

Architects address 'Getting the most from a course designer'

By Peter Blais

How a developer can get the best out of a golf course architect was discussed by four of the world's top designers speaking at November's Urban Land Institute fall meeting in Washington, D.C.

Rees Jones, Ed Seay, P.B. Dye and Tom Fazio explained what developers and architects can do to help each other with the ultimate goal of improving the final product.

Developers have entered a new era, far different from the go-go days of the late 1980s, Jones said. Money is less readily available, requiring investors to move more cautiously. Potential buyers need to be certain what they are going to get before they get it.

"You can't build a character-less golf course and be successful. They aren't visual amenities for real-estate developments anymore," he said.

To make sure developers get what they want, they should hire the architect at the outset, Jones said. Too often, architects are brought on after the master plan is established, numbers developed, and told "here is the plan," even though the topography may not be right for a golf course, he said.

"There's a lot an architect can do at the outset to site the course for better golf, the real estate for better homes and have a major attraction that will draw people," Jones said.

At Woodside Plantation Club in Aiken, S.C., the developer brought Jones aboard after the master plan was done. Many hillside holes were simply unworkable, Jones said.

Jones flipped the design, putting golf holes in the valleys and creating value for real estate on hillsides. The result, Jones said, was a great golf course that contains errant shots and funnels them back into the valleys. The hillside homes sold out so quickly that developers had to build another golf course, he added.

"People were sleeping outside the sales office for 48 hours making sure they got the best golf course lots," Jones remembered.

If a course is sited correctly, home buyers can tell before their residence is built what they are going to have for value. Homes on hillsides, with the course in the valleys, is an ideal situation. Home sites located below the course rarely attract premium prices.

Such ideal sitings have been complicated by recent government regulations characterizing many lowland areas as protected wetlands, Jones conceded.

"If you have a choice, find a gently rolling site with a lot of folds," Jones told developers. "Don't get one that is too steep or rugged. And definitely don't find one that is too wet."

The Peninsula Club in Charlotte, N.C., epitomized how owners should work with consultants, Jones said. The developers hired Jones early and had him help select the planner, membership marketing director and management firm.

Each new consultant was included in hiring the next person.

"It caused us all to work harder because we all became part of the selection as well as implementation process," Jones said. "Even through the (Persian Gulf) War and this recession, they've sold over \$10 million worth of property. And they already have 300 members."

Selecting an architect is not easy. It requires considerable research and a decision on the designer's main function — a marketing tool, creator of a quality design, "or hope-



fully both," Jones said.

The first step in selecting an architect is looking at his past work, Jones said. Talk to former clients.

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— Rees Jones

Meet the designer's staff and discover who will be involved with the project. And ask as many questions as possible about the

design process.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation did an excellent job of researching potential architects when it came time to add another course, Jones said. After narrowing the field to five candidates, the Foundation put together a selection committee consisting of the head pro, superintendent and three vice presidents.

Committee members visited each of the architects' offices. They met the entire staff and invited each

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1890

1897

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1920

1927

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1966

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1980

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of the game.

Ed Seay, Rees Jones, Tom Fazio, P.B. Dye share

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architect, or one of his representatives, to play at one of the architect's courses with them. The committee completed the process with each of the five candidates before making a decision.

"After we completed the course, we got a letter from the developers saying we'd given them everything they wanted," Jones said. "That was the ultimate compliment. But they have to credit themselves to some degree because they did the

research."

Before hiring an architect, a developer should know what additional things the architect will do, such as preparing videos, being present on key occasions, meeting the press, doing television appearances.

"In many communities, the biggest event is the building of the golf course," Jones said. "It becomes a newsworthy event. In Augusta, Ga., they had a half-hour television program on the development of Jones

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— Ed Seay



Creek Golf Club because golf is so important in that area."

Once the architect is chosen, listen to him regarding approvals, zoning requirements, planning,

marketing, and perhaps most importantly, the selection of a contractor, Jones advised.

RIGHT CONTRACTOR CRUCIAL

Hiring a competent contractor

may be harder than hiring the right architect, he said. Golf course construction is very specialized. Unqualified contractors can leave a developer with problems for years to come.

In addition to the architect's input, developers should also check a contractor's past sites, talk to clients, and make certain the contractor can complete the job in a reasonable schedule.

Regardless of course type — resort, daily-fee, private, real-estate development — developers should know what they want and then communicate it to their consultants.

"Too often we're not told who developers want to market the course to. Sometimes they just keep their fingers crossed and hope people will like it," Jones said.

Many older courses are being rebuilt because builders moved little earth when they were originally constructed. Many members scream and yell at the changes. At Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., Jones presented his renovation ideas at a meeting of 400 members. The subsequent membership vote was 650-490 in favor of his proposed changes.

"Now that it's re-opened, it will host the U.S. Senior Open in 1995 and you can't find any of the dissenters," Jones said.

One developer asked why golf course development costs have risen 250 percent over the past six years while the general inflation rate climbed just 50 percent.

Courses cost different amounts in different parts of the country, said Jones, who told about a lakefront golf course he designed near Greensboro, N.C., that cost just \$2.5 million.

"But we got dirt moved for 85 cents a yard. In Williamsburg, the first price we got was \$5 per yard. When you go to California you have more irrigation costs. In the Northeast you have wooded sites, and you can't get rid of the timber by burning it. You have to carry it off. On islands, you have to import equipment. But in the Southeast and Southwest, you can still build pretty reasonably priced golf courses."

Jones concluded: "There are great golf courses, well-conceived courses and ill-conceived courses. Regrettably, there are too many ill-conceived courses that could have been avoided if the owners had done the proper research before they got on the roller-coaster and couldn't get off."

COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT

Communication is the key once all the consultants, including the architect, are in place, according to Seay. Only by asking questions can a developer understand how much a job will cost and when it will be completed.

To improve communication and reduce surprises, Seay has started having the owner's representative and the contractor complete a daily



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report. The report asks three things:

- What did you do today? For example, how many yards of earth were moved or feet of pipe installed?

- What are you going to do tomorrow? Tell everyone, so no one is surprised.

- Are you on schedule and within budget?

"There is nothing more important than that daily communication," Seay said.

While communication is to be sought, comparisons are to be avoided, Seay said. Telling the architect, 'Here's \$3.5 million, now build me another Pebble Beach or Augusta National,' is simply unrealistic.

"That wouldn't even buy the irrigation system for nine holes at Augusta," he said. "Yes, you can build a nice course for \$2.5 million. But don't be unrealistic."

Careful, sophisticated and flexible funding is the most important thing of all, Seay said.

Dye said selecting a top-notch superintendent, and bringing him aboard early in the development process, is as important as selecting a good architect.

"If you don't end up having a good golf course superintendent, you're looking at a \$3-million to \$4-million project, or even upwards of a \$30-million project, that won't look very good," Dye said.

"No matter who you choose for a designer, make sure that your designer and someone who understands golf help you select your golf course superintendent."

The architect can use some of the bad material unearthed in the residential development within the golf course, Dye said.

"The golf course has the most flexibility," Dye said. "If you say you've got to find someplace to put 30,000 yards of fill, we'll find someplace to put it. On-site decisions can be made like that when the architect is there. Whether a tee box is elevated two feet or 15 feet is just a matter of a set of steps."

"If you're an owner with 100,000 yards of muck you have to get rid of, I'd rather lose it on the golf course than truck it out at \$4 a yard. I'll put it in the golf course somewhere. But you have to compensate me with my budget so that I don't spend all my money losing your real estate's bad material. There has to be a little give-and-take."

ECONOMICS ARE CHANGING

The five-fold increase to build a basic course in the past dozen years has shocked Fazio. Competition between developers and designers trying to outdo one another have pushed prices upward.

Also, developers can no longer wait for trees to grow or grass to take hold. To meet the competition of nearby developments, a new course has to be perfect from day one. Anything less and the course is a failure, Fazio said.

"We've gone from not using very little sod in the late 1970s to sod-

ding every square inch of a golf course, so that when it opens the conditioning is on a caliber with that Augusta National quality," he said.

Those days are changing, however. Economics will be much more important in the 1990s, Fazio predicted. Designers and developers will have to be innovative in the coming decade to build courses that are perfect from Day One at a lower cost.

New, low-maintenance grasses



'No matter who you choose for a designer, make sure that ... someone who understands golf helps you select your golf course superintendent.'

— P.B. Dye

could bring prices down by reducing chemical and water use and requiring less labor, he added.

Existing courses will increase in value because of the difficulty of

obtaining permits for new courses, Fazio predicted. Consequently, architects should find significant renovation work available.

The need for public courses and

a tight economy should result in more reasonably priced public courses on non-difficult sites, Fazio said. Most hard sites will be passed over until environmental and economic climates improve.

More golf courses will be financially split apart from the master residential plan, Fazio said. Someone other than the real-estate developer finances the golf course and operates it on a daily-fee basis until the economy improves and it can be converted to an equity club.

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