

Reconsidering the Restroom

The Spatial Opportunities of Single Stall Public Restrooms



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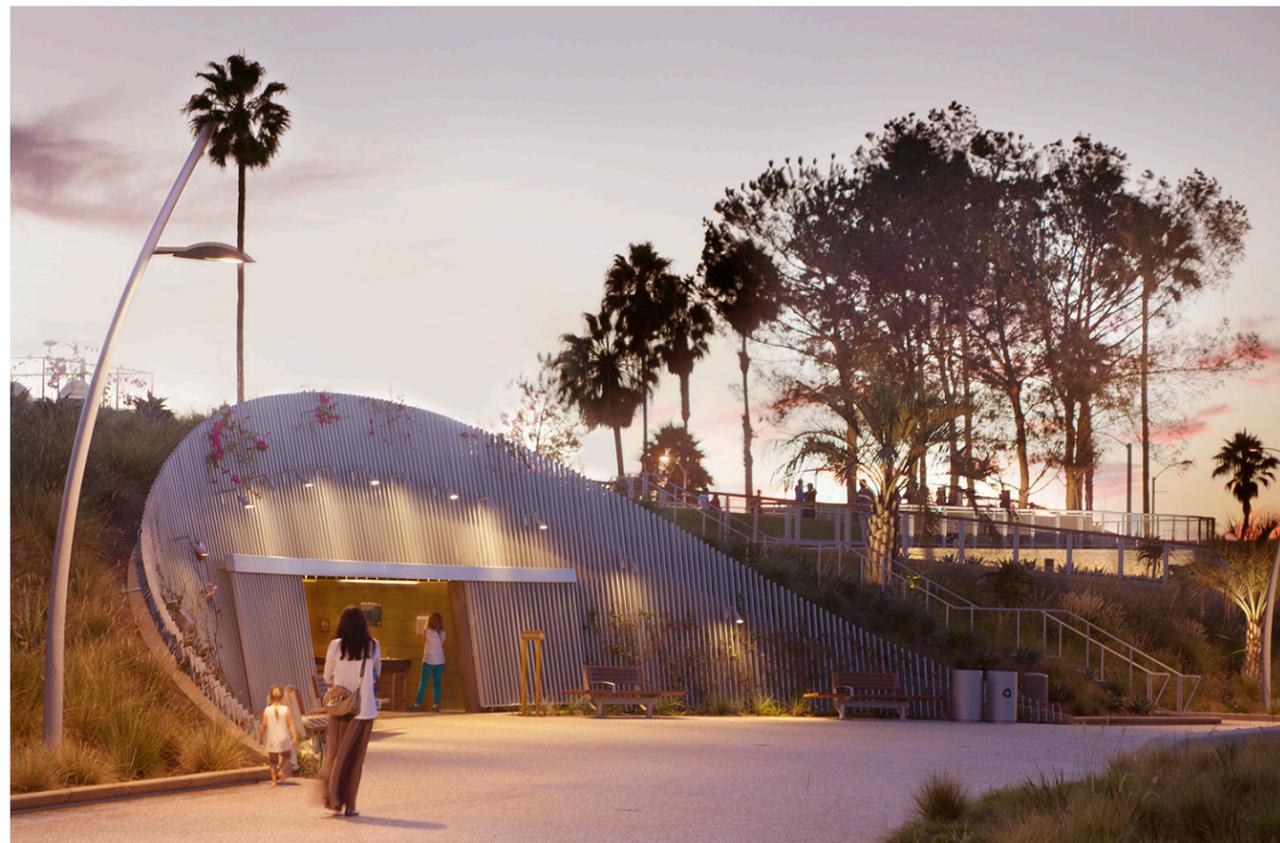


FIGURE 1 The Comfort Station at Tongva Park

Meandering along the curving paths nestled into the hills of Santa Monica's Tongva Park (FIGURE 2), designed by James Corner Field Operations with Frederick Fisher and Partners Architects, one encounters various garden 'eddies' within the landscape. While most offer moments of serenity and pause, one of these opens into a wide passage connecting one path to another under a landscaped hill (FIGURE 1). This is Tongva Park's public restroom—an eighteen-foot-wide by forty-foot-long breezeway flanked by toilet partitions and a trough sink on each side. Though a partial-height, wooden screen divides the 'comfort station' into two areas, little beyond door signage and color divides this space.

The Tongva Park restroom is one example of the single stall public restrooms that Frederick Fisher and Partners (FFP) has completed in the last several years. At a time when the traditionally private act of visiting the restroom has become part of a decidedly public policy debate, each of these projects explores the spatial opportunities of single stall restrooms as an alternative to conventional gender-designated, multi-user rooms.

In keeping with the core values of FFP's Southern California-based practice, the comfort station's architecture makes little distinction between indoor and outdoor living.

The openness of Tongva Park's restroom was not intended to make a political statement; rather, it was an attempt to integrate the facility more fluidly into its surrounding landscape. In keeping with the core values of FFP's Southern California-based practice, the comfort station's architecture makes little distinction between indoor and outdoor living. Individual toilet compartments and communal sink areas are open to nature on three sides – including a large, square opening to the sky above. Natural light illuminates the restroom from multiple directions, avoiding what Partner-In-Charge David Ross describes as the 'flashlight effect,' when one directional light source creates an atmosphere of high-contrast light and shadow. The space's porosity also takes advantage of its location one block from the Pacific Ocean, enabling the coastal breeze to provide continuous natural ventilation—an issue Project Manager John Berley notes as one of the biggest challenges in restroom design.

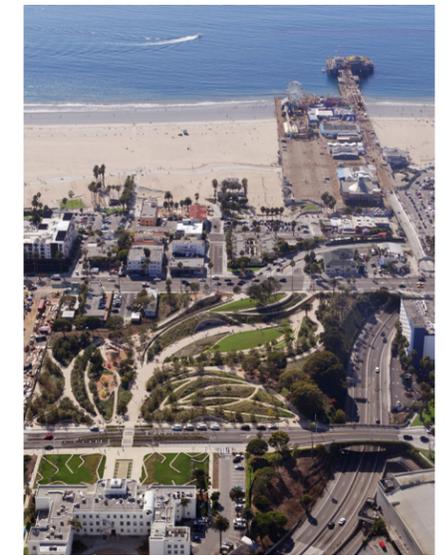


FIGURE 2 - Tongva Park in Santa Monica from Above

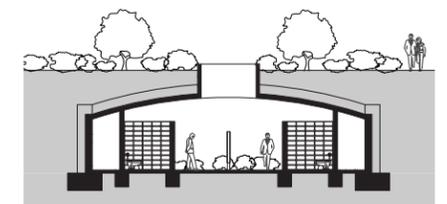


FIGURE 3 - A Section of Tongva Park's Comfort Station



FIGURE 4 The Porosity of Tongva Park's Comfort Station Contributes to its Daylighting, Ventilation, and Perceived Safety

The comfort station's open plan also addresses another important issue for the City of Santa Monica: security. Karen Ginsberg, Director of Community and Cultural Services, explains that given Santa Monica's large homeless population, people have recently come to feel that enclosed public restrooms invite loitering and other illegal activities, but "public restrooms with individual stalls and common sinks provide privacy for patrons." While Ginsberg is aware that Tongva Park's individual toilet compartments can still tempt the homeless to use them as campsites and/or storage facilities, the problem was mitigated by increasing the amount of enclosure the partitions offer both at the ground level and overhead, as well as by including moveable, lockable gates at the passage's two entry points that block after-hours access, when illicit activity is more likely to occur.

"Public restrooms with individual stalls and common sinks provide privacy for patrons."
- Karen Ginsberg

According to Ginsberg, when the city of Santa Monica first began implementing more open designs for its public restrooms approximately fifteen years ago, the idea of single stall restrooms replacing gender-designated, multi-user toilet rooms initially faced opposition, particularly from mothers with young children who were concerned for their children's safety. Since then, however, general opinion in the progressive city has shifted. A current restroom renovation project at Clover Park plans to do away with gender designations on individual stalls, a decision that both demonstrates this shift in local public opinion and follows the lead of the State of California, which implemented Assembly Bill 1732 on March 1, 2017, requiring all single-occupancy public restrooms statewide to be open to anyone.

Assembly Bill 1732 was authored by Assemblyman Phil Ting of San Francisco, who commented that with the bill's passage, "California is charting a new course for equality. Restricting access to single-user restrooms by gender defies common sense and disproportionately burdens the LGBT community, women, and parents or caretakers of dependents of the opposite gender." The City of Santa Monica is working with consultant Scott Turner Schofield on ensuring equal access at several of their existing facilities. The Manager of Santa Monica's Annenberg Community Beach House, Nan Friedman, explains that "he is looking into the the current 'policy, customer service, and signage' for the existing



FIGURE 5 Three Design Iterations Depict the Restrooms' Transformation from a Traditional Approach to Restroom Architecture with Separate, Gender-Specific Rooms with their own Respective Entrances (A) to the Existing Design's Open Pass Through with a Shared Oculus to the Sky (C)

facilities to get ahead of any issues, to be as prepared as we can from a customer service standpoint, as well as considering any architectural changes.”

The design of the Beach House by Frederick Fisher and Partners was initiated in 2005, before the office began consciously exploring the benefits of the single stall restroom or looking into opportunities for making changing rooms more private for their individual users. The Beach House currently offers two restroom areas servicing the outdoor recreational spaces – one servicing the beach, playground, and café, and the other with changing rooms by the pool. Both spaces are open air and accessed from outside. However, both spaces have designated gender-specific rooms. Project Manager John Berley notes that at the time, “we treated the changing rooms like typical lockers rooms” – rooms with open showers connected to open changing areas (FIGURE 6 and 7). Not only has the lack of privacy in the changing rooms deterred individuals from using the public showers, the gender-designations of each room have become a customer service challenge. There have mostly been complaints about children of the opposite gender in changing rooms.

Scott Turner Schofield hopes to work with the city Santa Monica to “create a culture within each space where everyone is respectful of *all* its users.” His experience working with institutions on diversity education began in college when he transitioned from woman to man. At the time, his alma mater, Emory University, had no policies in place on how to accommodate and support Schofield’s transition and its implications on his day-to-day life on campus. His work has since contributed to policies at numerous universities and businesses. For Santa Monica’s public facilities, he is currently working on creating policies around appropriate behavior in changing rooms – defining staring and touching as unacceptable behaviors, helping them to expand their family bathroom to include a shower for those seeking a private changing experience, and training the facility’s staff on how to respond to complaints about changing room users. Scott notes that unless the architecture is different, his work will primarily revolve around signage, policy, and training its current employees on appropriate customer service, so that occupants “can inhabit the provided spaces and not have to think too much about it.”



FIGURE 7 The Showers at the Annenberg Beach House are Open to the Changing Area.

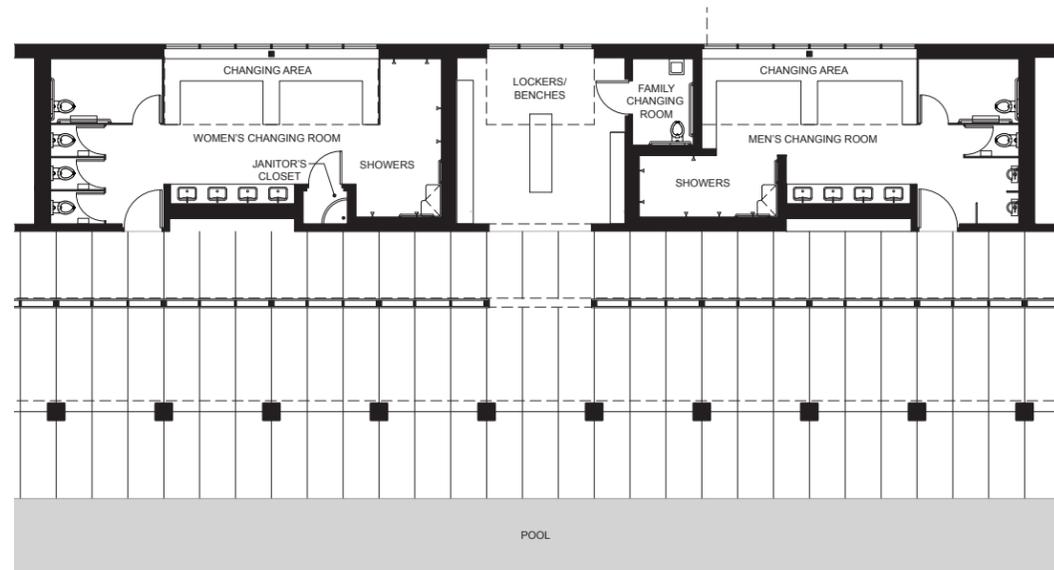


FIGURE 6 Plan of the Gender-Designated Changing Rooms at the Annenberg Community Beach House. The changing room currently does not include a shower.



♥ terranaomi, santanadempsey and 64 others
 turnerschofield I consulted on this public #business #bathroom to make it #inclusive for every #gender. Signs showing that both are #accessible, that both have toilets, and that one has urinals allow people to make private choices for their own comfort and needs.

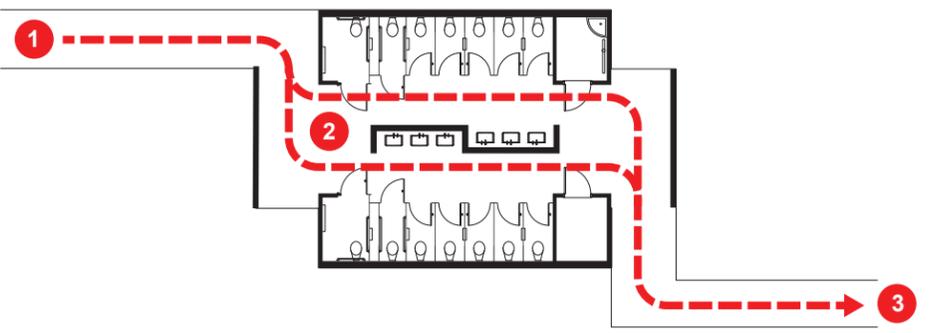
FIGURE 8 Scott Turner Schofield's Instagram Post of New Restroom Signage at a Theater to Expedite the Restroom Line at Intermission.

“Scott Turner Schofield hopes to work with the city Santa Monica to ‘create a culture within each space where everyone is respectful of all its users.’”

Schofield previously worked with a large theater with two small, gender-designated restrooms that were overwhelmed by crowds at intermission. His suggestion to remove the gender designation from the restrooms has enabled a quicker flow for its users, as one line for 6 plumbing fixtures moves faster than two lines for only 2-4 plumbing fixtures. The result was a change in signage. Since the men’s room had urinals, the signs on each room indicate which plumbing fixtures are inside with a new sign in between reading “all bodies welcome.” Those who do not want to use the room with urinals do not have to, but everyone is welcome to use any fixture.

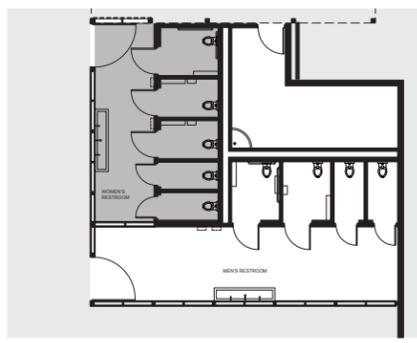
Despite the clever rethinking of such existing infrastructure, Schofield’s anecdote confirms FFP’s current intent to consider such circumstances during the initial phases of design. We at Frederick Fisher and Partners hope the Beach House will be able to amend its current restrooms that services the cafe, playground, and beach by removing the exterior partition between the men’s and women’s restrooms and converting the facility into single stalls (FIGURE 9). This would accommodate the large beach-time user flow as well as remove any concerns about which stall parents or caretakers of dependents of the opposite gender and non-gender conforming individuals can use.

As opposed to gender-designated restroom *rooms*, single-stall restrooms present the opportunity to design more porous spaces with improved circulation. Frederick Fisher and Partners has explored how single stall restrooms can improve the ‘flow’ of groups at educational and cultural institutions. FIGURE 10 depicts a concept for a public restroom that’s integrated into a cultural institution’s path of travel. That path is flanked by single stall restrooms with a half-height communal sink area between, operating both as a screen wall to create privacy for the stalls as well as to create a central social space for a restroom stop. For the school tours that use this restroom, boys and girls form a single queue, enter the structure, and use the first available toilet stall, rejoin his or her classmates at the central sinks to wash their hands together, and then proceed beyond to join a teacher or chaperone for the rest of the tour. FFP’s work with cultural and educational institutions has taught us that gender-designated restroom *rooms*

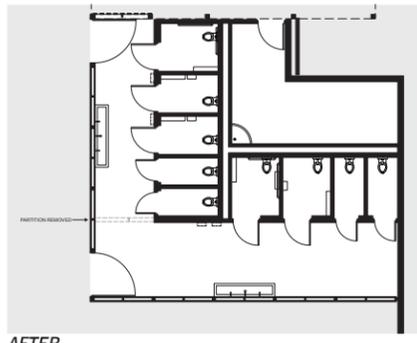


- 1 AN INSTITUTIONAL PATH OR CORRIDOR
- 2 RESTROOM STOP
- 3 REGROUP AND PROCEED

FIGURE 10 The Restroom Acts as One Stop Along an Architectural Promenade



BEFORE



AFTER

FIGURE 9 A Minor Renovation to the Annenberg Community Beach House’s Public Restrooms Would Convert Them to Single Stall Restrooms

become essentially dead-end corridors that do not support queuing. Moreover, monitoring student behavior in these rooms becomes challenging as more often than not, teachers and chaperones are women, and the traditional restroom design requires separating the students by gender behind closed doors.

In addition to increasing efficiency, single stall public restrooms provide the opportunity to create spaces that communalize private rituals and bring people together. In general, we think fewer internal separations and boundaries make better environments in all types of spaces. Frederick Fisher notes the value of moving the more communal elements of restrooms like hand-washing “out of the deep, dark, cloistered corners into light, open spaces where serendipitous encounters can occur.”

“...the tea ceremonies of the Taoist and Buddhists, in which elaborate rituals have evolved around a daily act as commonplace in Eastern cultures as bathing and shoe-tying.”

- Leonard Koren

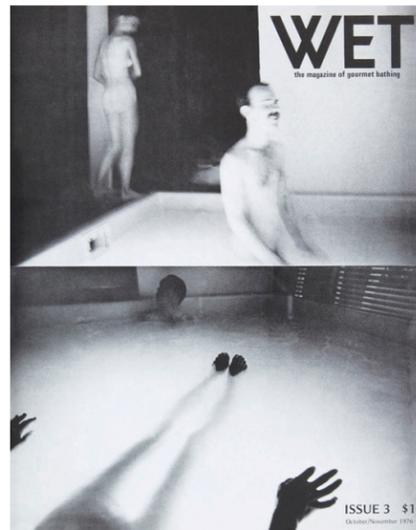


FIGURE 11 An Early Cover of *Wet Magazine*, Depicting Leonard Koren's Photography that Celebrates Bathing

Fisher's embrace of spatial and inter-personal connectivity, even in sites of what are conventionally private rituals, can be traced to his involvement in the 1970s with the art publication *Wet: the Magazine of Gourmet Bathing*, founded by Leonard Koren. Trained as an architect, Koren wrote that the “the closest correlative” to communalizing the act of bathing “could be the tea ceremonies of the Taoist and Buddhists, in which elaborate rituals have evolved around a daily act as commonplace in Eastern cultures as bathing and shoe-tying.”¹ Observing Koren's celebration of friends gathering in a spa to enjoy each other's company and the sensory pleasure of immersion in water—a commonplace activity in other cultures—Fisher came to appreciate his attempts to “demystify and destigmatize bathing,” removing the ritual's shameful connotations through humor and delight.

1 Koren, Leonard, *Making Wet: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing* (Imperfect Publishing, 2012), 67.

The public restrooms Frederick Fisher and Partners designs are certainly not trying to de-privatize what happens behind the toilet partition; rather, to reconsider the notion of the public restroom as a ‘cloistered’ private room that isolates people. This means respecting individuals' needs for privacy—even in public—while simultaneously communalizing those rituals that can help bring people together like hand washing.

A communalized restroom facility that FFP has recently completed exists in a new science education building that FFP designed for Crossroads School for Arts & Sciences' upper campus in Santa Monica. Given the area's mild climate, circulation within the science building occurs outside. Wide enough to accommodate social interaction, the building's exterior walkways are also programmed as collaborative spaces. Several areas that are part of the building's circulation paths feature gathering spaces such as outdoor teaching facilities (FIGURE 12).

Located on the second floor, the building's main restroom operates in part as just another space for social interaction. To access the toilet compartments, students first pass through a communal hand washing area that is separated from adjacent outdoor walkway only by a partial screen wall and a change of floor material from wood decking of the exterior corridor to ceramic tile (FIGURE 13). Past the hand washing area are two back-to-back spaces, each with a row of full-height toilet compartments. The toilet areas are not closed off from the restroom's more public zone, and the toilet compartments are all designated as non-gendered.

“After class everyone visits the restroom together. It's something you do with your friends—you don't have to separate.”

- Eli Offer



FIGURE 12 An Outdoor Teaching Facility along an Exterior Corridor at Crossroads School for the Arts and Sciences

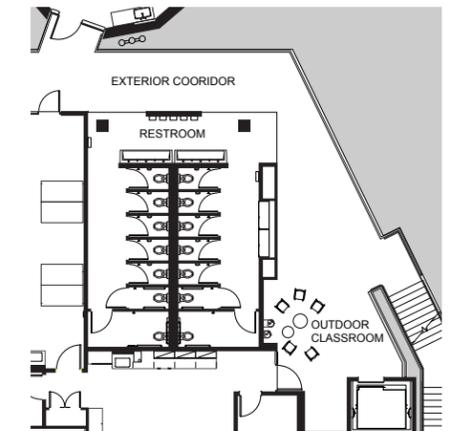


FIGURE 13 Plan of the Restrooms in Crossroads School of Arts and Sciences' New Science Building



FIGURE 14 The Hand Washing Station at the Restroom at Crossroads School of Arts and Sciences

A progressive school with an active LGBTQ student organization called the “Pride Club,” Crossroads has in fact decided as an institution to remove gender designations from all its restroom facilities. Crossroads student Eli Offer has observed that the lack of gender designation was “originally a little weird and people thought one side would become gendered, but that wasn’t the case.” Now, he says, “after class everyone visits the restroom together. It’s something you do with your friends—you don’t have to separate.” Regarding the restroom in the new science building, Head of School Bob Riddle confirms that not only did the school not “face any institutional challenges to installing gender-neutral restrooms in the Science Education & Research Facility, but the only opinions [we’ve] heard have been positive.”

The restroom projects described thus far detail creative uses of space that are made possible by designing single-stall restrooms where conventional gender-designated, multi-user rooms may have been designed before. They provide opportunities to connect people with their exterior environments, increase efficiency and safety, and communalize social rituals. These restrooms offer flexibility - both in terms of design as well as for their users - a flexibility that continues the historical trajectory of increasing restroom inclusiveness (FIGURE 16). With them, parents or caretakers of dependents of the opposite gender as well as gender non-conforming individuals do not need to choose which is the appropriate room for them. Theorist Judith Butler advocates “not to celebrate difference as such, but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.”² In its restroom projects—and others—FFP explores this idea through design. Fisher often references the idea of ‘loose fit, long life.’ In other words, architecture that allows for change—whether in terms of function, character, or plumbing—has a better chance of withstanding the test of time. Much like people’s identities, spaces are not fixed. Good design acknowledges such ephemerality and embraces it.



FIGURE 15 Restroom Signage at Crossroads School of Arts and Sciences Combines the Forms from Traditional Restroom Signage - the Circle from Women’s and the Triangle from Men’s



FIGURE 16 Segregated Restrooms in a Louisiana Courthouse in 1964, a Time When Race and Gender Determined Restroom Access. Photo: Bob Adelman

“not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation”

- Judith Butler

We at Frederick Fisher and Partners believe that no space should ever cause people to feel anxiety or exclusion; rather, well-designed architecture should bring people together, give them equal access to light and air, and embrace the functions of everyday life. Ultimately, we believe that life should be improved through architecture – even in the restroom.



FIGURE 17 People Coming Together at Frederick Fisher and Partners' Public Beach Facility Project in Santa Monica, the Annenberg Community Beach House

