

# going for gold

Maximising space is a key trend for 2007. We take a look at a £750,000 development at Goldsmiths that has redefined an under-used university sports hall

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**S**quash court conversions in local authority leisure centres have long proved their mettle, doubling the size of gyms or adding an exercise or wellness studio, consequently increasing both participation and revenue. While such conversions are by no means outdated, they have also spawned the way for much more complex, thorough developments in public and higher education leisure facilities, designed to turn these into profitable fitness facilities akin to those in the commercial sector.

At Goldsmiths, part of the University of London located on its own campus in New Cross, a 295sq m (3,175sq ft) sports hall was, until recently, used by students for teaching and recreation. Now, after five years' planning, it's been transformed into a full fitness facility with 2,000 members, thanks to the appointment of a dedicated sports manager and a subsequent partnership with Pulse.

We explore the reasons behind the development, the design and build, operations and impact of the overhaul.

## project background

The new 90-station Club Pulse fitness suite at Goldsmiths was born out of a 'Save Our Sports' campaign, initiated by the Goldsmiths Students' Union back in the year 2000. At this point, fitness facilities at Goldsmiths simply didn't exist. For sports fans, there was the main sports hall and outdoor pitches, but no provision for workouts or wellness.

An informal sports and leisure working group was established and a survey undertaken of the demand for facilities. The main recommendation – for a dedicated sports manager to deliver a new fitness gym – led to the 2003 appointment of Neil Rogers as sports development and activities manager. Then began a lengthy planning process.

"For Goldsmiths, the project had to meet four key objectives: to boost student recruitment and retention; widen participation through community usage; meet the requirements of the college's estates strategy; and promote its HR strategy by aiding staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing," says Rogers. "The student union, meanwhile, wanted

the facility to enhance the portfolio of student activities; appeal to wider demographics; demonstrate that students' needs were represented and being responded to; and to fulfil what was to be a five-year campaign."

In October 2004, the Project Plan and Options Appraisal was formulated, covering everything from user requirements and local provision to procurement options and operational considerations. This passed through all stages of approval by the end of the year.

With no capital funding and little fitness expertise, Goldsmiths needed to get a partner on board to fund, design, build and operate the gym. A tendering process began in March 2005. Pulse was deemed to offer the best options in terms of the level of refurbishment, investment, operational delivery and income, and draft contracts were issued in June 2005. However, six further months of negotiation by Goldsmiths – "to ensure the best deal for students and staff," says Rogers – meant work onsite did not begin until March 2006.

## in partnership

The project is Pulse's largest university fitness development to date. A similar, but slightly less complex, facility opened at Middlesex University two and a half years ago. Business manager for Pulse, Aron Nassim, says the higher education market is one in which he hopes Pulse can become more involved. "Universities



1. Goldsmiths' 295sq m sports hall was originally used by students for teaching and recreation. A decision was made to transform it into a full fitness facility for public and student use



2. The creation of a mezzanine floor was an obvious solution to maximising space, although it did lead to complications; minimum floor-to-ceiling heights were only just manageable



So what does the partnership with Pulse entail? As well as Goldsmiths' lengthy planning process, Pulse conducted a full feasibility study – carried out by an independent company – to demonstrate a number of financial solutions and illustrate likely outcomes. For Goldsmiths, a full package was needed and a 10-year Pulse Investment and Operational Partnership was established. Under this, Pulse agreed to design, construct, project manage and deliver the facility, as well as continue to staff, market and manage the operations, with a £790,000 investment by the company. Operating on an income-share basis, the partnership transfers commercial obligation to Pulse – which pays all operational and staff costs including the capital and interests costs – with the university keeping a percentage of the profits. Goldsmiths, however, retains ownership of the facilities.

### design and build

The design brief was to create a facility to meet the needs of Goldsmiths' internal market, but also to provide a first class, private sector style facility for the community. From the outset, Rogers worked very closely with Pulse – as he continues to do today – to ensure the facility suited Goldsmiths as well as Pulse's commercial needs and resources.

"I am responsible for overseeing the administration and development of Goldsmiths' sports facilities; the development of student clubs and competition; managing coaching provision; staff and student recreation provision, and volunteer coaching in the community. As such, I oversee the partnership with Pulse and performance management of the contract," he explains.

### Pulse partnership Pulse will continue to staff the facility under the 10-year agreement

are not just centres for learning; they have the potential to be the hub of local communities," he says.

There is now an active encouragement for schools, colleges and universities to offer more than just education; to offer sports and leisure facilities, arts and entertainment, conferences and exhibitions, and employment and volunteering opportunities. This philosophy is one held strongly by Goldsmiths. Rogers says: "The facility is designed to help further our Widening

Participation aims and objectives, which are of great importance to the institution.

"We operate a range of community projects, volunteering opportunities and projects to raise the aspirations of local youths, including: volunteer community sports coaching; award-winning schemes like Open Book, which supports students from offending and addiction background to change their lives through education; and Inmates, which recruits, trains and develops students to become official prison visitors."



3. The open plan fitness suite was designed across two floors, covering a total of approximately 600sq m, with the first floor accessed by a staircase in the centre of the gym



4. The ground floor of the facility houses strength machines, freeweights, a dance studio and studio exercise bikes, while the first floor has cardio machines with integrated AV



◀ The build was a 12-week contract, starting on 20 March last year and finishing, on schedule, on 12 June. Over this time, several building challenges had to be overcome. Prior to work starting, asbestos elements had to be removed and the walls dry-lined as a result of water penetration to the building caused by failed tanking. The whole sports building site is a conservation area, so listed building consent also had to be agreed before construction began.

Nassim says that, from the outset, the building had huge potential. "What we didn't do" he says, "was just add a mezzanine floor to create more space. We wanted to achieve a funky design."

The creation of the mezzanine floor, though an obvious solution to maximising space, was more complicated than expected. The height of the hall – 5.9m – restricted floor-to-ceiling heights and the minimum heights of 2.6m – 2.7m, also dictated by Pulse Fitness were only just manageable.

Another challenge was that the project was undertaken during Goldsmiths' exam period, meaning hours of work were restricted due to noise levels. "The contractor diverted work to other areas and worked out of sequence to ensure we didn't slip behind," says Nassim.

## the facilities

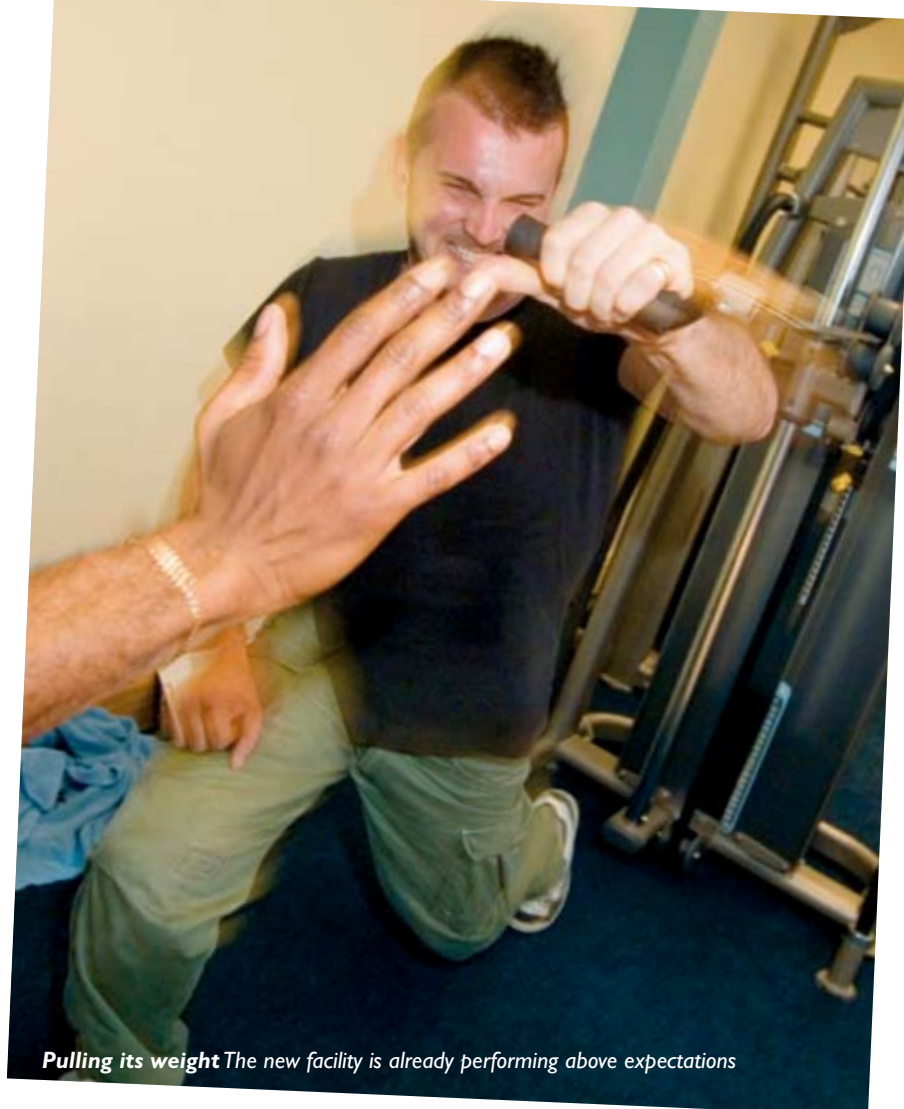
The open plan fitness suite is spread across two floors, covering a total of approximately 600sq m (6,458sq ft). On the ground floor are 27 Pulse Evolve strength machines and freeweights with matting, as well as a 90sq m (970sq ft) dance studio with wooden sprung floor, mirrored walls, air conditioning and built-in music system. There are also 22 Pulse Studio Cycles, allowing for a full range of group cycling exercise classes.

The first floor, which is accessed by a staircase in the centre of the gym, is home to 63 Freedom CV fitness machines with an integrated AV system. There are also separate plasma screens for extra entertainment.

The sports hall had existing changing rooms, which Pulse kept but refurbished, while the reception area was also revamped with a new entrance, a Flex front desk and access control and swipe card system, and Club Pulse branding.

## now in operation

Club Pulse opened last July, when Goldsmiths' students had already left the campus for their summer break. However, just two weeks of pre-sales saw more than 300 members from the local



PICTURE: DAVID RADFORD

*Pulling its weight* The new facility is already performing above expectations

community sign up. "It was not part of our original plan to open at this time," says Nassim. "But focusing on the public, then on the students, actually worked really well."

The external marketing campaign, led by Pulse's marketing manager Rachel Shelton, used a combination of flyers, adverts, shopping centre displays and leafleting at tube stations – Goldsmiths is located between New Cross and New Cross Gate stations. One of the main challenges in attracting the public was that the facility is in the middle of the campus, invisible from the road, which is why the tube stations were targeted.

In September, Pulse turned its attention to the returning students and staff, numbering 8,450 and 1,500 respectively. "We are as much charged with serving the internal market as well as the external," says Nassim. Email is a key tool in marketing the facility internally. Club Pulse also uses ads in student magazines and banners in student accommodation.

Membership now stands at over 2,000, with 57 per cent students, 29 per cent staff and community members, and the remainder casual users. The club has capacity for up to 3,000 members. Good value membership costs £35 per month for community members; £28 corporate; £25 for staff; and £15 for students. Casual users pay £5.50 per session.

## the next decade

A modern design, on-schedule opening, successful pre-sales and marketing, a variety of equipment and exercise classes and great value membership is clearly a recipe for success. In addition, Goldsmiths has rebuilt the original sports hall with an additional £100,000 investment, so this is still available for student use.

But how will the new gym benefit Goldsmiths in the long-term? "Prior to the development, the site was not generating income at all," says Nassim.

Shelton adds: "Club Pulse is already performing well above our expectations for year one. Projected sales growth should put the income from the 10-year partnership in the millions."

Rogers says income from the facility will be reinvested in student provision: "We hope the facility will help to break down barriers with the local community, increase productivity and reduce staff absenteeism. We also hope it will improve the health and participation levels within the student body and contribute to recruitment and retention of students, leading to longer-term investment in other sporting facilities for Goldsmiths."

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