

FROM POP-UP TOILET TO PERMANENT FACILITY

Winnipeg's Example of Activist-Led Public Washrooms

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1.0 Introduction

Amidst the shut-down of many businesses and services during the COVID-19 pandemic, cities across Canada were confronted with “the need for washrooms that are accessible to members of the public, particularly people who are houseless” (Barranger et al., 2021, pg.3). However, there has been demonstrated need for public washrooms in Winnipeg long before this time. Between the hesitancy of municipal leadership and “diminishing public investment in urban infrastructure and amenities, citizens and communities have resorted to actions that serve as expressions of both self-help and resistance against the prevailing political and

market conditions” (Hou, 2020, p.118). This is exemplified in Winnipeg, where partnerships of activists and organizations have pushed to reintroduce publicly accessible washrooms through unsanctioned public engagement and tactical pop-up initiatives. Media coverage and online information has been a critical part of these intervention helping to “gradually chang[e] the intensity and nature of public participation” (Lin & Kant, 2021, para.9). Today, online news media and social media platforms continue to “facilitate real-time information dissemination and online dialogue, in which citizens communicate with planners and public authorities” (Lin & Kant, 2021, para. 9).

2.0 Background & Context

In the early 1900s, the City of Winnipeg had five staffed public restrooms; the last of these facilities was shut down in 1979 (MacLean, 2021). In response to the closure of these facilities, the NDP government erected an unpermitted permanent toilet at Memorial Park in 1973 – much to the dismay of municipal elected officials (MacLean, 2021). The question of washroom access in downtown Winnipeg, particularly for unhoused populations, has grown since the 1990s during which most businesses enforced “washrooms for customers only” policies (MacLean, 2021). The Memorial Park washroom was torn down in 2006 due to lack of supervision and concerns with public safety; it was the last remaining public washroom in downtown Winnipeg (MacLean, 2021).

Recognizing the growing need for public washrooms in their own community, BridgmanCollaborative Architecture partnered with the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ in 2008 to initiate the first of three public “pop up” toilet iterations. Through this partnership, two unsanctioned public port-a-potty style toilets were installed at Higgins Avenue and Main Street – right outside BridgmanCollaborative’s office (Bridgman, 2010). Staff from the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ would monitor the washrooms by day, record the number of users per day, and lock the facilities overnight (Bridgman, 2010). By Fall 2008, the City of Winnipeg realized that the toilets had been operating without a city permit and shut them down (Bridgman, 2010). This act of public toilet activism initiated by BridgmanCollaborative reignited the conversation about the need for such facilities in downtown Winnipeg.

By 2018, traditional news media in cities like Montreal, Ottawa, Edmonton, Toronto, and Halifax saw an uptick in reports about their own public toilet projects and policy

initiatives (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018). At that time, Winnipeg still did not have policy or budget in place for public washrooms (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018) despite the tactical urbanism of the port-a-potty installations ten years prior.

Harnessing the national buzz of public washrooms, BridgmanCollaborative Architecture coordinated an ad campaign to dispel negative perceptions of public washrooms – such as fears about criminal activity and maintenance operating costs (Bridgman, 2010). This campaign involved “therapeutic community consultation” led by BridgmanCollaborative (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13), that engaged 50 individuals representing different washroom user groups. Each participant had their photo taken and responded to a questionnaire. The portraits and accompanying quotes of these participants were then printed on posters and displayed on bus shelters, with funding and coordination support of the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018).

In Summer 2018, BridgmanCollaborative, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ, and Siloam Mission partnered together to construct and staff a pop-up washroom installation that doubled as a social enterprise (Bridgman &



Figure 1: Public toilet poster campaign (BridgmanCollaborative Architecture)



Figure 2: Pop-Up Public Toilet outside of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in downtown Winnipeg (Jaqueline Young/Standpoint Photographic)

Bridgman, 2019). The pop-up washroom was a temporary, mobile structure that occupied five prominent locations throughout downtown Winnipeg (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018). The washrooms were programmed to have staff on site while the washroom was open, to enhance the safety and engagement of the space as well as record the number of users per day (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018). The Downtown Winnipeg BIZ contributed \$100,000 towards the project, which was used to construct the facility and train ambassador staff (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). Collaborators noted that the presence of on-site staff contributed to the success of the pilot project (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2019).

The high visibility of the pop-up locations caught the attention of the media and helped raise awareness about the need for washrooms in downtown Winnipeg. The three pop-up toilet iterations highlighted the need to investment in permanent and accessible facilities (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2018), supportive city policies, and funding for daily operations (Bridgman & Bridgman, 2019). Finally, because the tactical urbanism of the campaigns and pop-ups were publicized in the news, more people were able to learn about, be educated, and support the project.

3.0 Case Study

The Amoowigamig Public Toilet at 715 Main Street in Winnipeg, Manitoba was

a culmination of BridgmanCollaborative Architecture’s consistent activism, multi-sector collaboration, momentum from previous temporary pop-up washrooms, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the construction of this permanent facility, BridgmanCollaborative went through visioning sessions with the City of Winnipeg and many other organizations to strategically plan for public washrooms in Winnipeg (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). When the pandemic hit and many shelters were closed as a result (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023), the need for a place where vulnerable populations could ‘go’ became glaringly obvious.

The concept for Amoowigamig is based on trauma-informed design – focused on addressing vulnerability concerns commonly associated with public washrooms, such as cramped and dark spaces (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). The facility’s essential design components included lighting, ventilation, and functionality for all persons. The bright yellow paint and toilet stalls wide enough to accommodate shopping carts (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023) make the space more welcoming. The facility is heated via a piping system in the floors and the doors on the north side of the structure can be opened for added ventilation (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023).



Figure 3: Rendering of Amoowigamig’s interior (BridgmanCollaborative Architecture)

Determining a site for a permanent facility was the most challenging part of the project (Wins Bridgman, personal communication March 13, 2023). Many locations for a permanent washroom could be justified based on the pop-up toilets' usage data accrued by the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ; the challenge was narrowing down available land with proper infrastructure for the facility (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). For instance, one site of interest on Henry Avenue and Main Street could not support a permanent structure due to plumbing interference (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). A key turning point for the project occurred when Damon Johnston from Thunderbird House leased the organization's land to the city to build Amoowigamig (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023).

A large portion of Amoowigamig's funding came from the Community Response Fund for Vulnerable Populations (CRFVP), donated by the Canadian Medical Association Foundation, and distributed by the City of Winnipeg via the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2023). Of this grant, \$620,000 went towards the facility's construction (CBC News, 2020), and the City of Winnipeg agreed to cover the 2022 costs of two staff working on-site for 12 hours per day, seven days a week (MacLean, 2021).

4.0 Outcomes

Amoowigamig's construction was completed by May 2022 and the facility opened in June 2022. Currently, the public washroom is staffed and open from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., seven days a week (MacLean, 2023; Pursaga, 2023). A great contributor to the success of the project has been the on-site support staff offered by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre. Beyond public toilet access, the services provided by staff at Amoowigamig include distribution of free condoms, needles, and

safe crack use kits (StreetConnections, 2023). Due to the presence and care of on-site staff, 30 washroom users have been housed since the June 2022 (Pursaga, 2023).

Since opening, the washroom has been widely successful and has been visited over 20,000 times (MacLean, 2023). However, recent news reports have indicated that the city may reduce Amoowigamig's operating hours due to unanticipated budget constraints. The facility has exceeded its expected use, and as a result, requires additional operational funding beyond provision in the city's 2023 annual budget (MacLean, 2023). The city requires an additional \$38,000 to maintain the current hours of operation for the rest of the year (Pursaga, 2023) to prevent Amoowigamig's hours from being cut to eight hours per day (MacLean, 2023).

5.0 Lessons Learned

Media plays an important role in promoting awareness of planning issues and garner public support for dignity-driven planning initiatives. Studies have found that "activists can utilize media to raise awareness and advocate the marginalized interests" (Tayebi, 2013, p.91), which is clearly demonstrated by the Amoowigamig project. From the initial pop-up toilets to the permanent facility, media has been leveraged by BridgmanCollaborative and partnering collaborators to generate public awareness of the need for public washrooms. Online and print media have also found to be instrumental in formalizing provocative, unsanctioned projects within policy (Douglas, 2018). Similarly, the publicized success of BridgmanCollaborative's previous pop-up toilets pioneered the Amoowigamig project. Other forms of media, such as the bus stop ad campaign, also worked to involve citizens in the planning process; not only did the posters give voices to the 50 photographed participants, images and quotes framed the project in an empathetic way and reinforced

the idea that washrooms are a universal need (Wins Bridgman, personal communication, March 13, 2022). Physical posters also widely communicated the project to persons who may not have access to the internet and social media.

Although construction for the project is completed, Amoowigamig continues to garner public support for future funding initiatives through online media. As of March 7, 2023, a petition by Change.org had garnered 2,800 signatures to increase the facility's operating hours (Pursaga, 2023), and by March 21, 2023, City of Winnipeg elected officials voted to grant Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre funds to maintain on-site staff at Amoowigamig (Unger, 2023). Information about the funding allocation and decision-making of Amoowigamig continues to be shared through news article and personal channels, where "[t]he forwarding or sharing function of social networking sites provides an opportunity for different social groups to raise a voice and make a specific concern to reach a large audience" (Lin & Kant, 2021, para. 9).

6.0 Conclusion

Municipal governments and staff should take note of online input and influence from citizens, activists, and organizations alike. Multi-sector collaboration and activism can support the success of a project, as demonstrated by the unsanctioned work of BridgmanCollaborative in partnership with community-led organizations and formalized as a permanent structure by city administration. By harnessing the power and influence of print and social media, more voices may be heard and considered in planning and decision-making.

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