

The rise of the monogym

The latest fitness trend is for studios offering only one type of exercise, says **Peta Bee**

For two decades we have pumped iron and gone for the burn in droves. Lured by the promise of better bodies, we headed along to sleek fitness emporiums with oxygenated pools, buff trainers and a timetable of classes that ran into pages. But has the gym as we know it had its day?

The Fitness Industry Association, in its annual review of gyms and health clubs, reported a dip in membership levels and the first year without growth for a decade. David Stalker, the association's chief executive, described the past 12 months "as the toughest in our 20-year history", blaming the flat performance on consumers' financial constraints and the saturation of the traditional gym market.

Not that we're giving up on gyms totally. Out of the gloom has arisen a trend for an altogether more tailored kind of workout environment: the monogym.

In the past year the UK has experienced a proliferation of niche gyms with studios that offer only one type of activity, typically for £10 per class, rather than the usual joining fees and £80 monthly commitment required by conventional gyms. This follows a surge in the popularity of similar facilities in New York and Los Angeles. Dedicated Pilates and yoga studios are nothing new, but now we can head to specialist boutiques for Spinning, ballet or Power Plate workouts.

Leading the way in this new generation of gyms is Boom!, in Shoreditch, East London: a funky urban space where the only classes are Spinning-style on indoor

exercise cycles, but ranging from a gentle cycle to a boot camp ride and a tough two-hour interval challenge.

Its founder, Hilary Gilbert, a former fashion model, was frustrated at the lack of specialist gyms when she moved from New York. "People are fed up with soulless gym studios where workouts aren't targeted to what they want and need," Gilbert says. "They know what type of exercise they like and just want to concentrate on getting better at it."

It's not only Spinning studios that are drawing workout specialists away from regular gyms. There are dance and ballet centres, such as Frange, also in Shoreditch, and a growing number of boxing studios, such as Gloves in West Hampstead. Next year, workout spaces devoted only to TRX suspension training will be cropping up around the country.

Driving the trend, Stalker believes, are the lower set-up costs for gym owners and a desire among users to make workouts increasingly efficient so that more is achieved in less time. "The fitness industry has a much more educated client base when it comes to people knowing how they like to get fit," he says. "They want to get on with it, no messing around."

Gilbert says that financial influences, too, are triggering a shift to niche gyms. "In this economic climate, people are watching their bank accounts more closely," she says. "They don't want to be forking out an annual sum for things they don't use, like a pool or dozens of weight machines. They want to pay for the classes they actually do."

Monogyms promise more focused workouts with plenty of individual attention. They also feature top-of-the-range equipment and instructors. To stand out from the crowd, the studios emphasise their own range of hybrid classes, special technologies or their unique atmosphere.

At Boom!, Gilbert commissioned a street artist to paint murals on the exposed brick walls. "It is edgy and a totally different feeling from most gyms once you step inside," she says. "It's more personal. You



A class at Boom!, a gym in East London that offers Spinning-style classes only

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get to know people because you have something in common — you like doing the same thing." Meanwhile, at Good Vibes, which has three centres in London, the setting for its Power Plate classes is light and fun-filled, in stark contrast to larger gyms where vibration platforms are often pushed into a corner.

Certainly, monogyms are not the kind of places where you plug in your iPod when you walk through the door; they are intimate and ripe for socialising. But is there an air of elitism, an almost cult-like element to them? Since they cater primarily for people who have some experience in the specific activity on offer, newcomers can be put off by the prospect of workouts being highly competitive. "They will definitely appeal to those who are convinced it's what they are after," says Dearbhla McCullough, an exercise psychologist at the University of Roehampton. "But some people are even put off general gyms because of the serious and almost professional attitude of some members. I wouldn't imagine they would suit everybody's personality type."

Gilbert says that the pay-as-you-go policy of many monogyms means that

members can leave if it's not for them. "We welcome anybody," she says, "and encourage beginners with targeted classes."

In New York, where the monogym culture is huge, the niche gyms go to huge lengths to sustain attendance. At Soul-cycle, a mini-chain with many centres across the city, there are wipe-down staff to clear away sweat pools at the end of each session. Classes, such as its trademark "good torture" class with core and arm exercises, are held in an intimate room with a chandelier.

Its rival, Flywheel, is looking to attract more men (indoor cycling is dominated by women), creating a stark interior at its monogym. But the emphasis is also heavily spiritual, with goal-setting a prominent feature before "rides", and yoga principles embedded in the training.

Stalker says that monogyms will need to continue to be inventive to survive in a fragile market. "These specialist gyms are a positive thing," Stalker says. "If they are creative with ideas, they will prevent people getting bored. And the crucial thing is that if you find something you really enjoy doing, the results will come because you will keep it up."

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