

the impact of the mass media and consumer culture on design, weaving together a comprehensive and consistent picture of the modern interior.

As is necessary for any book promising a history of a visual medium, the book is packed with images. As expected based on the time periods covered, the images are exclusively in black and white. However, Sparke adds descriptions of color and finishes, and while some of the more recent interior images could certainly have been in color, Sparke overcomes the limitations of grayscale with excellent descriptions that allow the reader to imagine the overall impact. A possibly unintentional benefit from the absence of color images is the resultant affordability of the book and thus it provides an inexpensive opportunity for greater student engagement with literature for history of interiors courses covering the modern period to contemporary design. A further strength of the book is its incorporation of designers and interiors from both Europe and the USA.

The book is a must for anyone interested in the history of interior design and its formalized development as a result of social and commercial changes in the context of industrialization. The portrait of how interior design evolved through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is complete, integrated, and extremely well presented.

## ***Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*, by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner**

Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009.  
262 pages, illustrations. ISBN 978-1592-13940-8.  
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### **Reviewed by Matthew R. Dudzik**

Gershenson and Penner have compiled a collection of essays as articulate as the subject is universal. In a time when sex and violence are so engrained in mass media that they do not turn heads, the Internet is breaking down cultural taboos, and society is increasingly accepting and transparent, our daily bodily functions remain among the topics considered nearly unmentionable. Even as I sat down to write this review I was amazed at the internal struggle I underwent in an effort to suppress my inner sixth-grader and pay attention to the value of the scholarly pursuits represented in this text. Although we are in the second decade of the twenty-first century we are still held back by a cultural repulsion so strong that it directs the academic discourse of toileting.

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The essayists throughout the book are indeed honest, albeit often polite, in their dialog with chapters such as: “Geographies of Danger: School Toilets in Sub-Saharan Africa,” “Stalls between Walls: Segregated Sexed Spaces,” “Our Little Secrets: A Pakistani Artist Explores the Shame and Pride of Her Community’s Bathroom Practices,” and “The Jew on the Loo: The Toilet in Jewish Popular Culture, Memory, and Imagination.” It is intriguing to note that many of these essayists, prior to Gershenson and Penner’s call for papers, felt isolated in their fascination and explorations in toilet culture. Perhaps it seemed a pursuit that lacked the purity associated with the scholar/saint to which so many of us strive. But truly, despite the fact that this is a subject that the society deems inappropriate, public toilets and their underlying articulation of societal assumptions is an important area for critical discourse in the twenty-first century. Indeed there is much to be gained from examining the paradox of our acceptance of graphic displays of fanciful violence and sex yet in light of our utter indignation at the mention of the obligatory process of the human body and its waste products. *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* explores a topic so universal, so fundamental to the human condition that is shocking that only now are we seeing its seminal work.

Gershenson and Penner bring “attention to the multifaceted significance of toilets [in order to] foster social action and lead to greater mindfulness of elimination as a dimension of embodied experience.” That is, they engage in critical discourse that not only questions the subject at hand but the very availability of such a subject to the scholarly gaze. The connections between the toilet and other more firmly entrenched notions of mobility regimes and social control are clearly drawn and amply demonstrated and reinforce the necessity of dedicated investigation. Throughout history, the privilege of access to toilet facilities indicated outsider status to those with a lower social status. By harnessing the ability to dictate a daily need, societies have long used the public toilet to control the amount of and types of persons moving within and through their communities.

The toilet and restrooms in general (particularly women’s restrooms) have long been inefficient and are overdue for a radical reconceptualization. So why in our technological age of advancement has this been overlooked? Simply because, as India once felt of its lower class, it is an untouchable. People do not want to talk of toileting nor wish to have their body of research associated with such a taboo subject, with all of its associated difficulties for advancement.

*Ladies and Gents* is broken up into two sets of essays. The first: “Potty Politics: Toilets, Gender, and Identity” expresses the need for accessible and secure public facilities, for a variety of stakeholders, as an essential element of the creation of cities uniting all of their work/learn/play environments into a conglomerate of socially just spaces. As the editors noted, “far from being banal or simply

functional [public toilets], are highly charged spaces, shaped by notions of propriety, hygiene and the binary gender division.”

Public toilets are part of the vast array of mundane spaces and objects that have only recently come to be understood as arenas for a critical academic investigation. Prior to beginning such an inquiry, it is necessary as with all foundational cultural research to examine the cultural context. The second set of essays does just that: “Toilet Art: Design and Cultural Representations” discusses the public toilet in relation to popular culture, art, film, theater, humor, and architectural design. This section on representation and representational spaces brings the dialog to a decidedly divergent framework. The fresh perspective directs the reader toward a more holistic and synthetic examination of the public toilet and brings into being the possibility that some future student of “Toilet Studies” will be able to do so in a more multifaceted light.

*Ladies and Gents* is ground-breaking collection that achieves a diverse albeit idiosyncratic range of perspectives through its authorship which includes academics, designers, and activists exploring issues of embodiment, gender, sexuality, place, space, culture, architecture, and design. This text deals with pertinent issues largely suppressed in the name of decency or simply ignored by mainstream society. While a fascinating and important read, due to its idiosyncratic, enjoyably fragmented collection parameters you would be misled to believe those who herald this book as the foundational text of “Toilet Studies.” It does however raise important questions about the habitual occurrences that we often overlook and deals directly with those rituals of expulsion and ablution that are perceived to be so filthy that they would contaminate even investigation or public reflection. However, with the publication of *Ladies and Gents* the tide is turning, if only slightly, to allow for the investigation the cultural notions of the body, sexuality, privacy, and technology manifest through public toilets.