



Historic buildings and structures dating back to the 14th century are a short walk from the exercise area.

Reimagining public space, China style



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GREEN
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Originally built for Chinese emperors during the 14th century as a religious complex used to pray for a good harvest, the Temple of Heaven in Beijing today serves as a major cultural and historic attraction for both residents and visitors.

Not unlike many of Europe's former royal palaces and gardens, the Temple of Heaven offers a compelling combination of architectural masterpieces now open for the public to enjoy... but made all the more appealing by the fact these buildings are surrounded by over 600 acres of parkland.

So, depending on which experiences resonate with you the most, you may be drawn here because you're a history buff, someone who appreciates awe-inspiring architecture, because you want to immerse yourself in nature, or any combination of the above.

However, what sets the Temple of Heaven apart from many other historic and cultural attractions around the world, is the Chinese have helped to reimagine this public space by sSyet another layer of experience tied to exercise and wellbeing.

As I discovered first hand during a recent visit, ensconced within the Temple of Heaven is Tiantan Park, a mecca for fitness enthusiasts.

In a setting defined by nature and

history, when you come in to the park nothing prepares you for the experience of suddenly entering an open area with dozens of pieces of outdoor exercise equipment, sectioned off grounds for group activities and on the day I visited, approximately 200 locals engaged in various states of activity.

Dozens of people simultaneously using the calisthenics equipment, taking part in a dance class, playing badminton, walking along a meditation trail or simply stopping and chatting with friends.

After you begin to adjust to the sensory overload of taking in all in of the things happening at once, what begins to sink in is the fact that local officials have built quite likely one of the largest outdoor exercise facilities you will find anywhere.

Essentially a playground for adults who clearly value keeping fit as well as the added social benefit of connecting with others of like mind, regardless of social or economic background.

Unlike the fancy gyms we have here in North America, there's no costly membership involved and the atmosphere is collegial instead of competitive, all of which helps to explain — as was conveyed to me through an interpreter, why so many of these people are drawn here and keep coming back.

While outdoor gyms aren't unique to the Chinese, what we can learn from this particular example is that wherever you live, there's considerable merit in adding outdoor gyms as an integral part of any public

park, and that we should have playgrounds not just for kids, but for adults as well.

Another takeaway is the notion of creating more hybrid experiences so that for instance, we get past the notion that you can't have this kind of equipment in an historic setting, such as Fort York in Toronto, or adjacent to the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. In doing so, you provide an added incentive to visit these attractions as well as a way to encourage members of the public to not only exercise but interact with one another.

As for communities that currently don't have much in the way of green space, here's another consideration. In areas currently lacking adequate parkland or public space, instead of transforming a former parking lot into a pop-up park until the land is developed, why not create a permanent parkette that includes a scaled down version of an outdoor gym?

All of this aligns with the forward-thinking idea of creating more hybrid experiential places, where people can go to enjoy the setting, exercise and relax. A setting that encourages people to actually talk to one another — providing a mental and social escape while at the same time breaking down social and economic barriers.

— Mark Wessel lives in Collingwood, Ont. and is a passionate advocate for living more sustainably at home and in the greater community. Visit his blog at www.sustainablecommunitybuilder.com.



The high level of fitness is a source of inspiration.



Complementing the exercise equipment is an area set aside for walking and meditation.



You are immediately taken aback by the size of the exercise area and the number of people working out.



Age is clearly NOT a barrier in this setting.