

LEE LI MING  
PROGRAMME IN  
AGEING URBANISM

# Age-friendly Neighbourhoods<sup>1</sup>

## Clean Toilets @North West

Belinda Yuen

Toileting is an essential everyday life activity. For the older person, it is even more important; body changes with age may bring about a need to use the toilet more frequently and with greater urgency. The prevalence of urinary incontinence among community-dwelling older adults in several countries including Australia and Malaysia varies from 7-42% (Sidik, 2010). In Singapore, the prevalence of urinary incontinence is around 4.6-14.5% (How and Quah, 2013). It is crucial that older people make it to the bathroom in time. Adequate and accessible public toilet provision can help older adults to maintain their dignity, participate in community life and retain active, independent lives. The availability and easy accessibility to clean, conveniently located, well-signed and safe public toilets are widely acknowledged as inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

age-friendly neighbourhood features (World Health Organisation, 2007).

The provision of public toilet in cities is not new. During Victorian England, ornate, on-street public toilets are provided as part of civic pride and public health considerations. In modern times, public toilet provision is increasingly integrated into sustainability, transportation and health agendas to support the creation of accessible, inclusive, sustainable cities (Box 1).

#### **Box 1: Smart Public Toilets in Japan**

Japan's public toilets have been upgraded in stages over the decades. Wheelchair access has become prevalent since the 1990s while outdated toilets are being replaced since the 2000s with multi-functional smart toilets for an ageing society and improved city image. A Toto survey found that 73% of foreign tourists had mentioned clean public toilets when improving the image of a place.

Examples of smart public toilet provision:

- Public toilets at Ebina Service Area on Tomei Expressway have sensors that can measure a person's pulse and driver's fatigue.
- Public toilets near Itsukushima Shrine in Hatsukaichi, Hiroshima Prefecture are equipped with multi-lingual capability to help tourists get instruction on how to use the washing functions.
- Public toilets at 3 busy stations – Shinjuku, Shimokitazawa and Yamato, are equipped with a

service that allows passengers to check which stalls are free using a smartphone app.

Source: Kinouchi, T. (2020) Japan's public toilets are not only clean, they are clever. *Nikkei Asian Review*, 2 February.

The lack of public toilet provision can discourage a range of people from accessing the city including older people, the disabled and families with young children. They are forced to stay home to attend to their toileting needs or reduce the time and distance they are able to travel outside their homes. Others develop coping behaviour such as restricting fluid and food intake to avoid needing a toilet when they go out. Help the Aged has found that the lack of public toilets is a significant contributory factor to social isolation among older population in UK with knock-on effect on their health – physical, social and mental such as low self-esteem and depression (Box 2).

#### **Box 2: Evidence on Public Toilet Provision in Local Areas, UK**

Help the Aged surveyed around 1000 older people on their experiences of local public toilet provision in UK in August 2006. The key findings included:

- 82% of respondents felt that public toilet provision in their areas did not meet their needs.
- 80% of respondents did not find it easy to find a public toilet.
- 78% of respondents found their local public toilets are not open when they need them.

- 52% of respondents agreed that the lack of public toilets in their area stops them from going out as often as they would like.
- Public toilets are often not located in places where older people need them such as on trains, bus and transport terminals and in parks.
- Top three toilet priorities include cleanliness, good lighting, security – feeling safe when using toilets.

Source: Help the Aged (2007) *Nowhere to Go: Public Provision in the UK*. London: Help the Aged.

## Clean Toilets@North West <sup>2</sup>

Clean Toilets@North West is a public-private-people initiative spearheaded by the North West Community Development Council (CDC) to co-create and co-own clean toilets with different segments of the community. Covering a land area of 138 sq km, the North West district has a population of close to 906,000 residents living in over 269,000 households. Recognising the importance of the availability of clean toilets to an ageing population<sup>3</sup>, in January 2020, the North West CDC launched its model public toilet to encourage better public toilet hygiene standards and improve toilet safety for the community, in particular, seniors.

<sup>2</sup> I thank North West Community Development Council for the materials for this case writing.

The North West CDC has adopted a multi-partner, multi-pronged approach to public toilet improvement. Encompassing a collaborative effort with coffee shop owners, government agencies and interior design companies, the 1<sup>st</sup> renovated public toilet in an existing coffee shop (built in the 1980s) in Bukit Panjang showcases the possibilities of a clean and safe public toilet for older people (Photo 1). The transformation process took around one year, from 2019-2020.



Photo 1: Model public toilet at NW CDC (image credit: North West CDC and Sunray Woodcraft Construction Pte Ltd).

According to a 2011 survey of 500 residents (aged 18-65 years) by Ngee Ann Polytechnic students, 61.3% of respondents were not happy with the state of cleanliness of public toilets in the district. They highlighted issues with poor design and maintenance including vandalism on toilet walls, broken toilet seats, foul smell due to poor ventilation,

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of residents aged 65 years and older in the North West CDC district has doubled in 10 years, from 8.8% in 2009 to 14.4% in 2019.

stains and mould between tiles grout lines, basins and mirrors, damaged toilet roll holders and soap dispensers, dim lightings, poor or damaged locking mechanism, dirty toilet cubicles, and incorrect or confusing gender signages.

Based on the findings, the national Public Toilet Cleanliness Campaign (spearheaded by the National Environment Agency) proposed a holistic approach to improve the standard of public toilets including mandatory rating scheme for toilets, continued government intervention and enforcement, specialised training of toilet attendants, improved toilet design guidelines, and effective public awareness and engagement. The North West CDC took up the challenge to provide cleaner and safer public toilets, identifying 3 key desired outcomes: design, maintenance and usage (Box 3).

**Box 3: 3 Desired Outcomes of Clean Toilets@North West**

1. Design outcomes
  - Toilet design concept is functional and robust.
  - Toilet furnishings and fittings are easy to clean and maintain.
  - Toilets are safe for older people.
2. Maintenance outcomes
  - Toilets are clean and kept dry at all time.
  - Fittings are kept functional at all times.
  - Toilet supplies are available at all times.
3. Usage outcomes
  - Users take good care of toilets during usage.

- Users are considerate towards cleaners and other users.
- Users are socially conscious to report defects and provide feedback promptly.

Source: North West Community Development Council (2020) Clean Toilets @ North West Guide.

As coffee shop toilets are frequently used by older adults, coffee shop owners and operators are recruited as key drivers on the provider side. A 2016 nationwide survey conducted by Singapore Management University students and the World Toilet Organisation reports that half of the coffee shops in Singapore have unhygienic toilets. Coffee shops, popularly referred to as *kopitiam*s in local parlance, are quintessential features of Singaporean social life. Often provided on the ground floor of public housing apartment blocks in local neighbourhoods, coffee shops serve a wide range of affordable food and drink as well as a meeting place for social interaction. An important aspect of the public toilet overhaul is safety for older people (Box 4).

**Box 4: Safety Features of Clean Toilets@North West**

Safety features include:

- Slip-resistant floor tiles to provide better friction and grip, reducing risk of fall.
- Stainless steel grab bars to provide support for older people and ensure their safety.
- Strategically installed ceiling fan to keep the floor dry.

- Lighting with minimum lux level of 300 to ensure visibility.
- Anti-fungi wall tiles grout coat prevents mould from growing on walls.
- Stainless steel trough urinal provides resistance to stains and facilitates maintenance
- Stainless steel grating keeps floor dry and facilitates maintenance.

Source: North-west Community Development Council (2020) Clean Toilets@North West Guide.

Accompanying infrastructure improvement, the North West CDC has developed software and heartware actions. It has established a feedback hotline and email for defects and cleanliness levels reporting as well as a series of educational materials (e.g. posters) to prompt users to practice good toilet etiquette (Photo 2). Collaborating with the Singapore Kindness Movement, the North West CDC has also conceptualised and implemented a kindness campaign on public toilets to improve public toilet usage habits. A Clean Toilet Design Guide and Checklist is available to guide public toilet providers in improvement work.

Following the completion of the first remodelled coffee shop public toilet in January 2020, four other coffee shops have committed to have their public toilets undergo a similar transformation. In the long term, the goal is to transform the public toilet culture and offer safe, clean and accessible toilets to the ageing population.



Photo 2: Poster to encourage better public toilet habits (image credit: North West CDC)

## Conclusion

The issue of older people's access to appropriate 'away from home' public toilet facility is a matter of critical importance in a rapidly ageing world. It is intricately related to independent living, outdoor mobility, health and quality of life issues. Lezlie Lowe in her book, *No Place to Go: How Public Toilets Fail our Private Needs*, reminds that the state of public toilets can reflect the kind of city and society we want to be. Others like Clara Greed (2003, p104), Professor of Inclusive Urban Planning at the University of West England argues that 'Well-cared for toilets project a sense of civic pride and increase confidence to invest in the area'.

There is economic value to providing clean toilets. As Mr. Koh Kai Hock, owner of Fuyuan Canshi Coffee Shop shared,

*Clean toilets are good for business. When customers have more enjoyable dining experience and are assured of food safety and hygiene, they will definitely come more often and buy more. So, I encourage other coffee shops to join the programme.*

Source:

C. Greed (2003) Public toilets in the 24 hour city. World Toilet Summit Proceedings B-4, pp 99-119.

Help the Aged (2007) Nowhere to Go: Public Toilet Provision in the UK. London: Help the Aged.

C H How and H M J Quah (2013) Managing urinary incontinence in the community. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 54(8):420-424.

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S M Sidik (2010) The prevalence of urinary incontinence among the elderly in a rural community in Selangor. *Malaysian Journal of Medical Science*, 17(2):18-23.

World Health Organisation (2007) Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide. Geneva: World Health Organisation.