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BY DESIGN

Excellence in Golf Design from the American Society of Golf Course Architects



TRANSFORMATION

How four golf clubs have overseen a reconfiguration of their golf facilities to secure a prosperous future

PROTECTING DESIGN

ASGCA Past President Robert Trent Jones, Jr. provides insight into what the BIRDIE Act means for architects

ALSO:

- // Club culture
- // Evolution of ASGCA
- // Shura Links

Considering the culture

Larry Hirsh of Golf Property Analysts explains the importance of understanding the character of a club when evaluating its course design.



Larry Hirsh

Larry Hirsh is the president and senior consultant at Golf Property Analysts, which is a leader in golf and club consulting, valuation and brokerage.

Culture refers to the unique character and atmosphere of a club, shaped by its history, leadership, policies and member interactions. It encompasses the club's values, traditions, level of activity and social norms, which influence everything from dress codes and behavior to the overall environment and sense of community within the club.

A club's culture can evolve over time due to changes in leadership or significant events, such as the pandemic, which has prompted many clubs to reevaluate and often modernize their practices to attract a broader and more diverse membership. Understanding a club's culture is crucial for assessing its economic potential and ensuring it meets the expectations of both current and prospective members.

From a golf course architect's perspective, knowing and understanding the target market is essential. Assuming the club is an existing one (versus a new course), not only does it have a culture, but that culture is likely to evolve, to

some degree, and change with the generations. For instance, if the club caters to serious, highly skilled golfers, they may want to make the course more challenging. If it is more of a family club, making the course playable is a likely goal.

Given the high level of confidence (and investment) most clubs place in their architect, they can have a significant impact in transforming it and most importantly the architect needs to be able to push back, when appropriate, at overzealous board members and greens chairmen who think they're going to host a major championship or become the most exclusive club in town, even when the club and course aren't suited. We encourage any club to have a culture analysis done so they understand the proper market position both now and in the future.

One question that clubs need to consider is how sustainable the pandemic surge in golf is, long term. We're seeing some signs and trends, but we don't know yet. Plenty of clubs are incurring substantial debt to make these improvements, and I

have attended conferences where the major management companies have stated publicly that they are ready and waiting to take on clubs deeply in debt should the economy take a negative turn. No club is ‘bullet proof’ and future planning needs to take this consideration seriously.

Real, sustainable growth of the game has been a challenge. The pressures of inflation are real, but things can be done differently to manage costs, whether it be how you build a bunker, or how you maintain the course. I am a big advocate of clubs looking to improve and to invest in their golf facilities, but it should be done intelligently.

Golf course architects can advise clubs not only on where and when to invest but also where and when they can design and build more cost-effectively. What I call the ‘space race’ between clubs all trying to outdo one another has led to not only excessive costs, but often excessive debt, which has been fatal to many clubs. There are numerous ways to accomplish goals and still create a quality product. Outspending the next club shouldn’t be the goal. We have a concept in the appraisal/valuation world called ‘the theory of contribution’, which states that one should spend no more on an improvement than its contribution to value. That’s often tough to accomplish with golf courses, but if the attempt is made, it can be the difference between long term success and economic failure.

An architect’s role is to ensure the project satisfies the members *and* is



Tomorrow's members want the golf club to be a fun place that the entire family can enjoy

accomplished in an economically feasible manner. Warren Buffet sums it up perfectly: “price is what you pay, value is what you get.”

Tomorrow’s member is not looking for ‘your father’s country club’. They want the club to be a fun place, where the entire family can enjoy the facilities and not be burdened by arcane and overbearing rules, as well as excessive costs. Golf course architects can contribute to this by building courses that are challenging for strong players and fun for recreational golfers with lots of tee options, modern practice facilities, walkable for health-conscious younger players and playable for older folks. I don’t think it’s focusing on ‘that person’ as much as multiple groups. It’s a balancing act between challenging and playable, but today’s best architects are recognizing that.

Enhancing return on investment (ROI) means designing and building efficiently. Not every course requires SubAir in the greens or a six-row irrigation system. They may, however, need larger tee areas and greens with more pin placements if high traffic is anticipated. It also

means designing to appeal to a broader segment and ensuring that they have fun. Golf is hard enough and while it seems to attract lots of players, retaining those players has been a consistent challenge.

In the UK, golf is an everyman’s game, but in the United States, it has become a status symbol which turns lots of people off. Broadening the game’s appeal is good for everybody, including those who seek to make it aspirational. The architect plays a big role in both club culture and ROI because when people talk about golf courses, the architect is often a defining feature, and they play a big role in both the cost and desirability of the course. The term value-engineering is one often used in conjunction with the best projects and any appraiser would encourage on any project.

Architects all want to do great work that they be proud of. That work may not be building a course for a major championship, it may be making the course fun for the members and keeping them happy. They, along with financial performance, are both measures of success. ●