

Art in Golf Architecture

By Max H. Behr

"The Meditations of the Peripatetic Golfer," in a recent number of *THE BULLETIN*, have led the Peripatetic Golfer to quote Goethe: "Art is long and time is fleeting." He adds the remark that "if time keeps on fleeting, another hundred years should reveal that it takes a real artist to make a golf course a thing of beauty." Whoever is the author of these pointed observations has here offered a challenge to a phase of golf architecture which is still in course of realization. And it is so, because we are too apt to mistake that which is pretty, or picturesque, for the beautiful. Prettiness, although pleasing, is a transient thing incident to the fancies of the moment; but beauty rests upon the fundamental,—its lineaments are the surface revelation of a perfection that lies beneath. Where beauty is lacking there must likewise be a lack of intelligence. Indeed, beauty may well prove to be the economic solvent to that continual evolution in the way of innovations and alterations to which most all golf courses are subject. If the holes have been most advantageously routed in the beginning, beauty should then be the ideal to be striven for in construction, for beauty practically always accompanies economy of structure. When we perceive it, we first become aware of truth; and only in the presence of truth do we recognize stability and permanence.

What, then, is art in golf architecture? What are the values we should seek to achieve it?

If we analyze golf architecture in general, we shall discover that, wherever beauty manifests itself in the necessary modifications of the ground, wherever the work done seems inevitably to be so, we can be relatively sure the work promises to endure. Experience has taught us that golf courses constructed with no higher end than merely to create a playground around which one may strike a ball, present the golfer with no more than a landscape brutalized with the ideas of some other golfer. That work of this kind should come, in time, to be picked to pieces is only what we should expect. Every golfer, whether he has a right to them or not, has ideas of his own upon the subject. And this is so because golf is an emotional adventure, and it is the emotions of man that fertilize the seed bed of his ideas. It is only reasonable, then, that the history of every artificial appearing golf course should be one of continual change. But, if we look closely, we shall find that these changes rarely involve natural hazards,—unconsciously, the veriest tyro at golf realizes he is contesting with Nature, and where he meets her unadorned, unblemished by the hand of man, he meets her without criticism.

If this be true, then indeed it behooves us, even if at all times we can not succeed in creating the beautiful, at least to achieve the semblance of the inevitable where we must impress our ideas upon the stubborn natural material to lend it to the playing of golf. We can not, obviously, proceed to lay our law upon the ground regardless of geological law which, in the first place, is responsible for its conformation. Golf architecture is not an art of representation; it is, essentially, an art of interpretation. And an interpretative art allows freedom to fancy only through obedience to the law which dominates the medium, a law that lies outside ourselves. The medium of the artist is paint, and he becomes its master; but the medium of the golf architect is the surface of the earth, over which the forces of nature alone are master.

In golf architecture, then, we are in the presence of an art closely akin to landscape gardening. What are the requisites to perfection in this art? Repton, the great landscape gardener of the XVIIIth Century, has perhaps most concisely and perfectly stated them.

"First, it must display the natural beauties and hide the natural defects of every situation. Secondly, it should give the appearance of extent and freedom by carefully disguising or hiding the boundary. Thirdly, it must studiously conceal every interference of art, however expensive, by which the scenery is improved, making the whole appear the production of nature only. And fourthly, all objects of mere convenience or comfort, if incapable of being made ornamental, or of becoming proper parts of the general scenery, must be removed or concealed."

It may never be possible to live up to such an ideal in golf architecture. In our endeavors to create a beautiful bit of nature, there are tees, greens, fairgreens, bunkers and the rough to be considered. Nevertheless, where it is necessary to make changes in the earth's surface to create these features, their lines and gradations can be made to seem as if they had always been, and their civilized aspect, because necessary to golf, will not be an affront to the beauty they reveal. And this will, more and more, become incumbent upon us to do, for the golfer of the future will demand of a golf course that "relief to be found in the æsthetic pleasure to be derived from landscape which expresses not man's will but the operation of natural forces."

Every modification of the ground must then be an individual problem by itself. And, to succeed with each, the golf architect must work in the spirit of the landscape gardener. He is not a perpetrator of ideas regardless; his ideas are inspired by and result from the most intimate perception of each actual bit of ground with which he has to do. His rearrangement of its surface must reveal that which appears real. Thus his ideas can not be subject to his own will, but must be subject to the natural operation of laws that lie outside himself; and he can be only successful if, in visualizing what is to be, he, in imagination, works with the tools of Nature, the elements. Of these, inland, undoubtedly the most influential is the erosion of water; by the sea, in links land, wind is perhaps the major molding element. An apt illustration of the proper use of one of these would be in work done abutting upon running water. If the life represented by this element in motion is not projected into the modifications of the ground by one, or a number, of the multifarious forms it occasions, and thus made to seem responsible for the new dispensation, the chances are the work will appear artificial. Therefore, in the prosecution of his designs, if the architect correctly uses the forces of nature to express them and thus succeeds in hiding his hand, then, only, has he created that illusion which can still all criticism.

In its broader aspects, golf architecture has always been an interpretative art; that is, courses have always been laid out taking as much advantage of the topography of the ground as possible. But, at this point, the vision of what is to be usually ceases—it is so easy to retreat within the order of the mind and escape the disorder of nature. And what is the result? Simply the imposition of ideas upon situations which are in no way fitted by nature to receive them; whereas, if the architect had continued as he commenced, endeavoring to perceive how it would be possible to render order out of disorder and yet make the result appear the action of natural forces, he would be, as he should be, an artist.

It must be evident that there are two methods in which golf architecture is pursued. In the one we see the architect, with plastescine or contour lines, inventing regardless of the nonconformity of situations to his ideas; and, thus, feeling himself free to modify the ground to his will, it is his destiny to be in bondage to the winds of fashion and reflect in his work the psychology of his time. Driven by a self-complacency in his omnipotence, the bark of his architecture, without the rudder of geological law, must drift from one fallacy of design to another. Only thus it would seem that "freak" architecture can be explained.

But the golf architect who looks upon his work as a true art will ever be humble, for his search is beauty. With so high a purpose, his *will* is ever subservient to his quest. It becomes the handmaid by which he brings to fruition his intuitions of truth. He must first feel before he thinks. And thus with no matrix of irrelevant ideas to dim his sight, he, with innocent eyes, perceives the forms of nature and rearranges them as they might once have been, or anticipates what they are to be, blending with his work that modicum of necessity that golf demands.

But when the laws of the medium, the surface of the earth, are made light of, from which alone true architecture can spring, its body becomes diseased and is subject to the inroads of parasitic ideas. Sand is now being used, not solely for its legitimate purpose—a hazard, but as a species of lighthouse to guide the player in estimating distance. Thus a crutch is thrown into the landscape upon which the eye of the golfer may lean, and the hazard of indeterminate space is to that extent mitigated. And greens are now being purposely tilted toward play, and enfeebled skill rejoices. The upshot of such an unsubstantial philosophy of golf must be to reveal every feature of nature; and, with nature robbed of its mystery, golf must degenerate to a *battue*, as have certain other sports, such as shooting, where birds and animals are driven down the muzzles of the guns. And thus true golf, an heroic and adventuresome pastime of the spirit, must become a mongrel, a cross between a sport and a game.

And this abortive philosophy of golf would seem to be sustained by that stricture of the Peripatetic Golfer, "All hidden architecture is bad." Should the golfer, in all cases, become immediately aware of what his fate is? Is golf to be robbed of all illusion? Is the walk between shots to be, only, either a tragic or a dull affair? *Does not the very essence of a sport lie in that suspense between the commencement of an action and the knowledge of its result?* Is it not this suspense that, in hunting, shooting, fishing, and in all sports, sublimates the mind and heart into a region of no knowledge, a region where, for a moment, we are permitted to dream impossible things and become heroes? In games we satisfy the physical demands of our bodies and the quick objective use of our senses, but in sports it is the nourishment of the imagination that makes them so lovable. In a game, we are face to face with a duplicate of ourselves; but, in a sport, we stand before the great unknown, wooing her with the virtue of our skill, hoping to be enfolded within her arms, but never sure that at the end we shall not find ourselves outcast. Surely, the maid of our heart should not reveal all her charms to us at once.

Leaf mold.—This is a splendid material to use in a compost mixture, and that is the way it should be utilized. Mix it with top soil and well-rotted manure. The longer this compost pile is allowed to stand, the better.