Famous architect syndrome

Golf course renovations always have been a substantial part of most golf course architects' businesses and have become a larger part since 9/11 and the new-construction recession. While the renovation trend is accelerating, a related trend of restoring old courses rather than redesigning them is gaining momentum as well.

This trend dates to the 1979 U.S. Open at the Inverness Club in Toledo, Ohio, when three new holes didn't match the original look of the Donald Ross design. The trend gained momentum with the sensitive restoration of The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., for the 1988 U.S. Open.

On the other hand, poor renovation jobs led to the creation of associations, like the Donald Ross Society, devoted to preserving the work of many Golden Age golf course architects and the emergence of independent, golf-design historians and golf course architects specializing in restorations.

While most courses are renovated for "here and now" reasons, many are considering restoring their courses to their original look as closely as possible or to their high point (i.e., the year they hosted a major tournament). Most golf course architects start the master planning process by asking whether members want to restore, rejuvenate, renovate or remodel their course. The definitions vary from architect to architect, but we all seem to provide the same alliterative choices as a starting point.

So which one is in the best interests of your club? There are pro's and con's to each approach.

Change is good

The case for restoration builds if a course was designed by a famous deceased architect (Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, Seth Raynor, Perry Maxwell and Alister MacKenzie). However, these architects are responsible for less than 5 percent of the 16,000-plus courses that exist today. Several no longer exist, others have been dramatically altered, and frankly, not all their courses were the masterpieces their supporters claim them to be. Assuming that only the top 50 percent of their courses might be worth restoring for historical value, that would amount to 300 courses.

The difficulties of a restoration start with the realization that most courses have evolved from their original designs by nature or necessity. A philosophical question: Has golf changed so much since the original design that we should consider a redesign as an adaptive reuse of a facility?

On golf courses, irrigation ponds were added, and drainage ponds and channels were expanded. These need to stay. But because of modern equipment, some features are no longer in play. Changes in maintenance demands and practices might make greens too steep, tees too small and bunkers impractical; and more lush fairways reduce the ground game.

Many famous deceased architects wrote about the need to allow for future length, so most people accept the idea of new back tees. But what about greens? Should their original size and contour be restored, knowing they're too steep for modern green speeds? Should bunkers that are 150 yards off the tee be replaced or moved further out to replicate the intended strategy? That depends on whether the bunker would fit the land similarly as the original, but it illustrates the value judgments needed.

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So, the question arises: What constitutes a restoration? Whatever it is, it's an approximation at best.

Rejuvenate it

A key part of restoration is the historian or golf course architect trying to determine what the original architect's intent was. If we could reincarnate Ross to consult on a particular green, he might say it wasn't one of his best projects. It's difficult enough for green committees to arrive at a consensus without adding a historian or someone from a protectionist society who considers himself stakeholder in your affairs to help make the decision.

If your course is truly a classic, there are marketing benefits of restoration. However, with the oversupply of facilities creating pressure to update courses, renovation might not be your best option. With so few golfers interested in architecture and the lure of catchy marketing campaigns that sell memberships or home lots, many owners need a completely new look for their courses to remain competitive. As someone said, "Since I'm paying dues in 2006, I prefer a 2006 golf course."

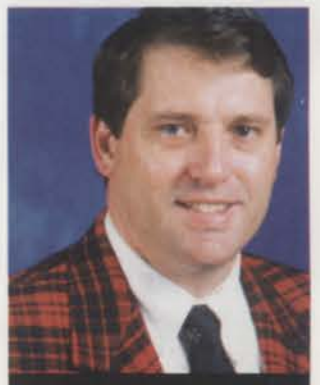
So, I often propose rejuvenation as a better solution, improving maintenance conditions and allowing some updates for the modern game while being sympathetic to the original style. Being sensitive to a good original design usually makes sense, and building over a good course from scratch usually is more expensive and doesn't provide much additional benefit. Generally, my guideline is to follow the existing routing to reduce infrastructure costs and propose feature designs I can justify that increase safety or improve maintenance.

After I'm gone

People ask how I would feel if someone remodeled my work after I'm dead. I don't know what happens in the afterlife, but I have a feeling I won't give a damn. I don't want to saddle the next generation with my wishes from the grave. I hope my course designs are well documented in photos, plans and in my own writing and will be placed in the care of thoughtful and reasonable people. But if my courses survive in any semblance of their original design, that'll be a good enough tribute to my designs.

Some of my courses have been altered already. Bunkers were removed to reduce maintenance costs, and while I might not like it, I understand it – conditions change, and courses must change with them.

I build playing fields for human enjoyment, and if that enjoyment wanes for reasons beyond my control, the important thing is to make sure golfers enjoy the game and the course. GCN



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