

Flushed with success on World Toilet Day

BY CATHERINE
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For The Straits Times

NOV 19 is not a date many mark on their calendar. But it is noteworthy. It is a tribute — one long overdue and largely ignored — to an invention that many through the years have toiled to contribute to, unrecognised and at times the object of ridicule for their efforts.

Inaugurated in 2001, World Toilet Day was last celebrated in Beijing last year with a World Toilet Forum and Exposition. Interestingly, China has laid claim to the invention of the modern water closet with the discovery of a 2,000-year-old toilet complete with running water, a stone seat and a comfortable armrest. Archaeologists, the Xinhua news agency reported, found the antique latrine in the tomb of a king of the Western Han Dynasty (206BC to AD24), who believed his soul would need to enjoy human conveniences even after death.

With this, the Chinese flushed out the more popular English claim — that it was London plumber Thomas Crapper who dreamt up the flush loo, which thus sometimes goes by the name “crapper”.

It was Thomas Crapper and not John Crapper, as some websites report erroneously, who patented a U-bend siphoning system for flushing the pan in the late 19th century, and who also installed toilets for Queen Victoria — which puts a rather loaded spin on the phrase “in the service of her majesty” or the more politically correct terminology “sanitary engineers in the service of...”

I will admit to being more than a little curious about what activity loo inventors were involved in when they got their inspiration. I have friends who will swear their “eureka” moments came while contemplating life’s conundrums on the humble throne.

It is believed the earliest written reference to the disposal of human waste is more than 3,600 years old and is found in the Bible: “And you shall have an implement among your equipment, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and cover

your refuse...” (Deuteronomy 23:12-13).

Historical evidence of the importance of proper waste disposal goes as far back as 2500BC. The Egyptians constructed bathrooms with latrines which were flushed by hand with buckets of water. The latrines emptied into earthenware pipes, many of which are still functional today.

A conscious effort towards proper waste disposal has a history reaching as far back as when man started to make the connection that his waste had a direct link with diseases which can lead to his demise.

But enough on the history. Let’s return to the present because the world still has a long way to go in ensuring a humble throne for everyone.

According to the United Na-

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tions, 2.6 billion people do not have adequate sanitation. This is equivalent to 40 per cent of the entire world population. There is a UN Millennium Development Goal for Sanitation: “To halve the number of people who do not have adequate sanitation by 2015.” It is up there with the goals to eradicate poverty.

Here in Singapore, we have come a long way from the days of night soil collection. We have sparkling public toilets which have undergone makeovers — a result of ongoing upgrading in public spaces from shopping malls to hawker centres.

Already, some 80 per cent of

toilets in coffee shops have been renovated and there are toilets in petrol stations which claim to be clean enough to dine in.

I recently felt moved to check out the newly renovated toilet in my neighbourhood coffee shop. There, I was greeted with comforting green tiles on the walls and a wash basin to match. The floor, its former white slippery tiles replaced with light brown non-slip ones, was dry and clean.

There were two cubicles in the ladies’. One had a sitting, the other a squatting commode. There was a hook strategically mounted on the wall for your bag. Gone but not missed was the smell of ammonia, replaced by an air deodorant that dispensed a pleasant scent, not cloyingly sweet as is sometimes the case. The store-room area had all the apparatus needed to clean the toilet, neatly tucked away in a store room with a collapsible sliding door.

A four-star rating I gave it by public toilet standards. It fell short of five stars because, as usual, there was no toilet paper — which is why the pocket tissue business is thriving here. It was four stars rather than three because there was a soap dispenser with soap in it, and a hand dryer.

In Bangkok this week, industry professionals from all over the world will gather to discuss improving the state and management of loos. There will be the exchange of state-of-the-art technology as serious thought is given to better designed loos — maybe even one that is self-cleaning.

But a clean slate in the structural and environmental upgrading of public loos will count for nothing if we are not “toilet trained” in toilet etiquette. So let’s not forget the critical missing link, the continued education of the toilet user.

As part of the 60 per cent in the world that enjoy good plumbing, consider our toilets a privilege which requires a corresponding responsibility. You as a toilet user need to contribute to their maintenance, cleanliness and hygiene.

It starts with washing your hands, please.

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