

Water Flowing Underground: 25 Centuries of Waste Disposal

by Jon Vara

Although there are over 25 million septic systems in the United States, with 400,000 more new ones being built each year, most homeowners — and more than a few builders — know almost nothing about how they actually work. Into this information void come authors Lloyd Kahn, Blair Allen, and Julie Jones, whose *The Septic System Owner's Manual* (2000; Shelter Publications, P.O. Box 279, Bolinas, CA 94924; 800/307-0131; www.shelterpub.com) tells you everything you might want to know about the subject, and at least a few things you might prefer not to know. The illustrations by Peter Aschwanden are a treat in themselves. (Readers of a certain age will remember him from John Muir's classic *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*.)

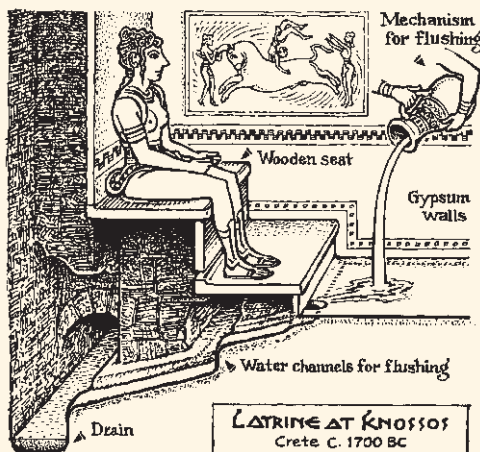
The SEPTIC SYSTEM OWNER'S MANUAL



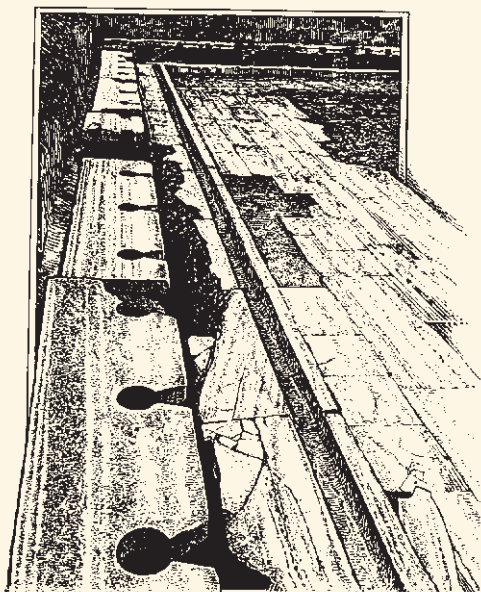
BY LLOYD KAHN, BLAIR ALLEN & JULIE JONES
ILLUSTRATED BY PETER ASCHWANDEN



Most purchasers will probably buy the book for the wealth of practical information it contains on everything from tanks and drain fields to dosing siphons and mound systems. (It might make an excellent, if marginally tasteful, housewarming gift for the client with a spanking-new septic system.) But the most fascinating part of the book may be the 21-page chapter that traces the history of waste disposal from neolithic times to the present. As the following illustrations show, it's been a long, strange trip.



Some ancient plumbing was surprisingly modern. More than 2,500 years ago, palace builders on the island of Crete built toilets with wooden seats and flushing systems that emptied into stone sewers.



The Romans, however, gave us the first real plumbing as well as the word “plumbing,” which comes from plumbus, the Latin word for lead. At the height of the Roman empire, stone aqueducts and lead piping delivered 300 gallons of water per person per day to Rome, a good portion of which may have been used to flush group-oriented latrines like those shown here. No need to jiggle the handle — water ran beneath in a steady, continuous stream.

WATCH YER BOTTOM!

PRIVIES IN CHINA AND SOUTHERN INDIA ARE SOMETIMES BUILT OVER PIGS' TROUGHS. PIGS, EAGERLY AWAITING THEIR FOOD, HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO GRUNT LOUDLY FOR USERS' ANTICIPATED LOADS AND MAY EVEN JUMP UP AND SNAP AT EXPOSED BEHINDS.

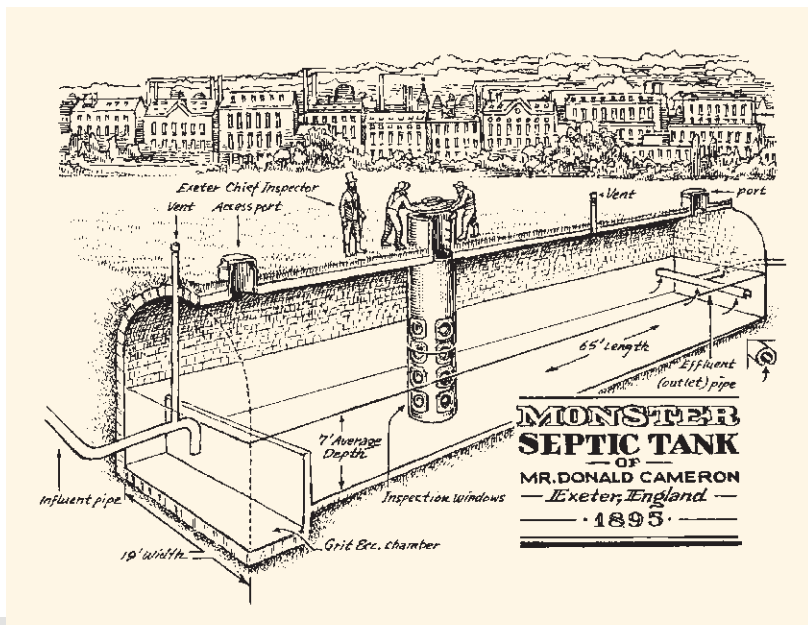
No doubt wisely, the book's authors chose to run some boxed items of text without illustrations.



By medieval times, sanitation was at a low ebb. Chamber pots were routinely emptied into the street — often from second- or third-story windows — where their contents flowed sluggishly into the nearest body of water. Did you know that the word “sewer” comes from the Old English for “seaward?”



Victorian England was a hotbed of innovation in waste management. The satirical drawing above presents the German illustrator's view of “the privy and chamber pot being defeated by Triumphant British Plumbing, which is unfurling a banner stating ‘Brittania rule [sic] the waves.’” That's Brittania, blushing in the background.



The modern 1,000- or 1,500-gallon septic tank can be seen as a logical compromise between the much larger and smaller containers formerly used. At one extreme is the 53,000-gallon British tank above, with the other represented by the bizarre contraption at right, which was actually approved by the U.S. Public Health Service in 1915.

