

Golf Architects Spread their Wings

Delivering Value | Adam Lawrence

Around the world, golf course architects are finding that the key to success is being a trusted advisor to clients on more than just where to place bunkers

On one level, golf architecture is a very specialized profession. It might seem that the golf architect, whose job is focused on one task—getting the best and most efficient design for a particular client on a particular piece of property into the ground—would be ill-placed to take on other roles. But in fact, the sheer variety of skills needed by golf architects means they are often the best people to resolve problems of many kinds on a job—as many are proving in an environment where new course construction is slow in some parts of the world.

To be a success as a golf course architect requires a broad palette

of attributes, some of which, at first glance, might not seem to fit together too well. The sales skills required to persuade clients to hire you in the first place don't always go with the kind of creative, artistic personality type that would be led to design as a career, and those artistic skills aren't an obvious fit with the kind of engineering abilities—understanding irrigation and drainage design, for example—that modern architects need.

But the nature of the golf development industry is that the people who have been successful over time have had little choice but to acquire and develop those skills. Even the largest golf architecture practices

are, in reality, small companies by the standards of the economy as a whole, and a substantial proportion of the industry consists of sole practitioners or two/three person firms. Combine this with the very large scale of most golf developments, and it's easy to see why golf course architects have had to become masters of more than one trade to survive. It is common for golf architects to bring to the party education and training in disciplines as diverse as engineering, landscape design and environmental design.

A classic example is in the case of site masterplanning. Land planning of developments is a big business, and goes back at least a century. But





At Lookout Mountain in Arizona, Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, is engaged in a project that will help save the operation ten million gallons of water a year

on projects where golf and housing are being developed together, a common complaint is that the course is compromised to benefit the real estate. On one level, this is only natural—the developer is expecting to earn his return from the homes rather than the golf, but sometimes a more flexible mindset is beneficial to all concerned. Take the new Verdura golf resort in Sicily, developed by British firm The Rocco Forte Collection. At Verdura, golf course architect Kyle Phillips, ASGCA, was responsible for the overall site masterplan and, by pushing the hotel buildings back a short distance away from the coastline, was able to use the whole

of the waterfront property for golf holes. This made Verdura's two golf courses significantly more dramatic and memorable—a vital consideration for a project that is aiming to attract golf tourists to a destination that has no golfing heritage. But it didn't come at a cost to the appeal of the resort's luxury hotel, as Phillips realized the tilt of the land meant every room in the hotel could be provided with a sea view in any case. The resort's planned villas have been located in a plot of land to the side of the golf courses, close to the clubhouse facilities, which should result in an appealing village feel—again, a bonus, as customers buying property in Italy are surely

looking for a traditional environment.

A rather different example of a golf architect taking on a wider role can be found at the Tapiola Golf Club project in Espoo, Finland. A relatively low-budget project, Tapiola, which has been in planning for more than ten years, is being built on a landfill site not far from the Finnish capital, Helsinki. It is designed by American architect Tim Nugent, ASGCA—but Nugent's job is extending way beyond placing bunkers and providing plans to a contractor from an office on the other side of the ocean.

Instead, Nugent has relocated to Finland for several months and is shaping the course's greens



At Stensballegaard in Denmark, Rick Baril, ASGCA, advised on rustic bunkering to reduce the maintenance requirement and at Verdura in Sicily (right), Kyle Phillips, ASGCA, created a masterplan that made best use of the land available

WHAT ARE GOLF ARCHITECTS DOING FOR CLIENTS?

- 97% Improving or expanding practice facilities
- 93% Adding new tees for juniors, seniors etc.
- 93% Discussing irrigation upgrades
- 93% Discussing turfgrass reduction
- 86% Making recommendations for cost savings
- 83% Developing long-range masterplans
- 83% Discussing turfgrass selection and overseeing regrassing
- 69% Changing courses to improve pace of play
- 62% Seeking out specialists to advise on water conservation
- 55% Assessing future infrastructure needs
- 55% Conducting land planning assessments

Source: ASGCA member survey

personally, saving the client’s money on additional fees and potential rework charges that could arise should a different shaper misinterpret his design intentions. At 135 acres, the golf course is compact, and was made even more so when a falcon’s nest was discovered behind the site of the planned twelfth green. “I hope Tapiola will be a good example of the direction new courses should be headed—fun and playable for everyone, but with just enough to keep good golfers interested,” he says.

Because of their place at the center of a project team, golf architects are well-placed to act as the client’s eyes and ears, spotting potential problems and opportunities as they arise. Given the pressure the golf industry is under in many parts of the world at the moment, course audits by architects are proving crucial in helping owners understand how they can reduce costs by cutting down on water usage, altering the presentation of hazards and other aspects of the course design, and even reducing the amount of turfgrass that a course needs to maintain. For example, at the new Stensballegaard course in Denmark, designed by Rick Baril, ASGCA, the

large bunkers are to be left essentially as raw hazards. At Baril’s suggestion, the owners of the course have embraced a very old-fashioned style of bunker maintenance—they will be raked by the greens staff, but no rakes will be provided on the course for players to use. “Bunkers are hazards,” the club’s policy document states.

Turf reduction is a hot topic around the golf industry. Especially in the kind of hot, dry climates that attract so many tourists to play golf, every acre of maintained turf is a big addition to the cost of running a course. In Arizona, as is well-known, a hard limit has been imposed by regulators on the amount of turfgrass courses are allowed to maintain, but in many other areas, developers and operators are addressing turfgrass reduction programs for hard economic reasons. At the recent ‘Golf in the Middle East: The Next Generation’ seminar organized by *Golf Course Architecture*, Toro and Thomson, Perrett & Lobb, keynote speaker Rob Shuttle of Abu Dhabi developer TDIC told the audience: “Golf course development cannot continue on the premise that bigger, greener and longer is better.”



GOLF ARCHITECTS WEAR MANY HATS

Helping clients select other consultants for projects, such as buildings architects, civil engineers, irrigation designers, mechanical engineers, environmental consultants, landscape architects, and even interior designers.

Long-term master planning: clubs know they need to improve their facilities, but don't always have the cash or the ability to do it in one fell swoop. Hiring a golf architect can help them create a document that will guide course improvement activities over the long term, perhaps even up to twenty years, prioritizing high-impact work.

Interviewing and selecting contractors: golf architects often know firms that perform special services such as building rock walls, water features, bridges and outbuildings, and can connect clients with these firms. This can be especially helpful for facilities that are upgrading their aesthetics and trying to gain ground in a competitive market.

Assisting with design and renovation of clubhouses and other amenities, such as maintenance buildings. Being immersed in the business of golf, architects have a unique, all-encompassing perspective, and have an intimate knowledge of what does and does not work functionally and often a knowledge of local building codes and regulations.

Project management: leading an entire development, renovation, etc. from beginning to end if necessary.

Assisting with graphic communications such as logos and imagery: architects are often connected to artists and professionals who can assist a client with printed logos, artwork and course furniture.

Media relations: architects are often well connected with golf media.

Shuttle added that TDIC's future golf development plans would seek to minimize irrigated turfgrass."

Phoenix-based architect Forrest Richardson, ASGCA, is at present engaged in a project at the Lookout Mountain course in Scottsdale, replacing a number of ponds on the golf course with hazard complexes consisting of bunkers and native desert areas. The alteration is expected to help the operators save over ten million gallons of water each year, making the course more sustainable both in environmental and economic terms.

"Our value has always been something in addition to design; it's our full service in bringing the project together," says ASGCA Past President Jeff Brauer. "This is evidenced by the fact that we get about ten percent of our fee for concept design and the rest for construction documents and oversight. Owners have always paid for the ability to (with apologies to Larry the Cable Guy) 'Get 'er done.' Someone has to translate grand visions to percentage of slope, width of clearing, quantities of work, and so on. It can be done on the fly by a contractor, or by using generic quantities, which is OK as long as the

project encounters no difficulties, but it's when things are different that a golf course architect can provide a well thought out technical solution for the vision. In addition, current events show what happens when oversight of big financial deals goes without adequate supervision. The same is necessary in golf construction, and it has never really gone away. There's an old saying: 'You don't get what you expect, you get what you inspect'."

With the sustainability of golf so high on the priority list of everyone within the industry, the wide-ranging skillset of golf architects in this regard can be of great help. "I have assisted clients with assembling integrated pest management programs, certifications such as Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary, energy audits, and lake and pond management services," says Scot Sherman, ASGCA. "On one project I recently hired and managed a certified arborist to inventory and evaluate 900 trees. The goal is to extend the life of these 'geriatric' trees, so a plan for each one was needed along with a budget and schedule for implementation. My connections were key to providing this service to sustain these important trees." ●