

Oh de Toilette!



Venue takes a close look at what's going down in bathroom design ...

Text: Sophie Gebhardt

While we all appreciate a great toilet in a venue — on a number of occasions I've returned to friends exclaiming, "You should check out the toilets!" — the significance of the smallest room for designers and venue owners has historically taken a bit of a back seat. In fact, a little sceptical about finding an interesting angle for this article, I was pleasantly surprised to find that there's often huge pride taken in creating a distinctive bathroom, and much thought put in to how to do so within the strict codes that apply to these spaces. So venue has scoured the land for toilets that stand out from the crowd and transcend the limits of the imagination. From over-the-top to sophisticated understatement, I, for one, will never think about toilets in quite the same way again.

Codes of Conduct

A number of those interviewed for this article said that sticking to the codes poses a challenge that pushes the creative mind to great heights. Both Craig Gamble (MIC Theatre Development Manager) and David Saunders (S2 Design) commented that, often, disabled toilets end up being aesthetically restricted as a result of a lack of flexibility in the standards. Craig notes that "the code requirements begin to create issues in disabled toilets in terms of design, which is why we have to have a white basin for example: the shape, the tap format, the reach distance, all of those things begin to drive what you have in your facilities. The code is, in lots of ways, fantastic — it's great that it's so prescriptive — but I think, in our industry, we need to find a way that is perhaps closer to the American model, where certain classes of buildings, like theatres, are allowed more flexibility. For example, in here (the disabled toilet), those who need wheelchair access almost have less amenities because of the code."

David Saunders echoes this sentiment in relation to his experience designing the disabled toilet for Yar restaurant & bar: "I really wanted to have the same detail in the disabled toilet as in the other toilets, so that the clients wouldn't feel like they had anything less and that their bathrooms were as highly considered as the others. But they couldn't be, because of the limits that are imposed by the code."

1. Garden Bar, Mawson Club: The Garden Bar, with its feature underground funky toilet space provides a communal double-sided vanity space and feature metal beaded curtain with lighting dappling the whole space. The red and black create a night club feel. Design by Altis Architecture.

2. Steel Bar+Grill, Sydney: Designed by Dreamtime Australia Design, the bathrooms remain a key feature of this steel-inspired restaurant and bar in Sydney's CBD.

3. Williamstown Apartment, Melbourne: In this Williamstown apartment building Jado Décor created a luxurious bathroom using simple touches, such as the elegant light fitting and bevelled mirror. The client wanted dark tiles so a number of different textures are used to create interest within the overall minimalist aesthetic.

4. Valve, Melbourne: Like the rest of the nightclub, Valve's loos are uncompromisingly chic. Note the toilet/hand basin combo. Design by Playground Melbourne.

» Altis Architecture: (02) 9364 9000 or www.altisarchitecture.com.au

» Dreamtime Australia Design: www.dreamtimeaustraliadesign.com

» Jado Décor: www.jado.com.au

» Playground Melbourne: 1300 734 560 or info@playgroundmelbourne.com





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1. Melbourne Theatre Company: The new MTC toilets are an exercise in intensity. Floor-to-ceiling tiles and colour makes the correct lighting the space more important and more difficult (Electrolight took care of this job). Design by Ashton Raggatt McDougall, tiles by Bisazza.

2. Argyle, Sydney: Michael McCann's Dreamtime went to town on these communal loos. Each pod houses a toilet, while the basin accepts water from the faucet above. Quite the talking point.

3. Dee Why RSL: The design incorporates the use of a Japanese Zen garden which allows patrons to use the facilities in relaxed surroundings. The neutral tones create a backdrop for the greenery. Design by Altis Architecture in collaboration with Kell & Rigby.

4/5. Yar, Melbourne: Textures, materials and colours set the tone at Yar. The ceiling features Elvis-like sky crane stencils, designed by Daniel Truscott. Apparently the cranes were an inside joke, turning the use of the Japanese crane motif (used heavily in the restaurant) on its head. Design by S2, Urinals by Britext, and taps by RBA Group.

» Ashton Raggatt McDougall: www.a-r-m.com.au

» Dreamtime Australia Design: www.dreamtimeaustraliadesign.com

» Altis Architecture: (02) 9364 9000 or www.altisarchitecture.com.au

» S2 Design: (03) 9534 9181 or www.s2design.com.au



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Resort design is trending towards integrating the bathroom into sleeping and living areas. Mostly this is accomplished by the use of windows (bi-fold or otherwise) between the bathroom and living. But it seems that the more luxurious the resort the closer you are to actually sleeping in the spa. As you'll see below.

1. Ultra South Penthouse: The idea here was to strip all unnecessary detailing and produce a minimal apartment. Mission accomplished, I'd say. (Design by DBI Design)

2. Peppers Blue on Blue: DBI Design takes the bathroom literally into the bedroom.

3. Sun Studios: Designer, Ian Nessick wanted to recreate a very Australian look for this photo studio complex. Why? It's housed in an old wool shed.

4. Radisson Hotel at Century Park, Shanghai: Visible from the suite, the bathrooms are both luxurious and add a quirky dimension to the rooms. A palette of creams, greens and whites contributes to a sense of space and light. The deluxe room stands out (6.) with the bath perched next to the window, the swirling aquatic design on the ceiling and the combination of sophisticated and unconventional accessories. Design by Hassell. (Photo: Derryck Menere.)

» DBI Design: (07) 5539 9788 or info@dbidesign.com.au

» Ian Nessick Creative: www.iannessickcreative.com

» Hassell: www.hassell.com.au



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5. Hotel Emporium: The Brissy-based boutique hotel is heavy on design, including cool, sexy bathrooms. Design by Urban Arts Projects and Greg Harris Design.

6. Radisson Hotel at Century Park, Shanghai: check No. 4's caption for more.

7. hard YAK, Melbourne: Sensuous, natural materials abound in this, now defunct, café/bar, dotted with antique items you might find in your grandmother's house to imbue a sense of familiarity. Caesarstone benchtops, Jarrah timber, chandelier from the Chapel Street Bazaar, and fixtures from Reece. Design by S2. (photo: Urban Angles.)

» Urban Art Project: (07) 3630 or www.uap.com.au

» Hassell: www.hassell.com.au

» S2 Design: (03) 9534 9181 or www.s2design.com.au



This has the effect of running oddly counter to the code's intentions, which are about, primarily, providing equal access for the disabled. This cannot, currently, extend to equal access to the kind of attention to design characterising the contemporary bathroom, singling out the disabled toilets as somewhat lesser spaces. Craig Gamble suggests that, to address this issue, "for places like cinemas and theatres, which are Category 9B buildings, there should perhaps be a subset of the Building Code of Australia for universal access in 9B buildings... but enough people have to talk about it before it is a possibility." Amy McArthur, from Plus Architecture, notes that manufacturers have a captive market in producing code-compliant fittings that are more aesthetically pleasing: "It's just an intelligent thing for manufacturers to do, because the code has become more and more stringent every year, and any development or refurbishment that we do has to comply."

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It's the Journey...

We've all been there. That awkward moment when we get up to go to the toilet at a bar or restaurant and we can't find them. Or, it's so patently obvious where it is that we feel like everyone is watching as we go in, and then again as we come out... Is there toilet paper stuck to my shoe? Is my fly undone?

There are two elements to good bathroom design that address this issue, and it is in striking a delicate balance between ease of access and discretion that the problem is surmounted. In the case of restaurants and bars, David Saunders adheres to a policy of illusion: "You can create a sense of not going to the bathroom, as though you're leaving the building, or just going somewhere else in that direction. So in Yar, you go down that same passageway to get to the staff office; you could be going to the office." And if you can't find the toilets? "Yeah, that's uncomfortable too. And that's a signage issue. And there are actually standards and regulations that govern signage. With toilets it's a bit more flexible than say, fire exits. You might put up a sign and then the owner might rip it down later, and no one is really going to enforce it because, you know, lives aren't going to be lost!"

In the case of theatre toilets, however, lives *might* be lost in the charge to relieve during the 20-minute interval. This high level of demand placed restrictions on Ashton Raggatt McDougall's original plans for the MTC toilets, where they were "keen to replicate the same trick that is played at Storey Hall, with hot pink in the gents and bright blue in the ladies."

Craig Gamble explained why the MTC had to go for the more traditional colour scheme: "Being the iconoclasts that Ashton Raggatt McDougall are, they love the concept of the confusion produced by the switch. And that's fine for Storey Hall, but, as you know, for an interval in a theatre 500 people get up and leave the room: 250 go to the bar and 250 go to the toilet, and then they change places and go back in. We can't have that hesitation at the door of 'Hang on, it's pink — am I in the right place...?' So we had to move away from that — the joke would be fantastic but it can't work at interval. So we went for the traditional blue for boys, pink for girls, and as you can see, it's pretty intense!"

... & the Destination

It is clear that making the journey to the toilets as comfortable as possible is a crucial element in their design, focusing on exactly where in the layout the toilets are placed, how they are accessed and making them easily located. And once you're there, what then? Well, what once was a bit of a design afterthought (and remains so in lesser establishments) is now without doubt a place to showcase ones art, to capitalise on what David Saunders describes as "a dedicated audience". "I think that toilets are places where people will scrutinise detail, so it's an opportunity to present different concepts: they're a showcase. I've heard a lot of people talk about restaurants and then talk about the toilets and they were disgusting! And after that they don't want to eat there and certainly will never go back." While David concentrates on continuing the theme of the restaurant or bar throughout the toilets, at the MTC the idea was to have the toilets stand out from the minimalism of the rest of the theatre building. Craig Gamble points out that "all of the spaces in here and next door, and the upstairs facilities, they all have a different style about them, a different sense, and that's where Simon Phillips (MTC Artistic Director) has tried to go with them. They're not just black and white."

And from all those I spoke to there are some basic details that cannot be overlooked: somewhere to put your bag, or your program in the case of the theatre; good lighting that doesn't cast shadows or highlight imperfections; and high quality low-maintenance surfaces that stand the test of time. Most importantly perhaps, as David Saunders concludes, in toilets that are making a statement, "the experience is enjoyable, visually stimulating, rather than technical, so you don't feel that urgency to get in and get out." <<



1. & 4. Sydney's The Beresford Hotel has just reopened after an elaborate make-over at the hands of Thomas Jacobsen. Thomas is a stickler for craftsmanship and quality and these high-end values extend to the European unisex club-style loos that have a brazen theatricality. They're darkly glamorous in black tile emblazoned with circles of Italian white gold mosaic and flaming red lettering. Even the toilet paper is black. (Photos: Andrew Jarvie)
 2. The Columbian: not the newest job, but still worth a look. SJB Interiors piled on the urban edginess for the Darlinghurst nightspot.
 4. Jacques Reymond: This highly salubrious and multi-hatted fine dining restaurant in Melbourne's inner east needed highly salubrious (if not multi-hatted) bathrooms. Enter SJB Interiors for some refined, slinky sophistication. Subdued lighting, generous basins and ottomans ensure patrons don't take one look in the mirror and run.
 » Thomas Jacobsen: (02) 9357 1509 or designs@thomasjacobsen.com
 » SJB Interiors: (03) 9686 2122 or www.sjb.com.au

