

COOP
DESIGN
RESEARCH

—
M SC.
PROGRAM

DISCRIMINATION BY DESIGN

ON THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING AN
INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO PUBLIC TOILET DESIGN

—
Author: Côté, Charlie-Anne

ABSTRACT

In the context of the ecological crisis that we are currently facing, the industrial production processes and the culture of material consumption that has been growing for several decades are being pointed out. In a perspective of reduction of material goods, a sharing economy of objects and spaces is an explored path of solution. But, from car-sharing services to co-working spaces, the use of the same good by a large number of people represents an important design challenge in order to adequately address the needs of the widest range of user as possible. Since the end of the '80s, architects and designers like Ronald Mace, Elaine Ostroff, Selwyn Goldsmith, and Roger Coleman have been exploring the issue of exclusion by design. Approaches such as Universal Design and Inclusive Design suggest a framework for designers to seek for the widest possible inclusion in mainstream design. Thus, Coleman presents Inclusive Design as a philosophical stance rather than a practical approach, it is embedded in a general culture and design practice that historically established inequalities, systematically sustained discrimination, and scarce resources for practitioners. Moreover, for designed results to be fully inclusive, a succession of attitudinal and political changes that go far beyond the scope of reach of project leaders would have to be enforced.

In this thesis, I consider the case of public toilets as they represent a highly diversified form of shared infrastructure that are likely to be used by all people regardless of their age, gender, class, or origin. The public toilets are small technical spaces whose design, signage, mapping, and location might lead to exclusion. Furthermore, their history is marked by class, geographic, and gender inequalities. Their use triggers bodily functions that are expected to be carried out in private and that are culturally anchored in a system of mores that taboo certain practices. I am looking more precisely at one street toilet located in Montreal whose design has been thoughtfully chosen for its universality and implemented in a very diverse neighborhood of the city center but consequently, still failed to address the local needs. On-site observations, interviews, and readings revealed the complex layers of social constructions, attitudinal barriers, engineering, science, politics, and policies that regulate the design intervention of adding a public toilet. I am looking at how participatory design and on-site education had not succeeded to improve the response of the community towards the newly implemented facility. I conclude that no space can fit all, and the solution might lay on a plurality of grounds.