



Aero Studios

ANYONE WHO KNOWS MANHATTAN CAN recognize the invisible line dividing uptown from down. So, when David Barton, proprietor of one of downtown's hippest gyms, set out to establish a gym in an Upper East Side apartment tower, he knew he had to make some delicate adjustments. "Downtown," Barton observes, "you give people a space and they make it happen. But here, they're a bit more spectator-like. We had to give them something to look at."

The raw space, according to Barton, would not have appealed to most gym operators; it had too many columns and plumbing risers, and an indirect connection to the street. But he could see the possibilities of its corner exposure, second story views and spatial intimacy. "To me, there was something old and gothic about it. You feel like you're hidden away in the top of some castle. It's a wonderful, cosy, sexy attic space."

In this 12,400-sq.-ft. "attic," Barton wanted a gym as comfortable as the seaside weightlifting shack he used to visit on Nantucket, a place where "you walk in and feel like you can touch everything." But he also wanted to infuse the new venue with metropolitan glamour: It had to be chic with an edge, at once voluptuous and calm.

Barton turned to Aero Studios, the design firm of William Sofield and Thomas O'Brien, to make a gym with downtown energy and uptown grace. It was, he recalls, their proposal to use leather pads in the lobby that convinced him they were the right men for the job. According to the designers, the challenge was "to do a luxurious Upper East Side gym that didn't feel prissy." Their \$2.5 million renovation employs a sophisticated palette of materials and a slew of special furniture and decorative objects to make this happen.

In terms of spatial planning, the gym is divided into a number of program-

Continued

Uncommon details, an alluring array of rich materials, and a few elegant decorator flourishes distinguish David Barton's new gym on Manhattan's Upper East Side.



Opposite: Tufted leather wall pads wrap one elevation of the street-level entry. Spindly steel legs hold a slab of clear acrylic topped by Mercury ball lamps. The main gym floor is one level up.

Above: On the second level, a mirrored, aluminum I-beam banquette topped with leather pad divides reception from cardiovascular areas. Projected video images flicker at the far end.

Upholstery and wall pad fabrication: Jones Upholstery. **Leather:** Duvel. **Wood flooring:** Designers Wood Floors. **Rubber gym flooring:** Carlyle Rubber Floors. **Custom reception desk, lamps, accessories:** through Aero-Ltd. **Custom I-beam bench, cabinetry, banquette fabrication, construction management:** 3-D Construction. **Photography:** Peter Maass/ESTO

matically distinct zones—reception, cardiovascular, weight areas, aerobics studios. The weight area is further divided—by polyurethaned concrete columns and wall sections—into a series of “rooms” organized en suite, each with its own few pieces of equipment, mirrors and light. Service spaces are kept to the interior edges, while the perimeter window wall is wrapped with a banquette that offers a place to flop, read or chat. The banquette both lightens and thickens the space at its edges; in Barton’s words, “It surrounds the hard-edged gym with softness.” Equally important, he notes, “It prevents people from bearing a 15-pound weight onto the roof of some lawyer’s wife’s limousine.”

Within this frame, space is composed to stimulate, but in a subdued way. “We knew,” the designers explain, “that we couldn’t create a nightclub atmosphere on the Upper East Side and have it work. But we needed elements of that nocturnal feeling.” Nocturnal wishes are sublimated across the spectrum of highly wrought surfaces, from tex-

tured metallic vinyl wall coverings to leather seat cushions and quilted wall pads. “These are surfaces that sparkle and glitter, pads you can fall into,” notes Sofield. The leather is meant to improve with age and touch, while other surfaces, such as the white vinyl canvas banquette upholstery and metallic vinyl wall pads, can be readily wiped clean.

Continued

Opposite: Punctuated by vintage standing lamps, the banquette mediates between gym floor and windows. Cybex equipment is unpainted steel finished in a clear lacquer. Rubber flooring tiles are made from recycled tires.

Below: David Barton’s mirrored office contains a McGuire rattan desk and white lacquer Kari Springer side tables. The window wall is framed in 4-in.-thick sections of beech-stained oak rubbed with a gray-white paint. Interior walls are covered in metallic vinyl.

Metallic vinyl wall coverings: Innovations in Wallcoverings. Barton office wall covering: Blumenthal. White vinyl canvas upholstery fabric: Frank Bell & Co.; pillow fabric: Circle Fabric; Hamilton Adams Imports. Barton office furniture, accessories: through Aero Ltd.



Throughout the gym, shiny metal and glass surfaces yield reflections of bodies and spaces. At the entrance stairs, a dropped metal mesh screen hints at the overall game of veiling and disclosure; just beyond, a mirrored I-beam bench reflects people's legs. Elsewhere, the conventional mirror walls of most gyms have been rethought as a series of discrete planes, individually hung and propped, in a range of sizes from diminutive to huge.

Perhaps the most risqué visual game—initially Barton's idea but substantially moderated by the designers—occurs between men's and women's shower stalls. Interlocked in a tongue-and-groove pattern (see plan), the stalls are separated by a five-layer glass laminate with a crackled milk-white glass core—and not, as Barton had initially hoped, by a single sheet of frosted glass. Transported by dim, colored light onto this surface, whoever is showering in the adjacent stall becomes a vague, shadowy silhouette. "We wanted something," the designers note, "that offered enough, but not too much transparency. But we wanted to be very careful about it, so it wouldn't be too scary." Enhancing the visual transparency, the muted sprinkle of the adjacent shower can be overheard as well.

The game of chance looking is further intensified with mirrored tiles placed in a random pattern throughout the lavatory, shower and changing areas. "Even the most confident people are insecure," the designers note. "So we thought it would be more fun and exploratory, and less self-conscious, to use little tiles instead of huge expanses of mirror."

All this looking not only anticipates the curiosity of the gym's members, but also reflects a formative experience of its founder. Barton recalls how he became excited about working out, as a 13-year-old boy, in the upstairs room of his house. "Lifting weights at night, listening to music and feeling my body change," Barton liked to observe his



neighbor across the street—that is, until she saw she was being watched and drew the curtain shut.

Reminding us of the connection between exercise and sex, Barton's story points to how the most ordinary of architectural elements—a window, a curtain—can mediate powerful relationships among looking, wanting and touching. In his new uptown gym, elements that are anything but ordinary intensify, sublime and sustain these pleasures.

HENRY URBACH

Above: Beneath the illuminated aluminum and frosted glass ceiling, the men's shower area presents a subdued palette of blues and reflections. A spectrum of colored lights animates the aroma-infused steam room—"eau de Barton," quips one (anonymous) member.

Opposite, top: Above a silver-leaf wall "painting" by artist Nancy Lorenz, exposed ducts are concealed by illuminated aluminum and frosted plastic coverings. Custom-pigmented flooring is rubber with a base composed of recycled tires.

Opposite, below: Factory-finished white frames surround locker doors specially painted in chrome. The quarter-sawn, end grain fir flooring has been finished with oil to resist moisture. It will darken and mottle with time.

Locker room tiles: American Clean. Terrazzo flooring: Magnan. Shower room ceiling, lighting consultant: Handley for Clark Johnson.

An overall game of veiling and disclosure is played out in a clever composition of highly textured forms and materials.



process

Few gyms sport a high level of attention to spatial organization, surface treatment and ornamental detail. But, committed to making a gym both sexy and comfortable, Aero Studios explored the use of tactile materials, seductive colors and diverting decorative objects in their design for the David Barton Gym on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

HU

1 The leather covering, throw pillows and tufted wall pads of the ground floor lobby were fabricated by Jonas Upholstery from leather supplied by Dualoy. Pads are made of horsehair. The wooden seat base introduces the beech-stained oak with white pigment found throughout the gym interior. Outside, the David Barton logo announces the gym entrance to passersby on East 85th Street.

printing press factories, this flooring absorbs shock well and provides a lustrous, vaguely terra-cotta feel.

2 Tufted wall pads—like this one covered in "Faux Sauvage" vinyl from Pollack & Associates—are used on the upper level in the corridor that links the reception area, women's locker room, telephone niche and aerobics studio. Beneath the pad is a bench upholstered in white canvas vinyl from Frank Bella & Co. The wall covering is "Bronze Dot" from Innovations in Walkcoverings, one of eight different metallic vinyl coverings used in the gym.

3 Oil-rubbed, end grain fir flooring by Designer Wood Floors was installed in the lower lobby, corridors and locker rooms. Familiar from industrial applications, such as

individual shower stalls are covered in polished porcelain floor and wall tiles by American Olean, with randomly-placed tiles of mirror glass. A five-layer, translucent cracked glass laminate fabricated by Aero Studios separates men's and women's stalls. Lighting in the shower area is filtered through gels, and colors can be adjusted.

5 Unlike most gyms, where each piece of exercise equipment faces a ribbon of wall-mounted mirror glass, the David Barton Gym offers a range of relations between equipment and architectural surfaces. Here, dumbbells and associated benches sit in front of a shiny metal surface—a gesso and silver-leaf panelled relief by artist Nancy Lorenz entitled "Mercury." To either side of the relief, assorted wooden frames in various shapes, sizes and finishes hold modest rectangles of mirror glass.

Photography: Peter Massa/ESTO

