

# Sanitary Conveniences and the Retreat of the Frontier: Vancouver, 1886-1926

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As a Canadian Pacific Railway boom town superimposed on the sawmill village of Granville, Vancouver was born with characteristics of both urban and frontier societies. Some early residents were fresh off the train from eastern metropolitan centres; others were habituated to life at the edge of settlement. For example, the first mayor had arrived from Winnipeg by way of San Francisco only a few months before his election (1886), but the first city council also included a carpenter who had been in the Burrard Inlet area intermittently since 1862. Within three years, Vancouver displayed material attributes of a pleasant and progressive city: initial segments of sewerage and water works, electric street lighting, tree-planted boulevards, and a park system; in 1890, it inaugurated one of Canada's first electric street railways. On the other hand, its disproportionately male population in those years (1891 census: 65 per cent) gave it a frontier flavour to which an abundance of saloons and brothels contributed, along with the comparatively unrefined toilet behaviour which concerns us here. This essay traces the provision of non-residential toilet facilities in Vancouver as indicative of the gradual retreat of frontier behaviour there. The period covered is from the foundation of the city in 1886 up to 1926, by which time frontier toilet behaviour was clearly no longer generally acceptable.<sup>1</sup>

#### Abbreviations used in notes:

<i>AnnRpt</i>	Vancouver, <i>Annual Report</i>
Clerk	VCA, RG 2 A. 1 (Vancouver, Office of City Clerk, Inward Correspondence)
Council	VCA, Vancouver, City Council, Minutes
HD <i>AnnRpt</i>	Vancouver Health Department, <i>Annual Report</i>
TLC	VCA, Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council, Minutes
VCA	Vancouver City Archives

<sup>1</sup> Council, 1 Oct. 1888, 16 Sep. 1889; *Census of Canada, 1891*, v. 1, 116; Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: an Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & National Museum of Man, 1980), esp. 12, 16, 36, 38, 39, 43, 49; Margaret W. Andrews, "The Best Advertisement a City Can Have: Public Health Services in Vancouver, 1886-1888," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, v. 12, no. 3 (Feb. 1984),

The doctrine that urination and defecation are to be performed in private and in connection with an organized disposal system arguably results from industrialized society's need for order and discipline;<sup>2</sup> certainly the crowding that occurred at the time of the Industrial Revolution brought an increase in the importance of toilet behaviour. General acceptance of toilet discipline is, consistently with the hypothetical linkage to industrialization, recent in at least some parts of industrialized society. Specifically, urination in public had been prevalent in the eighteenth century and continued some decades into the nineteenth in the first nation to industrialize. Byron is reported to have found a hotel hall "to be a less inclement place than an uncovered yard,"<sup>3</sup> and early trains in England allowed passengers to alight so that men could "salute the sunrise, as decorously as they might, at the ends of platforms, while women stood in earnest conversation here and there, their long skirts providing cover."<sup>4</sup> Lower-class English people urinated without privacy even late in the century.<sup>5</sup>

This scene changed with the appearance of public toilets, the availability and character of which is an index of civic commitment to toilet discipline. Iron-sided urinals were provided in London soon after the Public Health Act of 1848 allowed municipal authorities to build public conveniences. It indicates a commitment to privacy that contemporaries considered the noisome London urinals necessary. More attractive public toilets for both men and women, supervised by attendants and providing lavatory as well as toilet facilities, began to appear in the 1850s. Fourteen per cent of visitors paid the small fee charged to use the ones installed at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. Victorian prudery (another expres-

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19-27; Norbert MacDonald, *Distant Neighbors: a Comparative History of Seattle and Vancouver* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Neil McKendrick, "Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline," *Historical Journal*, v. 4, no. 1 (1961), 30-55; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964) and his "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (Dec. 1967), 56-97; Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: a Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), ch. 5; Richard Schoenwald, "Training Urban Man: a Hypothesis about the Sanitary Movement," in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), v. 2, 669-92.

<sup>3</sup> *For Your Convenience: a Learned Dialogue, Instructive to All Londoners & London Visitors, Overheard in the Thélème Club and Taken Down Verbatim by Paul Pry* [pseud.], (London: Routledge & Sons, 1937), 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> John Pudney, *The Smallest Room* (London: Michael Joseph, 1954), 75.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *The English: a Social History, 1066-1945* (London: Grafton, 1987), 591, 634.

sion of a commitment to privacy) inhibited the spread of public toilets to some extent: George Jennings, the installer of the Crystal Palace facilities, employed the euphemism “halting station” even while castigating opponents for “false delicacy,” and there was resistance to construction of facilities for women. Hasluck’s *Sanitary Conveniences and Drainage* summarizes for England in 1906: “Prior to the last fifteen or twenty years, conveniences were constructed above ground, and as it was necessary for their purpose that they should be put in the most frequented places, attention was generally called to them by their extreme ugliness. During the last fifteen or sixteen years, however, very large numbers of underground conveniences have been constructed, nearly every municipal authority having four or five or more within its boundaries, and, in many cases, provision has been made for the female sex.”<sup>6</sup>

There is unfortunately no coherent historical presentation of the emergence of public toilets in any extensive part of the industrializing world.<sup>7</sup> May N. Stone indicates that domestic toilet arrangements in the late-nineteenth-century United States followed English precedents and that English fixtures were imported,<sup>8</sup> and it may be that implementation of public toilets in the United States also followed English example. Anecdotes from the small popular literature on this subject can be indicative; we may, for example, infer that public toilets were to be found in eastern U.S. cities by 1930 from a reaction to New York in the 1920s: “lamentable lack of public conveniences; . . . and rather than see a few very splendid edifices, of imitation marble and alabaster, . . . I would prefer to see the money spent upon cheap and efficient places of great number and frequency in our streets to serve our needs promptly rather than to crush and

<sup>6</sup> United Kingdom, *Statutes*, 11-12 Victoria (1848), c. 63, par. 57; Paul N. Hasluck, ed., *Sanitary Conveniences and Drainage* (London: Cassell, 1906), ch. 8; Reginald Reynolds, *Cleanliness and Godliness* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943), 159; Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 200-01. The quotation is from Hasluck, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> No such presentation was found as a result of searching *Dissertation Abstracts International*, sec. A (*Humanities and Social Sciences*), 1861-May 1989; “LCMARC” and “REMARC” databases on Library of Congress Holdings (Dialog Information Services Files 421-26); *International Index: A Guide to Periodical Literature in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1940-1965; *Social Sciences and Humanities Index*, 1965-1973; *Humanities Index*, 1974-1989; *Historical Abstracts*, 1965-1979; *America: History and Life*, 1964-1988. Suitable index headings or search words varied over time and from index to index; I came to consider “public comfort station,” “toilet,” “sanitary convenience,” and “sanitary accommodation” best for manual searches, “public comfort station,” “toilet” and “history” together, “sanitary convenience,” and “sanitary accommodation” for computer searches.

<sup>8</sup> May N. Stone, “The Plumbing Paradox: American Attitudes toward Late Nineteenth-Century Domestic Sanitary Arrangements,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, v. 14, no. 3 (Fall 1979), 284, 286.

dominate our inadequacy with their affluence and magnificence."<sup>9</sup> Municipal works records would doubtless yield a reasonably clear outline, but they have not been studied for this purpose. With respect to Canada, there are no relevant studies.

In Vancouver, the frontier practice of unfettered response to calls of nature prevailed without public objection for a decade after municipal incorporation. Although the first public health bylaw (March 1887) included a section requiring that "[e]very dwelling-house, hotel, saloon, boarding house, store, shop, foundry, factory, or manufactory . . . have connected therewith a privy or privies," that section was quickly repealed (November 1887).<sup>10</sup> Well into the 1890s, aldermen were concerned with more annoying remnants of frontier life, such as camps on the foreshore and free-ranging horses and cows; when they turned their attention to sanitation, they focused on grossly filthy premises such as the shacks built on stilts over the foreshore on Dupont Street, whose occupants dumped refuse of all sorts to decompose on the mud below. Ordinary residences were also likely to be smelly and unsightly: offensive wells, pools of stagnant water, and deposits of garbage were included as subjects of inquiry in an 1893 house-to-house sanitation canvass.<sup>11</sup> The first complaints to the city council about toilet behaviour were two received in the summer of 1896. One of these came from a Cordova Street clothier who objected to the practice of using his storefront as a public urinal. (The sanitary condition of hotel and saloon urinals of the time makes a preference for storefronts understandable.)<sup>12</sup>

In 1898 (Vancouver's population having reached about 21,000) the city council began to work for the ready availability of convenient and moderately attractive toilets, a significant encouragement for the retreat of frontier toilet behaviour. In the following years, the council established increasingly stringent maintenance standards for non-residential toilets, authorized municipal public toilets, and considered requiring all businesses to provide toilets for employees (ultimately resigning this to provincial jurisdiction). Proposals on these issues were not presented or considered as a co-ordinated campaign; the more or less consistent change which occurred merely reflects the consistent aim of the city government to bring

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Vancouver, Bylaw 7, sec. 43 (quotation) ; Bylaw 50.

<sup>11</sup> Council, 20 Jun. 1892, 13 Mar. 1893, 20 Mar. 1893, 30 Oct. 1893, 3 Feb. 1896, 21 Sep. 1896, 22 Mar. 1897, 25 Jul. 1898, 29 Aug. 1899, 25 Sep. 1899.

<sup>12</sup> Council, 15 Jun. 1896, 17 Aug. 1896, 14 Mar. 1898, 12 Apr. 1898.

and keep Vancouver up to a perceived standard of health and cleanliness for cities in industrialized society.

The vocabulary used in Vancouver municipal records to refer to toilet facilities also illustrates the retreat of frontier attitudes. Although "closet," "water closet," "toilet," and "urinal" were used throughout the period under study to refer to plumbing fixtures, designations for the building or chamber housing such fixtures shifted from the forthright and male-oriented to the euphemistic and sexually neutral. In the late 1890s "urinal" occurred four times as often in the minutes of the city council as "lavatory," "water closet," and "sanitary convenience" combined, and "urinal" continued to appear in letters and petitions from the public and in committee reports through 1909.<sup>13</sup> The use of "sanitary convenience" increased in the early years of the twentieth century, and this, along with the slightly less explicit "public convenience" and simply "convenience," were the preferred terms in the second decade of the century. The equally veiled "comfort station" came into use in the early 1920s.<sup>14</sup> The fading of "urinal" in favour of "sanitary convenience" coincided with acknowledgement of the need for public toilet facilities for women. The sexually neutral terms already in use, "water closet" and "toilet," were deemed too frank where women were concerned.<sup>15</sup>

### *Standards of Maintenance*

Bylaws establishing the most basic maintenance standards for toilets were passed in the city's first decade. Privies were required to be cleaned out at least once a week, and badly neglected ones could be cleaned or filled in by the city at the expense of the owner or occupant. Water closets were required to be ventilated to outside air, and the city was empowered to make sewer connections at owner's expense and to enter premises to inspect plumbing. Along with city actions against nuisances, such regulations as these show frontier attitudes being replaced by more urban expectations well before the city council began to consider any specifically non-residential toilet issues.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Council, 5 Oct. 1908, 2 Aug. 1909, 16 Aug. 1909, 20 Dec. 1909.

<sup>14</sup> Council, 10 Oct. 1921, 14 Aug. 1922. Also see *The Daily Province*, 23 Aug. 1923, 10.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of the language of the toilet, see Pudney, ch. 2; Wright, 118; Alexander Kira, *The Bathroom: Criteria for Design*, Cornell University Center for Housing and Environmental Studies Research Report No. 7 (Ithaca, NY, [1966]), 54; Muriel E. Newton-White, *Backhouses of the North* (Cobalt, Ont.: Highway Book Shop, 1972), 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Vancouver, Bylaw 61, sec. 71c; Bylaw 90, secs. 14g, 14h; Bylaw 131, secs. 40, 48; Bylaw 175, sec. 49; Bylaw 211, sec. 4; Bylaw 245, sec. 58; Council, 8 Aug. 1892, 24 Dec. 1894, 31 Dec. 1894, 9 Sep. 1895.

The standards in place were, however, ineffective as applied to non-residential toilets, which remained unattractive and unsanitary into the 1910s. Municipal public toilets were badly lit; the board of works (a city council subcommittee) considered installing electric lights in 1899, but decided to take no action when they found that the cost would be \$15 per year each. The Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council called the city council's attention to the unsanitary conditions of toilets in hotels and saloons in 1904, and to the unsanitary condition and poor lighting of public facilities in 1912. In 1908, a visitor from Toronto wrote, "[t]hat urinal in the lane just north of the chief Post Office is really a standing disgrace to your fair city." Responding to a complaint from the proprietor of a nearby business, the city engineer confirmed the poor condition of that urinal, and the city medical health officer commented in his annual report for 1910 on the unpleasant consequences of frequent spitting in the city's sanitary conveniences.<sup>17</sup>

Sometime around 1910, the condition of public toilets began to improve. Electric lights were installed in municipal public toilets commencing in that year, and complaints of unsanitary conditions in public toilets, common in city council minutes of the 1900s, became much less frequent in the 1910s. A more disciplined behaviour on the part of users is likely an important cause of the improvement. In his 1911 annual report, the city plumbing inspector suggested that a majority of residents had internalized urban sanitary standards when he spoke of "the growth of a wholesale desire for domestic and personal cleanliness, which is the first condition for physical and moral well-being, and without which the most expensive appliances, or even the most stringent health laws, are practically valueless." It is consistent with such a view of public attitudes that the city was becoming more exacting in its enforcement of bylaws concerning toilets. The health department's annual report for 1912 shows an increase in the sanitary inspectorate and gives the impression of assiduous detection and correction of defective and deficient plumbing in office buildings, saloons, and restaurants. Expense for maintenance of municipal public toilets had reached \$9,000 by 1925, likewise suggesting the acceptance of fairly rigorous standards.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Council, 5 Sep. 1899, 19 Sep. 1899, 16 Aug. 1909; TLC, 5 May 1904, 12 Apr. 1912; Clerk, v. 27, file "Sanitary Conveniences 1908," W. J. Stevens to Mayor, 29 Sep. 1908 (quotation); *HDAnnRpt*, 1910, no pagination.

<sup>18</sup> Council, 20 Dec. 1909; *HDAnnRpt*, 1911, 2, 14 (quotation); 1912, 14, 15, 17, 29; *AnnRpt*, 1925, 43.

*Municipal Public Toilets*

The first step taken toward the ready availability of non-residential toilets was to provide them at city expense. The 1898 city council approved construction of a public water closet for the city market shed and five urinals on alleys in the central part of town. Several other useful urinals were constructed on alleys in the next decade, dotting the area approximately bounded by the waterfront, Granville Street, Hastings Street, and what is now Main Street. Public buildings tended to be well served: one urinal was behind the main post office and another in the alley between the city hall and the Carnegie Library.<sup>19</sup>

The cost of construction of the first municipal public toilets was low enough to be included in the annual operating budgets of the board of works, the board of health (another city council subcommittee), and the parks board, but aldermen came to see more elaborate structures as desirable for their thriving metropolis, and costs escalated. Whereas the five urinals placed in downtown lanes in 1898 cost about \$100 each, two conveniences for men constructed in 1910 cost \$1,750 each (in 1922 dollars, about \$200 and \$2,700 respectively).<sup>20</sup> Borrowing to fund toilet construction seemed a reasonable course. The city council obtained a charter amendment from the provincial government to allow passage of bylaws for that purpose and placed a money bylaw for \$55,000 for construction of sanitary conveniences before the electors in January 1913. That bylaw was approved, as was one for \$50,000 submitted to voters in December 1922. The elaborateness of the structures continued to increase; one built in the early 1920s cost about \$24,000.<sup>21</sup>

Until the early 1910s, municipal public toilets were provided in the crowded and busy part of the city for men only. Theirs was the need that

<sup>19</sup> Council, 28 Feb. 1898, 18 Jul. 1898; *AnnRpt*, 1898, 10. It is difficult to determine the exact number and location of urinals constructed. City council minutes show authorization of construction which did not take place, and the city's annual financial statements make no mention of expenditure for urinals which clearly were constructed. It is probable that seven or eight had been built by the end of 1908. For their locations, proposed and actual, see Council, 18 Jul. 1898, 18 Feb. 1907, 14 Dec. 1908; Clerk, v. 27, file "Sanitary Conveniences 1908," W. J. Stevens to Mayor, 29 Sep. 1908; *idem*, W. A. Brown to Health Committee, 20 Aug. 1908; Clerk, v. 26, file "Health Petitions and Communications Dealt with," F. T. Underhill to Health Committee, 3 Nov. 1908.

<sup>20</sup> *AnnRpt*, 1898, 10; Council, 6 Jun. 1910. My calculation of 1922 dollars is based on the wholesale price index in *Historical Statistics of Canada*, ed. M. C. Urquhart and K. A. H. Buckley (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 291.

<sup>21</sup> Council, 22 Nov. 1910; British Columbia, *Statutes* (1911), c. 75, sec. 5; *The Daily Province*, 25 Nov. 1912, 14; 26 Nov. 1912, 3; Vancouver, Bylaw 1006, Bylaw 1563; *AnnRpt*, 1922, 75; 1923, 77.

aldermen perceived and shared. Letters to the city council requesting public toilet facilities asked for “urinals” through the first decade of the twentieth century. The 1908 visitor from Toronto described above as pained by Vancouver’s comparatively primitive sanitary facilities pointed out “the great need of providing several modern urinals for public use,” considering them “an absolute necessity.” The Rev. Daniel Spencer, superintendent of the Local Option League (a temperance organization), petitioned the city council in 1909 for public urinals and public drinking fountains, seemingly oblivious to the natural consequences of use of the latter by women.<sup>22</sup>

Women’s needs for municipal toilets were considered before 1910 in in connection with beachside facilities. In 1903, tenders were called for plumbing at English Bay for six water closets for women along with four water closets and four urinals for men. Although expenditure for them is not shown explicitly in the city’s annual financial report, it is clear that toilet facilities were present at English Bay Beach in 1904. By 1908, those facilities needed either augmentation or replacement: the parks board, “owing to immediate need,” resolved “that the Board of Health be asked to have Public Conveniences for men and women be placed at either end of Bathing House at 1st Beach English Bay.” In the event, only facilities for men were constructed; women had to await the building of a new bath-house the following year.<sup>23</sup>

New notions were apparent after 1910, with calls for toilets for both sexes coming from within the municipal government and from the general public. In his annual report for 1911, the medical health officer wrote, “Ordinary decency and comfort appeal strongly for the early installment of the double conveniences,” and in the following year the city council health committee urged the construction of sanitary conveniences for both sexes. In 1911 and again in 1912, the Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council wrote to the city council asking for public conveniences for both sexes, and in 1912 a male CPR employee wrote with a similar request.<sup>24</sup> This change of policy and opinion, like the first-place vote received by a woman in the 1912 school board elections and the municipal

<sup>22</sup> Clerk, v. 27, file “Sanitary Conveniences 1908,” W. J. Stevens to Mayor, 29 Sep. 1908 (quotation); Council, 2 Aug. 1909.

<sup>23</sup> Council, 8 Jun. 1903, 27 Dec. 1904, 3 Jun. 1908, 15 Jun. 1908; Clerk, v. 27, file “Sanitary Conveniences 1908,” Secretary of Board of Park Commissioners to Chairman of Health Committee, 13 May 1908 (quotation); *AnnRpt*, 1908, 20.

<sup>24</sup> TLC, 2 Mar. 1911, 18 Apr. 1912; *HDAnnRpt*, 1911, 6 (quotation); Council, 4 Nov. 1912, 18 Nov. 1912.



enfranchisement of married female property-holders in the same year,<sup>25</sup> indicate a growing expectation that women would have a normal role in life outside the home.

With women's need for public toilets widely recognized and \$55,000 for construction authorized by the money bylaw of 1913, the way seemed clear for double sanitary conveniences elsewhere than on the beaches. The medical health officer, the health committee, and the public were keen to have construction undertaken, and architectural plans were prepared. However, the depression of 1913 and World War I intervened, reducing the city population from 118,000 in 1913 to 97,000 in 1916. Fiscal caution prevailed, and the city council continued to determine against construction of sanitary conveniences until 1920, when the population again reached the 1913 level.<sup>26</sup> Except for approximately \$4,400 spent in 1913, the \$55,000 authorization remained unused until 1921, and it was the fall of 1922 before any new conveniences were opened.<sup>27</sup> The persistent excess of males in the population (characteristic of the frontier) probably contributed to the delay between attitudinal change and actual provision. There were 188 men per 100 women in Vancouver in 1891, 145 and 150 in 1901 and 1911 respectively; the imbalance had diminished to 113 men per 100 women by 1921.<sup>28</sup>

Vancouver women did not campaign for public toilet facilities for their sex before 1921, even though women's organizations did lobby the city council regarding a number of other concerns. They lobbied for active roles in government — an advisory board of women for the municipal health committee and appointment of women to the health inspectorate and the city library board —, and they lobbied for social betterment programmes popular with women, such as temperance, vice prevention, and child welfare. Women were apparently unwilling to make their bodily functions a public issue until the new standards of womanly behaviour engendered by the war began to be accepted. In 1921, the Women's New

<sup>25</sup> Roy, 80.

<sup>26</sup> *HDAnnRpt*, 1913, 6; Council, 6 Oct. 1913, 26 Jan. 1914, 9 Feb. 1914, 15 Jun. 1914, 10 Sep. 1917, 4 Oct. 1917, 22 Oct. 1917, 28 Jan. 1918, 26 Jan. 1920, 9 Feb. 1920, 3 May 1920; TLC, 18 Dec. 1919. Population figures are for mid-year and are calculated from data in *AnnRpt*, 1922, 68-69.

<sup>27</sup> *AnnRpt*, 1913, 10; 1914, 9; 1915, 9; 1916, 9; 1917, 9; 1918, 8; 1919, 8; 1920, 8; 1921, 10; 1922, 75; 1923, 77. It is not clear what was built with the \$4,364.94 spent from Bylaw 1006 in 1913 — most likely a toilet for men at the north end of Howe Street, near the harbour. (Council, 10 March 1913.) Its location and low cost compared to the double toilets of the early 1920s support the conclusion that it was for men only.

<sup>28</sup> *Census of Canada*, 1921, v. 1, 340.

Era League (formed from women's suffrage organizations after their successful fight for the vote) asked the city council for "erection of Public Comfort Stations for women and children."<sup>29</sup> Although the emergence of a taste for forthrightness in Vancouver women's lobbying efforts was followed in 1922 by renewed provision of municipal public toilets — now for both sexes as a matter of course — the end of economic hard times and the declining disparity of the sexes in the population were the major causes of the change in policy. Women's political activities in the preceding decades did, however, undoubtedly contribute to the attitudinal change which led to provision of public toilets for them.

### *Regulation of Employers*

Soon after the first municipal public toilets were installed, the city council began a complementary effort to have businesses provide toilets for employees, focusing originally on construction firms, which had many employees working outdoors exposed to public view. In March 1900, the city health inspector suggested to the board of works that toilets should be provided on construction sites, and the full city council approved the board's recommendation that builders be notified to install earth closets for the use of workmen employed in the erection of large buildings. In May 1904, the Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council submitted a resolution to "draw the attention of the City Council to the necessity of passing a Bylaw compelling contractors and employers generally to provide proper closets, etc for the convenience of employees." The health committee seems to have been willing to consider a blanket requirement at that time, for they initiated a toilet survey of all public buildings (including all factories and office buildings) and asked the city solicitor to determine what power the city had to require that toilets be provided by owners of business buildings.<sup>30</sup>

However, when the city solicitor responded later in 1904 that passage of a bylaw requiring toilet facilities in public buildings was within its authority, the council reacted by instructing the solicitor and the medical health officer to prepare a resolution on the matter to present to the provincial government.<sup>31</sup> This temporization continued the half-hearted policy represented by the 1900 council's overlooking the needs of men

<sup>29</sup> Council, 12 Jan. 1891, 1 Feb. 1892, 8 Nov. 1909, 4 Jun. 1912, 1 Feb. 1915, 31 July 1916, 5 Nov. 1916, 29 Jun. 1920, 10 Oct. 1921 (quotation).

<sup>30</sup> Council, 13 March 1900, 9 May 1904, 10 Oct. 1904, 24 Oct. 1904; TLC, 5 May 1904 (quotation); British Columbia, *Revised Statutes* (1911), c. 87, sec. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Council, 7 Nov. 1904.

working on small construction projects. Although aldermen favoured sanitary order as an attractor of skilled labour and capital, they were for the most part small businessmen<sup>32</sup> and undoubtedly aware that many businessmen would likely resent both the cost of toilet construction and the city's meddling in what they saw as internal business matters.

As the aldermen might well have foreseen, their buck-passing made no contribution to the availability of non-residential toilets. Provincial legislators, who were no more attracted to business resentment than the aldermen, proved reluctant leaders of sanitary reform. No provincial legislation addressed the question until 1908, when a factory act was passed requiring provision of "privies, earth or water closets, and urinals." Even then, local enforcement of provincial legislation was problematical. When the city council asked the police commissioners in 1910 to enforce the provincial Shopkeepers Act, which required retail and wholesale shops to provide clean, well ventilated toilets for their employees of both sexes, the commissioners replied that they had no jurisdiction.<sup>33</sup>

In default of broadly effective provincial legislation, the 1907 Vancouver city council considered anew requiring businesses to provide toilets. In July, the health committee recommended preparation of bylaws on scavenging, the city old people's home, and "providing closet accommodation for both sexes in public buildings." The city council adopted the report on 8 July and at the same meeting began implementation of its recommendations by giving all three readings to bylaw 565, regulating management of the old people's home. On 22 July, all three readings were given to bylaw 566, on provision of containers for garbage. A bylaw requiring toilets in public buildings was not undertaken. Instead, first reading was given at the 22 July meeting to bylaw 576, largely devoted to vehicular traffic and obstruction of roads and sidewalks, but also providing (in section 30) that "[i]t shall be unlawful for any person . . . to make any indecent exposure of his person or to expose his private parts to public

<sup>32</sup> Robert A. J. McDonald, "The Business Elite and Municipal Politics in Vancouver, 1886-1914," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, v. 11, no. 3 (Feb. 1983), 1-14.

<sup>33</sup> British Columbia, *Statutes*, (1900), c. 34, sec. 26; (1908), c. 15, sec. 24 (quotation); Council, 23 May 1910, 6 June 1910. For comparison, the British Public Health Act of 1848 gave local authorities power to ensure that factories employing both sexes and more than twenty people at one time would provide "a sufficient Number of Waterclosets or Privies for the separate Use of each Sex" (United Kingdom, *Statutes*, 11-12 Victoria [1848], c. 63, par. 52); in the United States, thirteen states had legislation requiring toilets in factories in 1890 and forty-three did in 1920 (George Martin Kober, "History of Industrial Hygiene and Its Effects on Public Health" in *A Half-Century of Public Health*, ed. Mazyck Porcher Ravenel [1921, rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1970], 380-81).

view. . . .” This provision would put some pressure on businesses to provide toilets, but its indirectness indicates continuing hesitancy to impose requirements.

Section 30 of bylaw 576 marked the end of municipal efforts during the period under study to require employers in general to provide toilets for employees. With rising expectations concerning sanitary equipment, the need for such legislation was decreasing. The municipal plumbing inspector reported in 1911 that “demand for more and better sanitary conveniences [is] particularly noticeable. People are no longer satisfied with the meagre equipment which was considered, only a few years ago, to be sufficient for a residence or apartment block, and conveniences which were thought to be luxurious are now regarded as ordinary necessities.” Whereas a total of 2,809 premises were connected to public sewers prior to 1900, 1,610 were connected in the boom year of 1911 alone.<sup>34</sup> With toilets in vogue, employers were increasingly likely to provide them on their own initiative.

Although they abandoned efforts to require all employers to provide toilets for their employees, Vancouver city councils did from time to time require this of specific groups of employers. Laundries, typically run by the disenfranchised Chinese, were required by a bylaw of 1908 to provide at least two water closets and two urinals for male employees and three water closets for female employees. Restaurants and eating houses were required two years later to supply separate sets of water closets for male and female employees and, in a notable phrase, to maintain them “free from incrustation from fecal matter and urine.” In 1921 a bylaw was passed requiring toilets in all butcher shops.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Visual Appearance of Sanitary Conveniences*

Engineering or architectural drawings for a number of sanitary conveniences proposed for Vancouver have survived.<sup>36</sup> The earliest ones are undated; dated drawings were produced from 1914 through 1926 in the city engineering office. In addition to verifying the sequence of provisions described above, these drawings portray vividly how the sanitary conveniences themselves were used to set a tone for civilized toilet behaviour;

<sup>34</sup> HD*AnnRpt*, 1911, 9, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Vancouver, Bylaw 613, sec. 13; Bylaw 766, secs. 20, 21 (quotation); Bylaw 1466, sec. 6.

<sup>36</sup> The set of drawings and related materials from which figures 2, 3, and 4 are taken, and which is also the subject of all otherwise unsupported references to “plans” herein. I am indebted to Wayne Reese, Chief Draftsman of the Vancouver Engineering Department, for bringing these to my attention and making them available to me. This set has been turned over to VCA.

this motive for municipal efforts to provide non-residential toilets is not readily discernible in city council debate, bylaws, and correspondence from the public.

No plans survive for Vancouver's first batch of public toilets — urinals erected around the turn of the century. According to city council minutes, the plans for those urinals came from England, perhaps along with the structures themselves. They were moveable and not particularly durable; one put in the lane at the rear of City Hall was replaced in 1909, ten years after its original installation.<sup>37</sup>

Plans and specifications relating to some facilities proposed and constructed from 1907 to 1912 do survive. Facilities like that shown in figure 1 were to be constructed of iron sheets perforated in ornate designs and erected upon a concrete slab. Roofs were to be of corrugated iron and wired glass, with decorative ironwork on the roof ridge. The dividers between water-closet cubicles were to be of cast iron and the cubicle doors of wood. The perforations in the siding and the open space left between glass and corrugated iron in the roof provided good ventilation; these structures were clearly not designed to be heated. There were no wash-basins, implications of the germ theory of disease having apparently not yet generally modified toilet rituals in Vancouver.<sup>38</sup>

Among the plans in the surviving collection is a page from the catalogue of Walter Macfarlane and Company of Glasgow showing urinals of perforated iron in styles even more elaborate than that of figure 1. There is also a blueprint by Macfarlane's entitled "Plans of Proposed Underground Convenience for Vancouver" (undated, but most likely from the 1910s) which shows ornamented partitions in the underground section for men and ornamental iron railings and street lamps at street level. The central lamp is multi-tiered, each globe is decorated with two filigree crowns, and elaborately patterned ventilating panels are set into its base. The principal railing posts are also topped with crowns. Such invocation of the highest secular power through decoration was not unusual. Some late Victorian domestic toilets had bowls resting on the backs of lions couchant or in the mouths of royal dolphins,<sup>39</sup> and one can readily imagine nannies urging their small charges to do their duty on their "thrones" as Her Majesty did on hers. A suggestion that Vancouver aldermen would want to make

<sup>37</sup> Council, 27 Jun. 1898, 3 Oct. 1898, 27 Mar. 1899, 25 May 1909.

<sup>38</sup> Clerk, v. 27, file "Sanitary Conveniences, 1908"; v. 28, file "Tenders, 1910," Frank Morgan to Board of Health, 6 May 1910.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, 206-07.

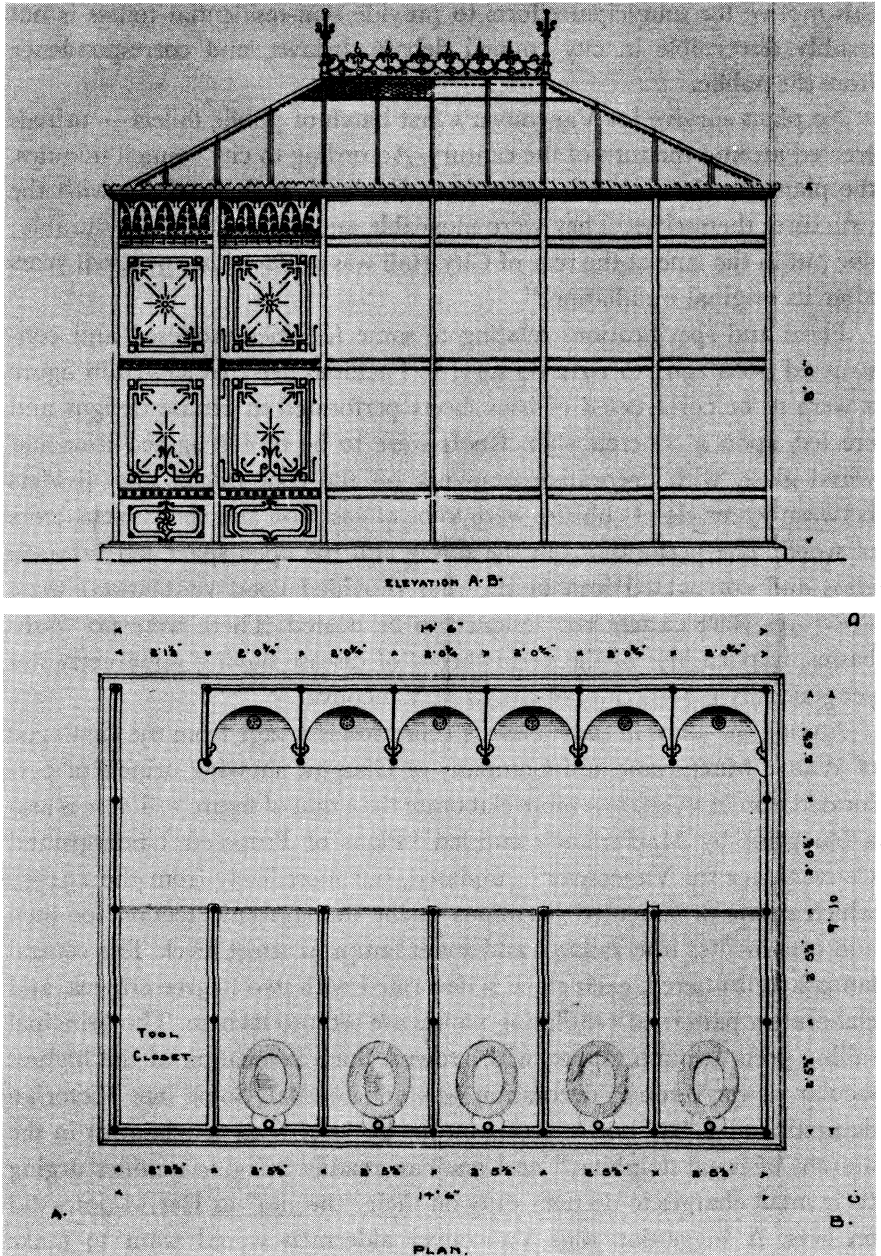


FIGURE 1  
Design for Public Convenience  
(Clerk, v. 27, file "Sanitary Conveniences, 1908")

similar use of royal symbols to lead their townsfolk away from frontier toilet habits is implicit in the Macfarlane proposal.

Vancouver officials did employ symbols of authority to promote up-to-date urban toilet habits, but the symbols they employed were those of new-world wealth and power. The decorative ironwork shown in figure 1, for example, invoked the mansions and government buildings of eastern North America and avoided implications of colonial subordination. Didactic value aside, grandeur of public toilet facilities, or at least an acceptable appearance, was a suitable accompaniment to emergence from back-alley placement into full public view. This did not occur immediately, however; Vancouver aldermen continued to place toilets in out-of-the-way spots for some time after the advent of wrought-iron trimming.

Passage of the 1913 money bylaw permitted more expensive construction, and the inclusion of women in the intended clientele brought sanitary conveniences out of Vancouver's back alleys. In the 1914-1926 period, toilets for the downtown area were designed to be placed underground along major thoroughfares. Designs for less built-up areas, such as the south end of the Granville Street Bridge and the corner of Kingsway and Broadway, featured eye-catching architecture and floral landscaping.

The hesitant progress toward facilities for both sexes is evident in a series of plans prepared in 1914. Plans prepared in June for the south end of the Granville Street Bridge were for a men's facility. July plans for the same site were for both sexes, with inferior accommodation for women: they call for sixteen urinals and six water closets in the men's section and three water closets for women and two for children in the women's section; telephones were to be located in the men's section only.

The 1914 plans for the south end of the Granville Street Bridge show a local idiom being used to express authoritative support for civilized toilet behaviour. The Tudor-revival exterior shown in figure 2 integrates wood, beach pebbles, and brick in a building which included a glass-fronted refreshment area as well as toilet facilities. The same materials are shown in the June plans, which were for an octagonal structure crowned with a cupola and embellished with a flower bed, strongly reminiscent of the Alexandra Park bandstand constructed in 1914 beside English Bay Beach. The materials proposed in these plans, particularly the pebbles set in concrete and the wooden shingles and beams, were derived directly from the local environment, and the Tudor-revival style reflected the tastes of the local moneyed élite. That style was used for a number of homes built between 1911 and 1914 in Shaughnessy Heights, an exclusive new CPR

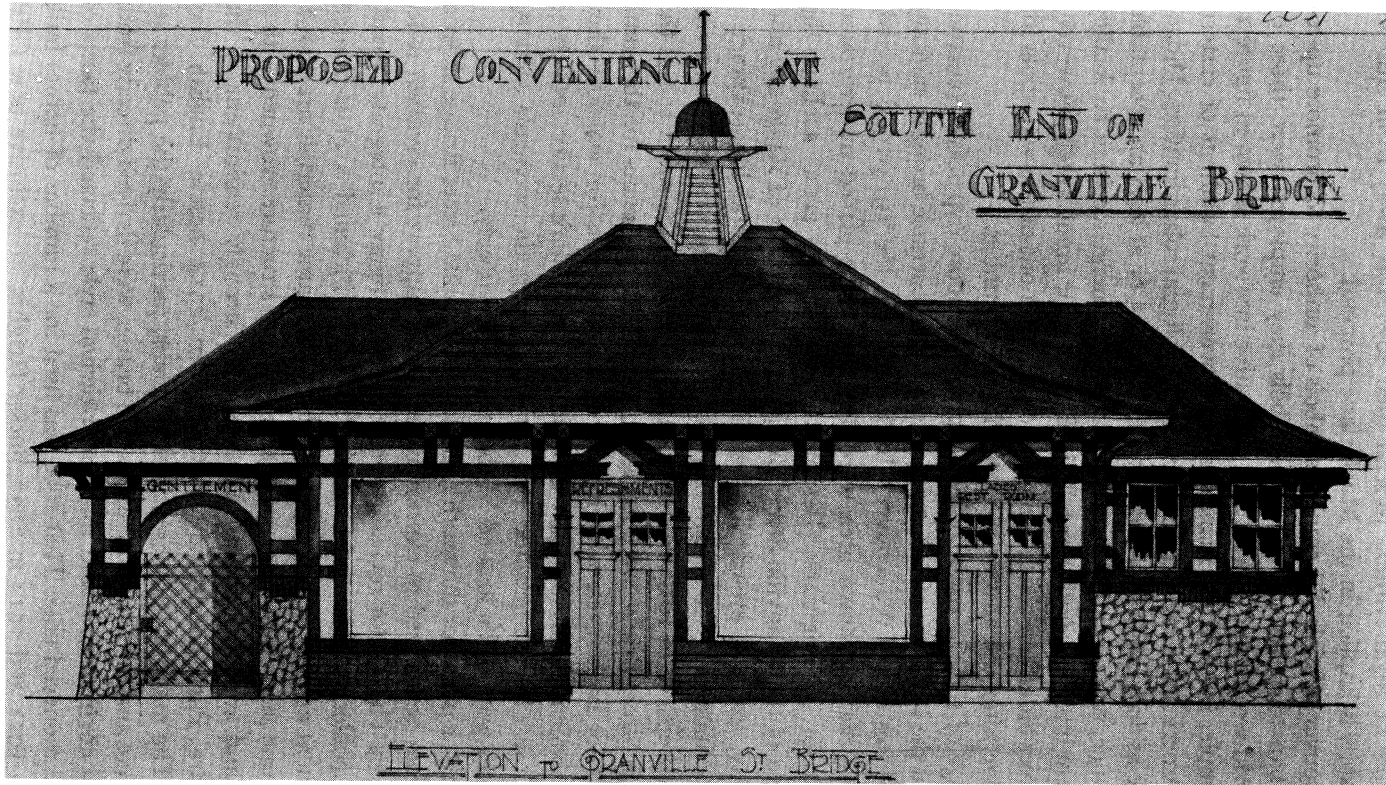


FIGURE 2

Proposed Street-Level Convenience, July 1914



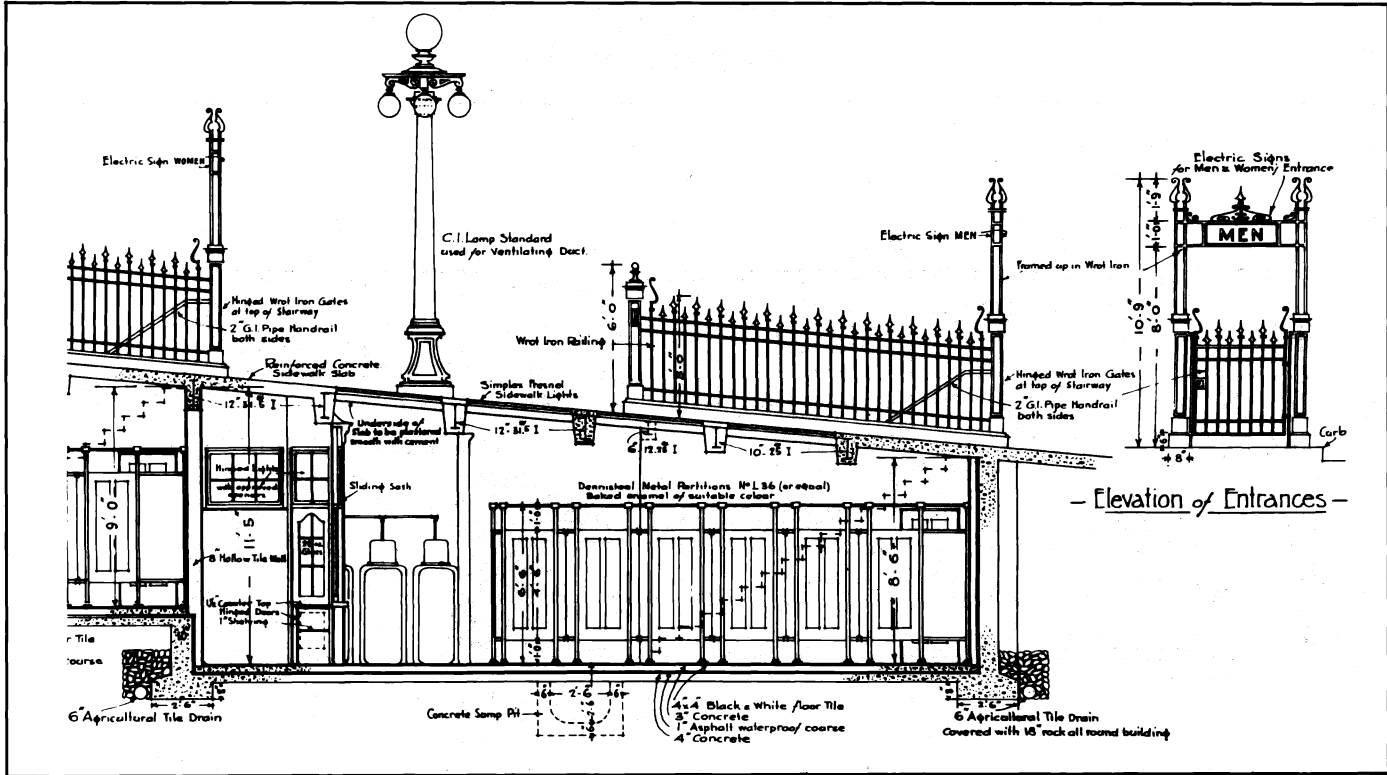


FIGURE 3  
Proposed Underground Convenience, March 1922 (Section, Part)

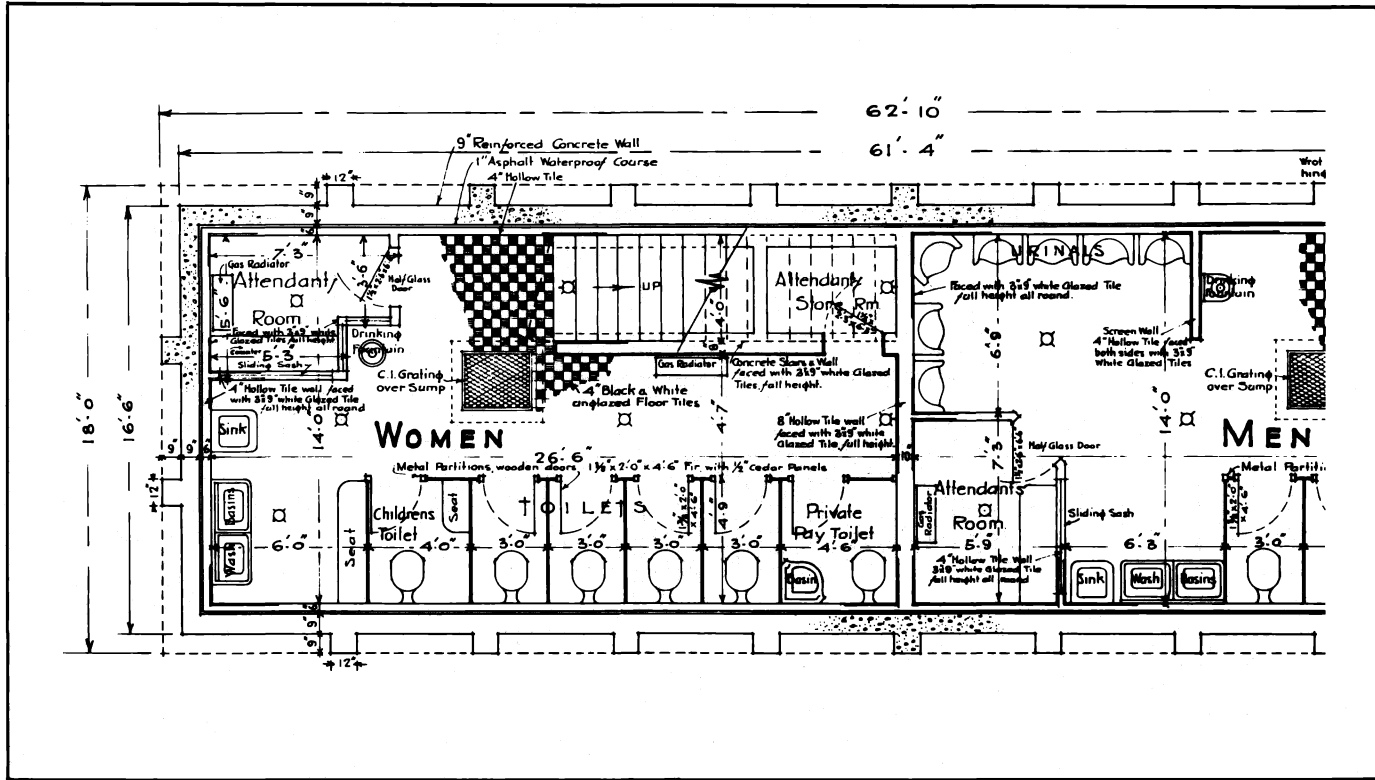


FIGURE 4

Proposed Underground Convenience, March 1922 (Plan, Part)

development approached via the Granville Street Bridge.<sup>40</sup> Plans for downtown underground conveniences continued to use imported authority symbols. The exterior ironwork shown in a 1922 design for Hamilton Street (see figure 3) is strikingly similar to that of the Macfarlane proposal described above.

In contrast with the stark facilities for men built in the 1907-1912 period, the public toilets designed from 1914 through 1926 provided a variety of useful services in comfortable and attractive surroundings. The 1914 plans for the facility for both sexes at the south end of the Granville Street Bridge include a store, telephones, and three shoeshine chairs. The interior of the 1922 design for the Hamilton Street underground facility (see figure 4) was finished in tile — white walls, black and white floor — and was to be heated by gas radiators. Wash-basins and drinking fountains supplemented water closets and urinals. The women's section included a resting place and a toilet exclusively for children; the men's section had match strikers to protect the enamel.<sup>41</sup> Each sex's section was to have a glass-windowed attendant's room and a "Private Pay Toilet" cubicle equipped with both water closet and wash-basin.

The arrangements depicted in figure 4 show that the frontier stage of social development was by and large a thing of the past. The plain interior of the iron-sided toilets for men, with its connotations of a rough, male-centred, egalitarian society, had been replaced by a facility suggesting an affluent, self-indulgent, class-conscious society in which women and children were cosseted. Whereas toilet plans as late as 1914 show particular attention to men's needs and tastes, the plans of the early 1920s emphasize those of women, children, and the affluent.

City council minutes show that toilet attendants were expected to keep the facilities clean, and they could further cater to the fastidious by providing soap and towels through hatches facing the wash-basins (shown in figure 4 as counters with sliding sashes). On the other hand, the extensive use of glass in the walls of the attendants' rooms suggests that they were also intended to discourage crude or disorderly behaviour. Plans dated 1914 and 1926 for public toilets located away from the downtown area do not show attendant's rooms. Remnants of frontier culture were thus apparently seen as particularly persistent in the heart of the metropolis, where seamen, loggers, and other hinterlanders from whom undisciplined

<sup>40</sup> Harold Kalman, *Exploring Vancouver 2* (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1978), 150, 155, 159, 161, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Council, 9 Oct. 1922.

behaviour might have been expected found lodging during their urban sojourns.

### *Summary*

The development of non-residential toilet facilities in Vancouver shows a three-stage retreat of frontier mentality. Before the turn of the century, frontier attitudes and practices were not unusual. People were not particularly fastidious, unpleasant smells were an accepted part of the urban environment, and toilet habits were casual, with saloons and hotels offering toilet facilities of a sort and vacant lots plentiful enough even in the heart of town to provide an alternative.<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence dating earlier than 1896 that residents' sensibilities were offended by men relieving themselves wherever convenient. Public objections to frontier-style toilet behaviour began to appear in the late 1890s, and during the following ten or fifteen years city officials discouraged such behaviour by raising maintenance standards for non-residential toilets, by providing downtown public toilets for men and some beach-side ones for both sexes, by encouraging employers to provide toilets in the workplace, and by legislating against indecent exposure. The municipal public toilets of that period were a mixture of pretentious decoration and austere facilities, and were commonly in an unsanitary condition. From around 1912 on, the frontier mentality was insignificant in mainstream society, although visitations of certain hinterland workers kept it active as a threat to sanitary order; the sanitary condition of public toilets improved, and new facilities constructed during that period provided services for both sexes in surroundings approaching the luxurious.

<sup>42</sup> For vacant lots in the heart of town, see MacDonald, photographs 4 and 5 (following p. 106); also Roy, 47.