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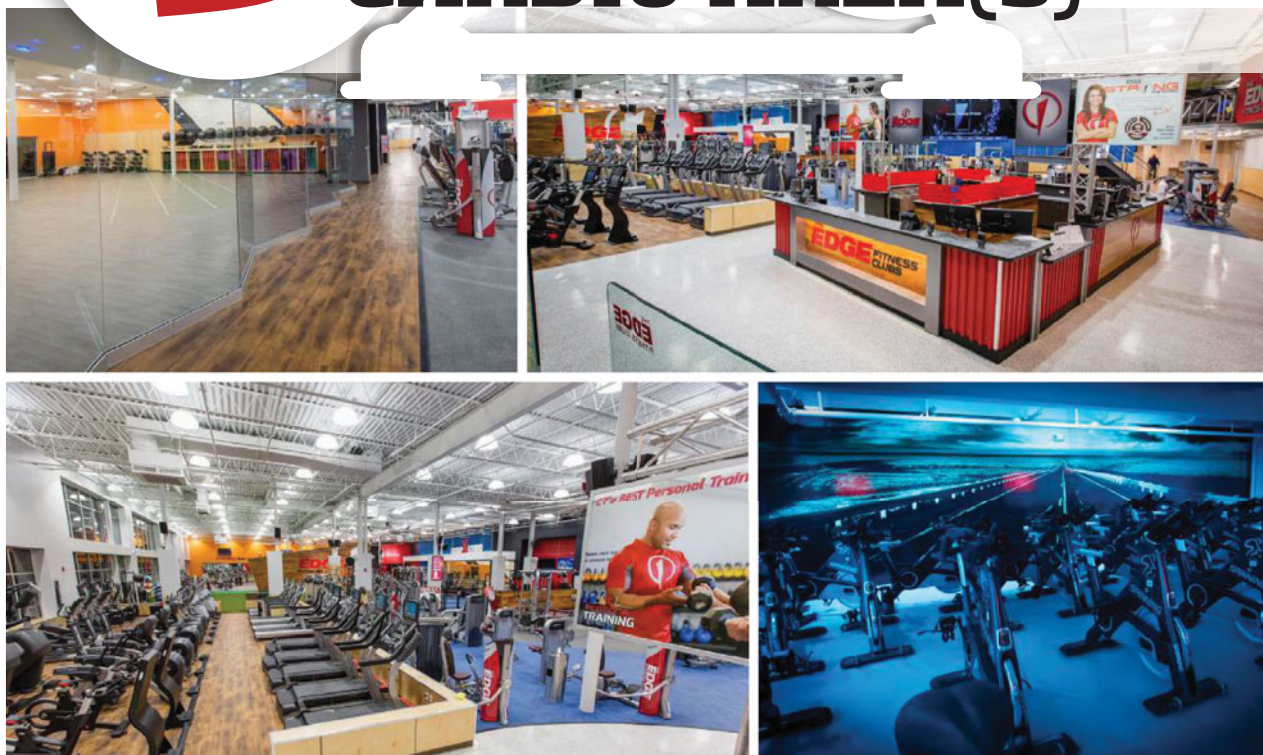
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5 things to consider when DESIGNING CARDIO AREA(S)



By Paul Steinbach

[Photos courtesy of Fabiano Designs]

Twenty years ago, entering a commercial health club invariably meant being greeted by the whirring energy of the facility’s cardio offerings – row upon row of treadmills and steppers and elliptical trainers. Equipment pieces were on full display, as were the exercisers using them.

That sort of in-your-face intensity has softened since, as health club professionals have gained new insights into what customers want and where they want it. “Cardio used to be front and center. We wanted to blow people away: ‘Look at all the cardio we have,’” says Bruce Carter, president of Optimal Design Systems International, a Weston, Fla.-based club consultancy. “This is evolving. Now, depending on the club layout, we’ll break up the cardio into two cardio areas. Some people might like the one that’s a little bit more off the beaten path, because that’s where they’re comfortable.”

To be sure, clubs have made more room for

functional training and group exercise – often a hybrid of strength and cardio within a studio setting – but those fitness modalities likely aren’t the first choice of the deconditioned. “Cardio allows someone out of shape to gradually move their body,” Carter says. “When they get into that functional and muscular conditioning, it’s a different acclimation for them. That’s why cardio is still king. It’s the most user-friendly type of physical activity for the largest number of people coming into a club.”

What, then, should operators consider in order to maximize their club’s cardio appeal? Here are five factors:

1 Location

No longer are a club's cardio offerings concentrated within a single space. "We like to have at least two separate cardio areas, if not three," says Rudy Fabiano of Fabiano Designs in Montclair, N.J. "The cardio area on a Monday night can be very intense. Everybody's running and sweating, and if you have 70 pieces of cardio – which is about the average for most facilities – and it's all in one area, that can be pretty intimidating. If you're not in the mood for that, what's your other play?"

Carter agrees. "Intimidation is always a concern," he says. "Most people who come to a club are out of shape, not too happy about how they look, and therefore don't want to be on display. People who are out of shape don't want to be the first thing people look at when they come in."

That can be said with increased certainty thanks to the advent of equipment-tracking technology, which provides operators with usage data on each specific machine. "From a philosophical and design perspective, what came out of that was the knowledge that equipment that is most hidden is used the most," Fabiano says. "Sociologically, that's kind of interesting to me. Everybody thinks that everyone wants to be on the front row. In actuality, the most-used equipment is the equipment that is least visible."

Facilities that have two levels can put one cardio area on the ground floor and another along a mezzanine, or "cardio deck," as Carter calls such locations. He adds that for single-level facilities, cardio areas can be placed off the entry to either side. "You can see the excitement and the energy, but it's not overwhelming you," he says. "And you're not on display on the piece. You're not being viewed when people come in."

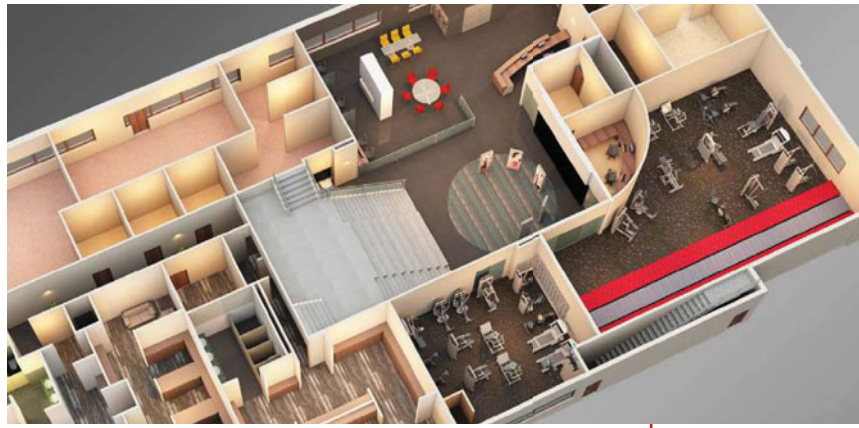
Moreover, the size of separate cardio locations can impact their perceived character and desirability as a destination. Says Fabiano, "I like to think about the larger cardio areas as more intense and the smaller cardio areas as a little bit more Zen."

2 Orientation

A clear indication of the increasing thought and money invested in fitness facility design is a growing emphasis on glazing. "There tends to be more focus on natural light and larger windows," Fabiano says. "That is leading to some interesting cardio placement. It tends to be nearer windows, to get that natural light as part that cardio experience."

Related to the location of cardio equipment is its orientation once in place. What will users see while they exercise?

"We always face cardio outwards to take advantage of the view," says Gregory Cilek, president of Iowa Sports Management in New York City. "This also saves usable space, since we don't need to put the cardio three feet off the wall to allow for circulation to access the cardio machines. There are some who think the downside to this placement is that someone walking into the training space views the backside of all the people using the cardio. We think the gain in view and the increased



usable square footage offsets this point."

"Whenever we can bring the outdoors in, we love to do it," Carter says. "If we have the option of looking out to some woods, we'll design the building around that."

Carter refers to the psychology of disassociation – how focusing on other things helps take the pain or unpleasantness out of exercise – as playing a role. It's a key driver of the cardio entertainment evolution, but there are other ways to orient equipment to keep users preoccupied. "Even more than TV, people like to get on cardio and watch other people work out," Carter says. "We love to do mezzanines with cardio on top looking down to the workout area."

Looking out through windows or inward toward other club offerings doesn't have to be an either-or proposition. "Certainly, if there are views, I advocate looking out if we can, and maybe some rows looking in," Fabiano says. "Most of the time in an urban environment, you do both."

Equipment data-tracking has revealed that a majority of cardio exercisers prefer working out in relative seclusion. [Image courtesy of Fabiano Designs]

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"Looking out to the trees is great, but if you're looking out at the same trees every day you come in, that could be somewhat boring after a while," says Carter, who suggests including both inward and outward views in the same panoramic field of vision as a way to bolster buy-in of the club's other offerings. "Cardio is a great way to sell fee-based programming, because if I'm on the cardio and I can see it, eventually I'm going to buy it. I want to market my fee-based programming within clubs, so why not put someone on a piece of cardio for half an hour and watch it?"

3 Spacing

In terms of overall square footage, a fitness facility's strength offerings will likely consume twice as much space as its cardio areas, due to safety concerns

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inherent to strength training. That said, cardio requires its own spatial considerations – best made during facility planning, when possible.

Cardio equipment should have at least three feet of space behind each piece, and ideally more, particularly for treadmills (manufacturers may provide their own guidelines). “At minimum, we like to give enough space to walk between the rows of equipment, which is three feet,” Fabiano says. “Generally, if we can and have the space, we like to give five feet. Most of the time, because of planning efficiencies, we don’t have that luxury.”

The slightest design miscalculation in space allocation for cardio can lead to substantial inefficiency. “Going 25 feet deep versus 28 feet, as an example, would only allow you to do two rows versus three rows,” Fabiano says. “You end up with inefficiency in the layout. That is probably the most common mistake that is made.”

Fabiano also recommends adequate space along the sides of each cardio piece, often dictated by its function. “There are the safety concerns that you should consider, and then there are the access concerns, as well,” he says. “You may get on an elliptical on the side. You don’t get on a bike in the back, so you need space between the equipment.”

4 Power

Another consideration that may impact cardio placement is the power and data requirements of today’s equipment pieces. If inadequate allocation of space is the top design mistake Fabiano sees, “the second mistake is not wiring properly for the data and the power required. Everybody’s got TV screens now with data plug-in. Consequently, you’ll go into a fitness center and you’ll see exposed raceways at the end of the project, versus something tucked away inside the floor.”

Raceways – enclosed tracks of cabling – or low walls are after-the-fact solutions to what Cilek cites as his most-witnessed mistake: “When we see the electrical box placement is not thought out in advance so that the electrical cords create all kinds of ugly and potentially hazardous spaghetti running from machines to boxes.”

The ideal approach is to integrate power routing within the substrate during new construction, remaining conscious of cardio placement now, as well as in the future. “If you have the budget and you can think forward, to have raceways that are poured integrally into the concrete is much more expensive, but you can design it to give you flexibility down the road, to add more, and you basically hide the exposed raceway within the floor itself,” Fabiano says.

5 Mix

Data tracking means facility operators no longer have to rely on intuition when making cardio-purchasing decisions. “Data tracking actually gives you real data of usage,” says Fabiano, adding that adaptation has been slow. “If I had to guess, I’d probably say less than 30 percent of my clients

base their design or purchasing decisions on true data, but I expect that to change and really become much higher as, one, the data tracking becomes less expensive, and two, people trust the data and understand the importance of it.”

The latest usage numbers compiled by IHRSA show that three of the top five spots on a list of club consumer participation are occupied by activities involving cardio equipment, led by treadmills at 24.2 million participants. Carter attributes that popularity to ease of use. “The treadmill is still number one, because if I’m out of shape, I can get on that treadmill, turn the speed to 2.8 miles an hour and do *something*,” he says.

Elliptical trainers claim 17.2 million participants, good for fourth on the list. Fabiano sees the popularity of ellipticals rising as manufacturers make them more multifunctional. “The elliptical has the flexibility to become a runner or a stepper,” he says. “I do see ellipticals gaining ground as more people find them more user-friendly.”



And ellipticals are not alone in their ascent, based on what Cilek is seeing. “We’ve seen increased demand for step climbers, flex-striders and water rowers,” he says.

Carter’s typical mix looks something like this. “Let’s say I have 100 pieces of cardio. Maybe 40 percent are treads and 35 percent are ellipticals, and then the balance is made up of recumbent bikes, upright bikes, stair climbers and rowers.”

Regardless of the chosen components, there’s little debate about the critical place cardio continues to occupy within the fitness landscape. “People still want their cardio, love their cardio,” Carter says, “and I haven’t seen where the quantity of cardio has gone down at traditional clubs.”

Mezzanines may provide cardio exercisers with a variety of visual distractions – from TV monitors to other exercisers. (Photo courtesy of Fabiano Designs)