

Do not silence my Bladder. Fight for an urban sanitary culture that includes women

Els De Vos and Baharak Bashar

Considerable efforts had been made by the City of Ghent to provide public lavatories and hygiene facilities in public spaces. No less than 130 well-kept dog toilets and 7 fields for dogs to do their business, had been installed since 1990. This commendable initiative did not find its peer in Europe. Recently the City had undertaken a second action. The nineteenth century batteries of free public urinals for men were partly renewed and partly completed by some brand new models, thirty six in total. Everything was done to pamper these users as well. Aerodynamic, high tech (on solar energy and with no water use), with smooth inox walls, these showpieces flaunt all over the city. Give credit where credit is due, the City of Ghent was awarded the "At Home in the City 2004"-prize. And rightly so, at least it would be if they had not forgotten about a substantial part of the city users: women. Apparently, this group was ranked lower than the dog community. This discrimination was noticeable even more strongly during big events, e.g. the Festival of Ghent. Women needed to shuffle along for the door of the few available toilet containers, and on top of that, they had to pay to use them. In the meantime, men could enjoy sanitary equipment for free. This unjust situation was denounced by the campaign "Do not silence my Bladder". Baharak Bashar, a Belgian woman with Iranian roots, set up the campaign in November 2004. The immediate cause was her experience that she almost had to pay a 50 euro fine for peeing in public and a 250 euro fine for public indecency. The campaign to push the authorities that were in charge (provinces, city governments, ...) to take the necessary measures to offer free sanitary equipment for women as well, started with a petition. Quite soon it reached the media, such as the newspapers, the radio and a popular television program on Flemish television. Later on, the campaign expanded. A website was made <www.plasactie.be>, several partners got involved, and a strategy was developed. Different activities were undertaken and are still in development. Last year the action group received a grant from Christian Dupont, the Minister of Equal Opportunities and Big Cities Policy, to organise a unisex toilet design competition and to set up a special toilet sign on the urinals about where to find a woman toilet for free in the nearest pub. As members of the action group, we can shed light on the evolution, experiences and concrete results of this form of urban activism. This immediately explains why we are interested in the subject of the workshop.



Biography

Els De Vos, Architectural Engineer and Urban Planner, is preparing a PhD at the University of Leuven on the social mediation of architectural ideas about living in 1960's-1970's Belgian Flanders. She does research in the field of gender, public space, home culture and anthropological architecture. Publications include: "Public Parks in Ghent's City Life. From Expression to Emancipation?" *European Planning Studies*, 13:7 (2005). She won the 2007 Society of Automotive Historians Student Paper Competition Award, and the 2002 Flemish Movement of Urban Planners Dissertation Competition Award. She takes care of the theoretical, architectural and urban aspect of the campaign "Do not silence my Bladder" .

Baharak Bashar is the initiator and coordinator of the campaign "Do not silence my Bladder". She is a member of the editorial staff of the programme "over-leven" (About Life/Survive), a weekly monothematic documentary slot about new advances in science and technology that is broadcasted on the Flemish public channel. Before she was employed at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel as a teaching assistant at the department of geology where she did geochemical research in the frame of the reconstruction of the climate.

Publications

ELS DE VOS (2005). "Sanitaire cultuur in Gent / Culture sanitaire à Ghent". In: A+. *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Architectuur*, 2005, 194: 16-17.

L. CLAEYS, B. BASHAR, E. DE VOS & K. BRANTEGEM (2005), "Leg mijn blaas het zwijgen niet op. Plaspraktijken, plaskennis en plasattitudes van vrouwen?". In: *Ethiek & Maatschappij*, 8 (4), 50-82.

E. DE VOS, L. CLAEYS, B. BASHAR & K. BRANDEGEM (2007). « Laat haar zitten! Plasgebruiken van vrouwen binnen en buiten de stad". In: *Ruimte & planning*, 27 (1), 10-28.