

HOW TO NOT BE AFRAID TO PEE

TODAY'S shame

WHAT IS
SHAME?

GAMES, FUN
& MORE

SPECIAL EDITION : TOILETS

WE'LL
TELL YOU
WHERE
YOUR
SHAME
COMES
FROM

MONTHLY SCOOP

PUTIN AND KIM
JONG-UN'S TOILETS



WE'RE GOING BACK
TO THE PAST! TO MEET
WITH RUTH BARCAN



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EDITORS' NOTE

In this issue, we tackle a topic more daring and personal than ever before: breaking down the silence on those awkward moments we all face when nature calls.

From hushed conversations with friends to sharing survival strategies, each of us has crafted unique rituals to navigate these everyday challenges. Intrigued by our collective experiences, we embark on a deeper exploration to uncover and share our discoveries with you.

One of our team members dedicated countless hours to literature and research, unravelling the origins of the shame associated with bodily functions.

We journeyed back in time, over coffee with Ruth Barcan, to philosophise on fear, anxiety, and the societal taboos surrounding public restrooms.

You'll also gain insight into the demanding work of managing the excretions of a dictator – proving that no matter how though your job may be, someone's always dealing with something more challenging.

It's clear, there's much to discuss. We're not alone in these feelings of embarrassment, and neither are you. Join us as we dismantle the stigma surrounding our most private moments. Together, let's break down these walls!*

Dearly,
Your editors

*For the writing of this magazine, we based us on ethnofiction, a subfield of ethnography that employs storytelling and first-person autobiography to communicate ethnological truths. We did not actually meet with Ruth Barcan, but based us on a article she wrote after attending the conference "Outing the Water Closet, Sex, Gender, and the Public Toilet".

A brief history on shame

When I heard that this month's issue would be all about toilets, I was thrilled. Who knew our little boxes of embarrassing moments could be so fascinating? From those too-loud, and too-smelly farts to the stubborn flushes and lingering sounds and smells, we've all been there. It's intriguing, though – why do we treat our basic human functions with such secrecy and shame?

I quickly found answers when I stumbled upon the work of German-British sociologist Norbert Elias who shed light on this mystery in his two-volume, "**The Civilizing Process**" in 1938. Elias delved into history, tracing our social norms and behaviours from the Middle Ages to modern times. His investigation into table manners of the mediaeval upper class revealed a world where nose-picking and dozing off at the dinner table were perfectly acceptable. Imagine that! (Elias et al. 1997)

Back then, mediaeval cities were far from the sanitised environments we know today. Human excrement was a common sight on the streets, and even royalty wasn't immune to peculiar habits – kings would use special thrones with holes, doing their business while conducting affairs of state. Can you imagine King Charles inviting you for tea on his toilet throne? Unthinkable!

Elias' point is clear: our feelings of shame around bodily functions are not rooted in rationality and natural instinct but have evolved with our ever-changing concept of 'civilisation'. The bourgeoisie, in their quest to distinguish themselves from others, began adopting refined behaviours, turning what was once normal into something vulgar and shameful. This shift demanded a greater sense of self-control and a sharper awareness of manners, both in oneself and in others. No more nodding off at the table...

Let's talk about toilets again. Before urbanisation (talking mainly about Western countries), people in rural areas relieved themselves openly whenever needed and waste was often thrown out of windows. As cities grew and populations grew denser, these habits became dangerous to public health. Engineers introduced sewage systems and new law penalised open defecation, leading to what German Writer Jacob Blume calls the "**domestication of shit**" (Blume 2002). (Richter 2020) Bold choice of words, but fitting!

A brief history on shame

This privatisation of bodily functions and the threat of punishment for misconduct, associated human waste with danger and dirtiness, embedding shame and embarrassment into our societal norms. Today, our sparkling clean cities stand in stark contrast to our past. Studies even show that your kitchen sink and sponge harbour more bacteria than your own toilet. (Barcan 2010) So, why the lingering shame?

Our embarrassment isn't about the concern for hygiene in order to stay safe anymore; it has become a social construct that is . Civilisation is a fluid concept – what's vulgar today might be normal tomorrow. Maybe it's time to rethink our toilet taboos. Imagine a future where we're no longer scared of the sounds, smells and existence of our own bodies and their function.

What will the future think of our customs? What will 'civilised' mean to them? One thing is certain: nothing is set in stone. So next time you feel a bit embarrassed in the bathroom, just remember – it is just in your head and your bodily functions are natural and valid. As Dominique Laporte would say: "**All we can hope to do is remove a few masks with the roar of our laughter, laugh them off the figures of power.**" (Laporte 2002)

A CHAT WITH RUTH BARCAN

Arranging this interview was quite a challenge.. We absolutely wanted to meet with the remarkable US philosopher Ruth Barcan who sadly passed away in 2012 at the impressive age of 91. This presented us with a bit of a timeline issue... Luckily, we managed to get in touch with the legendary Doc Brown from Back to the Future. He generously allowed us to use his DeLorean Time Machine, enabling us to travel back to 3rd November 2007. On that day, Harvey Molotch of New York University and the Center of Architecture had organised a conference on the topic of public toilets, and Ruth Barcan was one of the participants. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the event, we found a moment to enjoy a coffee with Ruth, leading to a delightful and enlightening conversation.



Hello Ruth, it's such an honour to meet you today! We've had quite a journey to get here, but we're thrilled to have made it in time. We're at the conference "**Outing the Water Closet, Sex, Gender, and the Public Toilet**", which aims to bring together experts in sex, gender, and space along with architects, designers, planners and activists. The goal is to rethink and reshape public restrooms.

Being two architecture students very passionate about intimate spaces and specifically toilets, we're really excited to discuss this topic with you. We believe, as Deborah Fausch said, that architecture is "**an art which directly engages the body**". So "**it must deal in concrete [reality] [...] with often abstract or hidden social and cultural logics**", which become very apparent when we look closely at public toilets.

Hi there! It's great to meet you both. Even though architecture and design aren't my usual field of work, public toilets have always intrigued me. "**There is probably no single space that will meet the often conflicting needs of different social groups, since there is no easy conformity either in principle or in concrete about what will make all people feel comfortable and safe. For this reason, public toilets are inevitably contested spaces.**"



Absolutely, that's something we've come to understand as well. Designing a single space that meets all the different needs of people is almost impossible when you consider the range of variety of needs and practices.

First, there are the basic bodily functions everyone shares: urination, excretion, and sometimes even vomiting. Already here, practices vary: some people sit, others stand, and some squat. Then there's menstruation, a function not shared by all humans. People with medical conditions have very different needs, like changing a colostomy bag, for instance.

Beyond these fundamental needs, we've observed other practices that play a significant role in public toilets but are not linked to the direct bodily functions. Some people use them for sex, masturbation, or drug use. Others use the space for washing, changing clothes, or doing their makeup and hair. Unhoused people might use the space as shelter. As you can see, the list of needs and uses is extensive...



Most certainly. Toilets "**away from home**", as The British Toilet Association calls them, ('The BTA – British Toilet Association', n.d.) are "**multiple spaces, in the sense that they house many needs and practices**". What's particularly fascinating about these "**away from home**" toilets, is that they become "**an encounter [...] with the ghosts and shadows of the mostly unseen users who have preceded us and who will take our place**".

Being in a public toilet can feel strange and uncomfortable because of "**the ghosts and shadows**" of the people who used it before us. Their presence is sensed through everything inside, with objects that "**serve as proxies for the unknown others**". **Sharing such an intimate and private space with strangers triggers "undefined fears and anxieties"**. While hygiene is often mentioned as the main concern, we suspect that, deep down, these fears stem from something else that we haven't fully figured out yet.



You're absolutely right to question that. While hygiene is an important factor, it's not the main source of anxiety about public toilets. Cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas said "**dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about diseases account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order.**" (Douglas 1984) So, the fear of dirt and contamination is more about social conditioning than a rational instinct.

Sociologist Norbert Elias looked into the history of socialisation and found that "**the progress of modernity involved an increase in shame, repugnance, and embarrassment**". Even though "**Westerners are undoubtedly more liberal in our social and sexual mores than we were a century ago, and more knowledgeable about the body, it is doubtful that we are more comfortable with our bodies than medieval people were**".

Today, our "**consumer culture actively fuels our disgust at any body that is not tight, taut, hairless, and odourless – in short, sealed off.**" And this sealed-off body needs "**sealed-off spaces in which to unloose itself**".

It's striking how we've become estranged from our own bodily functions, relegating to hidden spaces. Everything is neatly categorized, leading to rigid separations of functions and bodies, which in turn reinforce divisions based on class, gender, race, and more.

Architect Joel Sanders pointed out that "**through the erection of partitions that divide spaces, architecture colludes in creating and upholding prevailing social hierarchies and distinctions**". This underscores the importance of being mindful of these categorisations to avoid perpetuating unnecessary social segregations.



Absolutely. It seems we've accepted a "**naturalization of the social division of people**" that's so deeply ingrained in today's society that it's not questioned anymore. Yet, these divisions are more nuanced than meets the eye.

Take men's toilets, for example. Inside, you'll find a juxtaposition of urinals and stalls, representing the contrast between "**liquid (urine) and solid (faeces) or [...] penis and buttocks**". This mapping of public and private spaces "**onto the body and its functions**", creates "**a complex theatrical dialogue between the open and the closed, the seen and the unseen, the permissible and the forbidden**".

For once, women's toilets are more inclusive, with only stalls available.

When it comes to women's toilets, the situation is a bit different. Despite the seemingly more inclusive stall setup, they still reflect deeper societal pressure. Even in the simple act of using the restroom, women face the challenge of maintaining appearances and "**bodily separateness from each other**".

"The cubicle arrangement is at once a welcome relief from the world of appearances and an extension of it, a precious bit of solitude, a time-wasting imposition, a protection from shame, and a reinforcer of modesty or shame." It's a paradoxical situation.

Outside the stalls, the unspoken pressure of having to fresh oneself up and look presentable reigns. Observing each other further reinforces the social expectations that women have of their appearance.

This reminds us of sociologist Erving Goffman, who views our daily interactions as social performances. According to "**dramaturgical principles**" (Gershenson and Penner 2009), spaces are divided into a front stage and a backstage. In the context of toilets, the stall is backstage, while the open area with sinks and mirrors becomes a stage for "**interpersonal rituals**". (Cahill et al., n.d.) It's quite complex...

But let's get back to the fear of contamination. We've noticed that many people develop "**bodily rituals to ward off the contamination they associate with touch**" when using public toilets. Whether it's using your elbows, feet, or backs to open doors, placing toilet paper on the seat, squatting, or even holding their nose - why do you think these practices have become so common?

Absolutely, it's fascinating how our fears often stem more from the fear of the unknown than from actual germs. In today's world, we seem to suffer from a sort of "**cultural amnesia**", forgetting that things could have been different once.

Norbert Elias pointed out that "**new social values produce new psychic structures and bodily responses and ultimately new rational, 'scientific' justifications**". This means that anything diverging from our familiar customs, norms, and beliefs is often deemed "**uncivilised**".

Interestingly, everyday items like phones, door handles, and even kitchen sponges harbour far more bacteria than toilets. Yet, toilets remain a focal point of our greatest fears. In my view, the root of this fear is "**less a rationally grounded fear of infection than a fear of the touch of the stranger, the Other who is so like us as to share our bodily shape and our bodily needs but who is unknown to us and therefore potentially contaminating**". We all sense the "**ghosts and shadows**" of others when sitting on a "**prewarmed seat**".



Another significant aspect when using a toilet is smell. Countless products have been developed to conceal every possible trace of bodily odour. Quantities of chemical products that “replace the smells of bodily interiors with the supposedly reassuring smells of science, sterility, neutrality.”

Similarly, technologies and concealment practices are set in place to mask the sound of public toilets. We all know the example of Japanese toilets, where once you lock the door, music starts playing so that no one can hear the sound of your most intimate doings.

Indeed, we’re back to the idea of the perfect, sealed-off body where no trace of its function can be left behind. Researcher Alan Hyde observed that “**every step in the history of public health measures for the encouragement of personal hygiene, the spread of bathing and eradication of filth, is always and necessarily a form of political hegemony.**”

Those who challenge our cultural norms in terms of gender, sexuality, race and class are often seen “**as a form of cultural waste – or, if that is putting it too strongly, as a form of troubling category whose presence we would rather conceal**”, just as our bodily waste.



This rise in “**political hegemony**” means individuals have more and more responsibilities to manage their bodies to fit in today’s norms. For example, odours that “**might have gone unnoticed**”, before are now “**tied to the individual, who is understood as able and obliged to manage their own body odour**”.

As architects, we dream of “**a world in which public toilets could be at once more pleasing to the senses, more practical, and more equal**”, providing space for every body, need, and practice. But realistically, expecting one small space to meet all these demands is too much. It’s like putting the toilet through an existential crisis!



I agree, it would be impossible. “**After all, division, separations, and disavowals are all mechanisms that make people feel safe**”. But remember, “**boundaries that make us feel safe run in different directions according to our ethnicity, age, religion, sexuality, and personality**”.

“**Perhaps, then, one answer for designers is that wherever possible, different sorts of spaces might be made available, allowing people some degree of choice in the matter of how they perform intimate acts in public**”.

THIS MONTH'S SCOOP: DICTATORS AND TOILETS

Hold onto your hats, folks! We’ve got the wildest, jaw-dropping scoop of the month! According to the French news magazine Paris Match, there’s a rather peculiar rumour floating around: Vladimir Putin’s bodyguards, members of the Russian president’s Federal Protection Service (FPS), have a rather unique responsibility when accompanying him abroad. Their top-secret mission? Safeguarding Putin’s poop. Yes, you read that right. Putin’s poop is apparently too precious to be left behind!

Reportedly, these elite agents are tasked with collecting the presidential waste in special packets, which are placed in dedicated briefcases for safe return to Russia. This bizarre ritual was observed during Putin’s visit to France in May 2017 and his trip to Saudi Arabia in 2019. Talk about a crappy job!

But, why can’t the dictator’s waste be flushed away like everyone else’s? According to The Guardian, it’s supposedly meant to prevent foreign powers from gathering information about the Russian leader’s health. Indeed, excrement has been used for espionage before. British military expert Tony Geraghty claims that during the Cold War, British spies collected soiled toilet paper used by Soviet troops in East Germany for intelligence purposes. The BBC reports that Stalin’s secret police supposedly installed a special toilet for Mao Zedong during his 1949 visit to Moscow, designed to collect rather than flush. (Giordano 2022; ‘Putin’s Obsession: Travelling with His Own Toilet and Having His Bodyguards Pick up His Excrement’ 2022; ‘Poutine malade : rumeur ou tumeur ?’ 2022)

With swirling rumours about Putin’s health, given he’s now 71 years old and a dubious history, it’s no wonder the Russian leader is paranoid about his excrement. In the world of powerful men, any sign of weakness is a big no-go, and Putin appears to be a man that does not want to let go of his power anytime soon.

But don’t be fooled – Putin is not the only dictator obsessed with his poop. Kim Jong Un shares the same phobia. When travelling, he is accompanied by a special transport plane carrying food, a bullet-proof limousine, and – you guessed it, a portable toilet. Quite a light traveller really.

Lee Yun-keol, who worked in a North Korean Guard Command unit before defecting to South Korea in 2005, spilled the beans to the Washington Post in 2018: “Rather than using a public restroom, the leader of North Korea has a personal toilet that follows him around when he travels”. This isn’t just for international trips though, when Kim’s out and about inspecting military bases and state-run factories, his private toilet is always close by. According to the South Korean news agency DainlyKN, Kim’s convoy includes a customised bathroom. “The restrooms are not only in Kim Jong Un’s personal train but also in whatever small or midsize cars he travels in and even in special vehicles designed for mountainous terrain or snow” a source familiar with Kim’s escort command told DailyNK in 2015. And don’t even think about using Kim’s personal facilities – anyone daring enough to try would face severe punishment, even death. Talk about a deadly throne! (Lee 2015; Fifield 2018; Capatides 2018)

North Korea even has some fantastical claims. Apparently, Kim Jong II had magical powers which meant he didn’t need to use the toilet at all. With such a legendary lineage, it’s no wonder Kim’s toilet facilities are treated with utmost secrecy and care. (Fenton 2015)

So there you have it, folks. The world of dictators is full of secrets, but who knew their bathroom habits would be one of them? Stay tuned for more jaw-dropping revelations!

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