

Chapter 1

Designing People

Is there any golfer in this world who is not an armchair architect of golf courses? With visions of other-worldly par-3s filling their heads? With emerald-green fairways flirting with water and far-flung bunkers? Are there any people on this earth more creative—and sometimes more at odds—than those artists who make their living out of designing golf courses?

Whether architects (believe it or not) compare course designs to cars, houses, clothing, or storms, golfers can relate. Here, give it a try.

Cars

“Ten years from now, we’ll look back on a lot of courses built in the 1970s and ‘80s and we’ll view them like we do Nehru jackets, big-fin Cadillacs and art deco. I like to build the golf course that’s more like the traditional home in the old neighborhood, with the steep roof and classic crown molding.”

— MARK MCCUMBER, the only person who was a golf course architect
before he got his PGA Tour card.

“Minimalism is a movement in art. Unless it is very strong and well executed, there is a yawning emptiness to a golf course designed with minimalism as a goal—somewhat like a stripped-down Chevrolet. By the

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same token, I think the excesses of the 1980s, which required 14 men on Flymos to maintain the bunker slopes, are on their way out.”

— THE LATE DESIGN GURU DESMOND MUIRHEAD

Paintings

“I think what happened for awhile was that the frame became more important than the painting. And now we’re getting back to making sure the painting is what we’re designing.”

— ARCHITECT REES JONES

Weather

“I wanted to make sure people liked my course and would play it. It has proven itself to be true. Golfers are going to feel at peace, at harmony with nature, not like out in the middle of a violent ocean.”

— KEN TOMLINSON, neophyte designer of award-winning Tidewater Golf Club & Plantation in North Myrtle Beach, S.C.

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Yard Games

“North American golf tends to be played, like yard darts, through the air. You hit it from spot to spot.”

— DR. MICHAEL HURDZAN, course architect and author

Music and Porcelain

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“There are a few definite underlying tactical principles, most of which were contained in St. Andrews. They were like musical notes. They could be made into an infinite number of combinations to produce anything from musical comedy to grand opera. I was, frankly, after grand opera [in his course designs]...

“We like to think the wild, incalculable poetry of Japanese porcelain, which I collect, comes out in our work in Japan. We want to make courses that compress the past, present and future into one with myth and mystery, emotion and vision. As one designs, there is a surge of clustering and fragmenting effects that are constantly adapting to the rhythms and sequences of both golf and the evolving landscapes. In Japan, art is woven into the way of life. In Anglo-Saxon countries, it is peripheral to it. So I would like each of my courses in Japan to be a masterpiece. I would like to become a national treasure of Japan like my admired acquaintance Kakiemon XIV.”

— DESMOND MUIRHEAD, studying the Old Course at St. Andrews

Light and Fancy

And if Muirhead was a little bizarre for your tastes, harken to:

“Visually, our courses speak profoundly to folks because I think we're the only ones who really work with light. We've studied light for years. The way the light works from morning to evening across this plane of vertical expression you've created, and how it works from season to season allows a very romantic

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mystique to come forward at all hours of the day. When you see photographs of great golf holes, or courses, they are always taken at that dramatic time of day when the angle of light is most profound. We've proven significantly that we can bring those dramatic hours into the middle of the day, so that hour after hour you're playing a different-appearing golf hole. It eliminates the repetition and boredom that you find in so many courses.

“In earth movement, the only thing you can rely on ad infinitum is the light. It's the only thing permanent. Trees and grasses die and horizons change with cityscapes and developments and everything else. But you can rely on light as a dependable partner in your efforts.”

— ROBERT VON HAGGE, course architect

Reality Check

OK, to reality, then. First, from a true student of the game and its history:

“The first depictions of golf architecture—other than seaside golf—was in the latter 1800s when man actually started working with earth artificially. From that point on, it has gone through tremendous swings and fluctuations in style, depictions, earthworks and all kinds of different presentations. I think the last 15 to 20 years is almost a natural reaction to what golf technology and implements and balls are giving us.

“Let's face it, the clubs and balls we use today are far surpassing anything we ever thought of 25 years ago. When I hear Pete Dye trying to devise different ways to combat that, I am very much in concert with his philosophies on how to

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test the best players. That point given, there are masses of golfers coming to the game who on television have seen golf courses laden with water and all different types of visual presentations. When you mention courses—like Oakmont and Royal Melbourne—which don’t have bodies of water, I’m sure they scratch their heads and say, ‘Where is the pizzazz? Where are the bells and whistles?’

“We’ve gotten beat over the head by magazines, television, all types of things that show waterfalls everywhere, flowers, all kinds of things.”

— BEN CRENSHAW, PGA TOUR GREAT AND COURSE ARCHITECT

Copycats? Naw! Yes?

“I like to think our philosophy is one of emulation with innovation. That’s all anybody can do, is emulate. It’s all predicated on our experiences—the same as if we were writing a book, or a song. We are gifted with a certain amount of discernment to be able to pick and choose what’s good in an appropriate situation. Emulate does not mean imitate. Emulate, by definition, is to strive to equal or exceed. Imitate is a repetitive effort. “

— J. MICHAEL POELLOT, course designer

“I don’t know how people can copy golf holes. It’s impossible. We couldn’t even copy our own.”

— ROGER RULEWICH, course architect, when asked by Sunbelt to replicate a par-3 hole on all the Jones Trail courses in Alabama

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“The three guys who had the greatest impact on architecture in modern times were Robert Trent Jones Sr., Pete Dye and Jack Nicklaus. Unbelievably contrasting styles. Everything is a copy or recopy from Day One, and Dye and Nicklaus were getting all the work, getting all the recognition, and everybody in the business said, ‘Let’s copy Pete. Let’s do the mounds, the deep bunkers, the pot bunkers, the links-type look.’ Then they realized in the ‘80s that it was still not as popular still as what was done in the first 30 years. And we’ve all gone back to the old ‘30s style. Even Pete has modified his stuff. Jack has modified his stuff.”

— TOM WEISKOPF, course designer and former PGA Tour player

“Life is too short to be doing the same thing all the time. It’s more fun to design courses in new ways.”

— BOB CUPP, scorched by the media and colleagues for the golf course he designed using triangles, squares, etc., but who has won raves for a number of other designs

Pressure, Thy Name Is Low-Handicapper

An insight from Tom Doak on political pressures within clubs for course renovations:

“If their course is short and not challenging for them, [scratch golfers] want to move the bunkers back down-range so they’re in play... I think those courses of the ‘20s are so interesting to people because they were built when good players hit the ball 220, 240 yards. Today, the average 10-handicapper hits the ball that far.

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He appreciates it because he is playing it the way it was designed. For the five guys who are one-handicappers, equipment improvements have made it easier for them than the architect meant it to be. But that’s only five guys out of 300 of the members. Yet, they’re probably the Greens Committee.”

The Humorous Jeff Brauer on Design Elements

- “When railroads must go through hills, they use tunnels. In golf, this option is open only to miniature golf course designers!”

- “I hate to divulge how architects find natural holes. I wonder about the fate of that magician who gave away magic secrets on television. Is he still alive?”

- “I avoid sharp doglegs in only two situations: where there are trees bordering the fairway, and where there aren’t!”

- “A routing is to a golf course as a floor plan is to the building. The real character of the course comes in the detailing and feature design.”

- “Yes, golf *is* a game, but you can rustle up a willing lawyer anytime, anyplace. In fact, I’ve been sued twice by suppliers asserting their Constitutional right to provide inferior products at a greater price than agreed upon. Now, I’m no Constitutional scholar, but I’d missed that amendment.”

- “A good architect talks to the land, asking it what kind of feature it wants to be—a green, tee or fairway—and listens. Routings in the South always take longer, because the land speaks more slowly, usually in a soft drawl. But, this process always works—except internationally, when the land speaks back in a foreign language.”

Who's the Best?

“I could never put [Donald] Ross and [A.W.] Tillinghast over [Alister] Mackenzie and [C.B.] Macdonald. Can you do a composite?”

— BEN CRENSHAW, PGA Tour player and course designer, when asked who he would hire to design a course.

Crenshaw went on to choose Mackenzie, saying: “He was so artistic. And on top of that he got some of the most fantastic pieces of land—Cypress Point, Royal Melbourne, Crystal Downs... To get extraordinary sites like that and to work them as he did, along with Perry Maxwell and the others who worked with him, is incredible. And they not only work for golf, but from an artistic standpoint are as inspiring as any courses. I don't think there was anyone more artistic, or who did more supremely natural work than Mackenzie. He preached it, but he did it.”

Crenshaw continued: “Certainly Mackenzie has a flair for art that I think was totally unique. His bunkers and mounding, green contouring—the strategic architecture is so well depicted. There is a route for everyone. It seems that whenever you view one of these courses, they've got every bit of fine golf on that particular property. And that is art. His bunkers are very eye-catching. They have different levels in them sometimes. They have fingers, bays and tongues. They frame and orient the shot as well as anyone's.”

“From the old guys, you'd have to pick from one of three: Tillinghast, Ross or Mackenzie. Ross might have had the best putting surfaces; Oyster Harbor on

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Cape Cod has the best putting surfaces I’ve seen anywhere—better than Pinehurst No. 2. The best bunkers are Mackenzie’s and Tillinghast’s. Tillinghast also set up some great strategic, risk-and-reward holes. Ross did some very good routings.”

— STEPHEN KAY, course architect

“My favorite? Pete Dye and Donald Ross. Pete really understands the importance of designing golf shots into a course. He knows where the pros’ hot buttons are and how to push them... Ross also understood the importance of creating golf shots, even more so than Mackenzie or Tillinghast. Seth Raynor was wonderful, but we don’t get to see enough of his work because he died so young [52].”

— BOB CUPP, course architect

“It’s like asking who’s the best baseball player, or basketball player, or the best president. We all have lent something unique in our efforts in this business, and I don’t know that we can say one of us is better than the other. I think everybody who endeavors to work in the industry is good, to the extent of being able to provide something useful to the golfers.

“We’re special when we take care of our families and we’re regular people and we don’t put other folks down.”

— GENE BATES, course architect