

Building protection: Public bathrooms and boundary making in United States history

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These days finding a public bathroom in any city in the United States isn't easy. Sometimes the absence of a clean and accessible toilet is the punchline to a joke, but other times it is something far more menacing, like when two Black men asked to use the Starbucks bathroom in downtown Philadelphia in 2018 and ended up in handcuffs and then on the nightly news.

"America," NYU sociologist and toilet scholar Harvey Molotch told the *Washington Post* after this incident, "has a public bathroom problem."

But the US didn't always have this problem. In the early years of the 20th C., cities from Philadelphia to Lincoln, NE to San Francisco built public bathrooms. And these weren't just metal stalls and sinks with concrete floors. They were "comfort stations". Local officials bragged about the size, central location, and brass and marble finishes of these facilities. At one point, the New York Subway system had more than 1200 public bathrooms. Today there are less than sixty public bathrooms in the entire city and most of them are locked up tight or hidden from sight.

So what happened? Why did US policy makers tear down what they had once built? What does this officially sanctioned, systematic destruction of these key pieces of the urban "social infrastructure" tell us about the building and maintenance of border and boundaries in everyday life in the US, because that's how public bathrooms operated. They were – and are – essential entry points to public life. When policy makers wanted to block people of color, the homeless, and those with fluid notions of sexuality from view, they closed off the bathroom.

My paper will explore these questions by looking at two or three specific bathroom battles that broke out around questions of race, bodies, and segregation (not just in the American South) in 20th century America. It will frame these conflicts as moments of boundary making, and as such, my submission will explore how ideology, conflict, and even systematic humiliation get inscribed into the built environments and public spaces.

CV:

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