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Greens of envy

The link between green design and maintenance
How modern day green speeds have influenced contour severity
Flattering, rather than flattening, the landscape



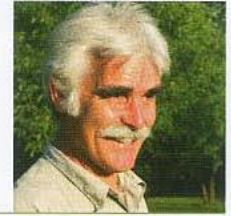
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Real intelligent design

Intelligent design is the term that has replaced creationism in the fundamentalist Christian battle against the forces of Darwinism. But in golf course architecture, another form of intelligent design is important – because a golf course is an artefact with specific functions and only courses designed intelligently in respect of those functions will be acclaimed. Intelligent design is what golf course architecture is about.

To make balls fly further and straighter manufacturers match new materials with changing requirements. Engineers develop new maintenance and irrigation equipment. Biologists and chemists create new varieties to ensure lush, faster grass. They all do this by numerous small and subtle changes over time – evolution. Improvements are preserved, failures abandoned – natural selection.

How do evolution and selection affect golf course design? On the scientific and technical level, it's quite simple. Drainage that doesn't work gets repaired. Dead grass gets over-seeded. On the craft level, greens that run too fast get rebuilt, uneven tees are reshaped. But the heart is the art, an altogether more complex story. The evolution of art is dynamic, subjective and reflective but there exist constants of aesthetics relating to harmony of form, colour, and taste.

Nothing stands still; golf course design evolves, as does everything else. Over the past twenty years, two major influences have significantly altered our perceptions of what a modern golf course should be. They have resulted in two opposed styles of design. The resulting polarisation has placed modern architects into two distinct camps. There remains a third group, the vast majority – the style-free zone, the opportunistic and the hesitant.

The word 'environment' did not exist in the golf dictionary before the mid eighties. Since then it has defined what gets built where, and how, in Europe, in many parts of the US, and in the rest of the developed world. But not, sadly in the developing world, with the consequent rise of rabid anti-golf

movements in places like Thailand, the Philippines and Mexico. However a small group of architects have embraced the notion of working within an environment and creating a new one, producing excellent courses without excess.

The 'Signature' factor has been slowly creeping up on us since the late seventies

"The scale of the Kingsbarns achievement can probably only be fully appreciated by an envious golf course architect"

when Jack, Arnold and Gary started to lose tournaments and decided to raise income by signing designs. The Signatures' primary function has been to sell real estate, package tourism and golf club memberships. Nonetheless their influence on golf course architecture has been immense, on a par with the environmental factors, and far more than that of changing technology.

There is nothing that says an environmentally friendly golf course is a bad one or that a Signature course is automatically good. Environmental issues act as a break on the ever-expanding requirements of ostentatious bad taste, conspicuous consumption and filthy lucre.

Where there are no environmental constraints and a great deal of money the Signatures have taken over the territory. The shining example is Dubai where Signatures compete ferociously to have the biggest, bestest course ever. Decent courses built only ten years ago have been bulldozed away to make room for new Signature courses. Dubai is currently in the running to win the International Association of Golf Tour Operators (IAGTO) Award for

Established Destination of the Year. To increase its chances Dubai Golf has invited 70 top tour operators and journalists for a weekend beano in Dubai just a few weeks before the IAGTO ceremony.

Where there isn't much money and there are fierce environmental constraints the Signatures don't have a chance of doing their thing and minimalism is the only permissible option. In this case the average quality of the courses can be, at best, mediocre by Signature standards but golfer enjoyment is usually high. Austria is a case in point. Austria won the IAGTO Undiscovered Golf Destination Award in 2004.

In the middle ground we have the British Isles and the US with a combination of money and restrictions. Two recent seaside golf course developments have caught the attention of the golf press: Bandon Dunes on the west coast of America, and Kingsbarns, on the east coast of Scotland. Both courses have been highly praised for the quality of their sites, the naturalism of their architecture and their intense golfing interest.

The scale of the Kingsbarns achievement can probably only be fully appreciated by an envious golf course architect. It actually looks like what it's supposed to look like – a genuine links course. But built on a boring piece of farmland (with great views). A testimony to some remarkable teamwork between the owner, architect, constructor, shaper, green keeper and a geographer. This is not minimalism. To imitate the effortless anarchy of such a natural landscape demands great skill, perseverance, resources and that occasional ray of sunshine – luck.

When many courses built in Dubai have been bulldozed and replaced in a frenzied cycle of renewal, I think that Kingsbarns will sit alongside St Andrews for as long as golf is played in Scotland.

That is intelligent design. **GCA**

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