Golf Architecture A WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE VOLUME ONE

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What is golf architecture? Tom Doak

Great golf architects have come from every background imaginable. James Braid and Jack Nicklaus were professional golfers, and Alister Mackenzie was famously a medical doctor. Charles Blair Macdonald was a stockbroker, Pete Dye an insurance salesman, George Crump a hotel owner, and William Flynn, a greenkeeper. All had a love for the game of golf, but many of them managed to design and construct their first masterworks with almost no formal training for their new avocation. How did they do it? And what is at the root of golf design?

I have many friends and acquaintances who envy the career I chose, though few seem to understand what I do. Some clearly believe they could do it themselves: that golf course design is no more complicated than deciding how one wants a golf hole to play. Others, describing it in the same terms as drawing or sculpture, must never have seen my own pathetic attempts at freehand sketching.

In high school, I was a mathematics whiz, and so I spent my first year of college at Massachusetts Institute of Technology learning that I did not have a burning desire to be an engineer. Advised that landscape architecture was the best academic background for golf architecture, I transferred to Cornell University and learned what I could from drawing planting plans and grading parking lots. Years later, I was asked to take a personality test, which pegged me to a tee, except for the baffling recommendation that engineering would be an ideal career for me. Had I taken a wrong turn somewhere?

Certainly, golf course design is not without its engineering applications: civil engineering for the grading of the course and hydraulic engineering for the planning of the irrigation system. Pete Dye once told me that ninetyfive per cent of the job is making drainage look good, and there's a lot of truth to that. Yet I had never really thought of routing holes and shaping them as a form of engineering.

The classic definition of engineering is the application of a system to a specific situation. In golf architecture, this would be the application of the game of golf, with all its complexities and varying appeals, to each individual piece of land. OPPOSITE: Thirteenth hole, Pacific Dunes, Oregon, USA. (Photo by Wood Sabold © Bandon Dunes Resort.)



Another view of the magnificent golfing terrain and scenery at Pacific Dunes. Tenth hole facing north-west. (Photo by Wood Sabold © Bandon Dunes Resort.)



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This is precisely what the golf architect must do. One tries to fit golf shots and strategies to the contours of the land. Green sites and fairway landing areas should be put in spots with an appropriate amount of elbow room and surrounding difficulty. Tees are located where the important features will be in view, while affording an easy transition from the previous hole. Fairway contours affect the golfer's stance and the action of the ball after it lands. In the larger picture, we are putting together a three-dimensional puzzle with an eighteen-piece (or perhaps, a seventytwo piece) solution.

Two aspects make the job especially appealing to the engineering mind. The first is that changing one piece of the puzzle will have ramifications for at least one other piece, a fact lost on many critics of golf courses. The critic might believe, for instance, that the fourth hole would have made a better par-3 than a par-4. Perhaps so, but would the third hole have been as good if the green were extended further on? If we didn't want five or six par-3 holes on the course, which of the others would have had to be extended into a par-4, and how

would that have affected the holes around it? Unfortunately, many modern architects have simplified things for themselves by rationalising that golf carts reduce the need for easily connected holes. This is one of the reasons we have less variety of golf holes today, and is the main reason golf takes longer to play. A great example of golf course routing is Mackenzie's plan for the third through sixth holes at Royal Melbourne, at what later became the West Course. If the same holes were built today, many golfers would criticise the fourth hole for its blind tee shot, which even Mackenzie would have admitted was less than ideal. But the routing of the fourth up over the hill made the third, fifth and sixth holes possible, and his addition of bold, carry bunkers at the top of the hill made the fourth both dramatic and unique. Indeed, the fourth may well be the best hole of the lot, although Mackenzie himself probably did not visualise that it would turn out so.

The other interesting aspect of golf design to the engineering mind is that each puzzle is different, and none offers a definitive solution. Apart from the subjective nature of design, a 200-acre property is so complex, and the rules of golf design so free-form that it is impossible to consider every solution. In fact, few golf course critics seem able to separate the art from the canvas—a sad truth, which makes it more difficult for young designers to achieve recognition for their efforts with lesser properties and modest budgets.

At the dawn of golf architecture, the field was dominated by golf professionals and greenkeepers, only few of whom had any real talent for solving puzzles. In the boom of the twenties, bright minds from a variety of backgrounds were captivated by the game of golf, and a rush of outstanding golf courses was born. I believe the new generation of architects has similar promise. Just as Tiger Woods hits golf shots which Old Tom Morris could not imagine, tomorrow's golf architects will create original and exciting golf holes, as unique as the land they are built upon. FOLLOWING PAGES: (left) Fifth hole Pacific Dunes, facing south-east. (right) Thirteenth hole facing north. (Photos by Wood Sabold © Bandon Dunes Resort.)



