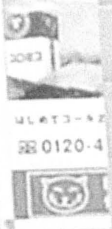
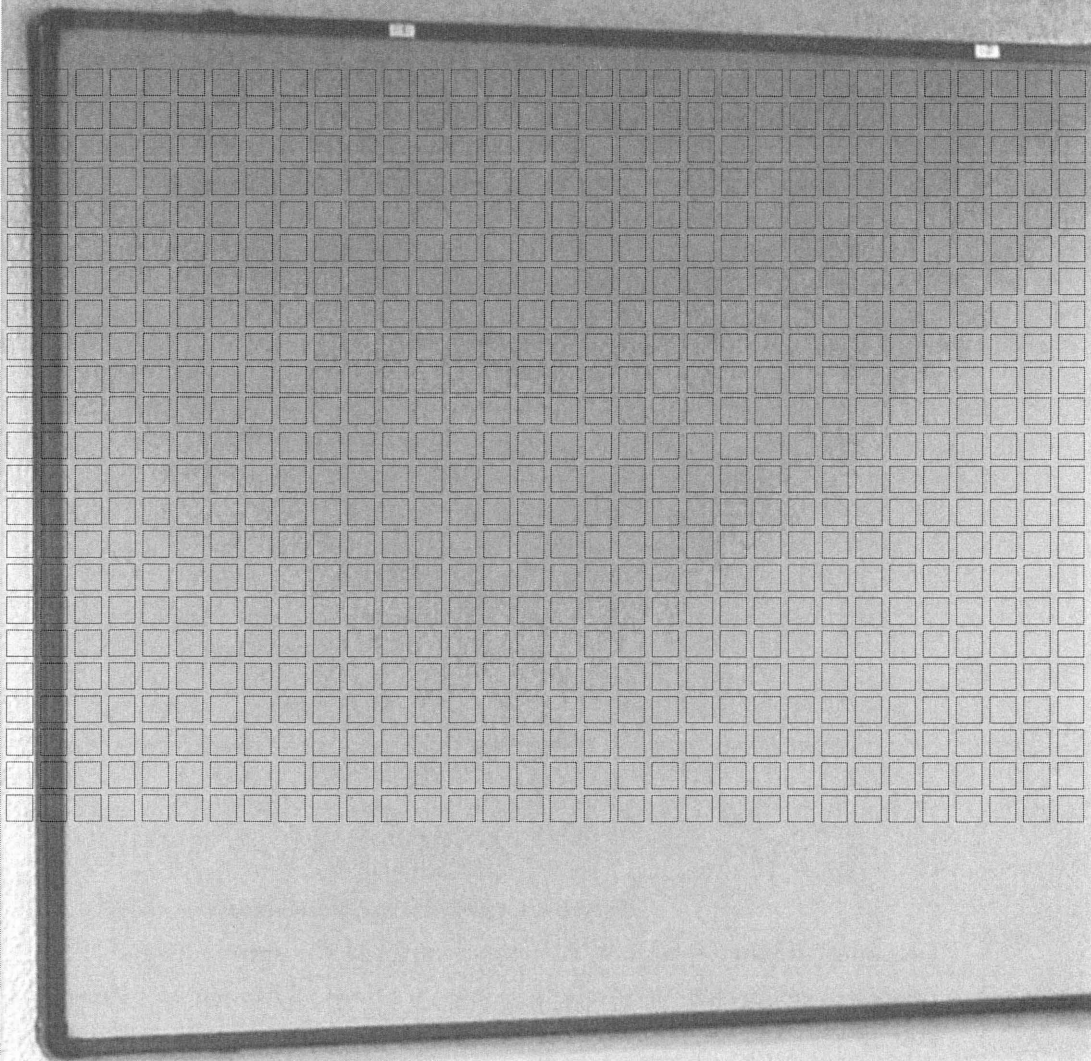


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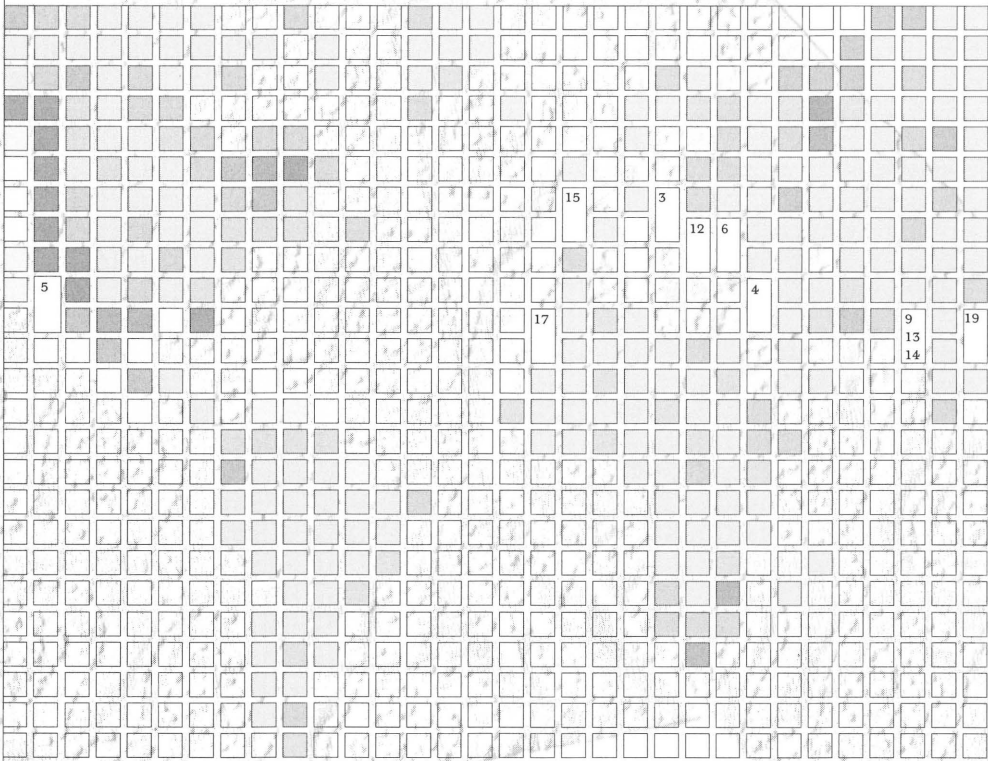


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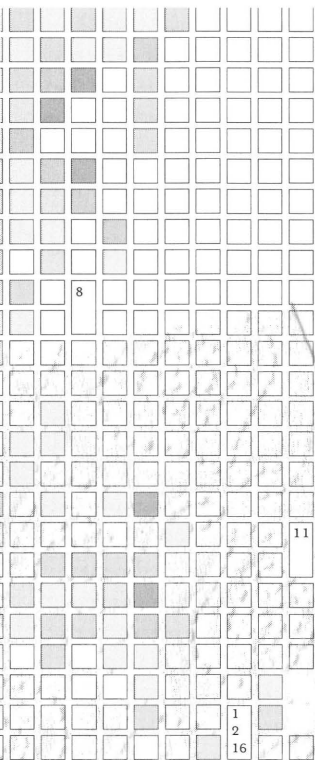




Lynne Ciochetto



The need for clear cross-cultural signage is related to increasing international business, recreational travel as well as significant world events like the Olympics. Using toilet signage as the occasion for examining cultural diversity and similarity, the author takes an historical approach to sanitary habits, contextualizing cultural habit and its manifestation in signage. Visual documentary evidence from many cultures accompanies the discussion. Analysis and investigation of these images in terms of uniformity within diversity locate the key functional characteristics of toilet signage as identification and segregation. A high level of consistency in use of male and female images to identify toilets, along with a great diversity in visual treatment characterize this study.



represents figure number in context of location

The widespread use of pictorial signage for toilets is a product of the acceleration of mass tourism, along with the internationalization of business and the economy that has taken place since the 1960s, but is also part of the processes and changes in society that commenced in the nineteenth century and arose out of the Industrial Revolution. In the contemporary period toilet signs are almost universally indicated by images of men and women, and the segregation of the sexes seems to occur in most cultures. I consider that this phenomenon is a product of the expansion of western culture internationally both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The development of pictorial information systems was a product of changes in the post World War II period, but the dissemination of these systems followed the expansion of US business, the internationalism of commerce and culture that occurred in the post war period which was driven by the United States. The use of these symbols paralleled the 'international style' of graphic design adopted by corporations for their communications (internal and external), based on a European visual and philosophical tradition, but driven by American and European business requirements. Toilet signs tend to be more abstract and stylized when they are in locations of high density traffic and tend to be in the international pictograph style reflecting a dominance of western form and culture. The vernacular and more popular forms tend to be in third world countries or in locations that experience low density traffic flows.

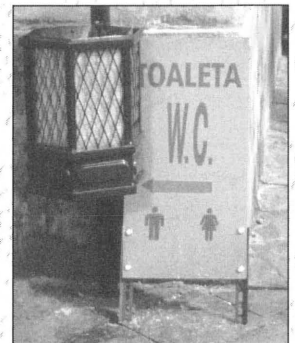
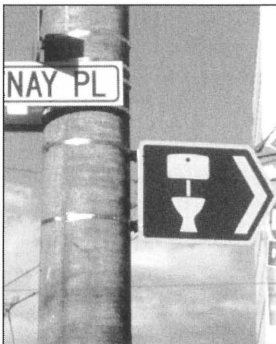
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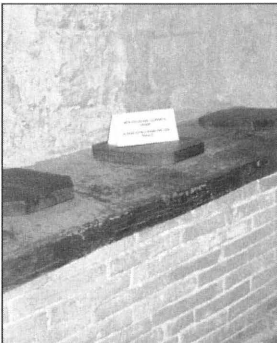
INTRODUCTION: **definitions and function**

(identification and segregation)

The signs identifying public toilets are some of the most common images existing cross-culturally in the contemporary era. Charles Saunders Peirce's definitions are useful to clarify different functional characteristics of signage. He defined signs in terms of three categories: icons, indices and symbols (Fiske, 1991). Toilet signage demonstrates characteristics of each category. The icon is defined as a sign that resembles the object. I found only a few examples that actually depict the toilet itself, and these were recently introduced in New Zealand (FIGURE 1). More often toilets signs represent users, differentiated into men and women, (and sometimes children), which I consider to be an iconic function. The index provides a direct link between the sign and the object, and toilet signage most commonly does this by indicating location, usually on the door of the toilet or a street sign near to the facility (FIGURE 2). The toilet sign also has a symbolic function as it does not, in most cases, depict the facility or the activity of using a toilet and thus involves learned behavior and culturally accepted conventions on segregation of the sexes and use of toilet facilities. Words also fall into the symbolic category as language involves learned behavior, as written words do not directly depict meaning (FIGURE 3). The commonly seen combination of both image and text raises the issue of the effectiveness of the pictorial image alone. While I consider that toilet signage falls into the category of signage that has elements of the icon, index and symbol, Fiske considers signs denoting men's and women's toilets as iconic (1991: 47).



The symbolic function of toilet signs in segregating the sexes is closely tied to cultural values. Historically in Europe, there is evidence of communal toilets in garrisons, castles and monasteries, but except for the latter it is not known if these were segregated (FIGURE 4). The segregation of toilets in the nineteenth century seems to be the product of Victorian values and the creation of different spheres of influence for men and women and the Victorian culture of prudery about sexual matters. Most cultures today have evolved privacy codes that forbid members of the opposite sex viewing the genital area of the opposite sex, as well as restrictions on the same gender using the facilities except for children and sometimes the disabled (FIGURE 5). Issues regarding the safety of women are another factor reinforcing segregation. In contemporary societies toilets are differentiated by gender in most cultures even when the toilets are shut behind doors in cubicles. The nature of toilet provision differs according to gender in most places. Privacy is provided in cubicles for women to both urinate and defecate, but not for men. Men publicly use urinals, while cubicles are provided for defecation, though some male toilets only provide urinals. The physical activity is rarely reflected in the signage (FIGURE 6). This segregated combination of toilet facility has been exported internationally as part of the western cultural package in colonial and post-colonial period and the signage used is part of the same tradition.



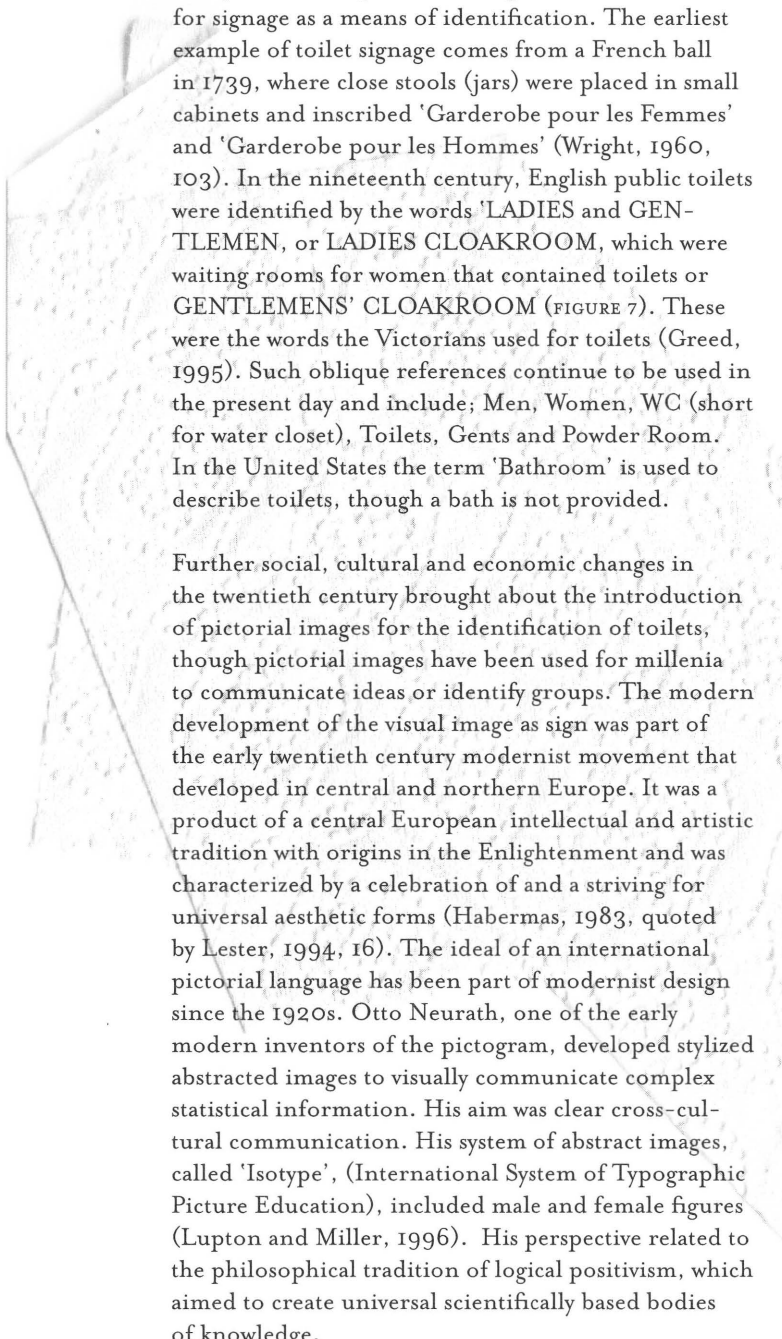
Though the history of toilet signage is relatively recent, dealing with human waste is part of the history of society and has been an issue wherever significant numbers of people are concentrated. Societies have developed systems for dealing with waste with varying degrees of success. The earliest example of toilet provision is in Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, where there is evidence of indoor toilets and a drainage system 5,000 years ago (Kilroy, 1984). There are remains of sewage systems in the Minoan cities of Crete from 2,500-950 BC; the Sumerians of the Indus valley and the Etruscans in 500 BC and Rome (Hugo-Brun, 1972). In castles, toilets were often placed on the outer walls and waste dropped to the moats or containers below. In the middle ages until the nineteenth century, waste was often collected in chamber pots that were poured out the windows into the streets. Different arrangements accommodated these pots, which were often enclosed in cabinets or portable commodes. The flushing toilet, common in the contemporary era, came into common usage in Europe in the late nineteenth century.



There are examples of public toilet provision in Roman cities and garrisons and even in British city ordinances in the twelfth century (Wright, 1960: 47-49). The need for public toilet provision was intensified by changes in society brought about by the industrialization of the nineteenth century that resulted in increased mobility and increased segregation of people among work, home and leisure activities. Some of these changes included: improvements in standards of living, the growth of cities, the expansion of the railways and transportation and the expansion of travel. The expansion of the railways stimulated the growth of mass tourism. There was an expansion in organized travel — travel was previously arranged by individuals and only a small number of wealthy elite travelled. In 1844 Thomas Cook introduced his first 'pleasure excursion' and by 1864 over a million passengers had travelled with him (Urry, 1990: 24). The first public toilet for men in the United Kingdom was opened in 1854 (Allen, 1991). Railway companies provided the first public toilets in Britain on station platforms in the nineteenth century. On the trains the first public toilets were provided in first class in 1874 and for the second classes in the 1880s (Horan, 1996). Travel stimulated the building of large hotels, the first being beside the railway stations. In the later nineteenth century the first department stores were built which also provided public toilets and rest rooms for 'ladies' (Adburgham, 1981; Davis, 1966). In 1851, six million people visited The Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace. Events like the Great Exhibition were soon duplicated throughout Europe and North America. The middle classes started eating outside their homes in public restaurants and hotels for the first time. At the same time, the need for toilet provision was intensified by this expansion of public life outside the workplace and home.

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The provision of public toilets generated the need for signage as a means of identification. The earliest example of toilet signage comes from a French ball in 1739, where close stools (jars) were placed in small cabinets and inscribed 'Garderobe pour les Femmes' and 'Garderobe pour les Hommes' (Wright, 1960, 103). In the nineteenth century, English public toilets were identified by the words 'LADIES and GENTLEMEN, or LADIES CLOAKROOM, which were waiting rooms for women that contained toilets or GENTLEMENS' CLOAKROOM (FIGURE 7). These were the words the Victorians used for toilets (Greed, 1995). Such oblique references continue to be used in the present day and include; Men, Women, WC (short for water closet), Toilets, Gents and Powder Room. In the United States the term 'Bathroom' is used to describe toilets, though a bath is not provided.

Further social, cultural and economic changes in the twentieth century brought about the introduction of pictorial images for the identification of toilets, though pictorial images have been used for millenia to communicate ideas or identify groups. The modern development of the visual image as sign was part of the early twentieth century modernist movement that developed in central and northern Europe. It was a product of a central European intellectual and artistic tradition with origins in the Enlightenment and was characterized by a celebration of and a striving for universal aesthetic forms (Habermas, 1983, quoted by Lester, 1994, 16). The ideal of an international pictorial language has been part of modernist design since the 1920s. Otto Neurath, one of the early modern inventors of the pictogram, developed stylized abstracted images to visually communicate complex statistical information. His aim was clear cross-cultural communication. His system of abstract images, called 'Isotype', (International System of Typographic Picture Education), included male and female figures (Lupton and Miller, 1996). His perspective related to the philosophical tradition of logical positivism, which aimed to create universal scientifically based bodies of knowledge.

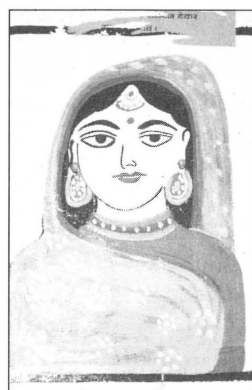
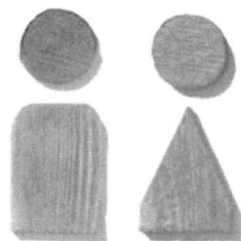
The need for the communication of information within and across cultures arose from the further expansion of international business and growth in travel and tourism, especially after World War II. Increased mobility, facilitated by the growth of car ownership after the 1920s, was later expanded by air travel. The 1938 Holidays Act in Britain introducing the paid holiday reinforced the institution of travel as part of contemporary life. By World War II there was widespread acceptance of the view that going on holiday was beneficial and a right of citizenship. The expansion of internationalized travel and mass tourism is one of the phenomena of the post war period. The first international jet service was established in 1957 (Urry, 1995). Mass tourism became internationalized in the mid-1960s and by 1984 there were almost 300 million tourist arrivals worldwide and international tourism was recognised by the International Monetary Fund as the second largest item in world trade (Urry, 1990: 47). The increased numbers of people on the move created a need for support facilities and toilets as part of the essential services. Signage is necessary as a means of identifying location at airports and railway stations and locations of mass activity and transit as well as public places, workplaces and throughout society wherever groups of people congregate. The signage systems implemented were usually part of the design and construction package.

The ideas of comprehensive design systems for organizations and public events took hold at this time. Other significant international public events of the post war period included the Tokyo Olympics in 1964,



the Mexico Olympics in 1967 and the Munich Olympics in 1970 and World Fairs, all of which had signage systems developed to facilitate communication to large numbers of people who spoke different languages. Visual way-finding systems were developed to facilitate these processes and toilet signs always play a crucial role in these symbol systems (Meggs, 1984).

One of the most thorough systems was developed by the United States Department of Transportation in 1974 (Meggs, 1984). Mass tourism in the United States tended to be national rather than international. There was a massive expansion in the ownership of motor cars in the United States compared to Europe and it was also the time in which the major freeway systems were constructed. The D.O.T. images are the ones that seem to have become standardized internationally in public places. The reason for this was that American business led the way in international expansion at this time. American businesses led the world in overseas investment in the post war period, starting with the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe. The organizations of the United Nations, such as the World Bank and IMF, also provided much of the finance and expertise in major projects such as building the international airports that were built in the 'development decades' after the 1960s (Meggs, 1984). The development of these symbol systems for public information paralleled the rise of corporate identity programs that were also a product of growth and expansion of international business and the growth of multinational corporations. Lupton and Miller see these processes as part of the emergence of an 'international hieroglyphics of communication' (1996), which was part of the expansion of the 'International Style' in graphic design that characterized corporate design in the 1960s and 1970s. The widespread adoption of these visual image systems internationally came about because they met a real communication need to convey information to large numbers of people who speak different languages. The visual information systems that have been adopted vary in detail but the more public they are the more they tend to follow standardized forms derived from the D.O.T. system.



8: Japan

9: Mandawa, India

10: D.O.T. US

VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS **of toilet**
signage

Most toilet signs take the form of stylized male and female figures, they range in style from minimal abstraction to detailed illustration in many media (plastic label, wood, copper, ceramics or simply painted on the door). At one end of the spectrum there is abstraction of the human form by using geometric shapes (FIGURE 8) at the other end detailed illustration (FIGURE 9).

The most commonly occurring signs are those derived from the D.O.T. and the Olympic signage systems of the 1960s. In these symbol systems the male and female toilet symbols differentiate toilets with the male form showing legs or trousers, and the female differentiated by a fin-like skirt (FIGURE 10). The generic form for humanity is the male figure and it is used throughout the systems except for the toilets where the woman is introduced. One instance when there are two figures depicted in the D.O.T. information system, the woman is waiting on the man, this reinforces the innate gender bias of most cultures reflected in these signs (Lupton, 1993: 225) and is similar in function to the word 'human' where 'man' is the default word for all people. These signs are culturally specific and their precise meanings (toilet here) are learned. As Lupton and Miller point out, the image of a woman conveys the service 'toilet' rather than 'brothel' where women's services can be bought. Also the clean, geometric forms are loaded with the cultural associations 'public,' 'neutral,' 'modern' (1996:44). Some problems result from the cultural bias of the internationalization of visual images, for example, in Saudi Arabia men and women wear the long skirt. Lupton provides an example where the female is differentiated by a veil, but this is reinforced by text in English and Arabic (1993: 229).

Often there is a lack of connection between the images used and contemporary cultural practices. The most common signs are those based on western dress with the male figure in trousers and the female in a skirt. They are culturally specific and are not obvious to those cultures where women wear trousers, for example, in China and Vietnam or in India where women wear a sari over pants and men wear a skirt-like wrap. Increasingly women in western industrialized countries wear trousers as well as men, but I have not seen a woman's toilet indicated by an image of a woman in trousers. Images of the sexes do not necessarily correlate with dress conventions in a society.

Explicit representation of actions associated with toilets is usually reserved for men (FIGURE 11) and seem to refer to urinals rather than full facilities, though examples from Spain and Budapest has a child sitting on a toilet (FIGURE 12). Age seems to make it acceptable to represent the act of using the toilet.

Partial representation in terms of the head and shoulders (frontal or profile) rely on length of hair or hairstyle (FIGURE 13). Another type of representation, largely seen in western locations, is with objects associated with men and women, such as top hats and gloves for men and cosmetics for women.

The most interesting forms of signage are often in restaurants and bars. Here there is a much higher incidence of local character and visual reference, because they are more likely to reflect local humor or vernacular tastes (FIGURE 14, 15 AND 16). They seem to be more often locally produced using local crafts or techniques (FIGURE 17).

There doesn't seem to be any relationship between style of signage and style of facility except that recently introduced unisex toilets have male and female signs on the toilet doors and sometimes a smaller image of the forms is used to represent a child (FIGURE 18).

There does not seem to be any correlation between signage and cultural differences in the use of public toilets. The main differences in toilets are the toilet



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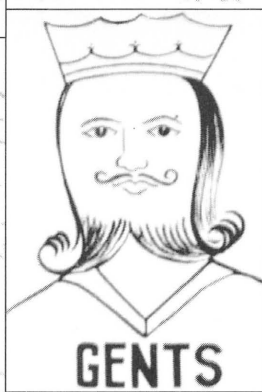
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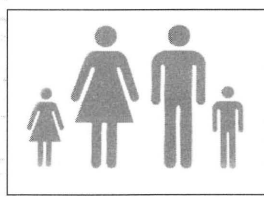
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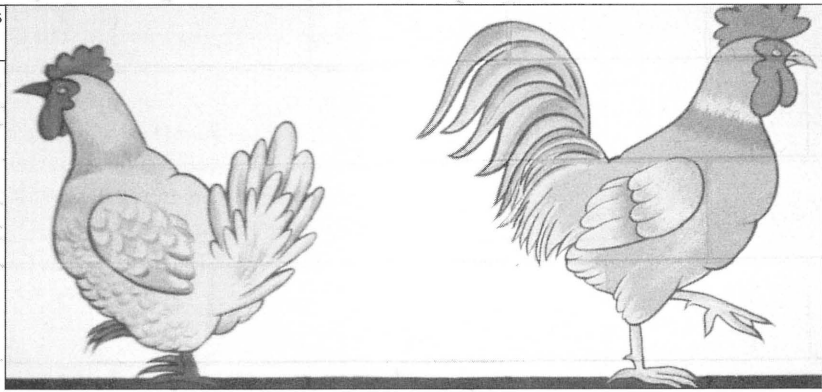
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19 16



1: Rarotonga (Jen Cheyne)

12: Budapest, Hungary

13: India

13: India

4: India

14: India

15: London, England

17: Morocco

9: Bhaktapur, Nepal

16: Oamaru, New Zealand

10: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

18: Wellington, New Zealand

with a bowl and seat, the urinal and the toilet that is hole in the ground with footrests. In some countries the former is differentiated by the term 'western toilet' or 'tourist toilet' (FIGURE 19). Signs tend to be more abstract in the more public locations and in international venues like airports or in public institutions where there are likely to be greater numbers of people from diverse cultures.

In many cases the word and sign are used (FIGURE 20) which implies a doubt that the images alone are sufficient as a means of communication.

CONCLUSION

The most common form of signage for public toilets that exists cross-culturally are the stylized forms of men and women that are derived from the signage systems developed for the major Olympic events of the 1960s and 1970s and the 1974 U.S. Department of Transport symbol system. The need to communicate to vast numbers of people who do not speak the same language prompted the development of these systems, but they have been exported internationally following the massive expansion of tourism and business in the period since 1960. The signs tend to be more illustrative, playful and culturally specific the further they are from the public arena.



AUTHOR NOTE

Lynne Giochetto is associate professor and head of two-dimensional design at the College of Design, Fine Arts and Music at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. With degrees in Sociology and Anthropology, a Masters in Sociology, a post-graduate diploma in Development Studies, she also has three years post-graduate study at the Kuntsgewerbeschule, Basel, in Graphic Design. Her approach is interdisciplinary and her passion for travel is reflected in her research. She has published articles on contemporary advertising and cultural change in Russia and in Vietnam. She is currently working on papers on advertising in India and China. In the course of her travels she collects interesting visual images, including the toilet signage seen in this essay.

