

Loos talk says a lot

Luxe 'washlets' in Japan show how the way we wash reveals who we are

culture culture



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The only thing worse than a cold toilet seat is a warm toilet seat – so proclaims a jet-setting Serbian pianist friend of mine, Mina, whose first exposure to Japan in Narita Airport's swanky loos caused her a bit of culture shock.

Having experienced the supermodern conveniences there while on a business trip over the past five days, I wonder how I've been dealing with that biting sliver of a cold, cold embrace against my derriere over the last three winters in London. But who needs a warmed-up toilet seat, least of all in unreasonably hot Singapore?

And here is where Japan's mighty doyen of loos and flushes, Toto, has a secret weapon: the air-conditioned cool toilet seat, most recently showcased in its spanking new Shinjuku museum and selected luxury department stores.

Toilets – or washlets as they are called in Japan – are so state-of-the-art that they come with built-in bidet and bum-washing facilities, in addition to fake flushing noises that can be activated at the touch of a button to camouflage the less glamorous sound of pee splashing into the latrine.

Most washlets in Japan are equipped with air-drying mechanisms, and the latest models on the market, activated wirelessly (one wonders why or how, given that the loo-user is surely securely attached to his seat during the entire usage of this extraordinary machine) can measure your blood sugar levels and urine.

Washlets, indeed, are the iPhones of Japan, multi-tasking so well with their 101 mix-and-match and potentially useless but ingeniously effective features. Some 72 per cent of Japanese households have a washlet installed, so we are told, making a figure higher than household computer ownership.

The country's most advanced washlet comes with 38 buttons, no less, plus a

manual containing several hundred pages.

The thing is: How did all this fuss about toilets come into being?

Cultural watcher Allen Chun from the University of Chicago has published a full academic paper on the subject. He tracked the changing roles of toilets through history from public latrines in Roman times that were also men's clubs to out-houses built away from living quarters to control the spread of infectious diseases.

As he understands, the amazing super-modernity of toilets in Japan is a dedicated extrapolation and market-savvy milking of this later desire for cleanliness, "domesticating the savage body in a changing domestic space".

Well-known Japanese novelist Tanizaki had different ideas. As he waxed lyrically in *In Praise Of Shadows*, "the parlour may have its charms, but the toilet is truly the place of spiritual repose".

Indeed, the humble toilet is far from a taboo subject. Instead, it is an important icon that has become a manifestation of deeper and subconscious thought (often also intellectual and political) at the same time that it promotes and rewrites new cultural practices.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek, for example, has gone as far as finding parallel lines between German, French and American toilet-flushing styles with corresponding approaches towards political ideology.

As he understands, traditional German loos flush from the front of each latrine, such that waste can be inspected for hints of illness, mimicking a German-style politics of "reflective thoroughness".

French toilets flush as quickly as possible from the back, mirroring a "revolutionary hastiness" in dealing with (forgettable) historical undesirables and social change.

Those in the United States and Britain leave stool floating half-submerged in a pool of water before it is appropriately swirled away together with the liquid, bringing a synthesis of the two approaches and paralleling an ethic of problem-solving-based pragmatism.

Now, all this talk might just be a little too much of a theoretical diversion for my own guesses as to why washlets are like they are in Japan, and why they seem to have failed at conquering any market outside the country.

But Zizek's point is clear: Toilets in our different cultures tell us a lot more about ourselves than we think.

For one, as he colourfully describes, they reflect our deepest and subconscious attitudes towards dealing with waste. We are not only talking about sewage, but also perceived social "problems" that originate from the leftovers of human consumption.

For some of my Japanese friends, embracing washlet culture is all part of living up to the cultural stereotype of being health-conscious and clean.

For me, it's the haptic fun of pressing different buttons couched within my larger curiosity for gadgets and contraptions.

This inevitably also ties up with my own take that toilet time, unlike those Roman latrines or indeed modern gents' public urinals, is solitary and precious, the last bastion of comfort and privacy.

Too often, I've relied on the magic cubicle for catnaps when office meetings have become unbearably boring.

I've known countless friends who've run off to seek sanctuary in a toilet when they don't want to be seen crying (or giggling) inappropriately – in public.

Thus, the crazy splash and splatter devices of washlets in Japan function (for me anyway) within the larger framework of "pampering". It takes awhile to actually trust technology and human-created artifice in this journey towards toilet-ability, however.

The very first washlet in the world was, like many good Japanese icons, invented in the US in the 1960s, before it was taken over and improved across the Pacific. Now, the re-export of washlets back into the West is making everyone just a little unnerved.

Back to Mina and her fear of warm seats: "It makes you wonder about the last person who sat on it, possibly for a long time."

I've taken an opposite stand to her, preferring to see washlets as a luxury and even as desirable product.

But if washlets, ironically, continue to deal with the basic function of human ablutions at the unnecessary cost of \$1,000 (at least), I think I'll have to sit on the thought of buying one for a very, very long while.

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