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A Visit to the Potty Lab

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By Tripti Lahiri



Quicksand Design Studio

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Product designer Rikta Krishnaswamy gestures to the array of items laid out on a table: a shampoo sachet, a mug, a towel, a bucket, soap, and a sari, among other things.

"Pick up the things you take with you when you go to the bathroom," she tells a man named Suresh.

Suresh picks up a soap dish, explaining, "I won't use someone else's soap. I'll use my own soap."

As he goes into a wooden shower stall, Ms. Krishnaswamy hovers in the doorway, asking, "Do you stand and bathe? Or sit?"

"I can do either," offers Suresh.

"But what do you tend to do?" persists Ms. Krishnaswamy.

Welcome to the Potty Lab.

The exchange, which took place over a recent weekend at the Gurgaon offices of the design firm [Quicksand](#), marked the culmination of months of research on how people in India, where more than half of households don't have their own bathroom, handle the daily necessities of bathing and going to the toilet. All of that is supposed to feed into the design of a series of public facilities, to be built in two cities in the eastern Indian

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state of Orissa once the monsoon is over, as part of an effort known as [Project Samman](#), or Dignity.

As development projects go, this one is pretty hip. It applies techniques like “[design thinking](#)” and anthropological research to figure out how people do stuff. In addition, the project’s effectiveness will be tested along the way, borrowing practices used from drug trials.



Quicksand Design Studio

An abandoned toilet facility in Delhi.

What they’re hoping to come up with is public toilets that get repeat visitors, thus reducing the practice of going outside, all while generating funds that make them more financially self-sustaining than existing public facilities.

Among the many questions Quicksand is trying to answer is whether to provide buckets at the facilities (will people be willing to share a bucket?), whether there should be taps or just showers in the

bathing stalls (so people don’t spend ages in there washing clothes), and whether there should be sinks (in many public facilities, an infrequent supply of water means sinks end up full of rubbish and cobwebs).

And each question leads to lots of discussion — for example, will people who are used to sitting on a stool and bathing by pouring mugs of water on themselves from a bucket switch easily to showers?

They also tried to figure out what people need that they’re not getting now.

“We’ve seen every toilet closes at night,” said Nirat Bhatnagar, who heads Quicksand’s social innovation team. “As a result people start defecating outside.”

Since the money for the actual construction is going to come from the Indian government and the municipalities of Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, in Orissa, all of this has to happen within a fairly tight budget – about the equivalent of \$25,000 for a facility with 10 stalls each for men and women.

Quicksand’s research is being backed by the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#). Meanwhile, [MIT’s Poverty Action Lab](#) is designing a randomized control trial around the toilets.

The trial, explained the Yale University economics professor [Mushfiq Mobarak](#), who is affiliated with the Poverty Lab, will test two different designs – one will have more bells and whistles – to see if that gets more people to use the facilities.

They’ll also test management structures – community-managed versus privately run on contract. In between there will be price testing, such as offering discount vouchers, to see how much behavior changes as a result.

“Whenever there is sharing there will be free-riding and users do not have adequate incentives to share the infrastructure costs,” said Mr. Mobarak. “We’re thinking about how do we introduce some innovations so these can be sustainable over the longer run.”

Presently public facilities in the India charge in the range of one rupee (\$0.02) to use a urinal, two rupees for a toilets stall and three rupees for bathing. At those prices though, it’s difficult for the toilets to generate funds for their own maintenance.

Projects to build good public toilets are challenging anywhere in the world, perhaps especially in India. Previously, [an effort to build upscale public toilets](#) in Delhi markets



Quicksand Design Studio

This is how the toilet facility might look from the outside once it’s built.

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was torpedoed after shopkeepers associations protested that they needed the space for parking for customers. Mr. Mobarak is hopeful that the Poverty Lab's research will shed light on social and cultural issues that shape toilet use.

"In the community-managed places we'll know who comes into leadership positions," said Mr. Mobarak. "If there are religious or caste-based selections to leadership positions, it's possible that gets translated into which groups actually find the toilet usable. You can look at these ethnic cleavages as well."

It will be a while till the results of that research are out though. Mr. Mobarak says his team will collect data on toilet use and financial management for at least three years. They hope to publicize some results by the end of 2013.

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