

Mirror, an interactive fitness wall glass that coaches home workouts.

The New Fitness Frontier

The future of keeping fit will be inside our homes.

by Tara Loader Wilkinson

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped our industries in myriad ways, and few more so than that of fitness. With gyms closing and people's ability to exercise outdoors restricted, lockdowns have led to the at-home fitness industry skyrocketing. Since March 2020, just over half of the 2,000 respondents in a recent survey by GlobalData said that they have started home workouts. Some 53 percent of UK consumers have been buying more home workout products in the last 12 months, showed the survey. The near-US\$100 billion fitness industry is shifting to working out, indoors, and virtually.



UK start-up Prevayl makes clothes that allow wearers to track their own biometric data. Below: Hydrow, a virtual-reality rowing machine.



“The days of gyms being a developer’s after-thought are gone. The cramped room with a couple of machines and dumbbells in the corner simply does not cut it today.” — Tim Weeks, personal trainer



At the luxury end of the market, home gyms have gone supercharged. At 80 Holland Park, a scheme of 25 new luxury London residences developed by Christian Candy, one of the selling points is the performance-driven gym designed by British Olympic coach Tim Weeks.

Weeks, a former Olympic athlete who had a life-threatening bike crash, is now a multi-award-winning coach and trainer to Olympic athletes and celebrities, although he prefers to keep his clients’ names under wraps. He is known for focusing on strengthening glutes and core, and a pursuit of ‘total human optimisation’.

In a post-pandemic world, Weeks says, wellness will become an integral part of daily life and developments and corporations that put human health and wellbeing at the centre of their design, will benefit. COVID has changed the way both developers, and home buyers, view gyms.

“The days of these spaces being a developer’s after-thought are gone,” says Weeks. “The cramped room with a couple of machines and dumbbells in the corner simply does not cut it today.”

Weeks set out on a mission to create the perfect “high-performance hub” at home, at 80 Holland Park. “As an athlete I learnt that you could have the best coaches in the world and the best training programme, but if you don’t have the right environment, you can’t facilitate your ambitions.”

The residents’ gym at 80 Holland Park has specific zones: a CrossFit training rig with boxing bag and ballet bar for regular gym-goers; a cardio wall with bikes, treadmills and ski ergs; a complete body-strength circuit; an open digital training area with all necessary equipment for streaming live classes; a private fully enabled Pilates space; and a shortened athletics track for dynamic strengthening work.

Weeks also wanted to integrate personal tech apps such as Apple Fitness+, Peloton and Zwift into the space. “I believe the future of fitness will be much more phygital: a mixture of physical and digital,” he says. “For this reason, we incorporated entirely ‘neutral’ equipment, allowing all residents to use the space regardless of their individual app preferences. This also plays into the fact that nowadays training doesn’t always have to take place in the gym. People increasingly vary their training programmes through choice or circumstance, requiring them





The gym at 80 Holland Park.

to train at home or outside, as well as at their gym; being able to transfer across locations with digitally supported consistency was a key consideration.”

Hydrow is an at-home rowing machine with a 22in touchscreen display streaming live workouts in global waterways, recreating an uncanny virtual feeling of being on the water. In the last year it has seen stratospheric success, with sales up 500 percent year on year, earning it the accolade as one of *Time* magazine’s best inventions of 2020. The company was founded by former US National Team Rowing coach Bruce Smith, who wanted to create an experience of on-water rowing at home, with expert supervision. Each class is led by a world-class athlete, including accomplished rowers and Olympians, such as Mike Dostal and Dani Hansen. “As a rower I’ve seen first-hand the profound impact that rowing can make — from the strength and motivation drawn from teammates to the peacefulness and clarity that comes from being on the water,” says Smith. “Our goal is for our users to be able to replicate that every single day.”

Another pandemic-fuelled success story is that of Mirror, an interactive fitness wall glass that coaches home workouts. Last year, founder Brynn Putnam sold the start-up to Lululemon for US\$500 million. During the most stringent lockdown months in the US, Mirror workouts rose by some 70 percent over pre-COVID times. Meanwhile, Peloton, a live, on-demand spinning bike with a cult following, announced second-quarter fiscal revenues up 128 percent year on year to US\$1.06 billion, with subscriber numbers jumping 137 percent during the pandemic’s peak, to more than 1.33 million.

Meanwhile, the market for ‘smart’ sportswear and wearable tech is on the up and up. UK start-up Prevayl makes clothes that allow wearers to track their own biometric data (including breathing, temperature, hydration and heart rate) with invisible sensors in the fabric. It has just secured £7.5 million in funding by London-based investment firm Stonebridge.

For those who have invested in the at-home fitness industry, the million-dollar question is whether the boom in home workouts will continue after the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey by GlobalData suggests it will. A third of those who have started working out at home since the pandemic began say that they did not exercise regularly before; and three-quarters claimed they will continue doing home workouts when restrictions end.

With obesity rates at records (worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975, according to the WHO), and mental-health issues increasingly paramount, at-home fitness is an industry that we should all get behind. Tim Weeks adds: “Previously the gym was the only space where you could go and train with sufficient support and focus, but technology has enabled a new level of adaptability and flexibility.” ◇