

THE FIX

How to Design a Home Gym That You'll Actually Use

As the pandemic rages on, the safest place to work out is at home. Here's how to create a personal gym you'll want to spend time in.



A well-designed home gym can provide extra motivation to work out, and durable materials like the interlocking rubber-tile flooring and plywood in this gym designed by Heather Hilliard can help make it last. David Duncan Livingston



By Tim McKeough

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A new year often comes with new resolutions, and for many, those resolutions center on physical fitness. Whether you want to work off all those holiday cookies or stretch your way into a healthier year, a home gym can make that more convenient — and safer, as the pandemic rages on.

A dedicated home gym [isn't a necessity](#), of course, but if you're fortunate enough to have the space, it can be a real luxury — especially if it's well designed. To make it a place where you'll enjoy spending time, give it some thought and concentrate on the design, advised [Sara Story](#), a New York-based interior designer and exercise enthusiast. "It should have a good atmosphere and good lighting," she said, much like any other room in your home.

For tips on designing a hard-wearing gym that's a joy to use, we asked designers how they approach workout spaces.

The New York Times



The gym at Sara Story's home in Texas has expansive views, as well as a wall of mirrors and storage for essential gear in cabinetry and racks. Robert Reck

Choose the Room

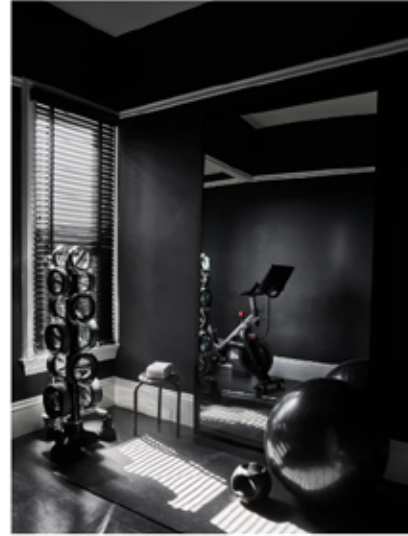
Although it's nice to have an expansive space for your gym, it doesn't need to be a huge room. [Nicole Hollis](#), an interior designer, turned a small, awkward room on the top floor of her San Francisco townhouse — roughly the size of a walk-in closet — into her home gym.

“We have this little room that's too small to be a bedroom, so we set it up as our gym,” Ms. Hollis said. Rather than trying to de-emphasize the tight quarters, she played them up, painting the walls and floor in dark colors to create a sense of drama, a strategy that many designers use for powder rooms.



Nicole Hollis turned a small, awkward space in her San Francisco house into a dramatic gym by painting the walls and floor in dark colors. Douglas Friedman

The New York Times

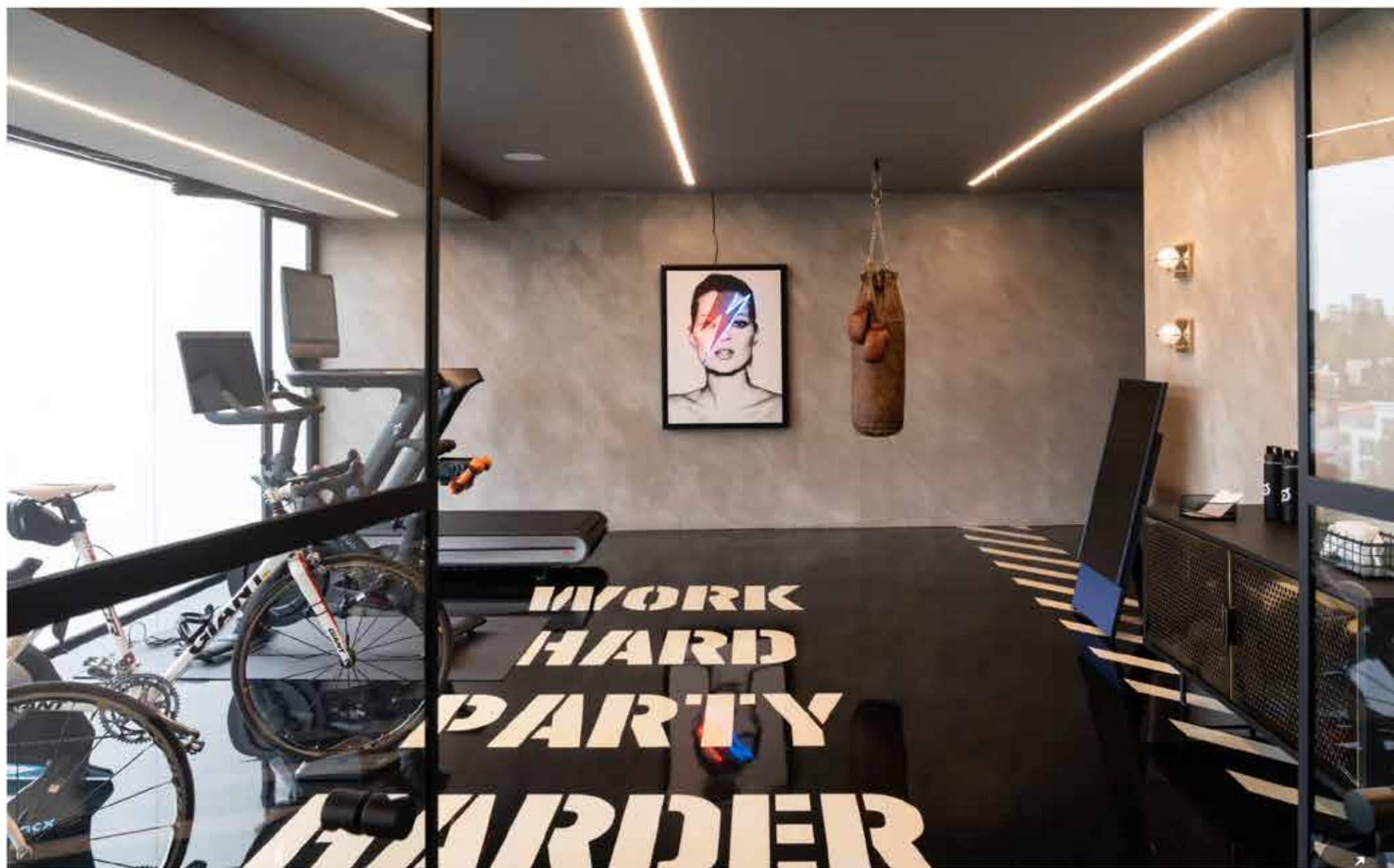


Nicole Hollis turned a small, awkward space in her San Francisco house into a dramatic gym by painting the walls and floor in dark colors.
Douglas Friedman

Basements are a popular place for home gyms because they often have leftover space, but for the fitness-obsessed, it's perfectly acceptable to put a gym in a more prominent spot — like an unused guest room, or a home office.

[Olga Hanono](#), an interior designer, recently completed a four-story home in Mexico City with a gym on the top level, which has glass doors and views over neighboring rooftops. “It’s not the deepest, most obscure corner of the home,” she said. “On the contrary, it’s a space filled with natural light.”

If possible, it’s best to put the gym near a bathroom, said Jimmy Crisp, the principal of [Crisp Architects](#), in Millbrook, N.Y., because “chances are, you’re going to want to shower after you work out.” And if you’re going all out, consider installing spalike features like a steam shower or a sauna.



A home gym in Mexico City designed by Olga Hanono has a custom epoxy floor and concrete-finish walls. Art, decorative sconces and a well-worn punching bag provide additional personality. Jaime Navarro

The New York Times

Take Stock of Your Equipment

There are many ways to work out, from free weights to elliptical machines, so knowing which equipment you'll actually use is important. And if you want a gym that is as attractive as it is functional, you're in luck: Finding good-looking equipment with a compact footprint is easier than it used to be.

"Now there's a blending of luxury and technology in the gym, and that's the best thing that could happen to us," Ms. Hanono said. "It allows us to place not only useful, but also beautiful, objects in these places."

Interactive fitness systems like [Mirror](#), [Tonal](#) and [Forme](#) are as unobtrusive as a wall-mounted mirror or picture frame. [Peloton](#) has streamlined stationary bikes and treadmills. [Wahoo](#) and [Tacx](#) make stationary smart trainers that allow carbon-fiber racing bicycles to be used indoors. [Ergatta](#) and [WaterRower](#) make rowing machines that look almost as handsome as finely crafted rowing shells. And companies like [Bala](#) and [Kenko](#) are rethinking what weights should look like.



Ms. Hollis outfitted a home gym in Thousand Oaks, Calif., with equipment from Technogym. Douglas Friedman

The New York Times

Develop a Plan

There's more to designing a home gym than just piling equipment into an unused room — it requires creating a layout with good spatial flow.

“We really like to consider the program and how the client will use the space, including what types of cardio equipment they'll be using,” said [Heather Hilliard](#), an interior designer in San Francisco. For instance, she said, “if there's a treadmill, you have to have space behind it, in case someone falls off. And you need space for navigating between machines.”

With electronic machines like treadmills and Peloton bikes, she added, it's critical to have electrical outlets nearby, so you don't have extension cords snaking across the room. When possible, Ms. Hilliard likes to add floor outlets directly below the machines.

It's also important to leave space for floor exercises, Ms. Story said. “You don't want to go into a gym where it's just all machines,” she said, because it could feel claustrophobic. Leaving open space at the center of the room will make your gym feel less cramped, while also providing room for yoga, stretching and calisthenics.



A home gym created by Crisp Architects and Valerie Grant Interiors has protective wainscoting and resilient flooring. *Antoine Bootz*

The New York Times

Address the Floor and Walls

The flooring and walls in a gym should be durable and easy to clean.

“Some form of resilient floor is always a good idea,” Mr. Crisp said. That often means interlocking rubber-tile or vinyl flooring, similar to the kind commercial gyms use, installed wall-to-wall or as a large area mat on top of other flooring.

Another option is to use cushioned mats that can be rolled out individually, in discrete workout zones, across a hard floor of wood, laminate or concrete, Ms. Hollis said. (Carpet is not ideal, because it’s difficult to clean.) She suggested “a couple of different types of mats — one for weights and one for yoga.” Individual mats can also be placed under equipment like stationary bikes, to dampen noise and catch drops of sweat.

For the walls, Ms. Hollis recommended paint with an eggshell sheen, as it’s easier to clean than a matte surface.

Or, you could cover the walls with a more durable material. Ms. Hilliard used plywood on the walls of one home gym she designed. Crisp Architects, working with [Valerie Grant](#), an interior designer, created shiplap wainscoting using wood planks for another gym.

All of the designers interviewed for this story also suggested adding mirrors — either mirrored walls or large framed mirrors — to enlarge the sense of space and let you check your form as you work out.



Another home gym designed by Crisp Architects is finished with a decorative chandelier.
Rob Karosis

The New York Times

Pay Attention to Lighting

You don't have to blast your workout space with the kind of overhead light you'd find in a commercial gym. Installing layers of lighting with multiple fixtures — and using dimmers to control those fixtures — can create a more inviting atmosphere and allow light levels to be adjusted for various activities.

“We incorporate a mood light and ambient light for the experience,” Rush Jenkins, the chief executive of [WRJ Design](#), in Jackson, Wyo., wrote in an email.

And because it's a home gym, you can choose fixtures you'd never see in a commercial gym, like chandeliers, pendants and sconces. “Depending on the height of the gym space, the main lighting could be a beautiful chandelier, or it could be a subtle flush mount,” Mr. Jenkins noted.

It's also important to consider where the fixtures are positioned in relation to the workout zones, he added: “You don't want to be down on a mat during exercise and looking up directly into a bright light.”

To bring in relaxing, atmospheric light without installing new wiring, one option is a portable LED lantern, said Ms. Hollis, who uses an [Uma Sound Lantern](#) from Pablo, which doubles as a speaker. “It's like a candle,” she said. “And it moves around with me.”



In this home gym by CLB Architects and WRJ Design, a cabinet conveniently holds small appliances and essentials like water and towels. (There's also a nice view.) Audrey Hall

The New York Times

Finish It Off

Using furniture and accessories that make it easy to keep your gym clean and tidy — and complete your workout without interruptions — will help you stick with an exercise routine.

If you'll have foam rollers, resistance bands or boxing gloves, think about where those items will live when you're not using them, Ms. Hilliard said. Cabinetry and case goods are ideal, but even a group of baskets on the floor can help.

Adding a bench, stool or chair provides a place to catch your breath between exercises, as well as a spot to throw a towel. And if you like watching TV or listening to music while you work out, and you don't plan to use a portable speaker or headphones, add audiovisual equipment to the room.

When space allows, Ms. Hilliard also likes to install a small station similar to a kitchenette. "Sometimes we do custom cabinets, where we have a water cooler or water bottles," she said, as well as an area for clean towels and a hamper for used ones. "As much as we can give it the look and feel of a high-end gym, so people actually want to go and use it, the better."