

# An Architect's "Inside" Look

by **ROGER G. RULEWICH**

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**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO I recall making what I thought was a profound statement to a friend who had been a client and who was at the time an aspiring architect. I argued that we were entering the golden age of golf course architecture, and he, being a traditionalist of sorts, and a very opinionated one at that, violently disagreed with me. I still think the golden age has arrived, and that we are in the midst of it.

What started this age? What are its characteristics, and where is it going? Economic prosperity, player demand that has outstripped supply, and growing and changing housing markets have provided the impetus for new course construction. From the last boom in the 1960s, when we were building over 350 courses a year, to a low of 100 new course openings in 1980, the pace has now quickened to over 200 a year. If we are to match golf's growth and meet the demands of the predicted boom through the turn of the century, we will need to open at least one new course a day for the next decade. Growth hinges on the creation of new facilities; it is supply driven, and if it doesn't keep pace, we risk turning people away from the game.

Claims have been written lately that we are either upholding, changing, or just plain ignoring the evolution of course design and the traditions of the game. As in any art form, beauty is in

the eye of the beholder. There are a lot of beholders in golf, and they don't keep their opinions to themselves. Curtis Strange says, "We are building crap."

Everyone's perspective is a little different. The pros have to play our courses, and how these courses suit their games understandably affects their judgements. In selecting and evaluating courses as sites for its championships, the USGA applies its own criteria. The various professional tours, tournament officials, sponsors, and the press consider many things when they evaluate courses. The developer and the resort operator probably have different perspectives altogether. While the bottom line of sales stills rules, there is an awakening concern for quality.

Then we must consider the golfers themselves, who pay the bills and support the entire structure of the game. Their perspective is certainly important to the architect, or should be if he wants to create something of lasting value.

Early architects didn't have the critics that we have today. To be sure, their work engendered opinions from all quarters, but their exposure was nothing like it is now. Their courses have existed for a long time, and the critics have been able to refine their judgements over the years. Time is a good test, but is not available to the modern course, the new kid on the block. Familiarity can breed contempt, but with golf courses it more often breeds acceptance, loyalty, and even love. Remodeling work is so difficult for the architect for this reason, because that old hole, green, or bunker has its fans, who are used to it and attached to it in some real way.

This is also the golden age of everything associated with golf, and that is different as well. It's not hard to understand when you consider that the National Golf Foundation has been able to characterize golf as a \$20 billion industry. It's staggering when you think of it, but perhaps not so much so when you consider the spending on equipment, clothing, membership and green fees, travel and accommodations, investments in golf course property, construction, and the maintenance and upkeep of our courses, plus sponsors,

TV, and golfers' support of the professional tours.

With this level of spending, golf promotion has also entered a golden age. The developer, in particular, has a real need to expose golf facilities to potential consumers. This has spawned competitive sales programs, advertising campaigns, and media coverage of all kinds. The number of publications, magazines, and journals available to us is amazing, and, to me at least, overwhelming. I feel an obligation to read them all, but if I did, I wouldn't have time for the design work I love best. So my bookshelf is overflowing with piles of these publications I fully intend to read, but probably never will.

Common to most all of these publications are pictures; gorgeous, mouth-watering pictures of golf holes. Some of the magazines seem to exist for this alone, and if you take out the resort sections, advertising supplements, and tour promotions, hardly anything is left. Golf course photography has become a fine art, and there are dozens of people making a living doing it. Did you notice it was a vintage year for golf calendars with tempting and beautiful pictures of spectacular holes? Even architects published them.

The impact of all this on golf course architecture shouldn't be underestimated. Not long ago the architect was anonymous. Oh, you might see a credit for Robert Trent Jones or Dick Wilson, but even *Golf Digest* failed to mention the architect in its first lists of America's best courses. What a turnaround today when you open up a magazine and find a four-page automobile-style spread asking you to "Drive Our 1989 Fazio." Or almost every advertisement describing a golf course as the latest and finest effort of one of us. Or a publisher devoting his pages to trademarks of the architects included in their top-50 ranking: "Mr. Green Genes," "The Natural," "Mr. Sand Man," "Pinball Wizard," "Old Man River," and so on.

This exposure is gratifying, to be sure, and was aided by writers like Frank Hannigan, with his definitive article on A. W. Tillinghast (*GOLF JOURNAL*, May, 1973) and others who wrote on the

major architects of the 20th century, including MacKenzie, Macdonald, and Ross. The book *The Golf Course*, by Geoff Cornish and Ron Whitten, generated surprising interest, and helps everyone find the architect of his course.

The lists of the "best" courses, which every publication tries to make distinctive, all indicate the architects responsible. Just recently, *Golf Digest*, in four of five issues, featured: (1) "The Dream Short Course," (2) "The 75 Best Resort Courses," (3) "The 75 Best Public Courses," and (4) "The Best New Courses of the Year." These lists have created tremendous interest with the public, and inclusion is jealously sought after by owners, developers, and, yes, architects as well.

The promotional value is not lost on public relations people, and you see ads referring to the list their course has made. A recent ad really stretched the point with a quote from Ron Whitten, of *Golf Digest*: "A possible nomination for best new course honors in '88."

But the perception is that the public is interested in this information and in the architect of the course they might play. This interest in architecture was brought home clearly to me and to the *Golf Digest* editors when they ran the Armchair Architect contest, in 1987. Asked to design a single finishing hole, given a specific site, 20,000 entries deluged the magazine and the judges, of which I was one. *Digest* thought 1,500 entries was about all such a feature would generate. There are a lot of architects out there.

But all of this exposure can be good news and bad news. It is good that the quality of the architects' work is recognized, but it is bad that we are tempted, even pressured, to create courses that are spectacular, photogenic, and difficult to a fault. In the worst sense, it is one-upmanship and status-seeking, but in the best sense it is a striving for quality and distinction. It has brought out a new spirit among the architects. As clients demand more of their golf courses, the architect must stretch his imagination, take on greater challenges, reach for new ideas, and frankly take more chances.

The sites he is given (or selects, if he is fortunate) today are more varied in location, terrain, climate, soils, vegetation, and construction techniques. He is asked to build courses where it would have been unthinkable not too long ago — in the desert, in the mountains, in flat, featureless tableland, in swamps and marshes, and on rocky soils or

where no soil exists at all. Add to this the growing list of environmental regulations and the difficulty of getting permits for building where soil erosion, wetlands, and stream and groundwater contamination are issues. These are critical concerns that didn't exist when many older courses were done.

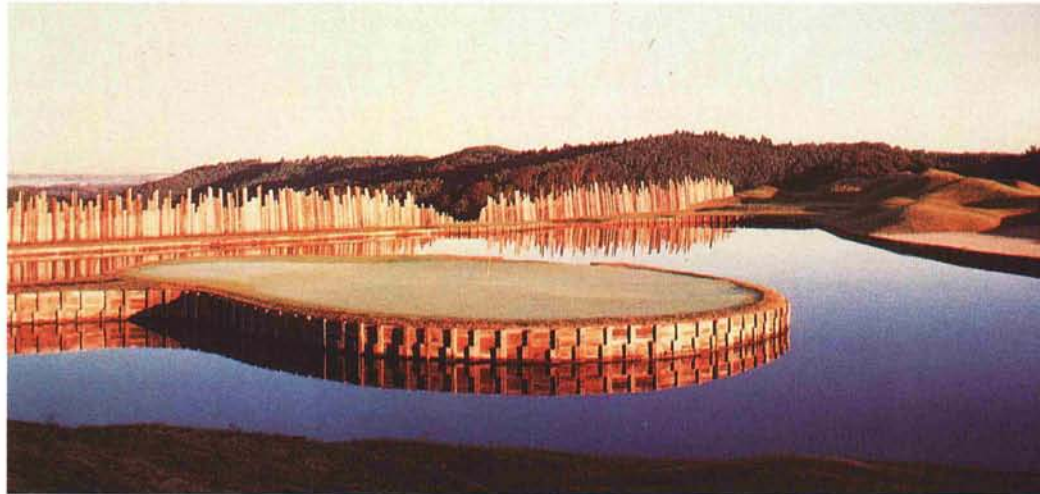
On the other hand, these difficulties and constraints have had strong, positive influences on contemporary design. The modern developer has become familiar with the environmental issues, and he accepts the necessary approval process as it relates not only to the golf course, but to other site development as well. They can see the benefit of preserving natural corridors and open spaces that become real assets rather than liabilities to the overall design. They are not afraid to select sites with physical problems to be overcome, since these will ultimately enhance the character

and aesthetic appeal of the golf course. They ask their environmental planners and golf course architects to define and then solve these problems with methods that create new and enhanced settings for golf.

With these factors influencing his design, the architect is forced to find new solutions, to be innovative, and to stretch his imagination even further. These problems require a non-traditional approach to design. There has been a lot of lip service given to the Scottish influence on both design and the maintenance of our courses. Many new courses are described today as links or dune style, with the more natural look. Anytime you cut back on irrigating, fertilizing, and mowing the rough and non-play areas, it is defended as being in the best Scottish tradition.

Ben Wright, well known British commentator, writer, and now developer of

*Rare not so long ago, island greens are becoming commonplace.*



golf courses, has some strong words for architects. He says, "It is the ridiculous obsession with what is imagined to be Scottish and traditional that has caused a rash of largely laughable courses," and he adds that "designers should forget forever" this obsession.

Well, architecture has always been and always will be, I think, an eclectic art form. Existing courses, tested and true, have always provided models for playability, shot values, and appealing design. It's not a new idea. George Crump at Pine Valley and C. B. Macdonald at the National Golf Links of America took the British courses which they visited and surveyed as models before they began their designs. The trick is to know how to do it, how to adapt models to new situations, and not merely reproduce or copy existing holes.

Traditional influences are strong in contemporary design, even as new solutions seem to ignore them. In the name of tradition we are borrowing some very obvious elements from the older courses: contour and undulation, pronounced mounding, grassy hollows, steep-faced bunkers, sharp edges, revetted and wood-faced slopes, double greens, longer roughs, and extensive waste areas. These are becoming common on so many new courses, and they've become familiar to all of us through their pictorial exposure. One hole does not a golf course make, but how often we talk of "the picture hole" on our course.

Perhaps we are overdoing it by incorporating so many of these elements. It may be a reaction to that tremendous output of courses in the 1960s that produced to many similar and bland ones. But don't cast too many stones at that era. There was also subtlety and restraint, which is not too apparent on the contemporary scene. The architect today wants to make a statement, to make his course distinctive and different from all the rest. With the exposure he's given today, he is encouraged to experiment, to be more imaginative, and create monuments to himself and his clients.

Certainly we go too far at times, and we are tempted to repeat and exaggerate the look that attracts attention today. We are subject to all the fashions and fads of the times. We want to be trend setters, we have egos, we seek approval, and we enjoy a bit of fame or notoriety. We also want to survive, get new commissions, and pull down the plums with spectacular sites and unlimited budgets. But there is a trap in all this, and it is



*Striking, but extremely difficult to play or maintain.*



sprung on the players, the superintendents, and even the owners who initially encouraged us.

The introduction of all these eye-catching elements can make extremely difficult conditions for play and upkeep if they are carried too far. We can defend par against the attack of the pros and best players, but we sometimes overlook the average golfer, and the women, juniors, and seniors who have to struggle through the hazards, playing recovery golf, and missing the fun and pleasure of a variety of shotmaking. We are fond of describing our courses as totally flexible, and we say they present a fair challenge to all players, but we don't always achieve this.

What we do is make life very difficult and expensive for the operator. We make maintenance very labor intensive with extraordinary amounts of hand work. Some courses have a full-time crew of eight on Flymos. We create a multiplicity of mowing patterns, make uniform irrigation a real task, create drainage problems rather than solve them, and make a trial of normal operations like fertilizing, aerifying, top-dressing, and spraying.

The industry has responded, incredibly well I think, with the tools to make these tasks easier or even possible. While it's fun to joke about solving the world's unemployment problem with the labor required for course maintenance,

we risk pricing the game out of reach of the average golfer, and discouraging the growth we all want. The architects are also doing things to ease maintenance and enhance their design at the same time. Large or multiple teeing areas give variety to play and avoid wear. Soil and drainage structure on greens and to a lesser extent on tees is vastly improved, thanks in no small part to the Green Section. The phrase USGA greens is still overused and abused, but we're getting there. Solving drainage problems throughout the course during the construction phase is not only a major concern, it is often a necessity when environmental constraints dictate. You all know what hell there is to pay to solve them after the course is in play.

We have more sophisticated control of irrigation. A greater variety of grasses and ground covers are being used. We think new varieties of drought-resistant and low-maintenance turfgrass species the Green Section is developing will open new doors for us.

It seems we are making management easier on the one hand and more difficult on the other. This is inevitably true with so many courses being designed by different architects under different circumstances and for different clients. The trick is to maintain balance in all this. With the means at our disposal to overcome difficult terrain, we can convert a piece of ground that seems unre-

ceptive into a beautiful and playable golf course. The early architects didn't have these means. But these are means to ends, and we shouldn't be carried away with our new technology and capabilities. They're here to serve our purposes, not to dictate them.

Our understanding of the traditions and models of the distant and recent past are brought to each new project. Our previous experience, our knowledge of the techniques of construction, and our own prejudices and egos are brought along with us. I hope we also bring an open mind, and that we listen to people — our clients, the planners and engineers, the managers, and the golf course superintendents.

Believing as I do that this is a golden age, I believe we are succeeding. Time will tell, and later generations of critics will have a better perspective for making this judgement. Any one of us is only getting a hint of what's happening today in contemporary architecture. It's hard to be in the midst of a boom and keep in touch with everything that's going on.

I feel confident that if architects love and respect the game, and listen to the people who play it, we'll keep the boom and the saga alive. These players who enjoy the game, who use and support our courses and create the demand for new ones, will then judge this as the most productive era of creative golf course design.