



eudaimonia!

CALLING

HOW TO BE WELL IN
21ST CENTURY LONDON

POWERED BY
CENTRAL YMCA

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We want to create a new kind of place to help people feel well.

It will be a place of refuge, regeneration and renewal; somewhere people can find a fuller, deeper and more integrated sense of themselves because it allows them to develop in mind, body and spirit. It will be a place where in an age of rampant, intelligent technology people can feel more fully human.

The Ancient Greeks had a word for this kind of deeper flourishing and wellbeing: Eudaimonia!. That is what we want to help create.

The ambition comes naturally to Central YMCA in London because we have always been much more than a gym.

We started life in 1844 looking after young men who had just arrived in the city, often feeling lost and isolated, in the midst of the swirling forces of urbanisation and industrialisation. The aim then was to help people retain a sense of humanity amidst economic upheaval and social ferment that threatened to uproot and overwhelm them from industrialisation and urbanisation to conflict and war.

That ambition to help people feel more fully human is still our mission.

First and foremost the YMCA is a community: accepting, open to all, non-judgemental. That is how our members describe our club in central London: a relaxed place where anyone can be themselves.

The YMCA as a whole has always been a highly creative community: generating new ways for people to come together around exercise. Basketball and volleyball were first played in YMCAs in the United States. The London YMCA opened Britain's first modern gym in 1888. In 1960s it was where the first aerobics classes in Britain took place.

The YMCA community's creative comes from this quiet yet palpable sense of shared cause: to provide people with the space to be human in a world that can too often seem inhospitable, harsh and unforgiving.

Yet the YMCA's mission has always taken it well beyond fitness. Central YMCA in London was where in 1931 the League of Coloured Gentlemen was formed, one of the first associations for black people in the UK. In the 1990s Central YMCA embraced the HIV positive community. We have always been open to people regarded as outsiders.

Now is a good time to think afresh about how to make the most of those principles in the decades to come. Central YMCA needs to do so because the whole gym and fitness business, to which it has been central, is reaching the point of exhaustion. Adding yet more running machines in an ever more competitive market will not make people happier and healthier and so it is unlikely to do much for the organisations who serve them. Gyms have become standardised, commodity products, selling memberships to people who often do not use them fully. We think for our organisation to have a strong future we need to offer our members something more than a bank of running machines.

We also think our need to renew chimes with what society needs.

The challenges we face now in London are in some regards no different from those of the 19th century: rapid urbanisation, bringing people from many different places and cultures flooding into a helter skelter city. Our society, like the 19th century, is marked by extreme inequality. Many people feel a sense of insecurity and upheaval as occupations and organisations are disrupted by competition and new technology.

Life for many in London is busy and exciting; always on but frequently stressful; often even people who are materially well off can feel over stretched as if they live on very thin margins, with few resources in reserve and no buffers to withstand shocks. Many others who lack such financial means feel even more precarious.

That is because many of the institutions we once relied upon seem to be suffering a collective breakdown.

The economy is not working for most people whose incomes are stagnant, their rents rising, their jobs increasingly insecure, and their futures uncertain. The political systems of many countries are in disarray, their legitimacy draining away as establishment parties find themselves clinging to power, prey to insurgent populist movements emerging from the margins and extremes. Authoritarianism and populism are on the rise. All of this takes place against a backdrop of mounting environmental crisis as the climate warms, competition mounts over critical resources and buffers we have relied on in the past run down. As if that were not enough, the sense of breakdown is compounded by the threat of terrorism, symbolised by the rise of Isis, with its disdain for liberal values of equal rights, democracy and free speech that we take for granted in a city like London. These seeming system-shattering breakdowns, are all symptoms of a model of economic growth and globalisation, which has stopped working for many people.

What has only started to become clearer is how this makes people feel in their daily lives. Many people feel left behind, let down and left out. That makes some feel so defeated that they retreat into loneliness, struggling with life on their own. Others feel stressed and angry, disappointed and resentful, feeding the fury evident in populist politics and all too often on social media. The breakdown of trust in institutions and leaders, both in business and in politics, is reflected in breakdowns of a more personal kind: the rise of mental illness and depression amongst all age groups. In response many people feel they need help to find a sense of calm and control, to rebuild their reserves to be resilient and to cope.

That is not the only way in which the challenges of our time differ from those of the 19th century. Then the main threats to health came from infectious diseases, such as influenza and measles, which killed people young. Now our main health challenges are long-term conditions such as diabetes, dementia and arthritis which are part of our living much longer lives.

The gym and fitness industry emerged in the 1980s as part of important changes in how people worked, became more individualistic, consumerist and health conscious. The need to exercise, to work on our bodies, became more urgent as work became more sedentary, technological and cerebral. The YMCA was at the forefront of that development in the UK introducing the first running machines into a gym format. Now rooms filled with ranks of treadmills and cross trainers are as ubiquitous as fast food and lattes. They are a part of everyday life for millions of people.

There is a danger however that using machines to work on our bodies in isolation is a reflection of the constraints of the time as much as an escape from them. It represents an ideal of fitness that can become self-regarding and narrow, instrumental and mechanistic. In fact most people who go to the gym to get fit are also going to feel better about themselves. The benefits are as much psychological as physical.

People go to gyms for many different reasons: to pound on a machine, to escape from work, to chat with friends. They seek benefits of many kinds, physical and psychological, emotional and social. That anonymity and adaptability is one of the attractions of the gym: it can be adapted to many different private missions.

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Yet there is a danger that gyms school us to a focus on the body first, with the mind and the spirit only an incidental afterthought. Gyms are in danger of becoming fitness factories. We want places where people feel can have their horizons opened up. We think that means addressing the mind and the spirit as much as the body.

That is why we want to go back to our core purpose – to nurture mind, body and spirit - to be a community where people can flourish by becoming more powerful and more purposeful in shaping their lives. That sense of power is not measured by how much weight you can press nor how far you can swim but how capable you feel in achieving your potential and shaping the world you live in.

Allowing people to flourish in this fuller sense will rest on helping people make three vital connections: a connection with a fuller sense of themselves; a stronger connection with other people; a deeper connection with the natural world.

FULLER SELF

We want the YMCA to be a place where people can make a connection with a fuller sense of themselves.

It will be a place where people can explore, discover and express different aspects of themselves, not just how much weight they can lift nor how far they can run.

People come to the gym for themselves; a place where they can devote themselves to a kind of dialogue with their own fitness; a precious bit of “me-time”. It’s a place where people escape from the demands of the office and the Internet. To some it might sound narcissistic but exercise is about people communing with themselves, tackling their challenges, meeting their goals, overcoming doubt and insecurity. A psychological sense of well-being is the most important by-product of physical exercise. People value even short bursts of time they can devote to themselves.

Yet we also need to care, more fully and directly, for the mind and the spirit, alongside the body. How might we stretch our minds as we might routinely stretch our hamstrings? How would we build up our strength of character as we build up our triceps or train ourselves to think in new ways just as we practice movement in yoga?

That is why we need to see the body in more holistic terms. Tending our bodies can be a way to tend our minds. One of the best ways to think is through walking; one of the best ways to have new ideas is to take exercise and see what happens when your brain is cleared of its daily clutter.

We want a place where people can feel a fuller sense of themselves, explore who they are in many different directions, through art, craft, learning, debate, ideas, as well as bodily fitness. There are many different ways to use your body to make, build, paint, draw, mould, shape, which feed the mind as much as stepping, squatting, pushing and running. The Greek philosophers who came up with the idea of Eudaimonia! debated ideas while they were in the gym.

We want people to come to our place to explore a sense of expanding possibility, to become different people, unafraid of their own potential.

So our starting point is that this should be a place where people can connect to themselves more fully, to explore their potential in mind, body and spirit.

SOCIAL SELF

The second connection vital for a sense of well-being is for people to feel connected to other people. People who feel well invariably have relationships that sustain them which come from being part of a community. That does not have to be an embedded geographic community but as we have found at Central YMCA it can be a community brought together by shared values, aspirations and purpose.

People who live well do not only have strong, regular and intense interactions with a small world of close friends, they also feel the benefits of weak and dispersed ties to many other people whom they might just bump into from time to time, see in the same square or park, market or restaurant. In contrast, people who are isolated, lonely and solitary are much less likely to feel well.

Relationships help to define who we are. We establish our identity through our commitments to other people, what we share with them and how we differ from them. Relationships provide us with a sense of solidarity and motivation, support and sustenance. They give us a sense of perspective on our own problems and challenges. Most of what we most value in life – love, care, respect, friendship, trust – come from relationships. They cannot be ordered from Amazon or produced by following a fitness programme. Being part of a community, feeling a sense of belonging, attachment and responsibility makes people feel stronger and so more able to be fitter and healthier. People are more likely to feel healthy if they are part of a constellation of healthy relationships. It is difficult to feel well if your relationships are toxic.

That is why the YMCA is open, egalitarian and accepting. The way that people discard their work persona as they don their exercise gear, helps to create this egalitarian feel. Yet as well as being open and egalitarian, our place needs to feel hospitable, socially and emotionally engaging. In too many gyms people have intense relationships with the machines they exercise on, the music they listen to in their headphones, the programmes they are using but not the people they are with.

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A community that makes you feel well gives people a reason to contribute and to participate. Many of our members only want to swipe in and out because they are in a rush. But we think others may want to do more if they are given the right kind of invitation to do so. By encouraging people to contribute we hope they can become part of a community and so feel that they have somewhere to belong, a precious feeling in the modern world. A community that helps people feel well helps people achieve their own goals by being part of something bigger than themselves. People who live in cities perhaps especially crave a sense of belonging. Our community is both open, cosmopolitan and yet feels rooted and homely. That is a precious combination.

Feeling well comes from having supportive relationships, belonging to wider networks for friendship and community. Our place to feel well would help people to develop these relationships.

NATURAL CONNECTIONS

People are more likely to feel well when they have a connection to the natural world, through light, trees, plants, running water, grass.

At the moment gyms give us a feeling of natural connection only in the most limited respects. We go to the gym to be physical, to push, lift, run, stretch, pull. Everything we do at a gym involves interacting with physical and natural forces. Yet this largely takes place in a mechanised environment of equipment with motors, bars and weights.

Yet even small hints of natural environment in urban settings can have a profound impact on people's sense of well-being. People living in sight of trees are likely to be healthier than those who do not.

In cities which are increasingly technological, high rise, congested and polluted, a place to feel well should be clean, fresh and green; a place to breathe, to touch plants and water; a place which feels as if it too is growing and flowing.

It should be a place of growth and regeneration, of natural flows, shapes, forms and colours: more like a glade than a gym.

People feel well when they can connect to nature. A place for them to feel well would be a place where they feel that connection at every turn, more like a clearing in a forest than a room with ranks of machines.

POWERFUL PEOPLE

Feeling well stems from having a sense of purpose to your life and feeling you have the power to achieve it. A place to make people to feel well would develop that sense of power and purpose in people by making these three connections: to connect with a fuller sense of ourselves; to feel part of a supportive community; to feel a deeper connection to a natural, free flowing and growing environment.

Those are the three main ingredients for a place for people to feel well.

It would be a place for pushing and pulling, stretching and lifting but for much more than that: for imagination and conversation, meditation and prayer.

Our society believes it can relieve suffering and enhance human well-being on a vast scale. And yet we also feel that the very systems we rely upon to achieve this can imprison us in forms of work and life that are alien and dehumanising. We often feel trapped by the very systems of technology and work, production and consumption which make modern lives possible.

The YMCA does not want to perfect the gym as a fitness factory, restoring people physically simply so they can be more productive workers. We want a place where people can feel more fully human, more purposeful and powerful. Going to the gym, working on feeling fit reveals a yearning people have for something more in their lives than buy and sell, work and shop. They are not there as consumers. The urge to go to the gym is an urge to live better, to improve, to go beyond, to dig deeper to find something more about themselves.

Great numbers of people feel this sense of seeking something more in life. They feel it in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of loss and crisis, elation and achievement. We want a place where people feel something more.

And that feeling, of touching something more powerful and purposeful, is what would keep people coming back.

These experiences of something more give us a different perspective on life. However fleeting they can stay with us. They make us feel authentic because we feel as if we have found ourselves rather than merely propping up a stale shadow of ourselves. The places and people that make these experiences possible take on a special significance. That is the kind of place we want to create and the kind of community we want to develop there: a place for people to feel something more.

EUDAIMONIA! 2017

This is the journey we will start at the YMCA. We do this in the knowledge that truly powerful places and communities grow because of they draw on the contributions of many. The times are past when strategy was determined centrally and handed down for implementation and execution. The best organisations learn and adapt at all levels.

That's why we launched Eudaimonia! in October 2016 – the beginnings of a movement to unlock and develop good ideas for living well. We want to connect with the many brilliant organisations, individuals and start-ups across London who want to promote a deeper sense of wellbeing in the decades ahead.

We will continue with this in the year ahead, convening and hosting a range of conversations with potential partners as well as turning ideas into action – supporting practical new initiatives within the club – new member-led activities, ventures, possibly even new campaigns. In doing so we plan to imagine, demonstrate and test what the YMCA of tomorrow could be. We firmly believe the future of the YMCA depends on helping people develop their fuller self. That is not a distant, vague aspiration but an urgent necessity.

At the YMCA we want to work with members, start-ups, established organisations, whoever is interested in exploring the future of well being. We want not just one off products – better food, art classes, outdoor activities – but also an infrastructure to support well being, across the city. We are planning important changes to our own gym, its physical lay out and structure to make this possible as are other YMCAs across the country.

We want to make available our club to be right at the heart of this shared exploration. It's a place to host debates and discoveries, to make sense collectively of the challenges and opportunities we face across London. It's a trampoline for our incredible staff and members to turn their expertise and ideas into the next YMCA-initiated activities, so that the new YMCA will emerge as a people-powered place. We hope it can be a hothouse where the ideas of our homegrown innovators combine with those from across London to be seeded, take root, and in turn grow and flourish across London and beyond.

We think people need to feel fit, well and healthy in fuller, more complete ways. To meet that need as a society we need new places, services, experiences and activities but crucially new communities for people to belong to. That kind of thriving community is what we are trying to create at the YMCA. If you too are interested in these opportunities and challenges come and join us.



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