



BEAUTY & GROOMING

Work it out: keeping fit at London's most stylish gyms

Words by Emma O'Kelly

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Boutique and home gyms in the capital are thinking outside the sweatbox with hi-tech spaces that combine wellness and leisure with luxury design

My neighbour recently threw out her exercise bike. As a former model, she works out every day, yet, like many Londoners, she realised her gym needed an update. The bike has been replaced by a TRX (total resistance exercise), some compact weights and medicine balls that can be tidied away when the space morphs into a screening room for the kids. New technology and fitness trends, including HIIT (high intensity interval training), Pilates, boxing and yoga, mean a treadmill doesn't cut it anymore.

Erfan Azadi, founder of London architecture practice Duck and Shed, recently created an "exercise basement" in a Primrose Hill mansion with a rubber floor, a gym wall and a projector. It acts as a yoga and pilates studio, a space for HIIT and a movie theatre. "A home gym today needs to be a flexible space," he says.

Changes in London planning laws have also affected home gym design. In 2015, to stem the spread of "iceberg houses" (those with more space underground than above), Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council decreed that basement digs must be single storey and half the size of the existing garden. This has led to a boom in boutique gyms in the area, which look more hipster hotel than utilitarian sweatbox.



At Core Collective in Kensington, a concierge-style front desk replaces swipe machines, changing rooms are luxurious and a restaurant and juice bar serve wholesome fare such as “serotonin specials” and sirtfood salads. Phil Waind of Waind Gohil + Potter Architects designed the space and a second site in St John’s Wood, which opens later this year. “Boutique gyms are expanding all over London and we are creating them to be bespoke luxury spaces that constantly evolve with technology and lighting,” he says. Cafés, treatment rooms, saunas and steam rooms add a “wellness” component to exercise classes and lots of mirrors encourage selfies and social media buzz.

KXU in Chelsea is the first commercial space by interior designer Peter Mikic, who is well-versed in creating upscale home gyms. “I wanted to create somewhere younger, less glitzy, more industrial,” he says of a design that features marble and bronze fittings, raw concrete surfaces and exposed brickwork. “A gym always has to stimulate the senses as well as the body.” 3, St James’s Square, designed by spa experts Sparestudio, ups the ante. With a meditation dome and a glass-roofed sauna, as well as a 3D bodyscanner and DNA swab testing that allow members to create personalised training and nutrition packages, it also has a scent bar, three sommeliers, a champagne bar and butler service.

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In home gyms, too, wellness is now a key component of any design. “People want to work out faster and smarter,” says Guy Matheson, associate director of London architects SHH, which specialises in luxury residential projects. “Almost all our clients now demand a gym with leisure space. Typically, one small room is dedicated to equipment while an adjacent area caters to wellness.” In the basement of a 26,500sq ft Grade-II listed house in Harley Street, Matheson created a hairdressing station, nail bar, Bikram Yoga room (with TV) that reaches 40°C, a hammam, sauna, swimming pool and a dancing pole under a domed roof. “The leisure element is a key component in every gym design,” says Matheson.



And that’s because leisure takes time. Getting to the spa, or booking an out-of-town retreat requires effort. “For time-starved Londoners, even the 30-minute journey to the gym is too long, and people who travel all the time want continuity in their workout programmes,” explains a spokesman at Bodyism. Last year, the Notting Hill fitness Mecca began offering tailored services to guests at The Lanesborough hotel and residents of Mayfair development Burlington Gate. This year, those living at Holland Park Villas will also have access to Bodyism’s personal trainers, its menu, treatment rooms and a 20-metre pool without having to leave their luxurious confines.

Elsewhere, developers are incorporating facilities into their apartments. At Lincoln Square in the City, Spanish design star Patricia Urquiola is devising a gym, spa, library and dining room that echo such five-star hotels as the Mandarin Oriental in Barcelona for which she is famous. When it opens this summer, residents of all 202 apartments will have access to Urquiola's brand of subtle elegance.

"Gyms are often so masculine. In the expected shades of 'wipeable' dark grey and red, they can be sterile places," says London interior designer Sophie Ashby. She has created apartments and the gym at One Crown Place, a development of 246 apartments on edge of the City. "The floor was based on the amalgamated lines of netball, basketball and hockey courts. We referenced old sports hall features such as climbing bars and brought in lots of plants." She adds: "In the apartments we combined modern luxury and handcrafted traditions, and I didn't see why the gym should be excluded from this concept."



Waind predicts that by the end of 2018 boutique gyms in London will have reached saturation point. Even so, exercise and wellness trends will still be the drivers in gym design. "We adapt our gyms to the London market, which is still behind the US in terms of innovation," he claims, "but the next exercise trend will come from there, like it always does."