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Not all sweat is created equal and when it comes to luxury fitness centres, the Alice Lane Health Club in Sandton sets a precedent for premium exclusivity and elevates exercise to a futuristic lifestyle.

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THE ALICE LANE HEALTH CLUB COST R150 MILLION TO BUILD; IT'S THE THIRD ONE TO GET "CLASSIC COLLECTION" STATUS.

partly man stands in the Alice Lane Health Club reception area with his membership card held high, announcing: "We are the Melrose Arch refugees, please let us in." A woman who looks like a VH1 *Mob Wives* cast member giggles behind him while her designer bag jiggles on her arm.

This is the 108th club to be opened in South Africa under Sir Richard Branson's chain and only the third, since the original Melrose Arch Club, to be given "Classic Collection" status. No mean feat considering the Alice Lane Health Club cost R150 million to build, drawing on the services of Paragon Architects, Design Line Architecture & Interiors, Tonic Design and Paul Pamboukian Lighting Design.

In terms of equipment, the training floor is populated with cutting-edge gear: a Queenax functional frame, a sort of adult jungle gym; the latest, slickest Artis range of Technogym treadmills; and Wattbikes and Myride technology, offering a virtual experience of some of the world's best routes.

The Aqua Lounge, an impressive Jacuzzi area, is fitted with understated aqua loungers that look "like sculptures you can lie on," says Dawid Rabie of Design Line. Other novelties include an Anti-Gravity Yoga studio and an open-air rooftop training area.

But that's not all... there's a boardroom for exclusive use by members, Kohu restaurant, Brew Bar that serves specialist coffee, a shoeshine bar, concierge service, a nook and poolside lounge. It is the warm flattering lighting – designed by Pamboukian Lighting – throughout that emphasises the double-storey building's spacious linear volume.

"The round fittings on the lights were done locally," explains Paul Pamboukian. "The idea

was to create as much flexibility as possible compared to normal light. In the yoga section, LED lights throughout are programmable to alter the mood. There's also a red LED strip in the handrail that lights up the staircase."

This red Caesarstone staircase, the brainchild of Lizl van Wyk and an all-female team from Design Line, is an iconic piece of the club. It's also a "Virgin moment" – like the ice cream on Virgin Atlantic flights. Another Virgin moment is having "His" and "Hers" emblazoned on the dressing-room doors. "Male" and "Female" are overused terms and it's what everyone else would do," proclaims Richard Lamb-Hughes, brand director of Virgin Active South Africa. "Now, we own 'His' and 'Hers' for our Classic Collection and, in turn, all the Virgin signature spaces that we designed for this Club."

The dressing rooms are decked out with Duravit toilets, Axor Hansgrohe basins, and Wisteria Lane liquid soap and body lotion – all of which ooze subtle sophistication, as well as a steamroom and sauna. The "Hers" section is fitted with mirrors framed by bulbs to give a Hollywood feel. "We had these mirrors specially made, which was hellishly nightmarish because they emit three sources of light!" exclaims Philippe van der Merwe of Tonic Design. "But it feels more glamorous and not at all like you're in a gym bathroom. It was a conscious decision to bring that in."

The shoeshine bar was another deliberate effort, says Philippe: "The Melrose Arch Club has a guy polishing shoes and we were asked to reinvent that image of someone sitting in a throne-like chair, because it felt outdated. So we decided it should be a bar." As well as the custom-made red chairs in the lounge, he continues, "We wanted a signature chair with

red to be in it, because it's Virgin's identity, but we also looked at complementary colouring and it all worked out."

"The club has upped its food game," Philippe adds. "You can have a full dinner here – which is especially good for single people." So it's a good place to get a date? "I'm not saying that," he laughs, "I'm married."

The clientele at the Alice Lane Health Club includes silver-haired men, women who wear Chanel sunglasses to train on the rooftop and young Gail Mabalane clones.

Summer will probably see more of the members gravitating to the rooftop that, like the rest of the building, is in line with green building standards. "The team spent 18 months working on this. It's such a pleasure to watch the sunrise from the treadmill," beams Richard. "You can see Sandton's CBD."

Back inside, a friendly receptionist lets the "refugees" in. She confirms that the Club has around 300 founding members and although it could easily accommodate 9 000 clients, the plan is to keep the membership at 4 000. "Obviously, its major pull is its exclusivity," Richard quips. And even with membership fees of R1 600 per month – with discounts depending on private medical-aid schemes – "sales are going very, very well." ✓

- **Alice Lane Health Club 011 783 8410, virginactive.co.za/alice lane,**
- **Paragon Architects 011 482 3781, paragon.co.za**
- **Design Line Architecture & Interiors 021 447 8367**
- **Tonic Design 011 327 2028, tonicdesign.co.za**
- **Paul Pamboukian Lighting Design 011 880 2831, ppald.com**



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PREVIOUS SPREAD

- 01** The sparkling, red Caesarstone staircase leads members from the lounge to the training floor.
- 02** The Alice Lane development in Sandton was designed by Paragon Architects.

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- 01** Linda Tshazi polishes members' shoes while they work out.
- 02** The poolside lounge, situated in a quiet, tucked-away corner, boasts an HD media wall.



- 01 Walking up the Caesarstone staircase, members get a glimpse of themselves in the suspended mirrors.
- 02 Round light fittings echo the fluid shapes of the Bosu and medicine balls and feature throughout the club.

01 The quietest area in the club, the Aqua Lounge is where clients have water-jet massages in the temperature-controlled Jacuzzi.

02 The Aqua Lounge can be accessed directly from the dressing rooms.

“THE LOUNGERS LOOK LIKE SCULPTURES YOU CAN LIE ON.”



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01 From the rooftop, the Sandton skyline is the perfect backdrop for breaking a sweat on the Queenax frame.

02 Louis du Plessis realigns, stretches and strengthens his body using the Anti-Gravity Yoga equipment.

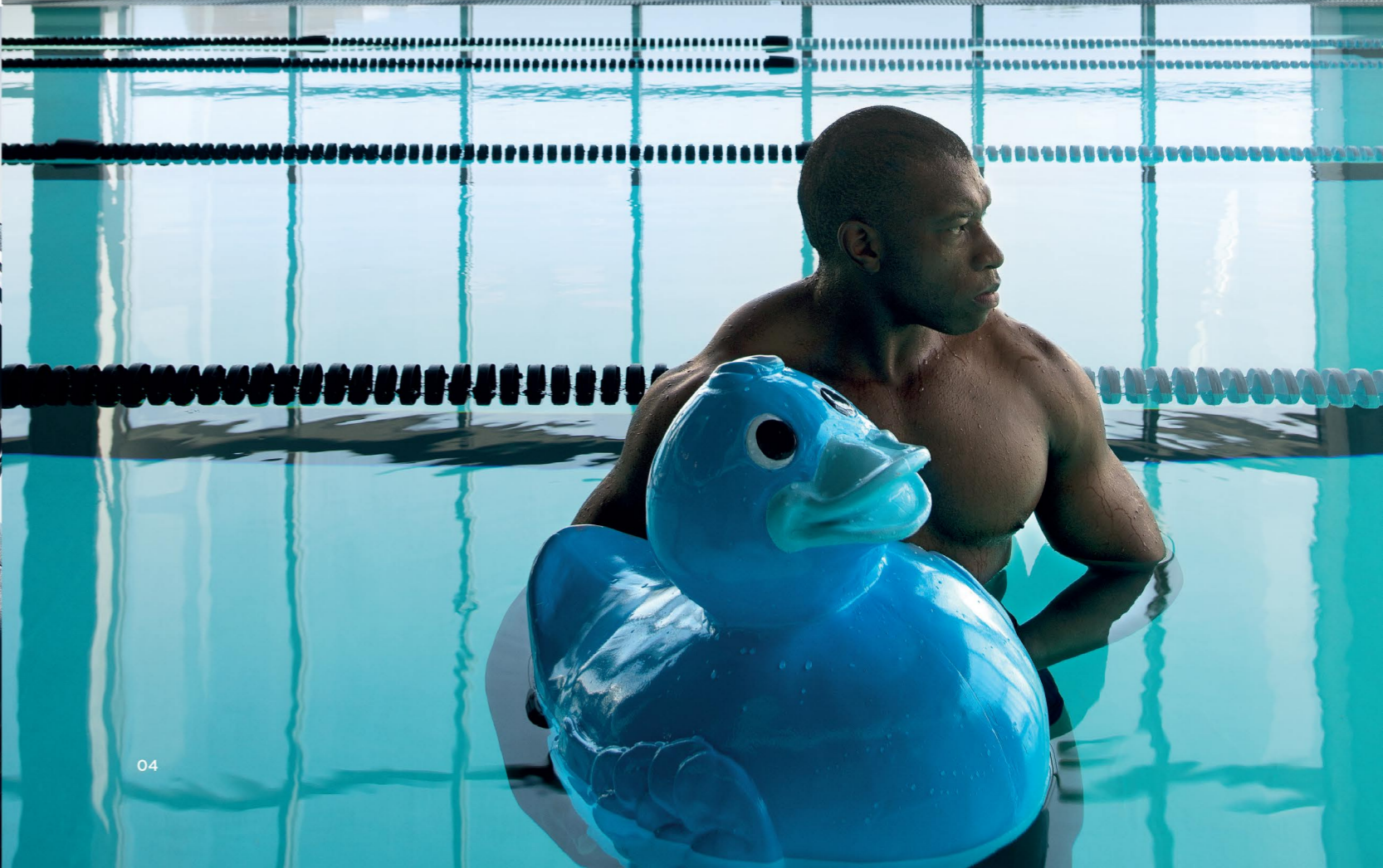
03 Trainer Mapule Ndhlovu puts on her game face to tackle a punching bag.

04 Tshepo Modipane relaxes in the 20m-long swimming pool, which has four lanes and breathtaking views of the city.



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