



September 20, 2009

Step It Up

By Alex Pasternack

Reports that new city health commissioner Thomas Farley intends to ban smoking in parks has overshadowed another of his initiatives: getting us to take the stairs. It might seem like a joke to people staggering to their sixth-floor walk-ups, but this is cutting-edge public-health theory. (One of the first things Farley did on the job was unlock the stairs in the building his department occupies.) This fall, the city will issue a set of “active design guidelines” aimed at increasing stair use. “If we engineered physicality out of our lives,” says Farley, “we can engineer it right back in.”



The Benefits

Stair-climbing is a more efficient form of exercise than walking: Two additional minutes of stair-climbing per day (approximately three floors) can burn more than enough calories to eliminate the average adult’s annual weight gain.

33%

Difference, in a Harvard study, in mortality rates between men who climbed more than 55 flights of stairs a week and those who didn’t.

30 Million

Number of elevator trips per day in the city

54,806

Number of elevators in the city

1983: The StairMaster was introduced

The Approach

The new guidelines will just be suggestions for now, while the city will emphasize to builders that quality stairs increase a building’s appeal and can help earn coveted LEED credits.

Former Department of Design and Construction assistant commissioner Rick Bell says that other incentives might include tax credits or expedited approvals for stair-friendly buildings as well as “zoning bonuses” – essentially, looking favorably on requests from stair-friendly applicants.

Our Elevator Dependency

The first elevator shaft was designed in 1853 for the original Cooper Union. At the New York World’s Fair in 1854, Elisha Otis demonstrated his early safety elevator, a steam-

powered version of which was first installed in 1857 at 488 Broadway (a city landmark, it's still there in working condition). By 1968, new buildings five stories and higher were required to have one.

Forcing People to Walk

Cooper Union's new academic building at 41 Cooper Square features luminous, centrally located stairs – and an elevator that stops on only three of the building's nine stories. It's not the first building to feature a “skip-stop” elevator; lifts at Baruch Colleg's Newman Library and Josep Lluís Sert's Riverview housing in Yonkers are similar. The idea was popularized by Le Corbusier in the twenties to save space by eliminating elevator landings.

Making Stair-Slogging Compelling

At the Soho Apple Store, which features a glass stairway, “I've never seen anyone use the elevator,” says Bell. Stairwells at the Eltona, a housing project in the Bronx, feature at the Bronx Library Center have windows and an art installation.

Two Stair Strategies:

Inspiring: 67%

Rise in stair use at a ten-story middle-income housing complex in the Bronx after the city started posting “burn calories, not electricity” signs.

Annoying

Buildings can discourage elevator use just by making elevators smaller and slower, tactics the city recommends “especially in low-rise buildings.” Karen Lee, deputy commissioner for the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, calls these tactics “the naughty strategy.”

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