

Golf Course Architecture, Some Perspective

Golf is evolving. Right now, there are dozens of different issues facing this game. From play and income concerns to water conservation and maintenance practices to difficulty/playability, sustainability, and feasibility. Certainly, there is no shortage of concerns for the continued viability of golf.

To gain some perspective, I have asked golf course architects and American Society of Golf Course Architects members [ASGCA] from around the country to answer two questions:

- Where is golf going?
- What is the role of the golf course architect in that trend?

The following are a variety of responses.

Garrett Gil, Wisconsin

“At least in the United States, we see the golf course trends, particularly among the daily fee and municipal courses, going towards reducing maintenance and operations costs. As greens fees are reduced to entice and compete for play, expenses must be reduced as well. In this regard, as architects, we are involved in a number of bunker remodeling projects to reduce not only the square footage of bunkers, but also the extent of perimeter to be edged. We also see trends and have assisted clients in conversions to lower-input turfs, overall reductions in maintained turf, and irrigation system and pump system alterations that reduce energy demand and water usage. Surprisingly in our area, as golf courses close, the remaining courses are making improvements to better themselves for the golfers they currently have and those they hope to have. All of these trends are targeted at providing quality of play at less cost and in a more efficient and effective manner.”

Andy Staples, Arizona

“Due to a global economic recession coupled with evolving environmental politics, golf will be asked to reassess how it is designed, built, and managed in order to stay relevant in the future. The golf course architect is the most visible, influential spokesman for golf’s drive toward sustainability. We have the tools to determine the appropriate number of costly features such as feature shaping, green sizes, numbers

and styles of bunkers, and turfgrass choices. We are in the driver’s seat when it comes to promoting sustainable philosophies such as energy efficiency, water conservation, and natural maintenance. This is the future of the golf course architect.”

Bill Amick, Maryland

“For a long time I’ve believed that many golfers, potential golfers, and we in golf could all benefit from having more well-designed, smaller golf courses. Courses that would be easier to play, less expensive, require less land, and take less time for a round. These could be both stand-alone and companion courses. Golf course architects should promote these where they are feasible and design them.”

Art Schaupeter, Missouri

“Golf is at a crossroads. The boom in development over the past twenty years was too focused on a narrow scope of golf course type, namely the “championship” caliber golf course. Less than 1% of golfers are able to play a golf course of this caliber. Moving forward, the golf industry must broaden its appeal if it expects to attract more players. Golf course architects need to be at the forefront of this broadening of golf’s choices. We can encourage the redevelopment of underperforming facilities to make them more inviting to a wider range of golfers and to non-golfers who might be encouraged to give golf a try. They should encourage the creation of alternative facilities (non-18 hole “championship” courses) so that players have a choice of how much time and money they spend on a given round of golf. The architects should focus their design efforts on maximizing a fun playing experience, which should include larger greens, fewer hazards, minimal or no lost ball opportunities, wider playable areas, and shorter courses. This is how golf course architects can do their part to encourage new players

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to give golf a try, while retaining the vast majority of players who are still trying to improve their skills and enjoy the sport at the same time."

J. Drew Rogers, Ohio

Where is golf going?

"I think we are somewhat dependent on what owner/operators do – how they choose to address our current climate, consumer desires, and the stagnant growth of the game. We all talk about ways to make golf more fun again and how facilities can be designed and operated in less traditional ways. Until we can make the game less expensive, more accessible, and more fun, we will continue to see the flat line. Improved stewardship is a contributing factor – the amount of turf we care for and the amount of water and chemicals we apply. There are direct correlations for all of these factors...all lead toward a more affordable game, a more accessible game, a game that is more enjoyable to play, and less time consuming – even a family activity."

The role of the golf course architect?

"We must advise and educate our clients, and promote the options every day to prospective developers. We have a responsibility as architects to promote the movement through our media outlets, through our industry contacts, and through our network of superintendents, management groups, and general managers. We also have a voice to promote solutions through the USGA and PGA. We possess the expertise to design or to modify a facility to address many if not all of today's operational concerns."

Greg Martin, Illinois

Where is golf going? - Global

Certainly, the international markets are expanding. These markets expand and contract quickly, based upon many factors. One thing for sure...golf is a global game. Just look at the PGA Tour winners from this past year.

As we expand our design talents overseas, we must be careful to make adjustments to our philosophies in these sensitive markets. Better land use; better resource allocation; more sensitivity to diverse landscapes; and more playable designs will be vital for allowing the game to grow.

Where is golf going? - Local

Golf course renovation will be more necessary than ever as the facilities built in the previous 20 years become dated. In the coming years, infrastructure, aesthetics, and playability will be addressed in a different way to widen golfer appeal.

Where is golf going? – Brown

This industry is slow to react...but when it does it is quick to change. That change is underway. The playing conditions at the U.S. Open, Whistling Straits, and the U.S. Amateur at Chambers Bay are just a sampling of what is now acceptable. Brown is ok, at least for industry insiders. That message must be broadcast to our customers. Golfers want green...but brown will be better for everyone, keeping costs low and designs interesting.

The role of the Golf Course Architect?

We have been complacent and allowed the industry to dictate our philosophies and design. That is changing also. It must change. We are now at the forefront of addressing those concerns including environmental sensitivity, economic sustainability, playability, and market appropriateness. We are leading and talking about it. Is anyone listening?

There is talent and vision in this industry. The architects I talk to on a regular basis are keenly interested in making golf more sustainable, available, and better. This talent is represented in many ways: from high-end resorts, to private clubs, to regional masterpieces, to creating wider access for golfers at local municipal facilities.

Most Architects are not looking for the MOST or the BEST...but better. Better is not longer, tougher, more challenging or more costly. Better is more engaging, more interesting, more sustainable, and more fun for more golfers. **-OC**



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