

# **Ladies and men's room mixup: A critical design perspective on social norms at a clubbing environment**

## **Authors of paper:**

**Vanessa Carpenter** - School of Arts and Communication, Konst, Kultur, Kommunikation, Malmö Högskola, Malmö, Sweden, [vanessajcarpenter@gmail.com](mailto:vanessajcarpenter@gmail.com)

**Mads Høbye** - School of Arts and Communication, Konst, Kultur, Kommunikation, Malmö Högskola, Malmö, Sweden, [madshoby@gmail.com](mailto:madshoby@gmail.com)

## **Project Team:**

Daniel Brynolf, K3, Malmö Högskola

Jonas Eriksson, K3, Malmö Högskola

Nicolas Padfield, HalfMachine

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## **Abstract**

In an effort to facilitate contact between people at a night club, we created a need for people to communicate: to clarify a confusing situation. This article explains how we developed a prototype for a restroom gender sign switcher, which operated both automatically and as a result of human interaction and input. We explore aspects of communication, question social norms, and explore how critical design can be used to change the dynamic of communication in the context of a night club.

**Conference theme:** Values and Culture

**Keywords:** Critical Design, Ladies and mens room mixup, social norms.

## **Introduction**

Creating a social connection with a stranger in a night club is difficult. This is a paradox to us since socializing is a primary purpose of a night club. Social norms tell us to have a reason to initiate contact. As a result, people look for excuses to engage in social activity. With this project we ask: *How can contact be facilitated at night clubs?*

Awkward situations create the need, rather than the desire, to communicate. This can be used as an excuse for creating contact. Normally restrooms in public spaces are divided between genders. Only two signs, male and female, define the difference between these two rooms. These signs are treated with great respect; it would be controversial if a male entered the room with a sign of a female on the door. By switching the signs females would involuntary walk into a restroom filled with males and vice versa - they would unknowingly and unwillingly be victims of our design. This project explored how such confusion creates social interaction between the different genders and amongst individuals.

## **A Critical Design Perspective**

Dunne and Raby (Dunne, A. and Raby, F., 2005) describe critical design as a "critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values." They venture so far as to describe products made through critical design to be

"unpopular" products. Since they would not be considered for mainstream production, instead the "purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about the aesthetic quality of our electronically mediated existence". Our aim is to make reflections about the effects of gender separation of restrooms.

Assuming that restrooms are simply a place where people go to relieve themselves is ill-defined; restrooms have many hidden qualities. Girls put makeup on while talking about the cute boys. Boys stand side by side at the urinal and brag about the funny and crazy things that happened last time they were out. The English language emphasizes the multitude of uses for this place by having many different words for "the room" depending on situation, culture and country e.g. ladies room, restroom, toilet, washroom, powder room, loo, and bathroom, among many others. By changing the signs we are trying to challenge the rules and function of the room to see if we can emphasize some of the hidden functions and possibly even facilitate new ones.

### **Our context is clubbing events at Inkonst**

Inkonst is a melting pot for different projects working around youth culture, art experiments and underground electronic music like Jeans Team and Stereo Total. About 10 event groups have residence there, making different social activities 3-4 times a week. We choose to focus on the clubbing events going on during the weekends. The clubbing event has different themes (e.g. hiphop, clubkids, electronica) depending on the group that arranged the event.

### **Ethnographical approach**

We used handheld point and shoot cameras that appeared to be average cameras, but with quality video capabilities. In this way, the cameras were not intrusive since most people also had cameras and were taking photos of themselves and friends. Another advantage was that we were able to move with people and were not restricted to one vantage point. We were able to move between groups of people, and between the restrooms without causing a disturbance.

It was important to conduct observations within the context of a night club. Blomberg (Blomberg, F. 1993) explains that "particular behaviors can only be understood in the everyday context in which they occur." Busy nights were chosen to observe the effects of group behavior. We chose to have three phases in the project:

- Phase 1: Preliminary observations
- Phase 2: Low-fi prototypes
- Phase 3: Working prototype

The method for each phase is described in the respective phases below.

### **Phase 1: Preliminary observations**

Before we started to create ideas or design prototypes we made preliminary observations at Inkonst about how people used the place to socialize. We focused on observing the following parameters: how they used the place; social and physical interaction; movement through the space; and what opportunities they used to engage contact with strangers.

#### Results - No excuse for interaction

People seemed to interact socially with others whom they already knew or who were friends of their friends. People immediately grouped themselves around tables and on couches or on the dance floor, and an invisible shield of privacy was created; requiring someone to have an abundance of courage to break into a group and start a conversation. One has to approach, begin a conversation, and somehow justify their interaction. The problem lies herein, since privacy, even in a crowded public venue, is a respected virtue and a stranger approaching and beginning conversation disrupts that privacy. Strauss (Strauss, N. 2005) discusses this phenomenon of beginning conversation as finding an excuse for communication and using methods to break through the invisible shield of privacy.

The rules of how to interact socially at a night club are implicit and complicated. There is no concrete "thing" to gather around and socially interact through. When playing street basketball, the game itself is that "thing", you can join the game although you might not know anyone. Even considering the more traditional folk dance, the rules are very explicit; usually the males line up on one side and the females on the other side. The dance itself defines how males and females are supposed to move around. To us there are obvious analogies to more modern concepts like speed-dating.

#### Results: People look for situations or excuses to interact socially

To compensate for the lack of a common "thing" to gather around, people look for situations or excuses to interact socially. The queue at the bar, the smoking area and the queue outside are situations where it's okay to interact socially because there is a purpose to being there. One member of our group encountered a situation where a door to the main area was locked; he was standing outside trying to figure out how to get back in when another person had the same problem. Interestingly, an immediate connection was made to try to solve the problems of "how

are we getting in again?" or "can we walk around?". The thing to socialize around became the locked door; there was confusion and a problem had to be solved.

## **Phase 2: Low-fi prototypes**

We decided to do several low-fi prototypes, to get a better understanding of how it would be possible to encourage social interaction between people in the clubbing environment. These interventions allowed us to measure the effort (if any) that people would put into creating social connections with strangers and whether or not that connection would lead to a successful communication. We had the following low-fi prototypes:

- Throw in a ball
  - What would happen if we placed a ball in the room. Would people start to play with it? Would strangers join the game?
- Sms me t-shirt
  - What would happen if we wore a t-shirt with our phone numbers on it and text to encourage people to write sms messages to us? Would people start writing messages?
- Change restroom signs manually
  - What would happen if we manually changed the ladies and mens room signs? Would people engage in social interaction?

## Results

The two first concepts did not adequately work. Neither had the desired effect as people did not send text messages and only played with the ball for a short period of time without meaningful interactions. It occurred to us that this is logical since the social context did not include playing with a ball or writing text messages to strangers, people had to understand how to engage with them in a socially acceptable way. For example, could that night's event announce to people that this event included playing with a ball, and if so, would the effects have been different given that people understood it was socially acceptable to partake in these events?

The manual change of the ladies and mens room signs worked very well. We noticed the following: it created awkward social moments between different genders; people did not need to understand the concept, they were forced into the activity, bound by the norms of not going into the wrong restroom; it was fun to control it and to be the one who knew what was going on; and people needed to figure out what was happening to release the tension.

This was enough observational feedback for us to decide to make a working prototype and see what other aspects we could derive from the concept.

### **Phase 3: Working prototype**

"Ladies and mens room mixup" became the title of our prototype. Our goal was to create a situation in which the restroom signs (male and female) would switch.

#### Icons

We used icons to represent the symbols of male and female for the restrooms. We had six different standard states for the male/female symbols which would be displayed on the two LED displays. These included: male/female; female/male; male/male; female/female; unisex; and blur.

Blur was developed as a mode in which the image would not represent a male or female symbol specifically but would be something more playful that would allow people to make their own determination of which gender the restroom would be. Blur mode included the following images: Danish/Swedish flag, happy/sad smiley, dancing male/female, circle/square, square/triangle, x/heart, square/rainbow, and reversed colors female/male symbols where the male was dressed in pink and the female in blue.

#### **Interaction Scenarios**

Our goal with this prototype was to determine if through using different interaction scenarios, people would take control of the situation and change the signs on their own accord. Throughout prototyping, we considered this to be a game, and thought that it would be more obvious as a game if people were able to independently control it. We created three different interaction scenarios:

- Automatic (door)
  - The signs would switch automatically every 7 times a person entered either of the restroom doors. In this scenario the interaction was indirect, people had no direct control over which restroom would display a particular gender.
- Wheel
  - The wheel could be manipulated by moving an arrow. The arrow pointed to different icons representing different the six different icon states possible to be displayed on the restroom doors. In this scenario people had a tangible way to control precisely which icon they wanted on each door.
- Poles

- By making a physical connection between two people and the poles the signs would switch. This interaction scenario was intended to test whether people would engage in physical contact to make to signs change.

### Technical setup

We used a Wiring board as main controller. This was through a clock data interface connected to two led matrix displays. The displays had 8x8 pixels. Each pixel displayed binary RGB, this gave us a total of 8 colors, inclusive black. The different interface were designed in the following way:

- Automatic (door)

- We placed a pushbutton in each door frame. This was wired to the Wiring board with the data side connected to ground with a 10k ohm resistor between (pull down).

- Wheel

- The wheel was based on 7 1.2k ohm resistors connected serially. The data pin moved between each resistor giving different readouts depending on the position.

- Poles

- On the first pole we sent out at square wave, on the second we listened to see if the square wave came through. This would only happen if there was a connection between the poles. This way we were able to filter out noise in the air. When not connected, we got measurements of 0-10 and when connected we would get measurements of 800-1200.

### Method

We wanted to observe the following: how people reacted to the sign switching; when they opened the restroom door; when (if) there was, unexpectedly, the opposite gender in the restroom; when a person of one gender approached a restroom door, and the reaction of other individuals of the same gender as they observed this; the behavior of people who had pre-existing knowledge of the typical gender allocation of the restrooms at Inkonst specifically; what happened when an individual understood how to manipulate the controls of the sign-switching; and if any individuals initiated communication as a result of the sign-switching.

Finally, we needed to understand what people's perceptions of the experience were. We wanted to understand if communication had occurred as a result of their experience, or if the experience generated positive or negative attitudes towards either the prototype or to individuals they encountered during the experience. We created a list of questions which can be seen in the attached appendix.

### Results

People seemed to react positively overall to the experience. Individuals, when confused, were interested to understand what was happening. Some people realized that they could use the opportunities to make a game of entering the 'wrong' restroom so that they could explore the 'forbidden' territory of the opposite gender. Groups of friends who had understood the concept had fun observing people open the 'wrong' door, and often guided people to the correct restroom.

### Unexpected encounter of opposite gender

If a male walked into a restroom with a male sign and a female was coming out, the distance between them defined the action. If they were within conversation range, a conversation began based on conflicting knowledge. If they were too far from each other the male usually dismissed his knowledge and diverted his route to the opposite restroom.

If an individual approached the restroom, they usually checked the signage, and proceeded to open the door slightly, to check inside for which gender was dominant. Often, this moment would be combined with that individual asking those around them which restroom was which, and would be given a recommendation.

In several cases, this moment of asking was greeted with similar confusion from the people inside or outside the restroom. It could be seen that occasionally, groups of friends would boldly enter the incorrect restroom, and be greeted by the opposite gender, usually with the phrase "this isn't the (male/female) room, that's the other one", and conversation would begin, as the two groups of genders would then discuss whether or not the signage was correct, and whether or not the number of people of a particular gender dictated the gender of that restroom at that time. Communication among and between genders, groups of friends and individuals occurred regularly.

### Interviews

We interviewed people asking their impressions about the prototype. Most people enjoyed the experience, explaining that they didn't necessarily feel uncomfortable however they did not always understand exactly what was happening. People explained that they had begun conversations with strangers regarding which restroom they were in, and that their only indicator was whether or not a urinal was present. People did seem generally confused about how the controls worked, but when it was explained to them they reacted positively.

Two males were surprised, but not necessarily unhappy, about the situation of having females in both restrooms. Upon asking if they felt uncomfortable about the mixed genders, one respondent

stated "no, pretty funny actually.. I did notice that something suspicious was happening.. But I thought it was me who was confused. Until we got the explanation" Overall, the response from people was positive.

### The amount of people affects the design

The prototype was most effective when there was a maximum number of people participating without forming any queues at the restrooms. If a queue had formed, usually at the ladies restroom, the signs seemed irrelevant since people were instead basing their decisions on the gender of the queue. It seemed more important not to offend the queue than to respect the signs.

### Pre-existing knowledge of restroom assignment

If people had pre-existing knowledge of which gender the restroom typically belonged to, some of these people would ignore the signs or social patterns, and would instead insist upon using their 'usual' restroom. Due to the number of people lacking previous knowledge; those using their 'usual' restroom were still in the hands of the system as they still had the potential to encounter a person of opposite gender while using their choice of restroom. When an individual had displayed determined behavior to use a particular restroom, they would attract the attention of nearby people who would follow them, despite signage indicating otherwise. It was also noted that as soon as the game is revealed to people they tend to go back to the more traditional norms and use the restroom that normally was intended for their gender.

### Understanding the manipulation of the signs

Using either the wheel or the poles required a lot of guidance. It was clear that this setup should be tested during a longer period of time where people could get used to playing with it to get a clearer idea of the effect. People approached the wheel, examined it, and few would try to move the lever. Upon seeing the results they would be more enthusiastic to continue experimenting.

People did not approach the poles on their own. Occasionally, someone would reach out and tentatively touch a single pole but then would move on, as if embarrassed or frightened to test it. We demonstrated to several groups of people and their friends, how to operate the poles. People enjoyed the demonstrations but were still very hesitant to try it on their own, and some people exhibited extreme reluctance at touching the poles, and refused to.

A female we interviewed laughed when she was told that she could control the signs. She said: "When there is a line to the ladies room I can just switch it over and walk in to the mens room!". It was clear that she felt like one of the few selected individuals that knew the inner workings of

the system. When explaining the solution to people they reacted positively. They accepted the idea and clearly saw this as a good excuse to mingle. Males seemed to especially appreciate the sign manipulation once they understood the mechanisms to change the door designation. They saw potential for personal gain as opposed to females who did it for personal amusement.

### Different than unisex

Unisex restrooms indicate that any gender of person is welcome to use the restroom; there is no conflicting information, and no confusion, anyone who enters a unisex restroom realizes the potential to encounter any other gender.

Since the gender allocation of the restrooms changes dynamically, either due to automated change, or due to people manipulating the signage, there is a time variable present. People might enter a restroom marked 'female' but during their time in the restroom, it is changed to 'male' and their understanding of which gender that restroom was allocated for would be falsified. Further, anyone entering that restroom would assume that now it is the 'male' restroom and would have no reason to expect a female to be inside. People's knowledge and understanding of what is right and wrong changes over time in this setup.

### Friction as a use quality

Löwgren (Löwgren, J. 2002) describes Use Qualities as "certain properties of a digital design that are experienced in its use". In Löwgren's definition of use qualities, the implication of creating surprise is discussed as a use quality: doing something unexpected, and having the autonomy of the design or the use questioned. We want to consider the use quality of friction. Friction can exist when something unexpected occurs, when a moment is uncomfortable, when the unknown is encountered and unprepared for. When this happens, design is questioned, and re-evaluated. When friction is introduced into an experience, into a design, the user must question themselves and the situation, and thus, must become more aware of the part they play in that situation. Friction creates opportunity for change, and the opportunity to question norms which usually exist unchallenged.

### **Conclusion**

Critical Design aims to challenge existing norms rather than merely improving upon existing conventions and ideas. The ladies and mens room mixup works to move those official values out of place. It has been our goal to question what would happen if we challenged those official values by creating confusion. We create a provocative situation which challenges how people

react to change and furthermore how they react to other individuals during this change. Debate and discussion arise amongst anyone wanting to use the restroom for the evening. The restrooms have a life of their own, especially in the automatic mode where only the restrooms are to blame.

People have the opportunity to create their own experience; as Dunne and Raby explain, "the user would become a protagonist and co-producer of narrative experience rather than a passive consumer of a product's meaning.". They could choose to use the opposite gender restroom, and begin a conversation, or better yet, use the tools provided to create an opportunity for themselves for communication and production of their own experience, and question the existing structure of how restrooms typically operate.

We were able to see some general tendencies of how people reacted to the installation. People can be divided into the following categories:

- Without prior knowledge
  - These were the victims of the design; and were crucial for the confusion to happen.
- With prior knowledge of the restrooms
  - These usually choose the restrooms which normally were assigned to their gender. They were only challenged by the people without pre-existing knowledge.
- With knowledge about the change of signs
  - These considered the signs to be without authority, and would instead choose a restroom based on their own experience. They were usually accepting of a chance encounter with someone of the opposite gender.

A balance exists, wherein the situation would be fun when a few people understood how it worked, and those few could take advantage of the situation. If everyone understood it, then the innocence of the system is gone, and it would no longer be playful. Considering this, it was apparent that a few people pushing the limits and questioning the norms results in interesting interactions and new experiences for everyone.

### **Future Work and Considerations**

A few unanswered questions still remain and could be examined further. Firstly, we have only tried the prototype for one night at a time. We must ask, what happens if the prototype is left at a club for a month or two? How would this affect the norms of the place? Second there was no clear response to the blur and unisex signs, only mild confusion of which restroom to choose. Having only the blur signs operating all night could also be an interesting study.

## References

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## Appendix

### Much appreciation and thanks to:

- Inkonst night club and staff
- HalfMachine

### Media Resources:

- <http://halfmachine.dk/posts/60>

### Interview Questions:

- Why did you start talking to that girl/boy/person?
- Would you have if you met on the dance floor?
- Have you talked to anyone else in here?
- When at a club, do you normally talk to a lot of strangers?
- What did you talk about?
- Do you mind that there are girls/boys in this restroom?
- Have you noticed the signs switching?
- How would/did you decide which restroom to choose?
- Did you feel comfortable with your choice?
- Did you understand how to manipulate the sign switching through the (tool name)?