

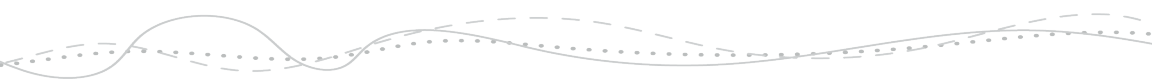
# Set Building Notes for *Orifices*

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July, 2025




Residing in the HVAC system of a shopping mall, molds crawl from the edge of the down light fixtures, speakers and air vents on the drywall ceiling above the urinal hall in a toilet situated in the middle of a twisting and bending passageway that can either be part of an evacuation pathway or a utility corridor of the mall. It is impossible for anyone other than the security guards and facility care workers, to sketch a mental map of this tubular network of diversions and conjunctions, a maze in a dungeon crawl. The walls are overlaid with fire-rated ceramics tiles in repetitive marble pattern, while non-anti-slip fire-rated tiles line the floor, in a beige that appears depthless under the cool daylight fluorescent lights, with occasional castor scratch marks over the otherwise monotonous gloss. This is not the kind of mall where soft jazz music plays in air-conditioned, scented corridors; you hear muffled footsteps from afar echoing in the corridors here, stifling and humid. This is the kind of mall where, to minimize construction cost, three disparate exits/entrances lead to the same toilet: smoke doors that are always double-door, each perforated with round wired glass windows, ø15 centimeter. Apart from the first pair, which is automatic and in slight delay for toilet goers in urgency, the rest are manual. Depending on the fire and/or health and/or safety and/or environmental and/or human rights and/or equality laws, regulations, guidelines and/or advice, some open by push, some by pull, sometimes they alternate, sometimes two in a roll, sometimes three. Experienced toilet users will plan their visits like catching an international flight, always prepared for a twist in faith, and in the unfortunate case of confusion in directions, follow the draft of air or the constant wheeze from the cracks of the bathroom doors, for the atmospheric pressure in the toilets is constantly higher than inside the tunnels, hence the whistle that resonates within these corridors will always bring one to their desired destination.

Not now, but on weekend afternoons packed with families and tourists in shopping sprees, a long queue awaits outside the toilet before one even notices the red stick figure next to the entrance.



From a beginning that cannot be seen inside the toilet, a slow-moving line spirals through like intestines running the inside of the building. There are no worse positions than the end of the queue; three counts ahead, one wavers at the alternative of walking to a less frequented toilet two floors above with each second passing as sunk cost. At the entrance there is heightened urgency and irritation, as one is constantly pushed by people leaving in relief and people surveying the number of cubicles squeezing in and out. Then comes the real test of endurance: the closer one is to the finalé, the stronger the physical urge is, intensified by the endless flow of sounds and smell triggering disgust but more so, a natural response that must be withheld. For we are waiting to enter a domain dictated by involuntary movements in our bodies, a place where the orifices of systems of bodies and bodies of systems meet.

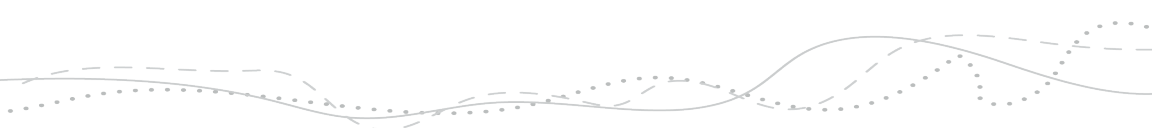
In front of the toilet next door, wet soles smudge over the tiles until they appear in a semi-gloss finish. The constant humming from the HVAC system is so loud that music is necessary: a digital piano recording of a faintly familiar pop song plays on loop from the ceiling speakers, with intermittent announcements arranged by the facility management team of the mall, reminders of personal hygiene in multiple languages by the same dull computer voice. A row of LED recessed down light reflects through the mirrors across the toilet, making it seem larger. Fitted with four adult and one child urinal bowls on one side and two cubicles facing four washing basins, an eeriness seeps through the space, where automation activated by proximity sensors flushes unoccupied toilets and water flows from the faucet as the mirror reflects the tiles on the opposite wall. The toilet or urinal flushes as soon as when one tilts forward slightly, possibly still excreting, splashing a cocktail of body wastes and flush water on the exposed skin; while the hand drier and water faucet refuse to work and remain responseless even when a desperate user rubs his hands ceaselessly in front of the device. Within this supposedly sterile space with minimized human contact, one's understanding of



proximity is perplexed and inverted, in the undetectable presence of subcontracted cleaners stationed in each of these toilets.

It is a disorienting olfactory experience to be confronted with a mixture of the mouldy, the rotting, ammonia and chlorine. The sting from bleach fails to obscure the omnipresent odour filling the space from the deep of pipes, the remains in drains, the unseen corners and invisible particles suspended in the air. Even in the quietest hours, air oscillates, propelled by the concealed exhaust fans and air conditioning units, cooling rather than evaporating moisture on your skin from the moment you enter, leaving a thin layer of cold sweat on the back of the neck.

Steam from the rice cooker quickly fleets and becomes invisible in the rush of circulating air. It is in the late afternoon on a weekday. Under the plastic stackable stool that barely fits between the shelves stands a rice cooker on top of a shoe box wrapped in a used plastic bag, above a stack of replacement wall tiles; in the water-proof box is a pair of worn but clean sneakers in a spunbond polypropylene non-woven fabric bag with a folded t-shirt, jeans and a few pairs of rolled socks; two black gumboots are wedged between both legs of the stools and the bottom frame of the shelves, one on each side; several cotton rags and a pair of cotton-lined vinyl gloves are hanging on a red nylon string tied onto the studs of the shelves, 60 centimeters in depth on three sides of the wall, in a room that is 180 centimeters by 180 centimeters. Officially a storage room, also a permanent makeshift resting room for the stationed cleaner, its door matches the tiled wall in the toilet perfectly, now a trapdoor wide opened. Light filtered from outside, so scant that one can only trace the vague outline of the objects inside the room, covered in a greyish hue and dampness. It is tightly fitted with buckets, mops, detergents, refills and a tower of toiletries to lean against, with softer items deliberately placed on sitting-shoulder-to-hip-height as cushioning. When the imprint of the body becomes so deep that the edge of the shelves and the resting ribcage come into contact, the shelves will be restocked accordingly, until the refills



slightly protrude the depth of the shelves. In front of the stool is a low foldable table, neatly covered with layers of old newspaper repurposed as placemats and upholstery for foot rest. In unequal distance from the two upper corners of the doorway leading to the storage room, two used plastic bottles with tops cut off are glued onto the tiled wall with semi-transparent silicon sealant, filled with water and aquatic bamboo plants believed to bring good luck, noticeably cared for. Least interrupted by whatever happens outside this space: a place for everything and everything in its right place, and everything that needs doing gets done — water flushed and drained, toilets used and wiped, bins filled and emptied, soap emptied and refilled, people come and go — the room remains as it is, all beyond is a perpetual cycle of changes in the space being maintained.

