

Gyms Cause Obesity

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OK - the headline is meant to be sensationalist - the real meat of this entry is about the fact that encouraging people to "get out and move" is not going to achieve the objective of slimming down the population unless we look deeper at the causes for our fatness. I think there is a strong correlation between the per-capita concentration of gyms in a city or region, and that place's prevalence of obesity. I have absolutely no objective statistics to back this up, just my own subjective and anecdotal observations.

I've noticed that gyms exist mostly in places where people choose to drive to their place of exercise. The large population of fairly skinny old Asian ladies in my part-time neighborhood in San Francisco do not go to the gym, and there are few gyms in the neighborhood, considering the density of the population. But the much fatter population in my other home of Winston Salem seem to all have all sorts of local gym options, and the gyms all have sprawling parking lots.

I wonder if gyms are a part of the problem, not a part of the solution. As we sprawl our cities out and make leaving the home wholly dependent upon an automobile, we eliminate the incentive for any sort of sensory stimulation to exist in our cities. Blandification and destruction of variety are less about conscious city policy than the diminished need for such stimuli as we hole up in our private wheeled pods whenever we're moving about. There's a very natural reason that all of Le Corbousier's utopian city designs involved lots of cars and very little visual, spatial, or demographic differentiation. They all go hand-in-hand, and interacting with them daily as we go about the business of life is the only thing that keeps them alive.

We get fat because we don't move about. We don't move about because there is no reason to. Sure, soy- and corn-based modern diets share some blame, but such diets are not a factor that can't be overcome with other inputs (like physical activity) - witness the often trim and athletic builds of many poor urban youths, who - though they munch on McBurgers two or three times daily - spend enough time on the basketball courts or futbol fields to work it off (and then some). Gyms don't help us: driving to a gym and working out there is about as stimulating as walking through a gated retirement community in the Southwest, and explains why so many people can't maintain the discipline to go back regularly over the long haul - who would want to?

My great aunt used to get lost in her retirement complex because of its regimented sameness, even though there were only a few dozen units - I often wonder if her progressive dementia was to blame for her inability to differentiate her surroundings, or if the undifferentiated nature of her surroundings exacerbated the dementia due to its total lack of available interactivity. This blandness pervades most suburban neighborhoods, especially those constructed in the past couple decades, which use HOA rules and development covenants to enforce regimentation and prevent individuation. I shudder at the thought of the oncoming American gerontocracy as it tries to navigate this corn-maze of streets decades from now.

We are no longer motivated by movement (or transit, if you will) because we have delegated that movement wholly to machines. Cars have done the damage that the community of mass transit never did, because of the point-to-point enclosure and individual isolation they provide. In some cases we obtain stimulation from those machines, with satellite radios, GPS navigation, DVD players and loud V8 engines. In other cases, we just go on auto-pilot and assume that movement is not something that should stimulate us at all. Thus the healthiest adults mostly substitute the stimulation of movement for some bizarre masochistic stimuli, such as risking their lives in the wilderness or engaging in Spartan team rituals (sports) as a substitute for the authentic human-scale sensory stimulus once universally derived just from getting around town.

There is the occasional individual who has overcome the need for stimulus entirely, and gladly toils away at the gym (few do this for long enough to actually get healthy, though) or who runs in circles around a faceless suburban block or park. Exceptionally rare is the diminishing portion of adults who live in an urban setting with real diversity of people and purpose. Unfortunately, the city-killing "return to the city" of the past decade has not produced the diverse and stimulating environments that can reverse this trend; primarily this is due to the fact that the new populations of gentrified inner cities do not see the city as a source of visual or interactive stimulation, but rather as just a dense version of the suburban sameness in which they grew up, with perhaps more nearby scripted entertainment or vice-quenching opportunities than their old house on Timid Deer Lane. Meanwhilst, Census figures try to tell us that most fat people live in cities, but these surveys define cities so loosely that any place with municipal sewerage is a city.

Kids are learning from this behavior. Those who fail to find artificial stimulation in video games are going crazy and developing antisocial behaviors that their parents are eagerly medicating. Social scientists are offering many solution proposals, but they all involve complex government programs, ad campaigns and PSAs to "get out" and financial

incentives to individuals and parents which will never be adequate or effective to move the trend, so long as city diversity is neglected (and/or consciously obliterated); so long as new suburbs are built with no sidewalks; so long as development covenants preventing nearby commercial development are commonplace; so long as we would rather subsidize the city-eroding network of highways and sound- and air-polluting air transporters so ghastly much more than a safe, quiet, efficient (and currently rotting) rail transit network; and so long as "urban" development is defined as wiping out city neighborhoods in favor of dense suburbs with ground-level retail and multi-level parking decks. As long as the majority of people think that "exercising" is something that requires a car or a risk-taking wilderness journey or spandex uniform, the elimination of fitness from the sphere of human normality will accelerate.

Are the industrial agriculture of ADM and Monsanto, or the shop-at-home incentives of modern infotech, to blame for our obesity? Sure. But the way we design our built environment is to blame for creating the market that these industries and technologies aim to fill. Chicken and egg are both too fat, and our ideas of city-building must change to slim them both up - let's stop trying to decide which caused the other, and address the real environmental problem instead.