

Vegas Ain't Got Nothin' on Golf

Themed courses have made their mark — for better or worse

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

In a somewhat liberal interpretation, C.B. Macdonald's storied 1911 design of The National Golf Links of America could be labeled a themed course. Macdonald would probably shudder at the description, particularly now that "theme" is so closely associated with Las Vegas and Disney amusement parks.

However, Macdonald sold the idea of his "ideal" layout by finding green sites that embraced the principles of great holes in Europe and then built his interpretations in Southampton, N.Y. His non-golfing design associate, Seth Raynor, went on to create numerous courses using several of the same de-

sign themes. But Raynor also varied the replicas by putting different twists on famous holes like the Redan par-3 from North Berwick in Scotland.

Themed courses have taken on multiple personalities and twists since the days when Macdonald tried to sell interesting design in America. Like the recent blitz of Las Vegas themed hotels, the process of building and marketing new golf courses is finding an easier and more successful route with themed golf. Will it continue and could themed golf give new life to the faltering new course market?

What's a themed course?

Every club and upscale daily-fee course claims to present a certain "experience." Some are ultra-private, others are family-oriented facilities, while plenty more are "true links-style" layouts. We even see the delineation made of "corporate daily fee" as opposed to just "daily fee." Most labels are marketing based, but most golfers find the courses aren't too different from the ones down the street after the promotional layers are peeled away.

Beginning with the 1989 Donald Ross Memorial Course in Boyne Highlands, Mich., however, the theme concept has been taken to different extremes. No matter how bizarre purists think the various architectural schemes are, themed projects have proven successful because their layouts present interesting, enjoyable course designs that operators find are generating plenty of play — without the glitzy marketing talk.

Stonebridge Golf Links & CC, in Hauppauge, N.Y., is a tribute to C.B. Macdonald, Seth Raynor and Charlie Banks.



The Donald Ross Memorial is a popular and well-regarded layout — not so much because of its ability to remind golfers of famous Ross holes that it sought to replicate, but because of the sheer fun of tackling its design. Course critic Tom Doak wrote in his *Confidential Guide to Golf Courses*, “In taking so much time to do detail work around the greens, even if they didn’t get them just right, they got better results than 90 percent of modern courses.”

In 1992, the first of two Tour 18 golf courses opened in Texas, with the goal of replicating the best holes in America from courses such as Cherry Hills, Pinehurst, Doral, Pine Valley, TPC Sawgrass, Riviera and Pebble Beach. Some of the replications retain playing characteristics of the originals, while others look nothing like the real McCoy. Besides copying design features, Tour 18s include Masters tournament scoreboard replicas placed just as they are on Amen Corner.

The Tour 18 courses average a healthy 60,000 rounds annually and have led to brisk real-estate sales. Golfers are finding the courses enjoyable, even if some of the famous places like Pebble Beach and Harbour Town don’t find the replicas so cute. After a long legal battle, certain signature features of those two resorts do not appear at the Tour 18 layouts. Golfers are constantly reminded by the course that “franchising permission for simulating the original holes from these courses has not been given to Tour 18, nor do the owners of these courses endorse, sponsor, approve of or affiliate with Tour 18.”

Legal problems slowed down replica business for the Tour 18 concept, leading to a company split. Tour 18 Dallas and Tour 18 Houston are now Arnold Palmer Management properties while another group, Tour 18 Inc., has just finished another themed course, the



The Tour 18 layouts replicate the best holes from America’s best courses.



“cutting-edge” Augusta Pines.

“Tour 18 is the originator and clear leader in the young-but-growing replica golf course business,” says Peter Nanula, Palmer Golf’s president and CEO. “Golfers love the unique experience at Tour 18 facilities.”

The latest trend

New concepts are constantly appearing, such as the Cowboys GC in Dallas (straight golf, but heavy on the Dallas Cowboys tie-ins). With Rick Jacobsen’s “family-friendly” nine at Illinois’ Glenview National, themed design has taken on a different, less tacky focus. Instead of perfect replicas, a new group of courses present hole designs “inspired by” the work of classic architects. The results range from interesting to excellent.

The Tribute at The Colony is architect Tripp Davis’s — you guessed it — tribute to the “linksland golf courses of Scotland.” Located near Dallas, Davis attempted replicas of holes inspired by his research in Scotland.

Though the sight of a beverage cart, wide concrete paths and separation mounding between holes undermines some of the course’s links flavor, plenty of other subtle touches by Davis and the developers take The Tribute to a higher level than most themed courses because playing interest remains the primary goal.

New Jersey’s Architects GC was opened this summer to pay tribute to golf’s great designers. Architect Stephen Kay enlisted *Golf Digest* architecture editor Ron Whitten to help choose and carry out holes inspired by the work of the premier architects for the period between 1885 and 1955. The 6,818-yard par-71 design does not present pure replicas. Instead, efforts were made to build in the spirit of architects as Old

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The Tribute at The Colony in Texas (near Dallas) was inspired by Tripp Davis’ love of Scottish golf courses.

Themed Courses

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Tom Morris, Macdonald, Walter Travis, A.W. Tillinghast, William Flynn, George Thomas, Ross and others, with the finishing hole built in the spirit of the late Robert Trent Jones.

Because the course basically plays in the order the architects lived and attempts to maintain their design style, Architects GC lacks the symmetry found on a typical layout. Yet, Kay and Whitten have been able to present design quirks and features that add to the character of the design. The theme also attempts to educate interested golfers with the course's general aura of reverence for the master architects.

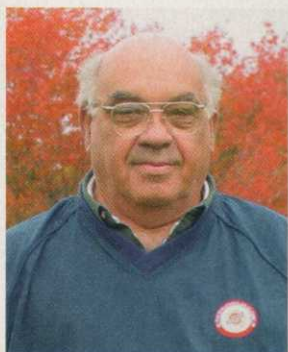
Historian George Bahto shares a similar respect for architects Macdonald, Raynor and Charles Banks and is finishing up a book on their lives. But before the pages hit the press, Bahto has been given the chance to redesign Stonebridge Golf Links & CC, a Hauppauge, N.Y., layout that's a modern-day tribute to his favorite triumvirate of architects. Like they did before him, Bahto has taken the design concepts they loved most and built his own inter-

pretations — the Redan par-3, the Eden from St. Andrews, the Biarritz from France and even the "Principal's Nose" bunkers used to great effect on the short par-4 sixth.

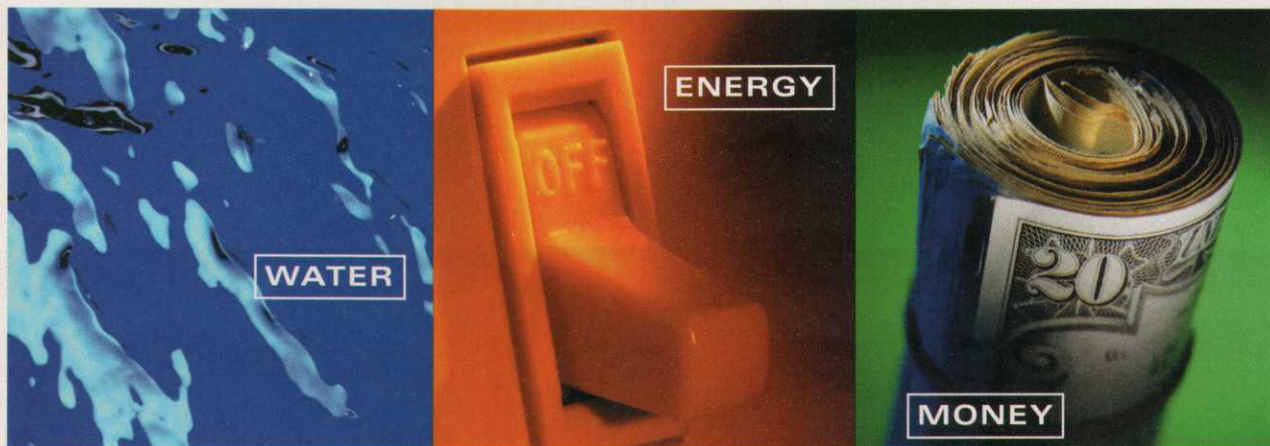
At just more than 6,200 yards and sandwiched between homes, Stonebridge could easily have become just another course, but the injection of Bahto's love for the design styles of Macdonald, Raynor and Banks transforms this into a must-see course for any fan of interesting green complex design.

Another admirer of the classics is architect Brian Silva, who has handled restorations of several Raynor courses, including Georgia's Lookout Mountain GC, built in 1926. With Chattanooga, Tenn.'s new Black Creek Club, Silva has helped advance themed golf by creating a classic design within certain parameters created to help sell the development. Again, instead of a straight replica course, Silva sought to fashion holes in the style of Raynor while injecting many of his own twists.

"We wanted to do what Raynor and Macdonald did: Adapt their classic golf holes to the



George Bahto, who redesigned Stonebridge Golf Links & CC, so reverses classical golf course architects that he's writing a book about them.



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inherent characteristics of our site, not directly copy a specific bunker or green," Silva says. "Perhaps the latter attempt is a weakness of some themed courses. The direct copy is not as good as the original."

The future

Even with the recent spate of higher quality themed layouts whose emphasis on fun design will solidify their place no matter what the golf market thinks of the trend, some developers are leery of "concept" golf.

"I had dreamed of developing a course that way, but if I do it's no longer going to be themed," says Portland, Ore.-based developer James Kramer. "We had a business plan developed for a thorough experience course. It would've been for serious golfers who appreciate the romanticism of Scotland, the 'Home of Golf.'"

What sullied Kramer on such an interesting concept?

"The Royal Links was the primary reason," Kramer says of the Las Vegas spin on themed

golf that Golf Channel viewers have seen announcer David Feherty endorsing. "[Royal Links] took the idea and did it half-heartedly. Even now, if you try to do a thorough experience, it's probably tainted by another course out there. I was excited at first, but themed courses have been done so much they've lost their novelty."

Still, Kramer points out that places like Tour 18 and other themed courses based on classic design will satisfy a significant number of golfers.

"If a person hasn't played the original, then he doesn't know any better about the replica holes," Kramer says. "From a business point of view, to know you can create something that people will go out to play, even if it's 45 minutes away, is significant."

So significant that themed courses will be here for years to come. Then again, themed courses have been a part of golf course design as long as the game has been played in America. ■

Geoff Shackelford is Golfdom's contributing architecture editor.

"The direct copy is not as good as the original."

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