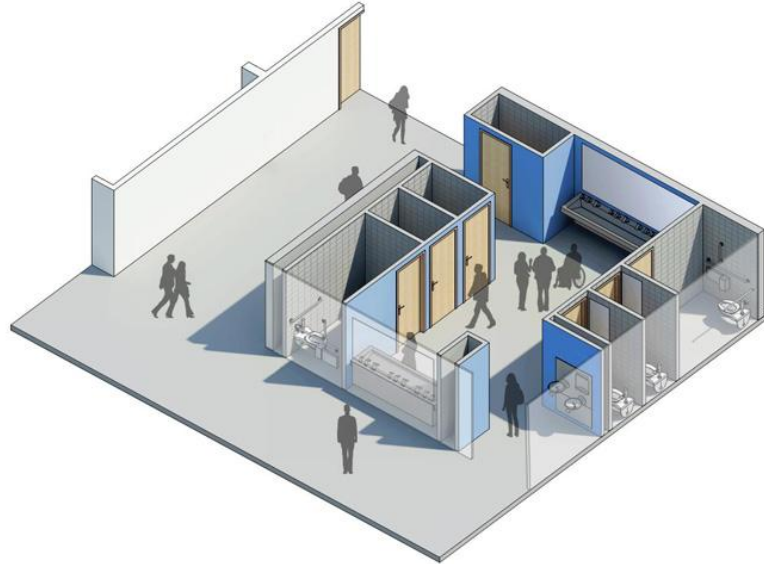




School bathrooms suddenly problematic

By: Kent Hohlfeld in Architecture and Engineering, News November 22, 2017 7:34 am



Gender-inclusive restrooms for Grant High School will have dual entrances and exits, toilets with floor-to-ceiling walls and communal sinks. (Courtesy of Mahlum Architects)

Among the many issues that come up in educational facility projects, bathroom design typically hasn't been one. It is now.

"It is a sensitive issue," **Soderstrom Architects** principal Henry Fitzgibbon said. "We have been bogged down on this issue on a number of projects. We spend four or five meetings on this subject alone."

In an effort to meet privacy concerns, legal requirements and a growing desire to avoid singling out transgender students, architects are designing bathrooms to be gender-inclusive instead of gender-specific. While the issue largely is one for high school and university projects, it's now even popping up for elementary school projects.

The most popular design method to accommodate changing needs is to create a series of toilets each surrounded by floor-to-ceiling walls. That is often combined with communal sinks.

"In the past, with the traditional designs, nobody even asked questions about the restrooms," Fitzgibbon said.

Dealing with the conflict between building codes and project goals is one of the toughest aspects of building gender-inclusive facilities. Most municipal codes specify a required number of restroom facilities and require them to be gender-specific. Meanwhile, state governments and clients are pushing toward facilities that are gender-neutral.


"It really needs to be incorporated into the building codes," Fitzgibbon said. "Right now, it puts the issue on the building official's desk."

Portland has been at the forefront of changing bathroom design. A renovation at **Grant High School** will result in all of its restrooms being gender-inclusive. They won't have a traditional single door leading to a room with stalls. Instead, students will be able to move in and out through two entrances/exits. A series of toilets will be individually surrounded by floor-to-ceiling walls. Communal sinks will be attached to walls in rows.

"It will be more of a pass-through design," Grant High School Principal Carol Campbell said. "It's more like your own private little restroom."

The design required a special consideration from the city of Portland that allowed the school to circumvent bathroom facility requirements. Rather than modify or change existing code, the city interpreted **Mahlum**

Architects' design of small rooms as meeting the code in providing separate facilities.

"We worked with code officials," said Alyssa Leeviraphan, Mahlum Architects project manager for the Grant High School renovation. "Their response was that if you meet these requirements, you are meeting the code." 

The interpretation that Portland used to allow the Grant High project to move forward could be used by others moving forward.

"A lot of code officials are looking to other municipalities as to how to get gender-inclusive bathrooms," Mahlum Architects principal JoAnn Wilcox said.

A major component of bathroom design is the increasing desire to make sure transgender students are not segregated. That played into the decision to make all of the Grant High School bathrooms gender-inclusive rather than a mix including some gender-specific.

It also helps respond to court decisions regarding concerns that certain students could be singled out.

"The conversations were about not creating an 'other' place," Campbell said. "We didn't want it to feel like there was a room designated for 'other' people. We wanted to make sure that there is no identifying way that people are singled out as 'other.' That was the main driving force."

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