

# Public toilets, accessibility, and human rights:

## A Winnipeg pop-up campaign

By Rae St. Clair Bridgman and Wins Bridgman



### SUMMARY

To heighten public awareness about the need for accessible public washrooms, a unique campaign was mounted that included a public art project pop-up public toilets, and a linked social incubator for at-risk youth. Framed by a community-based model of consultation, key partnerships, and innovative design clarified long-term infrastructure investment requirements.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans le but de sensibiliser le public au besoin de toilettes publiques accessibles, une nouvelle campagne a vu le jour pour installer des toilettes portatives agrémentées d'art public, et aussi pour mettre sur pied un incubateur social pour les jeunes à risques. Encadré par un processus de consultation de la collectivité, des partenariats productifs et un design innovant ont servi à préciser les besoins à long terme en investissement dans l'infrastructure.

In 2010, Rae Bridgman published an article in *Plan Canada* that reported on activist efforts by BridgmanCollaborative Architecture over a two-year period, urging Winnipeg city officials to provide more public toilets downtown. Broadening the appeal to municipalities across the country to be more “civil” and look for ways to provide public toilets for everyone in need, she wrote: “Winnipeg is not alone in trying to come to grips with the serious public sanitation issues that cross regulatory, disciplinary, and professional boundaries. Many considerations must be met, including land use planning and the safe disposal of human waste, human rights and dignity, public health and the transmission of disease, user-friendliness, accessibility, gender issues, cultural appropriateness, as well as safety concerns and the city’s image.”<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward to snapshots of what’s happening almost decade later... the rally for public toilets across the country continues. Examples of recently-published articles include “Oh the places you’ll go! Public toilets return to Montreal”<sup>2</sup> and “When you gotta go, and there’s not a public

toilet in sight.”<sup>3</sup> They welcome the gradual return of public toilets for the first time in half a century, even while lamenting the infuriatingly slow pace of that return.

The humble public toilet has become, in the words of one journalist, “the next frontier for human rights.”<sup>4</sup> Driving the urgency to explore that public realm frontier are the needs of, among others, residents living on the streets, construction workers and others who work outside, people with disabilities, parents with young children, the elderly, religious groups, as well as advocates for transgender rights. A group that has become more visible recently is persons with hidden mobility disabilities (represented by the Hidden Mobility Disabilities Alliance and its research), for whom “distance to be walked” is a primary barrier to community participation.<sup>5</sup> The work of this group joins the chorus of many others also calling for dignity, accessibility, and inclusivity for all.<sup>6</sup>

Illustrations of initiatives underway across Canada include the following: Montreal is poised to spend \$3 million on 12 free-standing public toilets sprinkled throughout the downtown, with three due



to be unveiled the summer of 2018.<sup>7</sup> Ottawa features a vocal *GottaGo!* Campaign Ottawa ([www.ottawapublictoilets.ca](http://www.ottawapublictoilets.ca)), which has been lobbying for an effective network of safe, clean, accessible, easy-to-find, all-season toilets for several years. Ottawa also has an app for locating open public toilets ([www.ottpee.ca](http://www.ottpee.ca)). Edmonton issued a survey in 2017 requesting public input on the degree of need for public washrooms in central parts of the city, and discussions are ongoing. As of 2017, Toronto has apparently promised to install 20 public toilets, and three are up and running; while Vancouver has nine self-cleaning public toilets, plus 94 more public facilities in city parks.<sup>8</sup> On the agenda for discussion in Halifax is making municipal washrooms universally accessible.

### BACK IN WINNIPEG – GETTING STARTED WITH A PUBLIC ART PROJECT

Although many members of the public and politicians in Winnipeg recognize how public toilets contribute to the liveability and amenities within cities generally, the City of Winnipeg does not currently provide a policy framework or budget for the issue. This project by BridgmanCollaborative Architecture together with Jason Syvixay (formerly Managing Director of Downtown Winnipeg BIZ) arose from their mutual interest in addressing the crucial need for public toilets in Winnipeg.

In order to raise awareness of the need for public toilets, the project began with creating visuals to capture the public's imagination. On 16 December 2017, some 50 people responded to the following media call of *Toiletless Winnipeg No More* and gathered at 678 Main Street (the Winnipeg office of BridgmanCollaborative Architecture):

Toiletless Winnipeg No More is all about raising awareness about how important public toilets are for anyone in Winnipeg regardless of age, gender, ability, cultural background, wealth, and whether you are a visitor, out at night, or exploring the City on an early week-end morning. Your picture may be used, with your permission, as part of an art project to represent your solidarity with the needs of all Winnipeggers and visitors.

Each person filled out a questionnaire that asked:

- When did you need a public toilet?
- What qualities do you need in public toilets?
- What ways can we represent solidarity with other people who need to use a public toilet?



Each person was photographed with legs crossed, a position that expresses in a universal language both need and vulnerability. Selected images and direct quotes were mounted on 12 downtown bus-stop shelters for the 2018 summer, with the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ funding printing costs and securing bus shelter placements. The surrounding cityscape magnified the images.

Grant Mitchell states "Like over 100,000 Canadians, I have Colitis, I need public toilets here and now." His poster was situated near the corner of Portage and Main, a place he had worked much of his life,

Michael Redhead Champagne's poster stands near the Upper Fort Garry National Historic Site in downtown Winnipeg (which has no public washroom). He states "We need to find ways to support our relatives who may be living on the street."



Jenna Wirch says – as her poster image beckons up toward the dome of the historic A.A. Heaps Building dome – “ ‘Cause sh\*t happens.” (As a matter of note, Abraham Albert Heaps was an outspoken advocate for Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi German.⁹)

Elaine Bishop, whose poster stands across the street from the downtown mall at Portage Place, states: “It’s a health issue. It’s a human rights and dignity issue. It’s a women’s issue.” This bus shelter poster was adjacent to multi-stall minimally supervised “public” private sector washrooms, which are strained by the large number of users.

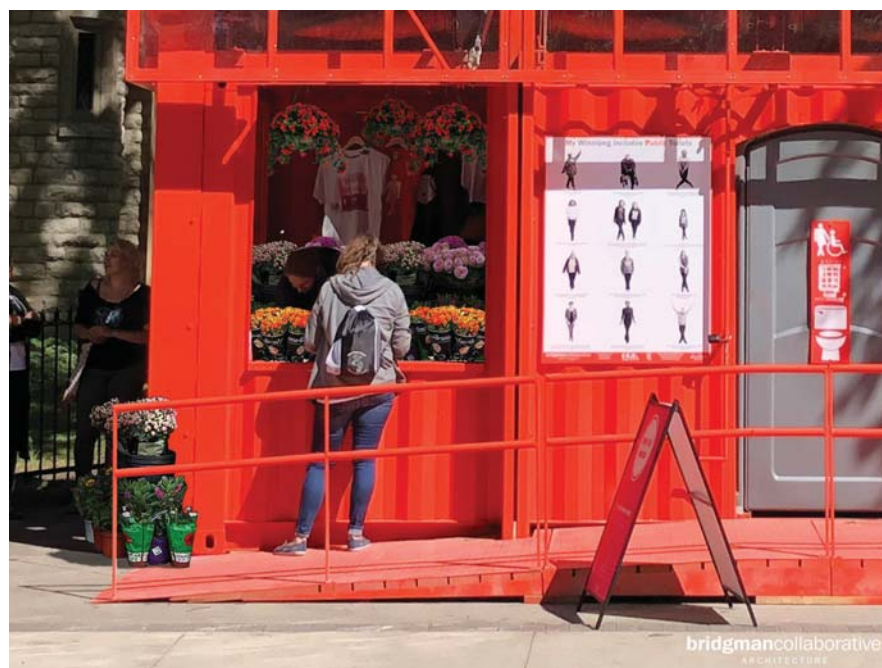
Nyree Bridgman says, “My mom says great cities have great public toilets.”

### POP-UP WINNIPEG PUBLIC TOILET

The Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet initiative was a summer 2018 Downtown Winnipeg BIZ/BridgmanCollaborative Architecture/Siloam Mission venture, answering the need for accessible (in the most general sense of that word) public washrooms in Winnipeg’s downtown core. The initiative aimed to lead by example through providing a clean, secure, well-maintained, and public washroom facility that was monitored. The facility was designed to be temporary and moved every few weeks to various downtown locations over the summer. The goal was to encourage publicity for future sponsored permanent toilets, through consciousness-raising, in order to gain general public support.

Building on various models of public toilets in downtown locations across Canada, the Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet pilot model included five elements:

1. **Youth engagement:** Through partnerships with the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ and Siloam Mission – a non-profit Winnipeg charity – the Pop-Up featured a social incubator or social enterprise for at-risk youth. These youth were referred to as Watch Ambassadors for the kiosk and the public toilets. The kiosk sold water, snacks, T-shirts, bags, artwork, and newspapers, but could also have been extended into another business (e.g., a florist shop). Proceeds went to Siloam Mission.
2. **Safety and oversight:** Safety and oversight of the maintenance occurred through the presence of the two Watch Ambassadors, the support of a third party that leased the portable toilets installed within the Pop-up Winnipeg Public Toilet, as well



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as regular site visits from the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ Watch Ambassador Team. The BIZ also provided other services to ensure the success of the Pop-Up, such as the Enviro Clean Team and CHAT social workers on site daily to engage with community members.

3. **Funding:** Pop-Up Winnipeg was funded by the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ at a cost of approximately \$100,000, which included the funding for Siloam Mission, architectural design fees, construction costs, and moving charges. The interest was in investing in people, as opposed to





immediately investing in, for example, the technology associated with a self-cleaning toilet. (The two are not mutually exclusive.)

4. *Design:* The Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet was designed to be a highly visible bright orange iconic [tourist- attracting] image playing on the words “pop up.” The acrylic glazed double walls slid “up” smoothly when the facility was open. The acrylic walls, when “down,” signalled the facility was closed. The basis for the form was a sea can shipping container, which was, of course, designed to be picked up and moved as a matter of course.
5. *Variety of sites:* Four downtown sites were selected for the Pop-Up Toilet, based on areas of need, availability of land, and a focus on different user groups. In two locations, Pop-Up Winnipeg was on private land, with individual businesses or institutions providing space. In two areas, the Pop-up encroached on City land. In all cases, the Pop-Pop did not require being connected to City services (e.g., water, sewer or electricity). The City designated the Pop-Up as a “building” for building permit purposes; each of the four sites had its own building permit.



#### BEST PRACTICES LEARNED (THUS FAR)

1. *Partnerships:* Partnerships are essential. In this case, they involved members of local businesses and community members, architectural and graphic designers, social enterprise advocates and outreach workers, supportive municipal officials, and supportive city councillors, among others.

2. *Community Services:* Watch Ambassadors, as part of Siloam Mission’s employment-readiness program, play a key role in oversight and maintenance, distinct from potential alternative approaches (e.g., automated and self-cleaning toilets, security cameras, etc.). Human contact and building relationships are crucial. As one article





put it, "beyond the experience and the money, it's a job that provides [the youth] with dignity. A job that shows them they are valued enough to be on a team – that someone trusts them enough to represent their organization. A job that allows them to contribute positively toward society."<sup>10</sup>

3. *Design*: The design can capture the public imagination, and the public toilet can become a destination in its own right.
4. *Messaging*: Politicized art, linking events, media exposure, and strong public presence can be used effectively to magnify the message.
5. *Public involvement*: The Pop-Up garnered positive responses on the part of the public and generous media coverage. Upwards of 35 – 40 people used the Pop-Up daily. Dramatic improvements in cleanliness and decreased vandalism were observed in the area surrounding the Pop-Up.<sup>11</sup>

#### ISSUES ARISING

While the pilot was very well received, it also highlighted additional issues to be addressed. Four occasional locations is obviously not enough. Here are standard or recommended distances between public toilets adopted by other jurisdictions: in Australia, from 500 – 1000m maximum, and in the UK, a maxi-

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mum of 300m between public toilets in busy areas.<sup>12</sup> For persons with hidden mobility disabilities, however, research shows that 12–15m is as far as they can comfortably walk without serious health consequences.<sup>13</sup> This research would suggest that placement be within 15m of (handicapped) parking or public transportation, rather than have facilities disconnected from transportation access.

The temporary nature of the Pop-Up Public Toilet begs for more permanent solutions. At the time of writing this article, those discussions were in full swing in Winnipeg. The positive responses to the Pop-Up boded well for these discussions. As always, *funding* was major topic.

A strong case for public toilets can be made, however, if we conceive of them as being an essential part of basic urban public infrastructure. André Picard wrote recently and eloquently, "It costs more than \$1-million to build a kilometre of road, and we also

pay to clear them of snow and fill potholes. We also police roads to ensure that people aren't speeding or defacing road signs. Why is building and maintaining roads for cars considered an unquestionable necessity and legitimate expense, but having public washrooms is deemed a superfluous luxury?"<sup>14</sup>

#### IN CLOSING

This project represents one more step in a decade-long social justice, human rights, and accessibility campaign in one Canadian city to bring public toilets back. Randy Turner wrote in a feature Winnipeg Free Press spread about the Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet (quoting Wins Bridgman), "We needed to take a much bigger view of the issue...This is not going to work by us doing something individually. We need to reach out to a large group of people. I was focused on my own little neighbourhood and, actually, we had a whole city of people who needed to use washrooms."<sup>15</sup>

Lobbying for accessible public toilets in Winnipeg continues. The Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet is the latest incarnation of that lobbying, notable for its aim to incorporate creative and quirky design, community-building ideas, cross-sectoral partnerships, support of youth-at-risk, and potential for commercial opportunities (e.g., the kiosk helps promote local businesses/artisans, orients visitors to the city, and discourages vandalism, etc.). All these elements render special the pilot Winnipeg Pop-up Public Toilet. Although the Pop-Up Winnipeg Public Toilet was conceived as a relatively low-cost pilot summer project, it certainly offers promising directions for more permanent facilities – to take action on Canada’s 2012 United Nations commitment:

“Canada recognizes the human right of everyone to safe drinking water and basic sanitation as essential to the right to an adequate standard of living.”<sup>16</sup> ■

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## AUTHORS

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## ENDNOTES

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