

WcCafe: The natural thing

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Client: World Toilet Organisation

All life on Earth revolves in cycles of growth and decay, destruction and regeneration, energy is produced, stored, consumed, dissipated and absorbed again. What is waste for one organism, provides nutrient for another. As we breathe oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, we feed the plants with gas that is essential for oxygen producing photosynthesis; our liquid and solid waste can fertilise plants producing clean air and becoming a source of food. Even though human defecation is healthy, productive and necessary, it has become a taboo, a source of embarrassment and vulgar humour in many cultures.

In a time where global population is steadily growing, it is of crucial importance to raise public awareness of the advantages and dangers of human waste production, sanitation, disposal and re-cycling. The WcCafe project aims to re-introduce these topics into mainstream parlance, with honesty and dignity, in an innovative and informal manner. The goal of the project is to design a WcCafe, where toilet discussions will become table discussions, acknowledging the necessity and importance of healthy nutrition, digestion, defecation and sanitation. The project has a global vision. It has a long term aim to improve sanitation standards around the globe, by promoting an ecological, sustainable toilet culture in both the developing and the developed world. Even though many private and public efforts address the issue of sanitation, the projects are plagued by the public perception of this topic and the hesitation to discuss it in an honest and dignified manner. WcCafe strives to make explicit the connections between nourishment, hygiene and sanitation, by celebrating the joys of nourishment, cleansing and renewal.

1. The aims of WcCafe

The project has three main purposes: (1) designing innovative forms to foster public awareness and offer educational opportunities in the field of sanitation, (2) creating a long term revenue stream for all partners involved (3) becoming a catalyst of a sustainable sanitation movement on a global scale. The project aims to strike a productive balance between being monetarily profitable, ecologically sustainable, socially responsible and aesthetically pleasing. It has a potential to become an important precedent for successfully integrating social entrepreneurship with a holistic design and a positive impact on the environment.

The project is founded on three core principles: dignified communication, environmental sustainability and social enterprise. These principles also represent the main risks and opportunities of WcCafe. Communication about the subject of sanitation is one of the crucial values, challenges, as well as opportunities of the project. The designers and managers of WcCafe must be culturally, socially and emotionally sensitive to their local situation (which can comprise customers from different cultures). This opens up a rich source of inspiration for site and culture specific design adaptations, making each WcCafe a new and surprising experience. The second valuable opportunity is integration of green (environmentally sustainable) design in all aspects of the project. By introducing the concept of 'no-waste', we can integrate urine and faeces as a productive element of the cafe - as plant fertilisers, providing nourishment and moisture to fragrant gardens, which would be integrated in the design of the cafe. By growing, for example, coffee plants fertilised with human compost on the Al Fresco roof terrace of a WcCafe, we can literally demonstrate the symbolic cyclic, no-waste processes moving from the WC, to the cafe and back again. The third important value of WcCafe is the social enterprise and social responsibility, embodied in the involvement of non profit and volunteer organisations, focused on re-integration and self-reliance of marginalised social groups, such as young offenders, rehabilitated addicts, physically or mentally challenged people, first generation immigrants, etc.

2. WcCafe in Singapore

The first WcCafe plans to open its doors in Singapore in 2008. The project uses Singapore as its testing ground and would be adapted to suit new locations and cultures. With its strong economic and strategic geographical position, Singapore is world renowned as an attractive place for testing innovative ideas in Asia. Demographically, it is one of the more multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations in the world, with Chinese, Indians and Malays forming the core of the population. For the first franchise, the target audience will comprise middle class Singaporeans, between 15 and 35 years of age, from a variety of ethnicities and religions.

The proposed project has three complimentary models: (1) a take away, where the focus is on quick service and the exterior skin; (2) Al Fresco, with 100 to 150 sq ft built up area, open seating in public space without air-conditioning; (3) 500 sq ft indoor, air-conditioned space. The choice of sites will be crucial for the successful implementation of the

concept and design. An ideal location for the WcCafe would be a thriving multicultural place, an authentic representation of Singapore, where tradition and innovation coexist. The proximity of rooftops, gardens and terraces would be a welcome addition - as they could become a source of natural light, as well as edible landscapes fed by the WcCafe.

3. Design directions

3.1 'Look and feel'

This is a global description of the proposed look and feel of WcCafe, with both its unifying and diversifying features. The three unifying aspects which would bind all franchises under one brand are: 'dynamic', 'fertile' and 'playful'. The diversifying aspects are: 'botanical', 'remixed' and 'transient'. All aspects should thread through the entire brand experience: food, drinks, visual language, aural language, product language and spatial language, as well as the less visible aspects of employment, purchasing and logistics.

3.1.1 Unifying

The features that will make all franchises recognizable as WcCafe is the unique atmosphere that combines the elegance and clarity of natural elements within playful urban structures (!).

Dynamic

The unifying element of all WcCafe franchises is based on playful combinations of light, water and soil, representing the different phases of matter - gaseous, liquid and solid. The soil would feed the lush flora planted in specially designed indoor and outdoor gardens. Light and shadows can be subtle dividers of intimate and social spaces within the cafe. The water can become a versatile element in the cafe, where translucent walls incorporate the fluidity of streaming water, cold drinks remind us of the freshness of dew drops, the suffused lighting infuses the space with the weightlessness of steam.

Fertile

The atmosphere of a WcCafe should appeal to all our senses and allude to fertility, growth and freshness of a balanced and life-giving eco-system. Visually, the space plays with opaqueness and translucency, with hiding and revealing, coloured in tones of blue-grey, warm brown, bright green and soft white, punctuated with deep orange and gentle yellow accents. Sonically, the space can resemble the flow of a river - in some places, the gurgling sound can be more audible, in other parts it could be quiet and subdued. Architectural elements and directional speakers would aid this dynamic aural landscape. Kinetically, the shapes of the architecture and the furniture could remind us of the gracefulness of human body - of its curves and movements. Our sense of smell could be stimulated by a unique 'WcCafe fragrance'. The fragrance could remind us of a jungle washed with warm rain, with delicate floral notes, complemented by mustiness and earthiness of moist soil and fallen leaves, where decay and perfume become intimately intertwined and smell fresh and fertile. Finally, the flavour of food and drinks should celebrate the richness, freshness and diversity of plants - herbs and spices, fruits and vegetables, roots and seeds - able to nourish us and be nourished by us.

Playful

The name WcCafe often makes people smile. They will expect a humorous or quirky element. We would like to keep a playful element in the design of the cafe, but kept in good taste. One proposal is to work with the less obvious elements essential for a functioning sanitary system - pipes, fixtures, holes and containers. By recontextualising them and giving them an entirely new role and thereby a new meaning, value and purpose. For example: Exploring the motif of a 'pipe' as a 'root' of sanitation, inspired by the drain pipes and water supply pipes used in bathrooms. Pipes and fixtures of all shapes and materials can become strong graphical elements of walls and floors, tables and roofs.

3.1.2 Diversifying

The characteristics of the local soil, water and light will give rise to different types of life - diverse forms, colours and textures, which will make every WcCafe unique - both biologically and culturally.

Botanical

Local flora could be one of the starting points for the diversification of the different franchises - in gardens, on tables, in food and drinks. Utilizing specific combinations of local plant life will give each WcCafe unique colours, shapes, scents and flavours.

Re-mixed and Re-used

Local culture should be integrated into every franchise, celebrating traditions and encouraging innovation. This culture

can inform the choice of local materials, forms and feeds, which would be mixed and matched in the style of WcCafe. We would like to think that good forms are not invented, but discovered or rediscovered. Most of us have fond memories of our mother's, aunt's or grandmother's mysterious bathrooms, seen through tiny keyholes. The customary objects found in their bath houses, such as wooden casks, bath tubs, water closets, sinks and pails would provide the core inspiration for the site-specific forms. We could draw on these objects and translate their forms into seats and tables, capturing the essence that people would associate with the magic of cleansing.

Transient

The cafe could host temporary exhibitions of local artists, crafts people, designers and historians, thereby adding an incentive for the public to return and learn more about cultural and artistic expression inspired by the human body, nature, hygiene and waste. For example, we could use local vernacular products and reposition them in the cafe to create temporary "installations". This could range from ancient toilet furniture, kitchen utensils, power generators, pumps, diapers, essential oils, to water closet modules. Alternatively, WcCafe could commission local artists to make sculptures, drawings, photographs or video works of figures in various states of cleansing (washing, bathing, defecating, urinating, etc.). Photographic analysis of wet human forms (skins and textures) could also be an interesting option.

3.2 Green design

We've finally reached a tipping point where being "green" or sustainable is no longer a choice, but a priority for both individuals and organizations. In WcCafe, this ideal must be assimilated throughout the process, from the design stage, to operation and maintenance and on all levels (Design process, collaboration between partners, Policy, architecture, interiors, product development, branding, advertising, food services, purchasing, operations, etc.). The idea of sustainability is continuously evolving. Our systems and values are changing, and so are our needs and responsibilities. We will need to adapt and create solutions which end the cycle of designed obsolescence and excessive waste in favour of designs that incorporate ideas like 'upcycling' instead of recycling and reuse instead of waste. We must closely look at issues of incremental improvements, iterative change and cumulative development. We must be aware of local solutions, minimising environmental impact from initial prototyping and manufacturing processes to gradually developing an efficient structure to sustain the project over an extended duration.

Ecological design starts with looking at the site's ecosystem and its properties. Some critical aspects which are important for a green solution include the product design, services design, integration of renewable energy sources to generate energy on site where possible, water and waste management. Recycling, and in particular, the use of Eco-toilets most appropriate to the site, is as important as selection of ecologically sustainable materials. Energy consumption will be a crucial issue and WcCafe could set an example within the energy norms of the given location. By demonstrating waste management through the use of Eco-toilets ~ (eg. urine diverting toilets, composting toilets, dehydration toilets and eco-stations) the project would aim to become a source of awareness and education for people in all walks of life. It would play an important role in encouraging incremental change in the way we think and behave in cultures that take sanitation for granted, as well as the more obvious tasks of encouraging ideas of sanitation where it is not given a thought. Ecological sanitation in WcCafe would embody the slogan of the project 'A natural thing' - as it would treat human urine and excreta as a resource, sanitizing them and recycling the nutrients for use in various usable and valuable substances.

And so the cycle continues...