

The Importance of Facility Design in the Business of Wellness

By: Hervey R. Lavoie

There are 950 medically affiliated, membership supported fitness clubs in the USA, per the Medical Fitness Association, and it's a number they expect to rise to 1,075 by 2010. This is a fast growing healthcare segment, both in urban and rural markets. It is driven by hospitals' realization that their community healthcare mission must expand beyond sick care and provide for well care.

This is the preventative side of healthcare and is built on the growing acceptance of the notion that "exercise is medicine." Healthcare is not only for the treatment of disease, but also the prevention of disease. Roughly seventy-five percent of all hospitalized patients today are recovering from illness or injury related to unhealthy lifestyle choices and this epidemic is on the rise. Now, more than ever, healthcare providers are recognizing the long term value of preventative measures. But how does one take this awareness and translate it into a successful and profitable business solution? And how is this business solution best accommodated in a building and what do we call this building?

The possibilities are many! Does it really matter if they are called "centers" or "clubs"? There is this certain undertone of exclusivity to the word "club" that causes most healthcare institutions to avoid using it. They opt instead for the word "center." It may just be semantics, but make no mistake about it, in the medical fitness industry, the most successful operations look like clubs, feel like clubs and act like clubs. They have a dimension of social connectivity and "belonging" that is not found in physical therapy clinics and rehab centers. Some healthcare institutions around the country have come to take pride in their facilities and embrace the "club" moniker without hesitation. Consider for example, Piedmont Hospital Health and Fitness Club in Atlanta, Bronson Athletic Club in Kalamazoo and Condell Hospital's Centre Club in Libertyville, Illinois.

True medical fitness must differentiate themselves from other exercise enterprises whose business premise is limited to "affordable access to equipment." A

club environment elevates itself with the presence of “enrichments,” in both facility and program that add substantially to a unique and sustainable member experience.

What is the importance of Design as a major influence on success in the Wellness industry? Certainly location, competitive positioning, operational efficiency, professional management, programming and marketing are must-haves. But why should wellness operators care about design in their development planning? Is it merely a beauty contest or is it an important factor in the quest for profit?

If building design is to be more than a beauty contest in bricks and mortar it must recognize and amplify the impact of all these other factors. Designers must demonstrate their ability to enhance business success and ultimately embrace the opportunity and duty therein. Clubs that deliver a memorable and user-friendly member experience, in a cost conscious environment, will always find success and profit.

Important and self evident areas of focus are parking, first impressions and transitional amenities such as reception, locker rooms, refreshment and social areas. It may seem obvious, but both operator and designer must take the time to thoroughly think through the ideal member experience and collaborate on how to optimize the performance of each component of the building. For example, no one enjoys a long, miserable hike from their car to the front door of the club and a concern like this will have great influence on site planning. The reception experience can have a strong influence on pride of membership and therefore member retention and member referrals. Creature comforts and uncongested conditions in the locker rooms, cafes and workout areas are essential to member satisfaction.

The importance of design requires the architect to accept an owners’ agenda for business success and understand the member-supported club business, learning as they go how to serve it in creative and far-sighted ways. An intelligent site and building plan are a prerequisite to unleashing the creative hounds of style, form and fashion. There are numerous facilities around the country where it is obvious that the styling began before the plan was perfected.

Too often designers want to indulge only their own creative agendas. They may wish to impress peers, win awards, earn the respect of mentors, avenge for past artistic failures or gratify their own aesthetic bias. None of these motivators are focused on

success in the club business. This self-serving approach is riddled with missed opportunities for designers to focus their creative talents on an agenda for business success. To cite some examples:

Location: Inspired design can mitigate the negative influences of a poor location, such as difficult topography, lack of views, bad neighbors, poor access or no retail exposure. It can also multiply the benefits of a great location. Good views, favorable grades and great exposure can be amplified and exploited by an attentive designer.

Operations: The day to day routine of member-based wellness operations must be understood by the architect. Design decisions can impact the number of staff required to run a facility. Member/guest access control can be simplified or complicated by design and layout choices. Access control is fundamental to business success in clubs, just as it is for cinemas and stadiums. Operations can also be impacted by the selection of finish materials, which can be durable and easy to clean or easily damaged and difficult to maintain. These are all examples of design and planning issues that can have a great impact on financial performance.

Clubs that locate their member reception and access control desks immediately inside the front door fail to create a welcoming lobby environment for non-members, forgetting perhaps that all their members were, at one time, non-members. It is no coincidence that, for hotels, the hospitality factor and the distance from the front door to the registration desk descends with the room rate. As in fine hotels, the better the club, the more generous the space that should be allocated to welcoming lobby functions, as it allows for a first time visitor to take comfort in their new surroundings and anticipate a sense of belonging.

Competitive Pressure: In a competitive wellness marketplace, strategic design can create the differentiation that leads to increased market share. If your competitor has a 15 lap per mile walk/jog track, you can gain an edge by having a longer track with fewer laps per mile. If your competitor has crowded, low ceiling group exercise rooms, then you tailor your design to have large, glassy, and high-ceilinged studios. Your competitor has gang showers, yours can be individual compartments. Your competitor expects members to bring their own padlocks while your members can enjoy the convenience of keyless electronic locks. Designing with a competitive strategy in mind

can create the differentiation that will not only improve your market share, but will expand the market itself.

Programming: In the area of program accommodation, design can promote flexibility, functionality and flow. Planning can create convenience and opportunity, anticipate needs and deliver value. The circulation of user groups, staff members and materials throughout the facility can be optimized to provide the best possible member experience. Inspired design can create synergy, which is the design miracle by which 2 plus 2 equals 5. Synergy happens when your tennis players, while limping through the club, notice the aquatic exercise classes and learn of its benefits to relieve their painful joints. Synergy is what happens when an avid weight lifter runs into an old friend coming out of a Yoga class and decides to join her next time. Synergy is what happens when designers pay close attention to opportunities in facility design for creating visual excitement, showcasing one attraction to another and arranging the fit and flow of the plan to encourage cross-awareness and cross-utilization.

Some key indicators for visual excitement include introduction of daylight, provision of entertaining exterior view opportunities, openness between levels for intra-club visual connectivity, cross fertilization of programs, intuitive way finding and generous ceiling heights. Also of great importance is the use of “invisible” circulation, which is the art of allocating space to circulation without creating unnecessary walls and doors. The most common mistake in club design is “death by corridor,” which is the wasteful arrangement of dedicated, walled-in, double-loaded corridors.

Another common oversight is the false economy thought to be gained by the use of enclosed, fire-rated stairs for all vertical circulation. A great feature of well designed clubs is a conveniently located, generously dimensioned, spatially open, monumental staircase as an architectural feature of the interior space. It is the strategic proportioning, scaling and placement of open volumes of space that is far more important to a favorable end result than the lavish application of luxurious materials. Imported marble is a poor substitute for adequate ceiling height.

An Industry of Miracles: The economic miracle that makes the club industry possible is leverage that allows an individual to enjoy affordable access to

facilities, amenities, programming and attractions that they could never afford to build and maintain as a sole user!

The statistical miracle that makes the club industry possible is the law of averages that prevents all members from showing up at the same time. This is beneficial as no club is sized or staffed sufficiently enough to serve all members at the same time.

The creative miracle that designers deliver is the collaborative work they do with operations managers and program staff to capture the intelligence and experience which resides in all parties to the wellness industry - owners, users, staff, suppliers, instructors etc. Eighteen months before opening, the architect must build a building on paper that will deliver a memorable and satisfying experience for each member.

As a club design specialist, I believe that the best results come from the recognition that there are no universally applicable answers. Club design is too important to a successful business plan to be entrusted to a standard big box prototype. The best solutions are similar to a custom-made suit versus one purchased “off the rack.” A club should be custom fit to the market, tailored to the site and shaped to enhance the programmatic assets of a full “reasons to join” package. Customized, professional design services are available for 6-8% of the total project cost, and from a value received point of view, it is the best money you can spend before the doors open.

Design image can reinforce pride of membership or erode it. This will influence member retention and member referral. Word of mouth is the best advertising. Intelligent design with attention paid to aesthetics and style can enrich the member experience just as easily as poor design can impoverish it.

Member supported wellness facilities that feel more like clubs and less like clinics will find themselves full of happy members for whom the “club” they belong to is as much a part of their identity as the clothes they wear, the car they drive and the house in which they live. When design supports pride of membership, design supports business success.