

I'm sure I can't do Barthes-ian justice to this idea, but I've been thinking about the symbolic function of climbing walls in campus recreation centers. This idea came up in conversation with a friend about the proliferation of amenities on campuses, and it follows from the responses to budget cuts that ask why the university spends money on stuff like rec centers while it talks about cutting academic programs.

A scene you encounter over and over again is the campus that was largely a commuter school with minimal amenities finding that the path to financial health requires increased enrollment, and that increasing enrollment seems to require offering a richer on-campus experience. This means more dorms, food court style dining, and always a big rec center. And a ubiquitous feature of these rec centers are the climbing walls, in a prominent place behind a wall of glass. At the school where I teach as an adjunct, I cut through the new campus center all the time, past their climbing wall. Textured material, a faux rock face, extends for a couple of stories, studded with colored protuberances to grab. Reasonably frequently a couple of students are using it.

I'm not a climber, so for the most don't know what the features are, exercise experience it is--I know play tennis or raquetball, lift have it from a good source that have to take that on faith.

Even so, a climbing wall always Seattle has a huge one that you can ignorance of the activity, it still vigorous lifestyle. I feel good and

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part the wall is a mystery to me. I and I don't understand what kind of what it feels like to run, ride a bike, weights, what muscles you work. I climbing is good exercise, but I

looks cool. The big REI store in see from the road. With all my sends out strong signals of a healthy when I see it.

I'm sure the student rec center people will have statistics to disprove this, but I can't help think that relatively few students use the climbing wall and even fewer use it as a significant source of exercise. But I bet all the students like seeing it.

This is where Roland Barthes would come in handy. It seems to me that the climbing wall in the student rec center is nearly a pure symbol, with just enough functional pretext to justify including it in the building program. So far I'm coming up with pretty mundane interpretations of this symbol and the way it functions in the campus' symbolic order--it indicates that the people here are active and vigorous, not square, rebellious in the socially and commercially acceptable way of Thomas Franks' Culture of Cool. It also involves an inversion of spaces--the interior of the cultivated, civilized world of the college is occupied by a portion of the natural world, not really untamed but offering an escape from the kinds of activities and structures found in classrooms. Or it shows people training for unintellectual activity in an unintellectual realm, just using simple means to get themselves across an expanse of rock somewhere "out there."

Barthes would have done something a lot more interesting with these climbing walls. I don't think I've gotten to the bottom of the symbolic content, but I do know when I am in the presence of something that exists primarily, overtly and unapologetically as symbol. The physical nature of that wall is pure illusion. It exists in the psychological realm, like a dream or a libidinal urge.

-Robert Stickney, Partner | RPM

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