

Tour De Porcelain

After two hours and seven restrooms, Adrian Chen finds out what drives Portland's fiercest public-toilet advocates.

BY ADRIAN CHEN



Carol McCreary, wearing a large red coat and an oversized winter hat with rainbow stripes, is gesturing inside the men's public restroom at South Waterfront Park. "Look at all of this excitedly natural light," she says, "isn't it great?" The room is indeed surprisingly bright for this damp spring afternoon. "And it's so *big!*" That's true, too: Our group of four—Carol (when you're touring toilets, you're already on a first-name basis), me and two other men—fits easily in the thing. The room is so big that some guy rides in on his bike and it's not crowded at all, though a little awkward. The guy looks at us and stares at Carol, a middle-aged woman in the men's bathroom. One of our group, a tall, quietly earnest man named Chris, tries to explain.

"Oh, it's all right," he tells the guy. "We're just having a meeting." We leave the bathroom quickly.

Waterfront Park is the first stop in my tour of downtown public restrooms. We will visit six toilets today, and I came prepared: Before meeting the group at Waterfront Park, I downed three large cups of strong coffee. Now I am a bladder with legs.

My guides are Carol, Chris Yarrow and Tom Carrollo, who together make up half of PHLUSH, a Portland-based advocacy group (the name stands for Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human). PHLUSH is tiny but dedicated. Its six members work fervently to increase public toilets' quality and quantity—the city's facilities are sorely lacking in both areas, the group says. (There are only 12 fitfully open public restrooms downtown.) Officially the group has no hierarchy, but it's clear that Carol's breadth of toilet knowledge and preoccupation with the smallest details of restroom design make her PHLUSH's de facto leader. Carol helped start the group last year, and as a professional consultant for nonprofit groups, ranging from Mercy Corps to USAID, she is something of a career advocate.

On Monday, May 22, the first of two public meetings will convene to discuss PHLUSH's first brick-and-mortar project, a new public restroom in Old Town. The project is a collaboration with City Repair, and Carol is excited. "There's a lot of interest in our goals of making people feel safe and comfortable in Old Town," Carol says. "I think this will be a model for the rest of the city."

Carol's passion has earned her access to the tight-knit global public-restroom community, which exists largely on the Internet and in Southeast Asia. Carol proudly recounts how, after reading about PHLUSH online, American Restroom Association president Bob Brubaker called her and offered to host a PHLUSH page on the ARA's website. "I was very flattered," she smiles. In Southeast Asia, the public toilet has become something of a pop-culture icon. Last year, a popular Hong Kong filmmaker made *Public Toilet*:

The Movie, and Carol speaks fondly of "that very nice young man," Jack Sim, founder of the Singapore-based World Toilet Organization.

We leave Waterfront Park by car for the second restroom, located on Southwest Clay Street, next to the Ira Keller Fountain. "It took us two days to find this one," Carol says, as she leads Chris and me to the Keller Auditorium parking garage (Tom stays with the car). The restroom's entrance is built into the side of the garage, and Carol notes that the small silver lettering that reads "Public Restroom" is almost completely hidden by a large awning. "You can't even see this from the street!" she huffs, before telling me that inadequate signage is endemic among Portland's public restrooms.

The entrance is a rectangular tunnel that curves sharply to the left, descending out of view. The passage is claustrophobic and vaguely menacing, like the esophagus of some enormous ceramic worm. The walls are covered in tiny, bright-orange tiles.

"This color, it's very energizing," Carol says energetically. But its curves worry her. Carol runs ahead, and as I round the bend she leaps from the shadows with a yelp, hands above her head. Her point: If I was a hapless youth (I am) and she an attacker, I could consider myself raped. Carol is very concerned about attackers. Next, she walks into the men's room, only to reappear a second later. "Oops," she says with a grin. "There's somebody in there." Chris lingers outside, looking kind of uncomfortable.

Next we drive to Portland State University's Urban Plaza on Southwest 5th Avenue. Carol has to make a phone call, so she sends Chris and me ahead to the restroom. She shouts, "See if you can find it!" as if kicking off an Easter-egg hunt. "I gotta go," Chris tells me before walking into a coffee shop and asking where the restroom is. I also really need to pee. The barista sends us two doors down and gives us the code to get in: 415.

We wait outside the glass door for Carol, who is not happy when she arrives. Last week, she says, you didn't need a code. We walk down the hall to the bathrooms, and as I join her in the men's room, Carol springs to the door and flips the deadbolt. I am hypothetically assaulted for the second time. Deadbolts are a major faux pas, Carol explains, as an attacker could lock himself and his victim permanently in the bathroom. It's uncomfortable enough just being locked in the bathroom with Carol. "How could the PSU Urban Planning School be so *dumb*?" she asks once we're outside, and a passing student eyes her suspiciously.

Carol complains a lot about Portland's public restrooms, but she's also full of ideas for fixing them. An impressive 34-page report issued by PHLUSH this February details no less than six potential options. Back in the car, Carol explains that the answer initially seemed to be automatic public toilets—self-cleaning cylindrical structures that look like futuristic phone booths and hold a single user. "We thought APTs were it," Carol says, but she soured on the idea during a fact-gathering mission to Seattle. While photographing an APT, she saw a homeless man piss on it, apparently expressing his displeasure over the 25-cent entry fee.

"It's not nice when people are pulling their dicks out of their pants," Carol says. "You can say that again," says Chris. These days, Carol is enamored with the idea of restoring the historic "comfort station"—an old-time euphemism for public restroom—on Southwest Park Avenue and Burnside Street, right around the corner from Mary's Club.

Two identical brick buildings that look like mausoleums make up the comfort station, separated by a small lawn and an ornate fountain—a strangely serene tableau in the face of a hectic Burnside. As we approach, Carol lets out a sigh. "Now, this is the most beautiful thing ever." The station was built in 1907, and Carol tells me that farmers coming into Portland from the surrounding countryside would stop here to freshen up

before selling their produce at market.

Today, the restrooms are in disrepair and only sporadically open, but Carol has plans for bringing the site back to its former glory, as detailed in the PHLUSH report. The fountain will be repaired and a restaurant or retail space will be attached to the station. "Or a doggie day care," she adds, an idea which she seems to have come up with on the spot.

Underneath the corner of Southwest 6th Avenue and Yamhill Street lies another historic comfort station, this one mothballed after Pioneer Courthouse Square and its modern restrooms opened across the street in 1984. Above ground, two small buildings house staircases that descend below the sidewalk to separate men's and women's bathrooms. The walls of the crumbling rooms, built in 1912, are covered with intricate tile mosaics like old New York City subway stations. There is an anteroom where attendants stood and a complex steam-heating system that prompts gasps from the city maintenance worker who let me down here a few weeks after my downtown restroom tour (Carol is in Uganda for a while, organizing a conference on AIDS). Thick slabs of marble were used as stall dividers, he says, but they were removed when the station was closed. And in the women's bathroom are unfamiliar fixtures that look like stunted urinals: a row of bidets.

Clearly, turn-of-the-century Portland was greatly concerned with public restrooms, a fact brought home by scores of official correspondences from 1915 debating, in great detail, the merits of various candidates for the position of restroom attendant. Today, files full of these and other restroom records collect dust in Portland's public archives.

Standing in this underground bathroom, it occurs to me that Carol and PHLUSH aren't just fighting for more places to pee. Carol's occasionally absurd passion for the minutiae that elevate a mere public toilet to the level of "comfort station" belies a nostalgia for a time when the City seemed similarly thoughtful in dealing with its citizens. City officials understood that public restrooms weren't just places for junkies and bums, and the budget provided funds for such unnecessary niceties as porcelain bidets and marble dividers installed 20 feet underground. When it came to restrooms, at least, Portland was more than just "the city that works," it was the city that wanted you to be comfortable.*

It's two hours into my tour with members of PHLUSH, when we find the last restroom on our list closed for repairs. The tour is abruptly over. Before heading home, Carol hands me a CD-R, which she has labeled "Photos of 197 Toilets." The tour has affected me in a way, as I feel that I literally cannot wait to get back to the office and check out this disc. And as I'm biking across town, it hits me: I really, really need to pee.

When You Gotta Go

Make your own DIY tour of downtown Portland's public loos.

EXISTING PUBLIC RESTROOMS

- 1. Smart Park** 7 am-midnight Monday-Wednesday, 7 am-3 am Thursday-Saturday, 9 am-10 pm Sunday.*
- 2. Saturday Market** 10 am-5 pm Saturday, 11 am-4:30 pm Sunday.*
- 3. North Park Blocks** This location may be closed to the public.
- 4. Multnomah County Public Library** 10 am-6 pm Monday and Thursday-Saturday, 10 am-8 pm Tuesday-Wednesday, noon-5 pm Sunday.

5. Pioneer Courthouse Square 8:30 am-5:30 pm Monday-Saturday, closed Sunday.

6. Lownsdale Park (Men's Room) 6:30 am-10 pm daily.

7. Chapman Park (Women's Room) 6:30 am-10 pm daily.

8. Waterfront Park Closed during construction.

9. Waterfront Park (underneath the Hawthorne Bridge) 6:30 am-10 pm daily.

10. Ira Keller Fountain 6:30 am-10 pm daily.

11. Portland State University, Urban Center 7 am-8 pm Saturday-Thursday, 7 am-7 pm Friday.

12. Waterfront Park, RiverPlace 6:30 am-10 pm daily.

**Closed Sunday when Saturday Market is closed (Christmas to March).*

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