



## COOPER HEWITT DESIGN PROCESS BATHROOM SYMBOLS

Cooper Hewitt's diverse and comprehensive collection and exhibitions showcase many designs that address real-world problems. One of those designs, the Universal Symbol Sign, provides the framework for exploring the challenge posed by this year's competition: **What would you design to help more of us feel included?** Through the design process below, explore how the symbol signs for bathrooms are being redesigned and expanded in order to help everyone belong.



In the mid-20th century, graphic designers created a collection of universal non-verbal symbols for use in public spaces such as airports, libraries, and train stations, including universal bathroom symbols that would help people find restrooms.

Recently, designers have responded to the growing interest worldwide in increasing inclusivity by acknowledging user groups left out of previous symbol systems. Bathrooms are one of the most common and important public spaces worldwide, and a gender-neutral bathroom symbol is needed.

Many designers and users have brainstormed diverse proposals to solve the problem of an inclusive, gender-neutral bathroom symbol.

Some designers have created variations on existing human-figure symbols and also proposed entirely new, abstract symbols, offering a broad range of ideas in order to find the option that is the clearest and most universally understandable.

With each prototype, designers test and refine their icons in order to make them instantly recognizable and inclusive. A challenge has been to find symbols that can communicate cross-culturally. For example, the toilet symbol does not reflect the shape or structure of all toilets around the world, and communicates clearly to some users and not at all to others.

While there is no universal symbol representing all-gender bathrooms, many places are replacing traditional bathroom symbols with alternate verbal and non-verbal signs to indicate all-gender inclusivity.



*Symbol Signs*, Cook & Shanosky Associates, 1974. (cropped)  
Short URL <http://cprhw.tt/o/2DGVi>  
Accession Number 1997-19-136 Object ID 18673291



*Gaul, Chris. "We're Missing a Universal Restroom Symbol, and Here's Why It Matters." Medium, Medium, 24 June 2019, medium.com/@chrisgaul/a-design-for-a-universal-restroom-symbol-bc5f9fd120b6.*



*Ball, Aimee Lee. "In All-Gender Restrooms, the Signs Reflect the Times." The New York Times, The New York Times, 5 Nov. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/style/transgender-restroom-all-gender.html.*

What's your idea? Now it's your turn! To jumpstart your design process, grab a sketch pad and start brainstorming ideas, or even build a couple of quick prototypes using materials found around your house to help you work through and advance your thinking. Formulate as many ideas as possible and don't worry if your sketches or models aren't perfect—you won't be judged by your drawing skills!