



Special Design Needs When Expanding or Renovating Big Clubs

By Hervey Lavoie

OHLSON LAVOIE
COLLABORATIVE

616 E SPEER BLVD
DENVER, COLORADO
80203-4213
T: 303.294.9244
F: 303.294.9440
www.olcdesigns.com

The industry of athletic clubs and fitness centers is composed of small clubs – less than 35,000 SF and big clubs – greater than 35,000 SF. This dividing line is quite arbitrary, and not intended to draw a line in the sand. Size of club, in my experience, is quite meaningful to those who specialize in planning and design of expansion/renovation projects in an active, open-for-business facility. Certainly a 34,000 SF club is still a good size building, a substantial financial risk and could benefit from many of the insights that follow. Unlike small dogs who think and act like they are big dogs, if you think and act like you are a big club, then you probably are.

Many big clubs today got that way through years of incremental additions and conversions. As a result, they are sometimes burdened by a building organization far different than what would be considered ideal if given the luxury 20 or 30 years ago of constructing the facility from scratch as a single phase, multi-million dollar development. Now these older big clubs often find themselves competing against fresh new large facilities with optimized designs. As big clubs contemplate ambitious improvement plans as a way of holding onto or even gaining market share in the face of big new competition, they should focus on some critical challenges that are unique to large clubs.

Wayfinding: The concern here is not that people will get lost in your building. The importance of enhanced wayfinding exists as an opportunity to ease and enrich your members' experience as they circulate from point "A" to point "B". Yes, big clubs with sprawling floor plans can have confusing circulation patterns. When new attractions are added, attention must be paid to creation of intuitively comprehensible and generously defined pathways, including open and user friendly stairways. If directional signage is needed, you know there is a problem. Open planning can go a long way toward preventing the way finding experience from suffering "Death by Corridor".

Diverse User Populations: Big clubs cannot afford to cater to a single user population. Successful big clubs have built their prosperity on satisfying member constituencies such as families and singles, seniors and young adults, children and youth, men and women, serious athletes and weekend warriors, tennis players and swimmers, etc. It is quite common that a club improvement that gives something new to one user group will end up taking something away from another, such as when a racquetball court is converted to a spinning studio. It inevitably falls upon the designer to manage this give and take so that each group feels like a winner in the end. Wow Factor: One way to soften the blow for a member group that will lose ground in a big club improvement project is to include a common area "wow factor" upgrade that raises the bar for all members, such as a new member lounge, a café upgrade, more convenient parking or an impressive new club entry lobby. Big clubs can benefit more from a "wow factor" investment than small clubs.

Biting the Bullet: Members are an adaptable species and can often become blind to serious flaws in a big club layout, such as inconvenient parking, narrow hallways, aging HVAC equipment, low ceilings or poor food and beverage location..... that is until a new player in the market comes along with a shiny new facility that has none of these negatives. These painful, long-postponed, course corrections for past errors of design judgment are different for every club. Many older large clubs have been enjoying "grandfathered" immunity to modern codes and regulations including ADA accessibility, fire prevention and life safety requirements. Such immunity comes with both risk and increased insurance premiums. Most owners and operators are aware of their weaknesses and know that sooner or later these weaknesses will need to be addressed - which means funds diverted from more visible, more popular improvement options.

Phasing and Logistics: Construction work on an active, functioning club building is like major surgery on a living breathing patient - complicated. Planning for intelligent phasing and cost-effective logistics is the construction equivalent of surgical anesthesia. Big clubs have more options for the temporary relocations needed to execute improvement programs. The key is to involve the entire multi-discipline project team - designer, operator and contractor.

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Big club survival is a high stakes game of strategic differentiation. The whole club can be greater than the sum of its parts when the big picture is understood and planning priority given to creating venues for cultivation of social connectivity. It is a beautiful thing when a "Fitness Center" makes the magical leap to "Athletic Club".

