Against the Grain

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Back Talk — Speaking of Bathrooms?

Jim O'Donnell

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Back Talk — Speaking of Bathrooms?

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

Many people have been asking me what we're focusing on most in the complete gut-and-reno of our largest ASU Library building, the 1966 **Hayden Library**. The project has been going on for about three years since conception, so the answer to that question changes. We're in the home stretch, looking to a full opening in January 2020, so we're getting to some very specific issues. Here's one I've never heard discussed in a plenary session at **ARL** meetings or even at a **Charleston Conference**: bathrooms.

Bathrooms? Yes, yes. Why should librarians care?

Two reasons: (1) If we're going to have a building that is genuinely homelike and welcoming for all staff and users, then doing the things it takes to make that building as comfortable as home is important. (2) Unfortunately, nobody becomes famous as an architect for designing bathrooms, and a good many contractors have made their budget by doing a little "value engineering" when it comes to these functional rooms.

(I do exaggerate about "nobody." The mayor of Suwon Korea, on the occasion of the **2007 World Toilet Association** meetings in Korea, built himself a special house. See photo. No comment.)

The underlying issue is of great importance around the world, of course. Inadequate public sanitation is at least a serious health hazard, but it's important in other ways. A wonderful book (*Golden Arches East* by **James Watson**) records what happened when anthropologists were dispatched to East and Southeast Asian cities to see how **McDonalds**, which tries to be the same everywhere to all peoples, adapted to different cultures. One of their striking results was to observe that

in several countries, **Mickey Dee** turned out to be the place where middle class and upper middle class ladies of a certain age gathered in the afternoon to chat with their friends. Why? **Mickey Dee** believes in really clean facilities — and people who had hitherto been hindered in spending time out of their homes in public places by concern for finding a decent restroom had decided that **Mickey Dee** was just the place. That's empowerment!

And we all know that there are gender differences in patterns of bathroom use. At intermission at concerts or halftime at the football game, you'll find lines outside one restroom and not the other. Building codes are beginning to recognize this disparity and mandate appropriately differential facilities based on average time of use, but we also all know that parity is still an ideal on the horizon in too many places.

So, early on in the renovation planning process, I began to call myself "the one who's obsessed about bathrooms." At first, they thought I was joking, until the tense meeting when we sent the designers back to the drawing board to count just how many porcelain receptacles would be in each room and to make sure there was an advantage on one side. They had resisted for a perfectly nonsensical reason. "Since we're exceeding the code requirement for bathroom stalls overall, it's ok that we have the same number for both genders, because we're sure there will be enough for every-

body." Hear that? As long as we give each gender enough, it's ok to give one gender plenty of extra facilities.

If you look back over the last couple of paragraphs, you'll see that I'm not specifying which gender I might be talking about. But does anyone reading this column have any

doubt which is which and what I'm saying? And you're probably pretty sure you can tell which other gender is more involved in the design and construction decisions.

So I'm going to list things to think about when you start looking at your library bathrooms. First, let me praise my colleague **Terry Cranmer** at ASU, facilities manager at the huge **Frank Lloyd Wright**-designed **Gammage Auditorium**. Quite a place, but until recently all it had was several pairs of tiny bathrooms in each floor and with more porcelain in the men's room per floor than in the women's room. **Terry** is a force of nature, though, and she successfully got plans made and executed for an additional large, bright, and brilliantly-designed women's room on the main level. I learned a lot from talking to her.

OK, the list:

1. The count of toilets for women should exceed the combined total of toilets/urinals for men.
2. There should also be any-gender restrooms on every floor. Our old complex had exactly two any-gender one-seaters spread over five floors. The new tower of five floors will have larger restrooms on the busiest floors plus two any-gender restrooms on each floor. In addition, on the busiest floor, we are fitting out two wellness rooms intended to provide privacy and comfort for people with special needs: nursing mothers, insulin-dependent diabetics, or folks who bike to work in Arizona heat and need a place to freshen up. (There is also an ablution room convenient to our dedicated prayer/meditation room.)
3. We're being less successful with matching sinks and counters and I'm still fighting that one, but the principle should be that counters are for putting things on and not simply as a place for water to puddle because the sinks are carelessly designed to splatter water on them. (There's a gender issue here too, in a world where one gender carries around more nice bags than another.)
4. Do not allow them to install hand-dryer-only bathrooms. Ever tried washing your face and drying it with a hand dryer? Or using a wall-mounted hand dryer to mop up the water on a sink counter six feet away? Fight to keep paper in the bathrooms.
5. Be aware of access and egress and make it easy for people to leave the restroom with clean hands, without touching drippy door handles.
6. Design the various stalls and facilities to maximize privacy — good

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NUMBER OF STAFF AND RESPONSIBILITIES: The library is staffed by 26 professional librarians and approximately 25 library staff.

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WHAT EXCITES OR FRIGHTENS YOU ABOUT THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? Our university is in a period of rapid growth (more students, more fundraising, more administrators, more programs). We can expect there will be difficult changes and growing pains in the next five years.

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fitting doors, unbreakable locks (and hooks to hang things on and shelves to put things on). This is emphatically an all-gender issue and often a place where nickels are unwisely saved.

7. Fight and win the battle for maintenance priority. When a toilet goes bad, don't let them bag it in plastic and leave it for a month — this happens — on the pretext that if there are several other toilets in the same room, it should be ok. Nobody takes that approach to toilets in their home, right?

There's a start. More ideas? I'd love to hear them. But there's one more important point.

We found out that on our campus, the libraries had been categorized as "tier 2" housekeeping facilities, like office and admin buildings. We believe we should be "tier 1" — like student housing. The difference? How often cleaners come around, how carefully they cover for folks who call out sick, and how much they respect the late or round-the-clock hours that we observe. We had a real mess this spring when, just at the height of finals week, a key housekeeper called out sick two days running. Facilities sent around a "porter" to do a quick spiff and trash emptying in the restrooms and let the rest of the building go. Doing that at the height of finals week? Ugh, ick, I won't describe it. Think food trash.

The overall message: fight for your users. If they find that you're providing clean, comfortable, safe, reliable restrooms, they'll spend more time in your building: and students who spend more time in the library do better in their work — it's as simple as that. Good restrooms make for good students who get good grades. And student success is our day job. 🍀