in Latin-European countries at the public stairways, at corners of buildings, including even the cathedrals, at angles of bridges, and other places, hardly deserve even a passing remark. How any enlightened community can for a moment tolerate such abominations, and how it can permit the waste to be disposed of by letting it run across the sidewalk of the street gutter, must remain forever a matter beyond comprehension.

Objectionable types like the above and others have led some well-meaning people to conclude that such stations should be put "out of sight," and hence that underground stations are preferable. But I shall be able to demonstrate further on that there is absolutely no good reason why an aboveground station cannot be so designed as to be attractive, yet unobtrusive.

In some cities one finds damp, dark and ill-ventilated stations, containing only the crudest toilet facilities, some of them underground, others at street corners, and it is to such places as these that a recent report in the *Canadian Sanitary Engineer* must have referenced when it says: "The comfort station which shamefacedly hides itself underground, or in a corner, is left to be used only by the lower class of the population. City councils are apt to deny to such places a proper appropriation for maintenance. The riff-raff who form the majority of the patrons bring to the place the filthy habits of their lives, and thereby make the work of maintenance more difficult and more expensive. [...]"

*Care of Comfort Stations:* The thorough daily cleaning of the stations, made necessary by the carelessness of many of its users, is an important duty relegated to its attendants, who should be trustworthy and diligent servants selected for their position because of their fitness, and not on account of political affiliations. A neglected and ill-cleaned station is sure to fail in its purpose as a public utility. In the larger stations attendants should be on the constant lookout so that no loose or easily detached fittings are appropriated and that no loitering or defacing of walls takes place. To do this efficiently, attendants should be given police powers, as in the case of office and bank buildings. Attendants should therefore be uniformed, white suits being the best. Attendants should be polite and attentive.

—Dr. William Paul Gerhard, Consulting Engineer, New York City, "Public Comfort Stations," *The American City* [1921]

America has often been accused of gross deficiency in the extent to which sanitary necessities in public places have been provided. Some foreign countries have taken the lead in erecting public comfort stations in congested areas. In the United States the progress has been sporadic and limited, and usually without official impetus. As these stations are for the public's benefit, provision for their erection and maintenance should be regarded as a public function, supported by the funds of the state or municipality.

*Design of Station:* The design of the station should be such as to harmonize with its surroundings and meet the needs of the community. It should be constructed in a neat and substantial manner in accordance



with recognized standards and practices. The designer should bear in mind that four walls, a roof and a door do not constitute a comfort station or rest room. Its location, arrangement, and sanitary appliances are all-important factors in insuring the safety, comfort, and sanitation, which the visitor expects and demands.

*Entrance Screens:* The entrances to the toilet rooms should be separated by screens or other means, and wherever possible, should be at least 20 feet apart or otherwise located with due regard to privacy for users.

*Uniform Sign Required:* Every public comfort station should have displayed conspicuously the standard public comfort station sign. There should be placed marks indicating women's and men's entrances. The uniform sign should be placed at other points best adapted for guiding the public.

*Size:* Every public comfort station should have at least 10 square feet of floor area and at least 100 cubic feet of air space for each water-closet and each urinal, together with adequate waiting-room area.

*Walls and Ceilings:* The walls and ceilings should be completely covered with smooth cement or gypsum plaster, glazed brick or tile, galvanized or enameled metal, or other smooth, non-absorbent material. In the less-frequented or inexpensive stations, wood may be used if well covered with two coats of body paint and one coat of enamel paint or spar varnish. But wood should not be used for separating walls or partitions which separate a toilet room from any room used by the opposite sex. All such partitions should be nearly as sound-proof as possible.

*Partitions Between Fixtures:* Adjoining water-closets should be separated by partitions. For privacy, individual urinals should be provided with a partition at each end and at the back where individual urinals are arranged in batteries, a partition should be placed at each end and at the back of the battery. A space of 6-12 inches is required between the floor and the bottom of the partition. The top partition should be from 5½ to 6 feet above the floor. Doors of the same height as required for partitions, should be installed for water-closet compartments.

*When Open for Use:* Every public comfort station should be open for use from sunrise to 10 pm, unless otherwise decreed. On occasions such as the assembling of large groups of people, the local authorities should designate a later hour of closing.

*Cleanliness:* Every public comfort station and all its parts, including walls, floors, and ceiling, and all fixtures, should be kept clean, efficient, and in good repair.

*Care of Comfort Stations:* The proper authorities should assign the care and maintenance of public comfort stations to responsible persons such as the custodian of the municipal building or police-officer. Governing bodies should vest attendants with full authority over the property and maintenance of stations and rest rooms, and furnish them with detailed instructions for the proper fulfillment of their duties.

*Indecent Pictures and Writing:* Strict rules against defacements should be adopted for public comfort stations, and a public notice containing a penalty for violations should be posted in every station."

—Frank R. King, State Plumbing and Domestic Sanitary Engineer, Wisconsin State Board of Health, "Public Comfort Stations," pamphlet [1925]



1938

*"Simple, Tasteful, Inexpensive:* The kind of building I have in mind is one of simple design. It is in perfect taste, I am tempted to say dignified, although in this modern age and generation, the word is meaningless. Indeed, this building is not so much dignified, as it is attractive, modern. Whatever dignity it may have will arise from the fact that it was built and is owned and supervised by the municipality, which is to say all the people of the community.

The building that I visualize is a dual building. Except for the entrance door labeled respectively MEN and WOMEN, there is no connection whatever between the two wings, which are the men's and the women's toilets. And the central building, which is a restaurant, serving beverages, sandwiches and other simple refreshments.

This type of utility may be classed with the municipal swimming pool, which is steadily growing in public favor and in certain communities serves as a social center in summer. The City Rest House need not become a social center, but it will come to be accepted as a social asset to any town. The enlightened public attitude which establishes it is in keeping with these forward times.

—Royal S. Copeland, M.D., United States Senator, New York, "The City Rest House: Solving the Problem of Public Comfort Stations," pamphlet [1938]

1947

*A.A.A. Condemns Insanitary Rest Rooms:* Sanitary conditions in many of the comfort stations available to the motoring public are enough "to make Neanderthal man shudder and rush for fresh air," it was charged last month by the American Automobile Association, in a protest sent to oil Company executives, oil and gasoline dealer associations, and city and state health authorities all over the country.

The statement termed the general situation little short of a national disgrace, and a positive health menace to the millions of highway users. It called for an immediate house-cleaning by service station owners, managers, restaurateurs, and others, who provide such facilities for the traveling public.

"Reports from all over the country," the protest said, "indicate that public indignation is growing over the increasing number of littered, spattered, dank, and ill-smelling rooms that are provided for the 'convenience' of tourists. These 'discomfort' stations and 'unrest' rooms frequently have stopped up plumbing, broken water faucets, dirt-encrusted wash bowls, soap-less dispensers, and a total lack of paper towels and tissue, and some of them are infested with all manner of crawling and winged creatures.

While admitting that some of the owners and some of the oil companies make continuing efforts to maintain clean, sanitary establishments, the A.A.A. called on the others to take immediate recourse in a little initiative, backed up by soap and water, paint, disinfectant, and "some elbow grease, regularly and vigorously applied.

—No author, *The American City* [1947]

1949

Dingy and drab, with obsolete fixtures in a bad state of repair, the average so-called "rest room" in the typical public building leaves much to be desired and is, indeed, a far cry from the much-vaunted American standard of sanitation.



Add to it the conditions created by bad lighting and ventilation, and it is easy to imagine the impression that a visit to the typical public-building rest room leaves in the minds of the average citizen, taxpayer and voter about standards of efficiency, cleanliness, competence, and the quality of overall administration maintained by the offending local government involved. If it can't keep its own "house" in order, the citizen may think, how can it be expected to look after my affairs and those of my neighbors?

—No author, "Re-Plumb Those Rest Rooms,"  
*Civil Engineer* [1949]

1959

Two years ago when the Council appointed me park superintendent, I discovered that the job carried with it the maintenance of a number of ancient public rest rooms, mostly of the frame type, all difficult to maintain both from a structural and a sanitary standpoint. The public lost no time in calling these dilapidated rest rooms to my attention. So in response to public demand and also because of my personal dislike of the repugnant structures, I was successful in persuading the City Council to allot funds to rebuild three of them. We plan replacing two more during the coming year.

*New Design:* After considerable personal study and investigation on how others have solved this same rather sensitive problem, I developed a design that is inexpensive, appears attractive and requires little maintenance. Most of the work can be done by park employees. The block work appeared rough to an experienced mason, but a coat of paint helped to conceal any irregularities.

We started our work early in October of 1957, as soon as the peak labor season was past. The men first excavated trenches and placed concrete footings. They then laid three courses of concrete blocks and pumice blocks to the eaves. They installed steel window sashes and the lighting and then supplied the roof. Inside we supplied Crane Santon #3-301-T rest room fixtures with #110 FY V Royal Sloan flush valves. We also placed panels, doors and other necessary fixtures and awaited spring for the opportunity to paint.

Finally, when warmer weather arrived, we painted the buildings inside and out, using first a masonry primer and filler. We then painted the interior with Glidden Spread Satin, a washable masonry paint that permits one to remove even lipstick, crayon and most other foreign materials without too much difficulty. We painted the exterior with Spread Glide-On, alternating between Sunshine Yellow and Lawn Green to provide variation in the different rest rooms.

Along with emphasis on good construction, we also have emphasized regular and thorough maintenance and sanitation.

—G.S. Bowen, Superintendent of Parks,  
Boise, Idaho, "Rebuilding Public  
Restrooms," *The American City* [1959]

1970

The past decade has witnessed the construction of new, functional, cement-block facilities. Most of these structures are located along the expressways, but a number are appearing in the parks and playgrounds of our cities. These relief stations may be viewed as an expression of the current interest in urban planning; some replace buildings no longer fit for use; others are located on the newly created urban playgrounds; and the bulk accompany the nation's answer to problems of mass transportation. Most of the newly built restrooms are isolated structures with ready access to the roads ...

—Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: A Study  
of Homosexual Encounters in Public Places*  
[London: Duckworth, 1970]







