

Keeping it simple

Adopting a 'less is more' approach to golf course design can improve a club's operational efficiency and golf experience, as Richard Humphreys finds out.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, one of the pioneers of modernist architecture and designer of the Seagram skyscraper in New York, adopted the motto 'less is more'. His most famous designs throughout the US and Europe are known for being functional and simple.

Drew Rogers, ASGCA, was taught by a professor who trained directly under van der Rohe at the University of Chicago, and says this mantra should not be misunderstood. It doesn't mean to simply do or use less, it means to do more with less, which should be applied very thoughtfully in golf course architecture.

"In recent years, the approach has become more en vogue, what with vast reductions in funding and labor. We're all trying to do more with less. As golf course architects, we certainly have a responsibility



Photo: Evan Schiller

By rerouting two holes on the Squire course at PGA National in Florida, Andy Staples, ASGCA, made space for a new nine-hole par-three layout

to play a part in achieving balance in design, and many times, it's the simple approach that is the all-around winner."

Thad Layton, ASGCA, says the phrase suggests a concept of restraint. "I believe restraint is simultaneously the most powerful, yet most underutilized tool in the arsenal of the golf architect. The key to the successful use of restraint isn't an all brakes and no gas approach – that would be downright boring. Rather, it is the selective use of restraint through contrast."

In his recent 'Ahead of the Game' film, ASGCA President Forrest Richardson emphasized how important a restrained approach to golf course architecture is. "Playing the game does not rely on hundreds of acres," says Richardson. "That model will live on, but we need to

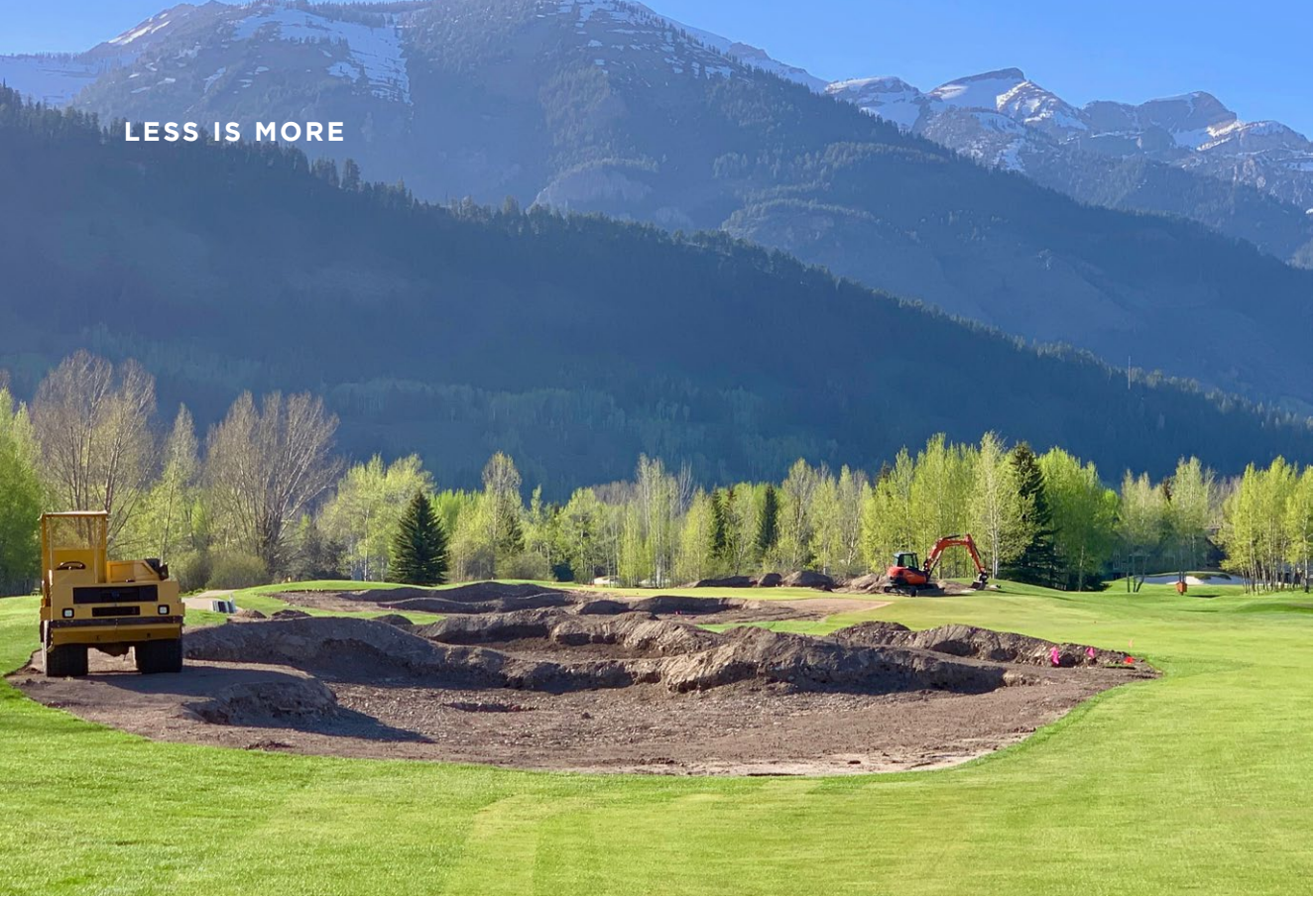


Photo: Brett Hochstein



Bunkers at Teton Pines in Wyoming, are being reworked as part of a renovation led by Thad Layton, ASGCA

plan smaller footprints or even not leave a footprint at all… rethink the water, the materials, the labor, the resources we use to build and maintain a golf course."

Less demand for sand

Bunkers are often among the first features to be rethought when considering a club's operational efficiency. Some clubs are rejecting a flashy, sprawling style – sometimes employed to provide eye-catching visuals – in favor of a more functional style that defines playing strategy but is more economical.

In Asbury, Iowa, for example, Kevin Norby, ASGCA, has reduced the overall bunker square footage at The Meadows Golf Club by nearly 50 percent.

"The city was looking to reduce the time required to maintain their bunkers after a rainstorm," says Norby. "With an average annual rainfall of 36 inches, the maintenance staff were spending a lot of time and resources pulling sand back up on faces and pumping bunkers out. They also wanted to improve pace of play as many bunkers no longer came into play for the low handicap golfer but instead penalized the shorter hitter and high handicap golfer."

Those poorly positioned bunkers were eliminated or relocated, while some new ones were added to enhance the course strategy. Norby also reduced the size of existing bunkers to make the course more playable and easier to maintain.

"The elimination of those bunkers that seemed to only affect the higher handicap player dramatically improved our pace of play," says general manager Jeremy Hawkins. "We experienced an average of a 45-minute decrease in pace of play for 18 holes last season – all while the course was full of players due to the increase in play from COVID-19.

"The labor required to maintain our bunkers has also been greatly reduced, which allows our crew to focus on areas that they normally wouldn't have had time to give their full attention to – especially after rain events."

Hawkins adds that the club's golf-related revenues for 2020 are up nine percent year in comparison to 2019. "We were doing pretty well in 2019," he said. "But we had 4,739 more rounds in 2020, roughly a 20 percent increase. That's not too bad considering we were closed in parts of March and April, and at one point in April and May were mandated to 15-minute tee time intervals, and people could only play with members of their own household"

Like The Meadows, Westlake Golf & Country Club in Jackson, New



Photo: Kevin Norby, ASGCA

Kevin Norby, ASGCA, has reduced the bunker square footage at The Meadows Golf Club by nearly 50 percent

Jersey, has also completed a project to reduce its sand areas. Undertaken prior to the pandemic, the club wanted to address issues relating to drainage, contaminated sand and deteriorated edges and faces.

The club turned to Drew Rogers for help. "The bunkers were 20 years old and had never been reconstructed or renovated," he says. "They were in pretty poor shape and the club was in dire need of a solution to address their management challenges as well as the poor playability and conditions that the golfers had to endure."

Rogers' plan saw the number of bunkers reduced from 46 to 29. "Redundant bunkers were eliminated, grassy hollows and uneven ground features were employed, excessively large bunkers were reduced in size, green entries were opened up and specific bunker placements were adjusted," he says. "The bunkers were reconstructed to ease management as well as improve playability, using Better Billy Bunker lining system and a high-quality sand and turf type tall fescue grass surrounds."

At Teton Pines Country Club & Resort in Jackson, Wyoming, a renovation by Thad Layton of Arnold Palmer Design Company includes work to reduce sand areas.

"We experienced an average of a 45-minute decrease in pace of play for 18 holes last season"

"The catalyst for the project was the bunkers. The liners were 10 years old and starting to breach the sand surface," says Layton. "Adding a new, heavy-duty liner evolved into a conversation about bunker styles, purpose, locations, sizes and maintenance. The plan calls for an overall reduction of 25 percent of the sand area, which should create more avenues for play and a more interesting golf experience."

Layton also took a more simplified approach to sand areas for his 2018 renovation of The Saticoy Club in California. "The focus was on bunker shifting and reduction while adding short grass to create strategy and variety," says shaper Brett Hochstein, who worked with Layton at both The Saticoy and Teton Pines. "Both projects have a stylistic response to history, context and the surrounding landscape – The Saticoy plays off the hilly topography



At Quail Ridge Country Club in Florida, Bobby Weed, ASGCA, has reduced maintained turf areas by 15 percent

and historical context of Billy Bell's bunkering and Teton Pines draws inspiration from the surrounding mountain ranges – but both at their core are about maximizing playing interest while working within a limited scope and budget."

Trimming turf

Clubs can also improve operational efficiency, and the golf experience, by reducing the amount of maintained turf on their golf courses. This in turn reduced the applications and resources required, and can help a golf course to sit more in harmony with its environment.

Palm Aire Country Club in Sarasota, Florida, hired Michael Benkusky, ASGCA, earlier this year to renovate its Champions course.

"We're looking to remove 12 acres of turf and incorporate crushed shells in many areas," says Benkusky. "The plan is to create playable areas under trees and in areas where it is difficult to grow turf. Removing turf that isn't needed will also allow the club to expand its cart traffic areas by using shells as paths."

Benkusky says that the biggest advantage that clubs like Palm Aire will get from reducing turf is that it will "eliminate water and the need to mow these areas, as well as creating better course aesthetics by adding another texture to contrast with the grass, trees and bunkers."

Erik Gowdy, director of agronomy at Palm Aire, says "there are multiple offsets into turning out-of-play areas, which were once weak turf areas at best, into shell areas. It cuts down expense in three major areas of our budget: labor, chemicals and irrigation, while increasing minimal expense in annual shell purchase. Florida is a perfect environment ergonomically and environmentally for these transition areas to be adopted as these areas fit the overall Florida landscape motif."

Florida's climate and associated high water costs mean that clubs located in the state stand to benefit greatly from projects designed to conserve water. At both Quail Ridge Country Club and Ponte Vedra Inn & Club, Bobby Weed, ASGCA,



Photo: Larry Lambrecht



Image: Michael Benkusky, ASGCA

Michael Benkusky, ASGCA, is replacing 12 acres of turf with crushed shells at Palm Aire CC in Florida

oversaw recent renovations that involved turf reduction.

On Quail Ridge's South course, Weed replaced turf with coquina-like screenings and pine straw. And at Ponte Vedra, he introduced 14 acres of coquina-like screening areas to replace rough grasses. Both projects reduced water usage on the course, saving the clubs time and money.

"The new course at Quail Ridge has seen a 15 percent reduction in maintained turf areas," says Weed. "There has also been a substantial reduction in maintenance problems, which had been linked to irrigation and drainage issues. This affords the agronomy team the flexibility to allocate their human resources to more important areas of the operation, such as greens, bunkers and tees.

"Better yet, real estate and membership sales at the club have experienced a strong positive response from prospective buyers. Year-over-year performance includes a 46 percent increase in home and membership sales, while non-resident memberships are up 12 percent."

Leaving a smaller footprint

Perhaps the ultimate application of a 'less is more' approach is to reduce the number of holes at a club. This might free up land to be sold for real estate, providing some lifeline revenue for clubs that are struggling to operate in their current form, and making way for a golf experience and other facilities that may appeal to a new audience.

One such project can be found in Wisconsin, where construction of a thirteen-hole par-three layout is progressing. Pioneer Pointe – designed by Todd Quitno, ASGCA – is being built on the site of the former 18-hole Tumbledown Trails golf course and will become the centerpiece of a new development, which is expected to include 82 home sites, a fitness center, tennis and pickleball courts, a restaurant and more.

"One factor that led to Pioneer Pointe being a short course was the lack of available land," says

Quitno. "The community land plan maximized the housing component, which led to corridor restrictions based on the desired density and adjacent land uses. Our assessment for golf was that it was too narrow for 'driver' length holes but could suit par threes where teeing areas and yardages were controlled."

Quitno's design has holes ranging between 95 and 280 yards and includes green layouts inspired by some of golf's most famous holes, including a Double Plateau, a Biarritz, a Punchbowl, and the iconic short seventh at Pebble Beach.

"Creating this shorter course means that the club can share its maintenance resources with the owners' other course [Hawks Landing Golf Club]," says Quitno. "Another benefit for the club is that by limiting the maintained turf footprint, it therefore limits the club's labor needs. We're using grasses and an irrigation strategy that minimizes herbicide use and tolerates drought conditions. Outer rough areas will be left unmown."

The non-traditional element of shorter courses is a factor that Quitno highlights as a draw for some people. "These layouts inspire fun without the constraints of 'real golf,' they encourage other forms of play, taking the emphasis off score; and they foster golfers of all abilities," he says. "Shorter layouts can also facilitate other land functions due to their minimal footprint, such as environmental restoration, storm management, ecological development and multi-recreational use.

"But most simply, they require less land and resources to build and maintain, and less time commitment to play."

In Stuart, Florida, Sanford Golf Design is transforming the former 36-hole Martin County Golf Course into a 27-hole facility called Sailfish Sands, which includes a reversible nine-hole course.

A 40-acre expansion of the airport runway protection zone into the course, combined with a feasibility study that revealed there wasn't a need for 36 holes, drove the decision to transform, explains ASGCA Past President John Sanford. "Many local patrons still wanted a 36-hole facility, hence the reversible nine."

"By reducing the number of holes and the overall golf course footprint, Martin County is able to reduce their maintenance inputs, such as fertilizers, pesticides, mowing, labor and water," says

> "Shorter courses require less land and resources to build and maintain, and less time commitment to play"

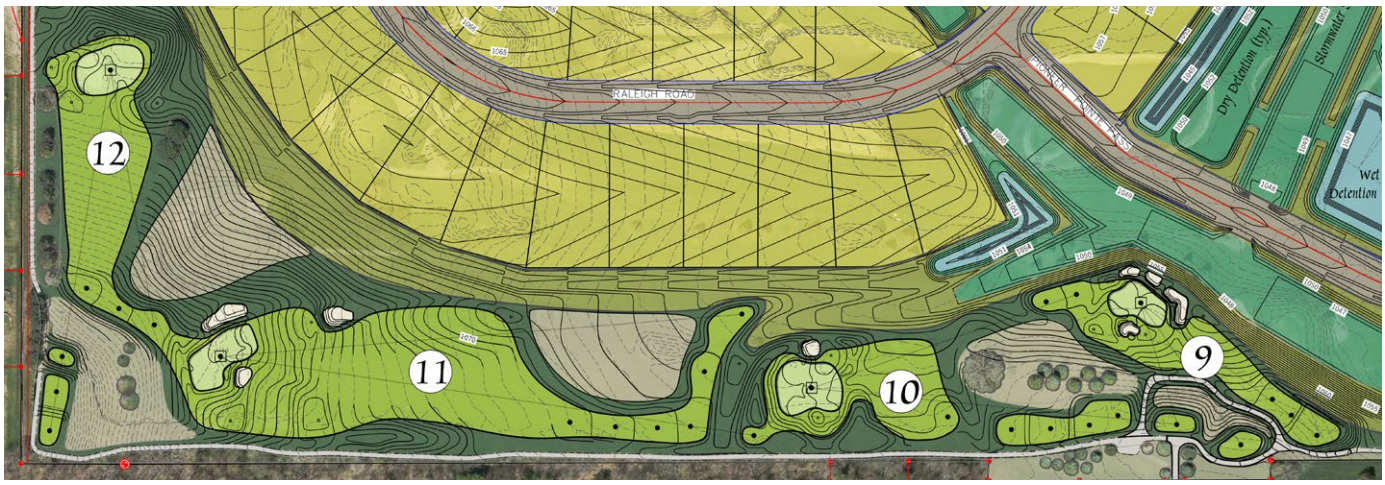


Image: Todd Quitno, ASGCA

Pioneer Pointe is a thirteen-hole par-three layout designed by Todd Quitno, ASGCA, which will be the centerpiece of a new residential development



Photo: Sanford Golf Design

Sanford Golf Design has created a nine-hole reversible layout at the renamed Sailfish Sands municipal facility in Florida

David Ferris, ASGCA, golf course architect at Sanford Golf Design.

The new design reduces the amount of water used in irrigation by 30 percent, and water from the nearby Willoughby Creek stormwater treatment area can now be used to irrigate turf. "We purposely kept the bunkers, fairways and greens very simple for playability and ease of maintenance," said Sanford.

Kevin Abbate, the Parks and Recreation director, says that the renovation "not only addresses sustainability from a maintenance standpoint, but also provides a great experience for players of all ages and skill levels."

Another reinvention project is approaching completion just a few miles down the coast, at Palm Beach Gardens. Andy Staples, ASGCA, has overseen a 'reimagining' of The Squire course at PGA National Resort & Spa.

Staples' plan has seen the former first and eighteenth holes, which played parallel to each other, converted into a nine-hole par-three course. The remaining 16 holes have been renovated and two short holes added to create a new 18-hole layout that plays to 5,744 yards.

"I focused on the three most innovative trends in the industry: firstly, reducing the time it takes to play; secondly, increasing player enjoyment, and thirdly, instilling classic design principles that spur interest in the game of golf," says Staples.

Areas of existing turf have been converted to coquina shell-style paths for both its visual effect and to reduce overall maintenance. Hazards have been kept to a minimum, with Staples focusing on expanding short grass fairways, chipping swales and grassy hollows.

"The obvious benefit of a short layout is the continued reduction of resource use and labor intensity, both areas of increased concern over the past 20 years," says Staples. "Shorter courses that are designed thoughtfully will check the sustainability boxes while providing a design that is unique, interesting and fun to play in less time than traditional 'championship' length courses.

"A par-three course not only provides the resort with a needed top-quality practice facility, but also an opportunity to expand its user base by attracting many of their guests that aren't avid golfers. These types of courses become social centers that all levels of golfers can enjoy, which make for fun and relaxing environments."