

# PEELING BACK THE PAINT

By Christine Schaffran

*Designing park restrooms  
for safety and maintenance*





When it comes to park restrooms, two things are certain—they should be clean and safe. Although this may seem obvious, achieving that goal may not be easy. Start at the one place that can make a difference before the concrete slab is even poured—restroom design.

Bill Woolpert, architect and owner of Green Building Architects in Petaluma, Calif., recommends kicking off the design phase by talking with the maintenance personnel who will be tasked with keeping the restrooms clean. He explains that sometimes the method in which a facility is cleaned impacts the materials that are used in construction. For example, he learned in one project that the crew liked to steam-clean the restroom once a week, which made the grout between tiles deteriorate rapidly. For this reason, he opted to use an epoxy-grout combination during renovations to ensure the aesthetic quality remained.

Woolpert adds it is important to look beyond construction costs and specify durable materials—especially mechanical components and plumbing fixtures—instead of opting for cheaper versions.

“Design for a new building to last 50 years and, over the life of the building, you will see lower maintenance costs,” he says.

Randolph J. Pease, senior designer at Integrated Architecture in Grand Rapids, Mich., says it’s important to evaluate materials not only for wear posed by users, but also environmental conditions, such as freezing and thawing cycles, blowing sand, etc.

From an operations-cost standpoint, water usage can be a big expense. Pease recommends low-flow fixtures with timed showers to reduce usage, as well as to diminish the environmental impact.

When it comes to designing to minimize vandalism, Woolpert says a good rule of thumb is to make the interior irresistibly comfortable.

“Every restroom needs an abundance of fresh air and natural light. It is amazing what a difference those elements make,” he affirms. “It seems that the nicer interiors get less abuse.”



# PEELING BACK THE PAINT

## A Landmark Study

In 2005, the city of Denver's Parks and Recreation Department commissioned a restroom master plan to evaluate

its 46 restrooms throughout the system. Mark Upshaw, architect/planner for the city, says the study—the first of its kind—took nearly three years to complete. In a 67-page document, findings confirmed that

“safety is one of the biggest concerns for users of ... parks, especially when using the restrooms.”

Further, the study affirms, one of the biggest problem areas is proper lighting.

“Adequate lighting is one of the biggest problems in large part because the restrooms are rarely seen at night by park's staff, and therefore burned-out light bulbs or malfunctioning light fixtures go un-replaced. These practices expose restrooms to unnecessary abuse.”

Natural light, Upshaw relates, also seems to play a role.

“Existing restrooms with natural light just seemed safer and felt better,” he says.

For this reason, both men's and women's restrooms were retrofitted with skylights.

However, not every remedy proved successful in deterring vandalism. For instance, Upshaw says, computer-programmed locks did not seem to work because they, too, were subject to vandalism.

Overall, Upshaw says, the most critical part in maintaining restrooms properly is selecting the ideal location. He points out that certain facilities, such as those too close to a parking lot or obscured from view, eventually will host “negative social behavior.” Additionally, proximity to an amenity—such as a skate park—may not be wise because it may inevitably be subject to vandalism. With an average price tag of \$400,000 to build a restroom

facility, Upshaw says location is a key factor that should not be overlooked.

“We felt strongly enough that we really needed to get the location right,” he says. “All of this works together to make people feel safer.”

Additional recommendations to ensure safety and deter vandalism include thinning or removing shrubs or trees, and redesigning the interior of facilities and the exterior screen walls to eliminate or decrease available hiding areas. Other suggestions include:

1. Making restrooms visible from areas of intense activity within the park, and where possible, visible from park entrances and the street.

2. Selecting exterior vandal-resistant lighting with polycarbonate covers or a similar product, controlled with a photo cell, and all wiring to be concealed.

3. Requiring doors to open out for escape.

4. Providing screening that will not make for a hiding place (64 inches high and 16 inches of open space at the bottom for visibility of one's feet).

## Safety In Numbers

Although there are no building codes that specify the number of compartments and sinks for park restrooms, Robert Brubaker, project manager for the American Restroom Association,



Don't ask what we have...  
*Tell us WHAT YOU WANT!*

[www.biologicalmediation.com](http://www.biologicalmediation.com)



Architectural Design assistance and Engineering is included with every *custom built* prefabricated structure. Public restrooms, concessions, park entry stations and more.

- Sustainable design and materials
- Renewable energy solar systems



800-524-1097



*Custom Builders*

**BMS**

BIOLOGICAL  
MEDIATION  
SYSTEMS, LLC

# PEELING BACK THE PAINT

says it's a good idea for safety reasons to separate sinks from toilets instead of compartmentalizing them.

"When you go down to one room, the privacy allows you to use it for things that it wasn't designed for," he says, pointing to vagrancy, drugs, drinking, and other unwanted behaviors.

In La Jolla, Calif., the Kellogg Park South Comfort Station design not only separates sinks and toilets, but also allows for a greater flow of traffic by utilizing space on the outside of the building. The toilets are housed in individual compartments, while sinks are located outside.

"Think of a bunch of port-o-johns back to back, and then turn it into a brick-and-mortar building," he explains.

Brubaker admits this only works well in warm-weather climates, but says the level of protection it provides to patrons is worth considering elsewhere.

"When the door opens and you see no one is there, then you can enter. If the

## Community Support For Clean Facilities

According to interviews conducted with Denver's maintenance personnel, cleaning and maintaining restrooms is considered one of the least desirable jobs. To help ease the burden, consider rallying the community to assist in keeping facilities clean:

- Consider volunteer projects to clean restrooms.
- Consider court-ordered community-service to clean restrooms.
- Post signs reminding users to keep the facilities clean, and list phone numbers to call for maintenance. Develop system signage to direct park and trail users to the nearest plumbed restroom when one is not visible from a trail or park facility.
- Encourage other city agencies, such as police, fire, and street maintenance, to use park restrooms so there is a wider range of use by responsible parties.

door is locked, that means there's someone in it, but you're not going to commit yourself before you go in and see no one's in there."

Pease agrees that an inverted layout that places all doors around the perimeter is ideal for visibility, as well as safety. He recommends eliminating internal passages where possible, and creating an

environment in which it's "easy to see and be seen."

For areas of the country that cannot feasibly utilize outdoor-exposed facilities, Brubaker says the zigzagging labyrinth entrance is preferred "from a security standpoint."

"First of all, you don't have to touch anything, so it's cleaner, but you can also





## Criteria For Locating Restrooms:

**One** Where 150 or more people gather per day in a four- to six-hour period at a particular location at least three times per week during the summer months.

**Two** Areas frequently permitted, especially for families, such as picnics. As noted above, this would apply to large families or multiple families, and especially where shelters are available (at least three permits per week).

**Three** Areas where permitted athletic events take place on a consistent basis, such as lighted ball fields.

**Four** Locations where there is a dense congregation of uses, such as the grouping of picnic tables, a playground, and athletic fields.

**Five** Areas where there is dense informal use (not permitted) that would demand water and restrooms facilities.

**Six** Key junctions at trails, paths, parkways, and pedestrian bridges.

**Seven** The uses and numbers of park visitors to a particular area must be well-established before a plumbed restroom is considered for installation. Use five years as a guideline before a restroom is considered.

**Eight** Before a restroom is built, employ a public process to determine if the restroom will create social problems for the park, communities, or districts surrounding it. If so, it should not be built.

# FRESHLY MOPPED IS AN OXYMORON.



## WATCH US CLEAN 30 TIMES BETTER!



**DON'T BELIEVE US?  
WE'LL SHOW YOU IN  
YOUR OWN FACILITY.  
CONTACT US FOR A FREE  
NO-OBLIGATION DEMO.  
SEEING IS BELIEVING.**



**kaivac cleaning systems™**  
Complete Cleaning For Healthy Results™

[www.kaivac.com](http://www.kaivac.com) • 1-800-287-1136

# PEELING BACK THE PAINT

walk around and look in before you commit to entering a stall," he explains.

He adds there is a downside to a larger footprint when utilizing a labyrinth-style entrance, but notes this is not a major factor for park restrooms since they are generally stand-alone buildings.

Besides, he notes, the peace of mind the openness of the design provides is worth the extra square footage.

"When Mom sends her son in to use the restroom, she can stand outside, but she can still hear what's going on and make sure he's OK," he says.

## Emphasize Importance

When it comes down to it, the more attention paid to restroom facilities increases customer satisfaction, which should be the ultimate goal of any park and recreation agency. However, as noted in the Denver restroom study, it is not always easy to convince employees of the importance of these facilities, which are sometimes considered a nuisance. As a manager or anyone involved in overseeing this operation, do your employees a favor and reiterate the importance of what

they do: "Those assigned with cleaning restrooms must be appropriately trained, mentored, and supported as appropriate," the study notes. It should be communicated that the task of cleaning restrooms is as important to the department and the city as any other task." **PRB**

*Christine Schaffran is the editor-in-chief of PRB (Parks & Rec Business) magazine. Reach her at [editor@northstarpubs.com](mailto:editor@northstarpubs.com).*

*To comment on this article, log on to [www.parksandrecbusiness.com](http://www.parksandrecbusiness.com)*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CINTAS FACILITY SERVICE



## Maintaining Restrooms

According to a recent Harris Interactive Survey, 94 percent of adults would avoid an establishment in the future if they encountered dirty restrooms. To keep restrooms clean and encourage visitors to return often:

**Provide the essentials:** Walk through restrooms on a regular basis to make sure they are stocked with soap, paper towels, and toilet paper.

**Protect the restrooms:** Implement an odor-maintenance program to keep restrooms smelling fresh. Include air fresheners and urinal screens to neutralize odors.

**Place a checklist in restrooms to make sure the following tasks are completed** (once per day is preferred; otherwise, as often as practical):

- Clean and sanitize floors, toilet/urinal areas, sink and mirror areas, door handles, baby-changing areas, toilet handles, faucet handles and light switches.
- Remove excess water from sink areas and the floor.
- Check proper functioning of odor-management system, lights, and plumbing.
- Remove any trash.

**Deep clean the restrooms:** Over time, dirt, grime and bacteria accumulate in restrooms, even with regular maintenance. To remove dirt that daily cleaning cannot reach, utilize periodic deep cleanings to sanitize restrooms and revitalize fixtures and floors.

—INFORMATION PROVIDED BY CINTAS FACILITY SERVICES.  
FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [WWW.CINTAS.COM/PARKS](http://WWW.CINTAS.COM/PARKS).