

The gym as a heterotopia*

The prevailing situation today is that fitness activity is usually carried out in gyms or in closed movement halls. These spaces can be designated as 'heterotopias' of a sort (hetero = different, topos = place), a key concept coined by Michel Foucault (2003) in his cultural critique. (Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, created for specific purposes, that mirror and yet differ essentially from what is outside.) The gym can be seen as the 'other space,' something completely different and distinct from the general social space. The gym has its own spatial form. Exercisers there have their own language, specific symbols, special codes, specific clothing, self-identifying accessories, special practices, etc. As the 'other' space, members have 'extra privileges' as well as special obligations.

The gym meets the definition of heterotopias, as it functions as a part of general space but is nevertheless separate from it. This is true in terms of the city it is located in, or even in terms of a hotel, in relation to the rest of the building. A gym is completely different in terms of its function, form and its surrounding spaces.

At the same time, gyms, wherever they are, are homogeneous. In relation to the space outside, they deviate distinctly, but in relation to themselves they bear an identifiable structural order. In this sense, the gym takes on a completely universal form. A gym will look remarkably the same whether it is in China, France or Israel. Those entering its portals always know how to 'activate' it, even if they have never visited that gym specifically, and they know how to use it even without knowing the language of the foreign place. This is because of the uniform formative nature of the gym. The equipment is essentially the same, the mode of dress is the same, the accessories are the same, the rules are very similar from one such space to another. Its specific name may vary from place to place, but not its essence.

Gyms, wherever they are, also adhere to the principle of liminality, that is, they require various 'rites of passage' and 'rites of acceptance' which amplify the separation

between participants and the rest of society, creating a tension and a special atmosphere. 'Gatekeepers' oversee entry and screen those who are accepted; within are staff members who circulate and ensure members adhere to local procedures, language and discipline.

Gyms also fulfill the principles of 'the other space' in that they are borderline places that create tension and an 'on-the-edge' experience. Upon entering a gym, we immediately find ourselves in a different atmosphere, with different music, sights, smells, lighting and mood. The gym is suffused with a different ambience, an alternative social order, which finds no expression in our general space outside and its events.

The heterotopic order of the gym is created by the types of actions performed there. These fitness spaces incorporate what can be considered a deviant virtual reality (relative to the 'real world' outside) that exists side by side with its reflection in the real world, which surrounds the gym but is not in it.

The gym is connected to the general space and at the same time undermines it. It requires its members to engage in different actions, movements, diet and rules of sleep, using a unique 'operational language.' Another heterotopic principle that is manifested in the gym is inversion: the space is inversely proportional to the real, accepted place. It is extraterritorial space, in a manner of speaking.

Another element of heterotopias is their own history. Heterotopias operate in every society and reflect changes that occur in ideologies, values, and practices. The gym also has its own historical development. From a space intended only for weightlifters it became a space for athletes of all sorts, and now a space open to the population at large. Over the years, dedicated gyms have been established for teenagers, for the disabled, for populations with their own gender character or sexual orientation, etc. As I showed above, the gym has evolved from a professional space dedicated to physical activity and strength to one for movement in general, with specialty classes and other adaptations, including the consummate consumer space.

Moreover, like other heterotopias, the location of the gym has also moved in relation to general space, from the outskirts of cities to their center, and in the city centers to hotels, shopping malls, office buildings, apartment buildings, private homes and so on. They have moved from underground shelters and basements to the facades, to the ground floor, the street level entrances, and to skyscrapers.

To conclude, we can view gyms as complete heterotopias, in which all those who enter experience a world dedicated to one and only one issue, which has no beginning and no end – 'physical fitness.'

Bibliography

*Yigal, P. (2024). *Holistic Fitness Training: The Science-Based, Mindful Exercising Guide to a Healthy and Active Lifestyle*. Amazon (Book 1 of 3: Fitness Training & Exercise Excellence).