



TYPOLOGY GYMNASIUM

Invented by the Ancient Greeks, the gym has served as a social institution that has impacted not only the body but also the mind, writes *Tom Wilkinson*

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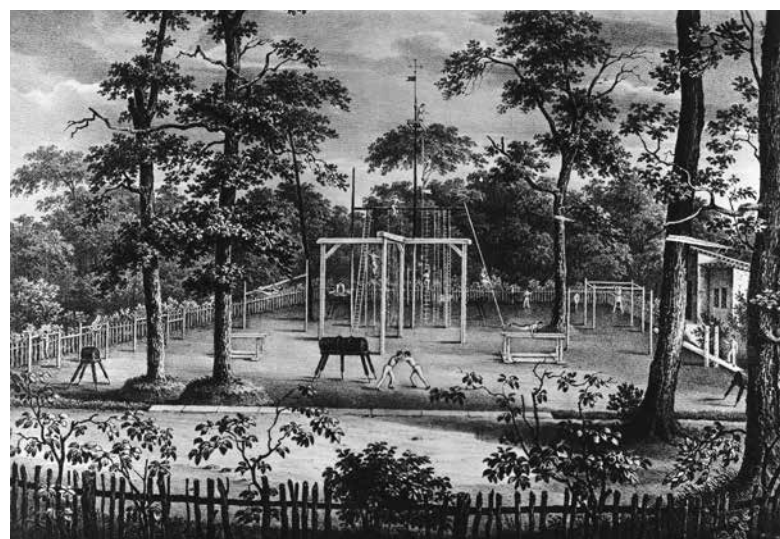




NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES / ALAMY



(Opening page) a contender for Mr Olympia in 2013 demonstrates the limits of bodily reconfiguration (Previous page) a punchbag in a Rio gym photographed by Miguel Rio Branco



JULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY IMAGES

(This spread, clockwise from top left) a fanciful reconstruction of activities in the Greek gymnasium; Hippolyte Triat opened the first commercial gym in Paris in 1847; the first modern gymnasium had been opened outside Berlin by Friedrich Jahn in 1811

‘I do hope it’ll make me grow large again’, Alice says on finding the bottle marked ‘DRINK ME’, ‘for really I’m quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!’ We all know the consequences of that decision: ‘she went on growing, and growing, and very soon had to kneel down on the floor ... and, as a last resource, she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney.’

Although Alice’s adventure is presented as an ill-advised drug experiment with nightmarish results, there are many people today who clamour for such experiences. Admittedly, the effects of anabolic steroids are not quite so dramatic, yet the swelling body that expands to fill the area around it is undoubtedly part of the fantasy of committed weightlifters, altogether tired of being such tiny little things. The aim of this

most obtrusive form of self-modification – in an age permeated by the American ideology of self-improvement, the McMansion and the SUV – is to increase one’s occupancy of space. And the space in which this transformation occurs is not a rabbit’s house but a gym.

These laboratories of the self are now ubiquitous in Western cities (and in many other places besides), where they are one of the few high-street businesses to have escaped the curse of online shopping. They can also be found in malls, hotels, offices, apartment buildings and, of course, attached to schools and universities. For the gymnasium is a somewhat loose type, which I have expanded to incorporate all facilities for athletic activity, albeit with a focus on participation rather than spectatorship. The activities they

encompass are also diverse, from the free weightlifting of the classic muscle gym, to cardiovascular training, yoga and aerobics, as well as racquet sports, ball games and boxing. These all have their own spatial requirements, some of which can be jointly accommodated in the multi-sports hall; there is also a general necessity for ancillary spaces such as changing rooms, showers, along with storage and reception areas.

The typology of the gym is not only a history of the configuration of these elements, but also of its changing social significance. It has an extensive hinterland, although the type has fundamentally altered since the Greeks invented it. The Hellenic gym was a semi-sacred institution, only for the use of men, who exercised there naked (the root word *gymnós* means ‘naked’); for

ATELIER JACOBI



‘The modern gym begins with the rise of the nation state and the woeful effects that industrialisation was having on the health of populations’



convenience, they tied their foreskins with a thong known as a dog’s lead and bound it to their waists. The heart of the gym was the palaestra, a colonnaded courtyard with a sandy floor in which wrestling, and other combat sports, took place. There was usually also a changing room, an oiling room (one oiled before and after exercise), perhaps a running track and space for exercising in bad weather, and lecture rooms. These last were necessary because the gym was also the place where teaching occurred; as Eric Chaline claims in his history of the type, *The Temple of Perfection*, ‘the gymnasium was the Ancient Greek world’s most important social institution’, where men and boys ‘were educated and trained for war and citizenship, and where they developed their sense of self’. ‘It was also’, he adds, ‘the place where they

experienced their first sexual relationships.’ The university grew out of the gym, too: Plato established his school at the Academy, which was initially a gym, and Aristotle founded his own educational institution at another gym, the Lyceum (root of the French *lycée*). The healthy body came before the healthy mind.

The Grecian ideal of the muscular male body is often referred to by contemporary gym-goers, but the modern gym begins with the rise of the nation state and the woeful effects that industrialisation was having on the health of populations. This resulted in volunteers being turned away from the armed forces in increasing numbers – a headache for the rulers of perpetually warring countries. After some vague stirrings of antiquarian interest, and spurred on by Enlightenment



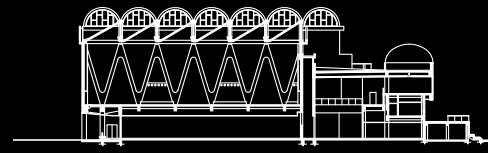
GONZALES PHOTO / ALAMY

(Clockwise from top left) Marcel Breuer’s 1926 apartment for Erwin Piscator, mocked by Brecht (among others); the original branch of Gold’s Gym opened in Venice Beach in 1965 – it is now a huge global chain, but this building was demolished in 2014; Muscle Beach, Los Angeles, the world’s most famous venue for muscular exhibitionists, is adorned with concrete sculptures; synchronised exercises on the roof of the Peckham Pioneer Health Centre in 1946



WENDY CONNETT / ALAMY

**Tianjin University
Gym, China
Atelier Li Xinggang
2015**



section AA

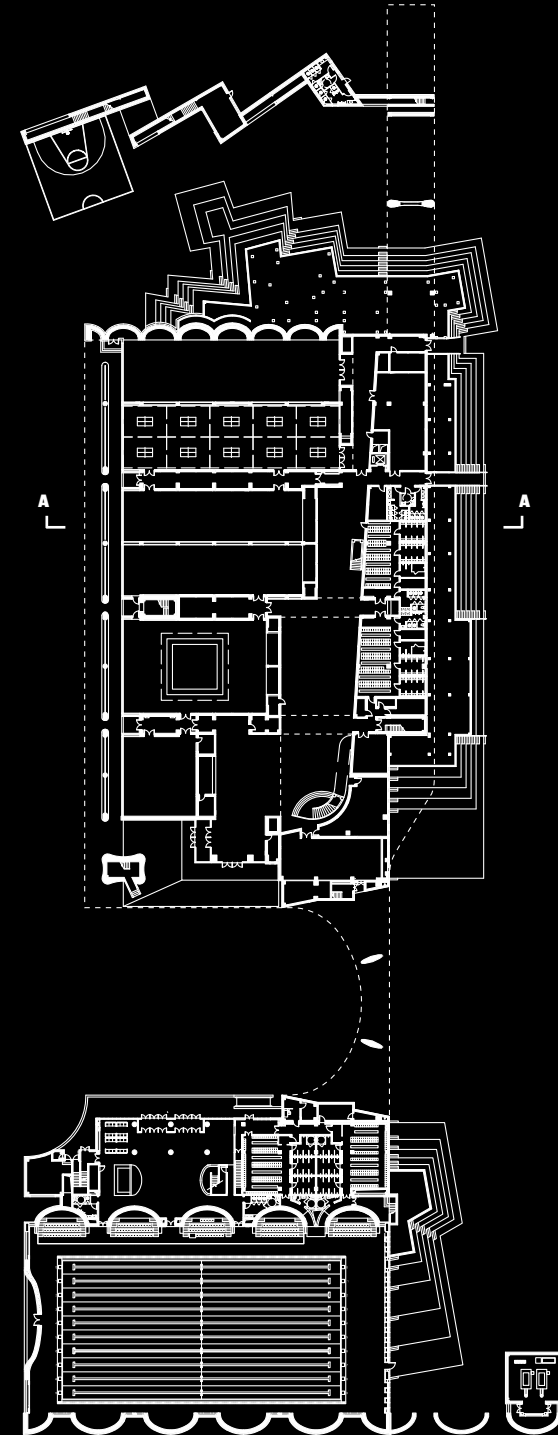


SUN HAITING



ZHANG QIANXI

While British universities continue to build facilities they can ill afford in order to attract higher-fee-paying Chinese students, the Chinese have begun to do the same and produced a gym that not only surpasses most Western efforts of the postwar period but even rivals that of the Romans. The 18,300m² complex at Tianjin University encompasses a multi-purpose sports hall and a swimming pool, the two being linked by a bridge; another elevated spur houses a covered running track. The vaulted roofs of the two main buildings are supported by massive conical forms in shuttered concrete and zigzagging fair-faced struts, with light filtering down through apertures reminiscent of the thermal windows of Roman baths. The whole is sheathed in an envelope of red brick.



ground floor plan



ROMAN BEZJAK

(Clockwise from top left) a Russian gym c1973; the concert and gymnastics centre in Yerevan known simply as Hamalir (meaning 'complex') opened in 1983 – it was sold for redevelopment in 2014; the

controversial Palace of Concerts and Sports in Vilnius, built on the site of a Jewish graveyard in 1971; the Palace of Youth and Sports in Pristina, Kosovo, known as Boro and Ramiz, opened in 1977



DARMON RICHTER

The 19th century saw the arrival of the *Turnvereine* in the United States, imported by exiles after 1848, and in France the establishment of a grandiose, open-air *Gymnase Normal, Militaire et Civil* on the future site of the Eiffel Tower in 1820. This centralised facility failed, but was eventually followed by the mandatory provision of *lycée* gyms and compulsory physical education. This idea soon spread across Europe – in the UK, however, the development of gyms was left to individual entrepreneurs and charitable groups. The YMCA was founded in 1844, advocating a brand of muscular Christianity that would only acquire its ironic connotations later, and in 1858 Archibald MacLaren opened a gym in Oxford. Funded by the university, the domed, two-storey building was centrally heated and included gym

equipment, space for fencing, and a huge tree trunk in the atrium for climbing.

The transformation of gym-going from a state-sanctioned militarisation of the population's bodies to an individualistic pursuit of self-improvement was subtle and, as the semi-fascist figures of Arnie and Captain America suggest, incomplete. In Chalaine's view, the most significant invention for 19th-century gymnastic culture was the camera; this permitted not only the diffusion of new ideals of physical beauty (these days especially via Instagram), but also allowed one to envision oneself in an entirely new way – the irresistible prelude to reconfiguration. Gym entrepreneurs played an important role too: charismatic former circus strongmen turned themselves into celebrities, offering correspondence courses, branded equipment

and gyms. Hippolyte Triat who, legend has it, had been kidnapped as a child and sold to a circus troupe, opened the first commercial gyms in 1847 in Paris and developed the system of graduated metal weights.

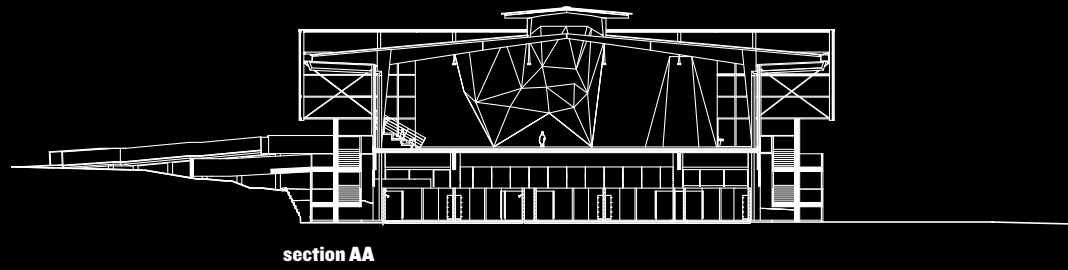
In the early years of the 20th century, the ideal of the healthy body that had grown out of a reaction to industrialisation's stunting effects developed into German *Körperkultur*, with an emphasis on Swedish callisthenics, sunbathing and nudism. This had an impact on architecture, influencing the classical Modernist sun terrace, so often depicted as the scene of synchronised frolics. Whether on the roof of the Bauhaus or the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, south London, these were stages for the publicisation of modern design's beneficial effects. In the latter case, the eugenically inclined founders intended the

**School gymnasium,
Abidjan, Ivory Coast**
Koffi and Diabaté
Architectes
2016

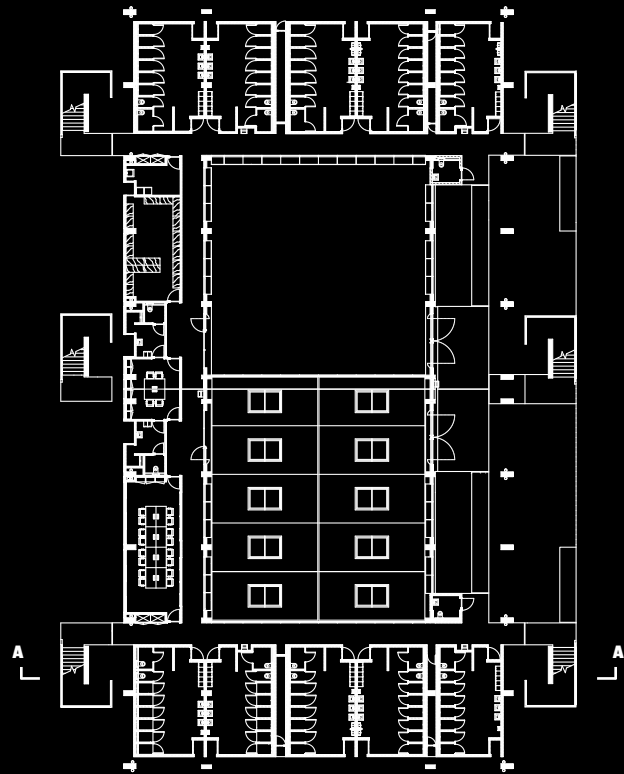


BOTH IMAGES: FRANÇOIS-XAVIER GBRE

This school gym in Abidjan, though large, is a more frugal example of the type. Necessity becomes a virtue, however, thanks to an elegantly lightweight design that shrouds the concrete and steel structure of the building in a double skin of metal mesh, with a striking red external layer. This perforated covering allows light and air to penetrate the building, cooling and illuminating it naturally. Within the base are changing rooms, a lecture hall and a gym, while upstairs are several multi-purpose sports pitches, seating for 200 spectators and what the designers claim is the first indoor climbing wall in West Africa.



section AA



ground floor plan

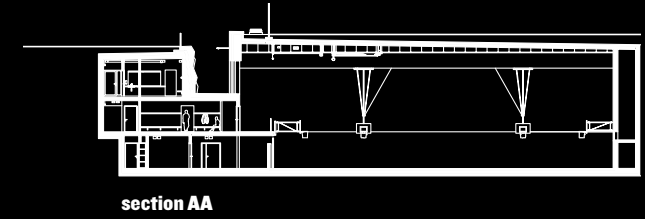


**School gymnasium extension,
Wettingen, Switzerland**
:mlzd
2016

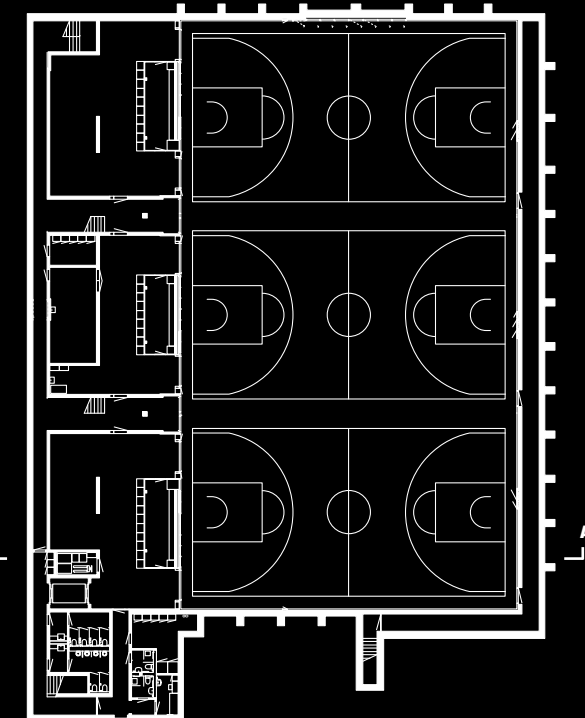


BOTH IMAGES: ARIEL HUBER PHOTOGRAPHY

In recent years, an enormous amount of money has been poured into Swiss schools, with some impressive results. While these are generally subtly designed, there are exceptions – such as the towering and somewhat flashy school at Leutschenbach by Christian Kerez, with its double-height, panoramic top-floor gym. Taking a diametrically opposed approach is a more recent gym by architects :mlzd at a school based in a historic monastery in Wettingen. At the time of the building's conversion in 1979, the new swimming pool and sports hall were constructed underground to preserve the appearance of the original structure. The recent gym extension joins these subterranean facilities, into which daylight enters freely via windows lining the sunken passageway through which students access the building. The architects have given character to this potentially drab corridor by articulating its other wall with a complex planar play of varyingly profiled concrete blocks.



section AA



lower ground floor plan





ALBERTO COSI / ITALIAN CONNECTION



ROGER FREI



ANA KOSTIC

(Clockwise from top left) Chiang Mai Sports Hall, constructed from bamboo by Chiangmai Life Architects in 2017; school gym in Linthal, Switzerland, by Spoerri Thommen, 2016; gym in a towering former Yugoslavian restaurant in Belgrade, which was converted in 2008

‘Jane Fonda had converted a generation to bouncing about in leg warmers, which required new, more-spacious layouts’

activities occurring on, and in, their transparent building to suck in the most genetically suitable material from the surrounding area for improvement. Gymnastic facilities were also designed for private homes, with Breuer’s Berlin apartment for theatrical impresario Erwin Piscator particularly notorious: the bedroom, *American Psycho* style, featured a climbing frame and boxing maize ball.

It was in the US, however, that the modern commercial gym developed, albeit from incongruously socialistic roots. Today, Muscle Beach is associated with Venice in LA, but the original was up the coast in Santa Monica and the facility was established by the Works Progress Administration in 1934 as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Free to all and increasingly populated by gays, the Santa

Monica version was shut down by the city in 1959, with a judge decrying it ‘freakish, homoerotic and unbalanced’. The cat was out of the bag, however, and entrepreneurs like Vic Tanny opened gym chains with an eye to a broader public than the rubber-matted, jockstrap-stinking basements beloved of bodybuilders. Instead, cleanliness, piped music (not an entirely new invention: the Greeks had exercised to the sounds of the flute) and new trends like aerobics were designed to appeal to middle-class professionals and women. Jane Fonda had converted a generation to leg-warmered bouncing about, and this required new, more-spacious layouts with sprung floors and segregated changing facilities.

In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, state-sponsored gyms flourished, with increasingly

expressionistic form post Stalin. These often combined exercise facilities with concert halls, demonstrating a distinctively non-capitalist, non-hierarchical conception of leisure. That’s gone now, replaced by a global dissemination of the American-style gym chain – in tandem with its calorific food and sedentary lifestyle.

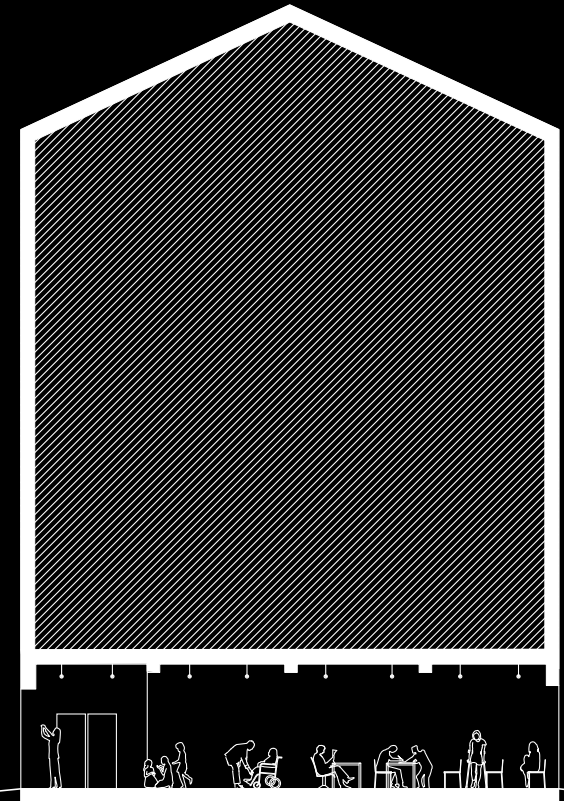
The middle-class imperative of physical cultivation cannot be understood without the context of generalised obesity, but we all know which tendency is winning: 75 per cent of Egyptians are now overweight, to cite one particularly appalling statistic. No amount of ‘nudge theory’ – through which authorities attempt to transform all buildings into exercise facilities by emphasising the stairs, for instance – is going to stop this runaway augmentation of the self.

Gym for people with disabilities, Granada, Spain Serrano + Baquero, 2015

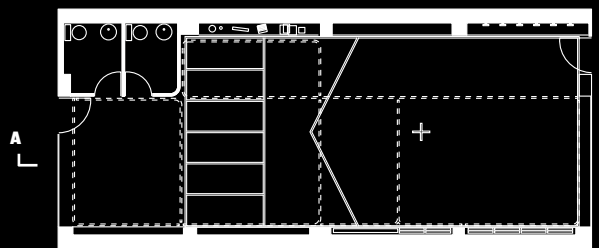


BOTH IMAGES: JAVIER CALLEJAS

Gyms are not necessarily democratic spaces. Quite apart from the macho, grunt-filled atmosphere of the muscle gym, which can be off-putting to most people, they are often downright exclusionary to women, the poor, fat people and those with disabilities. Countering this last tendency is a recent conversion by Spanish architects Serrano + Baquero, which has transformed a small, double-aspect commercial unit in a suburb of Granada into a gym specifically for disabled people. The conversion has been accomplished with the lightest of touches: the unit is at ground level, obviating the need for a ramp and, inside, all partitions have been removed. Instead, translucent curtains can be used to divide the room as required; these also provide privacy for the users of this otherwise entirely transparent space.



section AA



ground floor plan

