Hey readers,

Periods are normal. But you’d never know that by checking out the average bathroom. The only menstruation-related public restroom fixture considered remotely standard is the trash, the one used to hide the evidence. A tampon dispenser is a rare sighting—a functioning, stocked dispenser, even rarer still.

Dispensers’ exclusion from public space reveals the ways that menstruation is not treated like other natural body functions. Instead, it has long been considered a sign of imbalance and weakness, discussed mainly in hushed tones and sly euphemisms. Historically, the medical profession has greatly contributed to cultural anxieties about women and periods. Viewing male bodies as the biological norm, doctors pathologized menstruation as deviant from male health, inspiring misogynistic distrust of women’s emotions, physical autonomy, and mental competence. Early medicine saw menstruation as a way for women’s bodies to restore balance of the four bodily humors, implying that women were always in a state of flux or imbalance. Even as medicine advanced into the 20th century, menstruation was thought of as a disease, requiring women to take mandatory rest from school and activities during their periods. This attitude towards menstruation did not shift until the 1940s, when WWII-era employers couldn’t afford for women to take sick days for periods. Not only did reductive understanding of menstruation as weakness cause women’s bodies to be politically and economically disempowered, it also created centuries of gaps in accurate knowledge about reproductive health and a lack of design innovation to improve the experience of menstruation. The history of period products has been an attempt to give women the ability to pass as non-menstruating.

But here’s the good news, society is finally beginning to acknowledge the strange ways menstruation has historically not been treated like any other body function. Its status in our cultural consciousness has been sharply on the rise since 2016. Activists are loudly challenging cultural and legal norms around periods and designers are responding with better products. The next battleground in menstruation will be access to free or low-cost period products in public spaces.

This Summer edition of Radically Normal focuses on the material culture of menstruating in public. Our goal is to shift the care of bleeding bodies from personal responsibility to public concern by advocating for public restroom design that reflects the banal, essential nature of managing menstruating in public.
Other hygienic essentials - toilet paper, tissues, paper towels - are seen as public goods; it’s time for period products to join.

As activists demand that we make the world more menstruation-friendly, we have a chance to reflect on what that vision looks like and how to make it actionable. What have our feminist forebears said on the matter? How can we operationalize this expanded service with consideration for public restroom custodians? What questions have we not considered about ensuring access to period products at scale because we’ve been too uncomfortable to ask?

Most importantly, how can this vision be more equitable, more inclusive? Menstruation activism is dominated by privileged, white, cisgender women (guilty) and is struggling to bring diverse voices to the table. If menstrual equity is the goal, we need to focus on the needs of people for whom a box of tampons is a significant expense, and on vulnerable populations such as the homeless and imprisoned. This movement will be hobbled unless it becomes more focused on issues of public responsibility.

We’ll get into all these questions and more as we envision a new relationship to periods and a future where free pads and tampons are as banal as toilet paper in public restrooms.

Bleed Boldly,
Katie Smiley
Material feminism was a feminist critique of labor and the built environment that developed along suffragette movements in industrial-era cities. It emerged in response to the domestic isolation and devaluing of women’s labor produced by urban housing. The core demands of this movement were to make facilities for domestic labor, such as cooking, cleaning, and child care, shared as opposed to private. Their claims are significant because, as Dolores Hayden, argues, “It requires a spatial imagination to understand that urban regions designed for inequality cannot be changed by new roles in the lives of individuals.” The design of public space can feel inevitable and insurmountable, but it can be reshaped for equity.

Second Wave Feminism 1960–1990

Second wave menstrual activism emerged as part of the larger women’s health movement (WHM) in the mid-to-late twentieth century. A female self-help network that grew into a national movement, WHM rejected the paternalistic medical profession by disseminating accurate information about reproductive health and encouraging women to examine themselves. Within this movement, feminist spiritualists sought to claim menstruation as a source of female power and identity. Driven by the idea that the personal is political, they saw menstruation as a source of body literacy and a spiritual connection to other women.

While not all menstruation activist were feminist-spiritualists, second wavers were united by their demand for the legal reform of consumer safety standards within the FemCare industry. Prior to these reforms, preservatives, scents, and new absorbent materials used in pads and tampons underwent very limited testing. Activists of this time also rejected commercial menstrual products. Many began to adopt homemade, natural, and reusable goods, such as sponges, cups, and washable pads.

Third Wave Feminism 1990–now

The 3rd-wave feminist menstruation agenda is focused on access and intersectionality. It champions a legal movement to stop the taxation of period products as a luxury good, the same rate as make-up. The movement is also fighting for access to period products in public restrooms, with schools and other public institutions being the highest priority.

An important dimension to 3rd-wave feminism is intersectionality. This means reconciling disagreements on whether menstruation is a biological process or a social construction of gender. People focused on the biological process claim menstruation as a female experience, since it has historically been used to disempower women. Gender constructivists emphasize that not all women menstruate, and not all people who menstruate are women. This is reflected in inclusive language such as “menstruators” and “period products.” This publication will opt for gender neutral terms when possible, such as “people who menstruate” and “period.”

While not all women menstruate, and not all people who menstruate are women. This is reflected in inclusive language such as “menstruators” and “period products.” This publication will opt for gender neutral terms when possible, but this should not be interpreted as downplaying the relationship between misogyny and menstruation. Moving forward, a comprehensive menstrual equity agenda should be formed around the spatial inequality critique of material feminism, the consumer safety/body literacy of 2nd wave, and the intersectionality/accessibility of 3rd wave.

A Comprehensive Menstrual Equity Agenda

Access
the right to physically and economically accessible menstrual hygiene solutions.

Inclusion
the right to benefit from policy and innovation, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status; an innovation economy should not only be focused on luxury goods for cisgender people.

Full & Equal Participation
the right to participate fully and equally regardless of your period; there are uncomfortable and messy aspects of periods that can never be solved, but your period should not hinder your ability to handle a difficult work schedule, focus on an important test, or make difficult decisions.

A Destigmatized Body
the right to not feel mistrust, discrimination, or undue disgust due to a natural body function.

Transparency
the right to make informed choices about what you’re putting in your body; period product manufacturers are not required by the FDA to disclose contents.

Comfort & Function
the right to products that work well, apply latest technology, and feel comfortable to use.
Moral Hygiene

Blame it on the Puritans, but personal hygiene and moral virtue are inextricably linked in American culture. As understanding of germ theory advanced and indoor plumbing became widespread, dirt was pathologized as moral weakness. Cleanliness became an essential path to access class privilege.

Cleanliness is next to godliness
immaculate performance
pure as the driven snow
untarnished reputation
blemish-free record
healthy perspective
smelling like a rose
spotless execution
cleanse your soul
pristine condition
unspoiled nature
porcelain skin
clean data
clean slate
rat race
muckraker
dirty whore
foul-minded
ill-mannered
a shitty idea
nasty woman
dirty politician
filthy language
sweating like a pig
purification from sin
wash out your mouth
this place is a pig sty
clean up your attitude
if you lie with dogs, you wake up with fleas

URINE-NATION

A history of design for public urination

Before diving into a specific critique of public restroom design as it relates to menstruation, one should consider the broader history of public restrooms. They exist for three primary reasons: public health and sanitation, worker productivity, and customer service. For people to be economically productive and spend time in commercial centers without disease, public restrooms were needed. Norms in bathroom design and availability defined what were considered normal body functions and who might be included in a productive society. Public restrooms have always been politically charged spaces. Architectural historian Barbara Penner noted, “Unless we recognize the part that bathrooms play in enforcing order and existing power relations, it is hard to make sense of why they are often such bitterly contested spaces.” Examining the legacy of public restrooms provides an important lens for understanding inequality and shaping future interventions in public space.

Bodies have to urinate, defecate, and menstruate, so restricting where, how, and with whom those acts take place is a powerful tool in enforcing social order. Historically, the absence of public bathrooms for people of color, women, and people with disabilities created a leash, a barrier for how far or long they could stray from home without risking embarrassment. As phrased by menstrual hygiene technology historian Sharra Vostral, “In a society that values cleanliness, stained clothing can be read as a moral, and not a technological, failure.” With the stakes for hygiene so high, bathrooms define who has access to public space.

In the history of design for public urination, municipalities have disproportionately focused on design for men over women. The reasons are numerous, including women’s lack of influence over public works, the invisibility of domestic labor, cumbersome clothing, and the male anatomical advantage of aiming. But deeper cultural attitudes at the intersection of gender and class, which still persist today, also explain the spatial organization of public restrooms. In availability and use, female facilities reflect women’s historically limited agency in public space. Gendered differences in how we relieve ourselves only exist in public space. Many of these norms were established during the Victorian era, when the belief in privacy, modesty, and “separate spheres” for men and women was met with anxiety over rapid changes in labor and technology. As urban populations swelled and knowledge of germ theory advanced, cleanliness became a new morality. Poor personal hygiene and sanitation put society at risk for infection and contagion. “Cleaning up the streets” was not a euphemism for moral
policing, it was one and the same.

Designed to mimic the act of peeing on the street, the urinal emerged in the 19th century as the hygienic crisis of human waste.1 Pissoirs, an outdoor urinal with a privacy enclosure, began to emerge throughout Western Europe. While the streets were previously soiled by men and women equally, germ theory turned public urination into a taboo and the urinal as a hygiene solution defined public space as male.2 It enabled men to relieve themselves in public without stigma, but restricted it for women. Efforts to design female public restrooms were actively protested by both men and women3 under the guise that allowing women into the public realm would “endanger both women’s weaker bodies and the welfare of future generations.”4 As women entered the industrial workforce, anxieties over their protection was met with the demand for productivity.

Gendered differences in how we relieve ourselves only exist in public space.

Gender segregated public restrooms first emerged in Industrial Era factories that employed large numbers of women. Separate restrooms were already common outside the home during this time period, but the practice was not enforced by law in the U.S. until 1887. In an essay on Victorian restrooms, Terry Kogan argues that ‘policy makers were motivated to enact toilet separation laws aimed at factories as a result of deep social anxieties over women leaving their homes to enter the workforce.’5 Women received more legal protection than men over factory sanitation standards. Believing that women’s emotional and physical weakness required space for modesty and retreat, factories employing large numbers of women were required to create separate women’s bathrooms that including private stalls and areas for rest. The origins of this design norms are obviously problematic, but have set a precedent for women’s restrooms as places for bodily care. Contrastingly, male factory workers received minimal sanitation standards and acknowledgment of their physical needs. At this time, the urinal also moved from the streets to the factory floor, since it enabled shorter bathroom breaks and therefore a more productive workforce.6 They were successful from an efficiency standpoint, but remain a unique breed of anti-social object within the confines of an indoor male restroom.

Moving forward a few decades to the post-WWII office environment, ratios of male to female restrooms and the presence of urinals became symbolic of male privilege and female exclusion.8 Designers have experimented with female urinals, but variation in women’s clothing and their difficulty of use have prevented their rise. Decades of legislation has attempted to reflect gender relations in public space, but it is always the site of contention.9 Broadly, Americans did not agree on male/female bathroom standards until the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, which introduced regulations on the design and presence female bathrooms in public spaces and professional settings. A key bargaining chip between proponents and opponents of the ERA was the continued separation of male and female bathrooms, as opposed to unisex. Somewhat ironically, the absence of urinals legally defined bathrooms as female, rather than the introduction of any design for female bodily needs. Bathrooms were defined as female through absence of design. The more our society designs for female bodies, the more valued women’s contributions become.

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Moving outside the gendering of workplace bathrooms, building highly visible bathrooms never received the same attention in the US as in major European cities. Many cite puritanical views on bodily privacy for both genders as the main reason, but the rise and fall of the Comfort Station movement reveals how it was also about moral policing and economic privilege. In his essay, “Restrooms in American Cities, 1969-1972,” Peter Baldwin describes the 19th century progressive movement to build underground public restroom facilities, euphemistically called comfort stations.10 This movement reflected the progressive struggle to subject the private body to public stewardship and was largely championed by female activists of the day. It was equally motivated by concerns about sanitation and personal morality. The sanitation argument was familiar, but this moral framing was new. At the time, public restrooms were only available only in customer serving establishments, like restaurants, department stores, and bars. Female leaders of the temperance movement thought men were being innocently lured into bars and brothels by their bladders, then compelled to drink in exchange for using the bathroom. Public restrooms unaffiliated with debauchery, comfort stations were promoted as the moral alternative.

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they were rarely used. This was due to class tensions. Women’s sense of privacy did not extend to a culturally and economically mixed setting. Wealthy women preferred to use the restrooms of private establishments like department stores in exchange for their patronage. Poor men benefited from all men’s need for urinals. But without wealthy and middle class women making a similar demand of public space, poor women’s needs were doubly not considered. The class conflict behind comfort stations was clear, as one station was torn down for being “in too public a place.” Calls for comfort stations died with prohibition, as moral progressives no longer needed an alternative to the saloon bathroom as a deterrent for drinking.

In America today, the truly public restroom is a rare sighting – male or female. Small businesses and coffee shops have become the band-aid solution, with some acknowledging their role more directly. In response to the public relations crisis surrounding a manager who called the police on two black men who asked to use the restroom without proof of purchase, Starbucks has announced that they will allow anyone to use their restrooms. CEO Howard Schulz said at the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C., “We don’t want to become a public bathroom, but we’re going to make the right decision 100 percent of the time and give people the key. Because we don’t want anyone at Starbucks to feel as if we are not giving access to you to the bathroom because you are ‘less than.’ We want you to be ‘more than.’” It’s not reasonable to expect every coffee shop in America to offer public restroom usage without compensation for staff and maintenance costs, but this statement is an important move forward. It acknowledges that public restrooms aren’t purely about hygiene and productivity anymore; they’re about expressing care and an acknowledging bodily needs as human needs.

Examining the legacy of public restrooms is important as society confronts their role in enforcing gender, class, and race. Debates on how and with whom we share public restrooms are fueled by larger issues around social identity. People in power rely on our inescapable need to relieve ourselves and the intertwining issues of hygiene and morality as leverage to enforce social order. These forces are still at work today as trans-discriminatory bathroom policies are being used to legislate cisgender identity. Making public spaces accessible to all requires design attention to those who have historically been neglected or deliberately excluded. The lack of design consideration for menstruation reinforces it, and menstruating bodies as abnormal. The lack of truly public restrooms in America reinforce hygiene as a privilege only for consumers and those who can pass as one. Public restrooms are an important way for cities to express care and expand who belongs to the commons.
code red
the curse
Aunt Flow
Aunt Ruby
on the rag
the bleedies
the nuisance
monthly trouble
riding the red tide
out of commission
the dam has burst
your friend’s in town
saddling up old rusty
Picasso in his red period
off visiting the red planet
taking Carrie to the prom
riding the big red Cadillac
the tomato boat has come in
a visit from Cap’n Bloodsnatch
the Red Sox have a home game
having ketchup with your steak
down the avenue of womanhood
wearing the red badge of courage
Miss Scarlett’s come home to Tara
driving through the redwood forest
communists have Invaded the summer house

When something is difficult to mention, we call it something else. The more euphemisms in the cultural lexicon, the more taboo the topic.

PERIODS IN PUBLIC
Menstruating outside the home, yesterday and now

Managing a period in public is anything but simple. To learn to be a menstruating human is to become an expert at navigating the secret underground tampon exchange network, managing your emotional responses to be seen as credible, and handling the uncertainty that a natural body function might suddenly disqualify you from staying that extra hour at work or going to team practice. Period products absorb not just the uterine lining but the social risks of a stigmatized body.

The history of period products parallels the shift from women’s domestic isolation to entry into the professional world. Period products began appearing in catalogs such as Sears and Roebuck’s in the 1890s. Small advancements in product variety and availability were made from 1890 through the 1920s, but modern menstruation management didn’t begin until the 1930s, which was deemed ‘the Kotex Age’ by William Faulkner (of all people). The time period marks the transition from menstruation as hygienic handicap to passing as non-bleeder. The advancements of the time are perhaps best expressed in this 1932 ad for the “Phantom Kotex.” The key sales points were comfort and invisibility.

The following are broad attitudes about menstruating bodies. They roughly correspond to historical time periods, but all continue to exist in some form today. “Removal from society” sounds like a thing of the past, but some cultures still isolate menstruating members. As recently as 2017, a girl in Nepal died from a snake bite while isolated in a menstruation hut.

EFFECT OF PERIOD STIGMA ON ACCESSING PUBLIC SPACE

Removal from society
Stigma is so severe that menstruators are isolated, at home or in another shelter.

Hygienic Handicap
Menstruation is treated as a temporary disability best hidden.

Passing as Non-Bleeder
Menstruation isn’t a problem as long as it remains invisible and unspoken.

Radically Normal
A hopeful future where menstruating is as unproblematic as urinating.
The copy reads: “Leaves no trace of revealing outline – even under closest-fitting frocks.” Making the experience of menstruation invisible allowed women to pass as non-menstruating.

The biggest gains in the public acknowledgment of periods began during WWII. Suddenly, women had to play an important role in the workforce, and employers wanted reliable employees who didn’t stay home during their time of the month. By disseminating medical studies and promoting the newest products, menstruation became broadly accepted as a problem that could be solved with the right products.

Openness on menstruation diminished as women were pushed out of their jobs in the post-war economy, but the use of period products to go about normal daily routines continued.

FemCare manufacturers competed to develop undetectable products.

Over the next few decades, FemCare manufacturers competed to develop undetectable products. Shapes, sizes and materials were altered to hide any evidence that a woman was on her period. A faulty or bulky product could abruptly remove the privilege of passing. This 1975 ad for Rely Tampons taps into the anxiety of the time. The products were marketed as so effective that they “even absorb the worry.”

Since 2016, the invisibility surrounding menstruation has been lifting.

1. Providing free period products in public restrooms reduces the stigma surrounding menstruation. It signals that an institution believes menstruation should not affect women’s ability to participate. When asked how they would feel if a place provided free period products, common responses were “cared-about” (13%) followed shortly by “great” (12%), “aware of female needs” (6%), and “happy” (6%).

2. The general perception of tampon dispensers is that they are rarely seen, are outdated, and are empty or supplied with low-quality products, the survey participants did not trust. Lack of product choice and the belief that available products are of low quality were big factors contributing to the perception of current tampon dispensers as useless. When asked to describe tampon dispensers 15% said “quarters”, followed by “cardboard” (9%), “low-quality” (8%), “broken” (8%), and “empty” (7%).

3. 96% of respondents “Strongly Agreed” or “Somewhat Agreed” that period products should be as accessible as toilet paper.

4. Participants agreed more strongly that there should be free period products in public restrooms than paid. 89% of respondents agreed that public restrooms should have free period products while only 83% believed there should be paid dispensers. The implication that menstruation should be treated differently than other body functions was worse than having no products at all.

5. At the end of the long survey, 64% of respondents chose to fill out a story about menstruation. The prompt was very open ended, “Tell me a story about menstruation!” The average word count of the stories was 71. Major themes were inconvenient places to unexpectedly get a period, staining another person’s items, being publicly seen with period stains, or having a period interrupt an important life event. We might one day live in a free-bleed fantasy where marking a pair of pants bears no consequence outside stain remover, but for the time being, period products are a necessity. Inevitably, every menstruator has chosen between participating or risking embarrassment. There needs to be a system for managing menstruation in public that is more reliable than always being prepared, relying on friends to have a spare, or throttling dispensers that haven’t been restocked since 1996.

In an effort to understand more about the public life of menstruation management, I administered a survey about women’s experiences with periods in public. 117 people replied. Here were the main insights:

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Period
Story
Time

I was preaching at our Saturday night church service wearing a cute white lace skirt. It was the end of August so I was trying to wear this thing as long as I could before it was no longer in season. My period wasn’t due for a few weeks, but as I’m breaking the communion bread, I realize it’s shown up a week early. (Something makes clergy never have to worry about when they’re blessing the elements.) I finish out the worship service without sitting down, but I realize I need to find a tampon stat. The problem is, most people who go to church are post-menopausal women. The one woman in her 20s is pregnant and can’t help me and the woman in her 30s doesn’t have anything. The place I end up finding them is the first aid kits in the youth room. After that experience I put little baskets to be mine since I’m the only woman in the vicinity. Super Plus Tampon too!

During college I studied abroad in the beautiful city of Seville in Spain. There was one evening in particular when I was completely out of money, alone, and realized I had just gotten my period. I had no choice but to go on a mission to steal a box of tampons from the Spanish equivalent of a 7/11. On my way to the store I had the misfortune of running into some acquaintances. I don’t remember exactly how I excused myself but I had to make a run for it because there was actually blood actually dripping down my leg (this has never happened to me before or since) However, I successfully managed to steal a box of tampons and remedy the situation in the bathroom at the Spanish 7/11. All’s well that ends well I suppose?

I once had to buy tampons in St. Petersburg, Russia. I was there for work, and I’d brought some with me, just to not have to deal with it, but I miscalculated and on the last day I ran out. No problem, I thought. I’ll just buy some while I’m out sightseeing. I kept that last tampon in for probably too long, but on my way back to the hostel where I was staying I stopped in the first store that seemed like it might carry tampons, just a convenience store looking place. They had toilet paper, and other toiletries, sort of tampon-adjacent products, but I could not find the tampons. So I want to see the woman behind the counter, “Do you have tampons?” She did not speak English. So I got out a pen and a piece of paper, and drew her a tampon. A little bullet with a string dangling from it. “Ooh, tampon!” she said, apparently the Russian word for tampon is just tampon in a Russian accent. “No, they didn’t have them. So I leave and try another store. No luck here either, so I ask the old woman behind the counter. She doesn’t speak English either, so I bust out my tampon drawing. She understands, but no they don’t have them. She starts pointing, trying to direct me, I understand, to a location where they sell it. It seems she’s saying to go left out of the store, then left again. So I do. And I arrive at a pharmacy. It seems in Russia they only sell tampons in pharmacies. Well that’s alright, I think, and go in. It is the narrowest store I’ve ever been to, and everyone is standing in a single line leading up to one counter. All of the products are locked behind glass along the walls. I realize, with horror, that the only way to purchase something at this pharmacy is to wait in line and tell the hot, young, male, Russian cashier at the counter what you want. But there’s nothing for it. So I get to the counter, ask for tampons, he doesn’t understand, I reach for my tampon drawing, and I hear laughter behind me. A girl in line behind me speaks English, and she understood me. So she asks him for tampons for me. Then she laughs again, turns to me and says, “He wants to know: how many drops?” I assume she means what size tampon I need, i.e., how heavy is my flow. “NORMAL,” I say, “JUST REGULAR, NORMAL SIZE!” Now, dear reader, to be honest, I could’ve used the super tampons. But I will not be telling that to the hot young Russian man tasked with retrieving them for me. So he brings me a box of the regular size O.B. tampons, I pay for them, and leave. Up to this point I had never used the O.B. applicator-less tampons, I always used ones with applicators. But at that point I was going to take what I could get and get out of there. So I got back to the hostel and used the OBs and it was fine, and in fact I loved those Russian tampons so much that now I use O.Bs exclusively.

The End.
Body literacy is our ability to understand, interpret, and respond to how our body feels. For example, we can feel bladder pressure and know it’s time to pee, or we can feel our mouth dry, and saliva thicken and know we should drink some water. But the signs are not always easy to recognize, and learning about your body can be a difficult, lifetime pursuit.

Enter the quantified self: the promise that some external entity can monitor, diagnose, and prescribe everything you’d ever want to know about your personal health. Consider the precedent set by Google Maps. This service gave us access to new, detailed information, making it less necessary to memorize streets outside our daily routine. As its data became more dependable, users became more dependent on its service. Bringing it back to the body, wearable health technology is paving the way for people to become worse at interpreting health signals and more dependent on products and services.

When I gave cycle tracker apps a try, I had enjoyable experience using them. It was fun logging the information about my flow length and amount, but it could never accurately predict my period start date. This critique is true for a lot of menstruators who don’t have regular periods. I was surprised by how off it was, because my regularity had always been a point of personal pride. It helped me realize that I might not be on the perfect, 28 day cycle, but I knew how to read my body’s signs perfectly. My PMS begins when my normally clear skin produces a small constellation of pimples. Within 48 hours of the pimples, I will feel an uncontrollable need to eat chocolate and weep profusely (insert Cathy comic joke). Instead of just waiting for these tears to kick off at some random occasion or animal video, I take the night off to watch a tear-lavative movie and apply a facial mask. My stand-by is the 1995 A Little Princess, which has never failed to make me cry, PMS or not. If I’m already feeling a little pre-crampy, I’ll top the evening off with an electric heating pad. Then I start wearing my absorbent underwear until that lining is fully shed. This ritual has heightened my emotional awareness and positively shaped my relationship to my period. I’m doubtful technology can reproduce this effect.

The simultaneous sale of empowerment and fear over a leaky, unmanageable body is cause for concern.

We wouldn’t expect a device to regulate any other bathroom body functions, so why are we making these for menstruation? Devices whose selling point is letting you know when they need to be refreshed occupy a tense relationship to menstrual stigma. The simultaneous sale of empowerment and fear over a leaky, unmanageable body is cause for concern. LoonCup, the smart menstrual cup, began its popular Kickstarter campaign with the language “It’s no secret: menstruation is not fun. But what if we could relieve our monthly stress and take back control?” They are playing into the cultural trope that periods are horrible, messy, chaotic — and only their product can make you a functional human being again. They are selling control over our wild, fluctuating bodies. I choose to opt out of this hyperbole.

I don’t think leakage is quite the crisis it’s made out to be. The fate of a favorite pair of white paints may hang in the balance, but is a smart tampon strung up to a beeper pack really the worst situation in the world? Or if you’re one of 99.9% of women not down for the free bleed lifestyle, maybe explore some inconspicuous black pants, absorbent underwear, or security liner that day?

Now that periods are more public than ever, there is a lot of buzz about ways we can change the game. Where there were once a limited set of options from large companies, there are now dozens of female-led startups rethinking female experience, sustainability, comfort, and conversation. As this next generation of hygiene technology is being developed, attention should be paid to the relationship these solutions have to the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation. Advisor to this project, Chris Bobel, observed in her recent New York Times op-ed, ‘American girls are socialized to see menstruation, and more generally, their bodies, as problems to be solved through use of the ‘right’ products.”

Period products are important because bleeding on your couch is inconvenient, but they should be developed with bodily care in mind, not crisis management. It is not enough for these new products to simply adapt modern design sensibilities and technology, they must also combat the centuries of stigma and shame that have made women reliant on a consumer products to control their unmanageable bodies.
Every user of women’s public restrooms is used to the sight of the defunct tampon dispenser. Its dated, clunky design and busted, rusted knobs effectively communicate that when it comes to menstruation— you’re on your own. Few give the dispenser a second look, even in times of need because the neglect of these containers has become expected by both public restroom users and the people who maintain them.

Smiley, an industrial design student at Rhode Island School of Design, said she began this project in grad school focused on a straightforward prompt: “Women’s biggest complaints about these machines were that they empty, coin-operated, and old-fashioned. As far as a design brief goes, those are really easy problems to fix. Add a transparent product window, a free or flexible payment interface, modernize the silhouette, and you’re done.” But that begs the question, if the solution is so obvious, why hasn’t someone already created it? Smiley responds, “Because menstruation management is treated as a consumer habit, not a body function. Everything wrong with the tampon dispenser extends from that simple truth.”

We have to start with the main question... why are the tampon dispensers empty?

This question alone is enough to fill a book, but I’ll try to keep it short. They’re the restroom equivalent of the broken windows theory, an urban planning concept about how visible signs of crime can make an entire block feel disordered, therefore more vulnerable to new crime. Visible neglect diminishes the perception of value, which spurs more neglect and disorder.20

It starts because custodians can’t tell if the dispensers are empty or jammed without opening them. Because they’re empty or jammed, women stop trying to use them. Because women stop trying to use them, facility managers think women don’t want the tampons. Because it’s too expensive to remove the machines, facility managers leave them there, permanently empty. Women take their emptiness as a matter of fact, so they never think to ask a custodian to restock it. For example, the tampon dispensers at my school have been empty since 1996. A facilities manager who has been working there since 1970s said I was the first person to ever bring it up. So, we need more people to raise this issue with their custodians, but we also need a much better dispenser.

Looking at your photos, your idea for a dispenser changed a lot. What was shaping those design decisions?
At first, I was approaching tampon dispensers as “feminist bathroom mascots.” They were very Lena Dunham. Two of my designs were literally based on a uterus and the international symbol for woman. And those were fun to make. But I came to this realization that those were over-essentializing menstruation. Beyond the fact that not everyone shakes tampon-poms for periods like I do, treating menstruation as deeply normal and uncelebratory is actually more meaningful. Beyond potty-training age, we don’t cheer for all other bathroom activity, so why should periods be any different?

I don’t want people’s reaction to be, “cool dispenser,” I want it to be “periods are just normal thing that get taken care of in public restrooms.” The dispenser isn’t meant to have an identity or to launch a brand; it is meant to include menstruation among standard bodily needs. That means making it invisible and unremarkable, except for the fact that it is providing a new service.

Is that what you mean by radically normal?

Yes, precisely. It’s easy as a designer to want everything that you make to be the most special thing anyone uses everyday, but that’s not really how objects work. Most things are unspecial, and there is value in that. The unremarkably competent dispenser, in other words, can more effectively challenge the way public restrooms treat menstruating bodies. In addition, by refusing to brand the dispenser, it allows the institution providing period products to get credit for making the dispenser available, rather than a flashy start up or FemCare company. Unbranded and invisible design makes it a public service.

Your unit is very obviously meant to treat toilet paper and period products in the same way. Where did that idea come from?

The rallying cry of recent menstruation activists is “toilet paper is free; why aren’t period products?” So I decided to take that as a super literal design prompt. Initially it was for discursive reasons, like a visual argument about their equivalence, but the farther I took the idea, the more it turned out to solve system design problems for custodians. Toilet paper dispensers are cheap, simple, and consistently stocked; let’s just copy what works about them.

Why did you decide to merge the product dispenser with the trash?

I realized that improving the experience of periods in public restrooms does not begin and end with getting the products there; it also accounts for the trash produced by these products. Those little wall-mounted trash cans next to the toilet are very clunky, both for bathroom users and custodians. The trash can is already occupying space in the bathroom stall, so it’s easy to make the case to just augment it a little bit. People are used to the wall-mounted dispenser that lives by the sinks, but merging these things makes for a much more seamless menstruation experience. You’re using the products when you’re in the stall, so you should be able to access them in the stall.

I also redesigned an icon for that trash unit. The current icons are so euphemistic; a typical one is a cylinder with the woman icon on it –it looks like you’re throwing feminism in the garbage. My icon looks like actual used pads and tampons. Flushing
period products can be tough on old plumbing and waste treatment systems, so clarity over what gets flushed vs. thrown away would go a long way.

There are a lot of new products in the menstruation product space right now. How do you see yourself as different?

In the dispenser world specifically, other solutions are overly technical and not mindful of how this object would actually fit into a custodian’s workflow. I don’t think smart objects are always more efficient. For example, there are systems to electronically monitor if the dispensers are empty. But that requires custodians to adopt an entirely new restocking protocol, one that is different from every other bathroom object. You can immediately tell if toilet paper dispensers are empty, so why are we making period products more complicated than that? Other dispensers are overly policing how people interact with it. They will offer free products, but the buttons that dispense them can only be pushed once every few minutes to prevent people from abusing the service.

More broadly, we are in the midst of a renaissance in menstruation activism right now, but most of the design-based interventions have neglected those who cannot afford luxury products. Conversation to destigmatize periods is rarely unaccompanied by a sales pitch. Free period products in public restrooms would make a huge difference for homeless women, whose upward mobility hinges on access to hygiene equipment.21 Another population critically left out of today’s progress are female prisoners. Policies on period products vary by state and institution, but products sold at prison commissaries are frequently unaffordable, or in such demand that they are used for barter. The limited availability means that women risk their health using them far beyond the recommended number of hours.22

If you’re most motivated to support those at-risk populations, why do high schools and universities seem like your primary clients?

You raise a really good criticism. Schools are the primary target because they are most motivated to make free period products available. Young people call out bullshit more easily; empty dispensers is an easy target. And the hope is that if you shift the mentality with this generation, it will have a ripple effect in the future. But even if we target the lowest income school districts, a solely school-focused roll-out strategy obviously has its limits.

The problem with expanding to other markets is unpredictability. It’s hard to know how people will react and what the gaps in your system will be. The most important thing this dispenser has to do is be stocked. If it’s consistently empty, it will undermine everything I hoped to achieve. Schools have a defined community, a clear sense of collectivism, routines, channels for direct messaging; all of those are tools used in free period product programs. We can have slightly more realistic expectations for how people are going to behave. I’m not saying this dispensing system would be perfect right away, but I’m confident with some trials we can keep these dispensers stocked in semi-public places like school. I have ideas for what this system would look like in a truly public space, but there would need to be a lot of research and piloting. Making that happen will be a challenge, but it’s the step I’m most excited to take.
LEAST GLAMOROUS, MOST ESSENTIAL

Designing custodian-friendly menstruation bathroom fixtures

Many in the menstrual equity movement are making bold moves to ensure access to period products in schools and other public spaces, but unresolved design issues remain from a facilities standpoint. New demands cannot be made of bathrooms without considering the people needed to sustain their systems. If public restrooms don’t work for custodians, they don’t work for anyone. They perform the least glamorous but most essential roles in making public restrooms functional spaces.

For a bathroom to be successful, it needs to be designed for discretion and to enforce period products as a commodity, not for ease of use or scale. The faulty design of the standard tampon dispenser is what happens when invisible need meets undervalued labor. No one wants to talk about menstruation or the experiences of people who keep our restrooms in working order. This avoidance results in inefficient systems and a lack of awareness and appreciation for the human effort required to sustain an unthoughtful system.

In an effort to design products that work within a system for providing period products in public restrooms at scale, I spoke with custodians and facility managers. We discussed their institution’s relationship to period products, workflow, pain points, and ideas for improvement. From these conversations, I’ve started to learn how to design a custodian-centered menstruation bathroom.

Low-Maintenance Fixtures

Low-maintenance to a custodian means easily restocked and serviced. Multiple interviewees at sites with period product dispensers noted their dislike of handling the individual tampons and pad boxes. Carrying them around with their supplies was cumbersome. The connected packaging design I have developed would solve this issue. Another aspect of low maintenance is analog as opposed to electronic. Hands-free sensors are nearly ubiquitous in restrooms today, but those require monitoring of battery life. Electronic dispensers add another step custodians have to take care.

Flexible Installation

The custodians I spoke with were receptive to making period products more available in restrooms, but would be unlikely to take a risk on providing a new service if the units were expensive and required architectural install. Common models of both tampon dispensers and in-stall trash cans are recessed into the walls. Installing and removing them requires a contractor, making changes in service expensive. An inexpensive, movable unit allows for experimentation with best placement, both within the bathroom and across the institution. The University of Washington used the pictured lucite boxes in their period product pilot program.

Clarity over medical waste status

Tensions regarding managing period products can be blamed on questions surrounding how to categorize menstrual waste products. All site research partners had conflicting or uncertain opinions about whether period product waste counts as biological waste. According to medical and dental offices I spoke with who frequently handle small amounts of body fluids, “if the absorbent material is not so saturated with biological content that it is dripping, it can be treated as regular trash.” By this standard, used band-aids and diapers are regular trash, but does it apply to period products? I don’t think I’ve seen a tampon drip, but it seems like a possibility. A lack of clear information has led some institutions to stop providing period products and barring access to, or failing to supply, in-stall trash cans. Period product service was suspended at RISD for this very reason. According to long-time RISD staffer Joe Melo, “We stopped stocking the dispensers years ago because we didn’t have a good system for disposing of the trash cans. That trash had to go to a separate place, by the nurse’s office. Because those have blood, they have to be handled different.” Uninstalling the units would have been expensive, so they stopped stocking the dispensers and blocked people from using the trash by duct taping a cardboard cylinder inside (see picture).

Minimizing blood-borne pathogen exposure risk

Custodians also feel uncertain if contact with used period products would put them at risk for exposure to blood-borne pathogens. Regardless of where is the biological/regular trash spectrum used period products lie, custodians would prefer to minimize contact with the contents of period product trash cans. Current trash units are lined with a waxy paper bag that does not relate well to the trash...
can walls and frequently collapses. This means period products frequently do not end up in the liner, making clean up difficult. Menstruation fixture manufacturers have tried to solve this problem by providing baggies for used period products, but making a better trash can sounds less wasteful and more likely for adaptation than asking hundreds of users to change their behavior. My proposal is a drawstring liner that grips to the walls. As the trash can is opened, the drawstring bag pulls itself shut.  

Resolved Systems Design  

Custodians can spot a flaw in a system immediately. They are not going to commit to a half-formed idea because if the system doesn’t work, they’re the ones who have to deal with the consequences. This is reflected in how they relate to the people who use their restrooms. One campus custodian said, “We love the students, but a lot of times they want to do a project and don’t think about what happens afterwards.” As the people who have to clean up others’ messes, they don’t write off flaws as “someone else’s problem.” Convincing a facility team to introduce a new service requires seamless design.

Appreciation from their users  

The biggest pain point among custodians I spoke with is that they felt unappreciated. When people leave their bathrooms in disarray or ignore signs for recommended use, it feels personally hurtful. They want to feel connected to a larger culture of care and respect surrounding the use of shared facilities.  

A highlight of this research was speaking with the University of Washington Facility Services team. They had recently started piloting a free period product program. When asked how the program began, they said, “Students asked us why students are constantly writing them to express their heartfelt appreciation.  

A surprising finding from their pilot program was how dramatically the use of a new type of dispenser increased the number of products taken. They joked, “With the coin operated it was like a Las Vegas slot machine; you had no idea if it could work.” Now that their products are free and in plain sight, annual spending on period products has gone from $1,000 to $20,000. When that budget increase resulted in push back from above, Facilities Director Gene Woodard reminded him “that we spend $300,000 on paper towels, $250,000 on toilet paper, $100,000 on soap.” This team serves as a stunning example of what is possible when activist claims are operationalized by facility services.  

One team member said, “The students who come here, this is their home away from home for 4 years. They view students as both their project partners and custodial staff. If it is easy to use for the consumer, all the better. Devices and equipment that limit the potential for exposure risk is there and it should be addressed and mitigated. Developing a system that considers the potential for worker exposures. Nor does it eliminate the need for a BBP program, training, and courtesy. Information about managing risk around blood-borne pathogen exposure for needles and direct body fluid spills is readily available on their website, but protocol for used period products were not specifically mentioned. In an effort clarify the health risks and waste management practices surrounding used period products, I contacted Christina Spring, who works in NIOSH communications. She came through with an official response.  

On whether used period products are considered medical waste or regular trash:  

“OSHA does not consider used feminine hygiene products and incontinent products outside of healthcare facilities as regulated medical waste. This interpretation has been in place since at least 1992 and was restated as recently as 2015 (Interpretation Letters attached, also since OSHA cited it, I am attaching the FDA standards for feminine hygiene products). This interpretation is based on their reasoning that ‘The intended function of products such as sanitary napkins is to absorb and contain blood, the absorbent material of which they are composed would, under most circumstances, prevent the release of liquid or semi-liquid blood or the baking off of dried blood.’ Typically things like adhesive bandages with a blood spot are also not considered regulated waste.”

On the potential of blood-borne pathogen exposure from handling trash with used period products:  

“This policy does not negate the employer responsibility to assess the workplace and work tasks to evaluate the potential for worker exposures. Nor does it eliminate the need for a BBP program, training, engineering controls, PPE etc.  

So, the potential for exposure risk is there and it should be addressed and mitigated. Developing products that you propose are a good way to control even the potential for exposure to housekeeping and custodial staff. If it is easy to use for the consumer, all the better. Devices and equipment that limit the potential for consumers and workers to encounter potential contamination are valuable to avoid infection hazards. The ISSA—The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association, formerly the International Sanitary Supply Association has expanded on the OSHA interpretation and offers further guidance for their members (online).”
One of the more controversial claims of the menstrual equity movement is the belief that period products should be free in public restrooms. It is understandable to question the economic reality of introducing a new public good. Period products have always been a consumer good, so why should we suddenly expect them for free?

Many approach this debate as a rights argument—period products should be free because they are a hygienic necessity to menstruating bodies. I value those voices (and to be clear, I agree with them), but were unsure of the specifics. For examples, one site’s policy was for custodians to bring coins to a general fund that collected coins from other vending machines. There was no tracking system, or way of telling which money came from which machine. The manager of that site suspected custodians kept the money for themselves, but admitted that she had not asked about revenue from the dispensers for years. Until our conversation, she had not realized that there was any way of knowing how much money was being collected from the machines.

All sites that used paid dispensers found them to be a liability. Interviewees reported that people would constantly break into the dispensers to steal the money (the pads/tampons were untouched). One site discontinued service because the dispensers were used, sites had general policies, but were unsure of the specifics. For examples, one site’s policy was for custodians to bring coins to a general fund that collected coins from other vending machines. There was no tracking system, or way of telling which money came from which machine. The manager of that site suspected custodians kept the money for themselves, but admitted that she had not asked about revenue from the dispensers for years. Until our conversation, she had not realized that there was any way of knowing how much money was being collected from the machines.

The coin-related liability could be fixed if these machines switched from mechanical coin operation to a smart payment system. But that would not solve all the problems associated with a paid system in general. Designing and operating a dispenser that charges for such small, lightweight products creates a number of pragmatic constraints. For one, they are expensive to manufacture. The least expensive traditional wall-mounted dispenser retails at $250, in contrast to toilet paper and paper towel dispensers which run as low as $10, or are free with a subscription to a company’s paper products.

Secondly, the internal mechanisms are required to grip and pull down an individual lightweight product when a coin is inserted are temperamental. If the period products are loaded slightly incorrectly or if someone puts in a wrong sized coin, the machine jams easily. Both scenarios happen frequently, keeping dispensers in a constant state of disrepair. Additionally, tampons and pads need an additional layer of packaging (cardboard tubes and boxes) to work with those temperamental mechanisms. This is wasteful, raises the individual unit cost, and also makes the dispensers compatible for only one brand of period products.

If these paid dispensers are expensive to buy and maintain, if they yield no profit, and if their temperamental design wastes staff time and resources... why are we still charging for period products?

Traditional dispensers are also difficult to restock. Pads and tampons must be loaded into the dispenser individually and precisely, which costs valuable staff time. If tampons are sold at $0.25 each, a $250 tampon dispenser can only hold enough products to make a maximum profit of $5. Assuming it takes a custodian making a living wage ($15/hr) 10 minutes to restock the machine, that already cuts profits in half.

So if these paid dispensers are expensive to buy and maintain, if they yield no profit, and if their temperamental design wastes staff time and resources... why are we still charging for period products? There is a complex cultural response about female bodies and hygiene as consumption, but the most straightforward justification seems to be a belief in what I call “tampon squirrels.”

I made my first tampon dispenser in September 2016, to conduct some tests on how location and politically charged messages affected the number of tampons taken. You can see the aside note for more details, but overall, it taught me that political messaging on the tampon dispenser had a strong influence on the number of tampons taken in a bathroom, but was not strong enough to overcome the stigma of accessing tampons in a public space.

Before the test started, I was expecting a Best Buy on Black Friday situation. I bought a box of 500 tampons for the 4 day experiment, expecting every other person to grab multiples or even clean

Digital collage by Katie Smiley
INITIAL TAMPN DISPENSER EXPERIMENT

Experimental Design
I created a dispenser meant to be obvious in its form and use and unobtrusive in a RISD public restroom.

I tracked how many tampons were taken under the different circumstances. The message attached to the dispenser was "period products should be as accessible as toilet paper." The dispenser was kept in the same circumstances for 24 hrs. The locations chosen were the women's restroom on the 2nd floor of the RISD ID building and adjacent to vending machines on the 2nd floor of the RISD ID building. I kept the locations constant to have comparable data in terms of traffic and visibility.

When the tampon dispenser was in public spaces, I spent 2 hours at each location tracking how people interacted with the dispenser and asking a few follow-up questions with anyone who stopped to look at it or took a tampon. The categories I monitored were: "did not observe", "observed, but didn’t stop", "stopped", and "took a tampon." Gender was also tracked and brief intercept interviews were done to understand context and intentions.

Results
Number of Tampons Taken

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>In a Bathroom</th>
<th>In Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without a Political Message</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a Political Message</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interacting with Dispenser in Public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Didn’t Notice</th>
<th>Noticed, didn’t stop</th>
<th>Stopped</th>
<th>Took a tampon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without a Political Message</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a Political Message</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings
Political messaging on the tampon dispenser had a strong influence on the number of tampons taken in a bathroom, but was not strong enough to overcome the stigma of accessing tampons in a public space.

out my obviously unlocked dispenser to squirrel away products for home use. To my utter shock, no such squirreling occurred. Withdrawals were extremely modest. Based on the building traffic, the number of tampons taken seemed aligned with my estimates of the number of women likely menstruating at the time (17.3% of female-identified ID students). After my initial experiments in RISD’s Industrial Design building ended, I moved the dispenser to my graduate program’s studio bathroom in October 2016 so that I could continue monitoring and restocking it. Over the course of 20 months, I have experimented with different product brands and quality levels, and yet, the number of tampons taken has remained consistent and appropriate based on our floor’s foot traffic.

This restrained use suggests that users respect the dispenser’s presence in our bathroom. Though these observations come from one community at an elite institution, and further, a community that has a relationship with me, the provider of the tampons, other research sites with free products have reported similar results. For example, the University of Washington facility management team confirms that the number of products taken seems aligned with estimates on need. They added signs on their dispensers explaining, “These free menstrual products are provided by UW Building Services Dept. Please only take what is needed in order to sustain this service. Thank you!” This earnest appeal to a sense of collectivist ethics seems to be an effective deterrent.

Occasionally, of course, people will take more than one tampon at a time, but this feels like reasonable use of the service. One participant explained, “Once or twice I took an extra one [tampon] because I was working late. CVS was closed and I was out at home. But I would never abuse it because I like knowing it’s there.” I don’t want to design against this type of behavior. People may take a few extra now and then based on personal circumstance, but they certainly aren’t depleting the supply for others.

While I cannot disprove the existence of the occasional tampon squirrel, I can definitively say that the risks of excessive withdrawal pale in comparison to the draconian drawbacks to the paid version. Designing overly prohibitive features to prevent someone from taking multiples is insignificant to overall costs at scale. And more significantly, it’s contrary to the spirit of period product accessibility.

Estimating Period Product Usage

Predicting behavior around a new free, public good comes with a certain degree of uncertainty. There will be an adjustment period, as people get over the initial surprise and develop new habits. If period products become universally accessible in public restrooms, menstruating people may stop bringing products with them altogether. But that is a huge habit adjustment and based on my research findings, most menstruators would still prefer to carry their specific brands or products. Dispensers are only used if their period came unexpectedly, if they didn’t have time to go to the store, or simply forgot, etc. Based on that finding, these numbers assume people take 1-2 products daily, instead of the 3-5 products needed for an entire day.

Daily Period Product Usage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Foot Traffic</th>
<th>Number of Tampons Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low dwell time</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High dwell time</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here’s a breakdown of that estimate:

- 17.3%: Based on age and average cycle lengths, that is the approximate percentage of women and trans-male individuals menstruating for the US population at large. This percentage would obviously be higher at universities and schools whose population skew young.
- 93%: According to my research, this is the percentage of menstruators (n=177) who do not have a pad or tampon when they need one at least once a month.

Dwell Time

Foot traffic is important, but dwell time is also significant. When someone enters a location, how long do they stay there? Offices and school libraries, for example, have very high dwell times. Since people stay longer, they are more likely need period products and less likely to wait and “just deal with it at home.”

For my experiments in the 2nd floor RISD ID building, my estimate came out to (17.3%)(0.173)(0.93) = 3.5 tampons needed for an entire day.

For my experiments on the 2nd floor RISD ID building, my estimate came out to (100)(.173)(.93) = 16 tampons needed for an entire day.
WRAPPING UP

Final reflections on process and moving forward

Breaking from the faux-magazine tone of the rest of this book, I want to extend sincere gratitude to all who have offered me help, wisdom, time, and candor throughout this thesis process.

Special thanks to my advising team, Charlie Cannon, Hannah Carlson, and Chris Bobel, the activists and authors who have inspired me, my family and friends who have supported this obsession, and RISD faculty, especially Mark Johnston, Tom Weis, and Ayako Takase who patiently handled my moments of dramatic doubt over actually being able to prototype the dispenser in my head. This has been a labor of love and you have all helped me through it!

Becoming a person who asks people about their periods has made me a lightning rod for interesting anecdotes and instant bonding with strangers. I was initially hesitant to make design for menstruation the cornerstone of my grad school experience. It meant that every job interview, every conversation with a mentor, every harmless inquiry on my thesis from an acquaintance was going to be about menstruation. But the completely uncontroversial response to this project has given me so much hope. I consistently underestimated my non-menstruating collaborators’ willingness to leap past initial discomfort to become great thought partners.

Upon graduation, I hope to develop this idea into a real product. The movement for period product access in public restrooms is here. I hope to meet that movement with a dispenser that will enable access to period products at scale.

If you take anything away from this project, I hope it is this: it is not arbitrary that certain bodies, needs, and labor are ignored by design for public use. Designers interested in shaping a more inclusive world must constantly question the sexist, racist, classist, ableist assumptions embedded in the built environment. This project is one small challenge to the public restroom, but I hope it serves as the basis for a career grappling with issues of equity and scale in design for public use.

Thank you for your time!

BOOK REVIEW

List of images and works cited

Works Cited


18. Respondents were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling through online social networks. A limitation to this data is that all respondents were cisgender women with at least some college education. A more economically diverse sampling, including trans men would yield different results.


List of Illustrations

All images not included on this list are property of Katie Smiley.

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