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PLUNGING THE DEPTH OF THE PLUNGER

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# Table of Content

Introduction........................................................................................................................................3

I. When toilets do not work - The toilet plunger
   1. Approaching the toilet plunger – Design and Function.........................4
   2. Revealing the plunger’s secret – Freud on Sexual Desires.................9

II. Locating the plunger – Observations on the Bathroom
   1. Germs and the new Paradigm of Health........................................10
   2. Dirt- Defecation- Pollution: Waste and the Habit of
      Disposal......................................................................................................12
   3. Shame as a Motor of Civilization.....................................................13
   4. Enforcing moral - Human Feces and Danger.................................15
   5. The bathroom and the elimination of waste.................................16

III. Changes of the Bathroom and the Re-Encoding of the Plunger......17

Reference List.........................................................................................................................20
INTRODUCTION

The toilet plunger is not a typical object of sociological and anthropological research. Being immediately associated with defecation, toilets and dirt, it is not until recently that academics attempt to explore the sphere of excretion from a material perspective by way of including even rather mundane objects into their discourse (Shove 2003).

Material objects form the basis of how filthiness is eliminated in the domestic sphere. Their agency shapes the discourse about hygiene and the way norms of cleanliness are reproduced through the use of these objects. It is furthermore suggested here, that the installation of the sanitary system, including the water closet and the sewage system, not only raised the level of cleanliness in the domestic sphere, but also imposed ideas of hygiene on the individual. Assuming that norms of cleanliness function as an instrument of moral control, the use of material objects reflect cleaning rituals of the body as well as of the domestic sphere. Through coding material objects, whether through their use or through their spatial context, the moral code becomes self-reproduced and internalized. In this regard, the toilet plunger seems to typify the “dark” side of convenience and comfort of the household and the disposal system. Its function of being a device for unclogging toilets and therefore getting in intimate contact with human feces makes this object especially interesting for scrutinizing the relationship of the individual to its body and its behavior in encoded spaces. Having first and foremost being used as a plumbing tool, it became part of the bathroom through its introduction into domestic space. By investigating the symbolic meaning of the toilet and the bathroom sphere, it becomes obvious that cleaning procedures, both of domestic space and body, do not only tend to eliminate dirt, but eliminate the entire human body. Human feces and waste as the material
traces of human existence are seen as a sort of “cultural” pollution of modern society and therefore are marginalized and rendered to an almost invisible existence. Thus, the plunger’s impact reaches beyond its physical appearance and its situation in a sanitary environment. By stopping the disposal of waste and literally inversing it, I consider the plunger a crucial object in the assessment of society’s self-image and its technological progress and civilization.

I. WHEN TOILETS DO NOT WORK – THE TOILET PLUNGER

I.1. Approaching the toilet plunger – Design and Function

Like many objects of everyday life historical sources about the toilet plunger are scarce. The date of its invention as well as the name of its inventor are unknown; patent records do not indicate any exact data, so that one can only speculate about the whereabouts of its first occurrence. How can we shed light on the life of an object given that there are barely any written records in existence? I attempt to follow the archaeological approach that defines style as a historical quality, (Hodder 1990) as well as discussing the changing design of the plunger. Instead of using style and design as interchangeable terms, I suggest to incorporate design into the discourse of style, thereby following Hodder’s argument, who points out that style is more than a simple addition of social functions and utilitarian functions (Hodder 1990, 44). Unlike style, the terminological history of design is related to aesthetics and the discussion of form and function. The concept of design as it emerges in the 20th century does not only refer to art objects and architecture, but it also serves to denote the beautification of functional objects. Norman (1988) criticizes this aesthetic understanding as being simplistic, because it does not take into account the practical aspects of handling tools and machines and, therefore, neglects their functionality.
In the United States there exist at least two varieties of plungers. The first one, the sink plunger (see graphic 1) has a flat rim designed to fit the perimeter of a sink, a bathtub, and shower, or similar opening forming a tight seal. The toilet plunger (see graphic 1) has a flange designed to fit into the bottom of a flush toilet bowl, with the flange entering into the exit pipe, forming a seal. The toilet plunger is a specific adaptation to the flush toilet, which was manufactured first in 1886 by the Beaufort Works in Chelsea, UK (Wikipedia, “flush toilet”, 04/23/2006). However, the red rubber cup plunger is widespread in American and German households and has the
reputation, shared by professionals and non-professionals alike, of being the most effective and reliable.¹

The history of the toilet itself is a history of trial-and-error and it is not until the toilet’s standardization and industrialized production that one single model arose as being the standardized model of choice for a large number of households. One reason why the plunger with its red rubber cup design is still around might be due to the relative stability of toilet design over the last fifty years. Ecological concerns, e.g. excessive use of water, have changed the physical appearance of the cistern but not that of the toilet bowl. Moreover, high costs prevent people from investing in new sanitary facilities, because it would involve an investment in new disposal pipes. It is considered to be too expensive and not worth the effort to install an entire new drainage system, just because of a temporary clogging incident. Unlike the ceramic hardware just described, the purchase of a plunger is quite inexpensive², since it is mass made and does not require any machines or technological devices for its use. The choice of its material is governed by its utility, since the plunger is considered a tool and not an aesthetic object, and its design is shaped by economic and functional demands.

The design of the plunger should reflect its function. The choice of durable materials, like rubber and wood enhances the consumer’s faith in the product and it also enables one to situate a particular plunger in a specific historical time period. It is most likely that the plunger was invented in its modern form between 1850 and 1900, when the use of wood and rubber was a common and popular material in the make up

¹ These results follow a non-representative survey. I interviewed hardware store owners and one professional plumber as well as several Americans and Germans about the kind of plunger they have at home or the plunger they would use. The majority named the red rubber cup plunger.

² Several hardware stores in NYC offer the plunger for about $5.
of tools (Sears, Roebuck & Co, 1969). Indeed, the invention of the plunger is determined on one hand by the first occurrence of the suction cup, which most likely appeared in the mid 1850s and, on the other hand, the invention of synthetic rubber, whose resistance to sunlight, abrasion and extreme temperatures was superior to its predecessors.

This is not the only way, in which the material shapes the design of the plunger; more aspects pertaining to the object’s materiality come to the fore when we see the plunger as it connects with the toilet. The toilet itself is made of porcelain and tends to break under high pressure. Therefore, the shape of the rubber cup is restrained in two ways: firstly, it must fit into the toilet hole and cover it entirely in order to produce a vacuum. And secondly, a cup, which is too big can produce cracks in plumbing fixtures and pipes. The plunger becomes an effective tool only, when the drain is curved, so that clogs can be removed by producing a vacuum. This did not happen before the first toilets with a s-shaped trap were invented (Stone, 297). The crucial point here is that the s-shaped trap and the plunger are mutually dependent: since the shape of the drain slows down the flow of the feces, it is more likely that one will need a plunger. For the sake of keeping odors at minimum, toilets from then on, tended to get clogged more often. When it was scientifically proven that diseases couldn’t be contracted through the inhalation of foul air, the s-trap became a merely hygienic reason, which completed the image of the clean modern bathroom: cleanliness and odorlessness.

With the acceleration of consumption cycles the design of products gained an importance as a selling argument. Within this accelerated cycle, new designs were not introduced as a matter of enhanced functionality, but were a purely collateral additive

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3 Charles Goodyear discovered vulcanization in 1839.
in order to maximize profits (Forty 1986, 6) and trigger and satisfy consumers’ needs. The variety of toilet plungers that can be purchased today is an indicator of the fragmentation of the market (see Annex for examples). Among these offers one can still find the red rubber plunger, which I consider to be part of the first generation of plungers.

Among the “high-tech” plastic plungers, the red rubber plunger comes across as some kind of antiquity, as something “old-fashioned”. It is not only the cheapest of all available plumbing tools, but also omnipresent in our material everyday life. People still tend to buy this plunger despite newer versions being introduced to the market on a regular basis which, allegedly, serve the purpose better and sport a more fashionable look. What is the explanation for that? It is not satisfying to simply state that the plunger belongs to the category of tools and that it is not an object consumers tend to invest money in. Thinking of the amount of do-it-yourselfers who are quarrying in hardware stores, there surely is an interest of hobbyists and homeowners in purchasing ever new inventions for their households. Advertising excessively promotes cleaning products and accessories like toilet seat covers and plunger boxes and in doing so focuses particularly on the bathroom as a space demanding continuous renovation. All this efforts notwithstanding the attempt to successfully introduce ever new plunger models failed.

One reason for this might be the function of the plunger, which is rather limited and does not evolve. All plungers are based on one basic core principle: suction power that unclogs toilets and sinks. By pushing the rubber cup down until it is flattened and then pulling it out again, the toilet plunger causes a vacuum, which sucks the clog upwards. More recent versions of the plunger extend this principle by enhancing the suction power that can be exerted on the cup, so that clogs can be
removed more easily from the drain. Consumer seem to stick to the product they know how to handle, and they might be reluctant in adopting new technologies or to change the product; this is especially true in the area of tools. The second reason might be that the plunger is an object, which is highly influenced by cultural inhibitions. Since the plunger is cheap in price, few consumers are willing to buy pricier plungers. Even if later models may have a better functionality, consumers are no really fond of dealing with the subject of toilet unclogging. The question as to the choice between different plungers does not really arise. Instead, people buy plunger which they know and can easily identify.

However, I will show that the preference for this specific plunger can also be explained through the symbolic quality red rubber cup plunger itself, and I will do so by taking into account ideas of psychoanalysis.

II.2. Revealing the plunger’s secret – Freud on repression of sexual desires

According to Freud’s seminal *A general introduction to psycho-analysis* (1935), humanity’s movement into a civilized society requires the repression of primitive desires. On his view, sexual drives are the strongest of all desires and need to be sublimated in order to be able to serve socially acceptable aims. These repressed drives are buried within the unconscious, yet they continue to play a significant role in our conscious behavior. Principles of repression such as compensation, sublimation or denial are at work in our unconscious whenever sexual desires are involved. Furthermore, Freud establishes a direct connection between dreams and insanity, which I take to be useful for a psychoanalytical approach to the discussion of the plunger.
Repressed sexual instincts do not only become manifest in language and dreams (Strachey 1966, 29pp), but also within symbolic representations of material objects. Speaking about the plunger, I encountered a German vulgar expression, “Gummifotze”\(^4\), emphasizes the idea that the plunger is being perceived as a representation of human genitals. However, the shape of the plunger unifies features of female and male genitals. The wooden stick refers to the penis, whereas the red rubber cup symbolizes the vagina. Its flexible material and its smooth surface make the rubber cup susceptible to both the activity of pushing and squeezing. In fact, the plunger’s flexibility in which features of the female genital are manifested is a crucial element for its functionality. Not only is the symbolic penis penetrating the symbolic vagina, but the very handling of the plunger, i.e. putting the plunger into the bowl of the toilet and attaching it to the hole on the bottom, symbolizes sexual penetration. Thus, moving the durable stick up and down refers to sexual intercourse. Moreover, one might conceive of the rubber cup the nipple of a breast and its movement of the plunger as a sort of sucking motion. Both interpretations thus introduce symbolic meanings, which have sexual connotations. In my opinion, these connotations are one of the reason, why, especially in Germany, the plunger has given rise to a whole culture of jokes.

Through the psychoanalytical approach it becomes clearer that the plunger is able to signify something that can be perceived as being dangerous to societal order. Uncontrolled sexual desires, Triebe, need to be suppressed, so that moral order can be established and maintained. The existence of civilized societies is mainly due to an internalization of behavioral restraints and of desires that the individual needs to undertake in order to conform to society and its rules. Therefore, one could

\(^4\) English translation: rubber cunt
understand the plunger as a manifestation of the repressed sexual drives which have escaped the over organized structure of institutional and societal control. Situating the plunger in a particular space and exploring its environment as well as its historical circumstances, reveals interpretations that are useful in determining its nature as well as the hesitation and aversion to an interaction with it.

II. LOCATING THE PLUNGER – OBSERVATIONS ON THE BATHROOM

II.1 A new paradigm of health

The Victorian Age, dating roughly from 1876 to 1914\(^5\), is the time where the bathroom as a necessity for American middle-class households emerged (Wright 1980, 119). Morality and health issues are at the center of the Victorian middle class ideology, which was shaped by gentility manuals delineating appropriate behavior and giving testimony to the belief that domestic space has an impact on the behavior of its inhabitants. It was not until the identification of bacteria causing typhus in 1880 by Louis Pasteur that the scientific foundation was established for germ theory (Lupton and Miller 1992, 17). The foul air theory had so far determined the design of toilets and it put particular emphasis on the drain system and the issue of preventing sewer gas from coming back up the pipe (Wright 1960, 210pp).

The germ theory had all the ingredients necessary for establishing a new form of class distinction through the discourse hygiene and moral. It seems to be the preoccupation of 19\(^{th}\) century health reformers not only to decode the bathroom as a place of exorbitant pleasures, which it has been in the tradition of the Romans, but also to educate morality and couple it with cleanliness rules for the working class.

\(^5\) Originally considered as the period of Queen Victoria’s rule in Great Britain (1837-1901), historians take into account for the United States the lag in cultural diffusion. See http://www.albanyinstitute.org/resources/victorianage/victorian.history.htm
Before that, the installation of plumbing facilities was mostly the business of the affluent members of societies, who could afford new bathrooms and therefore tried to protect themselves against diseases. However, since the first plumbing installations were highly risky because of leaks and the fear of dangerous bacteria, some upper class member became even more afraid. Through connection to the sewer system, they had opened their homes to the invasion of deadly germs (Shove 2003, 99).

The ideas of the reformers formed a powerful discourse which expressed “collective” anxieties of the time, namely the fear of deadly diseases. Yet, the real problem was the extension of cleanliness standards into people’s homes. Since the issue of bodily hygiene is played out mostly within private space, the effectiveness of the reforms was largely due to form of advertising that used the fear of bacteria as a selling argument. Furthermore, this strategy combined scientifically proven facts about disease and bacteria with emotive feelings of anxiety and guilt about uncleanliness. The discourse about cleanliness and hygiene was deeply moral and went far beyond the issue of scientific proof of germs (Forty 1986, 165). Standards of cleanliness and hygiene were established not only to keep the population of a city healthy and to guarantee the well-being of the workforce, but also in order to establish and maintain social control. Even though education was the most important tool in teaching hygiene (rules of cleanliness), manufacturers stepped into the gap by way of advertising soap products as essential for the protection of the family against germs (Wright 1980, 117). Indeed, the lag between scientific and popular knowledge makes the spread of wild theories about germs possible and helped to promote cleaning articles. Hygiene within the space of the bathroom means that it does not only have to be clean, but also that it has to look clean. In this regard, moral connotations are
extended to the design of the bathroom and effect the choice of materials for surfaces as well as the choice of tile color: white.

II.2. Dirt – Defecation - Pollution: Waste and the habit of disposal

Our unease and discomfort with the plunger is deeply rooted in our moral education, since one of the first things we learn as a child is to control our defecation system or else to get punished for not being clean. The child initially fascinated by its feces, learns to see them as something dirty and inherently dangerous. The way we learn to judge urine or menstruation blood is through the application of other objects to them. The toilet teaches us to flush feces out of sight and out of mind, in the same way as women “give” their period blood to objects like tampons or sanitary pads to dispose of them immediately. This is a standardized way in Western Civilization to deal with such things and the central reason for this practice is hygiene. But apart from the dimension of cleanliness, it is also a cultural dimension that determines the way we deal with our bodily functions. For example, why is menstruation blood considered as impure causing disgust and shame while semen is considered a spender of life?

The history of the sanitary napkin enlightens how the process of substituting napkins for rags shapes the female consumer’s disposal behavior (Strasser 1999). The initial plan to produce fully disposable napkins that can be flushed down in the toilet was never realized. However, once the practicability and convenience of the napkins came to be recognized and was heavily promoted by commercials, an “ethos of disposability” was determined (Strasser 1999, 173) which rendered the discussion of re-use versus disposal obsolete. The advantages of the sanitary napkin quickly established a throwaway habit creating and enforcing a norm which makes the use of
sanitary napkins standard. The standardization of products in the realm of personal hygiene not only normalized the use of disposal napkins (and later tampons), it also, as early as the late 1920s, made the use of rags as being viewed as unclean and not conforming to newly established standards.

This is only one example of how standardization in cleanliness came about. This development is not restricted to personal hygiene, it takes over the whole modern home. Fundamental technological transformations such as plumbing systems set new standards of cleanliness, which were integrated into normal behavior and briefly afterwards considered common sense. The habit of throwing things away becomes so much part of the American Culture that any disruption in the process of throwing away causes a sense of insecurity about the right behavior. Society provides the individual with all kinds of norms in order to assure social order. Morals and a detailed catalogue of manners are, on this view, the result of individuals conforming to rules of society for the sake of status recognition. They can also be interpreted as a fear of being excluded from society. In consequence, it is not only the individual’s action that society controls, but this process also impacts the organization of human sentiments as well. Hygiene as a discourse is a good example of how positive feelings are reinforced in order to encourage collaboration. On the other hand, negative feelings act as sort of punishment of communal and individual performance.

II.3. Shame as a motor of civilization

In connection with the progress of civilization, Elias (1993, 1997) identifies feelings of shame as expressions of internalized rules and regulations of society. Rising thresholds of shame and repugnance therefore stabilize social order. The effect is enhanced through the internalization of these restraints. One could argue that the
“super-ego”, which Freud (1962) described as the moral part of our conscience is the result of an internalization of morals, that reproduces social regulation on the individual level of experience. The individual experiences feelings of shame as very painful, which is why the psychological mechanism tends to protect the individual from experiencing shame. It is the most effective where the individual feels exposed to the public by being caught in a situation which does not conform to society’s norms. In contrast to guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being wrong; it does not only effect the individual’s actions, but its self-perception.

Thus, when it comes to an embarrassing situation, e.g. that a toilet clogs and is on its way of flooding the bathroom, the plunger is the emergency tool that prevents the individual from being exposed to an embarrassing situation. Instead of revealing the “accident” to the public and having to call a plumber, thereby exposing intimate details to a stranger, the mishap remains within the walls of the bathroom. The seclusion of the bathroom means also a protection for the individual that is allowed to do whatever it wants without being observed by others. The privacy of the bathroom is what made it highly suspicious for the Victorian “guardians of morality” who suspected unmoral behavior behind the closed doors. In this respect, the bathroom signifies an ambiguity which effects the objects that are situated in its space. In consequence, revealing the fact that one has overflowed the toilet does not only lead to an exposure of shame, but also to the assumption that it is the individual and not the bathroom facility which is responsible for the disruption. The individual is judged upon the assumption of having used too much toilet paper or having thrown things in the toilet which the sewage system cannot digest. The perfidy lies in the fact that especially those individuals wanting to conform to rules of hygiene are punished the
most, for it is those that observe the greatest thoroughness in cleaning up after themselves. It is as if the material world created to serve humanity’s demand for comfort, cleanliness and convenience turns against its creator.

II.4. Enforcing Morals – Human Feces and Danger

Even though the plunger might be a helpful tool within the isolation of the bathroom, it is considered dangerous in public discourse. In assuming that narratives on social order can take on considerable power, talking about the plunger implies the risk of being exposed to an embarrassing or shameful situation, not only because the plunger is in possible contact with feces, but also because its presence reminds people of the possibility of clogging toilets. Already seeing the plunger sitting next to the toilet can therefore evoke memories of shameful situations which the self, according to psychoanalysis, wants to suppress for their non-conformity to the individual’s inner ego ideal.

Making a taboo out of something which is seen as dangerous to society, is a feature Mary Douglas is particularly interested in (Douglas 1992). She assumes that systems of purity or cleanliness, rather than being primarily concerned with establishing hygienic conditions, function instead to establish and reproduce order (Douglas 1992, 3). It is because of this that Douglas rejects any comparison between religious rituals of purification and the hygiene measures of our own culture, regarding the former as purely symbolic and the latter as purely practical. Douglas emphasizes that our own attitudes are not necessarily practical, i.e. based on medical considerations, but that our hygiene, on top of that, contains a symbolic element. Taking into consideration Douglas’ concepts of purity and danger might help us to understand how the plunger is perceived as something dangerous in the modern home.
that has to be hidden in a plunger box to conceal its ugliness. It is in its form already, as I explained in chapter I.2, that the plunger represents disorder in the form of repressed desires. The reason for this stigmatization stems from the plunger’s contact with human feces, associating it with dirt and pollution. However, the symbolic meaning of dirt, in Western societies as, I hope, the story of the plunger will prove, is much more profound.

In Western culture dirt is seen as a “matter out of place” (Douglas 1992, 36), as something that we find inappropriate in a given context. The plunger is therefore an object, which disturbs the given order of society because it cannot be classified. Douglas reminds us of the idea of relativity and the situation of objects in space. Similarly to her example of shoes on the living room table (Douglas 1992, 37), it is the plunger’s symbolical as well as physical pollution that prohibits it from being placed on the table. It is not until the invention of plunger boxes that a specific place is assigned to the plunger.

II. 5. The Bathroom and the Elimination of Waste

Both Douglas and Elias are concerned with the symbolic reproduction of order. Whereas Douglas takes note of the fact that for the individual the elimination of dirt means to conform to an ideal order of society, Elias, on the contrary, points out that the individual’s increase in self-control leads to a higher level of social differentiation and integration (Elias 1993, 360). The bathroom can be considered as the place where a physical as well as a symbolical process of elimination takes place.

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6 In various advertisements about plunger boxes the argument for a plunger box is not only seen in the cleanliness aspect, but in the lacking aesthetic value of the toilet plunger. I see here an interesting disturbance in the perception of the plunger, which cannot be framed by its functionality. Nobody would perceive a hammer, which is an utilitarian object as well as the plunger, as ugly, even when sitting on the table. The rejection of the plunger is determined because of its connection to human feces and its pollution of the bathroom.
As suggested by Lupton and Miller (1992, 1), biological digestion mingles with habits of consumption and disposal as well as with a simplification in bathroom design. Furthermore, the bathroom is the place where the body is civilized, not only through cleaning it, but also by eliminating its symbolical and biological presence.

Through the act of cleaning and purifying the bathroom, the work of cleaning itself becomes a fetish. Embedded in the Victorian tradition is the idea, that through the act of cleaning a house, thereby performing an act of domestic, women had to prove the purity of their character and adjust their behavior to society’s morals. Taking the house as a metaphor for the women’s body obliges her to take care of her house in the same way as she takes care of her body. The ritual of cleaning increases the symbolic power and therefore the fetish, which resides in the desire to purify the human body (Dant 1999, 56). The close relation between bathroom and body means, thus, that by cleaning the bathroom one symbolically cleans one’s own body as well. The fascination for a clean bathroom can be understood as a desire for purifying those parts of the body that are being perceived as dirty. On this view, the clean bathroom stands for an absence of corporeality and it also emphasizes the purity of the home and of those who live in it. Its perceived value goes far beyond mere utility, just like an expensive car is supposed to have agency, which adds to the potency of its owner.

The sanctified environment of the bathroom renders the plunger beyond its danger as a transmitter of germs, also dangerous also on a symbolic level: it stands for the repressed sexual desires, which are in contradiction to the fetish of cleanliness. The process of eliminating human waste is inversed by using the plunger; the purification of the body through the use of objects is inversed, too. Attempts of moral purification are also inversed, since the use of the plunger makes the individual conscious of its repressed desires. In this regard, the metaphor of the “civilization of
the body” (Lupton and Miller 1992, 17) tries to comprehend not only the desire for eliminating the corporeality of the body, its odors and bodily functions, but it also enforces conforming strategies, the individual employs in order to attain its ideal of a moral order.

The plunger signifies the dark underbelly of this order. The clogged toilet, by violating the rules of hygiene does not only disturb the order of the bathroom, but also brings to a halt the process of digestion and elimination which structures homes. The plunger reverses the flow of waste into the other direction, putting the one who uses the plunger in an embarrassing situation where borders of social appropriateness are blurred, and where the individual is exposed to shame and repulsion by society as soon as the “accident” is discovered.

III. CHANGES OF THE BATHROOM AND THE RE-ENCODING OF THE PLUNGER

Since the 1920’s with its clean white aesthetic, the design of the bathroom has changed to include colored ceramic as well as enamel products. New bathroom design also indicates that concepts of convenience and pleasure increasingly determine the discourse about bathrooms, which had been dominated by concerns of hygiene. Shove (2003, 104) suggests that the possibility of beautification of the bathroom did not emerge until the sanitary regime relaxed, and when diseases like typhoid declined and chemical disinfects were considered effective enough to keep germs out of the house. By not focusing on health concerns, new ways of distinction became available that influenced bathroom design and habits of consumption. It was not until the bathroom was adopted by the working class that it could become again a place of distinction. This fact is visible in its design as well as in the emergence of an entire industry that offers bathroom goods. Objects are not restricted anymore to the cleaning of the body,
but instead a whole range of products is designated to render the bathroom more beautiful.

The transformation of utilitarian domestic spaces, such as the kitchen and the bathroom into aesthetic ones also affects the objects situated in this space. The plunger in his nature as an emergency tool has the status of an outsider in the ensemble of bathroom facilities. Since it does not fit neither into the concept of cleanliness, nor into the one of comfort, its status needs to be redefined. As I argued in chapter I.1, the functionality of the plunger restricts its appearance in such a way that significant changes can not occur without altering the practicability of the plunger as well. In this regard, the emergence of plunger boxes is a recent phenomenon. Trying to assemble plunger and toilet brush into one place does not only introduce a new level of orderliness into the bathroom, but also that the bathroom’s function as a place of waste elimination is charged with symbolic meaning.

Hiding the plunger in a plunger box can give rise to several interpretations. The aspect of beautification is also bound up with the individualization of the bathroom, which now, like all other rooms of the house expresses the personal style of the owner. In fact, this is similar to the Victorian tradition of expressing the character of the owner through its dwelling. However, now it is not for the purpose of proving one’s moral purity but rather a form of conspicuous consumption with no other reason than emphasizing the wealth of the bathroom owner (Veblen 1991). The economic forces on display are the same: novelties in plunger design rarely add to an increase convenience. Thus, the bathroom becomes a “marketplace for an endlessly regenerating inventory of products” (Shove 2003). The plunger does not escape this development. Since his presence is invaluable as long as the sanitation system is not

7 U.S. patents for plungerboxes as well as integrated plungers with boxes date from June 5, 2001 (Patent No. 6,241,091) and January 6, 1999 (Patent No. 6,038,709)
completely overhauled, the plunger is now, by way of the plunger box assigned to a
determinate place. By arresting and concealing the plunger in order to establish and
determine its symbolical boundaries, the wildness of the plunger is finally
domesticated.
REFERENCE LIST


