

ENDING TOXIC CULTURE AND INSPIRING INCLUSIVITY OF COLLEGE GYMS

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ABSTRACT

This undergraduate interior design capstone research explores how intentional, inclusive design strategies can help dismantle toxic culture and foster a more welcoming, empowering environment within college gym facilities. As wellness and fitness spaces play a critical role in students' physical and mental health, this research examines how factors such as spatial organization, lighting, materiality, privacy, accessibility, branding, and representation contribute to the overall gym experience and culture. By analyzing these elements through a lens of inclusivity, safety, and belonging, this study aims to inspire gym designs that support users of all identities, body types, and fitness levels.

The development of this study emerged in response to growing awareness around toxic gym culture, including intimidation, gender based assumptions, lack of representation, and barriers to participation. Key issues were found through anonymous surveys, such as judgmental feelings, difficulty with space, and the prioritization of aesthetics and peak performance over comfort and inclusivity. Furthermore, case studies of inclusive wellness centers and progressive exercise facilities emphasize tactics that promote long term participation, self confidence, and community building.

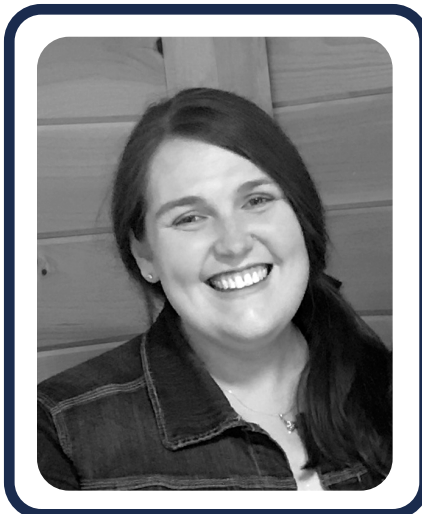
The Creative Agenda builds upon key findings from the Literature Review and Research Agenda, focusing on spatial empowerment and inclusive representation. A reimagined collegiate gym prototype integrates features such as diverse equipment zones, gender inclusive locker areas, versatile materials that align with the RIT brand identity, inclusive visual graphics, and programming support for beginners and marginalized groups. The design also includes private spaces for individual use, offering flexibility for rest, reflection, or movement, and explores the integration of social media in a positive, purposeful way to foster community, encouragement, and authentic representation. Renderings, diagrams, and material palettes illustrate how these design decisions can actively dismantle exclusivity while promoting equity and holistic wellness. Ultimately, this project answers the question: How can colleges reduce toxic gym culture in the age of social media?

Key words: interior design, inclusive design, college gym facilities, toxic gym culture, mental health, social media.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
THE COMMITTEE	ii
THE CANDIDATE	iii
FIGURES	v-vii
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	2-16
RESEARCH AGENDA	17-30
CREATIVE AGENDA	31-55
APPENDIX	56-65

FIGURES

FIGURE 1: EVERYBODY LA	12
FIGURE 2: GENDER NEUTRAL LOCKER ROOM	12
FIGURE 3: DP1 GROUP SESSION	13
FIGURE 4: INCLUSIVE BENCH PRESS.....	13
FIGURE 5: GYM AVOIDANCE	19
FIGURE 6: GYM AVOIDANCE	19
FIGURE 7: SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT	19
FIGURE 8: SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT	19
FIGURE 9: INFLUENCERS IMPACT	20
FIGURE 10: AREAS OF COMFORTABILITY	20
FIGURE 11: FREQUENTLY USED AREAS	20
FIGURE 12: PRIMARY BENEFICIARIES OF CURRENT GYM LAYOUT	21
FIGURE 13: INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING GYM IMPROVEMENTS	21
FIGURE 14: TOXIC GYM BEHAVIORS	21
FIGURE 15: MOST APPEALING PRIVATE OR QUIET SPACES	22
FIGURE 16: BLOCH FITNESS CENTER	23
FIGURE 17: MIDTOWN ATHLETIC CLUB GYM	24
FIGURE 18: MIDTOWN LOCKER ROOMS	24
FIGURE 19: FLOOR 2 AREA OF CONGESTION 1.....	25
FIGURE 20: CURRENT LAYOUT 1	25
FIGURE 21: CURRENT LAYOUT 2.....	25
FIGURE 22: FLOOR 2 AREA OF CONGESTION 2	26

FIGURE 23: CURRENT LAYOUT 3.....	26
FIGURE 24: CURRENT LAYOUT 4.....	26
FIGURE 25: FLOOR 2 AREA OF CONGESTION 3.....	27
FIGURE 26: CURRENT LAYOUT 5.....	27
FIGURE 27: CURRENT LAYOUT 6.....	27
FIGURE 28: FLOOR 1 AREA OF CONGESTION 1.....	28
FIGURE 29: CURRENT LAYOUT 7.....	28
FIGURE 30: CURRENT LAYOUT 8.....	28
FIGURE 31: FLOOR 1 AREA OF CONGESTION 2.....	29
FIGURE 32: CURRENT LAYOUT 9.....	29
FIGURE 33: CURRENT LAYOUT 10.....	29
FIGURE 34: RIT CAMPUS MAP.....	31
FIGURE 35: WIEDMAN FITNESS CENTER.....	31
FIGURE 36: WEST SIDE SUN & SHADE.....	32
FIGURE 37: EAST SIDE INTERIOR SUN & SHADE.....	32
FIGURE 38: LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN.....	32
FIGURE 39: LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN.....	32
FIGURE 40: LEVEL 1 CURRENT LAYOUT.....	33
FIGURE 41: LEVEL 2 CURRENT LAYOUT.....	33
FIGURE 42: LOCKER ROOM CURRENT LAYOUT.....	33
FIGURE 43: LEVEL 1 ZONING IDEAS.....	34
FIGURE 44: LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN.....	34
FIGURE 45: AREA OF CONGESTION.....	34
FIGURE 46: LEVEL 1 CURRENT AREA.....	34

FIGURE 47: LEVEL 1 INITIAL SKETCH	34
FIGURE 48: LEVEL 2 ZONING IDEA	35
FIGURE 49: LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN	35
FIGURE 50: LEVEL 2 AREA OF CONGESTION	35
FIGURE 51: LEVEL 2 PROPOSED AREA	35
FIGURE 52: LEVEL 2 INITIAL SKETCH	35
FIGURE 53: INSPIRATION IMAGE 1	35
FIGURE 54: LOCKER ROOM ZONING IDEA	36
FIGURE 55: LOCKER ROOM FLOOR PLAN	36
FIGURE 56: CURRENT LOCKER ROOM	36
FIGURE 57: LOCKER ROOM INITIAL SKETCH	36
FIGURE 58: INSPIRATION IMAGES	36
FIGURE 59: LEVEL 1 FINAL FLOOR PLAN	53
FIGURE 60: LEVEL 2 FINAL FLOOR PLAN	53
FIGURE 61: LEVEL 1 FINAL RCP	54
FIGURE 62: LEVEL 2 FINAL RCP	54

INTRODUCTION

This capstone project examines the influence of gym culture on user experience and explores design strategies to foster inclusivity and minimize intimidation. Centered on the RIT Wiedman Fitness Center, the study investigates how intentional redesign can create a more welcoming and supportive environment, particularly in the era of social media. Through interviews, surveys, and case study analyses, the research identifies key design elements that enhance accessibility, encourage engagement, and accommodate diverse user needs. These findings will inform a comprehensive design solution aimed at transforming gym spaces that inspire and engage all individuals in their fitness journeys.

Reference Appendix A for the original Capstone Prospectus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There are many reasons people choose to work out, whether it's the feel-good boost, a mental escape from a long day, or the drive to train as an athlete. Fitness is personal, and gym culture at its best, welcomes rather than dismisses those who choose to workout. The word culture, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.”¹ Gym culture is defined as “the shared behaviors, values, customs, and attitudes shaping the overall environment of a gym.”² Both of these definitions are seen in the explanation of toxic gym culture, which is referred to as “an environment within a fitness space where individuals may feel judged, excluded, or pressured to conform to certain standards or behaviors.”³

In our current culture, social media is a contributor to setting unrealistic expectations within the gym. Reinforcing the social media aspects of toxic “gym culture” or the do’s and don’ts for obtaining unrealistic body goals that fuel appearance related disorders. The mainstream fitness industry was founded with the goal of encouraging healthy living, but it has now become a place frequently damaged by “racism, misogyny, misogynoir, anti-trans prejudice, and intolerance for non-binary people.”⁴ Additionally, fitness has become a venue for the commodification of the body due to advertising and media, reflecting the dominant middle-class white norms often reinforced by today’s commercial culture. In a study from the University of Alberta in 2019, the investigators looked at “194 fitness blogs and their authors. Only 16.4% of the authors had certifications related to fitness or

1 “Culture Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>. Pg. 21

2 “An Ultimate Guide to Create a Strong Gym Culture.” Wellyx, May 27, 2024. <https://wellyx.com/an-ultimate-guide-to-create-a-strong-gym-culture/> Pg. 21

3 NinjAthlete. “Understanding Toxic Gym Culture.” Medium, August 18, 2023. <https://ninjathlete.medium.com/understanding-toxic-gym-culture-e45e49efca23>. Pg. 22

4 Bell, Deniece, Saidur Rahman, and R Rochon. “(Trans)Forming Fitness: Intersectionality as a Framework for Resistance and Collective Action.” *Frontiers in sports and active living*, July 26, 2023. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10410259/#s1>. Pg. 21 2

exercise.”⁵ Exercisers often strive to replicate idealized bodies because the media fails to represent diverse, everyday physiques.

College life is an adjustment for many students, and it is also a time that health behaviors like physical activity start to change. During a time when there is a need for physical activity, many college gym spaces are often perceived as intimidating or unwelcoming. This contributes to the perception that this is an environment where people feel judged or made to feel uncomfortable, especially for those who don't fit the gym culture's expectations of physical fitness. A welcoming gym environment can help create a sense of community and belonging, which are essential for college students. Interior design can't directly solve the issue of social media and toxic gym culture, but it can help create a more inclusive and inviting environment for those who want to work out. By designing spaces that prioritize comfort and accessibility, optimized gym environments can create a more positive and supportive experience.

Exercise has proven to release endorphins and serotonin, “hormones that naturally enhance mood, cognition, and concentration.”⁶ When combined with thoughtful design, these physiological benefits can be amplified, fostering a space where individuals feel empowered and motivated to achieve their fitness goals in a healthy, encouraging atmosphere. Various emotions are experienced during workouts, including a sense of pride after completing a session, knowing that something positive was done for oneself. Ideally gym users feel welcomed regardless of their expectations or fitness level. Gyms are a perfect way to help students relieve themselves of daily burdens such as academic stress and social pressures. This in turn, will lead to improving mental health, academic success, and personal development. A welcoming gym environment can also help create a sense of community and belonging, which are essential to have for college students.

5 Fueled and Balanced. “Toxic Gym Culture.” Fueled and Balanced (blog). January 16, 2024. <https://fueledandbalanced.com/2024/01/16/toxic-gym-culture/>. Pg. 21

Query

How can colleges reduce toxic gym culture in the age of social media?

Hypothesis

By redesigning gym spaces to be more comfortable and inclusive, students will increase frequency of visits and experience a more positive environment.

How Social Media Fuels Unrealistic Body Standards

The initial literature explorations focus on current trends surrounding gym culture, and some of the negative impacts it's having on society. Social media has emerged as a key driver in perpetuating unrealistic body standards, "with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter heavily influencing the perceptions of young adults, particularly those aged 18-29, who comprise 88% of active users."⁷ This is done through passive use, which is viewing and scrolling through content by other users. The way social media works so well to capture the viewer's attention for a long period of time, is by using algorithms based on what the user is stopping to interact with, whether that be liking, commenting, or some other way of engaging with the post. The algorithm then will provide the viewer with more content that is similar to what they have been interacting with. While some of the content can be constructive, a significant portion exacerbates body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues, especially among college students, who are still forming their identities across social contexts. Social media's influence on body image is profound, often promoting idealized and unrealistic physical standards that can drive individuals, especially young adults, to pursue gym culture as a means of achieving these unattainable appearances. "Gen Z college students connect to social media for validation, support, and gratification needs."⁸ In the book *The Lonely American*, by Old and Shwartz, it is argued that "loneliness in 21st century America is higher than in any previous generation,

7 Ana Martínez-Alemán, Adam M. McCready, and Heather Rowan-Kenyon, "How Social Media Affect College Students: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future," *Journal of College Student Development*, April 3, 2024, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/923527>. Pg. 22

8 Martínez-Alemán, "How Social Media Affects College Students: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future." Pg. 22

despite the fact that modern Americans devote more technology to staying connected than any society in history.”⁹ Constant exposure to idealized bodies affects college students by making social comparisons, as well as affecting their mental health and well being and in return reducing their social connections with others because of how they feel they will be perceived. The millions of videos and photos posted every day on social media promote a visual of supposedly healthy bodies in trendy and fashionable ways.

There is an emergence of exercise addiction (EA), a phenomenon that has been associated with using physical exercise primarily to enhance body image, rather than being driven by the goal of improving health and overall well-being. The ideal of a “perfect” body has been related to success, and “the preoccupation with physical appearance has led not only to an objectification of the human body, but also the development of various appearance related disorders.”¹⁰ Some of the disorders include muscle dysmorphia (MD) and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) which can lead to eating disorders, mood disorders, and addictive behaviors. Body dysmorphic disorder is an under-recognized and usually not diagnosed, “severe psychiatric condition characterized by recurring and persistent concern with an imagined or minor defect in physical appearance focused on a specific body part.”¹¹ These associations are invasive, unwelcome, and typically difficult to avoid or manage. If left untreated this disorder can lead to mental health issues, severe depression, suicidal ideation as well as social impairment.

Gender Differences in Gym Usage and Motivation

College is a time of many changes, one of which is a sharp decline in physical activity.

9 Matthew Pittman and Brandon Reich, “Social Media and Loneliness: Why an Instagram Picture May Be Worth More than a Thousand Twitter Words,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563216302552>. Pg. 22

10 Ornella Corazza et al., “The Emergence of Exercise Addiction, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, and Other Image-Related Psychopathological Correlates in Fitness Settings: A Cross Sectional Study,” *PloS one*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6447162/>. Pg. 21

11 Corazza, “The Emergence of Exercise Addiction, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, and Other Image-Related Psychopathological Correlates in Fitness Settings: A Cross Sectional Study.” Pg. 21

Additionally, it is found that the first year of college is when students gain the most weight. This can be from a number of factors, such as lifestyle changes, increased access to unhealthy or processed foods, stress and emotional eating, and a lack of routine. The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine produced a study on exercise preferences of emerging adults, ages 21.2 plus or minus 2.3 years, and 90% of which were in college. The study found that the desire to lose weight for men was motivated by wanting to improve physical appearance and fitness, while women were motivated by social-pressure. There were also differences in exercise preferences, for example, “women preferred a combination of moderate intensity cardio with strength training at a higher rate than men, while men preferred intense strength training at a higher rate than women.”¹² The majority preferred a “combination of moderate intensity and strength training, while the least preferred was only strength training and only intense strength training.”¹³ Determining this kind of information is important to note when it comes to space planning, and which activity spaces should take priority over others.

Another key takeaway from this study was that students in college prefer to exercise on their own and that using a self guided approach can lead to improved weight outcomes. Lastly, are the reasonings behind the “why” college students want to go to the gym. For college women, “they aim for competency and confidence; they perceive social barriers to strength training (appearing weak or uncomfortable around men). College men aim for strength and improvements in mood, they are motivated by building strength and becoming physically fit.”¹⁴

Gym Usage Among Different Groups in College Settings

When thinking about college there is an emphasis on students, but a less considered group

12 Jean M Reading and Jessica Gokee LaRose, “Exercise Preferences among Emerging Adults: Do Men and Women Want Different Things?,” *Journal of American college health : J of ACH*, July 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8404202/>. Pg. 22

13 Reading, “Exercise Preferences among Emerging Adults: Do Men and Women Want Different Things?” Pg. 22

14 Reading, “Exercise Preferences among Emerging Adults: Do Men and Women Want Different Things?” Pg. 22

is the faculty and staff who also are a part of the everyday scene. “Less than twenty-five percent of working adults in the United States accumulate the recommended amount of daily moderate-intensity physical activity required for a healthy, active lifestyle.”¹⁵ Along with that it is reported that “only twenty-five percent of American adults in the workforce participate in the recommended one-hundred and fifty minutes per week, or thirty minutes per day per five days a week, of moderate-intensity physical activity required for a healthy lifestyle.”¹⁶ It would make sense to expect that the activity levels of college employees would likely exceed the national average observed across the general workforce, when in reality, “approximately seventy-five percent of collegiate faculty and staff members fail to consistently accumulate the weekly suggested one-hundred and fifty minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity recommended by the Mayo Clinic, the World Health Organization, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.”¹⁷ Even with the greater accessibility to these facilities, college and university faculty continue to fall short of achieving the recommended daily amount of physical activity. Studies have consistently demonstrated a strong positive relationship between the advantages experienced by both employees and employers when an effective worksite health promotion program is implemented. These programs have been shown to boost workplace productivity, reduce healthcare costs, and foster a greater sense of employee happiness and overall well-being. Some of the findings in a (year) study done by Kevin Hunt and Candice Griffeth from Georgia College, were as follows;

- Cardiovascular machines, resistance machines, and free weights are areas most utilized.
- 30% of the people surveyed were members of off-campus wellness centers due to their operational hours.

15 Kevin Hunt and Candice Griffeth. “Promoting a Culture of Wellness Among Employees on a College Campus: Increasing Employee Usage of a Campus Wellness and Recreation Center,” *The Corinthian*: Vol. 20 , Article 15, (2020). Pg. 21

16 Hunt, “Promoting a Culture of Wellness Among Employees on a College Campus: Increasing Employee Usage of a Campus Wellness and Recreation Center.” Pg. 21

17 Hunt, “Promoting a Culture of Wellness Among Employees on a College Campus: Increasing Employee Usage of a Campus Wellness and Recreation Center.” Pg. 21

- The idea of exercising in the same space as their students was intimidating and daunting, especially if they lacked the knowledge of gym etiquette, were out of shape, or lacked familiarity with gym machinery and equipment.
- The possibility of embarrassment prevented employees from frequently going to a campus facility.
- Older adults with less knowledge of equipment and gym etiquette were uncomfortable and avoided the environment.

While the focus in college environments often centers on student needs, it is crucial to consider the health and well-being of faculty and staff. Despite having access to fitness facilities, many college employees struggle to meet recommended physical activity levels, which can impact their overall health and job performance. By implementing comprehensive wellness initiatives could help tackle these issues by improving access, reducing discomfort, and encouraging healthier lifestyles, leading to positive outcomes for both employees and institutions.

Interior Design and Inclusivity in Gym Spaces

In order to provide a friendly and accessible environment that caters to the various needs of every individual, inclusive gym areas must be thoughtfully designed. Gyms often times have become places of exclusion, “with structural barriers and informal, or unspoken, cultural norms such as gender binary and heteronormative views, discouraging, and/or preventing certain groups, such as folks in larger bodies, those with (dis)abilities, women, racialized, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals, from accessing fitness and health centers.”¹⁸ Many people assume that in order for a gym to be truly inclusive, they would need to renovate their whole facility or buy new equipment, when there are many other ways of combating this. Some of the key approaches to fostering inclusivity in gyms are mainstream diversity and universal inclusion. Mainstream diversity entails developing spaces and programs that represent

a range of identities and demands. While universal inclusion ensures that the maximum number of people may use gyms without needing extra accommodations. By prioritizing these principles, fitness spaces can shift from being exclusive to genuinely welcoming for all. It's also important to distinguish between accessibility and inclusivity. "25% of the world's population is affected by a disability either directly or indirectly and 61 million of those people live in the US.¹⁹" Accessibility focuses on "whether someone can physically reach or use a facility or service, while inclusivity emphasizes whether they feel welcome, comfortable, and valued in that environment."²⁰ Both concepts are vital for creating spaces where everyone feels they belong.

Another way to incorporate inclusivity is through the use of color. Colors have a psychological and physiological effect on people. Just as a person feels joyful on a sunny day and downcast on a rainy one, the implementation of color can be used in the same way resulting in either a positive or negative impact on a viewer. Warm colors, usually red, orange, yellow, are known to be stimulating, while cool colors, most often blue and green, are calming. Colors can evoke different emotional responses in people, and these responses can be related to the meaning or associations that people have with those colors. "Green evokes the most positive emotional responses and is associated with relaxation, and happiness. Blue is perceived more positively than red in the open-plan environment, but other studies suggest it can also be perceived as depressive."²¹ Red is often associated with passion, energy, and excitement, but it can also be perceived as aggressive, confrontational, stimulating, as well as distracting. "Working in a red or colorful room with visual complexity puts the brain into a more exciting state, causing the slowing of the heart rate and overload."²² The experience people had in blue and green spaces were associated with a sense of wellbeing, and blue was

19 "An Ultimate Guide to Create a Strong Gym Culture." Pg. 21

20 "An Ultimate Guide to Create a Strong Gym Culture." Pg. 21

21 Aleksandra Curcic et al., "Effects of Color in Interior Design," Research Gate , 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333928432_Effects_of_color_in_interior_design. Pg.21

22 Curcic, "Effects of Color in Interior Design." Pg. 21

“reported to have a drowsy and sleepy effect.”²³ Lastly, it was found that cognitive task performance can be enhanced by the color red, while creative task performance can be enhanced by blue. The idea of neutral colors was not talked about significantly throughout this study, but it was found that they can also enhance productivity. Even though colors may generally be associated with certain emotions, it's important to remember that there can be variation in how different people react to different colors. When thinking about gym design, it is important to consider the emotional impact of color choices and to use it strategically to create a desired atmosphere or mood.

Emotional impact can also be affected through spatial layouts. In today's gyms certain areas may be perceived as specifically masculine spaces, often referencing a dominant form of masculinity shaped by specific social contexts, not only discouraging women, but also men who do not conform to this image. Therefore, some gyms have started to implement an unofficial “girls only” area. These areas resemble a common area of a gym, but are significantly smaller, have less free weights, and more cardiovascular and weight machines. There are also frosted windows to stop people from looking in from the outside. While the aim is inclusiveness, “it seems that there is a sort of inclusion by seclusion logic, by means of offering spatial shielding to ensure gender segregation.”²⁴ In some gyms, the separation of spaces reflects a subtle form of gender segregation, often driven by the discomfort women feel in male-dominated areas. For instance in some of the common spaces it was found that men would gather to watch, linger, and take pictures which created an intrusive, unwelcoming environment that pushed women to seek refuge in the “girls-only” section. This inclusion by seclusion approach, where gender-specific areas are literally built into the gym, provides comfort to women but at the same time strengthens gendered spatial divides and hierarchies. It perpetuates the notion that women are less capable of certain exercises, particularly weightlifting, and thus need a separate,

23 Curcic, “Effects of Color in Interior Design.” Pg. 21

24 Greta Helen Bladh, “Spatial Bodies: Vulnerable Inclusiveness within Gyms and Fitness Venues in Sweden,” Social Sciences, October 4, 2022, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/10/455>. Pg. 21

more nurturing environment. Ultimately, this system infantilizes women by suggesting they are less competent, further embedding gendered assumptions into the gym's physical and social structure. This dynamic brings attention to the overall gym layout, which typically organizes equipment and spaces in ways that influence how people move through and utilize the facility.

Overall there seems to be many things that are incorporated into a gym layout. A section for free weights, such as barbells, dumbbells, kettlebells are usually in one area as well as circuit weight machines which allow people to do a range of different exercises all while targeting different muscle groups. With the rise of crossfit, gym goers will see a lot of cross train cages, or multifunctional stations, which allow people to do many different exercises with one machine. Another area is designated for cardiovascular machines such as treadmills, stationary bikes, airdyne bikes, and stationary rowing machines, all of which are usually structured in rows. Lastly is a “concomitant scene, which is a more secluded area with enough space to allow for stretching, and equipped with soft yoga mats, BOSU balls, Pilates balls, resistance bands, and similar workout tools.”²⁵ Very common in gyms is the use of mirrors. While this feature can be helpful for users to watch their form and make sure they are doing the exercises correctly, an abundance of mirrors can create an increased self-awareness and sensitivity to both one's own appearance and that of others. Locker rooms can also come across as segregating by offering limited options that exclude or alienate individuals based on their gender identity, body type, or physical needs, making the space unwelcoming for many users.

In examining how gym design can foster inclusivity, two case studies illustrate contrasting approaches and outcomes in creating welcoming environments for diverse groups. Everybody Los Angeles is a wellness center with a mission to “welcome all bodies, genders, races, nationalities, faiths, classes, sexualities, sizes, ages, and abilities.”²⁶

25 Bladh, “Spatial Bodies: Vulnerable Inclusiveness within Gyms and Fitness Venues in Sweden.” Pg. 21

26 “Our Space,” Everybody Los Angeles, September 24, 2024, <https://www.everybodylosangeles.com/our-space>. Pg. 22

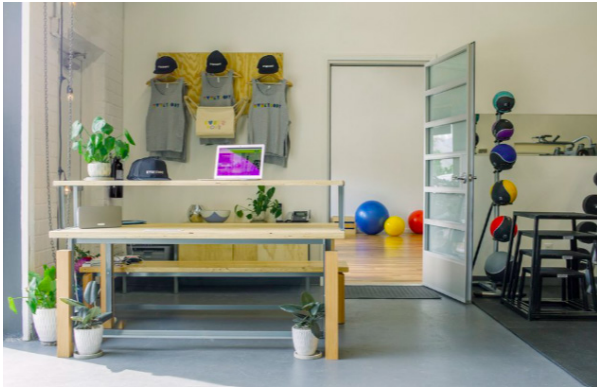


Figure 1-Everybody LA



Figure 2-Gender Neutral Locker Room

This facility has a full service gym, as well as a gender neutral locker room. The staff consists of people who embody their mission, and their rates are determined based on your income which makes it even more accessible to everyone. They also have an action plan that lays out all of the different ways they make their facility accessible to everyone. With things such as signage in the sauna to indicate benches are removable to accommodate ADA turn radius, as well as ADA bathrooms, showers and changing rooms. Elements like these that some might not even notice, make a huge difference to those who need them most.

The second case study is on DPI Adaptive Fitness which is a company that specializes in programming adaptive fitness opportunities for individuals living with physical disabilities. Their mission is “to deliver the highest quality of safe and effective adaptive fitness programming resulting in undeniable progression.”²⁷ They use a wide range of different machines that are specifically designed for people with disabilities.



Figure 3-DPI group session



Figure 4-Inclusive Bench Press

For many individuals with disabilities, their daily lives are often adapted to accommodate their needs; however, this gym environment is specifically designed to eliminate the need for such adjustments, providing an inclusive space from the outset.

Conclusion

Gym environments play a crucial role in shaping not only physical health but also the emotional and psychological experiences of those who use them. The literature review reveals the link between social media's promotion of unrealistic body standards and the rise of body dissatisfaction, exercise addiction, and unattainable fitness goals among college students. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing these issues through gym design, highlighting how inclusive, welcoming spaces can help counteract the harmful effects of toxic gym culture and support healthier relationships with physical activity. The issue of gendered spaces, such as "girls-only" areas, highlights a broader problem of reinforcing societal divides. While these areas may offer comfort for some, they can perpetuate the belief that certain groups don't belong in shared spaces, particularly in areas focused on strength training. This type of "inclusion by seclusion" can maintain gendered hierarchies and spatial segregation, limiting the potential for an inclusive gym atmosphere. A well-designed gym layout should break down these barriers, providing spaces that accommodate everyone's fitness journey without isolating or infantilizing any group. Additionally,

gym layouts, including the placement of mirrors and equipment, significantly affect how comfortable and empowered individuals feel. Mirrors, though useful for form correction, can heighten self-consciousness, deterring users from fully engaging in their workouts. To counter this, gyms should include private or semi-private areas that provide a more personalized, less intimidating environment. Colors and spatial layouts also play a vital role in influencing emotional responses—warm colors stimulate energy, while cool colors promote relaxation.

When combined with open, welcoming spaces, these design attributes can transform gyms into environments where physical activity is accessible and enjoyable for all. Ultimately, gym design should not only meet practical needs but also foster emotional well-being. By supporting both students and staff in their fitness goals, well-designed gym spaces can enhance mental health, productivity, and a sense of belonging, contributing to healthier and more balanced lifestyles.

The literature review guides the research agenda by identifying target groups and incorporating firsthand experiences, both positive and negative. The research informs the creative agenda goal of designing for an inclusive environment by identifying design elements and strategies that foster a sense of belonging, accessibility, and comfort for diverse user groups.

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RESEARCH AGENDA

Introduction

The literature review highlighted key themes and gaps that shaped the approach to this research. One significant observation was the lack of comprehensive studies addressing toxic culture and inclusivity in college gym environments, particularly among recreational gym users. While existing research explored gender inclusivity, mental health, and gym accessibility, there was a noticeable gap in understanding how these factors interact within competitive athletic programs or campus fitness facilities. This gap underscores the need for targeted investigation through questionnaires and interviews, focusing on populations directly impacted by toxic culture, such as students, teachers, alumni and faculty.

Reference Appendix D & E for survey questions.

Instrument Structure

There are two question sets used in this questionnaire, depending on whether the participants use The Wiedman Fitness Center (QS1 & Appendix D) or do not use The Wiedman Fitness Center (QS2 & Appendix E).

QS1 aims to discover:

- How comfortable the participant feels using the gym.
- Different potential design elements that would affect their comfortability levels.
- What the participants would change about the current gym layout.
- How the locker rooms play a part in their gym experience.

QS2 aims to discover:

- Why the participants may avoid using the gym.
- Design elements or features in gyms that make the participants feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.
- If social media affects the participants' choice to use the gym.
- Different design elements that affect the participants comfort levels.

The questionnaire divides into QS1 and QS2 to gather the broadest possible sample within the limitations of time and the scope of undergraduate research. Both questionnaires gather data from the target demographic and there are an estimated 100 responses for QS1 and an estimated 50 responses for QS2. The data will be collected and interpreted to further answer the research hypothesis that by redesigning gym spaces to be more comfortable and inclusive, college students will increase frequency of visits and create a more positive experience.

The data collected is stored on a private drive, and the findings provide insight into gaps in the current gym environment, helping to answer the research question of how gym spaces can support mental health in the age of social media. Both question sets inform the creative agenda application and gain additional insight outside of what was found in the literature.

Participant's Rights

When starting the questionnaires, both QS1 and QS2 participants are given an informed consent document (Appendix B for QS1) and (Appendix C for QS2) which overviews the capstone topic, lists any known benefits or risks, and lays out participant confidentiality. The informed consent form is incorporated directly into the questionnaire (Appendix D for QS1) and (Appendix E for QS2) to ensure thorough adherence to ethical practices before collecting consent. The questionnaire is entirely anonymous, with no personal details requested or revealed. Participant responses are identified as "Participant #" in the dataset, and no names, contact information, or specific ages are collected. All data is securely stored on a password-protected computer system. Once this undergraduate research concludes, the digital file will be permanently erased. Any responses included in the Capstone project are summarized and displayed as visual elements such as charts, graphs, or icons.

Findings

60	Responses to Survey
88%	RIT Undergraduate Student
20%	RIT Graduate Student
20%	RIT Alumni

What is the main reason you might avoid going to the gym?

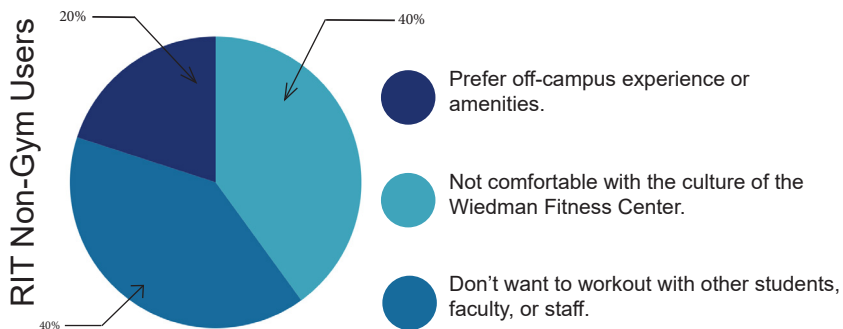


Figure 5-Gym Avoidance

These two charts represent the reasons why people who use the RIT gym or people who don't might avoid going.

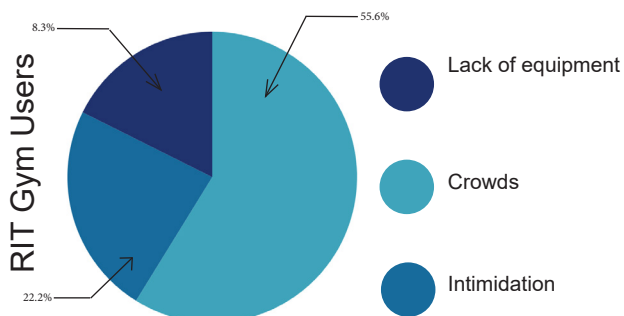


Figure 6-Gym Avoidance

In what ways do you think social media and influencer videos have impacted gym culture?

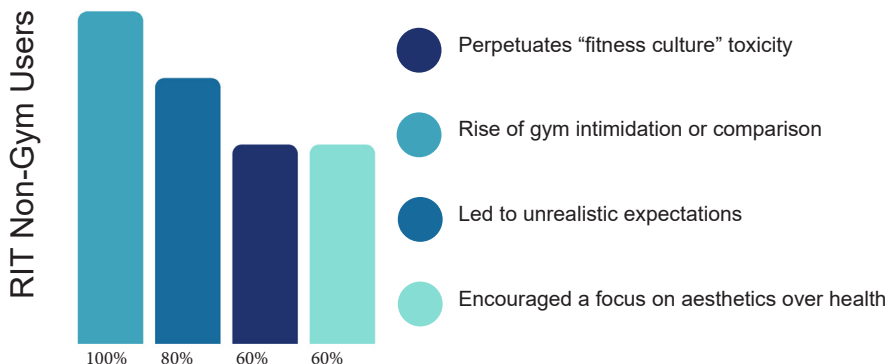


Figure 7-Social Media Impact

Both of these graphs show which ways people who use the RIT gym and don't, view how social media has impacted gym culture

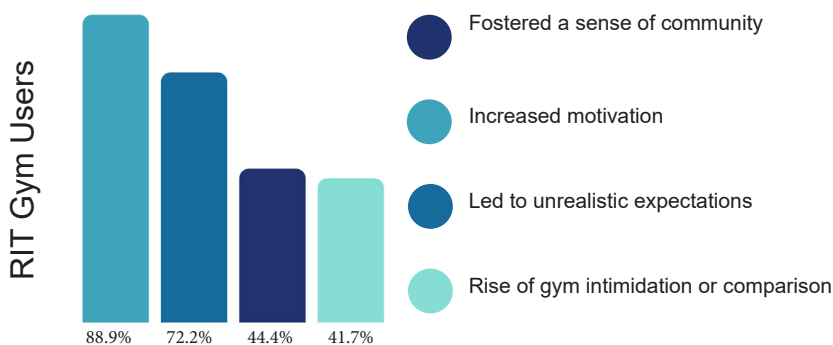


Figure 8-Social Media Impact

Have influencers posting workout videos on social media impacted your perception of using the gym?

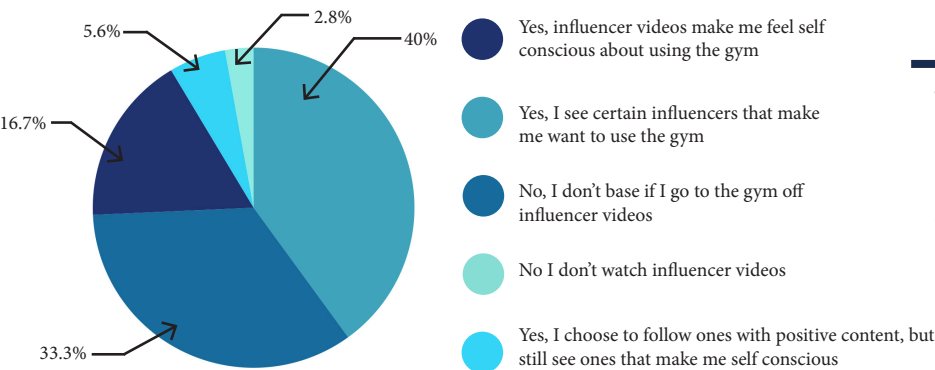


Figure 9-Influencers Impact

This chart shows how RIT gym users have been impacted by social media in their perception of using the gym.

Which areas of the gym do you feel most comfortable using?

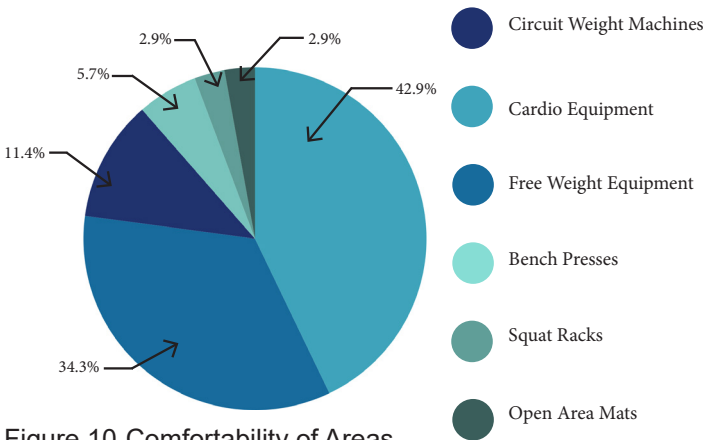


Figure 10-Comfortability of Areas

This chart represents the areas RIT gym users feel the most comfortable using.

Rank these areas of the gym based on how frequently you use them.

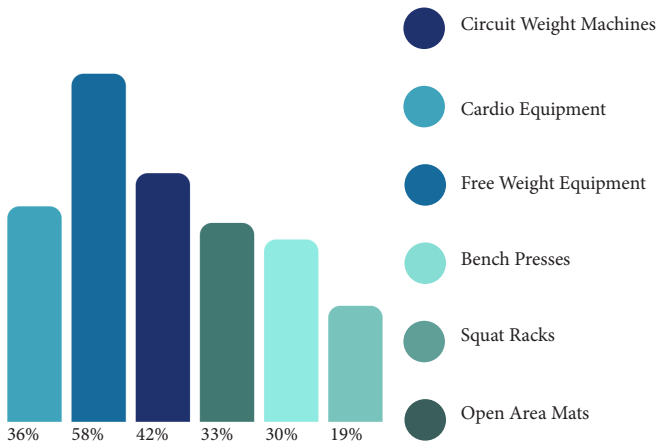


Figure 11-Frequently Used Areas

This graph shows the areas RIT gym users most frequently use.

Who do you think benefits the most from the current gym layout?

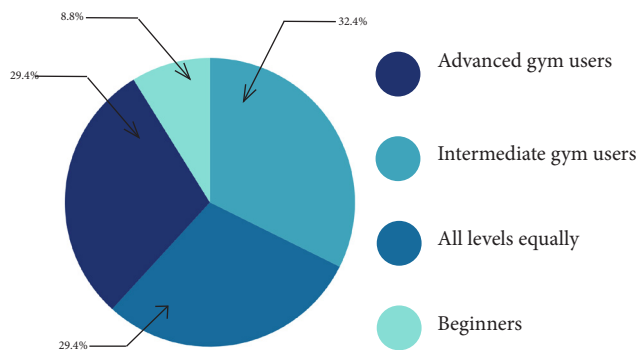


Figure 12-Primary Beneficiaries of Current Gym Layout

This chart represents who RIT gym users think benefits the most from the current layout of the Wiedman Fitness Center.

Rate the following improvements for making the gym more inclusive and welcoming.

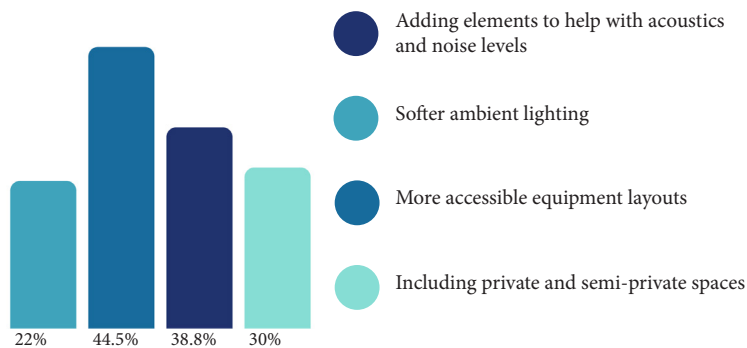


Figure 13-Inclusive and Welcoming Gym Improvements

This graph shows the highest ranked improvements for making the gym more inclusive and welcoming.

Have you ever experienced any of the following toxic gym behaviors at the RIT gym?

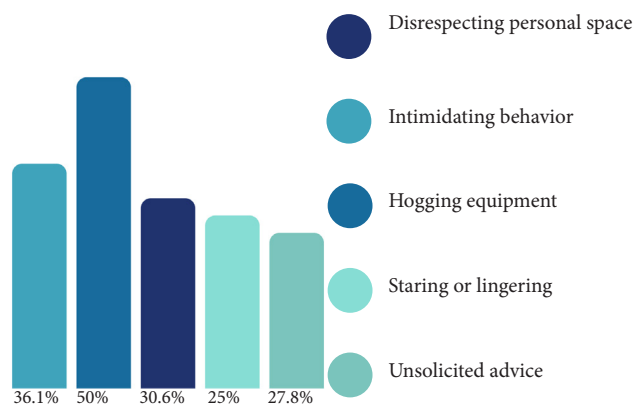


Figure 14-Toxic Gym Behaviors

This graph represents the most experienced toxic gym behaviors in the Wiedman Fitness Center.

If the gym had more private or quiet spaces, which do you think would be the most appealing?

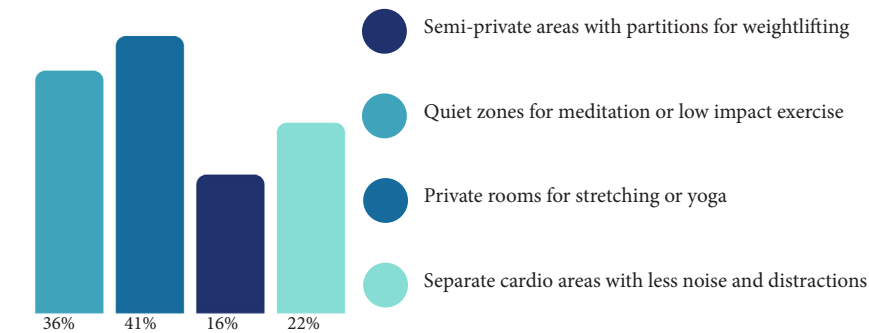


Figure 15-Most Appealing Private or Quiet Spaces

These two graphs represent the reasons why people who use the RIT gym or people who don't might avoid going.

What design changes, if any, would make you feel more comfortable or included at the gym?

"I feel that the gym has a spread of the top level being angled for beginners and the bottom being angled for intermediate. I personally feel really comfortable with the gym, so not many changes would help much, but i think separating cardio from lifting would be good."

"Less of a division between the free weights and the individual machines, completely divides beginners from experienced and makes it daunting to move down to the experience layer, so often people don't, leaving that space only for a small group of people."

"Separation of the "jocks" and "jock wanna-bees" from the " normal " fitness community who aren't gym rats."

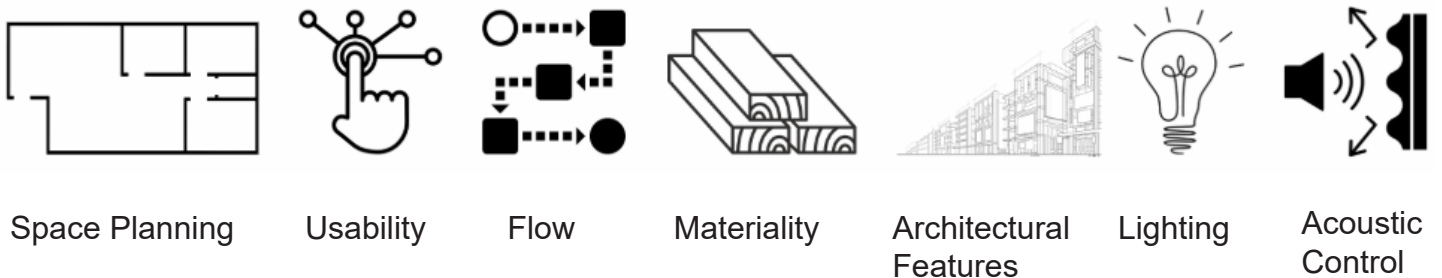
"More flexible space, better lighting and acoustics, clearer wayfinding, maybe more instructions around on how to use equipment."

"Lighting could definitely be improved, also reorganizing gym equipment for better congestion management."

OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES

Observations were conducted to gain a firsthand understanding of the dynamics within gym environments. By observing how individuals interact with the space and each other, it was possible to identify behaviors and patterns that surveys or interviews might not capture. The goal was to better understand the commonalities and differences among gyms in the Rochester area, leading to a clearer idea of what needs to be addressed in the new design.

When attending other gyms the key factors observed were:



Bloch Fitness Center

University of Rochester, 720 Library Rd, Rochester, NY

The Bloch Fitness Center at the University of Rochester features a straightforward, open-layout design. The primary areas of congestion were concentrated around the circuit weight machines, while other areas remained relatively unobstructed. Equipment and safety instructions were clearly marked; however, there was a lack of designated wayfinding for specific workout zones, as most equipment was housed within a single, undivided space, except for the cardiovascular machines. The lighting design was minimal, consisting primarily of pendant fixtures with no variation across different areas. Acoustic elements were not prominently utilized, contributing to a lack of sound control within the facility. Architectural features were sparse, resulting in a uniform aesthetic with little visual differentiation. The color palette was predominantly neutral, adhering to the University of Rochester's school colors. Overall, the facility exhibited a dated design, with limited attention given to aesthetics or spatial diversity.



Figure 16-Bloch Fitness Center

Midtown Athletic Club

Luxury Athletic Club, 200 E Highland Dr, Rochester, NY

The Midtown Athletic Club featured a spacious, well-organized layout with a variety of designated areas. Some spaces were fully enclosed by walls, while others were defined by half-walls or open divisions. Transitions between areas were reinforced through deliberate material changes, ceiling variations, and distinct lighting schemes, creating a clear sense of zoning. Despite the presence of extensive equipment, the layout allowed for ample spacing, preventing the facility from feeling overcrowded. Natural light was well-balanced with artificial lighting, ensuring a bright yet comfortable atmosphere. Additionally, acoustic control elements were incorporated to manage noise levels effectively, contributing to a more pleasant and functional environment.

The locker rooms were designed with a blend of openness and privacy. The layout flows naturally, with designated areas for getting ready, ample locker storage, and private changing stalls. Showers feature individual doors for added privacy, while thoughtful spatial divisions ensure a comfortable and accessible experience without feeling closed off. High quality materials and modern lighting enhance the overall atmosphere, making the space both inviting and efficient.



Figure 17-Midtown Athletic Club Gym



Figure 18-Midtown Locker Rooms

Wiedman Fitness Center

Rochester Institute of Technology, 1 Lomb Memorial Dr, Rochester, NY

2nd Floor Areas of Congestion

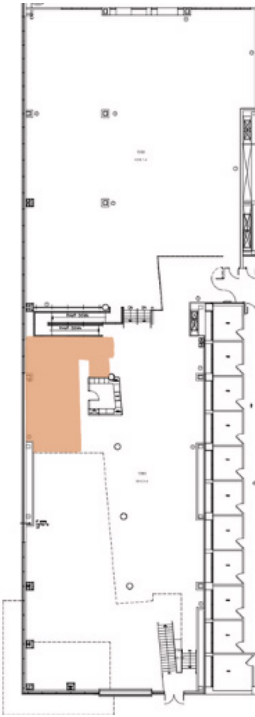


Figure 19-Floor 2 Area of Congestion 1



Figure 20-Current Layout 1

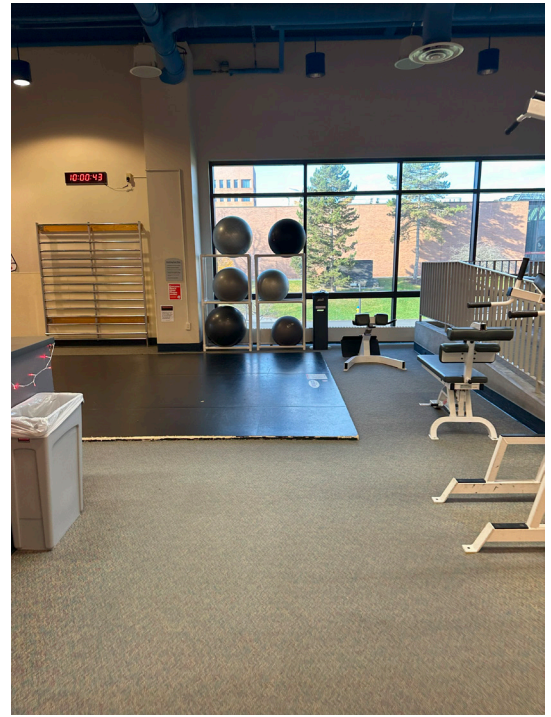


Figure 21-Current Layout 2

Current images of the second floor of the Wiedman Fitness Center highlight areas of congestion, particularly behind the existing reception desk. During the site visit, it was observed that the space behind the desk presented an inefficient layout, providing an awkwardly sized area for users engaging in workouts without equipment. The open ceiling design contributes to a sense of spaciousness, while portions of the second floor offer a direct view of the level below.

2nd Floor Areas of Congestion

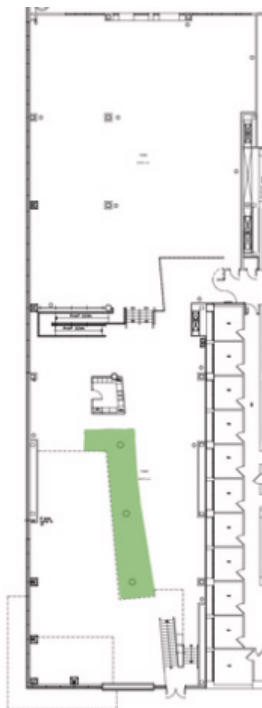


Figure 22-Floor 2 Area of Congestion 2



Figure 23-Current Layout 3

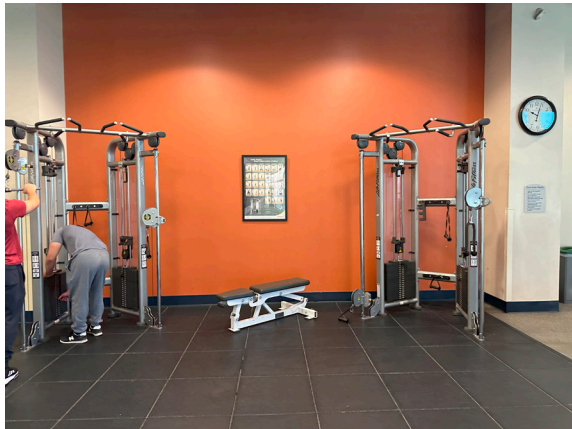


Figure 24-Current Layout 4

The second-floor congestion area includes cardio equipment, circuit weight machines, and open mat spaces. This zone is situated along the primary circulation path leading from the second floor to the first. Observations indicate a lack of a clearly defined pathway and limited privacy for users. The space features a transition in materials, with a shift from mat flooring to carpet, as well as a change in wall color to differentiate zones.

2nd Floor Areas of Congestion

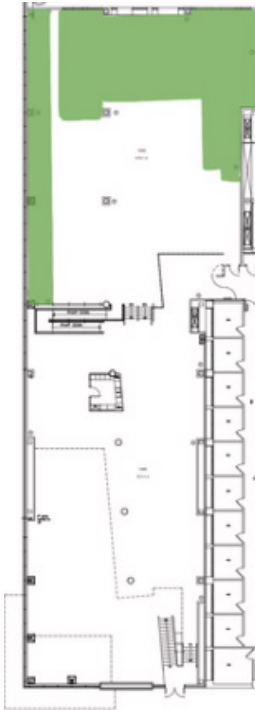


Figure 25- Floor 2
Area of Congestion 3



Figure 26- Current Layout 5



Figure 27-Current Layout 6

The northernmost section of congestion on the second floor primarily consists of circuit weight machines and squat racks, positioned along the rear of the cardiovascular equipment area. While the mat space is somewhat secluded in the back corner, it remains open to the surrounding environment. This area features a motivational quote displayed on the wall and benefits from natural light streaming in through exterior-facing windows.

1st Floor Areas of Congestion

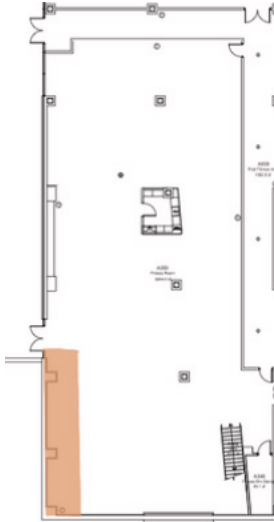


Figure 28-Floor 1 Area of Congestion 1



Figure 29-Current Layout 7



Figure 30-Current Layout 8

The open training area and squat rack section on the first floor experienced significant congestion, with minimal spacing between equipment. While a portion of the area along the wall offered some sense of privacy, it remained largely exposed. The space was well-lit with abundant natural light, and subtle ceiling height variations added some dimensional interest. However, the flooring material remained consistent throughout the area, lacking distinct zoning differentiation.

1st Floor Areas of Congestion

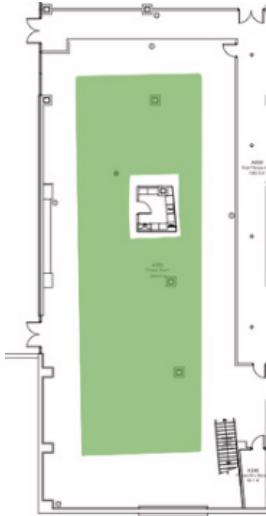


Figure 31-Floor 1
Area of Congestion 2



Figure 32-Current Layout 9



Figure 33-Current Layout 10

The open training area and squat rack section on the first floor experienced significant congestion, with minimal spacing between equipment. While a portion of the area along the wall offered some sense of privacy, it remained largely exposed. The space was well-lit with abundant natural light, and subtle ceiling height variations added some dimensional interest. However, the flooring material remained consistent throughout the area, lacking distinct zoning differentiation.

Summary

Through survey responses and observational studies, key insights were gathered about how students interact with and experience the existing college gym environment. Respondents highlighted specific areas of comfortability within the space, as well as equipment that was most frequently used, often correlating with spaces that felt more open, private, or unthreatening. A recurring theme was the need for more inclusive and beginner friendly areas, as well as better spatial clarity and flow. Notably, there is a clear separation of fitness levels based on gym floor levels, which can create unintended hierarchies or feelings of exclusion.

Observational studies revealed that environmental factors such as materiality, lighting, and acoustics significantly influence users' comfort and willingness to engage in the space. The current gym layout shows potential for inclusivity but is held back by a lack of spatial organization, cohesive branding, and an overall sense of belonging. These findings underscore the importance of intentional design in creating a more welcoming, equitable, and supportive gym experience for all users.

CREATIVE AGENDA

The Wiedman Fitness center is a two-story 16,000 square foot gym located in the Student Life Center at Rochester Institute of Technology. The gym features a full range of selectorized machines, free weights, cardiovascular equipment, and some stretching areas. The locker rooms are accessible on the first floor and consist of lockers, bathrooms, showers, and a sauna. There is also one gender neutral area in both the men's and women's locker rooms.

The creative agenda consists of redesigning the pre-existing RIT Wiedman Fitness Center gym. This proposal intends to foster a space free from the pressures of toxic gym culture, and allow a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. Through changes in space planning, adjacencies, materiality, ceiling heights, lighting and signage, the space will be enhanced to help create the most inviting atmosphere possible for its users.

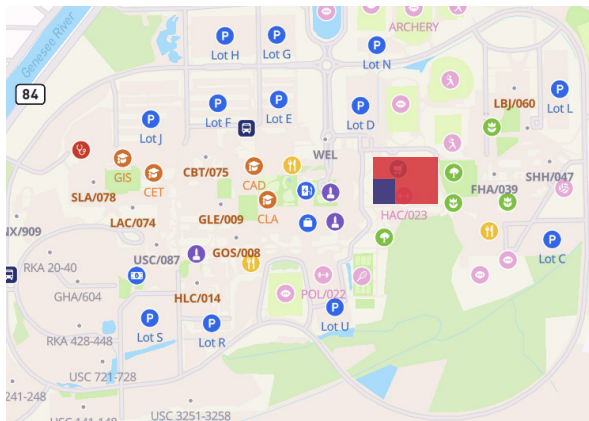


Figure 34-RIT Campus Map

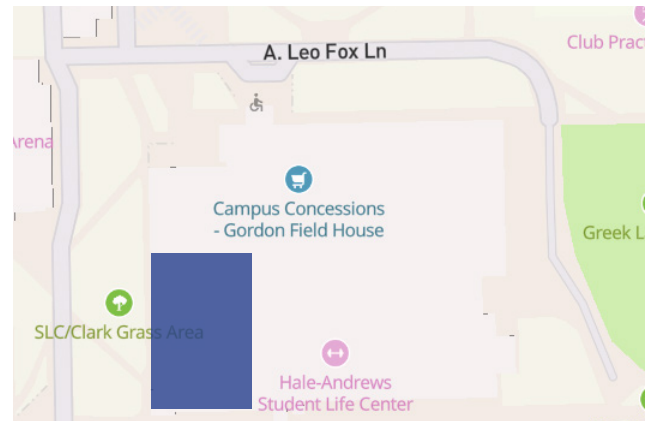


Figure 35-Wiedman Fitness Center

- Student Life Center
- Wiedman Fitness Center



Site map of the fitness center. The sun path plays a crucial role. The highlighted red is the fitness center with the locker rooms within the entire building of the SLC.

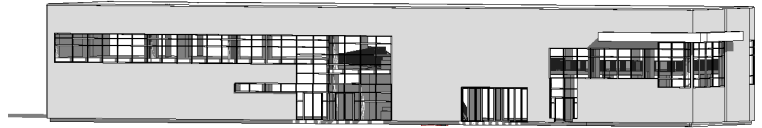


Figure 36-West Side Sun & Shade



Figure 37-East Side Interior Sun & Shade

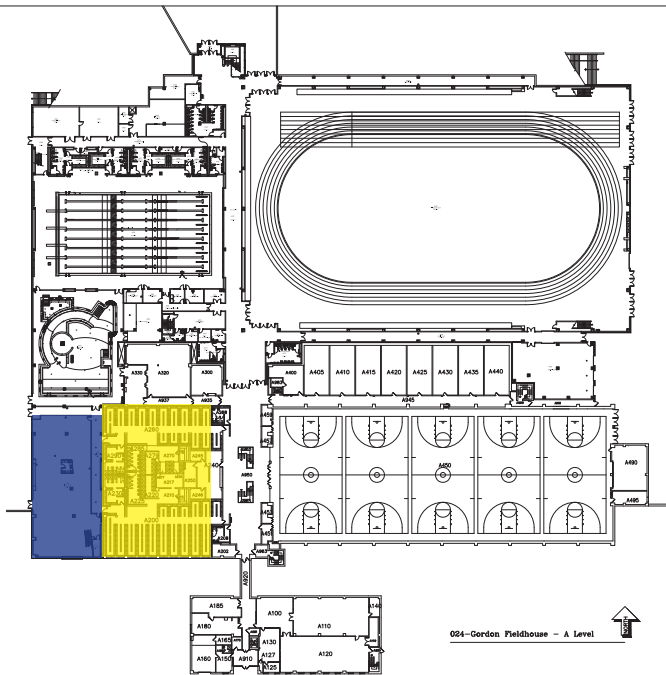


Figure 38-Level 1 Floor Plan

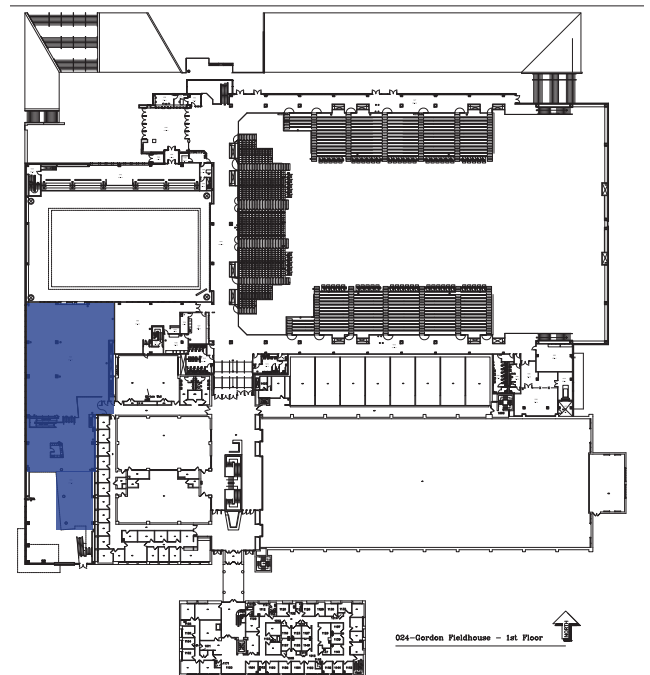


Figure 39-Level 2 Floor Plan

- Gym Area
- Locker Rooms

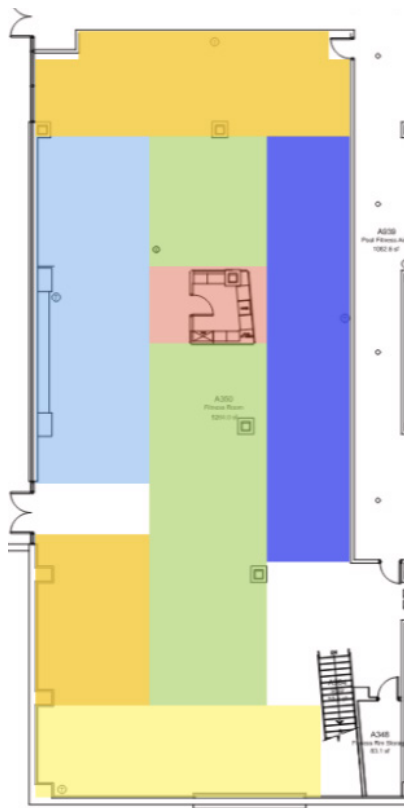


Figure 40-Level 1 Current Layout

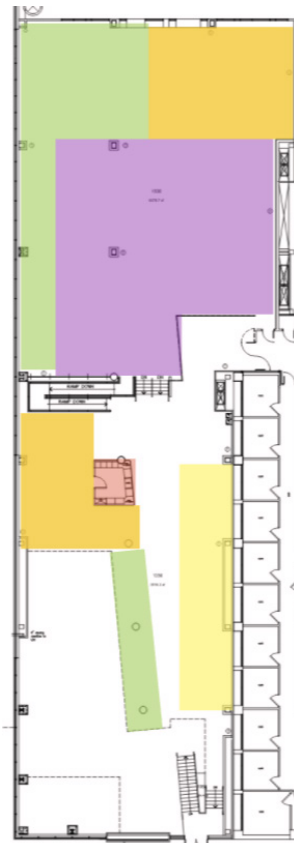


Figure 41- Level 2 Current Layout

- Mats/Open Areas
- Squat Racks
- Free Weights
- Reception Desk
- Bench Presses
- Cardio Machines
- Circuit Weight Machines

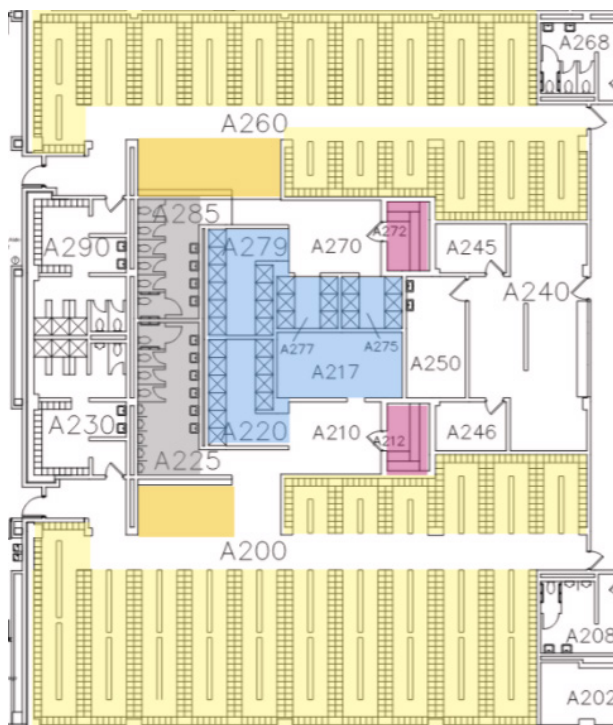


Figure 42-Locker Room Current Layout

- Vanity Space
- Lockers
- Showers
- Sauna
- Bathrooms

1ST FLOOR INITIAL PROGRAMMING

The initial zoning concept for the first floor strategically organizes equipment to enhance flow and accessibility. The farthest section will be designated for free weights and bench presses, creating a dedicated strength training area. The middle section will house squat racks, centralizing high-intensity lifting while preventing overcrowding. The space nearest to the entrance will be reserved for circuit weight machines, offering easy access for quick workouts. Additionally, this area may incorporate a semi-private space, providing a designated zone for individualized or small group training while maintaining an open, inclusive environment.

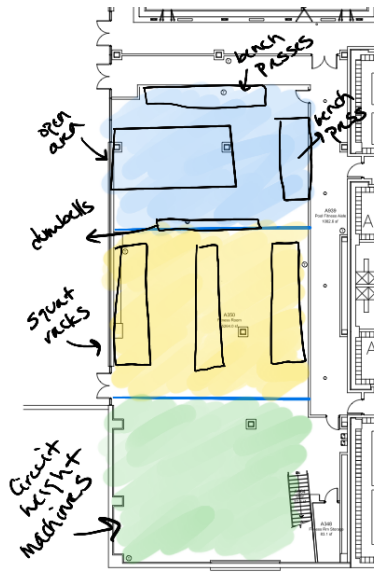


Figure 43-Level 1 Zoning Ideas

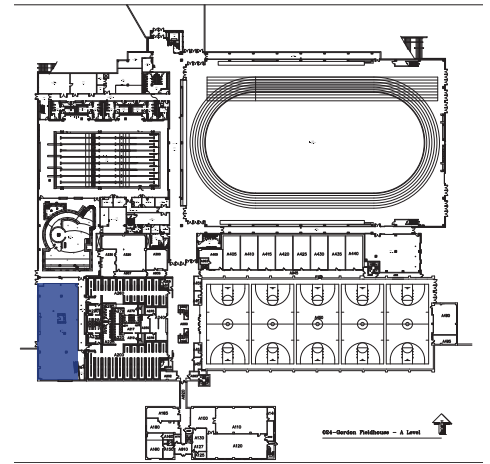


Figure 44-Level 1 Floor Plan

The concept for the rear zone of the first floor emphasizes an open, versatile layout while incorporating subtle spatial divisions. These divisions will be achieved through a combination of varied flooring materials, textures, and a low partition wall, which helps define different functional areas without creating a closed off feel. This approach maintains the open atmosphere, ensuring visibility and accessibility while providing a sense of structure and organization. The design encourages fluid movement between spaces, catering to diverse workout styles and fostering an inviting, dynamic environment.



Figure 45- Area of Congestion

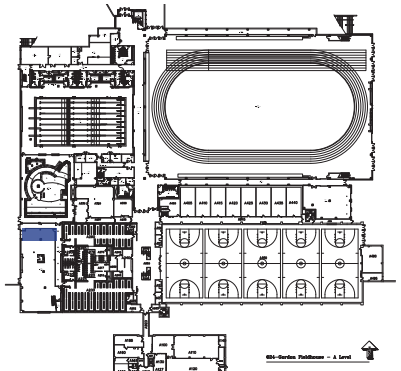


Figure 46-Level 1 Current Area

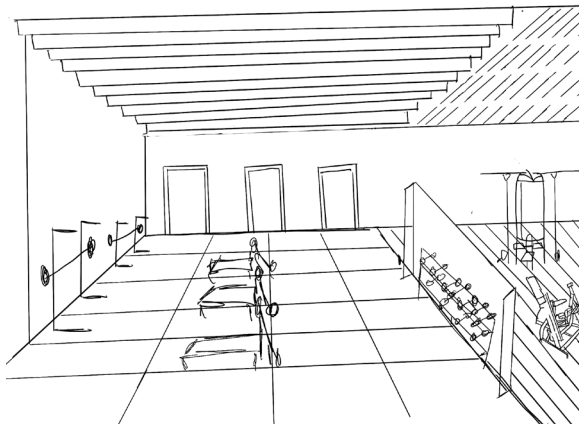


Figure 47-Level 1 Initial Sketch

2ND FLOOR INITIAL PROGRAMMING

The initial concept involves zoning the second floor into distinct areas. The northernmost section would be designated for open mat and private spaces, followed by two zones for circuit weight machines to alleviate congestion, as these machines are often overcrowded. The final section would house cardiovascular machines. Additionally, there is consideration for extending the floor to the farthest wall, maintaining a visible connection between the two floors while opening up the previously cramped space. A significant portion of survey participants emphasized the importance of natural light in creating a welcoming atmosphere, so the natural light in this area would be preserved and remain visible.

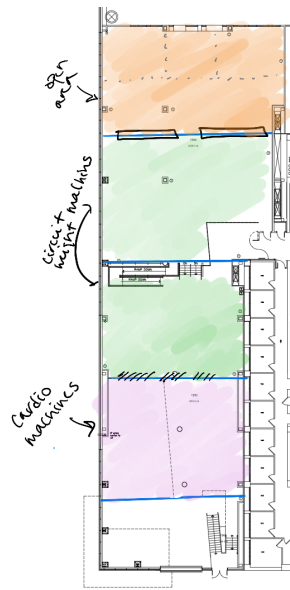


Figure 48-Level 2 Zoning Idea

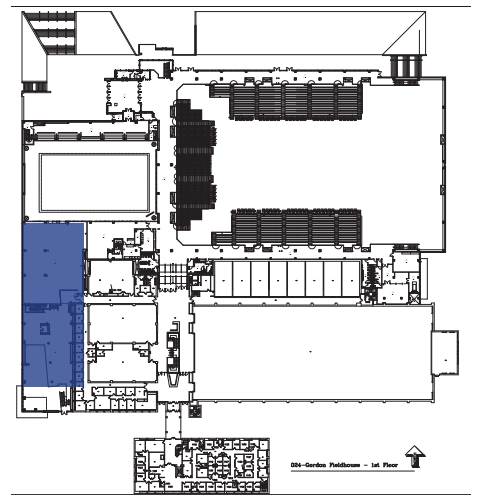


Figure 49-Level 2 Floor Plan

The vision for the second floor incorporates a dynamic and visually engaging design, using a combination of material and ceiling changes to define distinct areas while maintaining an open and cohesive atmosphere. To further enhance spatial organization and create subtle separations without fully enclosing spaces, sheer metal curtains will be introduced as dividers, as seen in the inspiration photo above. These lightweight, semi-transparent barriers will provide a balance between openness and privacy, allowing light to flow through while still delineating different workout zones. The combination of these elements will contribute to a modern, adaptable space that supports both functional needs and aesthetic appeal.



Figure 50-Level 2 Area of Congestion

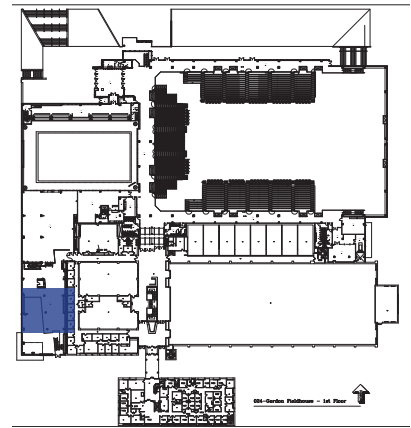


Figure 51-Level 2 Proposed Area

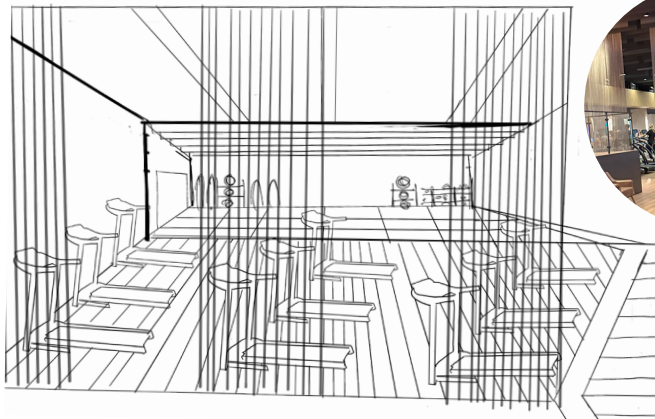


Figure 52-Level 2 Initial Sketch



Figure 53-Inspiration Image 1

LOCKER ROOM INITIAL PROGRAMMING

The initial concept for the locker rooms focuses on optimizing space, improving functionality, and elevating the overall aesthetic. A key priority is expanding the locker areas to provide more storage and convenience for users while incorporating private changing stalls to enhance comfort and privacy. Additionally, the design will feature upgraded materials, modern lighting, and refined finishes to create a more inviting and contemporary atmosphere. Thoughtful layout adjustments will ensure better flow and accessibility, transforming the locker rooms into a more efficient and welcoming space that aligns with the overall gym redesign.



Figure 54-Locker Room Zoning Idea

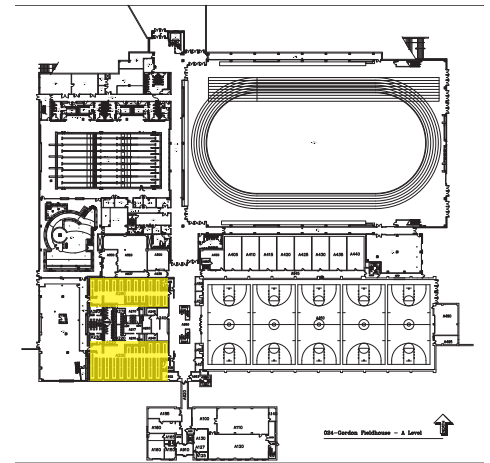


Figure 55-Locker Room Floor Plan



Figure 56-Current Locker Room

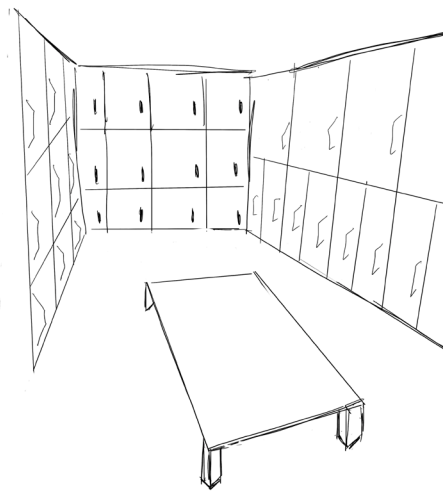


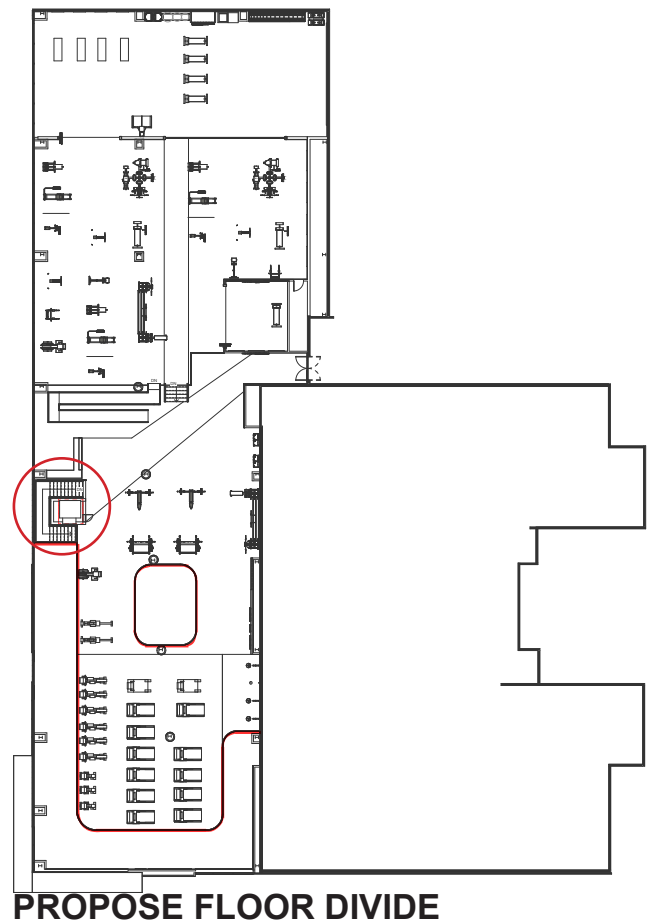
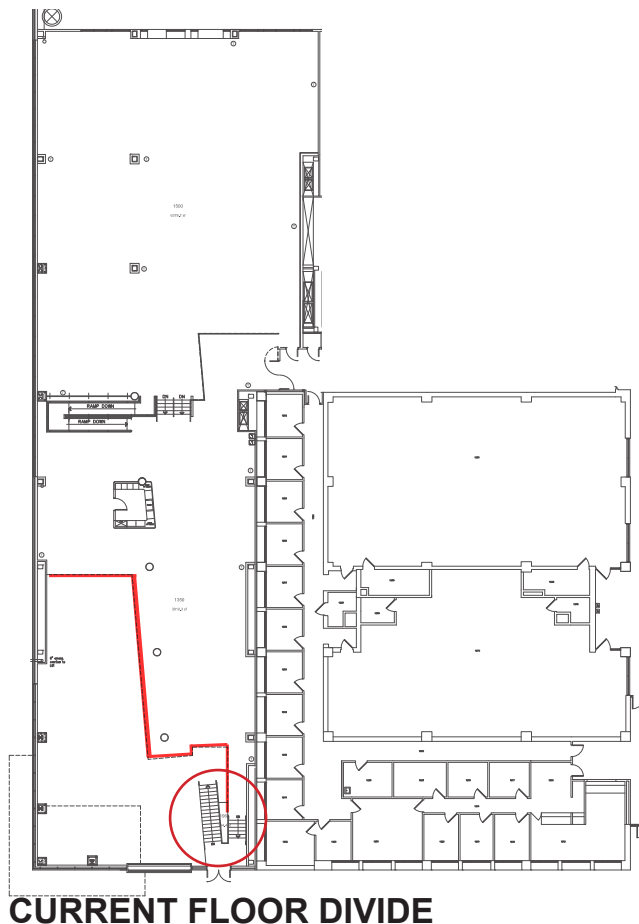
Figure 57-Locker Room Initial Sketch



Figures 58/59- Inspiration Images

FINAL DESIGN PROPOSALS

CIRCULATION & FLOOR SEPARATION

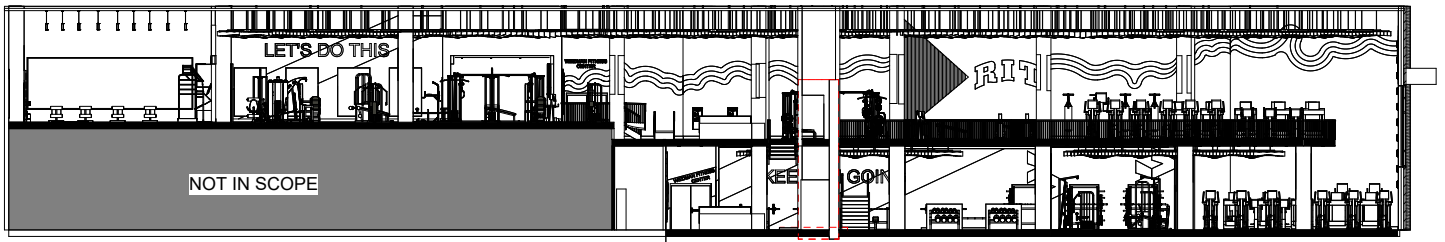


The current floor layout of the gym lacks clarity and organization in terms of circulation flow, user pathways, and overall spatial planning. The placement of the stairs requires users to navigate through equipment zones to access them, creating an inconvenient and awkward experience for both those walking through and those using the equipment. Additionally, the stairs are currently the only means of vertical circulation, as the facility lacks an elevator. This presents significant accessibility challenges for individuals with disabilities and complicates the transport of heavy equipment between levels.

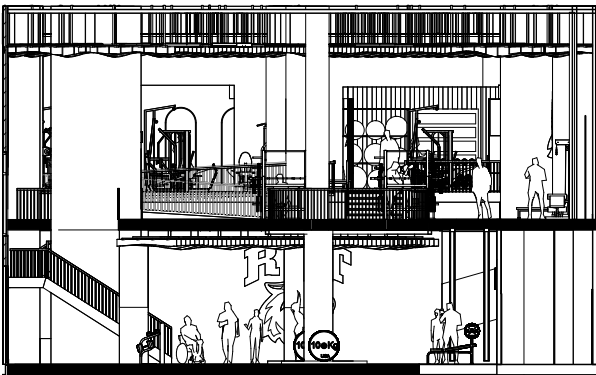
In the proposed redesign of the floor plan, several key considerations were prioritized. Maintaining the “open to below” feature was important, as survey participants expressed appreciation for the visual and spatial connection between the two levels. Preserving natural light across both floors was also a priority, so the upper level has not been fully enclosed. The new floor configuration allows for a more efficient equipment layout on the second floor and incorporates a central opening to enhance the sense of community and visibility between levels.

Most notably, the circulation core has been repositioned closer to the second-floor entrance, adjacent to the reception desk. This strategic relocation improves user access by preventing interference with workout areas and placing vertical circulation in a more intuitive, centralized location.

CIRCULATION & FLOOR SEPARATION: SECTIONS & RENDERINGS



NORTHSOUTH SECTION



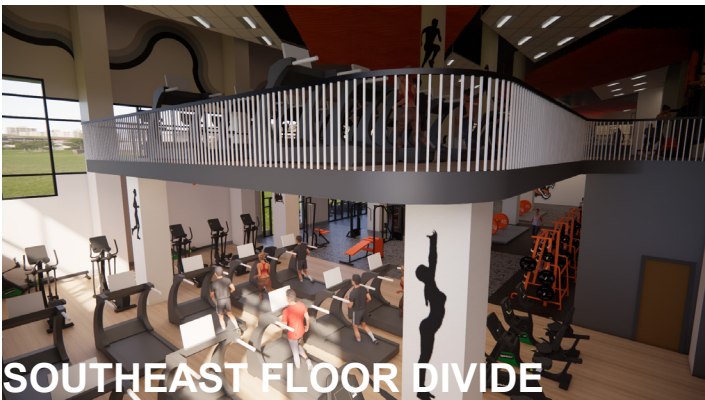
EASTWEST SECTION



LEVEL 2 MIDDLE FLOOR CUTOUT



SOUTHWEST FLOOR DIVIDE

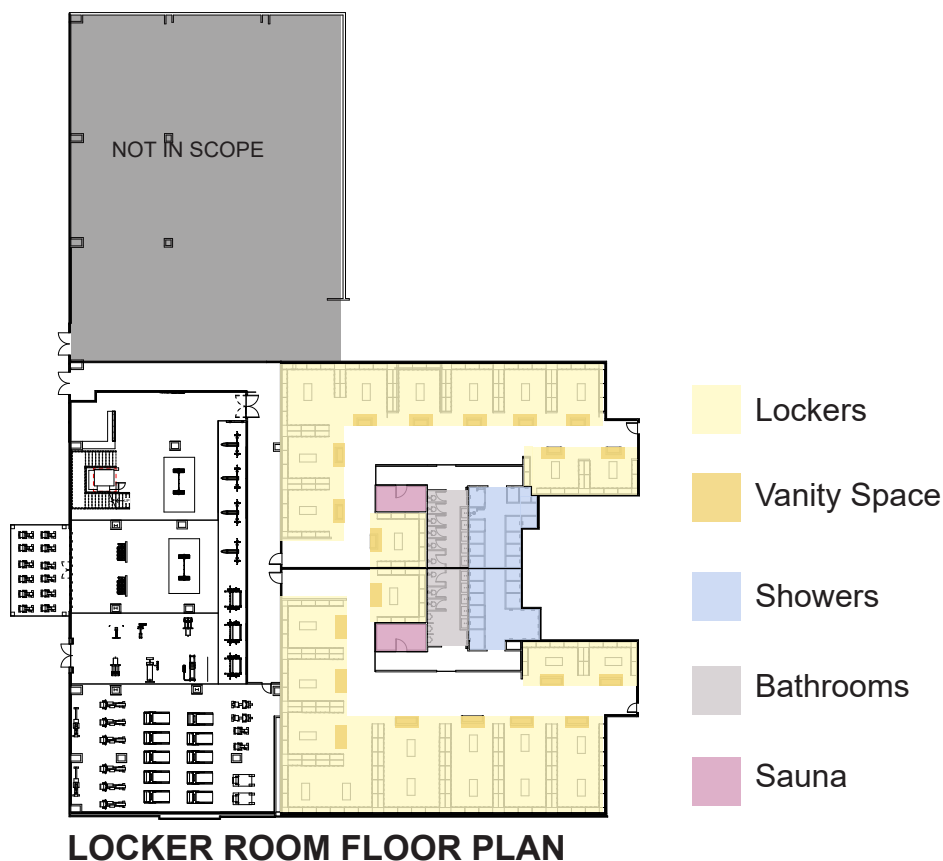


SOUTHEAST FLOOR DIVIDE



LEVEL 1 MIDDLE FLOOR CUTOUT

LOCKER ROOM PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN



The current locker rooms convey an institutional atmosphere, lacking warm, inviting materials and offering minimal privacy features. The spacing between the lockers and benches is particularly narrow, posing significant accessibility challenges for users who rely on wheelchairs, walkers, or other mobility aids. This limited clearance restricts access to the lockers and hinders ease of use. Additionally, the current layout does not provide adequate visual privacy, those changing in the locker area are in direct view of individuals passing through the main circulation path.

The proposed redesign prioritizes enhanced privacy and inclusivity while maintaining the functionality of the existing layout. Privacy improvements include the integration of partial visual barriers and individual changing stalls, designed to minimize disruption to the overall floor plan. RIT's signature colors and materials have been incorporated throughout the space to create a more welcoming and cohesive environment. Small vanity areas have also been introduced to serve as subtle partitions, offering users an added layer of privacy as they enter the space.

Rather than creating entirely separate changing rooms, changing stalls have been thoughtfully integrated into the shower areas. This combined solution offers a private alternative for individuals who may not feel comfortable changing in the open locker area, while also improving the overall efficiency and accessibility of the space.



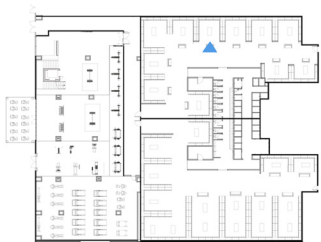
LOCKER ROOM



LOCKER ROOM WITH USERS



INDIVIDUAL LOCKER SPACE



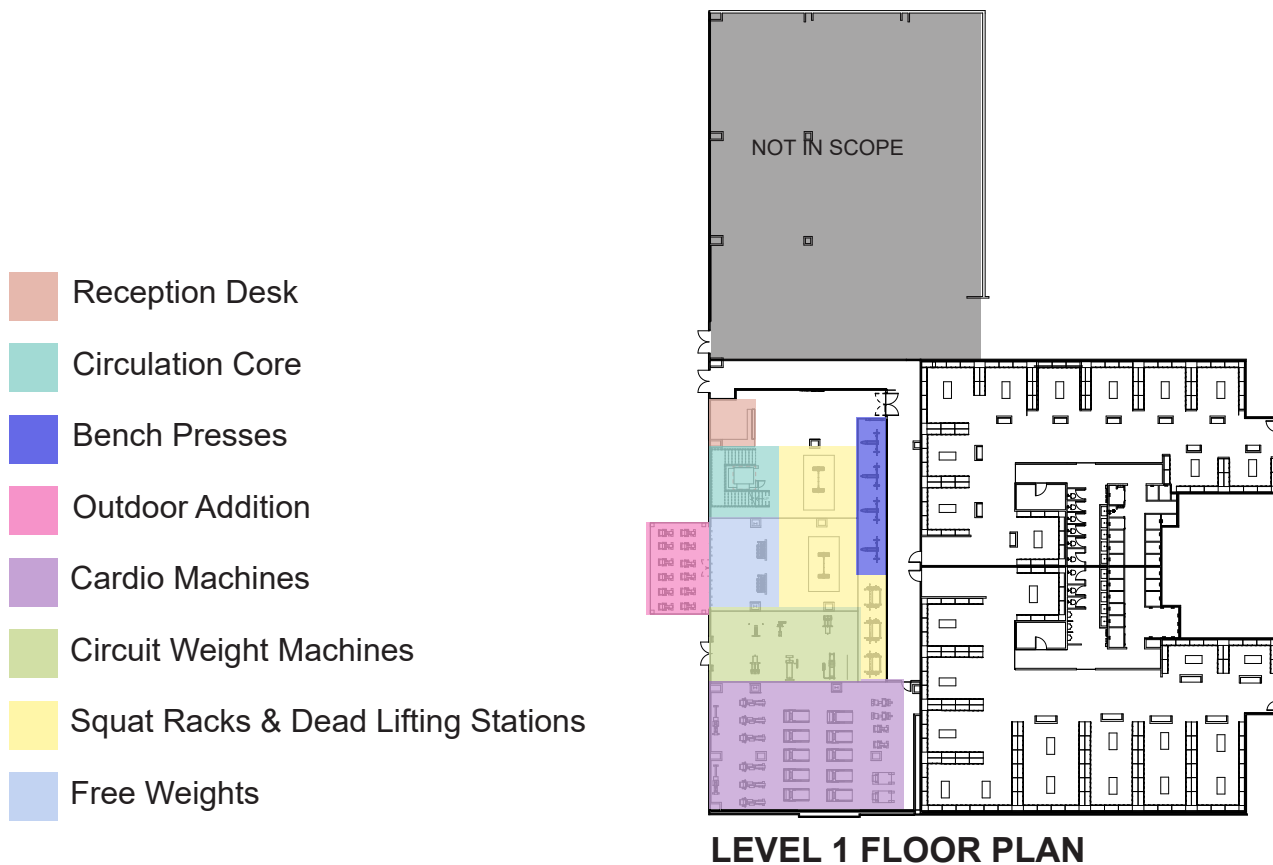
VANITY BLOCKAGE



SHOWER & CHANGING STALL



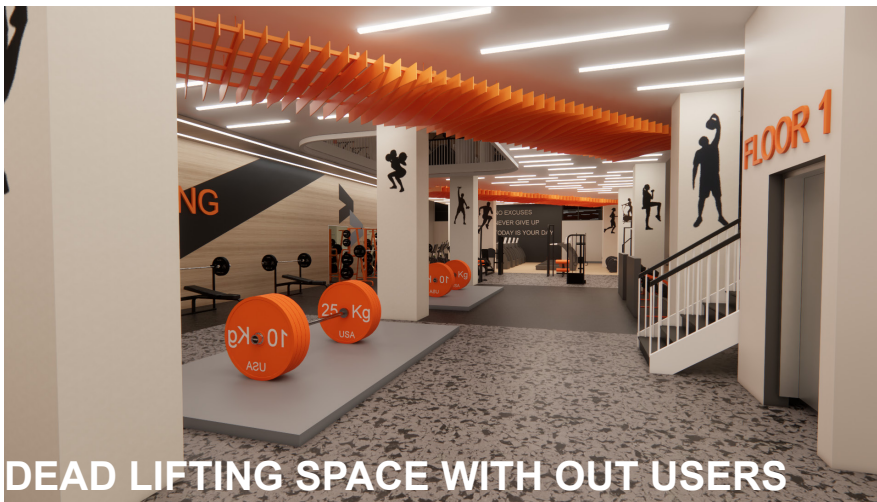
LEVEL 1 PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN



The current Level 1 gym space lacks RIT-specific branding, accessible circulation, and overall spatial organization. The existing color palette, materials, and lighting are uniform throughout, resulting in a space that feels visually monotonous and disconnected from the university's identity.

The proposed redesign focuses on creating distinct functional zones through strategic use of varied materials, ceiling treatments, and lighting. The main entrance has been relocated to the northern wall, enhancing the overall arrival experience. This change improves visibility to the reception desk and circulation core while preventing users from immediately entering areas with fitness equipment, thereby promoting a safer and more intuitive flow.

To foster a sense of community and inclusivity, graphic design elements have been incorporated throughout the space. These include a photo wall showcasing diverse gym users and motivational quotes integrated into the interior walls. Color-coded flooring visually delineates different activity zones, aiding in spatial orientation and use. Acoustical ceiling panels have been introduced to reduce noise levels and improve the overall comfort of the environment. Additionally, an exterior addition has been included in the design to connect indoor and outdoor experiences and further encourage community interaction.



These two renderings depict the same space, one with users and one without, to highlight the impact of RIT branding, university colors, and updated flooring materials. The perspective is taken from the circulation core, looking toward the southern wall, where new circuit weight machines have been strategically placed to enhance spatial organization and equipment flow.



LEVEL 1

View from the southern weight training area looking north toward the community wall and circuit training zone. RIT branding, bold ceiling features, and updated flooring create a dynamic and unified feeling, while the open layout supports intuitive circulation and equipment access.



GRAPHIC ELEMENTS

Perspective from the central circulation path looking toward the free weight area and motivational graphic wall. The orange “Keep On Going” typography reinforces an energetic, encouraging atmosphere, and distinct flooring materials help define the strength zone.



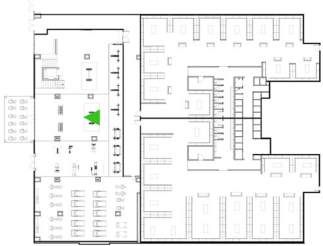
LEVEL 1 MAIN ENTRANCE

View highlighting the photo mural wall near the main entrance, featuring a collage of RIT community members to emphasize inclusivity and school spirit. This area sets the tone for the gym experience, combining visual storytelling with wayfinding and branding.

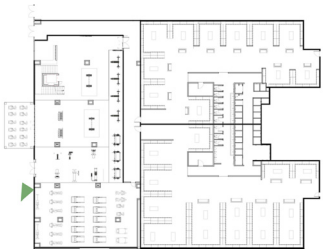




OUTSIDE VIEW



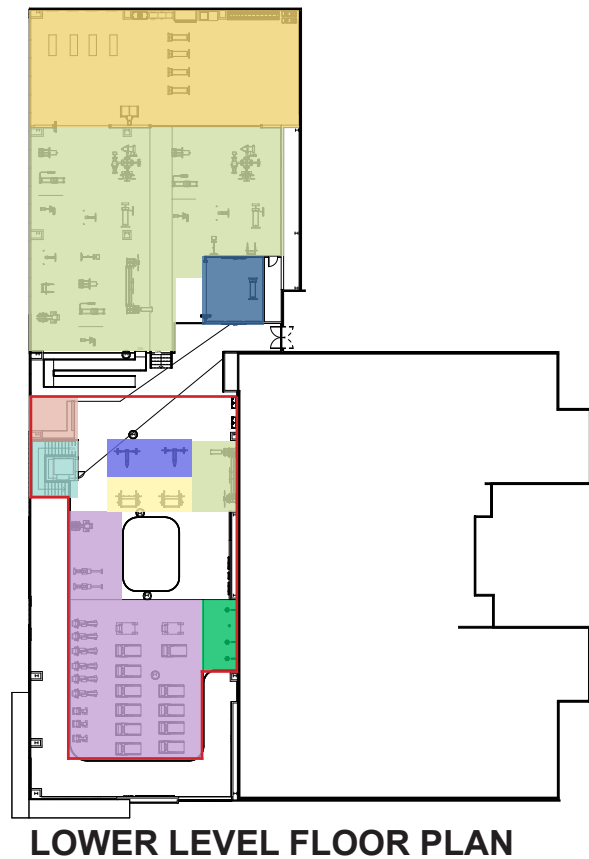
OUTSIDE ADDITION



The new exterior addition creates a seamless indoor-outdoor connection, offering flexible space for outdoor training, stretching, or socializing. Designed to foster community engagement, it enhances natural light and visibility into the gym while inviting those walking by to engage with and use the space. By extending the activity zone outdoors, this addition supports a more inclusive environment, welcoming users of all comfort levels, including those who may feel intimidated by traditional gym settings.

LEVEL 2 LOWER LEVEL PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN

- Reception Desk
- Circulation Core
- Photo Room
- Boxing Station
- Cardio Machines
- Circuit Weight Machines
- Squat Racks
- 2ND FLOOR LOWER LEVEL



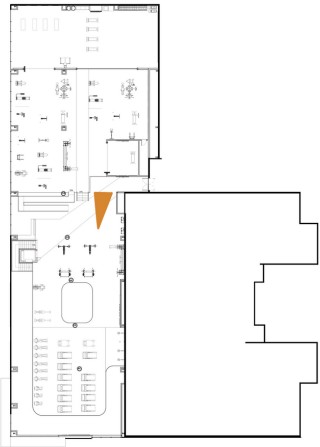
The existing second floor of the gym is divided into two distinct zones: Level 2 Lower Level and Level 2 Upper Level. Currently, the main entrance is located on the lower level; however, it lacks clear visibility and creates an awkward point of entry for users. This area, like much of the existing facility, is devoid of RIT branding, cohesive materiality, and thoughtful spatial organization.

In the proposed redesign, the circuit weight machines have been relocated to the lower level to address concerns regarding visibility and user comfort. Previously, the elevated placement and orientation of these machines created a perceived hierarchy, making users on the lower level feel observed or exposed. The new layout introduces a more balanced distribution of equipment across both levels, enhancing accessibility and equity of use. Material and lighting upgrades have been applied to improve the overall atmosphere, and circulation has been restructured for greater clarity. The reception desk has been strategically positioned adjacent to the circulation core, making it more visible and accessible for users upon entry.



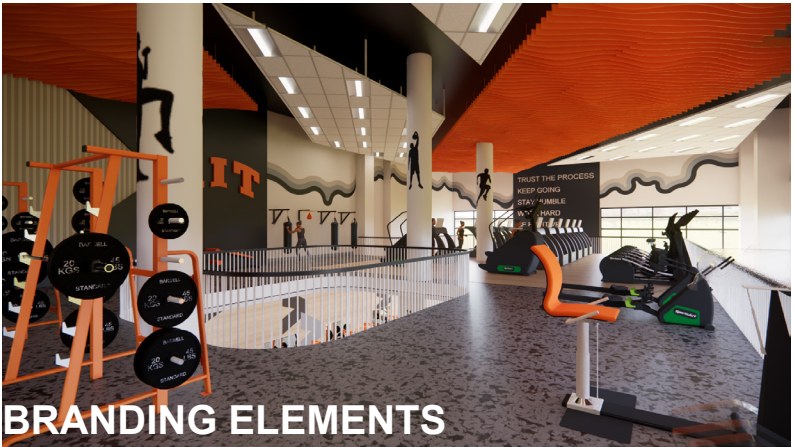
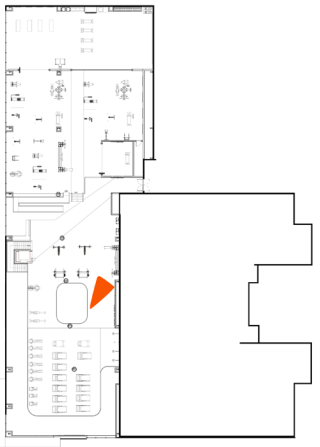
LEVEL 2 MAIN ENTRANCE

This entry view of the second floor highlights an open, welcoming layout designed to encourage community interaction. Clear pathways and social seating areas foster a sense of belonging, helping all users feel comfortable and seen.



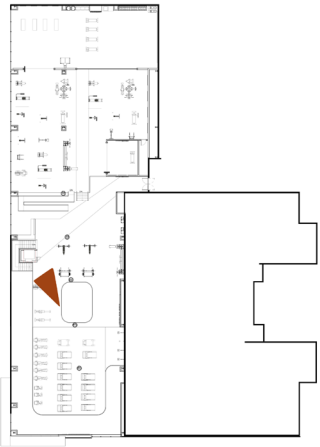
CARDIO MACHINES

This area emphasizes visibility and connection. The railing and open sightlines invite users to feel part of a larger, active community. Inclusive design choices support varied fitness goals and promote equal access for all.

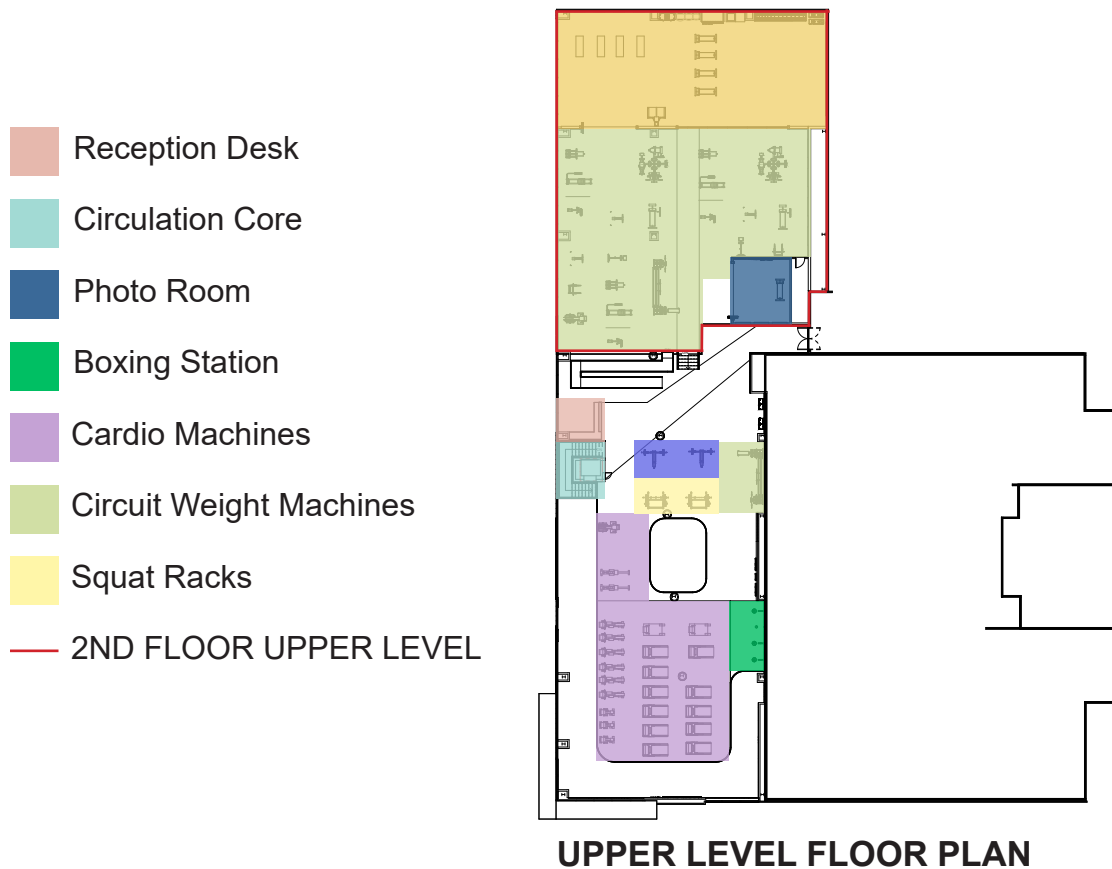


BRANDING ELEMENTS

This angle showcases intentional graphic elements. The gym is much more low-tech than other areas of RIT, but the graphic elements help detract from the individual and instead, place focus on the environment.



LEVEL 2 UPPER LEVEL PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN

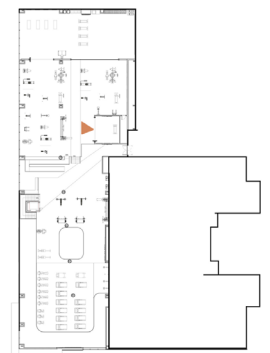
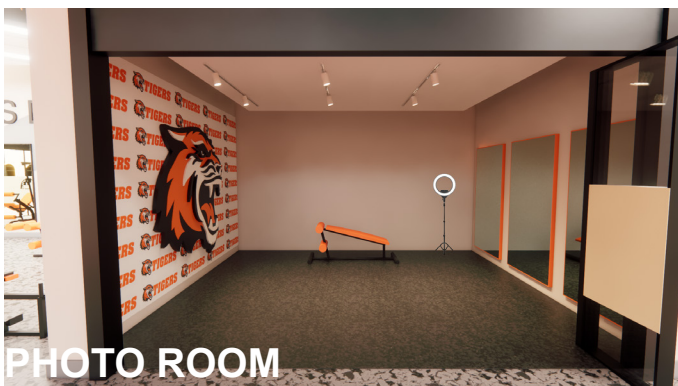
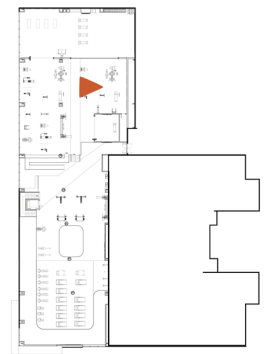
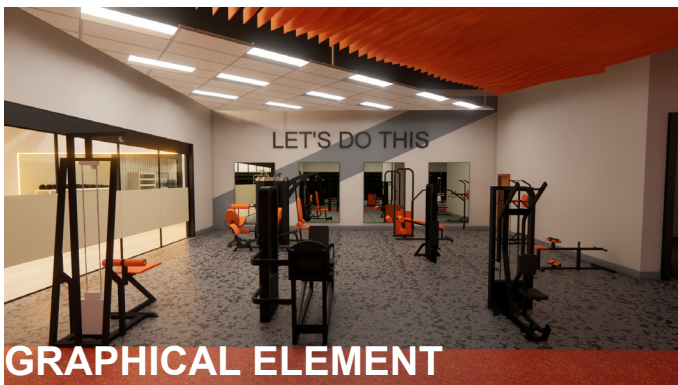
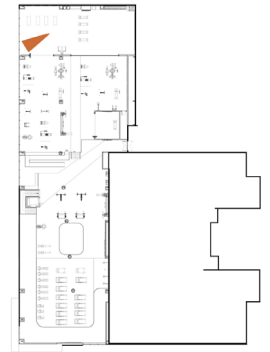
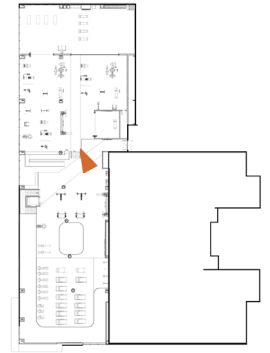


The current upper level of Level Two reinforces a perceived hierarchy between gym users, as mentioned previously. Its elevated position, lack of privacy, and absence of RIT branding or school colors contribute to an unwelcoming and disconnected environment. Users often feel exposed, and the overall design lacks intentionality in both spatial planning and user experience.

In the proposed redesign, the upper level has been reimagined to create a more inclusive and user-centered experience. One of the primary goals was to establish a private workout zone for individuals seeking a more intimate or less crowded gym environment. This designated space offers a quieter, more comfortable atmosphere while maintaining visual cohesion with the rest of the facility through consistent branding, improved materiality, and optimized lighting.

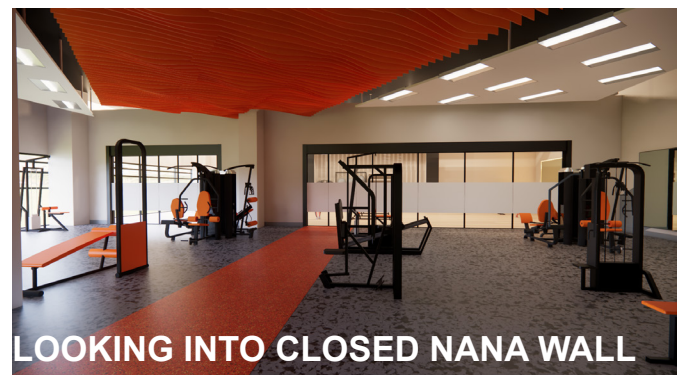
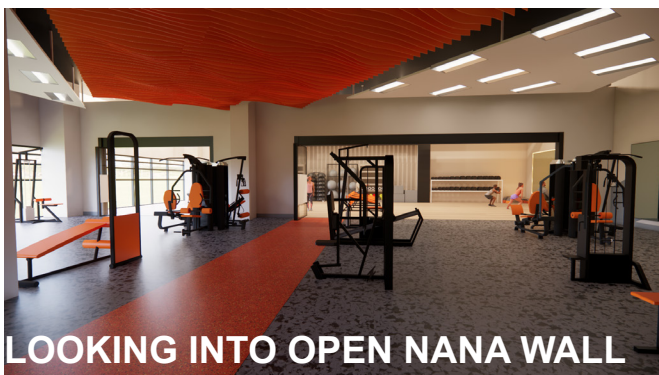
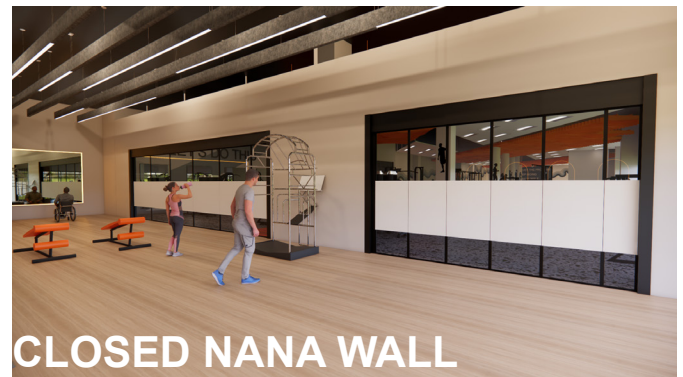
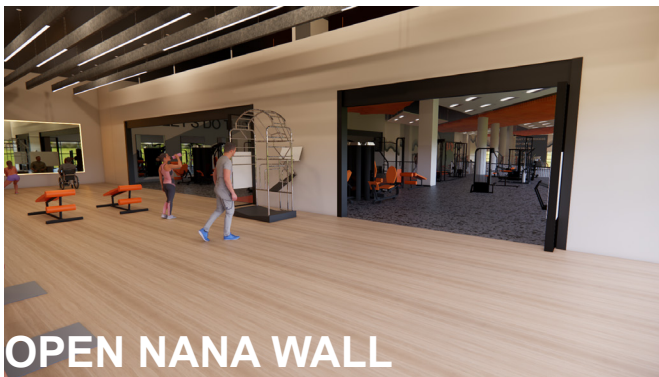
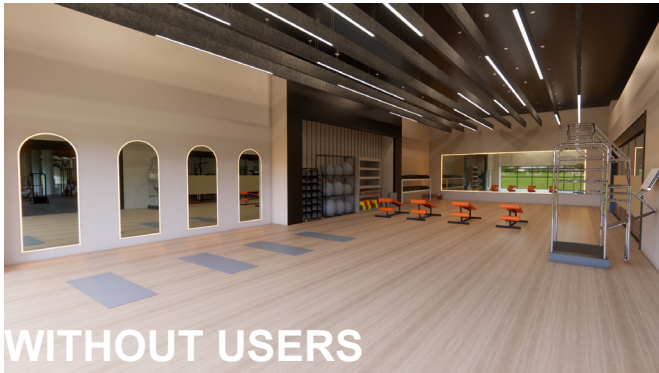
To better reflect contemporary gym culture and user behavior, a dedicated photo room has also been introduced. Recognizing the influence of social media in fitness spaces, this room provides a designated, thoughtfully designed area for users to take photos. Outfitted with curated lighting, RIT colors, and branded design elements, it offers a professional quality backdrop for content creators, influencers, or anyone looking to document their progress. While users are still welcome to take photos anywhere in the gym, this addition respects the culture of social sharing without compromising the experience of those who prefer more privacy.

Circulation throughout the upper level has also been restructured to promote smoother navigation and reinforce a sense of unity between both levels, addressing previous concerns of fragmentation.



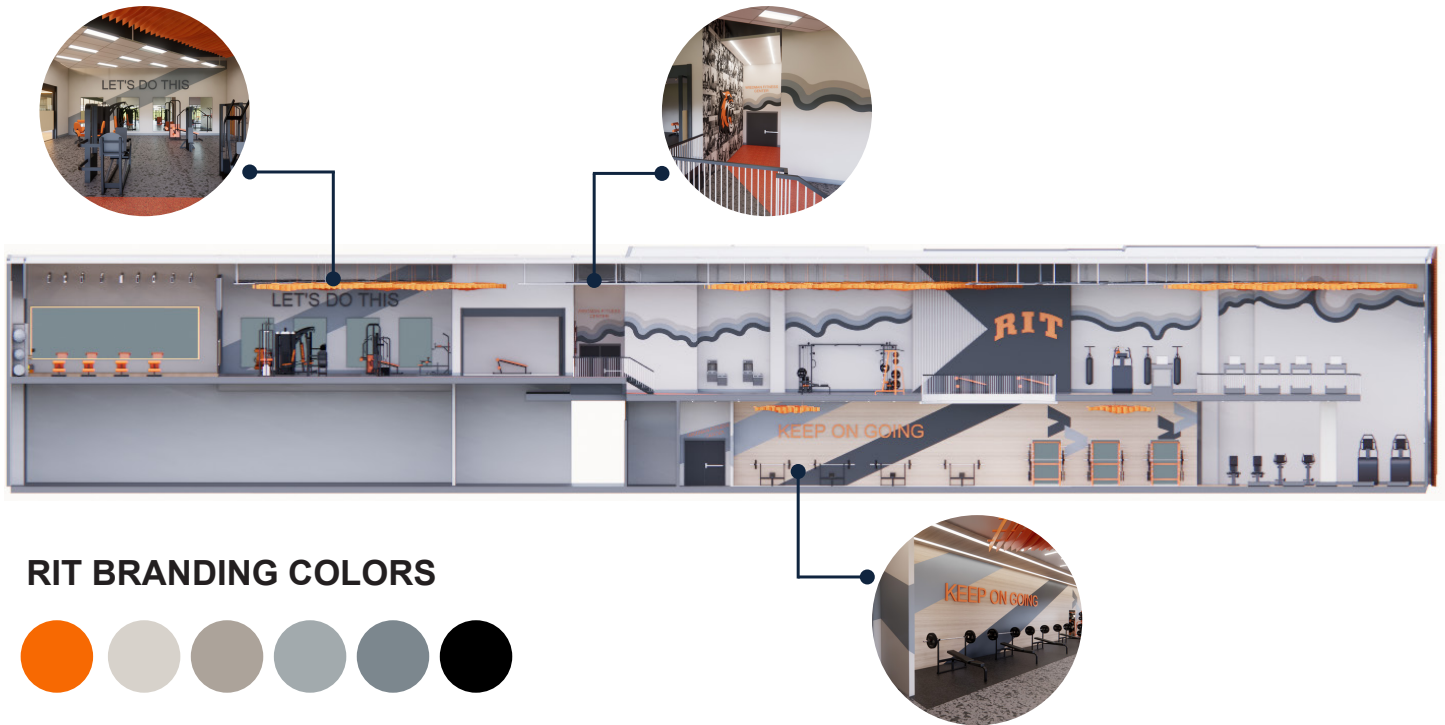
The photo room is a dedicated space designed for users who wish to capture workout content or personal progress photos in a professional looking environment. Featuring curated lighting, RIT branding, and clean, neutral backdrops, the space offers optimal conditions for high-quality photos and videos. It supports the social aspect of fitness culture while maintaining respect for the privacy and comfort of others in the gym.

PRIVATE ROOM



The private space on the upper level features a more subdued and minimal design, intentionally muted to place emphasis on the user and foster a calm, relaxed atmosphere. It is separated from the rest of the floor by two NanaWalls—folding glass partitions that allow the space to be fully opened or enclosed, depending on user preference and programming needs. This flexibility supports a variety of uses: while the area remains open to all users during regular hours, it can also be reserved for specialized classes such as yoga or Pilates. During these sessions, access is limited to registered participants, ensuring a focused and uninterrupted experience. This space promotes a greater sense of community and inclusion by accommodating diverse needs, preferences, and comfort levels within the gym environment.

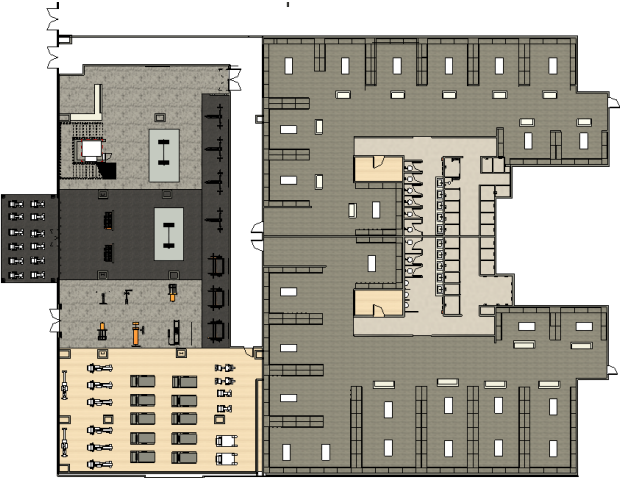
BRANDING & GRAPHIC ELEMENTS



The design concept centers on the narrative “To Distract is to Defeat,” with every spatial decision aimed at reducing self-consciousness and redirecting attention toward the environment rather than the individual. In the main gym, each area was carefully considered to minimize visual hierarchy and create a cohesive, immersive atmosphere. Strategic placement of equipment, intentional circulation patterns, and thoughtful zoning all contribute to a more equitable and engaging user experience.

Throughout the gym, visual cohesion is reinforced through the integration of RIT branding, a curated color palette, and dynamic graphic elements. Rather than leaving walls blank and uninviting, branded design moments and visually stimulating features were introduced to activate the space and celebrate school spirit. These elements not only enhance the spatial identity but also create intentional “Instagrammable” moments, encouraging users to connect, share, and feel part of a larger community. The result is a space that is both functionally inclusive and visually vibrant, reflecting the values of the RIT community.

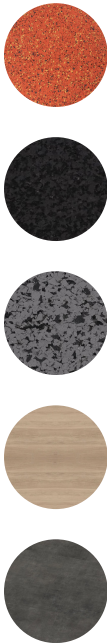
FINAL FLOOR PLANS WITH MATERIALS



LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN



LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN



FINAL FLOOR PLANS

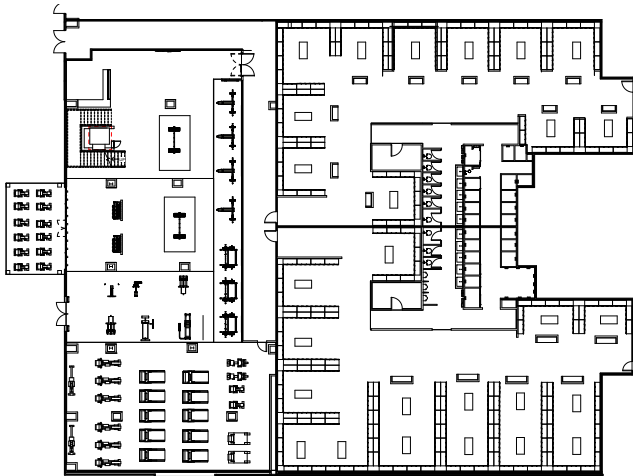


Figure 59-Level 1 Final Floor Plan

LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN

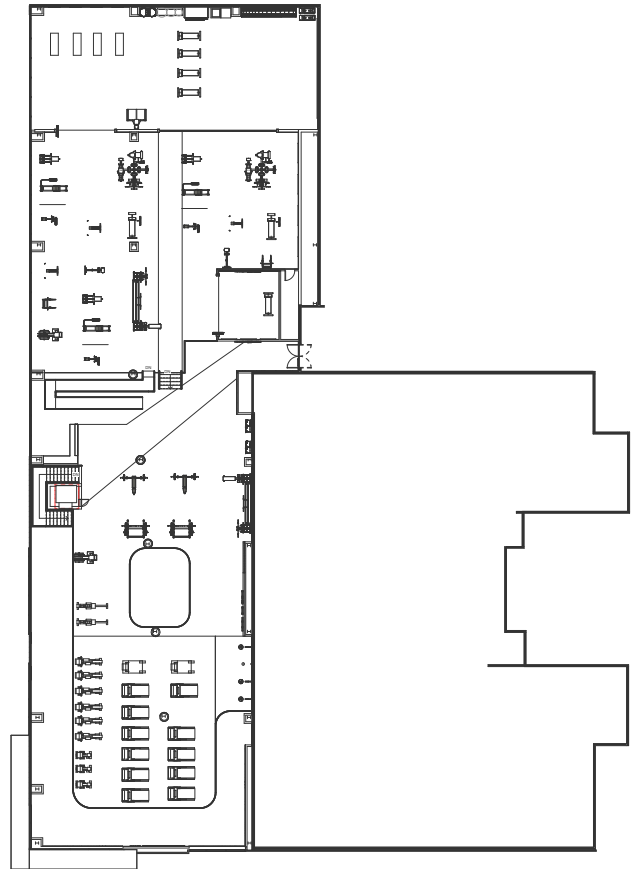


Figure 60-Level 2 Final Floor Plan

LEVEL 2 FLOOR PLAN

FINAL REFLECTED CEILING PLANS

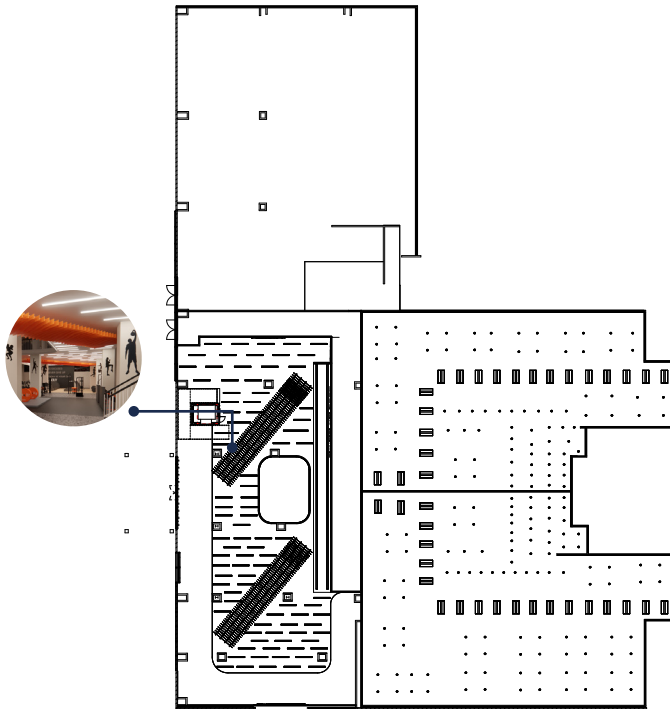


Figure 61-Level 1 Final RCP

LEVEL 1 RCP

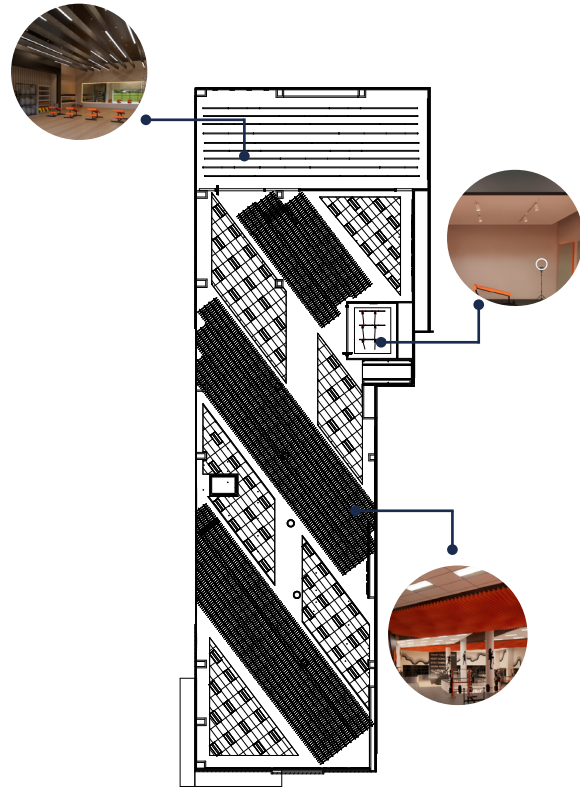


Figure 62-Level 2 Final RCP

LEVEL 2 RCP

CAPSTONE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

With rising awareness of toxic gym culture, intimidation, and social pressures within college fitness environments, there is an urgent need to reimagine gym design through a more inclusive, intentional lens. As health and wellness continue to be key pillars of student life, the gym should be a space that welcomes all users, regardless of identity, experience level, or body type. However, many existing collegiate facilities still fall short in providing an environment that feels safe, comfortable, and empowering for all.

The primary goal of this undergraduate capstone project is to explore how inclusive spatial planning, improved circulation, cohesive branding, and targeted design interventions can challenge the culture of exclusivity and foster a more supportive, community-focused gym environment. Informed by both user research and environmental psychology, this project proposes a two-level redesign of RIT's main fitness center that addresses issues of visibility, privacy, accessibility, and social dynamics. A core narrative, *To Distract is to Defeat*, guided the development of spaces that shift attention away from performance comparison and instead place focus on user comfort, environmental quality, and belonging.

Strategies such as reorganization of equipment to eliminate perceived hierarchies, the introduction of private and multi-functional zones, and the integration of RIT branding throughout the facility were used to create a visually engaging yet equitable experience. Additionally, designated social media-friendly areas, like the photo room, embrace contemporary gym culture without compromising the privacy of other users.

In conclusion, inclusive, flexible, and identity-driven design strategies can be powerful tools in dismantling toxic gym norms and promoting a healthier, more supportive fitness culture on college campuses. Through thoughtful spatial interventions and visual storytelling, design can help create environments that empower users, foster community, and ultimately redefine what it means to belong in a gym.

Appendix A-Capstone Prospectus

Capstone Candidate: Annie Burks

School: College of Art and Design, School of Design
Rochester Institute of Technology

Program: Interior Design

Capstone Topic

Ending Toxic Culture and Inspiring Inclusivity of College Gyms

The Issue

There are many reasons people choose to work out, whether it's the feel-good boost, a mental escape from a long day, or the drive to train as an athlete. Fitness is personal, and gym culture should welcome rather than dismiss those who choose to workout in ways that make them happy and that work best for them individually. Social media is a contributor to setting unrealistic expectations within a gym. Reinforcing toxic "gym culture" or the do's and don'ts and unrealistic body goals that fuel appearance related disorders. College alone is an adjustment for many students, and it is also a time that health behaviors like physical activity start to change. During a time that should embrace the need for physical activity, many college gym spaces are often perceived as intimidating or unwelcoming. Contributing to creating an environment where people feel judged or uncomfortable, especially those who don't fit the gym culture's expectations of physical fitness.

Capstone Justification

Interior design can't directly solve the issue of social media and toxic gym culture, but it can help create a more inclusive and inviting environment for those who want to work out. By designing spaces that prioritize comfort and accessibility, gyms can encourage a more positive and supportive experience. Exercise has proven to release endorphins and serotonin, "hormones that naturally enhance mood, cognition, and concentration."¹ When combined with thoughtful design, these physiological benefits can be amplified, fostering a space where individuals feel empowered and motivated to achieve their fitness goals in a healthy, encouraging atmosphere. Various emotions are

1 Basso, The Effects of Acute Exercise on Mood, Cognition, Neurophysiology, and Neurochemical Pathways, (2017)

experienced during workouts, including a sense of pride after completing a session, knowing that something positive was done for oneself. This feeling of personal achievement is something that can be accessible to everyone. Ideally gym users feel welcomed regardless of their expectations or fitness level. College students already have to deal with academic stress and social pressures, and gyms are a perfect way to help students relieve themselves of those daily burdens, as this will lead to improving their mental health, academic success, and personal development. A welcoming gym environment can help create a sense of community and belonging, which are essential to have for college students.

Literature Review

The initial literature explorations focused on current trends surrounding gym culture, and some of the negative impacts it's having on society. In modern culture, "a gym body is a fashion statement, and many trainers are pursuing social capital and participation through gym training."² This strikes the idea of body image vs. health and wellbeing, which stem from social media creating unrealistic expectations of what people are doing in the gym, and limiting people from wanting to use a public gym. Although going to the gym might mean something different for every person, it still can be a very intimidating thing to do, the goal of this exploration is to propose a design solution that fits not just one person, but every person. Future research will focus on studies that examine the direct effects of various design elements, such as spatial layouts, the use of color, and acoustics, on gym user experiences and behaviors. This Literature Review will also explore how design strategies can be customized to enhance inclusivity, minimize intimidation, and cultivate a positive and supportive college gym environment.

Research Agenda

To supplement my own experience, as an athlete I have worked out in many different gyms, and have learned to notice things that work and things that don't within the design of the space. The research agenda will consist of gathering data from college students, faculty and staff, who use the Rochester Institute of Technology's gym on campus to get as much information about the space and the areas which can be improved. Through surveys and interviews, will collect data about their reasoning for exercise and aspects of toxic culture that affect them. Interviews will reveal key details to help support the creative agenda. Visiting a variety of college and public gyms will produce a better understanding of spatial layouts, design elements, and overall functionality. The findings from these studies will provide valuable insight into how specific design elements influence a gym user's experiences, and what college age students perceive as a non-toxic gym environment.

2 Walton-Smith, Navigating the growing toxicity of gym culture, (2021)

Creative Agenda

The creative agenda goals consist of redesigning the pre-existing RIT gym, by putting the wants and needs of the user first and emphasizing how a space can make someone feel. These ideas intend to foster a space free from the pressures of toxic gym culture, and allow a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

Summary

The aim of this capstone is to investigate how interior design can transform gym environments to counteract toxic culture and foster inclusivity. The research activities such as interviews, surveys, and case study reviews, will identify key design elements and strategies that promote a welcoming atmosphere and support diverse user experiences. These insights will substantiate design approaches for the creative agenda, with the goal of creating gym spaces that inspire and engage all individuals in their fitness journeys.

Appendix B-QS1 Informed Consent

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in an undergraduate capstone study to look at Ending Toxic Culture and Inspiring Inclusivity of College Gyms. Please take whatever time you need to discuss the study with your family and friends, or anyone else you wish to. The decision to join, or not to join, is up to you. In this research study, we are investigating how gym environments can support mental health in the age of social media. With the goal of redesigning gym spaces to be more comfortable and inclusive, college students will increase frequency of visits and have a positive experience.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate, this is a basic outline of what will happen over the course of your participation in the questionnaire. You will be asked 19 multiple choice questions and 1 short answer questions based on your experience using the RIT gym. These questions range from your personal opinions about using the gym, your thoughts on social media's effect of gym usage, as well as potential design elements you like or dislike about the current space and what you would want to be included in a redesign of it. We think this will take you 10 minutes to complete.

The investigators may stop the study or take you out of the study at any time they judge it is in your best interest. They may also remove you from the study for various other reasons. They can do this without your consent. You may also stop participating at any time.

RISKS

We believe there are no known risks connected to participating but there may be some we are not aware of or other risks that we cannot predict.

BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

There are no incentives, monetary awards, or gifts for participating. While you may not personally experience benefits from participating in this study, others may benefit in the future from the information we find in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will take the following steps to keep information about you confidential, and to protect it from unauthorized disclosure, tampering, or damage: data will be stored in a multi-authenticated

In some cases, it may be necessary, for your safety or for the integrity of the study, for individuals from the HSRO or appointed by the HSRO, institution staff, IRB or sponsor to access your data.

Your information even if the identifying information is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Data will be used in the following ways:

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

Consent of Subject (or Legally Authorized Representative)

Signature of Subject or Representative _____ Date _____

Appendix C-QS2 Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in an undergraduate capstone study to look at Ending Toxic Culture and Inspiring Inclusivity of College Gyms. Please take whatever time you need to discuss the study with your family and friends, or anyone else you wish to. The decision to join, or not to join, is up to you. In this research study, we are investigating how gym environments can support mental health in the

Appendix C-QS2 Informed Consent

INTRODUCTION

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WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate, this is a basic outline of what will happen over the course of your participation in the interview. You will be asked 2 multiple choice questions, 1 short answer question, and 4 long answer questions based on your experience not using the RIT gym. These questions range from your personal opinions about using the gym, what design elements would be more intriguing for you to use the gym, how you think social media may play a role, and what sort of barriers you see within gyms. We think this will take you 10 minutes to complete.

The investigators may stop the study or take you out of the study at any time they judge it is in your best interest. They may also remove you from the study for various other reasons. They can do this without your consent. You may also stop participating at any time.

RISKS

We believe there are no known risks connected to participating but there may be some we are not aware of or other risks that we cannot predict.

BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

There are no incentives, monetary awards, or gifts for participating. While you may not personally experience benefits from participating in this study, others may benefit in the future from the information we find in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will take the following steps to keep information about you confidential, and to protect it from unauthorized disclosure, tampering, or damage: data will be stored in a multi-authenticated

password-protected drive folder that only the research team will have access to. Data will be aggregated and presented in charts and graphic representations for the entire survey group, not individuals. Quotes, if any, may be used but will not contain identifying information unless initialed here _____ .

In some cases, it may be necessary, for your safety or for the integrity of the study, for individuals from the HSRO or appointed by the HSRO, institution staff, IRB or sponsor to access your data.

USE OF INFORMATION

Your information even if the identifying information is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Data will be used in the following ways:

Direct quotes used anonymously, summarizing and aggregating the information.

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled, and it will not harm your relationship with the student researcher, RIT or the interior design program.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

Email Associate Professor and RIT Interior Design Undergraduate Program Director Mary Golden at megfaa@rit.edu if you have questions about the study, any problems, unexpected physical or psychological discomforts, any injuries, or think that something unusual or unexpected is happening. Contact Heather Foti, Associate Director of the HSRO at (585) 475-7673 or hmfsrs@rit.edu(link sends e-mail) if you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant.

Consent of Subject (or Legally Authorized Representative)

Signature of Subject or Representative

Date

Appendix D-Survey Questions for RIT Gym Users

Do you prefer working alone, with one other person or with a small group? (multiple choice)

How comfortable do you feel using the locker rooms? (multiple choice)

Rate these questions based on your comfortability

How comfortable do you feel with the level of privacy in the locker rooms?

How comfortable do you feel engaging in social interactions in the locker rooms?

How comfortable are you with the use of phones in the locker rooms?

Would access to private changing stalls make you more comfortable using the locker room? (yes or no)

Would doors instead of curtains make you more comfortable using the shower? (yes or no)

How comfortable do you feel using the gym on campus? (multiple choice)

What is the main reason you might avoid going to the gym? (multiple choice)

If the gym had more private or quiet workout spaces, rate which would be the most appealing.

Private rooms for stretching or yoga

Quiet Zones

Semi-private areas

Who do you think the RIT gym environment is most welcoming to? (multiple choice)

Have you experienced any of the following gym behaviors at the RIT gym? (check all that apply)

Rate the following improvements for making the gym more inclusive and welcoming.

Including private and semi-private spaces

More accessible equipment layouts

Adding elements to help with acoustics and noise levels

Which areas of the gym do you feel most comfortable using? (multiple choice)

Who do you think benefits the most from the current gym layout? (multiple choice)

Rate the importance of the following for making the gym feel more inclusive.

Equipment arrangement

Varying floor levels

Lighting

Have you ever felt that the gym environment made you feel uncomfortable or excluded? (multiple choice)

If the gym had more private or quiet workout spaces, which do you think would be the most appealing?

- Private rooms for stretching or yoga
- Quiet zones for meditation or low impact exercise
- Semi-private areas with partitions for weightlifting

Which type of lighting do you think is most important to creating a comfortable and welcoming gym atmosphere?

- Natural lighting
- Soft ambient lighting
- Accent lighting
- Spot lighting

How comfortable do you feel sharing the gym with a diverse range of people; different genders, body types, fitness levels? (multiple choice)

What design changes, if any, would make you feel more comfortable or included at the gym? (short answer)

Appendix E-Survey for NON gym users at RIT

What is the main reason you chose not to use the gym on campus? (multiple choice)

Do you think social media affects your choice to use the gym? (multiple choice)

If your previous answer was yes, how does social media play a role in affecting your choice to use the gym? (short answer)

How do the following aspects of the gym's atmosphere impact your comfort level?

- Noise level
- Lighting
- Spatial layout
- Aesthetics
- Accessibility

Rate the following improvement for making the gym more inclusive and welcoming.

- Including private and semi-private areas
- More accessible equipment layouts
- Adding elements to help with acoustics and noise levels
- Softer ambient lighting

Private change stalls in the locker room

Rate the importance of the following for making the gym feel more inclusive.

- Equipment arrangement
- Varying floor levels
- Lighting
- Open layout