Spatial Bodies: Vulnerable Inclusiveness within Gyms and Fitness Venues in Sweden

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Abstract: Today, gyms and fitness venues set out, on a superficial level at least, to cater to the individual, no matter what their gender and are therefore often seen as inclusive spaces for physical activity and its concomitant health benefits. However, previous research has shown that gyms as such, as well as certain areas within gyms, are perceived as specifically masculine spaces, often referring to a contextually contingent hegemonic masculinity, thereby deterring those who do not align with this image, especially women, but also certain men. Even when these dividing lines are crossed, a gendered movement schema remains, because there are different social expectations of what, how, and where men and women should exercise. As we will see in this paper, these movement schemas are produced and reproduced through discursive spatial linkages within the gym and fitness culture. In addition to investigating in what ways gendered norms are implicated within the very architecture of gyms in general, one gym, in particular, is used as an example since it is written into its statutes that it should work in a norm-critical way, providing a case study that shows an attempt to disrupt this inhibiting gendered spatial discourse and, thereby, possibly creating a more inclusive gym space.

Keywords: gym and fitness; gender; inclusiveness; architectural economy

1. Introduction

During the late 20th century, sporting practices that do not adhere to any formal gender-segregated organizational rules, such as gyms and fitness centres (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010; Smith-Maguire 2008), became a global trend, attracting a large proportion of the adult population in both Sweden and other Western societies (The Swedish Sports Confederation 2018; Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). Just as with organized sports, physical activities, such as working out at gyms, were, from the outset, seen as a male prerogative (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Smith-Maguire 2008; Vertinsky 2004). At the end of the 20th century, the concept of “gym practices” evolved to include “fitness practices”, and these terms are sometimes used interchangeably to signify the process of creating a “fit, strong, and healthy” body. It is also within this shift of semantics that the male prerogative of commanding the space within gyms, and now also fitness centres, has, to a certain extent, withered, thus making room for women’s entrance to these spaces (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010; Smith-Maguire 2008). Today, gyms and fitness practices are set out, on a superficial level at least, to cater to the individual, no matter what their gender (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Smith-Maguire 2008) and are often seen as inclusive spaces for physical activity and its concomitant health benefits (Fisher et al. 2018). These sites, i.e., gyms and fitness centres, along with the even more recent dissemination of CrossFit boxes (Crockett and Butryn 2018), are part of a global industry, with vast capital investments at stake and 162 million members globally (Walsh 2017; Coen et al. 2020, 2021)
Although constructed as a panacea for the ills of sedentary urban life (Smith-Maguire 2008; Sassatelli 2015), as sites to attain healthy bodies, gym and fitness venues are places where gendered ideals and images of body-making are constantly being reproduced and perpetuated (Bladh 2020; Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021), which, in turn, is translated into making the gym more inclusive for certain people, rather than for others (Bladh 2020; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). Thus, as earlier research has shown, the inclusive character of the contemporary mixed-gendered gym, although seemingly welcoming to all, is still conditioned by a mindset focused on to what extent one approximates a certain masculine ideal (Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). This has been evidenced through empirical work showing that both the gym as such, as well as certain areas within the gym, are perceived as specifically masculine spaces, often referring to a contextually contingent hegemonic masculinity and thus deterring those who do not align with this image, not only women but also certain men (Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). As such, there seems to be an unofficial (albeit sometimes official, in terms of “girls only” areas) spatial gendered division within gym and fitness sites, with a larger number of men seen using the free weights, while women tend to make use of cardiovascular machines and attend more group exercise classes (Craig and Liberti 2007; Dworkin 2003; Johansson 1996; Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). Even when these dividing lines are crossed, a gendered movement schema remains because there are different social expectations of what type, how, and where men and women should exercise; as we will see in this paper, these movement schemas are produced and reproduced through discursive spatial linkages within the gym and fitness culture. In addition to investigating in what ways gendered norms are implicated within the very architecture of gyms, in this paper, the Club refers to a gym that has the belief written in its statutes that it should work in a norm-critical way. This could be understood as an attempt to seek to disrupt a gendered spatial discourse that premiers certain forms of masculinity, thereby possibly widening the gym doors to be open to more diverse members. This leads to further questions regarding what kind of environment is enabled by a norm-critical stance, as well as another leading question—when something is specifically included, what else is then excluded?

Aims and Research Questions

The following article seeks to explore how a physical context in space and the making of places are saturated with norms; in this case, particularly those norms regarding gender within the vicinity of recreational sites, such as the different types of fitness gyms. It thus problematizes the inter-relationship between the making of bodies and spaces/places and the power relationships within these corporeal–spatial makings. By taking this perspective of spatiality and bodies, one is able to deconstruct (socio-)spatial thresholds within and surrounding these fitness venues. Thresholds are here understood as gendered social constructs and norms that direct bodies in certain ways, and, thus, circumscribe potential movements and capabilities. The issue of thresholds is further nuanced by inquiries regarding whether or not endeavors to be norm-critical and working toward inclusivity somehow mitigate the gendered thresholds that impede movement; if so, in what ways are thresholds being rearticulated? The aims of this paper are addressed by the following research questions:

- What architectural features are seen as problematic within gyms and fitness venues?
- What does work in a norm-critical way at a gym entail, in terms of inclusivity?
- In what ways are bodies oriented differently, due to gendered spatial directions, within gyms and fitness venues?

In order to contextualize this study, Section 2 gives the study background and examples from the literature, which will be followed by the analytical framework utilized in Section 3. Here, I draw upon Elizabeth Grosz and her reading of Derrida; she argues
that place and bodies are co-constructed through architectural discourses, i.e., architectural economies (Grosz 1995). Section 4, Settings, is intended to enable an analytically engaged (visual) comprehension of the different types of fitness venues referred to in this paper, in order to highlight their architectural links. The empirical material and the methods used to collect the data are presented in Section 5, Materials and Methods, and the analytical approach is thereafter employed in the subsection, Analysis: Narrative and Deconstruction. The results of the study will be presented in Section 6, Findings, which is structured according to certain themes found in the material. Section 6.1, Gazing and (Non)Specular Surfaces, deals with how specular surfaces—whether they be mirrors, pictures, or socially induced images of what types of bodies fit where— affect what directions people choose. Section 6.2, Vulnerable Inclusiveness, focuses specifically on the particularity of the Club, and the meanings behind how working in a norm-critical way is interpreted and experienced. In Section 6.3, Gendered Spatial Orientations, a directory of bodies according to gender is presented by referring to the participants’ experiences of traversing different gym sites. The findings of this article are then summarized in Section 7, Conclusions.

2. Background and Literature

With the booming popularity of gyms and fitness culture during recent decades (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010), research concerning this phenomenon has also expanded, at least to a certain extent. This section sets out to present an overview of the previous research regarding gym and fitness culture, especially that which relates to the specific themes running throughout this study. Consequently, the corpus of works considered here will by no means represent an exhaustive account of the literature regarding gyms and fitness culture but will instead serve as an academic background against which this present study can be understood. In addition, even though gyms and the fitness culture are nowadays understood to be a global enterprise (Parviainen 2011; Sassatelli 2010; Steen-Johnsen 2007; Coen et al. 2020, 2021), the scholarly literature referred to herein springs from Western institutions, as does this study.

The academic corpus regarding gyms and fitness culture is quite diverse in terms of its primary topics. So, too, are the methodologies, methods, and theories employed, ranging from extensive ethnographies (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010; Hedblom 2009; Andrews et al. 2005; Smith-Maguire 2008; Söderström 1999; Johansson 1998) to cultural media analyses of fitness magazines (Tolvhed 2016; Dworkin and Wachs 2009) and other fitness media (Kennedy and Markula 2011), such as fitness blogs (Boepple et al. 2016; Andreasson and Johansson 2013, 2014), Instagram accounts (Camacho-Miñano et al. 2019; Deighton-Smith and Bell 2018), and Pinterest boards (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016).

The gyms that earlier researchers encountered during the 1990s differed from those with which later scholarly work has engaged, especially regarding their demographic profile. These early scholars were met with gym spaces that were a male preserve and were predominately associated with bodybuilding practices (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Sassatelli 2010). Within this context, studies regarding gym culture mainly focused on issues relating to masculinity (Saltman 1998; Klein 1993), with reference to R.W. Connell’s theoretical framework regarding (hegemonic) masculinities (Connell 2005) and bodybuilding (Klein 1993). As for the women attending the gyms of that time, their bodybuilding practices attracted the most scholarly attention, in terms of female bodies transgressing gendered bodily norms by acquiring (masculine-connoted) muscle mass and reducing subcutaneous fat (Bunsell 2013; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Dworkin 2001; Aoki 1996; Johansson 1998).

With the advent of aerobics as a form of exercise that is offered within the same venues as weightlifting, as well as bodybuilding competitions incorporating subdivisions emphasizing aesthetic fitness, rather than an overtly big and muscular body, “gym and fitness” became a conjoined term, and the references to gym and fitness culture arose. Like the research regarding women bodybuilders, which pointed toward potential gender
transgressions and the malleability of gender, so too was aerobics conceived of as a practice whereby women could challenge the image of traditional femininity, in terms of the thin and weak woman gaining strength (Krane 2001; Johansson 1998; Lloyd 1996; Markula 1995). However, at the same time, the literature also suggested that aerobics is yet another means of disciplining the female body so that it remains slender and feminine (Krane 2001; Bordo 1993; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Johansson 1998; Lloyd 1996; Markula 1995).

With the marriage of gyms and fitness, the gym became co-opted into consumer culture. The momentum of the commercialization of gym and fitness activities was, and is, enhanced by means of certain understandings of gender, perpetuating a hierarchical relationship between masculine and feminine, as well as the privileging of white skin (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Although the fitness industry is seen as a platform upon which power relations are being reproduced and cemented, in terms of gender and ethnicity, the previous literature has also entertained the idea of gyms and fitness centers as places where gendered norms are being negotiated and transgressed (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Krane 2001; Dworkin 2001; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). However, this empowerment can also be understood as a type of commodity feminism, whereby, rather than working to alleviate unequal power relationships, individuals are encouraged to consume fitness and, thus, empower their own social positioning (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Smith-Maguire 2008). This indicates that, in order to achieve empowerment through fitness, one has to have sufficient capital to be able to consume it, in terms of available leisure time, economic capital, geographical proximity, and so on. Hence, this empowering message can primarily be capitalized upon by the middle classes (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Smith-Maguire 2008). Entangled with this empowering message for the affluent individual, the individualization of health is also apparent (Fisher et al. 2018). Gym and fitness practices are constructed as a means to combat ill health among the population, but these are achieved by each individual’s actions, without addressing other issues that undoubtedly have an impact on people’s health, such as social relations and environmental pollution (Tuana 2008). This individualization of health under the auspices of Western neoliberalism is often referred to as healthism (Lupton 2018; LeBesco 2011; Crawford 1980). Furthermore, the gym and fitness industry has capitalized on the promotion of health through certain images, with the consequence that health is identified in terms of aesthetics, equating a fit-looking body with a healthy body (LeBesco 2011; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Smith-Maguire 2008). This has dire consequences for those who do not conform to such bodily ideals, leading to the stigmatization of people who carry certain amounts of subcutaneous fat (Lupton 2018; LeBesco 2011).

As such, research during the first two decades of the 21st century has identified the workings within and through gym and fitness culture as a signifying trait of postmodern and neoliberal times, due to its complicated relationship with consumer culture (Sassatelli 2010; Smith-Maguire 2008; Dworkin and Wachs 2009). The consequences for the individual during this temporal era are frequently understood by utilizing the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault regarding discourse, discipline, and self-surveillance (Sassatelli 2010; Hedblom 2009; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Smith-Maguire 2008; Turner 2008; Chilling 2003; Pronger 2002; Söderström 1999).

However, countering the process of the commercialization of fitness and the selling of gym memberships is the increase, in recent years, of the construction of open non-commercial outdoor gyms in predominately urban areas (Bergmann et al. 2021; Jansson et al. 2020; Sami et al. 2020; Cranney et al. 2019; Jansson et al. 2019; Chow et al. 2017; Ramirez et al. 2017; Scott et al. 2014). This trend has been commended for its potential to offer an inclusive venue for health promoting physical activity among the general public, as no membership fee is required and there are no specific opening hours. As such, at first sight, these outdoor gyms may seem to be accessible to anyone and everyone. Nonetheless, these open gyms are not built in a contextual vacuum but may be
conditioned by certain spatial discourses regarding health and bodies, in terms of gender and ability, something that will be elaborated upon later in this article.

Although the research from various perspectives regarding gyms and fitness is nowadays quite comprehensive, only a minimal amount of scholarly work has considered a socio-spatial framework within the field when trying to understand the gendered implications within the concept of gyms and fitness (Bladh 2020; Coen et al. 2020, 2021). Within a socio-spatial framework, gender and place are considered to be co-constructed (ibid); as such, in order to understand in which ways gendered norms are realized as unequal gender hierarchies within gym and fitness, one has to take its very architecture (Bladh 2020) and geography into consideration (Coen et al. 2020, 2021). While Coen and her colleagues have used feminist emotional and visceral geography as points of departure, when understanding the unequal gendered prerogative to claim space within gyms and fitness sites (Coen et al. 2020, 2021), this article focuses on the ways in which the architectural economy (Grosz 1995) of gyms and fitness implies gendered conditions for inclusiveness (or not) within these spaces.

3. Analytical Framework: The Architectural Economy of Gyms and Fitness

Aided by the empirical material gathered for this paper, I will argue that gender norms, such as those expressed through contextually sensitive hegemonic masculinity, are incorporated and spread within the very architecture of gym and fitness venues, and that different sites of gym and fitness culture are linked through a specific architectural economy (Grosz 1995). The term hegemony is derived from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations, where one particular group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. Hegemonic masculinity is, thus, temporally and spatially contingent, where one form of masculinity is privileged over others, as well as over femininity (Connell 2005). Even though it is not referring to gym and fitness culture in particular, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful when theorizing tacit thresholds within the vicinities of these places, because it is not men per se who command the space but, rather, the image of hegemonic masculinity (Coen et al. 2020, 2021). In this case, this image is specifically that of the well-trained and athletic white male body, to which both men and women have to relate as the body that has the prerogative to inhabit gym spaces. The production of masculinity throughout the sporting world is marked by the hierarchical, competitive structure of the institution, which also defines masculinity in mass culture and provides a continuous display of men in motion (Connell 2005; Messner and Sabo 1990). Adjacent to this, the gym has the historical association of being a purely masculine space (Vertinsky 2004).

Of note, Grosz does not specifically refer to gym and fitness culture when arguing how architecture and spatiality are produced, and at the same time reproduced, via certain norms and discursive practices (Grosz 1995). An economy refers to the distribution of material, such as cultural, social, and economic goods, within a system of production, circulation, and consumption (Grosz 1995, p. 118). The term “architectural economy” is not merely entwined in the distribution of:

“...bricks, stone, steel, and glass, but also in the production and distribution of discourse, writings (including the bodily traces of a building’s occupants), and its division of space, time and movement, as well as the architectural plans, treatises, and textbooks that surround and infuse buildings.” (Grosz 1995, p. 118)

Through a Derridean understanding of textuality, in that it exceeds the written letters and is seen as a trace, inscription, or writing (Grosz 1995, p. 126), we are able to deconstruct the spatial discourse of gyms in textual terms and illuminate their architectural economy. Even though they are differentiated, due to divergent geographical locations, or due to being attributed differently as “general” gyms, fitness centres, “girls-only” areas, outdoor gyms, or CrossFit boxes, these different places, with their seemingly differentiated specific characteristics, still relate to each other through a
certain architectural economy. Discursive power does not work within Hobbesian terms but is rather predicated upon subjection and enaction. Hence, the architectural economy refers to spatiality as being co-constructed with human beings (Grosz 1995).

4. Settings

An architectural economy can be understood as the discursive framework that enables fitness spaces to be understood as recreational areas, as places where bodies are able to move in specific ways. I would argue that this notion is supported by the recent globalization of gyms (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Parviainen 2011; Sassatelli 1999a, 1999b, 2010; Steen-Johnsen 2007), making it possible to enter a gym in almost any city in the world and recognize its spatial features. The topographies of these recreational sites often consist of compartmentalized areas that are aligned to certain movement patterns, such as lifting areas containing free weights, with mirrors covering large areas or entire walls. Such large-scale mirrors also feature in rooms designated for group exercise classes and become a form of hyper-dimensional reflective surface. Their presence can be experienced as overwhelming to some visitors due to their abundance and magnitude, as we shall see later in this paper. In addition to the free weights, such as barbells, dumbbells, and kettlebells, regular gyms usually incorporate spaces for weight machines designed for a range of different exercises targeting different muscle groups as well as isolated muscles. Nowadays, with the booming popularity of functional fitness and CrossFit routines (Crockett and Butryn 2018), cross cages are frequently also part of a modern-day gym. Structured in rows, cardiovascular machines, such as treadmills, stationary bikes, air bikes, cross-trainers, and/or stationary rowing machines, stand in formation, waiting for patrons to exude sweat and heavy breaths full of carbon dioxide. A concomitant scene is an area that is sometimes a little secluded, intended for stretching, and furnished with soft yoga mats, bosu balls, Pilates balls, resistance bands, and the like. Another feature that differentiates some gyms from others is that of offering a spatial section reserved for women only. In Sweden and also, to a certain extent, in the surrounding Nordic countries, as well as in a few gyms worldwide, a large chain of ca. 250 gyms has standardized its venues to include specific “girls-only” sections. Even though they are discriminating against male patrons, the structural spatial logic within these “girls-only” gym areas resemble the common area of the gym. However, the number of square meters allotted to “girls only” is significantly smaller, as is the range of free weights available, in favor of more weight machines and cardiovascular machines. In contrast to the common area, the “girls only” section has frosted windows, preventing people from gazing in from the outside. The gym chain’s website reveals that these specific areas reserved for women represent an effort to ensure that women feel comfortable at their gyms (fitness24seven.com n.d.). It seems that there is a sort of inclusion by seclusion logic, by means of offering spatial shielding to ensure gender segregation. Although the effort of this work towards inclusiveness may lower the thresholds for women to initially enter the gym, its concrete existence runs the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes about what types of bodies should engage in what types of movements. In addition, previous research suggests that despite the existence of gyms with facilities designated for women only, it is still the case that “real” gyms are those gyms that predominantly contain men (Craig and Liberti 2007), which suggests that this seclusion might induce comfort, but it is at the cost of reproducing a gendered hierarchy of what can be considered a “real” gym or not.

Contrasting with these spatial seclusions is an additional type of gym, with an exercise area that is hyper-visible to any gaze. This is the outdoor gym, as seen in Figure 1, which is absolutely devoid of dividing concrete walls and windows. However, a spatial and architectural economy is still prevalent, as seen in its chin-up/pull-up bars, dip bars, shoulder presses, and the like. These sites have much in common with military training courses (see Figure 2), showcasing events included in the military pentathlon, which were initially designed to train young men to become strong, fit soldiers (Heck 2011).
Although CrossFit boxes and functional training gyms place a greater emphasis on free weights, cross-cages, and climbing ropes instead of weight machines, if the latter are present at all, it is still the case that these places inherit well-established spatial features from those established in the “regular gym”, serving as instructional cues for the moving body. As the pictures of the CrossFit box show (Figures 3 and 4), it harbors numerous features that are similar to those in outdoor gyms and military pentathlon courses, in terms of its cross-cage, as well as features similar to general gyms (Figure 5), in terms of its rows of cardio machines and its stack of barbells.

Figure 5 also depicts a row of squat cages at a general gym. Although the squat cages resemble the cross cages found in CrossFit boxes and at outdoor gyms, a significant dissimilarity is the feature of hyper-dimensional mirrors covering the walls.
Figure 3. Boxen Umeå Syd (a CrossFit box in Umeå, Sweden).

Figure 4. Boxen Umeå Syd (A CrossFit box in Umeå Sweden).

Figure 5. Umeå Sport & Motion Utopia, Sweden.
This section has provided an overview of how, even though different types of gyms and recreational centers are laid out differently, they are still recognizable as places encouraging certain schemas of movement because they are structured according to an architectural economy. Most importantly, this architectural economy cuts through and organizes the meaning-making of recreational gym spaces, even though these spaces are clearly discernable from each other, in terms of the number and size of mirrors and/or pictures on the walls, if there are any walls at all, the absence of free weights in favor of weight machines, or statutes instructing norm-critical work. The differences among these recreational gym spaces set the stage for local meanings, but there is still a syntax, a certain discourse, that enables these places to be recognized as gym spaces. Thus, they carry an architectural economy that, in turn, affects and is co-constituted by the bodies moving within these spaces, as well as those bodies that are kept out of them.

5. Material and Methods

The fieldwork was initiated at a certain gym, the Club, which presents an interesting case study when investigating the workings of thresholds and repays taking an exploratory case-study approach (Yin 2003). Written into the statutes of the Club was a proclamation of active engagement by trainers, coaches, and patrons to work from a norm-critical perspective, interpreted (by the participants) as countering expressions of misogynistic displays of masculinity. This can be understood as a queer positioning because it is actively working against a circumscribing form of heteronormativity (compulsory heterosexuality) (Ahmed 2014). As such, this particular site represents a rare example within the gym and fitness scene, explaining its omission from the previous research concerning these types of gyms.

The overall collection of data was undertaken during the years 2017 (first set of data) and 2019 (second set of data) in Sweden. The material sourced from the first set of data consisted of transcribed semi-structured interviews (Oakley 1998) from 9 participants who all resided in the same city, as well as field notes from participatory observations. The second set of data was retrieved by conducting memory exercises with two different groups of women residing in different cities, where one group was affiliated with the Club, and the other one was not.

After browsing the homepages of other gyms, the sui generis character of the Club made it favorable for a case study, and the board of the club was contacted via email. As a result of this correspondence, I was approved for conducting participatory observations at their gym. However, given my own history as an avid gym-goer, not to mention having worked as a gym instructor, and attaining my Personal Trainer’s certification, I did not experience any physical displacement when entering the field. According to John Van Maanen, physical displacement is a requirement for a researcher to achieve first-hand experience of an environment together with the participants, thereby observing the problems, backgrounds, language, rituals, and social relations of that environment (Van Maanen 1988). In fact, I was already enculturated within the gym and fitness culture and was aware of gym etiquette, its implicit rules, and its vernacular. In hindsight, I can acknowledge that I might have been blinded by my previous understanding of the field, taking some aspects for granted as being knowledge that everybody possesses, things that I cannot explain in detail since (whatever these aspects might be) they are still cloaked beneath a veil of embodied habit (see also Chapman Sanger 2003); however, simultaneously, being an insider also eased the process of access to the field.

The field notes from these observations generated the ideas, issues, topics, and themes (Tracy 2003; Emerson et al. 1995) that would prove useful when writing guidelines for the forthcoming interviews and collective memory exercises. I participated in the activities held at the Club, mostly kettlebell workouts and bodyweight training sessions, along with a few yoga classes. All in all, I spent approximately 10 h at the Club during the spring of 2017, dispersed across five different days, in conjunction with group workouts
and additional time spent talking and interacting with the gym members before and after the workouts.

The interviews involved questions about those factors that had implicitly propelled the patrons to locate themselves in this specific recreational venue (the Club), and how their previous experiences are part of any spatial comprehension; that is, our past is part of what builds our present dwellings. In this case, past experiences of sports and training were seen as an integral part of the understanding of “gyms” in general, as well as of “the Club” in particular. The benefits of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews include enabling the researcher to describe and understand the unique experiences of others (Stage and Mattson 2003; Kvale 2007); I was on a quest to solicit the histories of bodily movement and the thresholds surrounding it. Although I had intended to interview an equal number of men and women among the gym members at the Club, it seemed as if the research project predominantly attracted women to participate in the study, which resulted in 2 males and 7 females as interviewees, with an age range of mid-twenties to mid-seventies. In addition to this, some interviewees were more talkative than others, rendering the interviews different in terms of time, ranging from mere a 30 min to 90 min. Certainly, both the underrepresentation of male participants, as well as the diverse lengths of the interviews, can be seen as limiting the study by means of premiering female experiences, as well as the fact that the lengthier interviews yielded a more extensive set of data, which, in turn, implicated a higher degree of empirical presence when presenting data for the study.

Inspired by the method of collective memory work, (Jansson et al. 2008; Brown et al. 2011; Stephenson 2005; Frost et al. 2012; Snelgrove and Havitz 2010; Haug et al. [1987] 1999), the second set of data was retrieved during March and April in 2019 while conducting what I have chosen to call collective memory exercises at two different locations in Sweden. Within the collective memory work/exercises, memories are written down as narratives of past events, and, in this way, embodied experiences are investigated (Brown et al. 2011, p. 499). In terms of this study, the measures were similar in many ways to those employed by Frigga Haug and her colleagues during the 1980s (Haug et al. [1987] 1999), although there is one significant difference, in terms of time. Haug and her colleagues worked together on their collective memory project for two years, while the groups with which I was involved spent between two and three hours together, working with our memories. Thus, rather than referring to collective memory work as the method employed in this study, the term “collective memory exercises” is more appropriate.

There is by no means a single template regarding the process protocol for conducting these types of exercises, and the technique is seldom presented in textbooks on research methods. Although there are different protocols, there are still some commonalities that are also present in this study, such as the choosing of a word or meaning to trigger memories and talking about them as a group (Jansson et al. 2008; Brown et al. 2011; Stephenson 2005; Frost et al. 2012; Snelgrove and Havitz 2010). The premise for attaining knowledge production through working collectively with our memories is that our experiences, which we re-live as memories, are constructed collectively, in that they are socially constituted (Haug et al. [1987] 1999, p. 44). The memory exercises that I conducted were centred around the topics of training, sports, and the body. This was performed as a means to uncover the taken-for-grantedness of our exercising bodies, or rather, the constructed directory of our strides and their thresholds, as we do not always know the significance that an experience carries until it can be re-articulated into words (Ahmed 2017).

Along with myself, two previous interviewees (25–29 years old) made up one of the groups. The second group consisted of two students in their early twenties (and myself) at a university in a medium-sized city that was geographically distanced from the location of the first group. Thus, gathering data from two geographically differentiated groups of participants when engaging in the collective memory exercises had specific ramifications for the sourced material as one group of participants conversed specifically in relation to
the Club, while the other group’s dialog centered on regular gyms and CrossFit boxes. In addition, with myself included, the group sizes during the two different memory exercises consisted of three individuals each. This numerical proportion proved to be quite conducive for dialog, as evidenced by the material produced through the memory exercises. Furthermore, we were all women participating in the memory exercises, and gender is a factor that should be taken into account while producing data (see Krizek 2003; Broom et al. 2009). This, in turn, opens up the possibility that the material retrieved from these exercises might have been different if the group constellations had been of mixed genders.

The requirement for the sampling was nothing more complicated than having reached the age of 18 as this is the age at which, by law, one is considered an adult and able to make one’s own decisions, such as to participate in a research study. Given that the advertisement for the study was posted on social media pages related to sport, and that the printed ads were pinned up at a gym, I had an implicit anticipation of reaching individuals with experience in sports and training, which was confirmed by the actual individuals taking part in the study.

The two memory exercises resulted in a total of four hours of recorded data, which were transcribed verbatim. Just as in the interviews, some participants were more talkative than others; thus, the amount of data differed. This difference in the quantity of verbal dialog might be explained by several factors, one being that I had already established a social relationship with the members of one of the groups, namely, those that I had already interviewed. This also gave them time to reflect upon several of the issues discussed during our prior conversations. Furthermore, the fact that one group did not have any relation to the Club also had an impact on the material, analysis, and results. In addition to the transcripts, during the memory exercises, I jotted down keywords during our discussions in order to moderate our conversations to a certain extent, and also to record my initial interpretations.

**Analysis: Narratives and Deconstruction**

Given that I have approached the empirical material using both a narrative and a deconstructive approach, one might say that I have conducted a deconstructive narrative analysis. This may seem like an oxymoron, given that a narrative serves as that which makes fragmentary experiences appear cohesive and sensible (Horsdal 2012; Sparkes 1999), while deconstruction seeks to undo the constructs that make things “appear” to be naturally given and cohesive (Derrida 2004; Borradori 2003). One such cohesive narrative device is the binary construction of gender (Warhol and Lanser 2015). However, deconstruction and narrative can be conjoined to serve an analytical purpose. While deconstruction seeks to identify the constructedness of binary pairs, their inherent power relations, and strives for novel terminologies (Borradori 2003), taking a narrative approach in the context of this paper recognizes, as does a deconstructive perspective, the socially constructed aspect of narrating our movements, as well as the experience of how these narratives come about and come to be the foundation for our perception of bodies in movement, within gym and fitness venues. Although not specifically referring to deconstruction, a narrative approach can still acknowledge the inherent power relationships within certain binary constructs by asking: “How might we write so that the warping tyranny of dualism, such as subjectivity/objectivity, masculine/feminine, temporarily able-bodied/disabled, young/old, and so on, are dissolved?” (Sparkes 1999, p. 29). When attempting to approach the body’s movement through narrative, one is prone to think that the very constitutive properties of text are also those that structure our bodily presence in the world (Brandon 2016). Although the stories told by the participants during the interviews were individually reported, the very ability to narrate them is dependent upon the social context (Sparkes 1999). Thus, by analysing several transcripts from interviews with different individuals, as well as the notes from our conversations during the collective memory exercises, I was able to discern common themes that are part
of the sense-making of bodily movement and perception. This approach to narrative is often referred to as paradigmatic (Sparkes 1999; see also Polkinghorne 1995); it closely resembles a content analysis “whereby the researcher seeks central themes, typologies or instances of paradigmatic categories within the narratives told by one person or by a number of people about a similar issue” (Sparkes 1999, p. 21).

A prominent theoretical position that directed the analytical process was that of gender as a social construct and a performative orientation (Ahmed 2006, 2014; Butler 2007, [1993] 2011). Similarly, but with a change in direction, unforeseen themes and concepts were derived from the material in an inductive manner (Sparkes 1999), which required identifying the relationships and categorizing the findings into a generalizable theoretical framework.

By taking a paradigmatic approach to narrative, one can approximate and understand “the subjective meanings associated with bodies in different contexts by highlighting the common themes that emerge in the stories told and the manner in which they relate to wider social issues” (Sparkes 1999, p. 21). This process entailed several readings of the material, whereby the initial readings involved noting, on a more colloquial level, the topics repeatedly mentioned by the participants during the interviews and memory exercises. To be sure, these topics were largely induced by the questions asked and, albeit to a lesser extent, by the triggers used during the memory exercises. However, there was not any univocal expression of the way in which these topics were discussed, signifying the individuality of the unoriginal. Although the codes were frequent and were dispersed throughout the material, the talk concerning them was identified within clusters of meaning, or rather, meaning-making. In order to enable an interpretation of these clusters of meaning, as produced through certain power relationships, a deconstructive reading of the material was conducted. Deconstruction aims to identify the constructed character of a binary pairing that is otherwise seen as natural (Derrida 2004; Borradori 2003) and to illuminate the hierarchical ordering of the pairs (Borradori 2003). In terms of this article, one binary pair has been in focus, that is, masculine/feminine. By means of coding and the subsequent clusters of meaning, I was able to identify the power relations pertaining to masculine/feminine.

6. Findings

6.1. Gazing and (Non-)Specular Surfaces

A common denominator among the participants’ descriptions of the Club was the lack of mirrors or pictures on the walls depicting “slender and fit” bodies, which was mentioned both during interviews and also in conversations with patrons while stretching after a workout at the Club. One participant, Maria, recognized the functionality of mirrors, in terms of enabling gymgoers to ascertain the correct movement schemas. Still, an abundance of reflective surfaces may induce reflexive thoughts about other things than checking one’s exercise form, such as physical appearance.

“There was probably more fixation on looks at my other gym too, a lot more mirrors and stuff like that. Here, there’s only one mirror, while at the other gym, you became more self-aware of what you did and how you looked … I can, in a way, feel like it’s a good thing with mirrors, in order to check if you’re doing things right, in that way I can understand it … but there’s a limit when it gets too much.” (Maria)

Although recognizing the instrumentality of mirrors in terms of making sure that one pursues the exercises with the correct form, participants stated that at a certain point, it can get too much. The mirrors’ presence then induce a heightened self-awareness and reflexivity regarding one’s own, and others’, appearances. It seemed that regular gyms were places where surfaces magnified certain sentiments about appearance, clothing, and diet, making them sites of implicit unease. This type of heightened self-awareness within
the walls of gyms and fitness centers due to the presence of mirrors is in accordance with previous research (Fisher et al. 2018)

Furthermore, the images of slender or muscular bodies covering the walls of (general) gyms signified an expectation of the kinds of bodies that should “fit” in the gym, inducing sentiments of shame in those who do not “fit” in, as though they carried a pathological disease that was contagious through body norms.

As mentioned by the participants, a differential feature that separated “regular gyms” from the Club was the prevalence of specular surfaces, which induced self-regulatory practices in terms of the self-checking of appearance and conformity to bodily ideals. Even though they used other words, the participants had reflected on how social bodily norms seep through the concrete walls of gyms, appearing through reflexive surfaces, such as mirrors, and the visual depictions of bodies. Hence, social corporeal expectations become embodied in the architectural economy of the gym and are embodied through the act of gazing/mirroring. I argue that the materialization of norms is a sensed phenomenon, one that is especially tangible in the feelings of shame when failing to match the norm. Despite existing outside of the gym, these norms become clarified through the gaze, at oneself, at others, at photographs. The architectural economy of the gym facilitates the circulation of bodily ideals, enmeshed in the architectural features; they are articulated through sentient bodies, i.e., feeling bodies, through feelings of shame, unease, or heightened self-reflexivity. As such, the architectural economies of the gym and fitness could be said to harbor a certain emotional geography (see Coen et al. 2020).

However, there are gyms with no concrete walls, no pictures, or mirrors, but there are still certain images that linger. In contrast to the aforementioned types of gym walls, saturated with mirrors and “motivational” pictures, are those boundaries that are not walls at all, at least in their literal, constructional sense. These invisible dividing structures enclose what has today become a common feature in Swedish cities, as well as globally; that is, outdoor gyms (Bergmann et al. 2021; Jansson et al. 2020; Sami et al. 2020; Cranney et al. 2019; Jansson et al. 2019; Chow et al. 2017; Stride et al. 2017; Ramirez et al. 2017; Scott et al. 2014). As these outdoor gyms lack what several participants had mentioned as being problematic, i.e., mirrors, they would seem, at least at first sight, to encourage inclusiveness, as no membership fee is required; they have no particular opening hours, there are no depictions of gender-normative bodies, and they are open to everyone. However, when contemplating them more closely, the inclusive character of outdoor gyms appears to be somewhat elusive:

“There are no mirrors, so you have to be confident that you really know an exercise…maybe you don’t need a mirror anyway…I think that everyone can, even though there’s a certain type. Or, maybe I shouldn’t say a particular type, but one notices that it’s people who train other things as well. There are not that many beginners … in any case, I’ve felt that I had to work myself up, before starting training at the outdoor gym. Maybe it isn’t that welcoming, or maybe not, but it’s a little hard to get into it at the beginning.” (Maria)

Even though there were no mirrors in sight at the outdoor gym, there were still reflective surfaces at work. The recurring representation of certain types of bodies, moving in certain ways, at the outdoor gym worked as surfaces to gaze at; if one recognized oneself in those images, one could have the confidence to enter. If not, one had to train beforehand to be able to train there and fit into the movement schemas of the directory of the outdoor gym.

This is an example of how bodies are part of the architecture included in the construction of place because it was by their presence that the specific bodies perpetuated an architectural economy of gyms. Maria had to work herself up to be fit enough, in order to make herself visible (conforming to what was expected) and to be reflected in the outdoor training venue. Expectation is due to the repetition of events and images; these
expectations, in turn, direct our views on what it is possible to envision. Like the spellings of words, some letters go together with other letters, creating words and sentences and, in cohort, presenting meaning. In an analogous manner, one can (unread) the outdoor gym, to be deconstructed textually, rendering its architectural economy visible as part of the distribution of a reiteration of the norms governing recreational gym spaces. These norms are manifested via certain types of bodies that ease into these spaces. For those bodies, the outdoor gym is an open space, and this constructs an expectation of an image to be reflected as/at. As such, the comfort and inclusiveness of space is a co-construct of bodies and spatial architecture. While not referring to outdoor gyms in particular, but more to the masculine-impregnated walls of the gym in general, Vertinsky (2004) explains that different kinds of social relationships and power initially contained within the gym are being stretched out across space. Increasingly, fewer of these relations are contained within the gym itself but instead reach beyond its walls, linking that space to the places beyond. Consequently, even though it is devoid of concrete building elements, the outdoor gym is still a habitat for the particular architectural economy that is present at regular gyms.

One participant reflected on an outdoor gym’s architectural economy, in terms of what kinds of movements were enabled and encouraged there, as well as what types of people were regular inhabitants that engaged in these movement schemas. When asked about her thoughts on outdoor gyms, Erica reflected on how these types of gyms catered for certain types (of bodies), creating an expectation of what bodies should do and how they should move:

“I live really close to an outdoor gym, but never set foot there alone, because I feel that it’s very male-dominated and I often think that at those outdoor gyms, there is [an assumption that] there you should have movements that you should subscribe to and do right in that space and they’re formed according to particular types. And it gets like, one should do chin-ups or pull-ups or some stuff, and I only felt comfortable there when I’ve done outdoor sessions with the guy I train with. Because then it means that one can be there, one has, like, a buffer.” (Erica)

This quote from Erica signifies how architectural properties can pervade open spaces. The architectural economy of the gym is dispersed across other places, such as outdoor gyms, and so are its concomitant power relations. As described above, the social relationships and power initially contained within the gym are being stretched out across space (Vertinsky 2004). Even though it is a site with no visible walls, and there are consequently no mirrors or pictures, there was still a masculine ideal that had extended out of the gym, enclosing seemingly open spaces with well-trodden paths for certain schemas of movement. For someone not fitting those schemas, not speaking its masculine language, or having a “buffer” for comfort, there still seemed to be walls keeping people out. Thus, place is not just structured space; it can be conceived of as an outcome, the product of an activity, which has a temporal dimension (Vertinsky 2004). The outdoor gym is formed according to certain expected movements, a prescription, as mentioned, to “subscribe” to. Insofar as outdoor gyms are nowadays a common feature of Swedish cities, this example can be related to what Grosz writes: “The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body” (Grosz 1995, p. 104). Whether put in the open, or enclosed by concrete walls, gyms are an urban phenomenon (Sassatelli 2015), and, as we have seen here, power relations that direct bodies in certain ways are being reproduced while bodies (dis)align themselves within architectural economies.

The abundance of mirrors, depictions of normative bodies on the walls, and branded clothing codes were features associated with general gyms but were lacking at the Club. These characteristics, as well as other bodies inhabiting these spaces, became specular surfaces through which the architectural economy of the gym could seep into the flesh of the participants, via the act of gazing, and be physically materialized through emotion.
6.2. Vulnerable Inclusiveness

At times, when talking about the Club, the participants placed other training venues in juxtaposition to it and, thus, oscillated between a close-focus reference to the Club and a distant echo from faraway gyms. The Club was commended by the participants for its ambiance, accredited by the lack of pictures of norm-congruent bodies or of mirrors or trendy clothing, as well as the silencing of any discourse regarding diet. This was the makeup of a comfortable setting, which, according to Nina, made the Club into a kind of “chilled” environment:

“When I got to this club, I felt like, it’s tough, it’s heavy, it’s sweaty, it’s a new form. I felt like I was evolving, it felt like kind of a chilled atmosphere … It’s a small place, not that many classes, it’s one or two classes per day, and it’s like, there are new people, but it’s still like this, you recognize everyone and say hello and such. That’s why I didn’t go to other gyms … I’ve experienced them as quite large and pretty anonymous.” (Nina)

Through the accounts uttered by the participants, and as Nina described it, one gets a sense of the Club’s atmosphere as being laid back, but still being a site for pushing boundaries, an intimate setting that has friendly verbal exchanges among its patrons. In Nina’s case, the intimacy was something that attracted her to this place, as opposed to other more general and more anonymous gyms. Another feature that was mentioned, which is congruent with the sampling logic of including the Club as an initial entry point to the research field, was its critical stance toward circumscribing gender norms. However, bearing this in mind, one coach, Juan, acknowledged that, due to the fact of the Club being a functional fitness/CrossFit-inspired gym, it did attract certain gendered articulations, which they actively worked to keep out:

“… a lot of this, this norm that exists around CrossFit clubs. What type of guys and what type of manliness thrives there. How it reflects when new people come… For instance, those “macho” men, with stringer tank tops and taking selfies, they’re not welcome. Sometimes new guys come, and you can tell they think that they’re the biggest and strongest there.” (Juan)

At such times, Juan will usually ask one of the female members to demonstrate an exercise, someone whom he knows lifts heavy weights. As soon as the new member sees the woman lifting this much weight, sometimes more than he can lift, his attitude immediately changes. This was an action demonstrating being norm-critical on the scene, at training. What was being demonstrated was not only the correct technique to perform an exercise but also that they did not accept certain displays of what Butler would term gender performances (Butler 2007, [1993] 2011), and at the same time reinforcing other performances, such as women being strong and lifting heavy weights. Congruent with Juan’s analysis regarding CrossFit gyms and masculinity, previous research has similarly inquired into the CrossFit gyms in terms of their harboring and perpetuating the discourses of a certain hegemonic masculinity, cloaked behind a veil of “natural taken-for-grantedness” (Kerry 2016), demonstrated by analyzing its semiotic landscape. Here, hegemonic masculinity refers to the image of the strong and athletic prowess of the male body (Connell 2005). In the case of the Club, instead of closing their eyes to attempts to reinforce a certain gendered (masculine) hierarchy, the written words of their statutes were taken seriously and acted upon. With a rainbow flag decorating the walls, instead of a profusion of mirrors and/or depictions of ideal confirmative bodies, in conjunction with its “chilled ambiance”, “openness” would be the adjective most appropriate to describe this particular gym.

However, as Butler reminds us, to always include means simultaneously to exclude (Butler 2015). Inclusion is not achieved merely by stating it in words, rather, it is something that has to be constantly created. What was necessary to exclude were the articulations of certain expressions of masculinity that could be seen as a deterrent for those not living up to the big, muscular (male) morphology that is often on display by
revealing clothing at other gyms. The prevalence of “the biggest and strongest”, or at least its self-proclaimed image, corresponds to the image of hegemonic masculinity, in terms of being big, strong, and muscular, which is something of an inherent trait within gym spaces. Previous research suggests, in support of Juan’s statement regarding the meaning of being inclusive, that such displays of hegemonic masculinity work as deterrents for both men and women (Coen et al. 2018, 2020; see also Fisher et al. 2018). This approach to inclusiveness was something that was commended by several of the female patrons when differentiating between the Club and other training venues. Although they did not specifically refer to it as “hegemonic masculinity”, as the types of spaces were seen to be male-dominated, such venues were something they avoided; they did not feel comfortable in such places. If they did go to such a gym, they would not spend time in the areas where these men were. One participant said:

“There were rooms within rooms, and some rooms you just don’t go into, because you’re a woman, even though there isn’t any formal rule that you shouldn’t.” (Sandra)

This exemplifies how gendered power relations are articulated through spatial discourse, as exclusionary partitions are created and distributed throughout the specific architectural economy of gyms. Rooms are created within open spaces by means of what type of body carries the prerogative to ease into such spaces in comfort. This, in turn, meant that, for Sandra, it was not closed doors keeping her out of certain spaces; rather, it was the socially constructed gendered norms of what types of bodies go where that affected her orientation within the gym. Thus, tacit thresholds are constructed, chimerical in their visibility but concrete in their effects on bodies. Expressions through the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity thus function as a silent exclusionary process, moving along gendered lines (Coen et al. 2018, 2020; see also Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018).

The Club reinforced counter-exclusionary practices, such as demonstrating certain exercises through displays by strong and competent women; in that way, they diluted the normative images of large men as having precedence in terms of bodily strength. To ensure comfort for the Club’s patrons, other practices were also enforced. For instance, there was an awareness of suitable clothing, to diminish the occurrence of negative corporeal evaluations in relation to others’ bodies, sentiments that were corroborated in previous research (Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020). A trainer at the Club, although visibly well-trained, had a rule of not showing too much skin, in order to work against an environment of bodily comparisons. The encouragement to keep clothes on the body, shielding bare skin, was a recurring sentiment among the participants.

Additionally, inclusiveness, or rather “radical inclusiveness”, a term used by one participant, Viveca, was also discussed during one of the memory exercises. It was addressed both in positive terms, such as was previously mentioned regarding the atmosphere at the Club, and also more negatively; this kind of inclusiveness carried with it an inherited vulnerability and informal regimes of emotional control and work. During this particular memory exercise, the trigger was “When I went to the gym and got angry”, to which one participant wrote down a specific memory of an event that represented several other occasions with similar content. The plot of the written memory centered on how the participant experienced vulnerability, followed by anger, due to unsolicited looks from the male coach, unprepared exercises during the class, and the odor seeping out of the coach’s body, leaving a trail of stink after him. On the way to the Club, the participant was filled with anticipation—what kind of work were they going to do today? Once there, and recognizing that it was THAT coach, she was careful to avoid eye contact. During the class, the patrons were on the floor doing sit-ups, and he, the coach, was positioned in such a way that he was right in line to see between their legs and was seemingly staring right at the space between her thighs. Her defensive strategy of avoiding eye contact then
changed to an offensive attack, one of staring back at the coach, while silently screaming her thoughts, as though they were verbalized through ocular instruments:

“I see you, you creep. Hope he doesn’t take it as an invitation … Do you have to stand exactly there? ... Can’t you just go and find some other place to stand? [When you were] There, you felt so vulnerable…” (Maria)

After Maria had recited her written memory, from which the above quote originates, another participant in the memory exercise responded:

“What a relief to hear such feelings expressed! As an adult and being at a place that is so “inclusive”, [with] radical inclusiveness. You can’t be mean in a place where you should be inclusive, in an environment like the Club... or other venues where there should be such radical inclusiveness... there’s no place for such feelings…” (Viveca)

The written memory articulates the feelings of not being in control, but at the same time being forced to control one’s feelings throughout an ongoing and recurring situation, in this specific place, resulting in fermented feelings of anger. To sustain an inclusive environment, the inhabitants of the Club had to undertake emotional labor (see Hochschild [1979] 2012), in that working out at the club not only meant taxing one’s muscles and cardiovascular system but also carried a requirement to handle other people’s feelings, as well as one’s own (see ibid.).

To create an open environment, something had to give, and, in this case, for Maria, it meant the emotional labor of suppressing emotions that were, in this particular setting, inappropriate. Even though the Club was, in many ways, a construct aligned with the architectural economy of gyms, in terms of it being a place where the body is supposed to move in certain ways (Coen et al. 2018; Hedblom 2009; Sassatelli 1999b), its stipulated work to ensure inclusiveness created a situated context that involved local norms. While, as Sassatelli describes it, gyms are characterized as exhibiting elements signifying that “this is a training session”, such as the participants’ particular focus or certain sounds, such as grunting, tense faces, and sweaty clothing (Sassatelli 1999b), within the specifics of the Club, participants are informed about the types of actions that are not to be expressed, in order to reinforce the message that “we are inclusive here”. This was further nuanced by Maria, as:

“...Especially with the Club, it’s sometimes just like, “Ah, God, I don’t want to speak to anyone, but I kind of have to be nice anyway”... I actually experienced this earlier this week in another conversation, that I have to be even nicer there than what I’m elsewhere. It’s not like you can have a “bitch-face” there, like at a regular gym... there’s such an expectation... you have to be even more [at the Club]...” (Maria)

Viveca completes Maria’s sentence: “… in order for your non-action to become an action” (Viveca).

What is being described in this discussion during the memory exercise is how, in the effort to create an open environment of radical inclusiveness, certain expectations are also created through the framed activities. In this case, not talking or saying hello, which is considered a “non-action”, becomes a discernible action, as it rubs up against certain expectations. Due to its specific context, seemingly non-expressive actions serve as communicative messages. This implies that, although they are silent, due to the specific temporal and spatial locality, bodies are powered to be verbalized by sight. Grosz writes about how bodies “become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized” (Grosz 1995, p. 35). By means of recognizing her own (non)actions as verbal, and concomitant with this knowledge, the participant experienced an emotional workload when trying to live up to the Club’s expectations of sociability. Radical inclusiveness, despite its positive connotations, certainly has its benefits, but it also implies arduous emotional work, because it requires conscious deliberations about
one’s own conduct. Again, referring to Grosz, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become corporeal (Grosz 1995), as they are indeed felt in the flesh of sentient bodies, and are verbally loud, even without sound. Being aware of how one can speak without words and act without acting implies emotional labor, which, at times, caused deliberations about whether to go and work out at all, and to grumble about how one’s previous demeanor was perceived by others. This type of deliberation was something that Maria and Viveca conversed about, when talking about the specifics of the Club.

“Should I or should I not go and work out? I mean, I want to work out, but I kind of don’t want to be around people, and then it gets like, I didn’t say hello to people by mistake, and then, ‘but God, this person… like… hope this person didn’t interpret it as I don’t want to, that I only say hello to some people, and not others’ “ (Maria).

“Shit, so much responsibility!” (Viveca)

“Yes, exactly!” (Maria)

The dialog between these two participants illustrates how the maintenance of the recommended “open” atmosphere at the Club required involvement by its members in ways other than by certain kinds of exercise. It also included taking responsibility for others and their potential feelings and suppressing emotions and ongoing reflections regarding one’s own (non)actions. Therefore, the situatedness of the Club not only mandated bodies to move according to a certain gym economy but also required a specific emotional involvement from its patrons. As Maria pointed out, having a “bitch-face” within the walls of the Club was endowed with a certain meaning that was not present in other places, such as in generic gyms. The benevolence of inclusion at the Club carries with it expectations of sociability, as part of that which has been set up to ensure inclusion. However, this is not an effortless act; rather, it is, at times, experienced as strenuous work. The specific involvement required from patrons of the Club, in order to ensure (radical) inclusiveness, was recognized by Viveca as a certain way of “taking care of each other”, which in turn demanded overt sociability.

Radical inclusiveness set the Club apart from other training venues, along with its “open and chilled” ambiance. This was, in part, attributed to the Club’s work at being inclusive and norm-critical, which was manifested via actively working against certain expressions of hegemonic masculinity. This could possibly be elevated to work as a template since transformations indoors have the potential to transform social-environmental relations outdoors as systems indoors often seep out into the open (Coen et al. 2018). However, this type of radical inclusiveness was not without its own perils, as it demanded an amount of emotional labor and care for others from its patrons, which was not required to the same extent at other gyms. This reveals how inclusiveness is a process, rather than a static state of being, and that it requires constant demanding work to be fulfilled. Radical inclusiveness is thus a tightrope to be carefully balanced, and is thereby inherently vulnerable. As the material suggests, something has to give, and sometimes this becomes too much. As such, not only does being inclusive mean that not everyone is welcome but, in a “radical” form, it is also a threshold, because it requires a certain amount of emotional labor to be enforced, resulting in some members leaving the Club. This makes radical inclusiveness vulnerable inclusiveness.

6.3. Gendered Spatial Orientations

Some gyms that were mentioned in the empirical data had ambitions of inclusiveness for women and girls by means of a specific spatial structure, providing “girls-only” sections separated from the common area. This was performed in order to ensure that women and girls “feel comfortable” when working out at their gyms (fitness24seven.com n.d.). Anne, a retired 74-year-old who frequented both the Club and a Fitness24seven gym, did not use the “girls-only” area. When asked why, she answered that she felt that the air quality in the bigger main area was better because it was not as stuffy.
“The girls-only gym gets so stuffy and cramped, and as I do not feel ashamed when working out among the guys, I make sure to leave room for those who like not mixing.” (Anne)

Thus, for Anne, the “girls only” part of the gym was not comfortable at all, as it obstructed her breathing, due to it being “stuffy”. However, Anne articulated an ethics of care (see Koehn 1998) for other women, with her implicit assertion that women were reluctant to work out in the common area because they experienced shame while being there. This care for others should not be conflated with the care for others mentioned in relation to the Club, where caring for each other was a component of its framed activities, while at this gym, “care for others” was, rather, the built-in “girls-only” area itself. As such, the ethics of care described by this participant was not part of what was expected but was instead an aberration. By not occupying space, Anne left more room for those wanting the comfort of seclusion. This spatial division is supported by previous research, suggesting that women (and some men) avoid certain areas of gyms where a particular hegemonic masculinity that is connected to physical prowess is on display (Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2018, 2020, 2021). However, for Viveca, who had also previously attended a gender-segregated gym, this comfort was referred to in terms of safety:

“In the common space, there were a lot of dudes. Not many of them seemed to work out, they mostly just hung out, stood, and watched others and took pictures…it was a weird atmosphere…It felt safer in the ‘girls-only’ part…” (Viveca)

It seemed that the gym chain’s ambition to create a space where women would feel comfortable working out was indeed achieved by establishing a spatial standard of “girls-only” areas at their gyms. This was evidenced through Anne’s implicit assumption that other women would feel too ashamed to train in the common area, feelings that were supposedly alleviated by entering a secluded area that was only open to women. Another example of comfort attributed to “girls-only” areas was how feelings of safety were instilled because this was a space where, specifically, in this case at least, certain manly behavior created negative sentiments toward the common area. As Anne exemplifies, a “girls-only” section does not necessarily mean that the common area is only inhabited by men. However, it seemed as though it was not just any type of woman who was a regular patron among the weights in the mix of the commons. When discussing the division between the common area and a secluded space for women only, one participant recounts that it is not necessarily merely one’s sex that prescribes one’s social standing at the gym:

“…There are well-trained women … yes; they get looks, of course, and some guys dare to ask them if they need any help … but you look at them and see that they’ve been there for a long time; then they rise in the ranks, anyway…” (Viveca)

In terms of this participant’s observation, women occupying a space in the common area were noticeably gym-savvy. It was also recounted that the gym contained a certain hierarchy, according to a sort of training “know-how”. Hierarchical ordering within the gym is in agreement with previous research, as bodies that approximate the hegemonic masculine image of the strong and physically competent male are given a certain prerogative to take up space (Coen et al. 2018). However, as stated in the quotation above, these women were able to command space due to their occupying high-level echelons of training competence. It was as though, for a woman, residing in the common area was not something to take for granted, but was, rather, conditional upon her inhabiting a specific position within the gym hierarchy. Even so, despite their “ranking”, women were still approached by men offering them “help”, which, in turn, constantly brought these women’s spatial occupation into question by the presupposition that they needed assistance in order to be there. Another participant, Tia, corroborated this, by recounting
her own lived experience at a general gym, with no formal spatial division in regard to gender:

I mean, I consciously bench-press only at one particular place, because if I walk into the bench press room, then I get tips on how you do it, and I don’t want tips … I mean, I’m always there, so a friend of mine asked me why. But I want to bench-press by myself, and I don’t want anyone to show me how to do it. I can bench-press by myself.” (Tia)

Clearly, in terms of competence, Tia would occupy the ranks of women qualified to command space at the gym. However, as a woman, her capabilities were repeatedly questioned by means of unsolicited advice. Even though they are weightlifting-savvy, women pushing a barbell are, due to their gender, questionable subjects within the gym hierarchy. This suggests that the architectural economy of the gym prescribes certain relations of power, in terms of which certain bodies have spatial prerogatives, and by which bodies are questionable within the very same space. The (discouraging) gendered directory within the gym environment was additionally emphasized by an observation at a general gym, where some men were pretending to do an exercise, laughing, and making a parody of girls attending the gym:

“… it was that hip thruster, as if that was a particular girl exercise. Girl exercise?! What the hell is a girl exercise? And why can’t girls be by the barbells? I find that quite common…” (Tia)

As such, these circumscribing gendered norms regarding body movements work to confine not only the women’s comportment but also the men’s. The “perceived” humor of this group, as they seemingly imitated women working out, was premised on the idea that this type of exercise was not something a man would do. The quotation reveals that you never see a man performing a hip thruster unless as a joke, which, in consequence, implies that men, as well as women, are confined within gendered norms of movement. This shows that gender is also constructed through the use of humor.

7. Conclusions

The concept of an architectural economy enables a deconstructive reading of spatiality, whereby places are recognized as textual. Thus, the architectural economy of the gym describes the ways in which these sites are inextricably linked through spatial discourse and how it is produced, as well as reproduced, by gendered norms, and is thus part of the directory inciting bodies to move in certain ways. In other words, they are part of the construction of thresholds (Bladh 2020), in both concrete and social terms. To reiterate, “thresholds” in this paper refer to gendered social constructs and norms that direct bodies in certain ways, thereby circumscribing their potential movements and capabilities. The way that thresholds are used in this paper could be understood as adjacent to what previous research has labeled gendered barriers and/or boundaries within the gym and fitness environment (Salvatore and Marecek 2010; Fisher et al. 2018; Coen et al. 2020, 2021), in that it circumscribes human body movement according to unequal gendered norms within the gym and fitness culture. However, the choice of thresholds is preferable, in that, through an analogy with aerobic and anaerobic thresholds, the gendered thresholds within the gym and fitness culture denote constraints, as well as malleability; therefore, they are not static, but, as a result of continuous work, they might be displaced, allowing for other movements and prerogatives of space.

With a close-up view, the specific contours of the Club could be illuminated as radical inclusiveness, achieved through a spatial structure in terms of a diminished quantity of mirrors and body-normative pictures, as well as establishing framed activities promoting sociability and care for others. In turn, this induced a “chilled and open” atmosphere and a particular sense of community, features that were commended by the Club’s members. An inherent part of the work to attain inclusiveness was the ambition to relinquish
negative expressions of masculinity, or macho men, because these expressions are seen as deterrents, keeping people out. Thus, inclusiveness at the Club was not equivalent to “everyone being welcomed”. However, despite the benevolence of radical inclusiveness, it required arduous emotional labor in terms of emotion management, overt sociability, and taking personal responsibility to ensure the “openness” of the Club. Safeguarding the “radical” nature of this inclusiveness was a balancing act on an emotional tightrope, thus making it vulnerable, rendering radical inclusiveness into vulnerable inclusiveness. As such, while a threshold might have been lowered, thus making the Club an inclusive place, this work does not do away with thresholds; they remain, albeit somewhat displaced.

As stated, the architectural economy of the gym was negotiated differently at different sites. At some gyms, a sort of “inclusion by seclusion” logic was literally built into the walls. These were gyms with a “girls-only” area, in addition to a common area. Although comforting for some women, who were deterred from using the common area, thereby being, in that sense, inclusive, this logic reinforces the gendered spatial orientations and hierarchies. In addition, by using the term “girls only”, instead of “women only”, women are being infantilized. Within the literature, when referring to generic gyms, even in those not having a built-in spatial gendered division, this infantilization of women was still part of the gendered directory of bodies because female bodies are hypothetically incompetent at lifting weights and are, thus, in need of a helping (male) hand, leading female bodies to orient themselves toward other spaces. This demonstrates that both human geographies and spaces are socially produced and are intricately connected with the maintenance of power and the production of various subjectivities (Fusco 2004, p. 160). Even though contemporary Western bodily ideals sanction a more muscular feminine body than in the past (Tolvhed 2016; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Krane 2001; Halberstam 1998: Markula 1995), as well as an increase in the number of women engaging in gym and fitness practices (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Dworkin 2001), socio-spatial thresholds are still being reproduced through an architectural economy of gym and fitness venues. At the core of the architectural economy of the gym and revealing its settings, one can see that, despite their internal differences, therein lies the imperative to move. However, certain gendered power relations condition the movements of our bodies, both spatially and socially. Our range of motion is, thus, not merely conditioned by our biomechanical capabilities. Indeed, we do not really know what they are, while we align ourselves with gendered delineations.

“If bodies are to be reconceived, not only must their matter and form be re-thought, but so too must their environment and spatiotemporal location” (Grosz 1995, p. 84).

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The research design was submitted and reviewed by the Regional Ethical Board in Umeå (Regionala etikprövningsnämnden Umeå 2016/100-31). In accordance with the ethical principles set out by the Swedish Research Council, the interviewees and participants of the memory exercises were given information about my research project, both verbally and in written form (Swedish Research Council 2017). The participants also received a consent form, which stated that participating in the study is voluntary, and, at any point in the research process, they could opt out of the study, rendering the material from the interview inadmissible (ibid.).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical reasons.

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