

## Bathroom Battlegrounds Book Review

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## ***Bathroom Battlegrounds* Book Review**

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### **Abstract**

Most individuals in today's day and age have come into a situation in which they find themselves excluded from society. Some have been lucky enough to find inclusion, but others still struggle to find how they fit in. A huge factor that prevents individuals from finding their footing in society is gender segregation in restrooms. *Bathroom Battlegrounds* by Alexander K. Davis gives a sociological view of how gender-segregated restrooms have communicated to society what we ought to understand about how bathrooms pertain to gender. He does this by exploring the history of gendered restrooms, explaining how the upper class had a hand in making gender-segregated restrooms, and giving solutions for how we can make collegiate students feel included at their institutions. I dive deep into each chapter and explain my praise and critique for how he has written and explained his arguments.

### **Keywords**

gender, restrooms, socioeconomic class, institutional inclusion

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### Book Review

Davis, Alexander K. (2020). *Bathroom battlegrounds: How public restrooms shape the gender order*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

*Bathroom Battlegrounds* provides unique insights for those studying communication, thoroughly exploring issues concerning restrooms, gender, and social class. Gender-neutral restrooms have been a popular topic of conversation, especially in businesses and institutions. The author, Alexander K. Davis, makes this apparent as he follows the events of the Obama administration debuting a new, all-

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gender restroom in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building to establish a more inclusive working environment for staff. While some saw the Obama Administration's decision as a progressive move toward a more gender-neutral environment, others, such as Assemblyman Tim Donnelly disagree. Donnelly has accused gender-neutral restrooms of a "privacy invasion," arguing that "the same politicians who want to end discrimination have discriminated against the majority of people who are uncomfortable with such provisions" (Davis, 2020, p. 5). Davis addresses the conflict through a sociological exploration of the history of gendered restrooms and efforts to establish non-gendered restrooms in civic, cultural, and institutional establishments across the United States. This topic is essential, especially at a university, as the lack of all-gender public restrooms creates an exclusionary environment for many. Davis' extensive observations provide an understanding of the messages arising from history, socioeconomic class, and public opinion about how to perceive bathrooms in the context of gender.

Chapter One, "Politicizing the Potty," provides a detailed socioeconomic history of public restrooms, spaces that originally were all-gendered. This historical background gives a clear image of public restrooms' initial purpose to maintain cleanliness in urban areas. "Public" toilets at the time were only located in areas accessible to individuals of higher class, such as hotels, train stations, and department stores. However, most public restrooms built for the entirety of the public were poorly maintained and often not connected to a sewage system, leading women to avoid them and business owners to protest for their removal. Davis introduces the idea of public restrooms becoming a method to divide the public based on their economic class. This strategy has striking relevance to today's socioeconomic divisions in public restrooms. In settings such as hotels and restaurants, restrooms are clean and well maintained. Conversely, they are often poorly maintained in locations free to the public, such as parks.

In the second chapter, Davis describes the early public outcry against these socioeconomic issues, with calls for all public restrooms to be of equal quality to those in higher class settings. In an attempt to address the public's wishes for better maintained public restrooms, the value of establishments increased dramatically. This was also the beginning of gender-segregated restrooms because of "tenacious middle – and upper class –beliefs about sexed bodies and sexual privacy" (Davis, 2020, p. 77). This chapter effectively engages the reader and elucidates the reality that a wealthier socioeconomic class has shaped society's views of gendered restrooms.

In addition to the issues of socioeconomic class affecting the segregation of restrooms, Davis also writes about issues of gender segregation in the workplace. Chapter Three, "Regulating Restrooms," offers an examination of several court cases, all of which resulted from employers strategically using bathrooms as "a ploy to not train, hire, or promote women" (Davis, 2020, p. 85). Cases such as *Spees v. James Marine, Inc.* assessed the conditions of the women's restroom in a welding shop that held only one female employer. The bathroom provided for her contained a portable toilet instead of a formal restroom, and there was no access to running water. Davis' use of these court cases powerfully illustrates how employers build a figurative "glass ceiling" for women. He expertly uses restrooms to convey the message of who is welcome, respected and valued in labor settings – cisgender men. Notably, Davis only highlights the essential details of these court cases, making the content engaging despite its complexity.

Davis devotes Chapter Four, "Working Against the Washroom," to explaining the construction of restrooms and how new mandates calling for restroom expansion made it difficult for institutions to include all-gender restrooms. Given that the chapter analyzes architectural issues in detail, Davis's arguments lack the clarity of the previous sections. In descriptions of specific building dimensions and details on building mandates, his points are difficult to grasp without specialized

knowledge. However, Davis provides an account of state laws that mandated the expansion of women's restrooms to add extra stalls. Consequently, these laws made it difficult for underfunded public spaces to implement unisex restrooms. Expanding a bathroom to meet new mandates is already expensive, but expanding enough also to add a unisex restroom would require reconstruction of the entire building. Davis explains how "truly inclusive spaces are only available to those citizens advantaged by economic privilege" (Davis, 2020, p. 133). Although the author's argument reveals a pivotal barrier to same-sex bathrooms, the advanced terminology distracts his points.

After going into depth about restroom mandates in businesses and institutions, Davis discusses three interviews he conducted in Chapter Five, "Leveraging the Loo." Davis conducted interviews over ten years with owners of businesses and institutions, receiving their opinions on ungendered restrooms. He provides valuable emphasis on interviews with individuals who genuinely wanted to create an inclusive environment by implementing all-gender family restrooms. One woman said, "It's hard to tap into your creative energy if you need to pee and there's no safe space to do that" (Davis, 2020, p. 145). Davis adds further nuance to these accounts by interviewing individuals who installed all-gender restrooms to save money or adapt to gender neutrality as a "hot new" trend (Davis, 2020, p. 156). Davis does a brilliant job in this chapter of highlighting that the ability to casually talk about a topic as "dull" as an ungendered restroom is a powerful sign of class privilege.

Chapter Six, "Transforming the Toilet," explores plausible steps to implement more gender-neutral collegiate campus spaces. Davis suggests exemplifying institutional isomorphism, described as "the tendency of organizations to change and evolve in tandem with one another, owing to a shared cultural environment" (Davis, 2020, p. 176). Notably, Davis includes approachable ideas in creating a welcoming environment. He suggests exemplifying institutional isomorphism, which is "the tendency of organizations to change and evolve in tandem with one another, owing to a shared cultural

environment” (Davis, 2020, p. 176). He highlights how expensive schools are praised for doing the bare minimum in being trans-friendly, with one example being Davis’s alma mater, Princeton University. Smaller schools are accomplishing outstanding student-focused work, such as Hendrix College in Arkansas, Pitzer College in California, and Lake Forest College in Illinois, yet have not been recognized for it. Davis concludes by offering his sociological view of gender, writing, “if gender is always being done, then it could just as easily be undone” (Davis, 2020, p. 183). He exercises admirable persistence in encouraging the building of more inclusive restrooms and approaching restrooms as a public good rather than an area of discomfort. Davis’s conclusion of *Bathroom Battlegrounds* leaves readers hopeful for the future of all-gender restrooms and institutional inclusion.

Overall, *Bathroom Battlegrounds* is a thoroughly researched, well-organized book that helps those studying gender and communication understand a sociological perspective of the intersections between restrooms, gender, and social class. Davis shows clear evidence that he is an expert on the subject through his years of research and the hundreds of interviews he conducted. His extensive research, however, was both his strength and his weakness. Some areas of the book appeared highly advanced for undergraduates studying communication. Davis’s intensive review of construction and building mandates and other government and legal issues diminishes the importance of several crucial discoveries. Despite these downfalls, the book provides an inspiring call to establish more inclusivity, starting with public restrooms. This book would be helpful for college students studying gender and communications who want to make their campus a more inclusive place. In all university settings, where students are developing their minds and selves, it is imperative to reevaluate and resolve an issue as trivial as comfort in the bathroom.

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