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Places of vulnerability: an investigation of restroom symbols, labels, and gender neutrality

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Places of vulnerability:

An investigation of restroom symbols, labels, and gender neutrality

by

Sara Elaine Wichtendahl

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
Debra Satterfield, Major Professor
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Ames, Iowa
2006

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For Joe

You inspire me every day
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES**

**ABSTRACT**

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

- Purpose Statement: 1
- Introduction: 2

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

- Introduction to Literature Review: 5
- Sex and Gender: 7
- Current Societal Trends and Attitudes Towards Gender: 17
- Dis/ability in America: 26
- Thirdspace and the Trilectics of Spatiality: 31
- Restrooms as Places of Discrimination: 35
- Symbols and Semiotics: 42
- Symbol Analysis: 45
- Conclusion: 52

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

- Symbol Survey Creation: 53
- Survey Analysis: 67
- Testing the Symbols: 78
- Public Reactions: 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of the Reactions</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Limitations and Areas for Further Research</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: SYMBOL SURVEY AND IMAGES</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: P.I.S.S.R. SURVEY</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL STATEMENT</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Transamerica Movie Poster 19
FIGURE 2: Transgeneration Movie Poster 20
FIGURE 3: Positive Space Campaign Poster 25
FIGURE 4: The Trilectics of Spatiality 32
FIGURE 5: Sign Marking Gender Free Restroom from PISSR Website 41
FIGURE 6: Full Set of AIGA and D.O.T. Transportation Symbols 47
FIGURE 7: Proportion Diagram of Restroom Symbols 48
FIGURE 8: Family Fitting Rooms Sign at Target Store 49
FIGURE 9: Restroom Sign with Ability Size Difference 50
FIGURE 10: AIGA Restrooms Symbol with and without Vertical Bar 51
FIGURE 11: Restroom Figures with Universal Symbol of Access 53
FIGURE 12: Family Grouping with Differing Abilities 54
FIGURE 13: Reduced Family Group with Differing Abilities 55
FIGURE 14: Genderless Family Grouping 56
FIGURE 15: Androgynous Figures with Symbol of Access 57
FIGURE 16: Androgynous Family Grouping 58
FIGURE 17: Traditional Sign with Different Labels 60
FIGURE 18: Three Traditional Figures with Labels 61
FIGURE 19: Family Grouping with Labels 62
FIGURE 20: Differently-Abled Family Grouping with Labels 63
FIGURE 21: Full Family with Differing Abilities Symbol with Labels 64
FIGURE 22: Androgynous Figure Grouping with Labels 65
FIGURE 23: Androgynous Family Grouping with Labels 66
FIGURE 24: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents 68
FIGURE 25: First Symbol Surveyed 69
FIGURE 26: Percent of Respondents Who Rated Question 3a to be a Neutral Symbol 70
FIGURE 27: Second Symbol Surveyed 71
FIGURE 28: Third Symbol Surveyed 72
FIGURE 29: Fourth Symbol Surveyed 73
FIGURE 30: Fifth Symbol Surveyed 74
FIGURE 31: Sixth Symbol Surveyed 75
FIGURE 32: Sketch of New Arrangement of Symbols Taken from a Survey 76
FIGURE 33: Recombination of Symbols Taken from a Survey 78
FIGURE 34: Symbols with Labels as they were Tested 79
FIGURE 35: Sign Posted on Restroom Door 80
FIGURE 36: Sign Posted on College of Design Restroom 82
FIGURE 37: Iowa State Daily Article Covering the Testing of the Symbols 97
ABSTRACT

There are few places left in United States society that represent gender segregation. Restroom spaces are one such place. They represent the false dichotomy that gender is only male and female, leaving out other possibilities. Separating restroom spaces by gender also negates user needs, particularly among the disabled and families. By symbolically renegotiating the restroom so that it is gender neutral, this space will be more open to the needs of users regardless of gender, age and ability.

Gender neutral restrooms allow free movement of all people and gives recognition to the needs of transsexuals, intersexuals, cross-dressers, gender ambiguous persons, parents with small children, persons with disabilities, and persons requiring and giving assistance to utilize the facilities.

This thesis is an examination of the literature that surrounds the issues of gender in terms of medicine and biology, historical perspectives of gender and dichotomies, and current societal attitudes towards gender division. This thesis also tests symbols that represent gender neutral restrooms and analyzes user reactions to the symbols.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose Statement

This thesis will examine public restroom space as an ‘other space’ in the way that they are labeled and aims to expand knowledge on its’ affects on gender roles within the public sphere. It will also examine the rhetoric of public spaces, the notion of gender as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, and our current ideas of gender, sexuality and subjectivity in the United States. This study includes a discussion of gender in terms of medicine and biology, historical perspectives of gender and dichotomies, and current societal attitudes towards gender division and their relations to restroom symbols and spaces. Examining multiple disciplines gives breadth to the scope of gender and its relationship to how gender specific restrooms are symbolically marked. This thesis contains a sample test of new arrangements of symbols for gender neutral restrooms. The sample test includes a small survey of the symbols and their testing in the built environment. The purpose of this study is to test symbols that are more neutral in their display of gender as restroom signage, to determine if they will aid in the denaturalization of the urinary segregation of the sexes. Denaturalizing this segregation allows for greater freedom of movement through the space as needed by the user. The benefits of this freedom are applicable, but not limited to, transsexuals, intersexuals, cross-dressers, gender ambiguous persons, parents with small children, and persons requiring or giving assistance to use the facilities.
Introduction

There are few realms where we still limit people in terms of the male/female dichotomy. Public restrooms are the most outward example of this binary gender system and the most frequent public declaration of one’s gender. Most restrooms are labeled ‘men’, ‘women’, or some variation of these terms, these labels usually include the traditional male/female symbols that society has long recognized and associated with restrooms. This labeling and symbolism leaves little room for persons who do not readily identify with these associations. The signage that outwardly marks restroom spaces sets up a gender boundary. Most people navigate through the public realm little aware of the imposed boundaries around them. They abide by the rules because they conform to the binary male/female gender system that the boundaries impose. For many, it takes stepping into the shoes of the ‘other’ before they feel the affects of gender segregation. Transsexuals, intersexuals, cross-dressers, persons with androgynous gender or those who prefer not to pick one or the other, parents with small children, and persons who need assistance to use the restroom are faced with a difficult decision when it comes to choosing which door to go through. The two door, binary system of public restrooms will affect almost everyone in a negative way at some point in life. People with children face the question of ‘what age is appropriate for letting a child use the restroom by themselves?’ This is further compounded by the place. If it is a place like a highway rest area, parents may not feel comfortable leaving their small children by themselves in a public restroom. Many parents may feel the awkward societal glares when their best interests as a parent conflicts with societies segregation of the sexes. Like parenting, many people will require assistance in order to use restroom facilities at some
point in their life. The need for assistance may rise from many sources, such as surgeries, accidents, physical or mental disabilities, drunkenness, and general aging. There is no guarantee that the person offering assistance will be of the same gender as the person requiring assistance. It is often embarrassing enough to have to ask for assistance, but this is compounded by looks and stares, ill-fitting facilities, and the need to sometimes ask permission to bring a person of the opposite sex into the gendered sanctuary of the public restroom.

There are many people in this world who do not fit easily within the binary gender system. Cross-dressers, intersexed people, transsexuals, and people who move about in the continuum that we call gender are forced to make a public declaration and take a side when they open the door of a public restroom. Gender is a Big Dichotomy\(^1\). When faced with a Big Dichotomy, it is important to break them open into new and different possibilities. A Big Dichotomy runs the gamut of Western history, philosophy and social theory, such as: subject-object, abstract-concrete, agency-structure, real-imagined, local-global, micro-macro, natural-cultural, center-periphery, man-woman, black-white, bourgeoisie-proletariat, capitalism-socialism, etc. The ideas of male and female are not extensive enough terms to understand real or imagined public spaces. Adding in the thirdspace\(^2\), or lived spaces belonging to the ‘others’ within society, to the public realm, specifically with public restrooms, breaks the ‘either-or’ decision of what space to utilize. It expands it to a ‘both and


\(^2\) Soja, Edward “Increasing the Openness of Thirdspace” Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts 2000

Please see Appendix A for the definition of the term ‘Thirdspace’ and other terms used within this paper.
also’ space where both males and females can make use of the space and also those who do not adhere to this Big Dichotomy. The inclusion of all genders neutralizes the restroom spaces of their previous gender connotations.

By neutralizing the restroom spaces, these places are more open to peoples’ needs. People can move about inside these spaces with ease, without awkwardness, stares, needing to ask permission, and with no anxiety. A neutralized space serves a greater percentage of the population equally without the biases of binary gender. Creating gender neutral spaces is a beginning step to breaking down gender barriers, realizing that gender is not dichotomous but a continuum, and creating social change. According to Edward Soja, “Making practical and theoretical sense of the world requires a continuous expansion of knowledge formation, a radical “other spaces”… that are both similar to and significantly different from the real- and-imagined spaces we already recognize”.

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3 Soja, Edward “Increasing the Openness of Thirdspace” Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts 2000, pg. 21
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Literature Review

This literature review will explore the concept of gendered symbols and spaces relating to restroom spaces. This is a topic that bridges many disciplines: gender and queer theory, anthropology, social history, geography, biology and medicine, semiotics, and symbology. The aim is to show the links between these concepts to demonstrate how symbols and labels representing sex and gender affect our societal perceptions of them. Social prejudices affect our use of symbols and labels in public spaces. This, in turn, affects where certain populations can go and what is socially acceptable for them to do in spaces. There will first be a discussion on the topics of sex and gender in historical, medical, theoretical, and spatial terms to demonstrate how our binary notion of gender is not an adequate representation of true sex and gender. Then, a look at the current societal trends and attitudes towards gender to gain a perspective of where the idea of opening up restrooms to all people regardless of gender, age, and ability fits socially. Ability and disability in America affect how a person uses and views spaces. The aging population in America and many other factors are pushing the disabled and disability rights into the foreground. The needs of disabled persons fit into the discussion of gendered symbols and spaces because spaces need to be built or modified to accommodate the user. If a person requires assistance the person giving assistance may not be of the same gender. Therefore, gender neutrality is
important to the disabled community as well. Then the discussion moves on to the theory of thirdspace, also known as lived space, a premise which serves to include populations that are excluded by standard heteronormative geographic theories and practices. With this established language for discussing places and populations, the topic will move to talk about restrooms as a historical place of discrimination. Urinary segregation has effects on vast populations as a whole, both in the past and currently. Then the discussion will address how restroom spaces are symbolically labeled, and what the symbols mean at their core. The communications that occur when we label a space pictorially and verbally affect the usage of the space. Wrapping up this discussion will be an introduction and analysis of the symbols tested in this thesis.

There are several themes that tie together the literature discussed here. (1) The primary theme that this thesis wishes to destabilize is the male/female binary system. (2) Another theme is the idea of ‘otherness’. Opening up public restroom spaces to all people requires addressing people and populations rendered as invisible and thereby a forgotten ‘other’ within society. (3) The third theme is the concept of universal design. Universal design, as it is defined here is not one perfect design for everyone but designs that work well for all people regardless of variations in ability. This idea requires constant study and an understanding of populations, particularly those that are marginalized and rendered ‘invisible’ to mainstream society. (4) A fourth theme is the idea of power. Power and the absence of power directly relates to almost all dichotomies held by society. Populations regarded as subversive or undesirable are rendered as powerless and are disciplined and controlled by social and cultural mores. By denaturalizing and destabilizing dichotomies and
geographies, the balance of power is upset and marginalized populations are able to move more freely within society.

**Sex and Gender**

To first discuss gendered symbols and spaces, we must first understand the nature of sex and gender. Sex and gender are not the same thing. Sex is a biological distinction referring to whether a person is female, male, or intersex. Gender is a much more open realm allowing a person of any sex to move about on a continuum of masculinity and femininity. It is the behavior, personality, dress, choice of work, etc. that dominant society traditionally attributes to, or associates with, biological sex; the cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity. We have been socially taught that sex and gender are the same, which males must be masculine and females must be feminine, and we look down upon those who are not. This dichotomy leaves little room for the idea that there are more than two sexes or that gender can move beyond a linear continuum.

Within the biology community, there is an argument about where our sex comes from, whether it is housed solely in our genitals, our hormones, our chromosomes, or in our

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5 Burgess, Allison “Queering Heterosexual Spaces: Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity” Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la Femme Vol. 24, No. 2,3 2006 pp. 29
7 Burgess, Allison “Queering Heterosexual Spaces: Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity” Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la Femme Vol. 24, No. 2,3 2006 pp. 29
psyche. In reference to a person’s genitals, about 1.7 percent of live births are babies with ambiguous or mixed genitalia. In the past these persons were labeled as hermaphrodites, but a more correct term is now intersexed. When an intersexed child is born, the practice has been since the 1940s to ‘fix’ the child. In the 1950s, John Hopkins psychologist John Money and his colleagues took up a study of intersexed, the results of this study has shaped the practice by which intersexual births are now treated. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling in her book, *Sexing the Body*, Money believed that intersexuality “resulted from fundamentally abnormal processes. Their patient required medical treatment because they ought to have become either male or female. The goal of the treatment was to assure proper psychosexual development by assigning the young mix-sex child to a proper gender and then doing whatever was necessary to assure that the child and h/her parents believed in the sex assignment”. It is the end goal of this psychological treatment that the intersexed child not only grows up identifying with their assigned sex but that they are also heterosexual. If the child grows up identifying with their sex, but is a homosexual, then the assignment is considered a failure. In addition to surgically altering the babies’ genitals, the child is placed on hormones for life, to replace the hormones that may not be produced with the removal of the sex organs but also to ensure that the child is further pushed into one sex or the other.

This process not only denies that there is a possibility for more than two genders it also denies the possibility that homosexuality is a natural sexual state of being. Fausto-Sterling makes a case for expanded definitions regarding sex. “...I argued that the two-sex system embedded in our society is not adequate to encompass the full spectrum of human

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8 Fausto-Sterling, Anne *Sexing the Body* chapter 3 pg 46, this chapter covers in detail the process by which gender is assigned in more surgical detail, such as required penis/clitoral length that usually prescribes children to being assigned one sex or the other.
sexuality. In its’ place, I suggested a five-sex system. In addition to males and females, I included ‘herms’ (named after true hermaphrodites, who are born with testes and an ovary); ‘merms’ (male pseudo-hermaphrodites, who are born with some aspect of female genitalia); and ‘ferms’ (female pseudo-hermaphrodites, who have ovaries combined with some aspect of male genitalia). This definition not only breaks down the binary sex system, but also requires the medical community to recognize intersexuals as valid in their gender rites and to stop ‘fixing’ them at birth. Since the first publication of “The Five Sexes” in 1993, the move for intersexual rights has begun to march forward and an intersexual community has “materialized before our very eyes”.

The increasing visibility of intersexuals helps to break down the male/female dichotomy both socially and medically, but it does not account for individuals who wish to temporarily or permanently move around the realm of gender. Cross-dressers, FtM (female-to-male) and MtF (male-to-female) transsexuals, drag queens, drag kings and male and female impersonators all challenge our notions of gender belonging to one or the other.

Cross-dressing is usually a term applied to men, although it can be applied to women, involving a person who dresses in the garments of the opposite sex for various personal reasons. It has become more socially acceptable for women to don men’s clothing, than for men to dress in women’s clothing. There are a variety of ways that this can be explained. It is generally assumed that women are granted a greater freedom of personal and sexual

9 Fausto-Sterling, Anne “The Five Sexes, Revisited” The Sciences July/August 2000
10 Fausto-Sterling, Anne “The Five Sexes” The Sciences March/April 1993
11 www.tri-ess.org
expression than men, and can therefore wear whatever feels comfortable. Another explanation is that female fashion is appropriated into male fashion.

The act of cross-dressing brings up many questions about our social mores. What is a woman? What is a man? Why do men and women wear different clothes? Why is a person’s identity so intrinsically connected to his or her clothing? Why do gender roles exist at all\(^\text{12}\)?

The answers to these questions may seem simplistic at first, but once you examine them, our foundations of gender identity grow shakier. Helen Boyd brings up these poignant questions that rock the base of many things we feel we know as being truths of gender. It is estimated that the amount of male cross-dressers is as high as 1 in 7\(^\text{13}\). Most cross-dressers live closeted lives, so the real number may be higher or lower. “We are covert\(^\text{14}\)” says Rose, the head of the Iowa Chapter of Tri-Ess. The person behind you in line for the movies may be en femme, filling up with gas in the pump next two you or living down the street from you and you may never know.

We play interesting pronoun games when encountering a person who is a cross-dresser, transgendered, or intersexual. We stumble between the “he…er, I mean she…er… it, you know what I mean” awkwardness. Within the English language, and across Western cultures there is a lack of terminology for more than two genders. The berdache of Native American tribes\(^\text{15}\), kathooey of Thailand\(^\text{16}\), hijras of India\(^\text{17}\) had a place within society, places


\(^{13}\) Boyd, Helen My Husband Betty: Love, Sex and Life with a Crossdresser Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York 2003 pp. 11

\(^{14}\) Carr, Rose, a remark made in her home at a recent Tri-Ess meeting. Rose is the head of Iota Kappa Phi Iowa chapter of Tri-Ess, the society for the second self.

of honor, and most importantly, valid classification within their culture. In America, we typically classify a person with gender ambiguity as an ‘it’. The definition of the word it, is as follows, “Used of a nonhuman entity; an animate being whose sex is unspecified, unknown, or irrelevant; a group of objects or individuals; an action; or an abstraction”.

When we refer to a person as an it, we linguistically chip away at their humanity. The tale, *Baby X: A Fabulous Child’s Story*, while quite remarkable in its’ depiction of a child raised without gender, refers to X as an it. This reference removes the reader from the human qualities of X as a small child. It is possible that the author could have referred to X as ‘the child’ or given a substitute pronoun, but this example offers up the question of how to address persons of ambiguous gender.

The idea of cross-dressing is interesting in its’ applications. We label men who wear women’s clothes as cross-dressers, where this label does not usually attach itself to women who wear men’s clothes. Our verbal addresses fall between the technical terms of ‘cross-dresser’, ‘transvestite’, ‘transsexual’, and ‘intersexual’, to the inhuman of ‘it’ and ‘that’. We do not equip ourselves with the linguistic tools of inclusion and confine these persons to the realm of ‘otherness’. Betty Boyd sums up our linguistic usages neatly, “sometimes I just like pretty shoes and pretty blouses but because I have a penis we have to use big words to

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16 Winter, Sam “Male, Female and Transgender: Stereotypes and the Self in Thailand” The International Journal of Transgenderism Vol. 6 No.1 January- March 2002 pp. 4 see also: Jackson, Peter Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand Bua Luang Books, Bangkok 1995 p. 188-224
17 Winter, Sam “Gender Stereotype and Self among Transgenders: Underlying Elements” The International Journal of Transgenderism Vol. 6 No. 2, 2002 pp. 3
18 This definition can be found by searching the word it at dictionary.com at the hyperlink: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=it>
describe it\textsuperscript{20}. Lacking common terminology or placing complex terminology renders these populations as ‘other’. This otherness results in invisibility to the general populous. Without a visible body and language, these people become marginalized and ignored. No body, no space. Without inclusion into society, cross-dressers, transgendered, and intersexuals are not given representation in society, symbolically or spatially.

Many people feel that the reasons we ignore these groups of people is firstly their hidden place within society and secondly that cross-dressing, transgenderism, intersexuality and all other forms of gender blurring and ambiguity are viewed to be a type of perversion. But what is perversion, asks Boyd,

“\textit{I think perversion is nothing more than each of us living our perfect world in our head, and occasionally making forays to try and make our perfect world a reality. As everyone’s reality and fantasy is different, I guess our world will never be perfect, except perhaps for each for a while.}”\textsuperscript{21}

The sheer number of cross-dressers demonstrates the importance of moving towards social acceptance of their existence. A poignant article from Dan Savage, a syndicated sex advice columnist, takes on Dr. Phil and his mainstream opinion of cross-dressing.

\textit{“I was watching Dr. Phil on television the other day with my wife. He was talking to a woman who discovered, after marrying her husband that he was a crossdresser, or at least had crossdressing tendencies. Dr. Phil counseled the woman to leave the man because of his “perversion,” and told her that no one...”}

\textsuperscript{20}Boyd, Helen \textit{My Husband Betty} Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York 2003

\textsuperscript{21}Boyd, Helen \textit{My Husband Betty: Love, Sex and Life with a Crossdresser} Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York 2003 pg 183, this is a part of a discussion about dating and relationships with persons who are sexually diverse. She stresses that while people and definitions are different, the two most important factors in sexuality are responsibility and self-acceptance.
could ever be sexually satisfied with a crossdresser for a husband because he would always be masturbating while wearing her underwear, and so on, instead of sexually pleasing her... Then Dr. Phil got on the phone and yelled at the husband for being dishonest... - Perverts and Nylon Tights

Yes, yes: in an ideal world people would make a full disclosure of their secret sexual fetishes before getting married and making babies. But most straight people with “shameful” sexual fetishes deny and suppress them for years in what almost always proves to be a futile attempt to control and deny their sexual desires and live “normal” lives... And why do straight guys with bizarre sexual fantasies and fetishes try to keep them secret? Why do they suppress them? Because of people like Dr. Phil... It’s the Dr. Phils who tell women with small children that the discovery of a run-of-the-mill sexual fetish is grounds for divorce.  

While Savage points out the biases of mainstream society to shun cross-dressing, he also labels it as a fetishistic behavior. If cross-dressing is labeled as a bedroom fetish it will nullify it as a respectable form of self-expression and many cross-dressers may not get beyond the geographical confines of their fetish: their bedroom. This is completely counter-productive if our motivation is to open up spaces to the ‘other’ and make everyone feel welcome symbolically. There are many motivations behind why a cross-dresser dresses up.

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22 Savage, Dan “What You Don’t Want” from the syndicated column “Savage Love”, this column appears weekly in many free papers in the United States and Canada as well as Europe and Asia. His column first appeared in the Seattle paper The Stranger. Savage is openly homosexual and is known for advising readers to explore their fetishes safely and promotes AIDS awareness and safe sex. For the first six years of the column, Savage had his readers address him with "Hey faggot," as a comment on previous efforts to recapture offensive words. This action was admonished by some gay activists.
These motivations are purely personal in their nature and cannot and should not be categorized merely as a fetish.

There is an old joke among the cross-dressing community about what the difference is between a cross-dresser and a transsexual- the punch line is usually ‘one year’, sometimes ‘six months’\(^\text{23}\). In reality, cross-dressers and transsexuals are not the same at all. While many transsexuals start out cross-dressing, it is usually because changing one’s dress is the easiest and least permanent gender signifier to change. Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is the umbrella medical term that groups these classifications together. Gender Identity Dysphoria as identified by psychologists and medical doctors, is a condition with which a person who has been assigned one gender (usually at birth on the basis of their sex), but identifies as belonging to another gender, or does not conform with the gender role their respective society prescribes to them. It is a psychiatric term for what is widely known by terms like transsexuality, transgender and (subject to debate, but full-fledged GID is present in at least some cases) transvestism or cross-dressing. Another proposed term for the condition is \textit{Benjamin's Syndrome}, named for Harry Benjamin, a pioneering researcher in the field of transsexuality\(^\text{24}\).

It should be noted that cross-dressers identify to a certain extent with their own gender, but that they wish to express the part of their personality and physicality that is typified as another gender, whereas transsexuals seek to change their gender on a temporary to permanent basis, as they do not identify with the gender that is assigned them.

Transsexuals seek physical changes to help correct the problem of their gender. These


changes can involve genital operations, such as a vaginaplasty, hormone injections, voice modifications, etc. Satisfaction with these medical procedures vary greatly depending upon the person and the type of treatment. A survey conducted regarding the satisfaction of MtF transsexuals with operative voice therapy, found that the operations were far more successful if the patient had voice therapy along with the surgery. Overall, having the surgery lead to greater satisfaction and integration into society as a woman. These procedures help to affirm a transsexuals place in society, this affirmation of their new gender has a profound affect on one’s mental health. Without support of friends, family or acquaintances, depression and suicidal tendencies are likely to surface. Larry Nuttbrock in his article “Transgender Identity Affirmation of Mental Health” noted that, “Transgender identity support (one dimension of identity affirmation) in the context of two types of social relationships (family member and friend/acquaintance) was significantly associated with depressive symptoms.”

The desire for acceptance as a person of another gender, both from within and without, leads many times towards surgery. Standard medical practice states that a person wishing to surgically alter their gender must live as a person of the opposite gender full-time for at least two years. They must have two letters of recommendation from psychologists who have seen them regularly over the course of these two years that confirm that the person has GID. The surgical procedures are costly and extensive, and there are a handful of doctors

in the United States that perform them. The largest and most well known clinic is in Trinidad, Colorado.

Sex and gender roles and behaviors are deeply rooted as power roles and struggles. Adrianne Rich in her article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence”, notes that,

“As sexual power is learned by adolescent boys through the social experience of their sex drive, so do girls learn that the locus of sexual power is male. Given the importance placed on the male sex drive in the socialization of girls as well as boys, early adolescence is probably the first significant phase of male identification in the girl’s life and development... As a young girl becomes aware of her own increasing sexual feeling... she turns away from her heretofore primary relationships with girlfriends. As they become secondary to her, recede in importance her life, her own identity also assumes a secondary role as she grows into male identification”.

Male sexual power and heterosexuality are normalized socially. Those who challenge this supremacy are perceived of negatively by society.

As all this research demonstrates, sex and gender cannot be confined to binary definitions. Sex and gender by nature are much richer in terms than an either/or relationship. This dichotomous fallacy affects all aspects of our lives, from our jobs, education, monetary situations, to the spaces we go to and the things we do within them. There are few, if any,
areas where are lives are not fingerprinted by our gender and the gender performances of the
generations before us.

Current Societal Trends and Attitudes Towards Gender

Within the political sector there have been many strides to repress the legal rights of
homosexuals and women. Film and literature express the voices of both those who are
marginalized within the social and political spheres as well as those who hold opposite
views. The recent successes of the film Transamerica demonstrates the growing societal
need for the voices of the homosexual and transgendered communities. Transamerica is
about a pre-operative MtF transsexual, who finds out about a long-lost son, whom she bails
out of jail and their resulting cross-country trip. The film, Transamerica has grossed
approximately $3 million in theaters29. It was also nominated for two Academy Awards30.

One of the movie posters for Transamerica depicts the main character standing before
two restrooms regarding the entranceways. We can only see her back, with her dark ponytail
and tall shoes, so we assume she is a woman. But her pause in front of the doors, along with
the title of the movie, let us know that this woman may not be all that she seems. The film’s
tagline across the bottom reads ‘Life is More Than the Sum of its Parts’. We can take this to
mean many things; such as the gendered experience of using the restroom is a part of life, but
not the whole of it. Or that a person is more than their ‘parts’ or gender, and we should not

29 “Transamerica Movie Statistics”
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=transamerica.htm>, sourced on February 15,
2006
on February 15, 2006
label them by their ‘parts’ alone. Her pause also informs us of the difficult everyday decision faced by transgendered persons of which restroom door to push open. She is placed between the two doors, breaking the duality of male and female as she stands somewhere in between. Drawing an imaginary line between the two restroom signs brings out visually a gender continuum. On the left there is male on the right there is female, but the person is in the middle. This shows that there is no space between the two genders represented, but there is a person in between.

The argument for a gender-neutral restroom can be made simply from this poster. The known and represented binary, gendered restrooms do not represent the full spectrum of gender. ‘Life is more than the sum of its parts’, lived spaces are greater encompassing than the perceived spaces.
The documentary series *Trans Generation* produced by the Sundance Channel in 2005, is an eight-part documentary that followed four college students as they journey across gender lines. The series addresses how social and familial relationships are affected by transsexualism, campus politics, and tough decisions that are made in changing genders. In the first episode of the documentary, Gabbie, a pre-op MtF transsexual talks about how she was given a three-person dorm room to herself that had its own restroom. Campus rules forbade her to use the women’s restrooms or to share a dorm with another female student. The university gave her her own space since there were no other spaces on campus that accommodated her.

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Figure 1: *Transamerica Movie Poster*

The documentary series *Trans Generation* produced by the Sundance Channel in 2005, is a eight- part documentary that followed four college students as they journey across gender lines. The series addresses how social and familial relationships are affected by transsexualism, campus politics, and tough decisions that are made in changing genders. In the first episode of the documentary, Gabbie, a pre-op MtF transsexual talks about how she was given a three-person dorm room to herself that had its own restroom. Campus rules forbade her to use the women’s restrooms or to share a dorm with another female student. The university gave her her own space since there were no other spaces on campus that accommodated her.

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31 Transgeneration Miniseries Homepage
<http://www.sundancescreenings.com/transgeneration.htm>
Edward Soja, in his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*, is re-envisioning real space and geographies to include imagined and lived spaces. He is an additional voice in the ongoing discourse of neutralizing space of gender, racial and economic biases. Soja envisions and remaps space in trialcetal terms rather than dialectical ones to address the fact that geography is unstable, shifting, uncertain and contested. By breaking space and geography out of the binary system of the real and conceived, spaces become unbalanced and ever changing, traveling throughout the multidimensions of the real, perceived, and lived. When we unbalance space and open it to change, says Soja, we can imagine a new urbanity and we can again ask ourselves the old question posed by Christine de Pizan, “What would a non-sexist city look like?” This question can be modified to ‘what would a non-sexist, gender-neutral restroom look like?’

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32 Soja, Edward *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts 2000 pp. 106
Within the political world, the currently conservative United States government takes a regressive stance towards sex and gender. On May 18, 2004 Massachusetts made same-sex marriages legal within the state. President George W. Bush immediately addressed his views about banning gay marriage within the constitution by issuing the statement,

“The sacred institution of marriage should not be redefined by a few activist judges, all Americans have a right to be heard in this debate. I called on the Congress to pass, and to send to the states for ratification, an amendment to our Constitution defining and protecting marriage as a union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. The need for that amendment is still urgent, and I repeat that call today”.

While in post-election years, the battle for gay marriage has cooled, there is still movement by organizations on both sides to legalize it or constitutionally ban it, and the view from the ruling house and senate is still against it. Limiting marriage to the union between a man and a woman completely ignores the existence of intersexuais, transsexuals and cross-dressers. The United States government turns a blind eye to these people and these issues with its support of a constitutional ban on gay marriage. According to Mary Anne Case “very few spaces in our society remain divided by sex, there’s marriage and there’s toilets, and very little else”. A constitutional amendment to legally segregate marriage to being between men and women only, limits societies understanding of the need for spaces for all people regardless of gender.

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34 Abraham, Yvonne; Paulson, Michael Boston Globe Online “Wedding Day: First Gays Marry; Many Seek Licenses”<http://www.boston.com/news/specials/gay_marriage/articles/2004/05/18/wedding_day?pg=1> May 18, 2004

35 Brown, Patricia Leigh “A Quest for a Restroom that’s Neither Men’s Room Nor Women’s Room” Published March 4, 2005 on www.pissr.org
Educational institutions are taking more liberal strides to break down gender dichotomies. At the University of Chicago, there are over a dozen gender neutral bathrooms, some of the facilities are dual labeled as being both gender neutral and family friendly. The movement towards the creation of these spaces was spearheaded by the QueerSafeCampus Initiative. This group noted that ‘Bathrooms segregated by sex are potentially unsafe and intimidating places for a variety of people... assault, insults and police intervention are frequently part of the reality of sex segregated bathrooms’\(^\text{36}\). The University decided to create these spaces to meet the needs of their students who are transgendered or preferred not to declare a gender. The university held a panel discussion on the creation of the restrooms on campus. Mary Anne Case, one of the panelists pointed out “…many women’s restrooms have a caricature of a person in a dress on it, going into it implies that we are willing to be associated with that image. …This moment is an act of self-labeling\(^\text{37}\). The daily frequency to which people use restrooms requires publicly labeling and relabeling themselves according to society’s standards. “People get all worked up about [women having their own space], but then they realize it’s not as perfect as they thought. Gender is what is being policed in women’s and men’s restrooms, not sex- people react to your presentation, not your genitals\(^\text{38}\). But it is still this reaction to a person’s presentation that is a mark of the social control and discipline of restroom spaces and activities. Ana Minian, a student at the

\(^{36}\)“Gender-Neutral Bathrooms Campaign: A QueerSafeCampus Initiative”
<http://queeraction.uchicago.edu/statement.html>

\(^{37}\)Katz, Robert “Panel Calls for Neutral Bathrooms” Chicago Maroon News Section, November 21, 2003, quoting Mary Anne Case Case is the author of “Disaggregating Gender from Sex and Sexual Orientation: The Effeminate Man in the Law and Feminist Jurisprudence”, her ongoing anecdotal research on gender iniquities in bathroom allotments ridicules the disadvantages as separate but equal.

\(^{38}\)Katz, Robert “Panel Calls for Neutral Bathrooms” Chicago Maroon News Section, November 21, 2003, quoting Naomi Sobel
University of Chicago and the liaison officer between Queers and Associates and QueerAction, cited an example of a person who mistook a woman for a man and called campus security because the woman used a women’s restroom. The Chicago Maroon, University of Chicago’s campus paper surveyed people about their feelings towards the gender neutral restrooms, many responded that they were not even aware that the campus had them. Other responses ranged from:

“[1] I’d feel fine using them, I don’t know why it’s such a big issue; it seems pretty obvious to me” to “[2] as long as you clean up your mess, your genitalia doesn’t bother me” to “[3] I would feel a little uncomfortable using them, but I don’t have a problem with them as long as you keep the ones that are just for men and just for women”.

The University of Chicago has been an inspiration to other university and college campuses seeking to build gender neutral restrooms. Beloit College in Wisconsin and McGill University in Montreal and the University of New Hampshire are all examples of campuses that have been pursuing the creation of these facilities.

Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut takes the idea of gender neutrality one step further. According to Wesleyan's Web site, the school offers gender-blind housing on one floor of a dorm. The gender-blind floor allows students to room with another student regardless of their biological sex. The bathrooms on these floors are unisex as are others that

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39 Glass, Kat “University Furnished Johns for All Kinds” Chicago Maroon News Section October 12, 2004
are requested around campus\(^{41}\). The Wesleyan gender-neutral policy on the Student Assembly Web site states that "any student who requests a gender-neutral assignment will receive a roommate who also requested a gender-neutral assignment\(^{42}\)."

The University of Toronto began the student-led, Positive Space Campaign in 2004. The goal of the Positive Space Campaign is to provide places where people of the LGBTQ (defined here as Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Two-Spirited Queer Questioning) community would be safe and could be open with their gender and sexuality. The Positive Space program was also designed to disrupt the heteronormativity of campus life. As it says on the University of Toronto’s website “[t]here is still widespread reluctance to speak out about sexual and gender diversity, which stands in stark contrast to the routine talk of the sexual and emotional bonds of heterosexual people\(^{43}\).” Positive Spaces were marked with buttons or cards. “A person might put a Positive Space card on their office door, and this might mark that person’s office as Positive. Similarly, a person might attach a Positive Space button to their bag, marking themselves as a Positive Space\(^{44}\).” The campaign has had constructive effects on the campus. Incoming students have noticed the presence of the Positive Space cards and buttons and

\(^{41}\)“Transgender Projects at Wesleyan University”
http://www.wesleyan.edu/wsa/transgender/projects.html

\(^{42}\)Kelly, Ryan “Gender Neutral Bathrooms Introduced in the MUB” The New Hampshire, here online at:

\(^{43}\)Burgess, Allison “Queering Heterosexual Spaces: Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity” *Canadian Woman Studies / Les Cahiers de la Femme* Vol 24, No 2,3 2006 pp. 27-30, Quote here taken from pg. 27

\(^{44}\)Burgess, Allison “Queering Heterosexual Spaces: Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity” *Canadian Woman Studies / Les Cahiers de la Femme* Vol 24, No 2,3 2006 pp. 27-30, Quote here taken from pg. 29
have emailed the school expressing excitement about the program and the visibility of the LGBTQ community.

Figure 3: Positive Space Campaign Poster

The increasing awareness for making room for other genders are not limited to the United States. In Japan, a 7-year old boy was admitted into his school as a girl after being diagnosed with gender identity disorder at the age of six\textsuperscript{45}. The child is listed with the female students, uses the girl’s restroom, and wears a girl’s swimsuit in the school’s pool. The decision is out of character for Japan’s strict school system, which has little tolerance for

children who do not fit in. School officials will watch the child closely and reassess the situation when the child hits puberty. The school has not told other parents of the switch, but so far there have been no problems with other students or parents. This case and the increasing number of universities demanding places and accommodations for all people demonstrate the ever-growing awareness of gender reaching beyond dualities and breaking down segregated spaces and traditions for more fluid spaces and interactions.

**Dis/Ability in America**

The need for gender neutral restrooms extends beyond the needs of cross-dressers, transgendered and gender ambiguous individuals and intersexuals to the needs of those individuals with disabilities. Temporary or permanent disabilities may require a person to need assistance in using restroom facilities. Persons requiring assistance to use the restroom may not always have a person of the same sex accompanying them to offer assistance.

The concept of ability and disability is difficult to pin down definitely. According to Arvid Osterberg and Donna Kain in their book, *Access for Everyone*,

“Disability is a complicated term that means different things to different people. Disability is also a troubling term because it implies a standard of ability by which people are measured and perceived to be *dis*-abled. Often, the term disability is used to identify people who are blind or deaf or who use wheel chairs and other assistive equipment to manage everyday life. It is important to note, however, that differences in ability include variations in
stamina and/ or cognitive and physical function that are not immediately apparent. In addition, individuals’ abilities vary over their lifespan 46.

Humanity has a long history of hiding away persons with disabilities, considering them invalid to society. “An able body is seemingly preferable to impairment, which often reminds us of our physicality, animality, human frailty, and ultimate death 47.” Historically, within the scientific communities we have tried to quantify and validate the discrimination against undesirable persons. The disabled body is viewed as merely a body and not that of an individual. In Martin Sullivan’s Subjected Bodies, a paraplegic recounts the rehabilitation process,

“…The most infuriating aspect of this totalizing approach was the appeal to remote paraplegic bodies in medical textbooks and the use of these textual archetypes as a yardstick against their real bodies, what they were capable of doing, and their individual characteristics were measured 48.

Measuring bodies against the ideal is the scientific method of quantifying people as able or disabled. This measuring loses individuality and sets the boundaries of abled or not, normal or different.

The aging population in America is drawing more and more light on the topics of accessibility and discrimination of people based upon ability. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990 and it prohibits discrimination in employment, in

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46 Osterberg, Arvid O.; Kain, Donna J. Access for Everyone: A Guide to the Accessibility of Buildings and Sites with References to ADAAG Iowa State University Iowa, 2005 pg. 5
47 Butler, Ruth “Disabled Bodies in the Gay Community” Mind and Body Spaces: Geographies of Illness, Impairment and Disability Routledge New York, 1999 pg. 208
places of public accommodation, including all hotels, restaurants, retail stores, theaters, health care facilities, convention centers, parks, and places of recreation, in transportation services, and in all activities of state and local governments because a person has a disability. Approximately 55 million people, about twenty percent of the United States population, have one or more physical or mental disabilities⁴⁹, and this number is increasing as the population as a whole is growing older. In regards to the aging population, approximately 7.6 million people in the United States require some form of home health care. Urinary incontinence is among the top three reasons that individuals are transitioned to a nursing home⁵⁰. Within these 55 million, 1.5 million Americans are autistic, according to the Autism Society of America, a number that increased 172% in the 1990s⁵¹. According to the Health Insurance Association of America, there is a 37% chance for individuals between the ages of 25 and 55 of having at least one long term disability that lasts three months or longer⁵².

Individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, including outright intentional exclusion and access to lesser services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs, or other opportunities. The ADA grew out of the Disability Rights movement, which began in the 1970s, and was encouraged by the other movements towards equality, namely the civil rights movement and the women’s rights movements. This movement was intrinsically linked with the Independent Living (IL) movement. The Independent Living

movement is seen as a philosophy; a new way of looking at people with disabilities and their function in society that seek self-determination, self-respect, and equal opportunities. IL sought to replace special education and rehabilitation with integration and normalization. Proponents of the IL movement felt that people around the world viewed persons with disabilities negatively,

“Portraying them as sick, defective and deviant persons, as objects of professional intervention, as a burden for themselves and their families, dependent on other people’s charity. These images, in the IL analysis, have consequences for disabled people's opportunities for raising families of their own, getting education, and work, which, in turn, result in persons with disabilities making up a large portion of the poor in any country”\(^{53}\).

The goal for both the ADA and the IL Movement is that persons who are less mobile, dexterous, physically or mentally able than mainstream society will have the same opportunities as others.

The marginalization of the disabled as ‘sick, defective and deviant’ parallels the marginalization of cross-dressers, gender ambiguous and transgendered individuals, and intersexuals as ‘perverse and sexually deviant’. It is this marginalization that helps to withhold the symbolic and spatial representation of the population’s user needs.

The physical changes to the built environment since the passing of ADA, have been numerous. The ADA requires elevators, transit lifts, wheelchair ramps, curb cuts, designated parking, and wider, smoother, and more level traversing surfaces. These improvements to the built environment have been enjoyed by many regardless of ability, as these features make it

easier to bike, push strollers or luggage, open doors, ascend through a building, etc. Since 1990, architects, interior designers, and community and regional planners keep in mind the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) before they start a design. The ADAAG primarily covers buildings and sites in the U.S. that are used by the public, such as stores, restaurants, ports of transportation, hotels, schools, etc. The ADAAG ensures that people of all abilities are able to share the same experiences and places equally. This idea is part of the basis for universal design.

According to Arvid Osterberg, universal designs are, “designs [that] should work well for all people regardless of variations in ability”\(^{54}\). All designs should be inclusive in their nature, rather than creating separate spaces or facilities for the disabled. A level entry way is preferable to a separate ramp to the entrance. While many buildings have been built or modified to be accessible, there are still facilities, technologies and boundaries that separate and segregate the experience of the place.

“We recognize that, in a real sense, environments, services, and products can be disabling when they are unable to accommodate many different people who have a wide range of abilities and needs. We advocate a philosophy of design for all people rather than a focus on accommodation of people’s perceived disabilities”\(^{55}\).

Universal design is an important concept to put at the forefront of all design processes. Designs should work well for all people regardless of variations in ability, gender, race, and economy. As designers we should seek to create and facilitate the ease of use of our designs.

\(^{54}\) Osterberg, Arvid O.; Kain, Donna J. *Access for Everyone: A Guide to the Accessibility of Buildings and Sites with References to ADAAG* Iowa State University Iowa, 2005 pg. 5

\(^{55}\) Id.
This requires awareness and understanding of populations who have been marginalized and ignored, those who have to create their own places within mainstream society.

**Thirdspace and the Trilectics of Spatiality**

The gender markings on space are visible in the three types of space; firstspace (perceived space), secondspace (conceived space) and thirdspace (lived space). Firstspace (perceived space) refers to the directly experienced world of empirically measurable and mappable phenomena. These are the places we experience and that have permanence in the landscape or have temporal use to viewers and users of the space. Secondspace (conceived space), is a more subjective and imagined space, concerned with images and representations spatiality, with the thought processes that are presumed to shape both material human geographies and the development of a geographical imagination. This is the point where buildings, places, and spaces pass from actual pieces within a landscape to collective consciousness of users of the spaces. Conceived spaces may also only exist within a person’s imagination, and not have any physical bearings with landscape. Thirdspace (lived space), are places real or imagined that belong to the ‘other’, persons who do not wholly belong within the dichotomous places of our society. They may move freely between one side and the other but carve out places for themselves outside of the dichotomy. First, second, and thirdsaces taken together make up the trilectics of spatiality.

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56 Soja, Edward “Increasing the Openness of Thirdspace” Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places Blackwell Publishers Massachusetts, 2000 pp.107
57 Id.
58 Id.
Thinking about space beyond the either/or definitions that we place upon it makes for a more real and unbalanced geography. Gillian Rose, in *Feminism and Geography* states, “I want to [ask] for a geography that acknowledges that the grounds of its knowledge are unstable, shifting, uncertain and, above all, contested”, spaces are perceived and conceived of with set parameters and definitions in mind. These set rules are not always the reality of the space and do not always account for the users of the space. A shifting and unstable geography is reflective of society and changed by the people who inhabit it. It breaks down societal norms and denaturalizes imposing orders of gender, race, economy, religion, and ability. Nancy Duncan calls for this denaturalizing of space according to its heterosexist oppression.

“Naturalized heterosexuality makes sexuality in the public spaces nearly invisible to the straight population... Surveys have shown that the majority of respondents have no objection

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59 Rose, Gillian *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* University of Minnesota Press, 1993 pp. 160
to homosexuals as long as they ‘do not flaunt their sexuality in public’. She encourages public displays and demonstrations of pride to the LGBT community to help destabilize our heterosexist society. United States society is normalized to the white, straight, Christian, affluent, and able-bodied communities. Demonstrations of pride in one's own race, ethnicity, religion, and abilities in the public sphere will increase visibility of these groups of people and help to denaturalize society’s ignorance of them. According to Gloria Anzaldua in her book *Making Face/Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, this denaturalization will begin to blend established boundaries and rewrite social order and history.

“We need theories that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries... Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified or excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it”.

Thirdspaces are borderland spaces. Gloria Anzaldua has written extensively about the borderland spaces and populations of the United States/Mexico border.

“In the borderlands is borne a new consciousness, the consciousness of the *mestiza*, as a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland casts me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because

60 Duncan, Nancy “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces” *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* Routledge New York, 1996

61 Anzaldua, Gloria *Making Face/Making Soul: Haciendo Caras* Spinsters/Aunt Lute, San Francisco, 1990, Quote taken from the preface
there is the queer of me in all races.) ... I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meaning.\textsuperscript{62}

The United States/Mexico borderland is a thirdspace, it belongs to those, like Anzaldúa who are neither wholly Hispanic or White, Mexican or American, gay or straight, male or female, but are a combination of both and more. This space is unique and changing constantly, defying definitions and labels that restrict the population.

Thirdspaces go beyond the either/or to the both/and relationships. This concept of thirdspace is important to incorporate into restroom spaces. Rather than the symbols on the doors and the spaces beyond belonging to \textit{either} men \textit{or} women, they belong to \textit{both} men and women and persons who do not define their gender as these, to encompass a more real perspective of gender and user needs. The true and \textit{lived} needs of the user are not fully addressed or represented spatially or symbolically by restrooms. Teresea de Lauretis in her book \textit{Technologies of Gender}, states,

\begin{quote}
"It is a movement between the (represented) and what the representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable. It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses. … These two kinds of spaces are neither in opposition to one another or strung along a chain of signification, but they coexist concurrently and in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} Anzaldúa, Gloria \textit{Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza Spinsters/ Aunt Lute}, San Francisco 1987 p. 80-81
contradiction. The movement between them, therefore, is not that of a
dialectic, of integration, of a combinatory, or of difference, but is the tension
of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy\textsuperscript{63}. Teresa De Lauretis makes plain here that our human movement within and without spaces, in
our case restroom spaces, is unrepresented in its fullest sense. We label them in a firstspace
sense, as masculine and feminine spaces, these labels and discourses must be shed as we
move to a more inclusive, more real and lived spatial discourse to make visible the human
populations that are not yet recognized and legitimized.

**Restrooms as Places of Discrimination**

A famous anecdote by Jaques Lacan is of juxtaposed Ladies and Gentlemen signs
viewed by children on an imaginary train ride. The children, who are brother and sister are
seated opposite each other when the train pulls into the station, they misread the signs on the
restroom doors as the name of the station stop: “‘Look’, says the brother, ‘we’re at Ladies!’;
‘Idiot!’ replies his sister, ‘Can’t you see we’re at Gentlemen’\textsuperscript{64}’. It is easy to imagine this
scenario, even with little description about the opposing doors that demark the women’s and
men’s restrooms.

“The image of twin doors symbolizing, through the solitary confinement
offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs anyway from

\textsuperscript{63} Soja, Edward *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*
Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts 2000 Quoting Teresa de Lauretis from *Technologies of

home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his public lie is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation\textsuperscript{65}.

While many people hold to the idea that separate restrooms for men and women are necessary for safety, propriety, and sanitation, they are truly one of the most prevalent forms of public gender segregation. These same concerns of safety, propriety, and sanitation as reasons for gender separate restrooms, parallel Jim Crow racial segregation.

In the post-Civil War southern United States, there existed up until the late 1960s, racial segregation of public facilities. Water fountains, pay telephones, public transportation, and restrooms were separated in many public and government buildings. Not only were these spaces separate, they were far from equal. Water fountains for ‘coloreds’ usually did not spout cold water, were not clean, and sometimes were not even housed indoors next to the ‘white’ fountains, making the user walk outside. Restrooms were no exception to the difference in facilities offered; in \textit{The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman}, Miss Jane says about the courthouse in Bayonne in the early 1960s,

\begin{quote}
"…up to a year ago they didn’t have a fountain there for colored at all. They didn’t have a bathroom inside either. White, yes; but nothing for colored. Colored had to go outside, rain or shine and go down to the basement. Half of the time the bathroom was so filthy you couldn’t get inside the door. The water on the floor come almost to the top of your shoes. You could smell the
\end{quote}

toilets soon as you started downstairs. Very seldom a lady would go down there because it was so filthy.\(^{66}\)

Many correlations can be drawn between the Jim Crow restrooms of the south prior to the Civil Rights Movement and our modern restroom facilities. In general, women’s restrooms are kept cleaner than men’s, while men often have the larger facilities. Infant changing tables are often found in women’s rooms, while it is much rarer to find infant changing stations in men’s restrooms, although this is changing. These are firstspace observable phenomena, recordable by taking note at the changing facilities stickers that grace the outside of many restroom doors, or watching as lines form more quickly and move more slowly out of a women’s restroom than the men’s.

In 1990, at a George Strait concert in Houston, Denise Wells was arrested and fined $200 for entering and using an otherwise empty men's room after finding thirty women ahead of her in line for the women's room. Not only did a jury ultimately acquit Wells, the Texas legislature responded to her plight with legislation mandating twice as many women's as men's toilets in new or renovated public spaces.\(^{67}\) In 1998, Bob Glaser sued the city of San Diego for over $5 million in damages for the "emotional trauma" he claimed to have suffered when a group of "giggling" women, frustrated by long lines for the women's room at a Rolling Stones concert, invaded the men's room, where he stood at the urinal, and allegedly rendered him unable to relieve himself. Although the women had violated a law that


\(^{67}\) Case, Mary Anne “Changing Room: A Quick Tour of Men’s and Women’s Rooms in U.A. Law over the Last Decade, from the U.S. Constitution to Local Ordinances” Public Culture 13.2 Duke University Press, 2001
prohibited them from entering "designated restroom facilities of the opposite sex," and although Glaser offered to settle for an ‘Equitable Restrooms Act’ and ‘reasonable compensation,’ Glaser’s lawsuit was dismissed and he was ordered to pay $4,000 to the defendants. These examples demonstrate the level of significance to which we take urinary segregation of the sexes.

“Sexual difference is enjoined as a penitential structure exacting strict compliance. We must all line up for ‘solitary confinement’ according to the cultural ‘imperative’ of gender.” This ‘solitary confinement’ is taken by our society with the utmost seriousness, in gender, in race and in ability. Sammy Younge, Jr., the first black student to die in the civil rights movement, was murdered in 1966, by a white Standard Oil station attendant in Tuskegee for refusing to use the outdoor Jim Crow bathroom. Isaac Woodward, who was a WWII veteran, had his eyes gouged out for using a white men’s bathroom in a Carolina bus station, when there were no restrooms provided for African American users. These historical events demonstrate how strictly society regulates restroom spaces; restrooms are a place of discrimination, where usage is disciplined and misuse is punished. In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault states that,


"Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology. Restrooms and the rituals associated with them are learned, controlled, and disciplined by society to all levels of humanity.

Despite the passage of ADA in 1990 and the ADAAG building codes that have regulated buildings since 1992, there are many facilities that do not account for user abilities. There are a large number of restrooms, even in new buildings, where it would be impossible to get a wheelchair in or maneuver one around, where there are tripping hazards, or where the door exceeds ADAAG weight and pressure and could be too heavy for a person with limited strength to open.

There are many other groups that have accessibility needs without necessarily being labeled as ‘disabled’ or covered by ADA. These groups include, but are not limited to, parents with small children, persons requiring assistance to use the facilities, whether they have special needs, have had surgery, are elderly, have decreased mobility, motor functions or vision, etc. It is safe to say that the majority of people will at some time in their lives require assistance to use the restroom or will provide others with assistance.

Parents with small children, particularly infants or those in strollers, also may have difficulty using narrow spaces or places with stairs, steps or tripping hazards. Standard stall sizes may be too small to fit a parent with a small child(ren), and they would be one group.

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that would benefit from an increased number of larger stalls. Additionally, there may be inadequate changing facilities, particularly in men’s restrooms. This is a major gender bias. It signals that society views that only women, or primarily women will have small children with them, and will be doing the changing. The relatively new concept of family restrooms and lounges are starting to pop up in places like airports, malls and other family friendly spaces. These places are a great improvement for many because it allows for a more free movement of people regardless of gender. However, the way most family restrooms are situated does not break down gender dichotomies. Usually where a family restroom is present there are men’s and women’s restrooms to be found in close proximity. This type of spatial set up implies that the family restrooms are exclusively for families or people needing assistance and others should declare their gender and walk through the doors of the men’s or women’s.

The way we label restrooms is our initial indoctrination to the space. Most often there are characters on the door representing men and women respectively. This dichotomy does not cover the gamut of actual gender, nor do they account for the range of needs for persons who are differently-abled. This labeling leads us to know that the space within may not account for all our needs as well. Establishing the restroom as gender neutral makes these places both male and female and for all those who do not abide by such restrictive categories. The activities that happen within bathrooms may be the reason that these spaces are still so blatantly segregated. It can be argued that denaturalizing these spaces would lead to an increase in violence against those whom these spaces are trying to include. It is important when considering these spaces to not isolate the ‘other’ when trying to include them. Labeling the space as ‘unisex’ or ‘gender-neutral’ may draw attention to the sex or gender of
the user. This extra attention may stigmatize the user so that we are hyper-aware of who is using the facility and who is not. The students at the University of Chicago brought up this issue when they created their gender-neutral bathrooms. The consensus of many students was that while they were in favor of the creation of these spaces they would not use them. These students feared that they would be labeled as a transsexual rather than just a person who needed to use the facilities. The large amount of attention brought by the University of Chicago to their changing of the dozen facilities, may have separated out the transgendered community rather than including them. There is a certain amount of normalization that happens with inclusion. Normalization can be argued as a positive or negative effect upon a group of people, but it is a sign of inclusion among the general populous.

![Sign Marking a Gender Free Restroom from PISSR Website](image)

*Figure 5: Sign Marking a Gender Free Restroom from PISSR Website*

There is a whole organization dedicated to the creation of genderless restrooms. People In Search of Safe Restrooms (P.I.S.S.R.) “believe[s] that all people, regardless of their gender identification or presentation, have the right to access safe and dignified restroom facilities without fear of harassment, judgment or violence. In order to reach this goal, PISSR is committed to establishing gender-neutral bathrooms.” The PISSR website lists names of businesses that create and maintain gender neutral bathrooms as safe places for

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72 People in Search of Safe Restrooms <http://www.pissr.org/aboutus.html> quote is the PISSR mission statement
people to go. They work with the Transgender Law Center (TLC) to try to create and catalog places that are safe and neutral for all people. TLC is working with the San Francisco Department of Buildings and Inspections to clarify city building codes and their relation to gendered restrooms. PISSR wanted to show the deep seeded problems with having gendered restrooms and conducted a 500-person survey to catalog the problems caused by gendered restrooms in 2001 (see appendix B for full survey). The survey catalogs the problems and discrimination that transgendered persons face at public restrooms ranging from questioning looks, to verbal and physical abuse, to being fired, to being nearly killed.

Symbols and Semiotics

To understand the importance of restroom symbols, we must first break apart the communication of symbols and semiotics. Thomas Sebeok, in his book *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, identifies the following six major types of signs: symptoms, signals, icons, indexes, symbols, and names. A symptom refers to intellectual, emotional, and social phenomena that are a result from perceived causes or outside stimuli. A signal is bodily and nonverbal communications. Icons are signs that are made to resemble, simulate or reproduce their referents in some way. An index is a sign that refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space. A symbol is a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way. Lastly, a name is an identifier sign assigned to a member or a species in various ways.

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73 Sebeok, Thomas A. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* University of Toronto Press Buffalo New York, 2001
According to the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign is “something by knowing which we know something more. We learn something more by comprehending a sign, because it stands for something else.” Symbols and pictograms are some of the oldest forms of communication. From archeological evidence, humanity has an innate sense of geometry and placing geometric pieces together to create forms, patterns and figures. The basis for many symbols can be broken down into the three basic shapes of circles, squares, and triangles. According to Jorgen Johanse and Svend Larsen in *Signs in Use*, one of the goals of designing symbology is to reinforce these geometric references to make the symbol visually strong.

Basic geometric shapes carry with them gendered connotations. The square and rectangle are considered to be regular, man-made and rational, where the circle and oval are considered to be more irregular, natural, and organic shapes. According to Carl Liungman, in his book *Thought Signs*, these shapes parallel our notions of gender. The square and rectangle have straight sides and right angle corners, making them more rational shapes. Straight lines and right angles are considered man-made, and therefore a sign of culture and civility which renders these shapes as masculine. The circle and oval are continuously curving which give them the tendency to be irregular and irrational shapes. Circles and ovals are found predominantly in nature rendering these shapes as feminine. Nancy Duncan, in her article *Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces*, explains the symbolic and ideal male/female associations as the following:

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75 Liungman, Carl *Thought Signs* IOS Press Washington, 1995
“[The feminine] as an ideal type is associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, the ‘shadowy interior’… [The masculine] as an ideal type has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse.”

Knowing this about simple geometric shapes, our usage of them implies multiple layers of meaning not inherent at first glance.

A sign is an inference to something that is not present. Placed signs within the built environment are meant to direct, inform, warn, and influence persons moving about within the space. The psychological attitude of persons seeking their way is quite different when inside or outside a building. According to Adrian Frutiger in his book Signs and Symbols, when a person is outside they are independent in their motions, but when a person moves inside, especially to a building they have never been in before, they lose their confidence and look for help in navigation. This is where the clear communication of signs becomes vital to the experience of a place. “Public systems of signal signs in traffic require instant recognition.” The meaning of signs are a collective understanding. A human being, during their childhood, acquires the meanings of the signs used for communication in their culture, as well as a whole series of conventions. The meaning of a sign is thus associated with conventions, some of which are associated with a particular cultural sphere, others are more

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76 Duncan, Nancy “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces” Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality Routledge New York, 1996

77 Frutiger, Adrian Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning Watson- Guptill Publications New York, 1997 pp. 351

78 Liungman, Carl Thought Signs IOS Press Washington, 1995 pp. 555
universal in their nature. Signs have no meaning until we associate one with it. In the film, 
*Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, 5-year old Cliff who cannot yet read, learns the 
difference between white and colored bathrooms. Poppa, the boy’s grandfather, takes it upon 
himself to teach Cliff to read the signs by making the initials W and C on a writing tablet. 
“Reading and racialization are mutually constitutive: to comprehend racial difference Cliff 
must enter the symbolic register, but the price of entry is submission to the racial regime.”

By walking through the doors, we are agreeing to the conventions placed before us, this 
complacency perpetuates the discrimination.

The restroom symbols of W and C, for white and colored, have some similarity to the 
M and F dichotomy that mark many restrooms today. By walking through these doors we 
concede to the gender dichotomy, negating the existence and needs of the ‘other’.

**Restroom Symbol Analysis**

Restroom signs are considered to be *signal signs*. Signal signs have the nature of a 
direction, an order, a warning, a prohibition or an instruction. Their purpose is not simply to 
communicate, but to produce an immediate reaction from the viewer. The shapes around 
signal signs are chosen in regards to visual intensity. Triangles with the apex pointing down 
is the most aggressive shape because it contrasts with most urban and rural backgrounds, and 
is usually used for prohibition signs. Circular signs bear a resemblance to an open hand and 
are the most clearly visible on a wide variety of backgrounds. Square and rectangular signs

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79 Abel, Elizabeth “Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow’s Racial Symbolic” 
blend in the most with urban backdrops and architecture and are used most often to display information.\(^{80}\)

The standard travel pictograms that are ubiquitous within public spaces such as airports, transportation hubs and other places of international events were designed by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and premiered in 1974. AIGA worked with the United States Department of Transportation (D.O.T.) creating an initial set of thirty-four symbols to address universal communication needs. Sixteen more symbols were added to the collection in 1979. Prior to this effort, numerous international, national and local organizations had devised symbols to guide passengers and pedestrians through transportation facilities and other sites of international exchange. While effective individual symbols had been designed, there was no system of signs that communicated the required range of complex messages, addressed people of different ages and cultures and were clearly legible at a distance.

To develop this system, AIGA and the Department of Transportation compiled an inventory of symbol systems that were in use at various locations worldwide, ranging from airports, train stations, and the Olympics. AIGA appointed a committee of five leading designers of environmental graphics: Thomas Geismar, Seymour Chwast, Rudolph de Harak, John Lees, and Massimo Vignelli. They evaluated their gathered symbols and made recommendations for adapting and redesigning them for maximum visual impact and clarity. The full set of symbols employed by AIGA and the D.O.T. are shown below.\(^{81}\):


\(^{81}\) AIGA “Symbol Signs” \url{http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm?ContentAlias=symbolsigns} March 30, 2006
When looking at the typical symbol used to label restrooms as male or female, there are subtle differences in the way that the icons are depicted. These symbols, were analyzed using the Adobe Illustrator .eps files that are available on the AIGA website for free download. The symbols were broken down into smaller fragments and measured. From these measurements, the relative proportions of the figures were determined. Figure 7 shows the relative proportions of the AIGA restroom symbols.

![Figure 6: Full Set of AIGA and D.O.T. Transportation Symbols](image)

When looking at the typical symbol used to label restrooms as male or female, there are subtle differences in the way that the icons are depicted. These symbols, were analyzed using the Adobe Illustrator .eps files that are available on the AIGA website for free download. The symbols were broken down into smaller fragments and measured. From these measurements, the relative proportions of the figures were determined. Figure 7 shows the relative proportions of the AIGA restroom symbols.
Figure 7: Proportion Diagram of Restroom Symbols

The male symbol is slightly taller, has broader shoulders, and thicker arms and legs, thereby taking a wider stance. The male figure is also more solidly horizontal and vertical, there are no angles to his body, save the curves that round the shoulder, hands, and feet. The female figure, on the other hand has narrower shoulders, arms, and legs. The spaces between the arms and body and between the legs are also narrower in the female symbol. Her arms are also angled out matching the angle of her skirt. These proportions were probably set by observing typical physical differences between men and women and symbolically representing them.
Retail stores are also starting to realize the need for family friendly spaces and are setting up lounges, fitting rooms and some restrooms for families.

Figure 8: Family Fitting Rooms Sign at Target Store

Figure 8, is an example of the signage used for a family fitting room in a Super Target in Des Moines, Iowa. This symbol borrows from the ubiquitous AIGA restroom symbols so its’ message is clear to viewers about the intended use of the space. However, it is still adherent to the Big Dichotomy of gender, as well as the traditional notion of family. It shows us that a family is a mom, dad, and child. The person in the wheelchair is not visually connected with the family and the size difference between this figure and the family grouping suggests that this person is of secondary importance to the able-bodied family.
Figure 9: Restroom Sign with Ability Size Difference

In figure 9, the universal symbol of access is much smaller than the standing figure. The visual impact of the size and weight relationship between the two figures is that the able-bodied individual is hierarchically more important than the person in the wheelchair. This size relationship is also problematic since the symbol of access is so much smaller it is more difficult to see at distances. This would be problematic for persons with decreased vision impairments.

A traditional variation of the AIGA symbol places a bar between the male and female character, this is a very visual barrier between the sexes representing the physical barrier of segregated restrooms.
Figure 10: AIGA Restroom Symbol with and without Vertical Bar

Removing this bar, as done in figure 10, gives more unity between the two figures and the space they are sharing. Although this helps to bring down a barrier, there are more modifications that can be done that can help us think about these spaces as being open and accessible to all beyond gender, age, and physical limitations. Simply showing the male and female figures together does not inform the viewer if it the space is accessible to those with physical disabilities and still implies only two genders.

The inclusion of the universal symbol of accessibility within the bounding box of the male and female caricatures, as well as keeping the icon the same size as the others, lets people know that the facility is accessible as well as including persons with disabilities on the same level. There are many facilities that include the universal symbol of access within their signage but it is not always included with the male/ female characters nor is it the same size, thereby giving it lesser importance.
Conclusion

Making restroom spaces more inclusive to persons regardless of gender, age, and ability, requires an understanding of why and how these places are spatially and symbolically restrictive to these populations. Taking an interdisciplinary overview of the literature available on the topics of gender and sexuality, ability and disability, and signs and semiotics gives breadth to the research. It also gives a greater understanding of what these spaces are, why they are this way, and how restrooms are segregating and discriminating to a variety of people.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Symbol Survey Creation

Testing the symbols was a three-part process. The first part was creating a survey to get feedback by asking people what symbols they felt were most inclusive to people regardless of age, gender, and ability. The second part was disseminating the survey and analyzing the results. The third part was testing the symbols as restroom signage.

The initial step in creating this survey, was to select the symbols. The first symbol is a combination of the known AIGA restroom symbols. This symbol, shown in figure 12, depicts the universal symbol of access in the middle of the female and male symbols.

Figure 11: Restroom Figures with Universal Symbol of Access

In an effort to increase the sense of inclusion, the access symbol is positioned so that it is in the middle of the group rather than to the outside as it is often depicted.
The second symbol, shown in figure 12, depicts a group of figures, two smaller ones to represent children, one adult figure, and the symbol of access. Since symbols not depicting a gender segregation default to the male figure, the female figure was not used at all in an attempt to create a greater sense of gender neutrality. The grouping is arranged with the children on the outside and the adult and wheelchair figure in the middle. The symbols were arranged this way to represent a family grouping and to also show that the figure in the wheelchair and the adult figure both represent parents. This symbol is designed to test how people view the universal symbol of access with regard to gender and if they recognize the grouping as a family.

![Figure 12: Family Grouping with Differing Abilities](image)

*Figure 12: Family Grouping with Differing Abilities*

The third symbol in the survey, shown in figure 13, is similar to the symbol shown in figure 12, with one child figure removed. This brings the figure in the wheelchair to the left side facing towards the group. The removal of the child figure makes the overall symbol more square and visually less heavy. This grouping is smaller than the other familial group. However this too, may be misread and thought of as a group comprised exclusively of males rather than a symbol for an open space.
Figure 13: Reduced Family Group with Differing Abilities

The fourth symbol, shown in figure 14, is the repetition of four of the male AIGA symbols, with two smaller figures representing children and two larger ones representing adults. This arrangement was designed to examine whether the male figure would be interpreted as genderless. Therefore, if this type of figure can be seen as genderless then this arrangement will project a gender-neutral family. This symbol redefines a family as well as takes away all gender differences, however this level of ambiguity may be confusing and misread as a group of males. If this symbol is read as only a group of males it will then render femininity as invisible, which will help to point out that symbolically defaulting to this type of figure is discriminatory.
Figure 14: Genderless Family Grouping

The fifth symbol, shown in figure 15, contains an androgynous figure, the symbol of access and the traditional male figure. The androgynous figure is based on the AIGA female figure, but without the skirt. The idea behind the removal of the skirt is that women do not always wear skirts or dresses. According to Adrian Frutiger in *Signs and Symbols*, the skirt is confusing to people from other cultures such as those from the middle east, that traditionally may not adhere to western modes of attire. Symbolically depicting a female in a dress is culturally démodé, within the United States. While women still wear skirts and dresses, they are no longer a daily form of attire. If we remove the triangular skirt of the female figure to make her more androgynous and less stereotypical, the signs can be interpreted as being more open to those who do not fit within our societal view of what we believe is feminine. The arms on this less stylistically feminine figure are still kept at their same angle to help clarify the figure to viewers that the figure is more feminine as it harkens to the AIGA female

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82 Frutiger, Adrian *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning* Bluhm, Andrew, translator Watson-Guptill Publications New York, 1998
figure. This figure is paired with the traditional male figure and the symbol of access to demonstrate that there is a difference between the figures and to let viewers know that the space is open to all people regardless of ability.

![Androgynous Figures with Symbol of Access](image)

*Figure 15: Androgynous Figures with Symbol of Access*

The sixth symbol, shown in figure 16, is the androgynous figure repeated twice, once as a larger adult figure and again as a smaller child figure. The androgynous figure could be placed in a familial grouping. This symbol shows that the space is open to all ages. Having an androgynous figure in the family group also demonstrates a different type of family, that family is not just man and wife but two people. This is to test how viewers read the androgyny of the figure in context with the other figures. One of the limitations of this symbol is that it does not indicate if the space is wheelchair accessible.
Combining these different symbols with the labels of universal, unisex, accessible, gender-neutral, family-friendly, single-user, or collective adds another layer of meaning to the symbols. The labels work better with some symbols than others, and form cohesive meanings that could help enhance the understanding of the symbol. These symbols also have different meanings when applied to different spaces. The symbol depicting a family with the label family-friendly may work very well for a store that sells a wide range of clothing. However, it would not work as well in a specialty-clothing store. However, the symbol depicting merely one of each person, with the label multi-user or single user (depending on the facility) may work better for public restrooms.

Simply changing the sign outside a gendered space could change the way we think about gender and about how we move throughout the public sphere. By knocking down the gendered barriers, we open up these spaces to a greater acceptance of the ‘other’, thus allowing people, regardless of their gender to move through the spaces with greater freedom and equality. This free movement of people throughout the public domain will help us to be more accepting of those who do not conform to our society’s outdated notions of gender and
These symbols could work alone or with the help of verbal labeling. Most doors now are labeled with ‘men’ and ‘women’ or some similar vernacular, but when we think about opening up the bathroom space to all people the labeling has to change as well. These symbols designed for this study have been combined with a variety of labels to see the affect of how a label helps to reinforce or detract from the meaning of the symbol. Figures 17 through 23 show the symbol and label combinations that were used in this study.
Figure 17: Traditional Sign with Different Labels

These are combinations of the traditional restroom symbols. The figures share the space within the bounding box to put them on more of an equal plane. Labels such as ‘accessible’ and ‘family friendly’ may not work as well for this symbol because they seem to imply that they are exclusively for parents or for those with disabilities.
Figure 18: Three Traditional Figures with Labels

The combination of three symbols speaks more to the inclusiveness of all people. All of the labels work well with this symbol combination. This symbol is the most clear in its’ communication because the individual symbols are familiaar in their use, but the different combination of figures implies a deeper level of meaning.
The label of ‘family friendly’ with this symbol combination helps to solidify it as a family grouping. The label of ‘unisex’ however, makes the figures read as all the same gender rather than a family or collection of different people. When combined with the term ‘accessible’ it implies accessibility for families, but there is no indication of the needs of those with disabilities.
Figure 20: Differently-Abled Family Grouping with Labels

This symbol combines well with the terms ‘accessible’, ‘collective’, and ‘multi-user’ because it shows the full range of age and ability. This symbol was designed to be genderless, having merely bodies shown, however it might not read ‘gender neutral’ if the labels were not attached.
Figure 21: Full Family with Differing Abilities Symbol with Labels

This grouping reads best with the term ‘family friendly’ as it depicts a family grouping. It also reads ‘accessible’, ‘multi-user’, ‘collective’, and ‘universal’ well. It is intended to show a family where not all members are able-bodied, therefore the interpretation of the gender of the person in the wheelchair will decide if this symbol reads well as ‘unisex’ and ‘gender neutral’.
This grouping works well with ‘accessible’, ‘gender neutral’, ‘multi-user’, ‘single user’, ‘unisex’, and ‘universal’ because it includes a more androgynous female figure which may not be easily identified as the stereotypical female. This symbol is not as strong with the label ‘family friendly’ because the group does not depict children and may not be read as a familial group.
This symbol works well with ‘family friendly’, ‘gender neutral’, ‘multi-user’, ‘unisex’, ‘universal’, and ‘collective’ because it shows a familial grouping of persons with a more androgynous gender. This may not read as accessible for those with disabilities.

With the symbols to test identified, the next a series of questions were developed to accompany each of the six symbols. First the participant was asked to consider a symbol,
then to rate the symbol on a scale between masculine, neutral, and feminine. They were asked to define the symbol as inclusive, exclusive, or other, and then explain their answer. They were also asked if they could change something about that symbol what would they change. They were then asked to select from a list of labels the one that they felt was most appropriate to the symbol. At the end of the survey, the participant was asked to consider all of the symbols together and rate them from best to worst in terms of inclusiveness. These questions were designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data about each symbol.

Fifty surveys were collected. The seven-page survey is included in Appendix B. The surveys were given to a wide variety of ages and genders. Members of the Iowa chapter of Tri-Ess, Transgender of Iowa, and Iowa State University LGBTA alliance, and to other Ames community members, were given the survey to ensure a sampling of these populations. The sample size of the survey was too small to gather any hard statistical evidence, but it is interesting to note how participants rated and reacted to the symbols.

The goal of this sample test was to ascertain what people thought of the symbols. The opportunity to write or sketch suggestions within the survey allows for this data to be used in future studies.

Survey Analysis

The completed fifty surveys were analyzed with SPSS software. SPSS is data mining and statistical analysis program. All the graphs regarding the surveys were generated from SPSS results.
The demographic break down of participants is as follows, 28 females, and 19 males, 25 heterosexual, 14 homosexual, 4 bisexual, 6 cross-dressers, 2 transgenders, 1 gender ambiguous, and zero intersexuals.

Figure 24: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents
Many people rated the first symbol as being neutral as it represented the traditional female, male, and accessible figures.
Others circled both sides of the spectrum, labeling the symbol as both masculine and feminine and not neutral. Some persons felt that it excluded families, because it did not portray children. It is not surprising that this symbol rated the highest. It is the most traditional in its structure and portrayal of binary genders and is not challenging to the viewer. The most interesting aspect of this symbol is that while it is the most traditional in its representation of binary gender, the more fluid gender groups, cross-dressers, transsexuals, and gender ambiguous individuals, all identified this symbol as being neutral. At the same time the first symbol, represented in figure 25, tested as a masculine symbol and was rated slightly higher in the overall rating, especially among certain categories of the LGBT community. This symbol, although it was far and away rated to be the most neutral, was not necessarily the favorite among all of the groups. This symbol demonstrates more stereotypical femininity in a way that the others do not, yet women gave it a less than favorable rating. This may mean that more women do not want to be projected in a stereotypical way. Cross-dressers rated this symbol highest. A possible reason for this is
while women push to not be categorized as very feminine, cross-dressers fight for their right to be *en femme*.

*Figure 26: Percent of Respondents Who Rated Question 3a to be a Neutral Symbol*
Figure 27: Second Symbol Surveyed

The second symbol on the survey, shown in figure 27, was rated very masculine because people felt that it only showed one adult male, two male children, and the accessibility symbol, and excluded a symbol for women. People did not understand the need for of two child figures in the symbol and felt that it was redundant. Although it was intended to be read as a family structure, it was not viewed that way. It was attempting to demonstrate that a family does not always consist of able-bodied people. This symbol rated high among all groups, even though it also tested as being masculine. Ironically, the masculine symbol did not rate as high with males as it did with females. This could be an acknowledgement of the predominance of masculine symbols and the understanding the masculine is often used to cover the feminine by implying that it is a generic reference.
The third symbol, shown in figure 28, was also perceived as excluding to women, but many participants commented that it was a good representation of being inclusive of age and ability. This rating suggests that although people view a masculine symbol as universal in many other situations, they do not view it as universal when it comes to restrooms. The most common comment made for this symbol was ‘add a female’. It is interesting that we are so engrained to needing separate gender representation within restroom symbols that even the conventions of other symbols do not cross over into this area.
The fourth symbol, shown in figure 29, tested the least positive because many felt that it was a large group of men and excluded persons with disabilities and non-males. No one viewed it as a familial grouping, and many criticized it for having too many repeating figures. It was intended that this symbol would be an alternative to the traditional portrayal of a family. It was theorized that it would be seen as a family with two fathers, or as a gender ambiguous family. Based on survey feedback, this symbol was not seen as a family but was seen more as ‘a group of guys’. This symbol rated the worst in both neutrality, and in overall ranking it was last among approximately eighty percent of survey respondents. The only groups that rated it as a first or second choice were females, heterosexuals and cross-dressers. The overwhelming unpopularity of this symbol demonstrates that it is the least effective in communicating neutrality and openness of spaces. It reads as highly masculine and redundant.
The fifth symbol, shown in figure 30, tested well especially among the LGBTA community. Many thought the new figure was interesting and comments were made to make it smaller or more rounded to look more feminine. It was suggested to split the traditional male and female figures in half vertically and place the two vertical halves together, as is done in some existing signage. Some felt that this symbol should include children figures to signify openness to families. Others viewed the newer, more androgynous figure as an adolescent boy or a gay male and some were simply confused as to what this figure was supposed to mean. This symbol rated highly among those who declare themselves as gender ambiguous. However, it did not rate well among the transsexual respondents. This was an unexpected result as it was though that both audiences would be in favor of a less stereotypical and more gender fluid figure. Women also rated this symbol highly, possibly due to a desire to move away from stereotypical femininity.
The last symbol, shown in figure 31, surveyed tested slightly above the previous symbol. Many people felt that it was more inclusive to families because it shows children, but it excluded people with disabilities. It was suggested to split up the adult figures and place the two children between them so that the difference between the adults would be more apparent. It is possible that the second time participants saw the more androgynous figure they started to understand more of what it meant. Some participants picked up on the visual cues left in the symbol from the existing female figure and recognized it as a female, while others did not and were confused by what the symbol represented. The symbol in figure 31, was much more consistently rated among all the demographic categories. It is possible that more participants saw this as a familial grouping and related it to the concept of family friendly restrooms. While this symbol rated as being more neutral than the other symbol containing the androgynous figure, this symbol rated lower in the overall ranking. In general, about one in three participants rated this symbol as their first or second choice for preferred symbol.
Throughout the surveys several people identified the symbol of access as having gender connotations and associated it to being a masculine symbol. It was felt that unless abject femininity was shown, which in this case is a figure in a dress, then the symbols were more masculine, and this is true with the universal symbol of access as well. Several comments were made that a feminine symbol of a woman in a wheelchair should be added. Many people, especially those who identified themselves as being homosexual, transgendered, or gender neutral, picked up on this idea and found the more ambiguous figure to represent a more real version of femininity and identity. One sketch, shown in figure 32, suggested bringing back the traditional female figure, place it with the new androgynous figure, the male figure, child representations of all three figures, and the universal symbol of access to clearly and equally represent all people regardless of age, gender, and ability.

![Figure 32: Sketch of New Arrangement of Symbols Taken from a Survey](image)

Many of the overall comments made on the surveys demonstrated a cultural consensus that unless femininity is expressly shown, we read masculinity. The new androgynous figure moved the restroom symbols along the spectrum from being clear to being more unique.

The surveys demonstrated a wide variety of responses to the tested symbols. The comments that were written after ranking the symbols in question 9 of the survey demonstrated a desire by some for more open facilities and the adherence to binaries by
others. There was a surprising amount of responses that indicated that the skirt should be added to one of the figures. It was clear that a break is needed from the masculine stereotype. For example, even the universal symbol of access was rated as being masculine. Some respondents even suggested the addition of a symbol of a woman in a wheelchair to make it more inclusive. It is clear that when gender is referenced even in a neutral way, the symbols are interpreted as masculine. This is in part a fault of the symbols tested. Once the survey results were in, it became clear how masculine some of these symbols were that same level of femininity was unrepresented. The idea of femininity in symbols needs to be explored and tested in ways that could lead to more neutral and open representation. This is an area for further investigation.

Overall, the demographic breakdowns had differing views of gender. There were clear favorites, most people favored the symbols they had seen before and expressed the most confusion over the less familiar androgynous figure. There were many suggestions to move the new symbols back to the old ones. However, when there was disapproval of a symbol there were few new ideas or suggestions written or sketched. One sketch suggested simply doing away with all figurative elements of restroom symbols and depicting simply a toilet. Another sketch offered a new combination of symbols, depicting the androgynous figures with the symbol of access as the whole symbol.
While it is easy to identify exclusiveness, portraying inclusiveness is more difficult to pin down and is a concept that first needs to be explored and then, more importantly, be learned.

**Testing the Symbols**

Based on the results of the study, the symbol and label that were considered to be the most indicative of inclusiveness of all people regardless of age, gender, and ability was placed on restroom doors to observe user reactions. The symbol shown in figure 35 was chosen to hang with four alternating labels since these four labels were all equally ranked in terms of inclusiveness based on the previous survey.
Figure 34: Symbols with Labels as they were Tested

The signs were slated to be displayed from April 10th to 14th, 2006 in Curtiss Hall, Beardshear Hall, College of Design, Parks Library, Carver Hall, the Memorial Union, and Ross Hall on the Iowa State University Campus. The signs were printed on 8.5” x 11” cardstock and hung over the existing restroom signage. Qualitative data was to be obtained through observation journaling to collect unbiased feedback about each user’s reaction to the signs and their meanings.
Public Reactions

Controversy started almost immediately upon posting the signs on the morning of April 10th. The first sign had just gone up in Curtiss Hall, a building that is part of the College of Agriculture, when people started asking questions about the signs. Some women working in the building expressed concern over having to share restrooms with men. The idea, they said, scared them or made them feel uncomfortable. Another person in Curtiss Hall declared the signs immoral since they read ‘gender neutral’. Soon after hanging, many of the signs in Curtiss Hall were removed by patrons. The signs were re-hung, however, once again the signs were removed.
Within the College of Design building, the signs were slightly more successful. Several people asked questions about them and some commended the project. The signs were up for most of the day. At the end of the day all the signs were off of the women’s restrooms, but they were still up on all the men’s. Because the symbols seem inherently more masculine, the men in this building may have found the symbols less threatening than did the women.

Once again, in the Memorial Union, a building that is home to commercial and organizational functions, the signs were torn down almost as soon as they were hung. Within several hours of their hanging, a sign protesting this study was posted below the test symbol.

During the day of April 10th, many email messages were received about the signs. Campus Planning received so many complaints that they asked for the signs to be moved so that they were not covering existing signage and add the phrase ‘student project- please do not remove’, to help alleviate some of the confusion. The signs were reworked to accommodate this request. By the next day, April 11th, permission to hang the signs had been revoked. The reason cited was that proper permission had not been obtained and the posted signage had not been approved. The following email was received from Facilities Planning and Management on April 11th:

"I am writing with concerns regarding the project that you had requested to post signs on Restroom doors.

We have received many concerns regarding the posters that have been posted. Upon investigation I have found that the posters that had been sent to us for approval are not the posters that are being displayed. The posters that are being posted are not authorized by this department and are still being hung as of this morning. In place of [Name Omitted] being out until tomorrow, I have instructed my staff and the departments that have contacted me to remove all posters immediately. I am requesting that posting any material in any buildings that are associated with this project be stopped."
Analysis of the Reactions

On the morning of April 11th, one of the signs had been folded in half and re-taped to the women’s restroom door on the first floor of the College of Design. This sign seemed to suggest that the people working within the buildings had not properly informed about the nature of the project and how the signs were going to be displayed.

![Image of a sign]

*Figure 36: Sign Posted on College of Design Restroom*

The events of April 10th and 11th paint an interesting picture about how our society views gender and the segregation of gender. User reactions were highly emotional. Morality

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83 Email from Campus Facilities, Planning and Management received on April 11, 2006 at 8:59 am, Author’s name suppressed
was brought up one user who seemed to feel that gender neutrality or the possibility of more
than two genders was immoral by nature.

Several viewers brought up the issue of safety. They felt that if people of various
genders were to use the same restroom, it would compromise their safety or security. An
e-mail, received on April 10th, stated the following concerns:

“This is a follow up to the gender neutral notes that were placed on the
restrooms on floors 2-6 of Ross. As you know, we removed them. After talking
with you it is my understanding that the students received permission to post
the notes but the office or individual who gave permission for the posting
should have gone one step further to notify the building supervisor, in this
case, (name omitted), who would have notified the various departmental
offices in Ross. We called all over campus trying to find out where they came
from and no one had the foggiest idea.

A few comments about the project:
1. The symbols used for a woman were not universally recognized which
made us question for validity of the sign in the first place,
2. We have 5 External Reviewers as special guests to the department and this
could have put them, unknowingly, in a very uncomfortable situation,
3. I change my clothes in the restroom and I don't like surprises and I suspect
I am not alone in this,
4. A gender neutral restrooms may need to be redesigned to accommodate all
potential users
5. There could be some safety issues - at least at a gender neutral restroom
such as a gas station the user has control of the situation with a lock and key.

My suggestion if you want gender neutral restrooms for a specific population
on this campus, it would be appropriate to designate a restroom on the first
floor of specific buildings for that purpose and leave the rest of them as they
are.”

The concerns raised by this email speak volumes to our relations to each other based upon
gender. Unwillingness from women to share the space with men on the basis of safety
implies that all men are potential victimizers. It implies that allowing men to have access to

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84 Email received on April 10, 2006 at 5:07 pm, Author’s name suppressed to preserve identity.
the same spaces as women would increase the level of sexual assaults. This may explain why the signs were all torn off of the women’s restrooms in the College of Design, while the signs on the men’s restrooms remained. It indicates that there is a level of distrust between men and women that drives toward segregated spaces and activities.

Restrooms are spaces of vulnerability. There seems to be a sense of security that is achieved by limiting the access of restrooms spaces to certain groups of people. While this solidarity may make some more comfortable, those that are left out of the approved group are without a safe space. There is no quick or easy remedy to alleviate the distrust between genders or the anxieties felt within restroom spaces. But, it is of great importance to discuss it and take steps towards understanding the nature of gender in order to alleviate these anxieties.

All the controversy surrounding this one day test of gender-neutral restroom signage demonstrates the highly emotional nature that is attached to urinary segregation. Just as the Jim Crow signs separated whites from coloreds in the south based on the excuses of safety, propriety, and sanitation, we too segregate men from women with the same excuses in mind.

Safety is a legitimate concern. If a restroom lacks privacy and sanitation, it also feels less safe. However, limiting the space in terms of gender gives a false sense of protection, especially in the event of assaults. But as Adrienne Rich explains in her article, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence*, because the male sex drive is seen as uncontrollable, women feel that they must protect themselves from it through conventions of modesty and separation.
The signs were up for one day, but they made a tremendous impact on those who saw them. The testing of these signs even captured the attention of the campus newspaper, the Iowa State Daily.\(^\text{85}\)

Out of this emotional public reaction is the place where a meaningful discourse can begin. The clear and present need for gender neutral restrooms will only become more evident. Therefore, continued study and development of symbols and spaces that reflect the needs of all users must be continued.

\(^{85}\) For full article please see Appendix A
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Project Limitations and Areas for Further Research

This project has many opportunities for further research. Firstly, the design and testing of the symbols could be continued and improved upon. The symbols designed for this test are not necessarily the best solution to the problem of creating symbols and spaces without gender boundaries. However, these symbols could become a foundational part of a discourse towards these goals. The traditional restroom symbols were introduced in 1972, if we consider the fluid and ever-changing ideas of gender, then it is important to continue to question and update these symbols so that they are reflective of the current understanding of lived thirdspaces.

Another limitation of this thesis is the number and type of people surveyed. Great care was taken to survey a broad range of people, but surveying greater and broader populations may affect the outcomes of the survey. The survey given for this thesis could be followed up with secondary surveys to gain more information about the subjects and to test further symbol development.

A limitation that was realized once the testing had begun was the overall masculinity of the symbols. These symbols are not perfect nor are they a final solution. However they could be drawn upon for further symbolic development. The AIGA symbol signs may be too loaded with societal mores and conventions to be effectively used to represent gender neutrality. This project is about creating gender neutral symbols for restrooms and opening
up the thirdspaces, an idea that is ever-changing and shifting to reflect current populations and society. There may never be a final design solution but merely a historical series of symbols moving and changing with time.

One of the greatest limitations to this project was the limited amount of exposure time the symbols had as tested signage. Many of these signs were torn down shortly after they were hung. This limited the amount of people that could view and ponder the concepts at the core of this test, as well as limited the discussions that may have resulted. This study could be attempted again for a longer amount of time or under different circumstances. Ensuring proper permission and clarity of communication about what the signs are and why the study is being attempted could help to prevent administrative backlash in a future study.

The ideal next step for this research would be to involve an interdisciplinary team consisting of, but not limited to, designers, architects, social scientists, psychologists, gender theorists, disability experts, and anthropologists to build a rich discourse in designing and understanding the application and meanings of restroom symbols and spaces. This team would bring a greater scope to the issues surrounding gender segregation and neutrality. With this base knowledge, studies could be done involving a greater number of participants and testing of symbols with greater statistical accuracy. Accurate testing and a more thorough investigation of all the aspects of gender-neutral restroom symbols and spaces would allow restrooms to encompass a more real perspective of gender and user needs.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored literature across the disciplines of biology and medicine, history, current events, geography, gender theory, and symbology and semiotics. These areas have shaped the understanding of what gender is, the history of gender segregation, and how society views gender. Restrooms continue to be one of the most prevalent forms of gender segregation within our society. In looking at these spaces we come to understand how beneficial it would be to open up these spaces to all people regardless of gender, age or ability. Cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersexuals, gender ambiguous persons, parents with small children, and persons requiring assistance to use the facilities would all benefit from having gender neutral restrooms.

Gender segregated restrooms benefit those who hold the place of power within society. Power is reserved for the normalized population: the white, straight, Christian, affluent, and able-bodied communities. Denaturalizing restrooms so that they are gender neutral and open to all, unbalances the power structure and increases the visibility of populations who are disadvantaged by gender segregation, namely cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersexuals, the gender-ambiguous, parents with small children, and those requiring and giving assistance to utilize the restroom.

With this in mind, a series of symbols based on the 1972 AIGA and D.O.T. universal restroom symbols were created to try to create a greater impression of gender neutrality. These symbols were then put through a two-part test. The first part was surveying the symbols, the second part was hanging up the signs and observing people’s reactions. The
reactions were so strong against having a gender neutral restroom that testing had to be abandoned.

Many people who observed the signs agreed with them in theory but still found them threatening when implemented. This demonstrates the distrust between genders as well as the prejudicial attitude against anyone who violates the standard two-gender system. The continued and increasing presence of gender neutral restrooms, on college campuses, in places of transit, and in the general public realm will help to break down the dualities of gender and the distrust of other gender(s). Breaking down these barriers can lead to higher acceptance and understanding of ignored and marginalized populations and a greater level of equality for all people regardless of their gender, age, or ability.
APPENDIX A: SYMBOL SURVEY AND IMAGES

Symbol Survey

1. Do you consider yourself as (circle as many that apply):
   - Heterosexual
   - Homosexual
   - Bisexual
   - Male
   - Female
   - Cross-Dresser
   - Transsexual
   - Intersexual
   - Gender Ambiguous
   - Prefer Not to Say

2. Do you have children or other relations that require assistance to use the bathroom?
   - Yes
   - No

2a. If yes, are these relations a different gender than your own?
   - Yes
   - No

3. Please study the symbol below:

   ![Symbol Image]

   a.) How would you rate this symbol:
      - Masculine
      - Neutral
      - Feminine

   b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (please circle your answer)
      - Inclusiveness
      - Exclusiveness
      - Other
c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.

d.) What would you change about this symbol? (feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):

- Gender Neutral
- Accessible
- Single/Multiple User
- Unisex
- Universal
- Collective
- Family Friendly
- Co-Ed

4. Please study the symbol below:

a.) How would you rate this symbol:

Masculine Neutral Feminine

b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (please circle your answer)

- Inclusiveness
- Exclusiveness
- Other
c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.

d.) What would you change about this symbol? (Feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):

- Gender Neutral
- Accessible
- Single/Multiple User
- Unisex
- Universal
- Collective
- Family Friendly
- Co-Ed

5. Please study the symbol below:

a.) How would you rate this symbol:

Masculine  Neutral  Feminine

b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (Please circle your answer)

- Inclusiveness
- Exclusiveness
- Other
c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.

d.) What would you change about this symbol? (Feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):
   - Gender Neutral
   - Universal
   - Accessible
   - Collective
   - Single/Multiple User
   - Family Friendly
   - Unisex
   - Co-Ed

6. Please study the symbol below:

   a.) How would you rate this symbol:

   Masculine  | Neutral  | Feminine

   b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (Please circle your answer)
   - Inclusiveness
   - Exclusiveness
   - Other
c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.

d.) What would you change about this symbol? (Feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):
   - Gender Neutral
   - Accessible
   - Single/Multiple User
   - Unisex
   - Universal
   - Collective
   - Family Friendly
   - Co-Ed

7. Please study the symbol below:

![Symbol Image]

a.) How would you rate this symbol:

| Masculine | Neutral | Feminine |

b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (Please circle your answer)
   - Inclusiveness
   - Exclusiveness
   - Other

c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.
d.) What would you change about this symbol? (Feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):

- Gender Neutral
- Accessible
- Single/Multiple User
- Unisex
- Universal
- Collective
- Family Friendly
- Co-Ed

8. Please study the symbol below:

[Symbol image]

a.) How would you rate this symbol:

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b.) What do you feel is portrayed by this symbol? (Please circle your answer)

- Inclusiveness
- Exclusiveness
- Other

c.) Please briefly explain your answer for letter b.
d.) What would you change about this symbol? (feel free to write and/or sketch your answer).

e.) What would you feel to be an appropriate label to go with this symbol (please circle your answer):

- Gender Neutral
- Accessible
- Single/ Multiple User
- Unisex
- Universal
- Collective
- Family Friendly
- Co-Ed

9. Of all the symbols surveyed, which do you feel communicates most clearly to the idea that the space is open to all people regardless of gender, age and ability? (Please rate your answers on a scale of 1 to 7).

Thank you for your time in filling out this survey!
Restrooms bend rules of gender for one day

By John Newman
Daily Staff Writer

People needing to take a restroom break on campus faced an unusual situation Monday.

Sara Wichtendahl, graduate student in art and design, changed many of the signs on restroom doors from "Men" and "Women" to gender-neutral and unisex designs as part of a research project.

"Over the past year, I've had a growing awareness of the problems with restroom spaces," Wichtendahl said. "I wanted to open them up to people beyond gender boundaries.

Every restroom in the Memorial Union, Ross Hall, Carver Hall, Beardshear Hall, Curtiss Hall, Parks Library and the College of Design Building was changed to unisex.

Wichtendahl cited several groups who would benefit from such a change, including families with small children, people with special needs and disabilities, transgendered and cross-dressers. Eventually, all public restrooms should be changed to unisex, she said.

The reactions she observed ranged from confusion to anger, and a few users verbally attacked her, Wichtendahl said.

The study originally received permission to span an entire week, but Wichtendahl said she was forced to remove the signs the day after installing them.

"I was told that I didn't follow the proper channels to get permission," she said. "I think it was probably due more to the huge volume of complaints."

Bob Currie, assistant director of facilities services at Iowa State, offered a different explanation. He said the sample signs Wichtendahl sent to his department made no mention of gender-neutral designs or wording.

"They put up gender-neutral figures on the ladies' restrooms, and that is not what they proposed to do," Currie said. "I think — and rightly so — that the users of the restrooms were offended."

Students had mixed reactions to the possibility of sharing restrooms with members of the opposite sex.

Jeremy Burd, freshman in animal ecology, said although one of the reasons he came to college is to expand his horizons, he opposed the idea.

"I think visitors to campus would be confused and uncomfortable," Burd said. Other students were more accepting of the idea.

"It wouldn't bother me," said Kelly Handegard, sophomore in health and human performance.

Figure 37: Iowa State Daily Article Covering the Testing of the Symbols
APPENDIX B: PEOPLE IN SEARCH OF SAFE RESTROOMS (P.I.S.S.R) SURVEY

People in Search of Safe Restrooms (PISSR) conducted this survey in 2001. The survey encompassed almost 500 participants and cataloged respondents comments on the problems of gender segregated restrooms. This survey looks closely at the needs of transgendered, transsexual, cross-dressing, genderqueer, and homosexual communities.

GENDER NEUTRAL BATHROOM SURVEY
Summer 2001
San Francisco Human Rights Commission

For more information, please contact:
Dylan Vade
Transgender Law Center
1800 Market Street, Suite 406
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 865-5619
dylan@transgenderlawcenter.org
www.transgenderlawcenter.org

Places surveyed by PISSR

• Went to: TGSF meetings (two), FTMI meetings (two), Transmen of Color meeting, Changeling meeting, Tom Waddell Clinic (twice), Radical Women meeting, Pink Pony (an all gender/trans/genderqueer club), drag king show, Young Loud and Proud Conference (LGBTIQ Youth), San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and the San Francisco Pride Parade.

• Left the survey at: A Different Light, Black and Blue Tattoo, Red Dora’s Cafe
• **Publications:** TGSF Newsletter published the survey (twice); The Bay Area Reporter wrote an article about the survey

• **E-mailed twelve lists:** eight transgender (genderqueer, FtM, MtF, transpeople of color, youth), two lesbian, and one general progressive.

## Results

N: Number of people responding

A: Percentage of people who want gender neutral bathrooms of some form

B: Percentage of people who want single person gender neutral bathrooms

C: Percentage of people who want multiple person gender neutral bathrooms

D: Percentage of people who want gender neutral bathrooms in addition to male/female bathrooms

E: Percentage of people who want gender neutral bathrooms replacing female/male bathroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transgender and not male or female</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender and ftm or male</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender and mtf or female</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total transgender</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not transgender and not male or female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not transgender and female</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not transgender and male</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total not transgender</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially transgender</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In conclusion: The survey found that transgender, genderqueer, gender questioning, and progressive LGB people are overwhelmingly in favor of gender neutral bathrooms (99%). Transgender and non-transgender people want gender neutral bathrooms almost equally: 99% of all transgender people, and 98% of all non-transgender people want gender neutral bathrooms. Non-transgender women (who make up the largest part of the survey, 40%) are 97% in favor of gender neutral bathrooms.

Most people are open to single person gender neutral bathrooms – 95%. And, only slightly fewer are open to multiple person gender neutral bathrooms – 79%. People are split about half and half on whether or not gender neutral bathrooms should replace or be added to female/male bathrooms (57% in addition, 49% replace).

The progressive LGBT communities are overwhelmingly in favor of gender neutral bathrooms and are also open to all forms of gender neutral bathrooms.

**Horror Stories – Why do we want gender neutral bathrooms?**

Why are we in favor of gender neutral bathrooms? How pervasive and serious are bathroom problems for transgender, genderqueer, gender questioning, and LGB people? Genderqueer is defined as a gender-variant person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. With regard to genderqueer people, out of 116 responses from those who did not identify as male or female, 48 people took the time to write out specific bathroom experiences, all negative. These experiences ranged from harassment to violence to getting fired. Harassment of genderqueer
people is frequent and includes: “being yelled at,” “screams of ‘there’s a man in the woman’s room,’” “frequent horrified looks,” and “I get looks/comments whenever I try to use a bathroom.” In addition to getting looks and comments, genderqueer people are often forced to leave the restroom by other bathroom goers and/or security: “people have told me to leave restrooms because they don’t think I belong there,” “having security called in because people thought I was in the ‘wrong’ bathroom,” and “security chased me.” For genderqueer people, going to the restroom can be dangerous: “almost got arrested for using the women’s room,” “got the shit kicked out of me for using the ‘wrong bathroom,’” and “I almost got killed.” Facing constant harassment and potential danger, many genderqueer people avoid public bathrooms altogether: “I often ‘hold’ it to avoid bathrooms,” “one time I held it so long my bladder hurt so much that nothing would come out,” and “can’t use any bathrooms,” “I would almost prefer to just urinate outside.” How often do genderqueer people face problems finding safe bathrooms? “People have no idea how many times I have not used a public bathroom and been really about to burst and in pain,” “I run into problems 80% of the time,” and “This is a problem every day.” In asking for alternatives, genderqueer people often face lack of understanding and support: for instance, one teacher replied to an all-day student, “well, do you have to use the bathroom while you’re here?” An employee was “fired for asking repeatedly for gender neutral/unisex bathrooms.”

For some people, it is a daily struggle to find safe bathrooms. Genderqueer people have a particularly hard time accessing bathrooms and genderqueer people are not alone. Transgender people who identify as either FtM, male, MtF, or female face similar problems. Out of 76 FtM/male identified transgender people, 31 took the time to relate bathroom

86 All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
experiences. Out of 49 MtF/female identified transgender people, 16 shared bathroom experiences. The experiences of MtF’s and FtM’s sound similar to the experiences of genderqueers. FtM’s and MtF’s also experience harassment and violence: “Yelled at -- ‘you’re using the wrong bathroom’” (MtF), “I have been slapped, pushed, and dragged out by security guards” (FtM), “got physically pulled out” (MtF), “having the door almost knocked down by teenagers” (FtM). As genderqueers, MtF’s and FtM’s, often avoid bathrooms, due to fear of violence and harassment: “hold it” (MtF), “I try not to use bathrooms” (FtM), “I have spent so many hours avoiding public multi-stall bathrooms that I have damaged my bladder and put pressure on my kidneys” (FtM). “Being in gendered bathrooms consistently makes me feel vulnerable to violence and possible arrest” (FtM), “it is always stressful figuring out where to relieve myself” (FtM). The simple act of going to the bathroom becomes a daily challenge: “The problem was a daily one. I’d think about where I was going, what bathrooms I’d have access to, how much I drank during the day, whether I’d be with people who could help stand guard…” (FtM). 87 Going to the bathroom should not be so difficult, should not require this much planning and strategizing, should not be fraught with fear of violence.

Why is it that many FtM’s and MtF’s face similar problems as genderqueer people? For one, some MtF’s and FtM’s are also genderqueer and/or do not identify as strictly male or female. Further, some of the FtM’s and MtF’s who do identify as male or female do not or chose not to pass. 88 And, many of the MtF’s and FtM’s who identify as female or male and pass went through a period of transition during which passing was difficult. So, many

87 All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
88 Passing: An FtM passes if others read him as male. An MtF passes if others read her as female.
FtM’s and MtF’s share with genderqueers a non-binary identity and/or a non-binary presentation (temporarily, or permanently; purposely, or not).

Genderqueers, MtF’s, and FtM’s are not the only people who have difficulties finding safe bathrooms. People are often harassed, not because of how they identify, but because of how they are perceived. Even those who do identify as female or male are put to a strict gender test: does one appear sufficiently male or sufficiently female to satisfy the gender police? Androgynous and masculine women face enormous problems finding safe bathrooms. So do androgynous and feminine men. Out of 192 women and 51 men, 52 women and 9 men took the time to share negative bathroom experiences.

Masculine and androgynous non-transgender women face many of the same bathroom problems that transgender people face. Many non-transgender women are harassed in women’s rooms: “told to use the men’s room,” “made eight women scream,” “security called,” “being followed by a police officer,” and “women told me to leave the women’s room and then tried to beat me up.” Many non-transgender women have no place to go: “women jump out of their shoes; I get harassed by the guys,” and “I hate it when people give you a hard time for going into the ‘wrong’ bathroom. What the hell are you supposed to do!” Many non-transgender women avoid bathrooms. How frequently are non-transgender women denied bathroom access? If one is a masculine or butch woman, often: “I run into problems all the time,” and “all of my butch female friends, ex’s, etc. ALL have experienced stares, harassment, threats, etc. in the women’s room. Some only use the bathroom when

89 Bathrooms are not only segregated by gender. Bathrooms are not only dangerous to differently gendered people. Bathrooms were segregated by race. And, currently, bathrooms are still segregated by class (for e.g., homeless people have difficulty using many ‘public’ restrooms.)
they have a group of friends to accompany them.”

Again, finding a safe place to relieve oneself should not be so difficult.

Some non-transgender men have difficulties finding safe harassment free bathrooms as well: “all my childhood, people told me I was in the wrong bathroom (long hair, too girly), “if my hair is long, I get stopped from going into the men’s room.” One father is worried about his intersex child not having safe bathroom access in schools.  

It is these experiences, which drive the need for alternative bathrooms. Finding safe bathrooms is a widespread difficulty in the LGBTIQ communities -- and, I’m sure, not in the LGBTIQ communities alone. We all have to use the bathroom, each day, several times each day. And, yet, anyone whose existence does not fit neatly into the narrow prescribed gender norms has enormous difficulty finding safe harassment free places to perform this basic and necessary human function. One should not get yelled at, chased, arrested, beat up, or fired for trying to use the bathroom.

“Safe-stress free bathrooms should not be a privilege for just a few traditionally-gendered individuals.” (genderqueer)

Why else do we want gender neutral bathrooms?

“I just need a place to pee.” (genderqueer)

The “best way to solve this is to have gender neutral bathrooms.” (FtM)

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90 All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
91 Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
92 Id.
93 Id.
94 Id.
We need safe accessible bathrooms. In gender neutral bathrooms no one would be yelled at, thrown out, arrested, etc. for being in the ‘wrong’ bathroom. There would be no ‘wrong’ bathroom. A safer place. This is one issue, the practical issue: the very real need of all human beings to relieve themselves without being harmed.

There is another set of issues: Male/female bathrooms are a daily structural reminder for genderqueers that we do not exist in the eyes of society (the law, medicine, etc.). We do not have to go to the bathroom. We do not exist. Bathrooms reinforce the current gender system. Bathrooms are a daily structural reminder that we must know at each moment whether or not we identify as female or male. Male and female, these are our only choices. Why must we artificially divide the huge gender diversity into two groups? Why is it so important that we relieve ourselves with only those who are lumped into the same group as ourselves? What if we are not easily lumped into a group? Do we not go to the bathroom? Bathrooms keep gender segregation alive – reinforce every day, several times a day, that there are men and women, women and men, men and women only and that we can easily tell who is a woman and who is a man, definite boundaries. Bathrooms tell me that I do not exist. Invisibility. As put by those who participated in the survey:

“How sad that I have to make a decision about my gender each and every time I enter a restroom.” (genderqueer)

“My ideal bathroom world would be one in which gender identity expression was accepted and this question would not matter. I think people should be accepted for who they are!” (genderqueer)
“As a transperson who felt considerable anxiety using women’s rooms for most of my life, the ability to have people perceive me as a human being rather than as a woman or a man who isn’t passing as one would be such a great relief! GNB’s (gender neutral bathrooms) could go far to help people stop being so anxious about who is in the room and whether they conform to gender norms.”
(FtM)

“I think it would benefit the non-queer people by having mixed bathrooms. It will demystify and break down gender barriers.” (non-transgender woman)

“Teach the culture not to freak.” (non-transgender woman)\(^{95}\)

Gender neutral bathrooms would be educational. Gender neutral bathrooms would be a physical reminder that the current gender categories are inadequate, that there are in fact uncountable different genders.

**Even more reasons for gender neutral bathrooms**

Long lines in women’s bathrooms: “Having m/f bathrooms is unfair to women who have to wait in longer lines.” (non transgender woman) Parents who are differently gendered than their children, e.g. father with daughter, have difficulties going into gendered bathrooms. Several parents suggested gender neutral bathrooms: for instance “gender

\(^{95}\) Five quotes from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
neutral bathrooms with changing tables so I can go in with my son, and my husband can go in with our daughter.”

(non-transgender woman)

Safe Suggestions

“For some reason its ok for me, a trans person, to be uncomfortable while I protect my delicate non-TG citizens from their own discomfort with the reality that not everyone is all pink or all blue. And that sometimes the pinkish blue or bluish pink people have to pee.”

“We have to find safe accessible bathrooms for ALL people. And this is possible. Several suggestions are in the survey:

Fort Mason rules. Lots of single person gender neutral bathrooms.”

“In Israel, they have gender neutral multiple stall bathrooms – they were a welcome relief. They looked like multi-stall women’s bathrooms, no open urinals. Inside most stalls was a single toilet, some had a urinal too (which would address the stinky problem). I wasn’t aware of people being afraid. Personally, I was just so thrilled that gender was a non-issue.”

96 All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
97 Id.
98 Id.
99 Id
“My favorite public bathroom experience was in Malmo, Sweden, in a museum— a multi-person gender neutral bathroom. Nobody made a big deal about it; it was just the way it was! Absolutely no one was freaking out. The stalls had floor to ceiling doors and walls all around. The doors were like doors to a room, no crack to peer through, with bolts that locked and let others know it was occupied. Then there were 10 sinks, commonly used. The entryway into the hall was open, so no one was ever far from assistance (a yell would have been easily heard). It was all very civilized and took a lot of energy away from the anxiety-producing aspects of sex segregation. Also, there was much less scrutiny and wariness present in the energy people brought into the space with them. I think that one of the factors in American bathrooms that leads to assaults is the isolation. I think women’s safety by virtue of a women’s sign on the door is an illusion. I think requiring people to behave responsibly by making their behavior public is a more community-oriented solution. Gender neutral bathrooms were common in Sweden. I’d really like it if we could do that here.”

“Reed College has predominantly gender neutral bathrooms — which most students prefer. There have been no reported problems with the gender neutral bathrooms.”

100 Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.
101 Kelsey Wirtzfeld, from Residential Life, mentioned that there have been no reported complaints about the gender neutral bathrooms.
Single stall gender neutral bathrooms with locking doors are about as safe as it gets. Multiple person gender neutral bathrooms can also be made safe, as safe or safer than sex-segregated multiple person bathrooms. The separate stalls can have doors with locks – just like single person gender neutral bathrooms. The entrance to the bathroom could be open, as in an airport. Yells would be easily heard. This type of multiple person bathroom is similar to having a row of single person gender neutral bathrooms with a shared sink area. “We can all share sinks, can’t we?”

The sign on the door could read “bathroom,” or “human.”

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102 Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey
103 The survey had many comments about the current sexist symbols on bathroom doors. “Change the signs, not all girls wear dresses,” “Change the sexist symbols.” Alternate suggestions are “bathroom,” and “human.” If we cannot live without segregated bathrooms, we could try “pee room vs. powder room” or “clean room vs. messy room” or “urinals vs. toilets” or “relieving oneself vs. other activities.”
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PERSONAL STATEMENT

The topic of restrooms as thirdspaces and symbolic and spatial gender neutrality is complex. I consider myself uniquely qualified to perform this study because of my background in graphic design and gender theory. I have also been blessed to have a sibling who is transgendered and I am a friend of a cross-dressing support group, Tri-Ess. My experiences with them has moved me from the shoes of the white, straight, Christian, and affluent to the shoes of the ‘other’. Immediately, I recognized the anxieties that surround restroom spaces within the public sphere, even within ‘alternative friendly’ environments. These places should not be a source of anxiety, therefore I dedicated my research to understanding and renegotiating restroom symbols and spaces to a more open and neutral end. Design is the mirror of society reflecting back on itself, when the mirror reflects an image of acceptance, tolerance, and understanding it will show on the face of society.
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