

# Washroom Accessibility:

Practicum Report

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*What organization were you linked with, and what did you come to understand about this group, its vision, and its praxis?*

For my GSXS 405 Practicum, I was linked with the University of Calgary Campus Architecture (and the Office of Sustainability) – The vision this group held for our particular project was to ensure that all campus washrooms are fully accessible and barrier-free regarding wheelchair users/people with disabilities and gender inclusivity. The Campus Architecture department has very strict outlines for regulation and measurement standards for every part of a washroom of any variety. Measurements include and exceed room dimensions, stall dimensions, space between stall doors and walls, space between stalls and sink counters, heights of toilet, sink, paper towel dispensers and so on. They work within extremely tight budgets and work hard to ensure future renovations meet every standard. In having us work with them for this practicum, I see it as a step towards making reparations for the poor architectural choices of the past. They are a small group (in the single digits for this semester), with limited reach, but a huge campus impact. More than looking at solely floor plans and numbers, there is an effort to ensure that real people are able to use the spaces they intend to change.

*What activities did you engage in?*

We visited every washroom on campus that had not been recently renovated by the end of our practicum in November 2022 (barring a few in Craigie Hall that we ran out of time for), to observe how they fit into new architectural standards for barrier-free status. We filled out checklists for every individual washroom and assessed the accumulated checklists for each building thereafter. This was done throughout five, three-hour sessions, to make up our total fifteen practicum hours, one of which was performed with a wheelchair on hand for physical

testing. These checklists covered the notable features of ‘barrier-free’ stalls, washrooms, and routes of travel to said washrooms, which may or may not prohibit their use by wheelchair users. We also addressed the overall usability of each washroom: what features would work better over others, spaces that could be used differently, inclusions and exclusions etc. Throughout, we discussed what social and economic causes may have contributed to the architectural decisions that led to a washroom with barriers.

*How did these activities help you understand feminist praxis?*

Praxis, by our course definition, entails the active practice of feminist theory, action, and reflection, in one combined effort (Kadi, 2022b). Within our practicum, we were exposed to what role such a concept plays in filling washroom checklists. Beyond marking boxes, we were examining the differences a washroom showed about social and community ideology based on the time the building was erected, and how the state of campus washrooms continues to impact the student body. Depending on the year of construction, barriers would vary in quantity, and we could gauge what levels of inclusivity were in mind when designed. In many of the washrooms, good attempts were made at being barrier-free, but often still lacked functional necessities, like enough space to make a 180° turn in the larger stall, or adequate grab bars for *any* kind of movement that may be necessary. For my growing understanding of praxis, I think this practicum experience most highlighted that: Intention does not equal outcome. In our praxis cycle (Kadi, 2022a) (theory □ action □ reflection, repeat) reflection follows action, which is to say after making action towards increased accessibility in campus washrooms, reflection is necessary to acknowledge that more could have been done to provide a fulfilling change, and thus adjust the theory for the next renovation. There are faults, and even microaggressions, built into our

infrastructure that cannot always be seen unless you're looking for them. An example is that of the washrooms of the Science Theatres basement: where the men's washroom has seven stalls and eight urinals, making up fifteen waste receptacles, harshly trumping the women's nine total stalls. This example would not be widely witnessed, for the majority of the campus body restricts themselves to one washroom. What it shows is a disproportionate reflection of what genders may be accessing the building's washrooms, and shows a distinct bias in design. It is important to assess and readdress aspects of daily life, even if they don't look broken at first glance, to ensure that the structures put in place are not inadequate or unintentionally harmful. Something can be perceived as 'good enough' on the surface but still has room for valuable improvements, as this practicum has emphasized the concept of praxis.

*How did this organization's work, and your contributions to the work, connect with our course readings?*

Throughout the practicum, I found myself frequently pondering *Death of Why* (2009) for every new washroom we entered. The impulse to ask why the washroom standards had not been checked in so many years was horribly strong. And why was no one else asking why? It had been so long since any of the buildings we looked at had their bathrooms renovated, when I *did* ask, our practicum supervisor supplied the reason being budget; only a small amount being allocated to certain sections of the university. Andrea Batista Schlesinger said, 'We numb inquisitiveness with consumerism', and I think this is an important acknowledgement when considering how many years wheelchair users on campus have lacked accessibility. *Why is there no budget for something as crucial as accessibility?* Not only in washrooms but even hallways with seemingly pointless doors—lacking automatic buttons.

The work *Ten Thousand Roses* (2005) continuously emphasizes community building and acting as a collective. Rather than delegating work down a hierarchy, sharing work evenly is characteristic of strong social change structures, and that's a perspective that's needed in this realm. Accessibility for the minority often translates to accessibility for all, and it should be within a collective mindset that we work towards making campus accessibility a priority in the eyes of the budget holders.

In a similar aspect, I think *As We Have Always Done* (2017) demonstrates taking a cause in its entirety from a different lens. There are so many complexities in nature that Indigenous people have always sought to consider when acknowledging nature as a whole. All nations that live within that whole, be it people, animals, or plants, are considered with no one over the other, they are all part of the collective. In the terms of our practicum, this is replicated by initiating change with accessibility as a necessary and true facet of the project, and not an additional factor to address.

There is so much diversity in an individual's thinking, and the complexity of every person's lived experience means that there is hardly ever a catch-all experience or predetermined outline. Adrienne Brown addresses this in *We Will Not Cancel Us* (2020), when the initial releases of their work came back with great backlash, for perspectives that they had not before considered. There are always valid exceptions and for accessibility, they must be taken into account, or else you are creating barriers that prohibit someone from equal opportunity for experience. In praxis, this often means accepting a mistake, as Brown did, and accepting and reflecting on new perspectives without assumptions, hearing it from the source and those

peoples' lived experiences. By addressing the washrooms physically, with the use of a wheelchair, we were able to take the assumptions out of the picture and create a new 'theory' for washroom architecture with a new perspective.

*Which course definitions do you understand more clearly as a result of your work with this group?*

*Praxis: "At its most basic, the term praxis refers to practice. Feminist praxis refers to the alignment of feminist ideas/thought/theory with feminist action with feminist reflection.*

*The word/concept alignment helps us understand praxis, as it reminds us to ask questions about whether theories and actions are aligned, reminds us to consider the importance of consistently/creatively evaluating what we are doing; it is a consistent, ongoing process. To understand praxis, think of our visual image – the circle that flows from reflection to theory to action, over and over again"* (Kadi, 2022b).

- Our practicum fulfilled all of the cycle sections of praxis (2022b) and I understand the concepts far more thoroughly now, having acted on them firsthand. In our scenario: The planning and designing of washrooms is the initial theory; the creation or renovation of a washroom is the action; and what we did for our practicum is the reflection of the cycle, that acknowledges what changes are necessary. With our reflection on the state of washroom accessibility and why it needs to change, submitting our checklists to Campus Architecture acts as a first step towards an improved theory for the future renovations to come.

Education: “*Let other members of society know about the problem/issue/concern in the hopes they will come to see the rightness of the group’s effort, and join, or at least support, the group*” (2022b).

- Education is a word I choose more loosely based on the idea that there is a lack of education on this subject, for it's something easy to slip under the radar—it’s not easily noticed if it isn’t relevant to you for some reason or another. Before our practicum, I was aware that gender-inclusive washrooms were few and far between on campus, but I did not know that the majority of campus washrooms were entirely inaccessible by wheelchair users, especially on higher floors. Education is needed here in the efforts of awareness, as it is something that should matter to *everyone*, not just wheelchair users themselves. If we pursue education, perhaps some of the collective ideologies emphasized in our course readings would become more achievable.

Direct action: “*This kind of action involves protest, rallies, marches, possibly civil disobedience (that is, breaking an unjust law in order to point to the wrongness of that law) in an effort to facilitate change*” (2022b).

- Direct action in the concept of exposing wrongness can be done in quiet ways as well. The checklists that we created explicitly address the wrongs of campus architecture, and with the opportunity of the practicum, puts those wrongs directly in the hands of those who can change it.

Sexism: “*A system of oppression and advantage based on perceptions of the gender binary, and of perceptions of sex/gender*” (2022b).

- Sexism oppresses on levels that are not necessarily visible: seeing the comparison of men's washroom spaces to that of women's, there is the level of quantity on ratio, but also the lack of baby changing areas in either sex's facilities, the frequent lack of sanitary disposals, and the extreme bias towards urinals before anything else.

Privilege: *“The systematic advantage, or unearned benefits, of belonging to a dominant group. Thus, white people experience white privilege by gaining the systematic advantages, or unearned benefits, of belonging to a dominant racial group. Men experience gender privilege by gaining the systematic advantages, or unearned benefits, of belonging to a dominant gender”* (2022b).

- My understanding of privilege was expanded for the able-bodied and gender privilege in the ways of full and consistent accessibility to washrooms. The degree to which men and able-bodied people benefit over others, in a lens as small as washrooms, was incredibly eye-opening, especially for an inherent human necessity.



### Citations

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