

Building Bodies, Constructing Selves: The Architecture of the Fitness Gymnasium

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Today's gymnasiums do more than shape bodies; they operationalise, monetise, transmit and feed fitness culture and ideologies in tandem with health policies, social structures, education, fashion, popular media and culture. The psychical, social and moral conditioning of subjects that is played out through the gymnasium is not a side effect of physical fitness, but its actual target. This makes 'working out at the gym' a subject of academic interest beyond exercise physiology. Thus, a significant body of research has developed in the humanities, which considers the production, representation and commodification of bodies and selves through gymnasiums. This work attends to the social history of fitness and exercise in gymnasiums; the place of gymnasiums within broader discourses around 'wellness' and health; the work of fitness instruction; the self-presentation of a muscular, fit body in social media; the relationship between working out, success in the workplace and neoliberalism; and the role of gender, class and professional status in exercise regimes in gymnasium settings. The gymnasium itself, as physical infrastructure and site, has been considered in terms of its historical evolution; its spatial organisation in relationship to social hierarchies and gender; and its management. The accessibility, cleanliness, organisation and quality of its facilities have also been studied in relation to consumer satisfaction.¹

Gymnasiums are more than neutral infrastructure or crystallisations of social practices and systems of thought. They are critical sites wherein

competing ideological positions about bodies and their environments are aestheticised. The spaces and settings of the gymnasium materialise Michel Foucault's conception of an 'architecture that would be operative in the transformation of individuals': places that shape matter and have a performative action on whatever inhabits them, imposing this on their occupants.² Architecture plays a formative role in shaping the transactional environments through which subjects come under constant transformation and negotiation. Yet surprisingly little has been written on the architecture and interior design of the contemporary fitness gymnasium. Existing scholarship stresses the standardisation of equipment, bodily movement and fitness parameters, going as far as to suggest that 'fitness centres have developed into more or less standardised locations worldwide.'³ We caution against extending the standardisation of bodily movement that is found in, say, the popular Les Mills Fitness programme and its concomitant equipment, to the architecture of gymnasiums. We observe instead that today's commercial fitness gymnasiums are extraordinarily diverse and knowing in their aesthetic differentiation. Indeed, gymnasium operators and their architects, like the crowd of 'individuals' in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, all insist on their vision 'for an extremely different gym to anything we have seen,'⁴ or claim to offer something unique, including even, the 'anti-gym.'⁵

The global real estate of gymnasium brands has grown exponentially in the last decade, each brand

successfully marketing and deploying a distinct sensibility across multiple locations and cultures. Many are parent companies or chains operating multiple studios and sub-brands, such as Equinox Fitness (which also owns Soul Cycle and Pure Yoga), Barry's Bootcamp, Psycle, Rebel, Third Space, and Crossfit (which positions itself as a movement). The great divergence in design expression between these gymnasium brands illuminates the way architecture is deployed as aesthetic capital, but we think design achieves more here than market differentiation; design elicits desire and constructs subjects. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that desire is 'never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions.'⁶ It is just such 'setups' and their relationship to desire that we fixate upon here through analysing the stylistic manifestations into which the gymnasium typology has atomised. In doing so we hope to show just how potently architecture contributes to the self-fashioning that takes *place* through the gymnasium. The desire to subject oneself to the regime of a gymnasium is stimulated by the seductive appeal of the array of potential 'selves' constructed within these spaces. The hybridisations of the gymnasium play with several recognisable aesthetic tropes. Here we examine the luxurious, the machinic, the therapeutic and spiritual, the ecstatic and fetishistic, and the militaristic. Through the translation of these tropes into surfaces, signs, materials and spaces, gymnasiums position their brand, create distinct experiences, and recruit and grow exercise communities.

Shaping Selves, Constructing Communities

Gymnasiums bring together the people, infrastructure, atmospheres, regimes and processes through which the targeted and precise *physical* conditioning of bodies is made possible. In the gymnasium, bodies are literally shaped (or, as some would have it, sculpted), through repetitive exercises and engagement with resistance machines, weights, and other equipment. As Pirrko Markula

and Richard Pringle argue, 'gyms are designed to discipline... bodies towards normalcy', towards the ideal male (increased muscularity) or female (thin and toned) body.⁷ Or, as Barry's Bootcamp trainer Andy Lee proclaims, the ideal body is one that is 'lean, toned, strong'.⁸ In pursuit of this medical and cosmetic ideal, gymnasium attendance has increased across all classes, ages and genders in the developed world over the past two decades. Physical conditioning has a psychical effect. The gym-goer's moods, thoughts, and self-perception are altered. An enhanced sense of self-determination and agency is developed as individuals work to overcome pain, exhaustion, sloth and boredom. The ways in which gym-goers are perceived by others changes too, especially through the entanglement of self-fashioning and self-representation that takes place most intensely through social media.⁹ Securing the approval (and desire) of others is just one of the ways that gymnasium environments contribute to the shaping of selves.

Indoor gymnasiums arose simultaneously with the prison, asylum and the schoolhouse 'in the context of a spatial disciplining and the functionalisation of social life.'¹⁰ The gymnasium has since departed from these 'total institutions' as Irving Goffman characterised them in *Asylums* (1961) – where inmates are committed against their will and new identities imposed upon them. The gym has escaped the schoolyard and reattached itself symbolically and sometimes literally to spaces of leisure, hospitality and self-care. Gym-goers voluntarily enter into the belief 'that they need to change, and that it is their responsibility to do so'.¹¹ Subjects submit themselves to forms of discipline, physical contact, performance assessment, and machinic engagement that in other contexts might be construed as harassment, objectification, humiliation, or torture.¹² This submission takes place in a social and political context, for the belief that one needs to get fit through structured exercise is provoked by media fat-shaming, work-based subsidies, health insurance policies,

advertising and the campaigns of gymnasiums themselves. The responsibility of self-transformation is perfectly captured by the mantra of Barry's Bootcamp – 'Fuck Perfection. You do YOU' – echoing Nike's 'You are entirely up to you. Make your body. Make your life. Make yourself.'¹³ Having worked hard to translate their ethos succinctly, gymnasiums often inscribe these emotive images and slogans on their walls – not unlike spaces of religion. The culture of individual responsibility and voluntarism makes fitness gymnasiums extraordinarily efficient from the point of view of both their commercial operation and the state's interests in a healthy populace, with gym-goers paying from their own pockets to perform exercises independently or in groups. The endless annual lists and reviews of 'best' gymnasiums by social and mainstream media influencers further stimulate the appetite for the endless reformation of bodies and subjectivities.¹⁴

Gymnasiums also shape selves within communities.¹⁵ Emile Durkheim posited that when people come together to perform any kind of ritual, be it dancing, singing or inscribing one another's bodies, a sense of something beyond the self, which we might call religious feeling, is born. He called the state experienced through synchronised social and physical activities 'collective effervescence.' This feeling is then directed onto people or objects that, thereafter, become sacred.¹⁶ Following Durkheim, Matylda Ciolkosz proposes that the synchronised movements of modern postural yoga, mirroring those modelled by teachers, enable greater acceptance of its philosophical notions and religious origins.¹⁷ This may well be the case for all choreographed exercise in gymnasiums, indeed, the experience of 'collective effervescence' is a motivating factor for participating in group exercise at the gymnasium rather than exercising alone at home. Collective effervescence extends the 'natural high' of endorphins from a private experience to a one that is social. Additional rituals before and after the workout prolong its sociality. At BXR London,

the collective sociality of the fitness enterprise is promoted as 'another family where you make friends and speak about everything after you train.'¹⁸ Harvey Spevak, the chairman of Equinox, asserts that membership is more than access to the gym, 'it's a lifestyle and a community'.¹⁹ Gymnasiums achieve this sense of a collective through protocols and practices that elicit *ritual* practice among the assembled bodies of gym-goers, which include prescribed postures and actions, as well as initiation rites, performance targets, competitive and social events, post-workout commensality, bathing and grooming, membership structures, etc. Eric Chaline compares going to the gym with organised religion, noting the regularity and zeal of adherents and the fact that 'the faithful of both church and gym travel to a separate building, wear special clothes, eat special food and take part in shared rituals that are performed with complete absorption and dedication.'²⁰ Like churches, individuals are brought into (and reform themselves in accordance with) the communities and competing ideologies that characterise each gymnasium.

Chaline's comparison between working out and organised religion is not a trivial one, for the architecture of the gymnasium constructs sometimes fantastic sensorial environments for the staging of ritualised activities. As the Barry's Bootcamp brand puts it, 'This is more than a pile of equipment. It's a magical combination of instructor, lighting, music, and the people in the room... the room becomes an ecosystem of collective accomplishment.'²¹ The CEO of the Equinox fitness chain claims, 'I tell our architects that I want people to walk into our spaces and feel a bit like they're in a temple – not in a religious way but in a spiritual way.'²² We have seen such 'collective' accomplishment before, in the synchronous group movements 'of geometrical exactitude' that Siegfried Kracauer identified as the aesthetic of the 'mass ornament.'²³ The dances of the Tiller Girls that Kracauer fixated on were performed on empty stages, against a curtain or

painted backdrop. In the contemporary gymnasium, formations of bodies and machines are staged in more elaborate and augmented settings, but as with the Tiller Girls, the surfaces and movements of bodies become part of the performance. Mirrored surfaces multiply and enhance the spectacle of 'mass ornament', creating the impression of an infinite space.²⁴ Gymnasiums exploit the full repertoire of experience design – scents, soundscapes and music, light shows, tactile surfaces, manipulations of air quality and movement. The main spin room at Becycle in Berlin, designed by Gotz and Bilchev in 2016, is such a space. It is a black box with acoustic standards equivalent to a recording studio, where DJs play sets at volume levels and with deep base and lighting equivalent to Berlin's famed nightclubs. It recalls spaces of pleasure in which an ecstatic, pharmaceutical release from the pressures of working life are sought and, like them, seeks chemical changes to the body's performance and mood. Many gymnasiums are, like Becycle, theatrically artificial and immersive – tightly wrought, even subterranean spaces, without views in or out, and with highly regulated thresholds for entry. Some manipulate air temperature, humidity, and even gaseous composition to establish a precise microworld. At SP&Co's No. 3 Jubilee Place, the most exclusive of all London's fitness destinations, for example, the reduced levels of oxygen in an advanced altitude chamber make bodies work harder, while giving those who can afford the experience the impression they are elite athletes.

Gentrified gyms

Today, leisure and work are no longer antithetical. What looks like leisure is best understood as an extension of work. The project of the self, or what Paul du Gay identifies as the emergence of an 'entrepreneurial self', is one in which individuals are engaged in a process of perpetual self-actualisation that is motivated by the desire to forge a successful career.²⁵ As Derek Wynne observes, 'the dominance of work as central to life produces a pattern

of leisure practice in which work interests predominate'.²⁶ Frew and McGillivray propose that 'the health and fitness club is the principal space where the quest for, and attainment of, physical capital takes place'.²⁷ This means that gymnasiums are part of the machinery of post-industrial economies. A muscular body attained in non-work time and, ironically, resembling the body of a pre-industrial labourer, expresses the modern subject's consent to the punishing work regimes of many professions. Professional identities are thus moulded through engagement with gymnasiums, which is why they are so frequently co-located with workplaces and their membership subsidised by employers. Amanda Waring, observing the use of health clubs by professionals who work in London's money markets, describes the development and maintenance of a fit and healthy body as an integral part of 'a project of the self' leading to enhanced career opportunities.²⁸ As one participant in Waring's study suggested, boutique fitness clubs are for 'high flyers who want to fly that little bit higher'.²⁹

Gymnasiums targeted at high-income urban professionals invest significantly in real estate and in interior design. Boutique gyms commonly use historic buildings in inner urban precincts to conjure the atmosphere of a traditional gentleman's club – indeed, members of one New York gym are exhorted to 'Think of the Equinox Wall Street Fitness Club as a luxurious 1920s private club'.³⁰ Equinox Wall Street is in the neoclassical Bankers Trust Company Building, built in 1910, and one of New York's Designated Landmarks. [Fig. 1] A number of high-end gyms in London do the same: Equinox Kensington is organised around the art deco dome of the historic Derry and Tom's building, a 1930s department store that was the headquarters of the Biba fashion chain in the 1970s. The Engine Room, a simulated rowing 'studio', is in a Grade II listed converted church in Marylebone. Another_Space, in neighbouring Covent Garden, preserves the exterior brick façade, tripartite sash



Fig. 1: Equinox Wall Street, New York. Photo: Eric Chan.

windows, and lofty interiors of the 1878 building's former use as a market warehouse. Expansive views of the city beyond are a characteristic feature of these upmarket gymnasiums, reminding the gym-goer of the domain over which they have (or seek) mastery. The interior of *Another_Space* was designed by Goldstein Ween with furniture, lighting and finishes 'more akin to those you would find in a boutique hotel than a gym'.³¹ Where less aspirational gyms stress the dedication of their employees to fitness instruction as a vocation, *Another_Space* highlights that its trainers are dancers, choreographers and actors – creative individuals with cultural capital (and concomitant precarious employment in the gig economy).³²

Cultural capital is captured in a myriad of ways. At *Core Collective* in London, *Waind Gohill* and *Potter Architects* included a public art program in their conversion of a mansion block to a bespoke gymnasium. *BLOK Shoreditch*, designed by *Daytrip Studio*, features photography by *Max Oppenheim* and light installations by artist *Ben Cullen Williams*. *Another_Space*, *Core Collective* and their ilk wish to attract design-conscious consumers. Similarly, *Equinox Bond Street* in New York includes a description of the gymnasium's architecture ahead of any information about its ethos, classes or trainers: 'With quintessential New York attitude, the club infuses historic urban architecture with a boundary-pushing downtown vibe. Housed in a former manufacturing building, *Equinox Bond Street* creates a true fitness temple with a soaring 18-foot ceiling, exposed brick, arches, and Corinthian columns.'³³ The interior is by architect *Kara Mann*, who knows her audience well – she also designed *Gwyneth Paltrow's* *Goop* retail pop-up in the *Waldorf Astoria* hotel. Its *Wall Street* club has 'plush, elegant' interiors designed by *David Rockwell*.³⁴ The *Bond* and *Wall Street* clubs are not, however, their most exclusive. *Equinox* operates ninety-six clubs, including a small set of gymnasiums for se(lect) members in

Manhattan and *London* who pay €135 per hour for training sessions. Extending further the submission of the subject's intimate physiology to disciplinary regimes, entry to the exclusive 'E clubs' is by retina scanner, after which exercises are performed in rooms kept at a cool eighteen degrees Celsius to minimise perspiration. At *Equinox*, changing room lockers are custom-built cabinetry in dark timbers and inspired one gym-goer to gush in her blog, 'The women's locker room is beautiful. It's so strange to actually like a locker room but this felt and looked luxurious.'³⁵ In fact, not so strange. *Ceren Doan* observes that what one buys with the higher membership fee is the opportunity to withdraw one's body from the gaze of others. The more "fortified" physical set-up [of changing rooms] in exclusive gyms suggests that "upper-class bodies" are to be handled more discreetly than other bodies and are entitled to more privacy and protection.³⁶

Upmarket gyms work hard to transform the anxieties and shame some associate with nudity in public into a more gentle, sensual frisson. Yearning and desire are transferred to rain shower heads, frosted glass doors, marble surfaces, hot fluffy towels, and expensive hair and beauty products. All because, as *Doan* says, 'due to the assemblage of naked and semi-naked bodies in this confined, shared arena the body and its function become a delicate matter.'³⁷

Gymnasium changing rooms are where beautiful bodies are not so much vehicles for success at work as they are the critical ingredient to attracting the gaze of potential sexual partners. Sex at the gym, rather than sex attributed to one's dedication to the gym, has stimulated a prurient media interest despite sanitary laws in most nations barring sexual activity in gymnasiums. The *David Barton Gyms* in 1990s and 2000s New York were famous as places where 'drag queens worked out in platform heels' and the 'locker rooms doubled as hook-up joints.'³⁸

Barton's most 'nightclubby' gym, according to the *New York Times*, in the former McBurney YMCA, had a fibre-optic light show in the steam room and was the subject of a legal suit by a member who alleged 'emotional distress' from witnessing sex there.³⁹ More recently, Equinox Wall Street was subject to an allegation by an employee that he was dismissed after reporting a valued client had masturbated in the steam room.⁴⁰ The relationship between gay communities and identities and fitness gymnasiums has been comprehensively described in Erick Alvarez's *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture* (2010).⁴¹ The relationship between heterosexual communities and gym culture, on other hand, has been studied primarily in terms of gendered exercise regimes, overlooking the ways in which gyms spawn interpersonal and intimate relationships. We suggest that, while etiquette and the narcissism of self-fashioning discourage gym-goers from interrupting each other's exercise routines to socialise, the addition of cafes (juice and shake bars), bars serving alcohol, spas and jacuzzis, clothing shops, and lounges, promotes the pursuit of extracurricular relationships between gymgoers. We observe that the more exclusive the gymnasium, the more extensive are its pre- and post-workout services and spaces. Indeed, reversing the provision of a gymnasium in a hotel, in 2018 Equinox launched a chain of luxury boutique hotels for health-conscious travellers to complement and extend its fitness brand.

Labouring bodies

Questions of class and professional status are not, however, as simple as a quick review of those gymnasiums that deploy luxury amenities and motifs might at first suggest. It is not the case that the professional classes only attend gymnasiums like the ones discussed above while the less well-off lift, push and pull weights in low-rent garages. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, numerous sociologists, from Max Weber to Georg Simmel to Pierre Bourdieu, studied the use of leisure

as a signifier of social position.⁴² Forms of leisure activity have been shown to convey social class or status.⁴³ Contemporary gymnasiums, however, freely appropriate a broad spectrum of leisure and labour practices from across societal and historical divisions. The gym-goer carries out acts of choreographed exertion, often borrowed from boxing and wrestling, or, as we will see in Crossfit, submits to laborious activities such as moving truck tires like a mechanic or climbing rope ladders like a stevedore. Gymnasiums intended for white-collar professionals uphold the erotic and exotic musculature of the labouring body as an ideal, and occupy the spaces of the underclasses, formerly the domain of dissidents and outsiders. Such gymnasiums participate in the gentrification of cities that further the disappearance of industry from their midst, but do so in ways that suggest they are unaware of or indifferent to the paradox. Soho House in Chicago, for example, occupies a former belting factory, while boasting that the leather boxing equipment in its gymnasium and professional boxing ring was fabricated by the city's last tannery.

The same tensions can be found in Crossfit gymnasiums, referred to by adherents as 'boxes'. Typically occupying the expansive structures and free volumes of former warehouses, factories and garages, these spaces appear to operate *almost* as-found. [Fig. 2] At SuperForce Crossfit, Porte Alegre, Brazil, the architects Grupo Nuvem designed the fit-out for the former car workshop so that the industrial character of the building seamlessly integrates with Crossfit's signature colours of red and black. A car balance has been preserved and co-opted as support for the ropes. Raw timber palettes are employed as seating. Rings and ropes hang from steel beams, scaffold structures and suspended frames are affixed to walls, all of which provide the metaphysical structures for corporeal exertion.⁴⁴ There are few machines because, as Crossfit's founder, Greg Glassman

declares, 'Crossfit doesn't use machines, it builds them.'⁴⁵ Instead, thick rubber mats are ubiquitous in these spaces; capable of withstanding impact, resistant to the dangerous slippage of moving bodies, impervious to the various bodily fluids expelled.⁴⁶ An essential component of the box is the use of free-standing structural frames from which its members are encouraged to hang – the ability to support one's own body weight is part of the ethos. While these boxes-within-boxes contain specialised proprietary fitness equipment, they are designed to resemble spontaneously assembled junkyard scrap, an image furthered by the presence of truck tires, chains, and barrels. These inclusions are geared to underscore Crossfit's ethos that its exercise programme is one 'that can be undertaken anytime, anywhere.'⁴⁷ Crossfit boxes have a porosity that sees trainees move into the street. The opportunistic appropriation of existing buildings and urban environments emphasises the alleged continuity between Crossfit and 'life', and rehashes older arguments about the moral and health value of the 'outdoors' versus indoor environments. [Fig. 3]

While Crossfit's motto that it 'prepares you for life' means no air-conditioning and a makeshift aesthetic, it is patently not preparing bodies for a life employed in physical labour or hardship. The economic incentives of minimal material adaptation make Crossfit accessible for those wishing to establish a 'box', yet its adherents are largely professionals whose working lives do not demand the capacity to move tires from one side of the street to the other. The production-line and manual labouring tropes are rhetorical. Here, the body itself is understood and measured for its productive capacity, its performance, as though a machine. The Crossfit machine is a dynamic one, with an ethos centred on achieving perpetual growth and continual improvements in productivity. Neoliberal conceptions of self-care as individualised responsibility in pursuit of a competitive edge are held in

tension within the locus of the Crossfit box as a site of sociability and togetherness. Crossfit boxes eschew mirrored surfaces, favouring the gaze of the group over self-surveillance: embodied regimes of mutual surveillance allow the monitoring of their relative progress towards shared goals.

Pain and pleasure

The fetishisation of industrial spaces and machines in the fitness sector speaks to a nostalgia for a time when bodily strength in the workplace was more than symbolic, yet gymnasiums also self-consciously and theatrically play with the history of re-appropriation of industrial sites by squatters and artists, for underground clubs, raves and illicit activities. Labouring bodies and industrial spaces hold an appeal that in gymnasium culture shades into the realm of sado-masochistic fantasy. The epigraph 'If you love me, be cruel to me' stems from the 1870 novel *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1835–1895). A contemporary of Sacher-Masoch, the nineteenth-century psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing subsequently coined the words 'masochism' and its counterpart 'sadism'. Medical literature describes masochism as a kind of (sexual) perversion that is premised on a wish to suffer pain, humiliation, and even torture. Brewis and Linstead qualify the paradoxical nature of sadomasochism, for 'it seeks to disorganise, to transgress, to shatter, *but in a disciplined and regulated fashion*.'⁴⁸ Masochism is not confined to the bedroom/dungeon, it can be found in other arenas. Carl Cederstrom and Rickard Grassman, for example, describe a punishing form of corporate culture wherein employees loathe the work they do and are well aware of their misfortunate situation, but derive some form of enjoyment from suffering.⁴⁹ It is easy to extrapolate such reflexive masochism to the fitness gymnasium, where the coupling of pain and pleasure is celebrated and intensified by the co-presence of other participants and the punishing demands of instructors.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: Typical Crossfit box. Photo: Josefina Casals.

Fig. 3: Crossfit occupies the street outside their box in San Antonio. Photo: Mark Bonica.

Observers have likened the machinery of the gymnasium – the treadmills, exercise bikes and weight machines – to instruments of torture such as the rack, the wheel, the cross and the cage.⁵⁰ At the flagship premises of the Rebel brand at Broadgate and St Mary's Axe in London, both designed by Studio C102, the references to the sado-masochistic dungeon extend beyond exercise machines. Subscribers attend classes led by trainers that Rebel gleefully describes as 'the people you love to hate'.⁵¹ The Broadgate venue, licensed to serve alcohol, is marketed as 'dark, underground and dangerous'.⁵² Entry to the space is through a PVC strip welding curtain, beyond which Rebel's neon logo visibly beckons. Service pipes and ductwork are conspicuously exposed. Changing rooms position client lockers of galvanised steel or copper alongside vintage barbers' chairs. All is washed with theatre-grade blue or red lighting. This theatrical staging of a post-industrial, almost post-apocalyptic aesthetic, manifests at Rebel's St Mary's Axe venue, with its reclaimed industrial light fittings from a communist-era Polish ceramics factory and a 1960s German cargo ship. To achieve an uneven quality to the floors at both venues, concrete was poured on different days and the floor left exposed for weeks before sealing with wax to gain a further patina.⁵³

The links between suffering and pleasure are even more pronounced in the architecture of those gymnasiums centred around martial arts. BXR, Marylebone, London, features an industrial chic aesthetic that combines backlit dark-tinted mirrors, bronze detailing, and raw concrete walls with murals by street artist Ben Slow. Partition screens are woven from braided leather made in Italy and resembling whips. A steam room is lined in cool grey marble and mosaic tiles. The space is focused on an elevated boxing ring and the gymnasium's founder, Olia Sardarova, boasts that while half the trainers have qualifications in sports science or nutrition, the other half are professional

fighters. Instead of fixating on screens, people on the treadmills watch the athletes in the ring, thus experiencing the pain of exertion while vicariously and voyeuristically enjoying the pain boxers inflict on each other. A similar focus on an elevated boxing ring can be found at The Burrow Life, located on a thousand square metre industrial site close to the airport in Kuwait. Its core classes are in Muay Thai kickboxing. Burrow Life's coaches – eleven men and two women – are fighters from Russia, Kenya, Spain, Greece, Panama, Iran, France, the UK and the United States. The interiors, designed by Lab100 Design Studio in 2015, are enclosed by walls of split concrete blocks, the roughness of which repels touch. A feature wall is of polished steel, floors are black vinyl and a spiral staircase is black steel. The training spaces are all top lit, creating a subterranean atmosphere. The Burrow homepage features a moody, dark and erotic film, in which men's bodies are sensuously cropped. The camera slowly pans on rivulets of sweat and close-ups of limbs entangled in combat and engorged muscle flash across the screen. Still images on the website include a close-up of a pair of men's hands inserting acupuncture needles into a muscular and tattooed bicep.⁵⁴ Another still, of the changing room, is taken from floor level as though the photographer was lying prostrate on the tiles.

Wellness

Considered essential to the construction of an identity of personal achievement and/or success, labour force self-monitoring is today an essential precondition of capital accumulation.⁵⁵ This form of biopolitical self-governance is perhaps most overtly expressed in the now ubiquitous organisational focus on health. As David Harvey observes, under capitalism sickness is defined as an inability to work.⁵⁶ Gymnasium goers make an overt commitment to wellness and, thus, to work. The outcome is literally wrought upon the body, at the same time as one's status at work is potentially enhanced. The medicalisation of fitness is most apparent in the

appropriation of clinical tropes. These seem, at first, to track in two directions – alternative or holistic medicine, and science-based western medicine. The first is characterised by plants and greenery, ‘oriental’ and exotic artefacts, burning incense, and neat rows of yoga mats. The second by hygienic white surfaces, stainless steel details, and a lack of ornamentation. Closer inspection finds the two directions increasingly blurred.

Lauren Bird notes that while yoga studios are spaces for secular fitness, unlike other gymnasiums they are often decorated with religious icons – mandalas, Tibetan prayer flags, murtis – in order to emphasise the idea of postural yoga as an antidote to the stresses of modern Western lifestyles through the integration of spirituality and traditional Hindu knowledge.⁵⁷ The interiors of these spaces are highly contrived, albeit in a bid for authenticity. There are no machines, only mats, cushions, blocks and ropes. To facilitate stretching and ‘detoxification’, the spaces may be warmer than in other gymnasiums, particularly in Bikram hot yoga and heated Vinyasa or power yoga, where the rooms are a very warm thirty-two to thirty-seven degrees Celsius with 40 percent humidity. Music is typically quiet, tonal, and instrumental, interspersed with bird and whale song. The idea that the space itself might contribute to ‘healing’ is widely held, and best captured in the inclusion of walls of Himalayan rock salt blocks in Virgin Active’s gym in Singapore and at Total Fusion Platinum in Brisbane, Australia. The ions from the salt are supposed to calm and detoxify the body, purify the air and assist with lung capacity.

The yoga spaces that Bird focused on were not the work of architects. Upmarket yoga studios engaging architects eschew the flotsam and jetsam of touristic forms of spiritualism. At MoveYoga, Melbourne, architects Hecker Guthrie employ a minimalist aesthetic of lime-washed timber floors, paper Paris au Moi lanterns, and walls lined with

vertical paper-washed pine half dowels. [Fig. 4a, 4b] Artfully placed potted plants and Japanese ceramics are set against the white walls of the former warehouse. The aesthetic is cool and bare, although the rooms themselves are infrared heated. The investment in high-end architecture at MoveYoga reflects yoga’s uptake among a wealthier, design-conscious clientele, for whom physical exercise is a process of releasing work-induced stress and the pursuit of wellness and beauty. ‘Wellness’ gymnasiums walk a delicate line between romantic evocations of nature and traditional cultures, and the techniques and imagery of advanced medicine. ‘Nature’ operates ambiguously in these settings as paradise lost and a call to one’s authentic ‘natural’ self, and manifests as ornament and scenography. At the Active Therapy Centre R3 in Barcelona, indirect artificial lighting ‘allows the lengthening of daylight hours’.⁵⁸ In other words, nature is to be improved upon, just as the natural body is to be improved. The visual aesthetic speaks of a pre-industrial age, but atmospheres are carefully manufactured using artificial light and heating to mitigate against natural conditions. Such simulation reaches a climax at Fly, London, a yoga studio with a cinema wall onto which are projected views of wilderness places – unsullied by people – where one might vacation. [Fig. 5]

Corpor(e)al

Michel Foucault famously spoke of the ideal figure of the soldier as one that can be made ‘out of a formless clay, an inept body, the machine required can be constructed.’⁵⁹ As the classical age ‘discovered the body as object and target of power’ Foucault wrote that it was easy enough to find signs of the increasing attention paid to the body, ‘to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces.’⁶⁰ The narrative of man-the-machine played out not only on the anatomic-metaphysical – as the focus of physicians and philosophers – but also on the techno-political register, ‘which was constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical

and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body.⁶¹ Today, in contemporary conditions of mediated war, the machine-like fit soldier is functionally superfluous. This has not deterred gymnasiums from deploying military-themed practices and spaces.

Repurposed military training regimes that draw on 'the bodily techniques, rhythmic practices, and spatial awareness developed in traditional sequestered sites of military discipline' now form 'one of the fastest growing sectors of a burgeoning commercial fitness and leisure market'.⁶² The largest is BMF, founded in 1999 as British Military Fitness but rebranded Be Military Fit in 2018 when the company was purchased by television adventurer Bear Grylls. Their cast of ex-service members train over thirteen thousand people weekly across 140 public parks in the UK.⁶³ The varied landscapes of public parks, each with a rich social and political history, are co-opted as if they were ready-made for military exercises. Grassy knolls, swales and ha-ha's become inclined resistance surfaces, trenches and obstacles. The unpredictability of weather serves an atmosphere of authenticity and hostile conditions permit the feeling of having prevailed together just as soldiers do.⁶⁴

Indoor gymnasiums must find other ways to stimulate muscular bonding and simulate the hardships of (an older style of) military experience. They do so in a manner that relies on stylised abstractions of natural landscapes. Planet Commando on the outskirts of Brisbane is an adventure course-cum-recreation centre in a former factory warehouse that promotes a 'unique adrenaline fitness experience'.⁶⁵ Subjects are guided towards feats of mental fortitude and physical endurance. [Fig. 6a, 6b] It was founded by a former French SAS paratrooper, Denis Payan who, with his family, designed and constructed a set of obstacles, platforms and plinths from timber

logs, planks, boards and rope, that look as though they were hastily assembled 'ad hoc' by 'soldiers'. The most distinctive quality of the construction is the application of an over-scaled camouflage pattern to panels and walls. Camouflage, as Jane Tynan observes in relationship to its application in fashion, materialises both 'the appetite for mediated representations of war' and the way in which 'fears and desires about conflict focus on the body'.⁶⁶ Camouflage corrals key components of militarist ideologies with a mediated aesthetics at a time of perpetual and normalised war.⁶⁷ Its ubiquity in boot camp-style gymnasiums is anything but innocent or incidental.

Barry's Bootcamps, or just Barry's as it is increasingly known, distort the expressive functionality of camouflage into an architecturally-scaled wall-paper.⁶⁸ This sits as a complement to the iconic palette of Barry's studios, with their stark black walls and red lighting. The red lighting is so intense and unrelieved that Barry's gymnasiums have hazard tape around the machines to prevent collisions in the barely illuminated rooms. Barry's exploit the disinhibiting effect of red light and its historic association with brothels, but more importantly signals the relationship between infra-red vision and war.⁶⁹ [Fig. 7] Rehearsing familiar regimes of bodily discipline, Barry's dedicate each day of the week to different parts of the body. Tuesday, for example, is Butt and Legs day. Barry's explicitly disassemble and reassemble the body as a mitochondrially-enhanced exquisite corpse. Barry's body is, literally, Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs – decentred, in a process of perpetual becoming.

Conclusion

In Foucault's view, practices of the self are not invented by subjects themselves but rather are 'proposed, suggested and imposed on them by one's culture, society and social group'.⁷⁰ We would also include the assemblages of markets, machines



Fig. 4a



Fig. 5

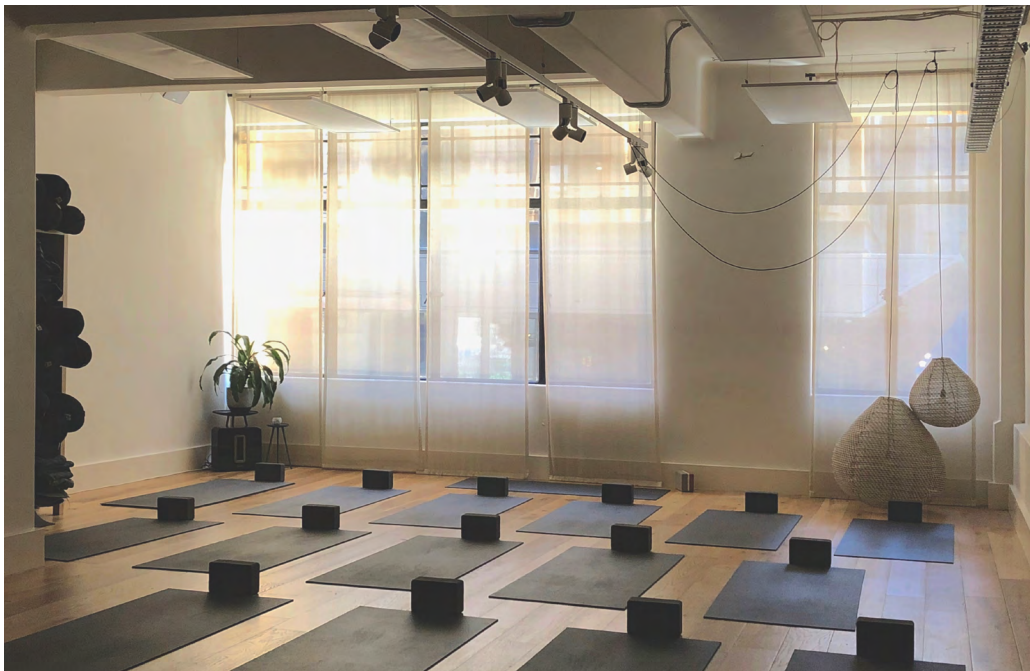


Fig. 4b

Fig. 4a, 4b: MoveYoga, Melbourne, views of the interior designed Hecker Guthrie. Photos: Marita Kaji-O'Grady.

Fig. 5: Fly London's simulated views. Photo: Josiah Craven, courtesy of Fly London.

and matter that produce trans-individual effects. Whereas for Karl Marx the production process made commodities that were to be consumed by subjects, Guattari and Maurizio Lazzarato diagnose the contemporary situation as one in which the production process makes subjects and regulates desires. Capitalism produces individual subjects within pre-formed identities – boss, reckless entrepreneur, caring mother, environmental activist, sportsman – at the same time as it de-subjectifies and fragments us into component parts of a bigger assemblage, for example as data. Guattari explains, ‘it is not the facts of language use nor even of communication that generate subjectivity. On some level, subjectivity is manufactured collectively just like energy, electricity or aluminium.’⁷¹ Lazzarato elaborates on Guattari’s thesis, writing:

The production of subjectivity involves expression machines that can just as easily be extra-human and extra-personal (systems that are machinic, economic, social, technological, and so forth) as they can be infra-human and infra-personal (systems of perception, memorisation and idea production, sensibility, affect, etcetera).⁷²

We have seen how the gymnasium constitutes such an extra-personal expression machine. It brings together spatial settings and architectural forms, with resistance machines and repetitive exercises, performance measurement tools and data, membership arrangements, competitions, classes and events, trainers and social hierarchies, and images of exemplary bodies and spaces that circulate through multiple communication channels. Yet, the gymnasium offers visceral experiences that can be intensely personal, even intimate. The workout may well be a transpersonal, externally-mandated process for the normalisation of the body and construction of subjectivities, but it also is one of the few spaces, outside of the bedroom, where bodies are vulnerable to each other and where human touch is exchanged. The convergence of the

intimate and the institutional is possible because the body itself is at once intensely and wholly you, *and* a public artefact composed of distinct parts and actions that can be judged and assessed outside feeling.

The gymnasium regime requires bodies to first be understood as an assemblage of parts for repair, maintenance, improvement, and display. In turn, the architecture of the gymnasium enables assemblies of bodies and machines by operating as an open-ended, sensually-rich and symbolically-loaded ecosystem in which connections can be perpetually made and unmade. Only an open-ended, incomplete, unfinished body-in-parts is able to integrate the machine as prosthetic and partner. In the gym, while legs, lungs and a stationary bicycle convene as an assemblage for the transformation of energy into movement and muscle, a second machine, independent from the first and constituted by eyes, ears, mind, screens and headphones, consumes a curated soundtrack. A third machine takes in the trainer, the mirrored walls and the synchronised movements of all those in the spin class. It is powered by a fourth machine, of member fees, salaries, legal contracts, marketing, real estate development. The gym-goer operates without regard to this fourth machine. He moves from bicycle to changing room, touched by marble basins and tumble-dried towels, washed by heated water and scented shampoos. Each sensation, each connection is orchestrated such that commercial transactions have the seductive quality of a personal encounter. Every workout confirms her self-discipline, her moral fortitude. Each time she chooses between yoga here or cardio there, she confirms who she is, at least for now.



Fig. 6a



Fig. 6b



Fig. 7

Fig. 6a, 6b: Interior views of Planet Commando. Photos: Planet Commando.

Fig. 7: Barry's Bootcamp, Lafayette, New York. Photo: Author.

Notes

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