

Disappearing conveniences

During the December cold spell, I had an early morning meeting. Given that the temperature was 11 degrees, I wore an overcoat and hat, as did everyone else involved in the meeting. Despite the fact that we were in a modern, multi-million dollar building, the meeting room didn't have a single coat rack or hook. The same was true of all of the rooms in the building.

Some of the folks involved in the meeting sat on their coats. Some placed them on the floor. Others chose to wear their coats throughout the meeting.

At one time, coat hooks were a ubiquitous feature in any public building. Yet, the architects who designed the building I was in decided that they could lower the cost of a \$60 million building by forgoing \$1.99 coat hooks. As I sat on my overcoat, I pondered some of the simple conveniences that have disappeared in recent years.

Near the top of my list of disappearing conveniences is the public restroom. In an effort to save money, municipalities have stopped building public restrooms. In some cases, existing public restrooms have been closed. Today, when most people need to use a restroom, they are likely to interlope into some restaurant or retail space and pretend to be a customer. As a result, many businesses have taken to locking their restrooms and restricting key access to paying customers.

In light of the decreasing number of public restrooms, Charmin, the toilet paper company, has developed a phone APP that will point you to the nearest public restroom. I downloaded the app and gave it a try to determine the prevalence of public restrooms in Ogden. As for the result of my inquiry, I will simply say you would be well advised to take care of business before leaving home.

Along with the public restroom, public drinking fountains are disappearing. This fact is ironic because most cities are touting their efforts to foster environmental sustainability. Today, the typical American now drinks 240 pints of bottled water every year. Public drinking fountains, that do not create plastic waste and save energy, are one of the most economical and sustainable conveniences that a city can provide. The slow demise of public drinking fountains is regrettable.

Perhaps the most obvious disappearing convenience is the phone booth. At one

Top of Utah Voices



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Commentary

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time, every public building and most street corners had at least one phone booth. Court houses, hotels and airports had entire banks of phone booths. The proliferation of cell phones has led to the demise of the public phone booth.

Unfortunately, even though cell phones provide an easy way to place a phone call, cell phones have not provided an adequate substitute for one of the most important features of a phone booth. That is a fairly

quiet and somewhat private place to sit down and have a phone conversation.

The disappearance of the phone booth has made phone calls a public event, and that fact carries unpleasant consequences. On more than one occasion, I have mistakenly thought that I was the object of an unprovoked tirade of obscenities because a person beside me was motivated to angrily shout into their cell phone. I have been subjected to strangers' unwelcomed accounts of appendectomies, arrests and illicit affairs.

The disappearance of simple day-to-day conveniences is symbolic of a more profound societal trend. More and more citizens are coming to believe that cooperating

with others to reach a shared goal is less productive than going your own way. The public good is being replaced by the privatized commodity.

I speculate that in today's environment, preoccupied with the private rather than the public, it would be impossible to build the New York Public Library, to commission the Picasso sculpture in Daley Plaza, to set aside the 2.2 million acres that make up Yellowstone Park, or to construct Mount Rushmore. That fact is far more regrettable than having to sit on one's coat.

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