

# THE TOILET: UNMENTIONABLE HUMANITARIAN OBJECT OR LUXURY GOOD?

**Tatiana Thieme**

Urban geographer and associate  
Professor, University College London

**Justin De Koszmovszky**

Partner, Archipel&Co



Mathare toilet, 2009 - ©Justin De Koszmovszky

**Tatiana Thieme** is an urban ethnographer and Associate Professor based in the Department of Geography at University College London. Her research focuses on urban 'hustle' economies in precarious urban environments, and includes research on the politics and business(es) of waste and sanitation in the global South.

**Justin DeKoszmovszky** is a partner at Archipel&Co where he leads the sanitation practice, focused on market-based solutions. Justin is also the co-founder of Community Cleaning Services, a social micro-franchise focused on shared toilet-cleaning across Nairobi.

Sanitation practices and infrastructures vary across the world, yet the perceived imperative to separate ourselves from our own bodily waste is universal, based on understandings of public health and cultural taboos associated with all 'waste', that which reflects loss of value and potential contagion<sup>1</sup>. The management of human waste, historically and geographically, reflects people's relationship to their bodies, their environment, their government, and their economy<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the lack of adequate sanitation, for 4.2 Billion people<sup>3</sup>, is cause for alarm and mobilisation. This article investigates the significance of the toilet, the symbolic and material site for intervention against sanitation poverty in the 21st century. What are the implications of the toilet being re-imagined simultaneously as a humanitarian object, an aspirational private consumer good, a public gathering place and a shared commons in countless neighbourhoods in rapidly growing cities of the global South?

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, on November 19<sup>th</sup>, World Toilet Day has turned what has often been perceived across cultures as a profoundly private if not taboo subject (shit), and the prosaic, non-object that was once exhibited as a Dadaist provocation by artist Marcel Duchamp (the toilet), into a crucial public awareness raising campaign. UNICEF and an increasing constellation of actors across the development and private sectors have been encouraging the world to 'give a shit' about sanitation, mobilising *the toilet* as a tangible focal point for addressing water and sanitation poverty, the 6<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Development Goal, associated with public health challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1 Douglas, Mary 1966. Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo.

2 Laporte, Dominique 2000/1978. History of Shit. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (translation by Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury)

3 WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, 2019: Available here: <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>



World Toilet Day posters

Undeniably, sanitation merits heightened global attention. Poor water quality and sanitation are leading causes of mortality and disease in developing countries with 4.2 billion people ‘lacking safely managed sanitation’ according to the World Health Organisation. With urban populations growing to unprecedented scales in the global South, municipalities are often under-resourced and unable to cope with the upgrading needs of outdated sanitation infrastructures in neighbourhoods that are still contending with historical legacies of uneven urban development. As a result, many crowded popular neighbourhoods, are systemically cut off from basic sanitation services, and have had to resort to ad hoc and improvised sanitation solutions, from building precarious ‘hanging toilets’ to resorting to open defecation when existing toilet facilities are too far, too costly, or too dirty and malodorous.<sup>4</sup>

Here it seems important to reflect for a moment on the implications of the ‘toilet’ becoming the poster child not only of sanitation challenges but also one of the symbolic and material claims to what Henri Lefevre called ‘the right to the city’ (le droit à la ville). For many urban residents, the most basic bodily (and many might argue, private) matter is rendered highly public (George 2008). It is now well known that more people today have access to a mobile phone than access to a safe toilet option<sup>5</sup>, a shocking paradox of modernity. The toilet, in all its forms—from aspirational good, to site of dilapidation, to its very absence—has become the emblem of urban precarity and embodied vulnerability. Over the last decade especially, the toilet has become a topic that lies at the nexus of humanitarian, public health, educational, urban planning, technological and business concern. As such, the call to care, to innovate, to mobilise, and to research has turned the toilet into both a kind of humanitarian object<sup>6</sup> and a luxury consumer good.

Humanitarian objects tend to provide a technical fix to a development problem while consumer goods tap into perceived needs and aspirations. As the toilet embodies both, questions of ‘access’ become public and political, but also an assumed matter of private and individual behavior, choice, and status. Therefore, the toilet can be regarded as simultaneously an individual human right and an aspirational good. This focus on the individual person and the individual household implies that addressing the sanitation problem comes down to the lack of individual toilets. Yet, for many low-income (especially urban) residents in the global South, the in-home toilet remains a distant reality and is not necessarily aspirational given the compact and multi-functional nature of the home. For many of these urban residents, the production of cleanliness and privacy associated with sanitation is less a matter concerning the household unit and is more a matter of shared, communal infrastructure and behavior. In the context of shared facilities, the ‘public’ (rather than



Waiting at the public toilet-Pune 2016 - ©Tatiana Thieme Nov 2016, Pune

4 Archipel&Co, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Firmenich, “Malodor & Sanitation Behaviors in Low-Income Settlements,” 2019: Available here: [https://archipel-co.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BMGF-Malodor-Sanitation-Global\\_report.pdf](https://archipel-co.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BMGF-Malodor-Sanitation-Global_report.pdf)

5 [https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/03/435102-deputy-un-chief-calls-urgent-action-tackle-global-sanitation-crisis#.UU\\_G\\_BySV3-](https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/03/435102-deputy-un-chief-calls-urgent-action-tackle-global-sanitation-crisis#.UU_G_BySV3-)

6 See 2018 special issue in LIMN on Little Development Devices and Humanitarian Goods: <https://limn.it/issues/little-development-devices-humanitarian-goods/>



Unenclosed toilet in Cape Town - ©Jaco Marais from online

in-home or private) toilet goes beyond design, hardware installation, infrastructure, and coverage. Toilets reveal the multifarious considerations related to the building, maintenance, management, access, and financing of shared ablution blocks, along with the often less documented but crucial everyday social life involved in making a shared resource work for and serve the needs of multiple end-users. Consider what the toilet (or lack thereof) reveals across three different urban sites.

In one of Nairobi’s oldest and largest informal settlements, a local community organiser once explained, “*In Mathare there are very few things that can be said to serve the public good. There is no community hall; there is no secondary school. But one of the things that you could say, it is ours, it belongs to us, is the public toilet.*” Against the backdrop of rapid and makeshift urbanisation amongst countless low-income urban citizens, toilets and the sanitation commons can be highly politicized, social, and contested spaces, sometimes more so than housing. In low-income settlements especially, the toilet (or lack thereof) represents a dramatic form of embodied and gendered insecurity, rendering women and children most vulnerable<sup>7</sup>. Given that these shared resources are crucial public facilities, for some politicians and development actors in Nairobi, toilets have even become symbols of ‘good will’ and visible investment. But despite the shiny plaque on the outside wall featuring a date and the name of a sponsor, these humanitarian objects, too often created as sanitation prestige projects with minimal forethought to sustainable management, are too often left ill-maintained, eventually breaking down physically and socially<sup>8</sup>. In contrast, there are community groups, often youth groups, who have taken pride in managing and cleaning shared toilets in Mathare to serve the surrounding community, in exchange for an affordable pay-per-use or monthly fee. While introducing a market mechanism to a basic need in an already low-

7 Amnesty International (2010), *Insecurity and Indignity: Women’s experiences in the slums of Nairobi*. Available here: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/36000/afr320022010en.pdf>

8 Thieme, Tatiana 2018. “Water is life, but sanitation is dignity”, LIMN, special issue on Little Development Devices.

income neighbourhood can be seen as yet another poverty penalty, residents that pay for access to a communal toilet can expect a certain standard of cleanliness and be assured that this shared facility is not only managed and cleaned in the first place, but that it is also generating a source of income for under-employed youth. Some of these well-maintained communal toilets have served as much more than a mere sanitation facility. In one neighbourhood of Mathare known as ‘Number 10’, the shared toilet managed by a local youth group for the last 10 years is today adjacent to a water point, a mobile banking kiosk, and an urban sac farm—all investments made by the youth group with toilet income and on toilet traffic. In other words, the toilet in this case has served as a trigger for various income-generating activities that have turned a site of ‘waste’ into multiple kinds of value.

The story of Cape Town, South Africa, reflects a different political direction to the Nairobi case: In 2013, the degrading state of toilets in low-income neighbourhoods, like Khayelitsha, became a politicised artifact representing poverty, inequality, and broken promises. Two decades after the end of Apartheid and the associated hopes for a better life for all South Africans, the infamous portable toilets or ‘portalooos’ and the ‘unenclosed’ toilets became the object of sanitation activism. Protestors brought these demeaning toilet structures and their contents into the city centre streets, using this politics of disturbance to voice grievances against inadequate basic service provision in informal settlements on the periphery of the city. In this case, the toilet was neither a humanitarian object nor luxury good, but rather a symbol of indignity, an absentee state, and persistent uneven allocation of resources. In 2015 these ‘poo wars’ extended to the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’



Shared toilet in Pune 2016 - ©Tatiana Thieme Nov 2016, Pune

student protests at the University of Cape Town, which contested the over-bearing and oppressive presence of English white colonial references across the campus. As a visible marker of persistent and structural racism in the urban landscape, human waste from a dilapidated portaloo from Cape Town's poor urban neighbourhoods became the connection between inadequate sanitation and anti-poverty, anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid struggles. In this context, the embodied 'politics of shit' and the degrading toilet operated as a shaming device directed towards the public sector, in a context where there were particular expectations directed towards the post-Apartheid state. This contrasts with the case of Nairobi where so many residents from under-resourced neighbourhoods have for many decades resorted to 'self-help' solutions<sup>9</sup> because they have either been let down by the state, or know that waiting for upgraded infrastructures is usually not an option<sup>10</sup>.

*It is now well known that more people today have access to a mobile phone than access to a safe toilet option, a shocking paradox of modernity*

In Pune, India, the toilet is not a humanitarian object provided by private donors or a matter of contestation towards an absentee state. The toilet is a middle-class luxury good and a powerful political tool. The well maintained toilet became a symbol of dignity during under the leadership of India's non-violent independence movement against British rule, Mahatma Gandhi. And today, the current Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi has, since 2014, promoted a nation-wide movement known as Swachh Bharat to ensure widespread access to a toilet across rural and urban areas. However, during a perception study of everyday experiences of sanitation conducted by Archipel&Co in 2016, we found that for lower-income households did not necessarily want sanitation to be brought indoors, even if an in-home toilet were provided. For most low-income households, the home is purposefully and pragmatically modular: the 'bedroom' becomes at different points in the day a kitchen, a sitting room, the workstation for in-home businesses, the after-school homework study, and the site of assembly for self-help groups discussing their saving scheme. The 'bathing corner' is used for cooking one minute and washing your feet the next. In this context, the toilet is set apart from the home not only because it is more convenient, but because it is also considered more hygienic to keep your ablutions far away from your dwelling, despite the very real security concern, particularly for countless women and children, when they face a long walk to the nearest toilet after dark.

These three examples seek to emphasize the diverse meanings associated with the toilet as a constellation of actors and sectors—public, private, civil society—work

towards advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, including improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene. It is clear that for most urban dwellers today, especially in the global South, a private toilet remains a luxury good. At the same time, access to a safe, clean, and reasonably close sanitation facility should be considered an essential

right. Within the current reality, however, the key characteristic of the 'real toilet' for the majority of urban citizens in rapidly growing cities today is the shared toilet, and often a contested commons. Therefore, passionate social innovators across the private, public and development sectors that have in recent years taken on the Gates Foundation's challenge to 're-invent the toilet' need to consider the importance of the collective and social life

that surrounds shared sanitation spaces, from the everyday civilities in the queue to the meaningful ways in which local actors are raising expectations for what might be considered 'adequate sanitation' in their own terms, and in their neighbourhood.

Sanitation projects today, ranging from eco-sanitation to micro-franchise models are encouraging and worthy of praise in their own right. Yet these interventions rely on communities taking an active role in improving their sanitation options. This might include fostering a collective willingness to pay a private sanitation provider or resolving the potential disputes that inevitably occur when any group of people share a common good. Ultimately, to bring about the critical improvements necessary, any sanitation intervention needs to work within the very real urban constraints and pragmatic coping strategies related to compact and modular living. As we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the toilet is perhaps more than ever both a humanitarian object and an aspirational consumer good, where community economics determine the quotidian, often invisible, labour involved in maintaining these sanitation commons. If we reflect comparatively on some of the various examples of sanitation improvement at work, it seems that the most effective way to ensure improved urban sanitation is a combination of infrastructure and "hardware" provision (across public, shared and individual toilets), and the "software" of social and market mechanisms to enable contextual incentives for a shared sanitation ecosystem. This is not an easy balance.

World Toilet Day continues to put a spotlight on the 'unmentionable'<sup>11</sup> once a year, but it is important that each time any of us are able to safely access a toilet we remember the profound politics of a prosaic and provincial pee, and recognise that ending sanitation poverty relies on, but also goes beyond, the near-by presence of a toilet for all.

9 Hake, Andrew (1977) African Metropolis: Nairobi's Self-Help City

10 See Robins, S. 2013. How poo became political. The Cape Times (Cape Town). 2 July: p. 9; McFarlane, C. and J. Silver (2016) The Poilitical City: 'Seeing Sanitation' and Making the Urban Political in Cape Town, Antipode; Robins, S. 2015. Back to the poo that started it all. April 9th. The Cape Times.

11 George, Rose (2008) The Adventures of Human Waste.