

**Matters Out of Place: A summary of a DC&W thesis research project ('The Portable Flush Toilet: From Camping Accessory to Protest Totem')**  
**by Nadine Botha**

June 16, 2016: A class-action suit is filed against the City of Cape Town municipality for racial discrimination in its sanitation services. Led by the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), the case is based on the inadequacies of the portable flush toilet (PFT) that has become widely distributed in informal urban settlements in Cape Town. This is not the first political use of this object designed for the US leisure and camping market in the 1960s.

Making world headlines, Chumani Maxwele took to the statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes in front of the University of Cape Town with a PFT waste tank of shit in 2015. In 2014, anonymous guerrilla group Tokolos Stencil Collective surreptitiously planted soiled PFTs at two creative events to infect the gentrified spaces with what they described as 'the smell of decades of indignity and oppression'. Earning the Ses'khona People's Rights Movement its appellation 'the poo protestors' in 2013, PFTs were used by members to fling shit at a bus transporting the mayor, and dump shit at the airport and government offices. These, and other sanitation-related resistance and demonstrations in Cape Town, have come to be known as the toilet wars.

My thesis – 'The Portable Flush Toilet: From Camping Accessory to Protest Totem' – is an investigation into what happens when an object designed for one context is applied as a solution to another context. By considering how the widely-considered 'standard' plumbed toilet has designed people's behaviour and beliefs since colonialism, the thesis shows how the shortcomings of the PFT have sparked the toilet wars. Using a design lens on these politicised events, otherwise unseen systems of infrastructure are made visible, exposing the continued urban design legacies of sociospatial apartheid.

My research took me through scores of legal affidavits, social audits and research reports by NGOs, annual reports from the municipality, academic papers, as well as Amazon product reviews and a Youtube channels about the toilet wars and PFTs. Numerous people were interviewed, including Axolile Notywala, the newly appointed head of the Social Justice Coalition, who was at the time head of the public services campaign that included sanitation; and industrial designer Richard Perez who was the City of Cape Town's embedded designer during the World Design Capital 2014 programme. Besides living in Cape Town from 2008 to 2015, when most of these events took place, I have gone to rallies, attended a decolonial summer school, worked for organisations involved, and done data hackathons for Code4SA. Additionally, I wrote about the topic for newspapers, magazines and an academic journal, the latter after presenting at the Decolonising Design Conference in Malmo in 2016.

The practice of using a lack of sanitation to racialise and discriminate against people in Cape Town dates back to Cecil John Rhodes' rule of the Cape Colony in the 19th century. This so-called 'sanitation syndrome' that linked cleanliness and health with race became the justification for the urban segregation that started at the turn of the 20th century, and was later codified in Apartheid's notorious Group Areas Act of 1950.

A quarter-century since the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, this ghetto-based urban design strategy not only persists but continues to be replicated. So-called 'temporary relocation camps' of corrugated iron huts with insufficient sanitation, and no access to public transport, schools or hospitals – even surrounded by barbed wire fences –

continue to be built by the City of Cape Town to this day. How can the city recognised as the World Design Capital 2014 still be using apartheid-style urban design principles? In fact, the gentrification accelerated by mega-events like the World Design Capital and the FIFA World Cup in 2010 also resulted in the proliferation of these camps on the outskirts of the city.

It was the sanitary conditions endured in the new and old camp-like settlements that sparked the 2013 ‘poo protest’ insurgence. At best inhabitants share a rarely functional toilet between four households, and many of these are unenclosed, forcing residents to shroud themselves in a blanket for privacy. More common are the rows of cement-enclosed chemical toilets that service an entire neighbourhood. These are notorious for being rape hotspots, and in 2008 were found to be an aggravating factor in the xenophobic riots. Access to private flush toilets for all would significantly reduce the opportunities for the extreme violence that is directed at women, LGBTI and foreigners.

The City of Cape Town municipality responded by providing PFTs, colloquially known as ‘porta-portas’ or ‘laptops’. The PFT consists of two interlocking tanks. The top tank contains the flush water and is moulded with a recessed toilet bowl. The waste holding tank clips onto the top tank. Without a sewer or water system, self-maintenance is impossible. A janitorial service has been implemented to collect full waste tanks, which stand piled up on the side of the road, and deliver empty waste tanks, thrice a week.

Given the manufacturer’s advice of emptying a PFT every two days per four users, and up to two families per PFT in Cape Town, the frequency is hardly sufficient. Overfull waste tanks are heavy and messy to carry. There are also disruptions in these services because of inadequate protective gear and health inoculations for janitors. Because the municipality has tendered these services to private contractors, there is less transparency, accountability and employment integrity. Janitors have also gone on strike and instigated their own poo protests because of temporary contracts with limited work hours that result in earning less than the minimum wage.

One third of the world live without basic sanitation – defined by the UN as ‘facilities that ensure hygienic separation of human excreta from human contact’. Although it is difficult to know the exact figures in Cape Town, since the municipality has self-defined the PFT as basic sanitation even if residents disagree, it is lower than the global problem. However, Cape Town is regularly included in the top 20 most desirable places to live for the rich – the only city on such lists to have informal settlements and less than 100% basic services.

‘What happens when we treat humans like shit, when we turn human beings themselves into the abject, into the thing that needs to be expelled?’ South African poet and cultural commentator Rustum Kozain reflects. As long as the City of Cape Town does not lay down pipes in informal urban settlements, both the settlements and their inhabitants – uncannily termed ‘squatters’ – do not officially exist. Moreover, as with the #Rhodesmustfall protests and the Tokolos Stencil Collective, the portable flush toilet has become emblematic of wider issues. The fight for dignity via toilets, then, is both a practical and symbolic move towards decolonising the system.

As an object, the PFT has served a vital role in bringing the reality of these unseen fringes of Cape Town into full view. The portable and hermetic waste-holding tank make it a potent functional and symbolic object to represent causes – from sanitation and urban design to education and empowerment – that cannot simply be solved by replacing it with another

object. These causes may or may not have the same impetus. Organisations, including the SJC, are innovatively using design for disruptive advocacy.

As the world enters a new era of protest, and many bemoan the lack of uniting leaders and ideologies in the fragmented left, totemic objects such as the PFT might serve as a convivial rallying points across interest groups, making us more aware of harmful design decisions that can otherwise remain unseen.