

Smooth Operations

For all the specialization in the field of aquatics facility design, it's clear the firms that design and build commercial aquatics facilities generally don't use or operate them. Almost all of the facilities I've seen (as a customer, operator and consultant) have a few basic design flaws with significant implications for the patron experience or operating costs.

Such problems arise in the design phase, so once the building is finished, they are virtually as permanent and intractable as the foundation itself. These flaws aren't noticed initially because they seem relatively insignificant, but from a customer or operator perspective, they can have a tremendous effect.

So before you break ground on your new project, see if your

design firm has accounted for these common problems.

1 Not enough temperature zones

Every facility (regardless of configuration) needs several different air temperatures. For starters, the air temperature around each pool must be carefully related to the water temperature. Generally, the air should be about 2 degrees warmer than the water. Otherwise, the pool will have difficulty maintaining its target temperature (and burn through energy trying), and your customers will feel too cold or too hot. You might be selling memberships, but you won't hold onto them.

Even with only one pool, you'll still likely need at least three different air temperatures: one for the

pool area (likely in the 80s); one for the customer service area (around 68 to 70 degrees, so people are comfortable coming off the street); and one for the locker rooms (some- where between the two).

Even a competition pool (at 78- to 80 degrees) needs air in the 80- to 82 degree range, which is too warm for people coming in off the street in business attire. Also, at that temperature, everything is exposed to a humid, corrosive environment, meaning short life spans for electronic equipment and a substandard look to any promotional materials.

The aquatic space also needs sufficient boundaries or careful duct placement to ensure that the various air systems aren't continually fighting each other. And perhaps your customer service area should be in another room completely.

This is unpleasant for customers, and deadly for your pool water.

3 Not enough control over access

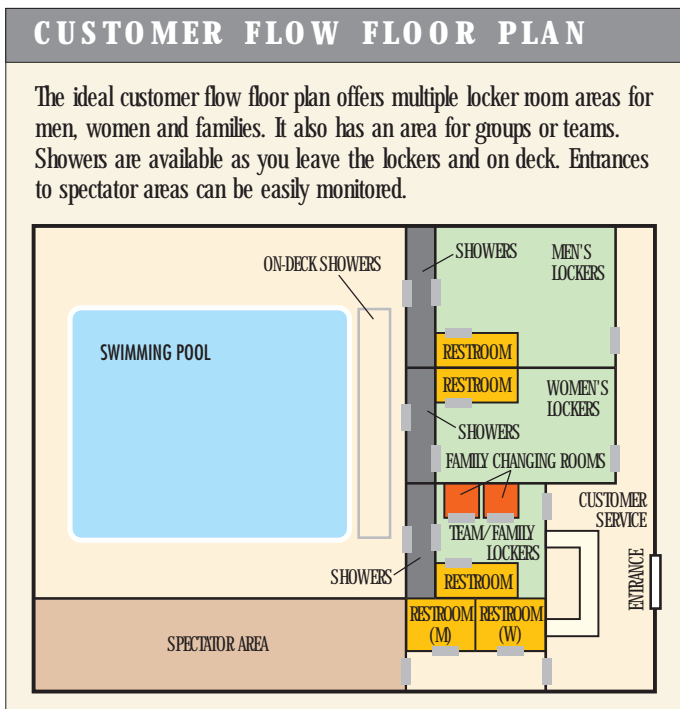
Every operator knows it's vital to make sure the only individuals entering the pool area are those who have satisfied the entrance requirements.

If the only visitors were there to swim, this would be relatively straightforward. There should be a strong chokepoint at the entrance(s), and only individuals who show they're entitled to use the pools may pass. But what about spectators for swim meets? Parents or grandparents watching swim lessons?

Most facilities have good access control to the locker rooms, but there's nothing more than an informal boundary between the spectator areas and the pools. So someone could say they're just watching, then quietly slip from the spectator area to the pool deck (and probably through an unmonitored door to the locker rooms). It's a ploy most likely to be used by those whose unauthorized use is the scariest — unsupervised teens and pre-teens.

Even with a good boundary between spectator and pool areas, what about bathrooms? In many facilities, the only bathrooms are in the locker rooms. If you're allowing spectators to use the locker room bathrooms, then they likely have uncontrolled access to the pool area. It's the kind of thing that makes insurance companies, and conscientious operators, very nervous.

A better way is a good initial chokepoint at the locker room



2 Mixing the clothed and unclothed

Far too many facilities lack direct access from the locker rooms to the pools. The result? People in bathing suits, probably soaking wet, walk through a space also occupied by people in street clothes. There's no air temperature that can keep the unclothed warm enough without making the clothed overheat. It's also distinctly uncomfortable to walk around in swimwear in an area where others are fully clothed.

The other problem with this scenario is if people on their way to the pool are mixing with people off the street. Then wet, bare feet are walking through mud, sand, grass clippings, snow and the like.

Well-designed facilities should be easy to navigate — and operate. Here are five design flaws that get in the way of both | by Dave Rowland



ALL WET Keeping showers clean and easily accessible is key to ensuring patrons soap up before entering the pool. Locker rooms also should be kept neat and tidy.

entrances (and separate access to spectator areas), a strong boundary between spectator areas and the pool deck, and separate bathroom facilities for spectators.

4 Inconvenient showers

Every operator knows that requiring showers before swimming is vital to maintaining proper water quality. Every operator also knows that it's a constant battle to enforce this rule. Unfortunately, most facilities make this battle worse than it has to be.

Having showers in every changing area (including the recent development of family changing areas) is only half the battle. Most family changing areas don't have immediate access to the pool deck — anyone who uses those showers is forced to walk through a nonaquatic, nonlocker area dripping wet on their way to the pool. The more inconvenient showering is, the less chance you have of enforcing this crucial rule.

Even for those using the main locker rooms, once they get onto the deck unshowered, you face a confrontation. Whether they're deliberately evading the rule or simply forgot, you're asking them to retrace their steps. It's really not an enormous thing to ask, but they'll think it is. How much easier would that conversation be if your staff could point to a

pool deck shower located only steps away?

So, consider easy access from family changing areas to the pool deck, and simple showers set at pool's edge.

5 Inability to separate age groups

Imagine this scenario: You're 84, with some health problems such as arthritis, which makes mobility difficult. You're attempting to navigate a locker room, already feeling vulnerable. It's slippery, you aren't wearing shoes and you know one false step could mean a broken hip. How do you feel when a couple of 4-year-olds run past, playing an impromptu game of tag?

Kids tend to be scary for the elderly in this situation. The youngsters move fast, unpredictably and often have less concern or awareness relative to others. Nor is it just older folks who can be inconvenienced. It's not easy for parents trying to police their kids, either.

Or, less extreme, imagine you're a 48-year-old professional relaxing after a tough day. Just as you get to the locker, it's overrun by 50 high school boys on their way to practice. Sound relaxing?

You can't segregate an entire facility based on age. There will be times when a grandfather brings his grandkids to the pool, and you want to encourage family time. Think about providing a "safe zone" for those who want it — and give your facility the ability to separate locker rooms so that one area can be enclosed for swim teams during certain times of day. ■

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