2024 CWA Summit Session Spotlight: Opening A Climbing Gym

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in **CWA Blog**, **CWA Summit**

Developing a new climbing gym can be incredibly rewarding. But it's not a simple process. Carefully balancing many factors—from the business model to the budget, real estate to construction costs—is needed to build a facility that will provide a good return on investment.

We sat down with architect Chris Ryan to chat about his upcoming educational session on that topic and hear some of his thoughts on today's environment for gym development.

Article At A Glance

- **Session Title:** *Opening a Climbing Gym Is a Different Game Than It Was Before*
- **Speaker:** Chris Ryan, Architect, Chris Ryan Studio
- **What Will You Learn:** What traps people can fall into when opening a facility.
- **Who Should Attend:** Anyone interested in developing a new climbing facility.
- **What You Will Learn:** How to balance the interrelated factors that go into developing a new climbing facility.
- **Where and When:** At the 2024 CWA Summit, May 15-17 in Portland, Oregon.

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Can you tell us a little about your background and why you're speaking on this topic?

Chris Ryan

I've been a climber for almost 30 years, and it has genuinely changed my whole life. I'm also an architect and a contractor. I led climbing gym development projects for almost a decade, and now I do that work independently. I work all around the country and the world, with a variety of different owners.

So, I have a lot of exposure to what's going on, what people are doing, what they're trying to do. For a while now, I've been trying to create the best facilities possible—world-class facilities that also are good businesses.

Chris Ryan

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After all these years being a climber and developing gyms, what do you feel has fundamentally changed in the industry today compared to years ago? And do you see new trends coming?

Chris Ryan

First, the cost of everything is dramatically higher. And when I say that, I don't mean it's just expensive. I mean, it's historically at a unique point of being expensive.

When we look back on a timescale of 100 years or more, the cost of materials relative to inflation has exploded at a rate that's far higher than normal, as has the price of labor. But we also aren't at a place where memberships or the amount of money that we're bringing into the business has followed that trajectory. So, we're at a unique point right now where the cost of everything—labor, materials, the cost of money itself—is really high.

> We're also seeing a lot of money coming into the climbing industry. The people I work with are building businesses—whether it's their first one or they're growing—and they may be working with their own funds, a smaller group of investors, or even a private-equity-backed group. **Private equity is part of what we're seeing right now, but it isn't the only way to go.**

Within the context of everything being more expensive and more money flowing into our sport, what are the opportunities right now? A lot of it, from my point of view, has to do with identity. What is the identity of your facility, of your brand, of your gym? Is it climbing, fitness, yoga, or is it something else? How else can your facility be used? Whether or not we're imagining it beforehand, or leaving room for people to contribute their own ideas to the spaces being created, can we bake the potential into the actual buildings themselves? We're in a unique position because climbing facilities are amazing. And still, they can be and can do a lot more than I think they're doing right now. How else can we do really fun, interesting stuff and play bigger? How can the facility itself just do more and do better? That question of what else these things are or can be is really relevant right now.

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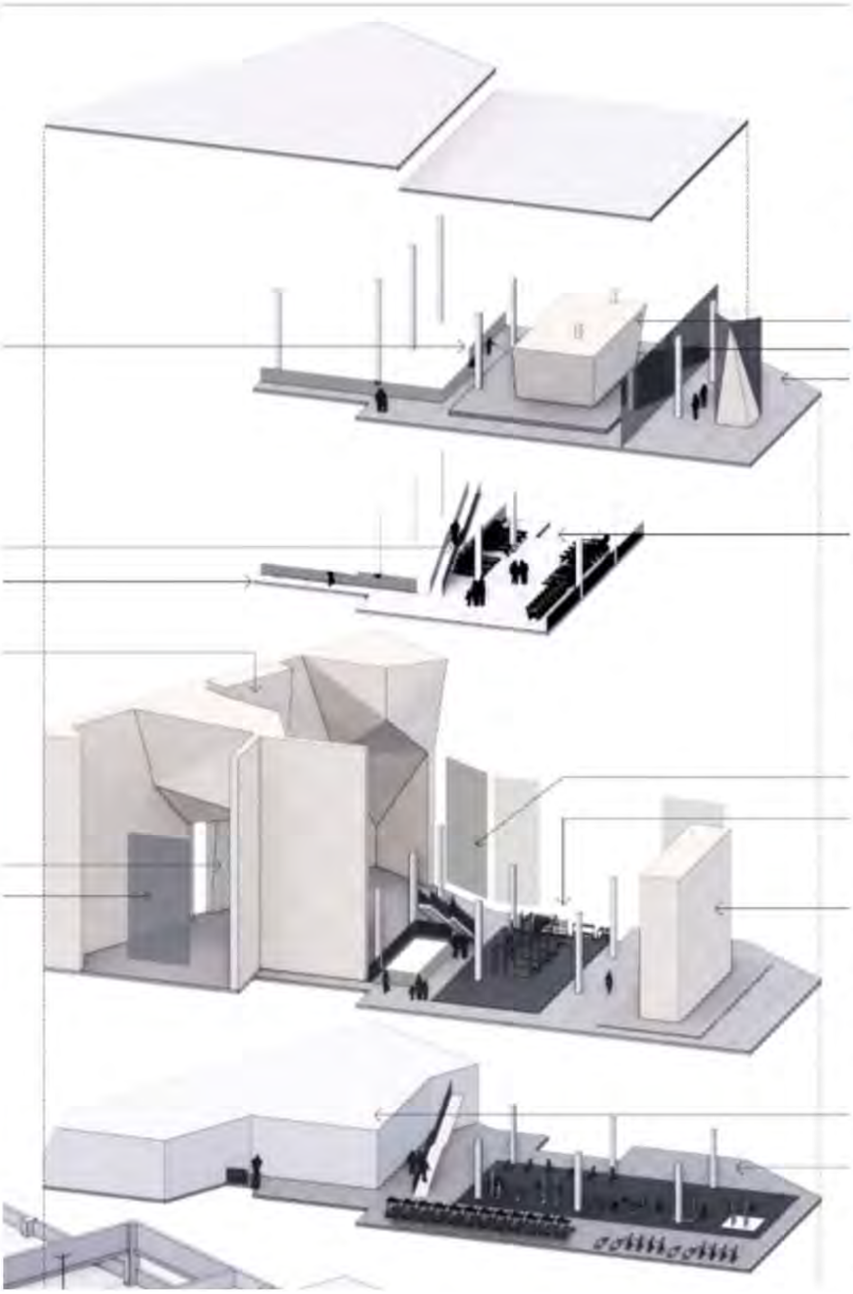
That's an interesting insight, that vision of a gym business and building doing more and improving.

Chris Ryan

Developing identity is a back and forth, where your vision—even if it's something small—brings a unique way of looking at the world. Then we look at tactics, like the nuts and bolts of it: How do we do this?



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So how does an aspiring gym owner balance all these factors?

Chris Ryan

People might have very big dreams, and that's great. But part of the reason we very quickly throw numbers at it and put together high-level budgets is to quickly realize that, often—unless they're willing to raise 6, 8, 10 million dollars—it's just not really in the cards right away. And so, then the question becomes: Is your dream, your vision, about a facility that is a certain size, or is it about what is happening within the facility? Because that's not based on size. You're creating this environment and this space for people, and for you to change your own life by running this business. That doesn't necessarily require 30,000 square feet; it could be 15,000 square feet. By using the

A sketch of a new climbing gym

gravity of numbers right away, we can usually reset or align the reality of what we think we can do, how much that would cost, and the financial performance or output. It's all about boiling down the true intent and arriving at numbers that you can actually stomach.

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What do you hope attendees of your session at the CWA Summit will walk away with?

Chris Ryan

The intent of the session is really to talk through the situation we're in currently. The context of making a building or building out a space, right now. How the money side of it and business structure aspects are changing, what the opportunities could be in relation to that, and what sort of tactics we can actually deploy very practically to make it happen, not just dream about it. How can we use identity in a strategic way to figure out what's incorporated into the gym itself? How do we go about looking at real estate or building layout to support your unique vision?

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This is not your first time presenting at the Summit. What keeps you coming back?

Chris Ryan

> I keep coming back because I think our industry has a long way to go, and I think we can do better in a lot of ways—in almost every way. I am one of those people who's really in love with climbing. I'm passionate about turning it into something that is a good business and impacts a whole bunch of people.

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