

FEATURE

The Freedom of Knowing Where You Can Go

New York City is installing 17 public bathrooms across five boroughs. The larger experiment may be whether reliable restroom access changes how freely people can move through the city.

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By **Accibly Editorial Team** · ⌚ 8 min read

Before leaving home, most people think about where they are going, how they will get there, and how long the trip will take.

For some people, another question comes first.

Where will I be able to use the bathroom?

That question can determine far more than comfort.

A wheelchair user may need enough room to position a chair or transfer safely. Someone traveling with a personal care attendant may need space for another person. An older adult may need a restroom close to the route rather than several blocks away. Someone with a gastrointestinal or bladder condition may need confidence that a usable bathroom will actually be available when it is needed.

Without that confidence, going out can require another layer of calculation.

Where is the nearest bathroom?

Will it be open?

Will I be allowed to use it?

Will it actually be accessible?

And what happens if it is not?

New York City is now testing whether some of that uncertainty can be removed.

| A small piece of infrastructure with a much larger role

In September, New York City began a one-year, \$4 million pilot to install 17 modular public bathrooms across all five boroughs.

The facilities are being installed on a rolling basis in public plazas and high-traffic areas the city says lack reliable restroom access.

They are free and scheduled to operate from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. The city describes the units as ADA accessible and fully touchless, with running water, flushing toilets, climate control and baby-changing stations.

Throne Labs, selected by the New York City Economic Development Corporation, is responsible for operating, cleaning and maintaining them.

People can enter using a text message, QR code, the Throne app or a free tap card distributed through community partners.

Those details describe a bathroom system.

But the more consequential question is what the system makes possible.

Can reliable restroom access change how much of a city someone feels able to use?

| When finding a bathroom becomes part of the journey

Research involving wheelchair users suggests that restroom access can shape behavior long before someone reaches the bathroom door.

A 2024 study interviewed 12 powered and manual wheelchair users about accessible public bathrooms. Researchers identified recurring concerns involving safety, hygiene, privacy, dignity and planning.

Many participants described putting significant effort into planning bathroom use or avoiding public bathrooms altogether.

The study also identified maintenance and cleaning as critical to whether a bathroom remained accessible and safe in practice.

The research was exploratory and involved a small group of wheelchair users. It should not be treated as representative of every wheelchair user or every person with an access need.

But it exposes something conventional accessibility measurements can miss.

A bathroom can technically exist without functioning as reliable infrastructure.

And uncertainty itself can become a barrier.

The difference between being able to enter and being able to go

Much of accessibility is measured at destinations.

Can someone enter the restaurant?

Can someone reach the subway platform?

Can someone navigate the building?

Can someone use the service?

Those questions matter.

But participation can be constrained before any of them become relevant.

Someone who cannot confidently meet a basic need while away from home may shorten a trip, organize it around known bathrooms, depend on private businesses or decide that the uncertainty is not worth it.

That makes restroom infrastructure part of a larger accessibility system.

Accessibility is not only about whether you can enter a destination.

Sometimes it begins with knowing you can leave home.

| When the bathroom belongs to someone else

In a city without enough reliable public bathrooms, restaurants, cafés, stores and other private establishments can become an informal substitute.

But a business bathroom is not the same thing as public infrastructure.

Someone may need to ask permission.

They may be expected to make a purchase.

They may need a code.

They may have to explain an urgent or private need to a stranger.

And gaining access to the bathroom still does not establish that the room itself will be usable.

For someone already calculating transportation, entrances, elevators, physical access and assistance, finding a bathroom can become another dependency in the journey.

A reliable public facility changes that relationship.

The question becomes less about whether someone will be permitted to use a bathroom and more about whether a public resource can reasonably be expected to work.

That distinction matters for independence.

| Accessible on paper. Usable in practice.

New York City describes the new facilities as ADA accessible.

That is an important starting point.

It is not the end of the accessibility question.

Real-world usability can depend on the approach to the unit, ramp and entrance, interior maneuvering space, grab-bar placement, transfer requirements, door operation, maintenance, cleanliness, availability and the individual user's body, equipment and support needs.

The 2024 wheelchair-user study is particularly relevant here because participants identified maintenance as critical even though maintenance is not captured in the same way by physical design standards.

New York's pilot gives the city an opportunity to evaluate accessibility as an operating condition rather than merely a construction characteristic.

Not simply:

Was an accessible bathroom installed?

But:

Was it usable when somebody needed it?

| The ten-minute question

There is one operating rule that deserves specific evaluation.

At the pilot launch, Throne described a sequence of notices before the door opens: users are told about the 10-minute limit before and after entering,

receive warnings at five and eight minutes, and receive a final warning at 10 minutes before the door opens shortly afterward.

A time limit can serve an understandable operational purpose. A public bathroom that becomes unavailable for long periods cannot serve other people waiting to use it.

But some users may require more time because of transfers, clothing management, catheterization, bowel or bladder routines, assistance from another person, fatigue, limited dexterity or other circumstances.

That does not make the 10-minute system the central story of the pilot.

It makes it one of the things the pilot should test.

The relevant question is straightforward:

What happens when someone legitimately needs more time?

At the launch, Throne said there was no way to extend a session and that it was 'working on a way to do that for people with existing mobility challenges or issues that are ongoing.'

How that works in practice should be judged through actual operation and user experience, not assumption.

| Reliability is part of accessibility

Throne Labs is responsible for cleaning and maintaining the units.

According to the city, real-time user feedback will allow Throne to respond to issues and prioritize units that need attention.

That may prove to be one of the most important parts of the model.

A technically accessible restroom that is repeatedly dirty, damaged, blocked or unavailable does not provide reliable access.

For that reason, maintenance performance should be treated as accessibility data.

How often is a unit unavailable?

Why?

How quickly is it restored?

Are accessibility-related complaints tracked separately?

Do the same problems recur?

Can users reliably determine whether a bathroom is available before traveling to it?

Those measurements would reveal whether accessibility survives daily use.

| Seventeen bathrooms are a test, not a citywide solution

Seventeen facilities cannot resolve New York City's broader restroom shortage.

The city describes this as a pilot, and that distinction matters.

Its value may lie partly in what New York learns from the next year.

Usage counts will be useful.

They will not be enough.

A meaningful accessibility evaluation should also ask:

Are wheelchair users able to approach and enter the facilities?

Can people maneuver and transfer safely?

Are the paths leading to the units accessible?

How often are bathrooms unavailable?

How quickly are maintenance problems resolved?

What happens when someone needs more than the standard session time?

Do people return after successfully using a facility?

Do users report greater confidence spending time in areas where reliable bathrooms are available?

Do some locations perform substantially better than others?

And what barriers appear only after thousands of real-world uses?

The answers could help determine whether the model should expand, change or be supplemented by other kinds of public restroom infrastructure.

| What the city has not yet answered

Accibly Insights contacted NYCEDC as part of this reporting with questions about site selection, accessibility, performance measurements and potential expansion.

NYCEDC responded by referring questions concerning the location rollout to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the New York City Department of Transportation.

Accibly Insights subsequently contacted Parks and DOT with questions about how locations were selected, accessible paths of travel, disability consultation, sites that may have been modified or rejected because of accessibility concerns, performance measurements and potential expansion.

No substantive response from Parks or DOT was received by the September 25 deadline.

Accibly Insights separately contacted Throne Labs with questions about accessibility design and testing, session length, maintenance, usage data and how the company evaluates whether the facilities work for people with different access needs.

No response was received by the deadline.

The Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York was also contacted for an independent disability-community perspective on restroom access, usability, independence and how the pilot should be evaluated.

No response was received by the deadline.

A lack of response does not answer those questions.

It means they remain questions.

And because this is a pilot, there is still time for the answers to become part of what New York measures.

| What becomes possible when uncertainty disappears?

Public bathrooms are rarely destinations.

People do not usually leave home because they are excited to visit one.

That may be precisely why their importance is easy to overlook.

The value of reliable restroom infrastructure may appear somewhere else.

In the person who stays at the park longer.

The wheelchair user who does not have to build an afternoon around one known accessible bathroom.

The older adult who feels more comfortable traveling farther from home.

The caregiver who has one fewer uncertainty to solve.

The person who visits another neighborhood, stays for dinner, accepts an invitation or simply spends more time participating in the city.

New York's 17-bathroom pilot cannot yet tell us whether those outcomes will occur.

That is what makes it an experiment worth measuring.

The most meaningful result may not ultimately be the number of times a restroom door opens.

It may be what people feel able to do because they know one will.

Sometimes accessibility begins before the destination.

Sometimes it begins with the freedom of knowing where you can go.

Evidence	22 records
Source Appendix	8 sources

UPDATE HISTORY

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HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS BUILT

8 sources reviewed.

2 source categories represented (Government, Research).

Evidence last reviewed September 28, 2026.

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