

Architects' reverse roles



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Look anywhere in the free world, and you'll find within a client-service provider relationship that the party that pays fees and costs generally controls the agenda and makes final planning decisions.

Interestingly, this scenario often doesn't exist within the golf course architect-golf course developer relationship – where the golf course developer pays the standard design fee and construction costs but frequently surrenders control of planning decisions to the architect. Because this scenario tends to compromise one of the developer's key objectives – a comfortable playability factor – developers often are left with courses that are difficult to play and attract too few golfers.

The core problem is that many golf course architects tend to overreach and are somewhat blind to the degree of difficulty they design into their golf courses. Generally, architects believe they're complying with developers' wishes about comfortable playability when they provide five to six sets of tees for each hole. The assumption here is that because distance is presumed to be the primary culprit that increases most golfers' scores – the multiple tee sets on each hole mean everyone can play these courses comfortably.

This is a false premise. While multiple tee sets enhance playability, they aren't the primary determining factor of a player's score, which unquestionably is the scope and intensity of green defenses throughout the course.

Too many architects defend their greens as if each was Fort Knox with conditions that require high, soft-landing shots to hold the greens: overbunkering, deep bunkering, narrow green depths, tight water hazards and overcontouring of fast green surfaces. Because the vast majority of players can approach greens with only low trajectory shots, they're consistently being faced with having to get "up and down" at almost every green. While scores and handicaps increase accordingly, the enjoyment factor quickly dissipates with all the scrambling to hole out.

Inexperienced developers (about 70 percent of the golf course developer pool) generally are defenseless when it comes to protecting their courses against a high degree of design difficulty primarily be-

cause they can't read the architect's highly technical topographical construction plans before committing to final course development. Consequently, developers aren't able to prejudge the playability level of their golf courses before construction, and therefore, must trust the architect to deliver a fair golf course. Unfortunately, this trust is often misplaced because many architects believe they know what's best for their client developers and also what's necessary designwise to be top 25/100 course ranking eligible, i.e., increase course challenge, which translates into greater playing difficulty.

At first look, it would be easy to blame the golf course architect for this scenario. However, this wouldn't be an accurate assessment of the situation because (1) the architect community shouldn't be held accountable for inexperienced developers who can't understand/interpret golf course design planning, and (2) once developers default in this regard, the architects are left with no other choice but to fill the void and assume duties at both ends of the architect-developer spectrum. Thus, we see a role reversal with architects assuming the client role of calling the shots.

Some might argue that because the architect and developer are on the same team with a common agenda, it shouldn't matter when developers lack experience because the architect will cover for the developer. This is a problem because it's a myth that architects and developers always share a common agenda. The critical difference is that architects generally design their golf courses with course ranking potential and the additional business this brings forefront in their minds; while developers have balanced challenge and the playing enjoyment of their clientele forefront in their minds. While both parties are well intentioned, there couldn't be a greater strategic planning dichotomy – one where the golf course architect will consistently prevail.

Another part of the problem is that it isn't easy for an architect to design a golf course that offers both a fair challenge to the better players and everyone else. While it's relatively easy to design an overtly easy or difficult course, finding the delicate balance point between these two extremes within one course

design is one of the more difficult challenges in golf. The architect community will tell you itself that an architect only begins to achieve this level of expertise after completing about a dozen or so golf course designs. This clearly suggests developers curtail the often-used practice of selecting less experienced architects to save modest sums of design fees. This is a counterproductive measure that lends credence to the penny-wise pound-foolish cliché because this approach consistently will yield high-economic-risk golf courses that minimize enjoying this earth's most enjoyable game.

Corrective measures

1. The initial remedial thought that comes to mind is to suggest developers hire golf consultants to help address the problems they have interpreting construction plans. The concern, however, is there are too few experienced consultants available to get the job done and too many inexperienced consultants willing to take the money to try.

An innovative counterapproach would be to have developers hire a second golf course architect/draftsman to counsel them through the design planning of the primary architect – among other things.

2. Thankfully, today's software programs allow architects to prepare exact, 3-D, computer-generated hole-by-hole animations from construction plans *before* committing to developing the golf course. This is similar to hole animations network telecasts produce from video tapes *after* course construction is complete.

Each of these two corrective approaches will afford golf course development teams the guaranteed opportunity to judge the playability levels of their golf courses *before* committing to construction. Furthermore, implementation of these two measures will allow developers to reacquire quality control of their golf course development projects, and because of this, to generate unprecedented constructive dialogue with the architects that will lead to better golf course design.

No investor should allow a developer to commit to golf course construction without implementing these two quality assuring initiatives first. Money talks, or money walks. GCN

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