

DESIGN MEETS FITNESS

SWEAT REPLACES SWEATSHOP: TWO NEW GYMS MERGE FORM AND FUNCTION IN TORONTO'S HISTORIC GARMENT DISTRICT.

THE PRIVATE URBAN GYM HAS BEEN REBORN, WITH A NEW LEGITIMACY. AS SOPHISTICATED YOUNG ADULTS AND WHITE-COLLAR CAREERISTS DISCOVER THE MERITS – PHYSICAL, SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL – OF BREAKING A SERIOUS SWEAT, THIS SLEEK NEW BREED OF GYM REQUIRES A PLACE AND PROFILE TO MATCH. WHERE MORE APPROPRIATE, OR DESIRABLE, THAN AMONG THE LONG-NEGLECTED SPACES OF TORONTO'S DOWNTOWN CORE, ONLY NOW BEING REDISCOVERED AND REVITALIZED? AZURE VISITS A PAIR OF THRIVING MODERN GYMS, WHERE SMART DESIGN COEXISTS IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH FREE WEIGHTS, TREADMILLS AND YOGA MATS.

TOTUM: BODY AS TEMPLE

BY BETH KAPUSTA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREJ KOPAC



At the newly hip corner of King and Spadina, already infiltrated by Toronto's advertising and design communities, Totum proclaims itself a new lifestyle gym – catering to the needs of a downtown clientele. The gym's overall effect is a little reminiscent of the great era of the elite club (think McKim, Mead & White's turn-of-the-century University Club in New York), when sophisticated urban living had a more ritualized functional separation.

Totum (which means *whole* in Latin) is serious about what it does, and to that end the space for the facility was designed to support a comprehensive range of health and fitness services, including many kinds of assessment and rehabilitation. About 85 percent of the club's members follow personalized fitness models that are based on an ongoing relationship with a lifestyle coach and include access to a personal trainer.

For husband-and-wife owners, Tim and Stacy Irvine, and their partner, Roland Semprie, this approach is the culmination of a philosophy that has evolved over time. The Irvines are no strangers to good design – earlier projects of theirs included a designed Pro Fitness gym, from which they learned that “a gym doesn't need to look institutional.” For example, as the model for Totum (or Totum Life Science, to give it its full name) encompassed rehabilitation space, its owners sought a design that would be comfortable; more like a spa than a clinic.

Inspired by international models such as Equinox in New York and the Third Space in London, the Irvines set out to take fitness in Toronto to “the next level.” The design process included a corporate rebranding exercise (to transform Pro Fitness into Totum), which put words to the owners' vision of redefining fitness – personalization, intelligence, pleasure, balance, performance – and gave a clean, modern image to the “whole health, whole life” philosophy. At the same time, 3rd Uncle Design began to plan the space, in an area burgeoning with condo developments for the young professionals who form the base of the predominantly 25-to-40-year-old clientele.

Totum is a compact, intimate place, occupying the 1,000m² basement and ground floor of a converted warehouse. Design began with the paring down of the old pipe-filled rooms and then proceeded to the judicious building up of a thoughtful sequence of spaces embodying Totum's vision.

Entry from street level begins with a glimpse of the raised ground-floor level and a Muay Thai boxing ring, visible from the streetcar stop just outside the door. A narrow strip of floor has been carved away



to create the entry and to make room for a stair that leads down to an elegant, minimally appointed lobby with reception area and juice bar. Photography is hung in the lobby and on the walls of a corridor leading to workout spaces. (Gallery owner/client Jane Corkin lends and curates the work.) The effect is refined without being finicky, because the designers have been sensible about knowing when to stop. Many of the more “designed” elements do double duty – for instance, a low maple bench in the lobby also acts as a light source, to illuminate and soften the exposed rubble foundation wall at the lower level. This creates what 3rd Uncle project designer, Arriz Hassam, calls a “flattering light.”

A sense of quiet saturates the sequence of spaces. The more expensive and refined materials are reserved for intimate areas, such as the change rooms. Etched-glass shower screens and luxurious rainhead fixtures, horizontal maple partitions, cedar screens and ceramic-tile floors and walls create a clean effect. Small private rooms for massage, chiropractic or physiotherapy services are located opposite the change rooms and here, too, the notion of individual care is strongly reinforced in the design. For instance, patterned-glass panels at floor level in the

OPPOSITE: THE RECEPTION AREA AND A JUICE BAR ARE LOCATED ON THE BASEMENT LEVEL. 3RD UNCLE DESIGN CREATED A LONG MAPLE BENCH WITH INTEGRATED LIGHTING THAT ILLUMINATES THE RUBBLE FOUNDATION WALL.

ABOVE: THE WALL BETWEEN THE STREET LEVEL ENTRANCE AND THE GROUND FLOOR WAS REMOVED, BRINGING DAYLIGHT INTO THE WORKOUT AREA AND ALLOWING A VIEW OF THE GYM FROM THE OUTSIDE. THE MUAY THAI BOXING RING CAN BE GLIMPSED FROM THE STREETCAR STOP OUTSIDE THE DOOR.

BELOW: A FORMER LOADING DOCK WAS OPENED UP AT THE BACK OF THE SPACE, TO BRING MORE NATURAL LIGHT INTO THE WORKOUT SPACE. TOTUM'S WORD-MARK IS KNOCKED OUT OF FROSTED GLASS.





treatment rooms are designed to allow light in from the corridor beyond, while protecting the privacy of the occupant. The panels serve the functional purpose of borrowing light for the dimly lit massage spaces from the hallway. They also make it possible for staff to verify – with a quick look at foot level – that a room is unoccupied, without having to knock on the door.

The linear corridor creates a sense of compression as one passes from the therapy level up to the high, open space of the workout area, and then the activity level, via a simple steel-railed stair. The workout room, with maple floors and exposed wood posts, beams and ceilings, conveys the feeling of a large loft, which ironically implies an increasingly domestic association – especially in this part of the downtown core, where even new condos are being built to the spatial and material specifications of the warehouse.

Hassam downplayed exhibitionism in favour of celebrating the body in more subtle ways, providing spaces with different levels of privacy and working through a design that “enhances the idea of individual performance.” Light – artificial and natural – became one of the most important “materials” incorporated in the design. Class space has been carved off the main open area, with optional acoustic and (partial) visual privacy supplied by glass-panelled garage doors. A grid of metal-conduit lighting supplements integrated lighting within benches, millwork and the main desk in the reception area, and a former loading dock has been opened up with large glass panes to flood workout space with natural light from the south.

By eschewing overt exhibitionism in favour of a relaxed minimalism that combines the best features of a spa with the domesticated loft, the designers were able to accomplish a lot on a shoestring budget. One has the sense that this design will age with grace, since the big moves are more about spatial sequences and progressions than they are about showy materials. The directness of the design vocabulary seems entirely appropriate for a place in which seriousness and pleasure are simultaneous goals. Totum’s deliberate tranquility is a sophisticated design calling card, for users with expectations of being stimulated, educated and pampered – all on a trip to the gym. **A**

TOP LEFT: FROM THE LOBBY, A CORRIDOR LINED WITH PHOTOGRAPHY HAS TREATMENT ROOMS BANKED ALONG ONE SIDE. AT THE END, A SIMPLE STEEL-RAILED STAIR JOINS THE THERAPY LEVEL TO THE ACTIVITY LEVEL.

ABOVE: THE WORKOUT AREA HAS THE FEELING OF A LARGE LOFT. A SPACE FOR CLASSES HAS BEEN CARVED OUT OF THE MAIN AREA, WITH OPTIONAL SEPARATION AFFORDED BY A GLASS-PANELLED GARAGE DOOR.

BOTTOM LEFT: THE MOST REFINED AND EXPENSIVE MATERIALS HAVE BEEN RESERVED FOR INTIMATE SPACES. ETCHED-GLASS SHOWER SCREENS AND LUXURIOUS RAINHEAD FIXTURES CREATE AN ELEGANT EFFECT IN CHANGE AREAS.