Alsop, Adam and FAT re-imagine the great British toilet

11 August, 2009 | By Laura Collins

Top architects' visionary proposals for RIBA competition to design the public convenience of the future

Five top British architects have produced innovative designs in response to a competition launched by RIBA and Radio 4’s Today programme to revive the tradition of the great British public toilet. The project was launched as part of the RIBA’s 175th anniversary celebrations.

The scheme produced a wacky range of designs including a public toilet housed in an overturned giant Roman head entered through an arched doorway, sculptural fountains containing a ‘touch-free’ eco-friendly public toilet, and a large glass flower with numerous lavitorial pods.

Here the featured architects describe their designs (pictured above):

Robert Adam: “Like all public fixtures on our streets, practical functions should be an opportunity for fine design. The classical lavatory is a modern facility with the best standards and access and it is also a pavilion in the tradition of the old telephone box and London’s taxi drivers’ shelters. It is made of pressed metal, would be prefabricated in parts and economical to make in numbers.

“It can be a male, female and disabled WC and can be combined to incorporate all three. The circular form can fit in just about anywhere. It can be discretely coloured to blend into the background or brightly coloured to act as striking feature. Its classical form would be suitable for new and historical areas and rather than being an unfortunate necessity would be an interesting ornament.”

Alsop Architects: “A public lavatory should feel fresh and clean and a lot of our perception of cleanliness is through smell. So I propose a loo that lifts up to let you in, thereby remaining open and well-ventilated when not in use. The toilet furniture would be made from concrete, so becoming part of the street, whereas the object which encloses it would be lightweight, sculptural and well-lit. This loo would contribute to the street in its presence and be a pleasure to use.”

DSDHA: “We combined the public’s desire for cleanliness and quality with putting beauty back on to our streets.

“So our WC is elevated to the status of a well-loved civic monument – as a series of public sculptures, a celebration of sanitation. Offering a bespoke sense of place rather than a standardised solution, the toilets incorporate Fountains, perhaps devoted to mythical river gods, and offer the city both art and practicality.

“Along with statuary and sculpture, each would be designed with a free-flowing drinking and handwash fountain, generous informal seating as well as the promise of best-maintained toilets in the western world, supported of hourly visits from a new breed of urban patrol: the Toilet Wardens.”

Eva Jiricna Architects: A toilet that can be mass produced and “plugged” into a specific location. From a central service point radiate pods which could be made to glow or even play music as the call of nature calls. The doors would operate like a VW van, opening outwards and sideways and the pods could even be have their own TVs. There is also the option of pods that provide undercover seating, advertisements, video projection and vending machines, not to mention solar batteries, wind turbines or light sculptures.
What is the maximum you would spend to use a **high quality** public toilet?

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What additional facility would **improve** your public toilet experience?

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Currently, what is the biggest **problem** with public toilets?

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Our proposal is for a toilet housed in a piece of public art, in this case a giant sculptural Hercules’ head in the classical style lying on the ground. It can be entered through a door, which we have based on the door of no.10 Downing Street.

“It is hoped that Hercules will inspire those who enter to conjure up whatever strength they require to complete their transactions within. Inside will be a view of the sky through an oculus in Hercules’ truncated neck.

“The design suggests the gendering of public toilets, something we are sure many women especially would welcome. Perhaps the ladies could take the form of a sculptural head representing Athena, Goddess of wisdom, warfare, strategy, handicrafts and reason, or Aphrodite, Goddess of love, lust and beauty.”

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