

LOOTOPIA

The 21st-century Comfort Station

(The Daily Telegraph, 2004)

The subject of loos is inescapably hilarious. You will not find anyone more serious about it than Richard Chisnell, the head of the British Toilet Association – yet the moment you start talking to him, those pesky metaphors start creeping in. The government, he tells you, has washed its hands of its responsibilities; the BTA has been inundated with complaints; bureaucrats talk a lot of hot air.

In his grey pin-stripe suit and black trenchcoat, there is little to distinguish Chisnell ('58, and getting more frequent') from the dozens of other people milling around the Royal Festival Hall on a weekday afternoon. But Chisnell is a man with a vision, committed to changing the face of urban Britain. He has seen the future, and it flushes.

Chisnell's dream is that every town and city should have at its heart an ultra-sophisticated 'comfort station'. The first thing visitors want to do on arrival, he argues, is go to the loo – and nothing could give a better initial impression of a place than 'nice, staffed, clean, fully equipped toilets: all your hygiene needs catered for, from bottle warmers to showers and proper changing facilities.'

But this is not the half of it. The comfort station – rather like a petrol station on a motorway – would be a focus for other services, aimed at visitors and locals alike, with major revenue-generating opportunities. Open 24 hours a day, it would have a café and a Tourist Information Centre; 'you might be able to send an e-mail, to buy a newspaper, have a haircut, have a massage; you could have secure parking for bicycles.'

Funded partly by public and partly by private money, the comfort stations would also be a prime site for advertising, which could bring in more than £100 million a year: ‘If only we could realise the captive audience in a toilet!’

At present, the state of Britain’s loos is declining alarmingly, just when demand is at an all-time high. The stress of modern life, Chisnell explains, means that people need to relieve themselves more frequently; unfortunately, local authorities have no statutory obligation to provide public conveniences – so when costs have to be cut, it is often the loos that go. Over the past three years, the number available has fallen by a third.

Chisnell himself has been ‘stuck in the toilet’, as he puts it, for 25 years: he used to be communications director of a washroom supply company, and helped to launch the ever-popular Loo of the Year awards. A short figure with a receding thatch of grey hair, who might be mistaken for Paul Daniels’s more serious brother, he claims never to tire of talking about loos, which he does passionately and articulately.

‘It’s a very emotive subject,’ he admits, ‘and that is because toileting is a very personal thing. Why should you and I put up with standards outside the home that we wouldn’t tolerate within it?’

The British, he complains, have an ‘isolationist’ attitude to loos: ‘A toilet, if it’s out of sight, is out of mind. If it’s on the edge of a park, tucked away, surrounded by bushes, no wonder it becomes inhabited by the toilet underworld.’

This ‘underworld’ consists of people who use lavatories for sex, drug-taking or sleeping rough; and though the government is producing – yes – a white paper on sex in public places, Chisnell believes that the police have no real desire to tackle such problems, partly because they fear accusations of homophobia. In the end it is usually the hapless attendants

who are left to cope. ‘Some of them deserve the MBE,’ Chisnell declares, adding that an unattended public convenience is pointless (‘Would you spend £100,000 on a house and walk away, leaving people to do what they want in it?’) and that ‘toilet managers of the future should be trained in communications skills, first aid, and how to deal with drug abuse.’

To see the way forward, he recommends a visit to Zurich, where the area around the main railway station has been transformed by a company called McClean WC. The initiative came from three Swiss businessmen who were caught short and found the local loos unusable:

‘It was a no-go area. It had been taken over by drug-users, all the shops were shut, people were having to pee elsewhere. They thought, “There must be a better way”.’

The McClean WC concept was inspired by McDonalds. The three businessmen decided that the world needed loos with utterly reliable standards, well-trained staff, and a strong brand image. Chisnell describes the results with the rapture of a man who has glimpsed the Promised Land.

‘It’s like going into a chemist’s shop – sliding doors, bright lights, staff wearing smocks and trousers, all the toiletries you could want to buy. Each cubicle is serviced after every use.

‘People beat a path there because they know it’s a toilet experience like they’re used to at home. And all the shops have come back – the whole area has been regenerated. Whereas they used to get 300 [hypodermic] needles a week, it’s down to one very three months.’

Westminster Council has been in discussion with McClean WC, and it is Chisnell’s most fervent wish that the company should take over a site at Marble Arch or in Covent Garden.

‘That’s where London’s comfort stations could come into their own, with 15 or 20 changing rooms and accessible toilets. We’ve got to have family rooms, shower rooms; backpackers could have left-luggage facilities. Covent Garden wouldn’t be famous for the crowds and the pigeons – ghastly things – and the entertainment: people would say, “Meet you at Covent Garden Comfort Station”. It’ll become a Mecca!’

Just for a moment, Chisnell seems to have forfeited his grip on reality: no one can seriously believe that the razzmatazz of Covent Garden could be supplanted by even the flashiest public conveniences. But there is no denying the nobility, and general good sense, of his Lootopian vision.

Chisnell admits to increasing frustration at what he considers his lack of progress; but, he insists, ‘I shall keep trying, until someone says, “It’s time for you to go into the asylum, old chap”.’

And he hurries off to catch his train from – where else? – Waterloo.