

A Tale of New York City Restrooms



by Phyllis Chesler

Our public bathrooms are driving me crazy. It can't just be me. Aren't others also having issues with the ever-evolving technologies of hand dryers, soap dispensers, and water faucets?

Maybe younger people welcome constant technological change and swiftly adapt to all things new.

One time, I remember it well, I could not even find the toilet stalls. This was in the mid-1990s. I was at a meeting at the Royalton Hotel on West 44th Street; the stalls were all mirrored and did not seem to have any handles. I faced what seemed like a giant, impenetrable, mirrored wall. Only when one woman exited did I grab onto the door, enter, and pray that I would one day find my way out.

I understand: Saving trees by replacing paper towels and their cost with an air blowing technique (known as the “electric hand dryer”) was certainly a good idea.

But why, then, do the damn hand dryers have to keep changing?

Once I got used to where to place my hands, (right under the blower), with no advance notice, I soon had to move my hands sideways, or up and down. What? Why? Once, I had to ask another patron how she used a particular hand dryer, but she said that she was also puzzled. Together, we consulted the management.

I’m not completely alone. Here’s blogger Mark Kaplowitz on hand dryers.

“Those hand dryers from the Industrial Revolution have been replaced by turbo-speed hand dryers...(that) are triggered by infrared sensors that can see wet hands before them as well as Taliban commandos in the Afghanistani night.

The configurations of the hand dryers are different, too. Instead of blowing air straight down, I’ve seen dryers that are folded over, and you place your hands inside a crease and the turbo-speed hot air dries your hands from both sides. In the future you’ll place your hands inside a teleportation chamber. The wet hands will be transported to a galaxy far, far away, where a swarm of miniature winged drier-fairies, that fly about your hands and dry them, not unlike the people that work at car washes.”

This problem does not come close to what happened to me when a perfectly well-meaning interior decorator had an expensive Japanese toilet installed in my home. It is known as a “washlet.” I had no idea that this toilet had at least nine functions and came with its own remote-control unit.

It is a combination bidet and toilet and, by pressing the right button, one can direct the water to squirt in the orifice of your choice. The seat can be heated, there is a

massage option, a choice of water pressure, a self-cleaning feature, and water jet adjustments. Automatic flushing and automatic lid opening are both included, as is a deodorizer. The control panel, (aka the remote), is either attached to the seat or can be mounted on the wall. This ultra-luxe item came with a thick pamphlet which described all these options and functioned as a guide to which buttons to press.

And so, I gladly sat down—and immediately got burned. The seat temperature was too hot. And, it could not be adjusted. “It” not I. Something was wrong with this particular contraption. And then, the water shpritzed wildly and splashed both me and the walls. It turned out that mine was a dysfunctional toilet; the company apologized and exchanged it. But I really could not handle the buttons and the remote. In defeat, I just pulled the electric plug out of the outlet and began using it as a regular, old-fashioned, toilet.

These days, I am always cheered when I happen to find an old-fashioned bathroom in a cafe, bar, restaurant, diner, or even theater. A simple way to lock the stall. Familiar water faucets, one for hot water, the other for cold. Blessed paper towels nearby, a choice of soap in a bottle and hand lotion too. Sometimes, even an attendant who offers the ladies perfume, sanitary products, aspirin, and even a sewing kit.

Gone, gone with the wind. But I saw it all coming when they shut the last Automat down, took away Schraffts, Chock Full O’ Nuts, and my favorite coffee houses in Greenwich Village.