



When the public toilets at Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park are unoccupied, the modern, clean, welcoming interiors are visible clearly from the outside.

Photo: Satoshi Nagare, provided by The Nippon Foundation

## Rethinking Public Toilets

Tokyo is turning heads with restrooms that are beautiful, accessible, and innovative.

by **Tim Hornyak**

In Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park, a small park opposite the sprawling green of Yoyogi Park in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, people seem to materialize out of thin air. It sounds like something out of a science fiction movie, but that is what happens when visitors to the park use its new public toilets. Each facility has transparent walls that become opaque when the door is locked. When they are unlocked, the walls become see-through again, and, to an outside observer, it looks like the person inside the toilet has appeared out of nowhere.

Designed by architect Ban Shigeru, the transparent toilets have been turning heads for their novelty, but they are designed to address two basic concerns of public toilet users: whether they are clean, and, before entering a toilet, whether anyone is inside. Besides doing that, the walls exude a warm lantern light at night, making them seem cozy.

Japan is renowned for its high-tech, robotic toilets with functions such as cleansing sprays and heated seats. Now public restrooms are being elevated to a new standard. THE TOKYO TOILET is an initiative to rethink, redesign, and beautify public restrooms in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward. The project involves a total of 17 toilets, and 12 have been completed so far. It is man-

aged by The Nippon Foundation, the largest foundation in Japan. The Nippon Foundation aims to be a hub of social innovation by connecting various entities such as corporations, nonprofit organizations, and governments in order to solve social issues.

“Although ‘public’ is in the term ‘public toilet,’ not everyone can use them easily,” says a Nippon Foundation spokesperson. “Compared to toilets in airports or train stations, few park toilets have universal accessibility, making them hard to use for people with impairments as well as the elderly, families, and children.”

When the door is locked, the transparent walls become opaque, emanating warm, earthy natural tones.



Photo: Satoshi Nagare, provided by The Nippon Foundation



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The unassuming bubble-shaped exterior of the “Hi Toilet” in Hatagaya harbors a plethora of voice-activated touchless technology.

“All THE TOKYO TOILET facilities have universal private rooms so they can be easily used. In addition, we want to dispel negative images of toilets and we want to rethink them through the power of design and creativity. Since public toilets belong to everyone, we also aim to foster the spirit of keeping them clean for the next user.”

A total of 16 architects and designers from Japan and overseas are bringing their artistic vision to this often-overlooked piece of public infrastructure, and have produced some startling results.

In Hatagaya alongside the bus stop, Nanago Dori Park has a new white, hemispherical public toilet that also has a futuristic aesthetic. Apart from looking slick, it has smarts. The facility is fully voice-activated and bilingual (Japanese and English). On voice command, it can open the door, flush the toilet, and even play music. The “Hi Toilet” is contactless, addressing user anxieties by eliminat-

ing the need to touch surfaces.

“This idea has been in place long before the arrival of COVID-19, but COVID accelerated the acceptance of this unique user experience in terms of ‘toilets being contactless,’” says creative director Sato Kazoo of Disruption Lab Team. “If this toilet could deliver a ‘clean city Tokyo’ image to the world, I would be extremely happy.”

To further illustrate the enthusiastic efforts of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to improve the lives of all in the metropolis, consider the Ueno Toilet Museum. Separate from THE TOKYO TOILET project, an existing public toilet facility in Ueno Park has been renovated with the cooperation of Tokyo University of the Arts. Ueno is an area with many cultural attractions such as museums and a zoo, and students have decorated the private toilet rooms with bright, cheerful murals depicting some of the animals in the zoo, and their natural habitats. Audio mim-

icking the sounds of the animals and their environments, created and performed by the students, has also been incorporated into the design.

With these remarkable, surprising public toilets, Tokyo is reaffirming its commitment to providing a safe, welcoming environment for residents and visitors alike, one that is imbued with the spirit of *omotenashi* Japanese hospitality.

The Ueno Toilet Museum is a renovated public toilet, with beautiful murals inspired by the nearby Ueno Zoo's pandas and other animals on the cubicle walls.

