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Gyms are losing that sweaty feel

Boutique studios emphasize atmosphere

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LIFE WRITER

Like hotels and spas, fitness studios are entering a new era that offers a strongly branded, boutique-styled and service-oriented experience.

"There are so many diverse specialties in terms of fitness right now, even in yoga classes," says Anwar Mukhayesh from HGTV's *The Designer Guys*. "You are finding instructors who want to open their own little boutique-themed gyms."

The Designer Guys are currently working on a boutique-style yoga studio owned by wrestler Trish Stratus, expected to open in Toronto within a year.

"She wants a very Zen boutique yoga den and she's going to be targeting less of the downtown core and more of (a suburban clientele)," says Mukhayesh.

Similar to luxury hotels, these refined fitness studios also offer Internet cafés, clothing boutiques and lounge and bar areas, a priority for some fitness studios because it allows members to socialize and network.

aiyoku a cardio lounge

The fiery red door with a dragon-handle leads to fitness studio aiyoku a cardio lounge, with the looks, sounds and feel more of Tokyo than Toronto.

As high-energy kodo music beats over speakers, guests are greeted by aiyoku's mascot, "Xi-an Joe" (a play on G.I. Joe), a 285-kg, full-size reproduction of the Chinese terracotta warrior, made with clay taken from the actual burial site in China.

The Asian fusion theme continues, from bamboo floors to Chinese birdcages hanging from the ceiling. To the side is an Internet café, tea bar and fridge stocked with sandwiches in Chinese takeout cartons.

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"Everything you see in here is authentic," says founder and former fashion designer David Peereboom. "Almost every article we brought back ourselves from either Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai or Tokyo."

In the back of the studio lies the "Great Wall" of aiyoku, where the facility's state-of-the-art cardio machines and treadmills are lined up. Each has a personal 26-inch monitor with a library of nearly 300 DVDs. "So you can catch up on *Sex and the City* or *Nip and Tuck*."

The gym also offers specially designed workouts, including tansei, a hybrid martial arts exercise, "Dragon Boat" and Wing Chung kung fu, a women's self-defence course. But the Asian theme does not stop there.

"The service industry there (Asia) is impeccable," says Peereboom. "It's sincere. It's honest. It's what we wanted to get across here."

Signature aiyoku, Asian-inspired service includes the delivery of a cool, scented towel as soon as members step off cardio machines.

"This industry lacks in service," says Peereboom. "Gyms are very much self-service, a box style: come in, sign up and off you go by yourself."

Since aiyoku is just under 2,400 square feet, the studio will cap off its \$199 membership, plus fees, at 500 people. Peereboom hopes the intimacy, service and style will pay off.

"We just wanted to create a niche for our client that was different," he says. "Will people still stay at the Holiday Inn? Of course they will. But they love the W, too."

aiyoku a cardio lounge, 77 Mowat Ave., Suite 001, 416-516-8999.

Spynga

The first thing gym enthusiasts may notice about Spynga is that the yoga and cycling studio does not have mirrors.

"We really wanted to have it so you can get in your own zone and won't worry about what you look like," says Casey Schacter, co-owner with Sari Nisker, of the studio opening April 16. "We don't want to have the gym-type feel at all. The lighting is very soft, everything is on dimmers."

It's designed to resemble a contemporary art gallery – fresh white walls accented with chandeliers.

"We have this idea where we really want to have a gallery art opening every few months," says Schacter. "We'll feature unknown Canadian artists and give them some exposure and have a cocktail party with a little deejay spinning."

Spynga also offers a lounge area with a tea bar, an exclusive line of organic soaps and candles by Red Flower and Josh Podol T-shirts, available only at Barney's in New York.

And then there's the yoga and cycling workout, a hybrid fitness regimen enjoyed by the likes of celebrities Julia Roberts and Pink. One instructor leads a class of up to 20 students and begins with yoga stretches on spinning style bikes. Members then embark on a 25- to 30-minute rigorous cycle, followed by 25 minutes of slow yoga. "The atmosphere, to me, is everything," says Schacter. "I know the teaching and the programs you offer are equally important, but I feel the atmosphere and the environment makes you want to wake up in the morning."

Spynga, 1415 Bathurst St., Ste. 302, 416-588-7796.

Flirty Girl Fitness

Mornings may be hard for the ladies at Flirty Girl Fitness. The women at Toronto's premier striptease aerobics and pole dancing studio have a reputation for not just being flirty girls, but also party girls. The studio has become known for hosting fierce girl's night out and bachelorette parties. Owner Krista Knee says that, after gym hours on weekends, "we'd serve free flirtinis, food and go out dancing ... Our reception desk doubles as a bar, so the computers come up and the girls get up and dance on it."

The studio is decorated with white leather sofas, soft pink lighting and butterfly accents. Knee thinks the key to a successful fitness studio is creating ambience that relaxes clients. Although the striptease, pole and Coyote Ugly dancing are new, she says most members feel immediately comfortable in her studio acting like Pussy Cat Dolls.

"I've always hated working out at a regular gym," says Knee. "It wasn't sexy. It wasn't comfortable. It was masculine-oriented." Thus, Flirty Girl Fitness was born.

The Designer Guys, who styled Flirty Girl Fitness, agree with Knee's take on creating an environment that allows people to let loose. "Escapism is a factor. It's less institutionalized," says Mukhayesh.

Flirty Girl Fitness, 462 Wellington St. W., 416-920-1400.



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