

# PEER Environmental Technology Seminar

Oct. 11-12, 2006, Montpellier, France



## Parallel session 1c • Sustainable consumption

**Social and cultural conditions for sustainable consumption: The case of alternative toilet solutions**

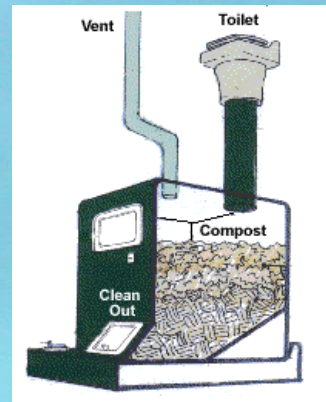
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# The case of alternative toilet solutions

- ◆ Ideological wish of recycling human urine and faeces
- ◆ Unsuccessful diffusion
  - not appropriated and used in ‘ordinary’ households
- ◆ Lack of knowledge about social and cultural resistance to change
  - Possibility of changing the present way of handling urine and faeces



# Perspective: Inconspicuous consumption patterns

- ◆ Not focus on consumption of e.g. energy and water, but on the services and experiences they make possible
- ◆ Understanding proliferation of unsustainable ways of life
- ◆ Ordinary practices encompass the environmental hot spots of consumption

# Theoretical focus

- ◆ Uncover conceptions of normal standards
  - What do people take for granted and how do such normal standards change?
- ◆ Linking theories of consumption, technology and practice
  - studying pathways of change (interaction between human and non-human actors)
  - uncover basic societal processes (technological change, shifts in discourses and changes in patterns of everyday life)

# Approach:

## Two perspectives on normal standards

- ◆ Technology-bound factors
  - Persistence of present norms (The toilet)
  - Study of the historical processes that led to lock-in of water-flushing toilets
    - literature review of historical material
  
- ◆ Everyday life-bound factors
  - Changes in normal standards (The bathroom)
  - Study of the development of current bathrooms and present trends
    - review of statistical material and of a dwelling magazine
    - general observations (exhibitions, commercials, etc.)
    - qualitative interviews on bathrooms

# The water-flushing toilet: a norm

- ◆ Focus on the process of embedding of technology in everyday life
  - Changes in frames for what people do and how they go about doing it
    - formation of a new wc-regime: moral views of urine and faeces
  - Changes in technological systems
    - centralisation and domination of water-flushing solution
  
- ◆ Technological innovation of alternative toilets is impeded
  - The functionality of alternative toilets is being measured through the premises of the existing system
    - avoiding smells and residues
    - having automatic and simple removal of urine and faeces
  - The current system impede distribution of alternative toilets (also: lack of acute driving forces at present)
  
- ◆ The water-flushing toilet is a norm difficult to replace (lock-in)

# The bathroom: norms on the move

- ◆ Transformation of the bathroom
  - changes in design, use and meaning of Danish bathrooms
    - the characteristic hygiene bathrooms have been challenged and develop in new directions
  - from hygiene to wellness bathroom
    - multiple bathrooms (at least two – maybe three)
    - increased time-use
    - ideas of wellness, self-indulgence, retreating, being together, convenience and aesthetics
  
- ◆ Environmental implications of changing bathroom standards
  - the current bathroom boom
    - reflections of interplay between broader social changes and the workings of different consumption drivers
  - Unfortunate consumption patterns
    - Enormous consumption potential, making room - and providing meaning - for more products and services
    - Escalation of expectations and norms

# Concluding remarks

- ◆ Problematic tensions between ideas of today and ideas (and technologies) of a supposed environmental tomorrow
  - reluctance towards environmental technologies embedded in our norms
    - dynamics of lock-in both in the form of systemic and cultural restraints
  - life-style patterns point in directions that do not coincide with sustainable consumption
    - environmental technologies are not in harmony with the overall development
    - increase in consumption patterns
  
- ◆ Solutions?
  - Environmental technologies should be more socially viable
  - Reconsider existing patterns and paths of development
  - Put the issue of long-term changes of daily practices on the political agenda