

**W**ith the wave of new themed courses, most in golf believe that either: (A) the game has taken tasteless, tacky and embarrassing to a new low; or (B) there is a wonderful irony in this fast-growing segment of the business.

No matter what you think of the Disneyfication of American golf, the movement of building new courses that replicate or celebrate classic design allows architects to do something they're prevented from doing in today's normal modern design: present interesting and even bold design ideas.

Sure, sometimes these amusement-park replications fail to remind anyone of the originals. However, deep bunkers, blind shots, alternate option holes and other oddities that lend interest to "traditional" classic courses are returning on themed courses.

It's one of the great mysteries in modern golf how a player can travel to a noted course — enjoy the oddities of its design, maintenance and musty locker room — and find the same features offensive at his home course. If a blind shot or a treeless "links-style" course is presented on a themed course inspired by one of golf's hollowed grounds, it's a good design feature. But if an architect presents the same ideas under the pretense of his own design style, the client inevitably will step in and say, "You can't do that!" In some cases, the architect might get such a course built, but the developer won't let the superintendent present the fast, firm conditions to compliment the traditional design.

The bottom line: Unless it's under the pretense of a themed course, it's not OK to try the quirky stuff found at the places we revere in golf as traditional.

As the golf business begins to suffer the consequences of building too many ordinary, overpriced and unsatisfying designs where repeat business is nonexistent, themed courses figure to emerge as one of the surefire ways to market courses and maintain a steady stream of customers.

The early examples are working because marketing such courses is easier and golfers will try anything once. But themed courses are

## Terrible Taste or Wonderful Irony?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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experiencing more repeat business because the players find interesting holes. Golfers are enjoying the courses thanks to a new take on the old design ideas that initially grew the game.

One can only hope that the themes we see in the coming years are more subtle while shedding some of the kitsch. A strong model is Stonebridge GL & CC in Hauppauge, N.Y., the concept course by George Bahto, where a difficult site was transformed into a must-see course because of Bahto's fascinating green-complex designs. Brian Silva's Black Creek Club in Chattanooga, Tenn., where Seth Raynor's style was respectfully used to create a course that's provoking enthusiastic discussion, is another fine model. The theme element merely allowed architect Silva to present design ideas that, for some bizarre reason, might not be acceptable if he merely tried them under the auspices of a typical Silva design.

"Many parts of most new courses have or should have themes," Silva says. "They should be based on classic characteristics and classic golf holes. Whether or not you as an architect decide to directly lift the 'look' along with the lifted characteristic or strategy is the next question."

Let's hope the lifting and borrowing becomes more subtle — so subtle that the words "theme," "replica" and "tribute" are eventually forgotten to the point that talented architects are given the freedom to present interesting designs that are their own. But until that day, at least themed courses present designs that golfers can discuss and enjoy — attributes the golf business needs to take more seriously.

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