

Certain modern course designers have grown tired of the praise heaped on the famous old architects. Surely, some of the old architect worship is overblown. Aficionados come up with intense theoretical explanations for bunker placement or green complex features that just as easily could have happened by accident.

But it's no accident that most undisturbed 1920s courses drain more efficiently and artfully than a majority of modern designs. How so?

The old guys and their construction teams weren't in such a hurry. They were on site and took the time to contemplate subtle ways to move water off the player surface. Drainage was vital to firm- and fast-playing conditions and better turf.

However, their equipment was rudimentary. They had to be judicious in their use of earth moving. They took the time to consider the effects of changing the land and took note of what happened to their sites after a big rain. Contrary to what skeptical modern architects will tell you, the old guys put drainage at the top of their list of concerns.

But it was kind of tricky to dig a sump with a horse-drawn scraper. That's why they turned to intricate surface drainage.

Engineers had yet to become obsessed with the idea of catching water and sending it underground. Furthermore, environmentalists didn't exist back then to complain about drainage flows into sensitive wetlands.

Surface drainage is barely part of the modern architect's pallet. Fueled by the McArchitecture pace that will forever haunt the 1990s, the task of moving surface water is addressed on blueprints, with adjustments left up to shapers and contractors to sort out. When drainage issues come up during construction and the architect is not around to sign off on a change order, catch basins are created so that everyone can move on to the next task.

It's the safe, expensive and unsightly solution.

Flush outs, sump wells and catch basins were also not part of the old design vocabulary. This is yet another reason why the old courses look just a little easier on the eye. In

In Praise of Surface Drainage

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old photos you don't see caps surrounded by impeccably circular catch basins dotting the fairway landscape. Golfers never had the privilege of watching their balls do a slow toilet-bowl circle flush down the chipping area basin, where they would be greeted by a sea of divots and a free drop.

With modern environmental restrictions often controlling how golf courses deal with their excess water, catch basins do provide an alternative for layouts that otherwise would not have been built if they were draining runoff into a natural body of water.

But there is no excuse for the excessive overuse of the "capture and send underground" approach today.

Of all the old guys, Billy Bell was the master of surface drainage. Seth Raynor was pretty good, too. Both came from engineering backgrounds, yet neither lost sight of the task at hand: creating attractive, interesting golf holes.

Bell dealt with tricky sites in flood plains or near steep hillsides, yet managed to use the best components of his engineering and green-keeping background to cleverly move water off the primary playing surface. Bell took advantage of this functional dilemma to inject design character via swales, barrancas and clever slopes effecting strategy. Raynor typically dealt with flat meadows but always ensured that his complicated greens drained well.

Remember surface drainage next time you undertake a renovation or simply analyze the components of a design. And when you hear someone going on about those "so-called" master architects, just remember that they dealt with a key functional need much more cleverly than today's architects.

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