

## An inconvenience truth, by [Agnes Poirier](#) in the Guardian

The mayor of Paris has announced a series of tough measures to prevent men from peeing in the streets. Why not just bring back the *pissotière*?

October 26, 2007 7:00 PM | [Printable version](#)

Pissing in public is, according to the [Daily Telegraph](#), a very French male pastime which demonstrates, to put it mildly, a striking "Gallic lack of finesse". The mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, agrees with the Telegraph and has announced a series of tough measures against *al fresco* urination. Among them is the anti-pipi wall, designed by architect [Etienne Vanderpooten](#), will attack the *pisseurs* by sending back their urine on their trousers. An eye for an eye, a pee for a pee.

Why not bringing back the good old *pissotière*, more elegantly called *vespasiennes* when they first appeared on the streets of Paris in 1834? Unlike its Roman ancestor, invented by Emperor Vespasien to collect taxes, Parisian *vespasiennes* were free to use. In 1843, 500 of them adorned the streets of Paris. With time, their design evolved but they were soon declared too *louche* and too smelly and, in 1961, were demolished one after the other. Only [one](#) remains, on [Boulevard Arago](#), opposite the only remaining prison in Paris, *la prison de la Santé*.

In 1980, when the Paris town hall voted for the end of free public toilets, pipi wizard and entrepreneur Jean-Claude Decaux saw the opportunity of a lifetime and the [sanisette](#) was born, at a cost. For 20 years, we Parisians had to pay to pee, in ugly-looking, scary concrete boxes where a few people got locked in for hours at a time or even got badly injured when the auto-cleaning system got out of control. Mayor Delanoë at last made the *sanisettes* free at the beginning of 2007 and it took a Norwegian artist, [Lars Ramberg](#), to make the *sanisette* a work of art, exhibited in Oslo and at this year's Venice Biennale. He painted three *sanisettes* blue, white and red and branded them Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. When you get close to them, you can hear voices: De Gaulle speaking, or a tenor singing the [Marseillaise](#). The effect is most peculiar and very funny.

One thing leading to another, do you remember the caca-bikes devised by Decaux for Chirac, then mayor of Paris, in 1982? These provided another example of masterful French engineering. With 200,000 Parisian dogs ejecting 16,000 tonnes of poo daily, the situation was dire and these bikes were proposed as a solution. Yet, 25 years later, the problem is still unsolved. The caca-bikes proved too expensive: the cleaning cost the town hall the equivalent of €2 per kilo of poo. This situation has inspired many writers, such as English-born Stephen Clarke whose first book, a world bestseller, was aptly called [A Year in the Merde](#).

So Parisians today still have their feet in the poo and soon risk to be sprayed with urine by silent walls. Charming.

Nota bene: for those of you who have what the Telegraph would call a "Gallic lack of finesse", watch this French comedy sketch on the male pissing experience called [Solidarité masculine](#). For the more refined among you who want to know more about the history of *pissotières*, see academic Marianne Blidon's [interesting research](#) on the subject.

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