

Moving Heaven and Earth

By Chad Konecky

The most important moment in any round of golf happens years before tee-time on the pages of a blueprint

When Scottish-born golfer Willie Park, Jr. unveiled his design for what is now England's Sunningdale Old Course back in 1901, it marked the dawn of a new era. Park proposed considerable construction and earth-moving to create the course. Until that time, European courses typically were laid out by professional greens keepers, a process that involved setting greens, tees and hazards in natural locations, usually along the coast, with little or no alteration to the landscape. Park ultimately became an innovator in a new field – a profession in which designers used their skills and imagination to convert raw, intractable countryside into glorious golf courses.

It was the German classicist Goethe who called architecture “frozen music,” and, without question, there's a similarly elevated level of artistry associated with golf course design. Even the ASGCA brochure entitled “Selecting Your Golf Course Architect” likens a course designer's job to that of “a symphony conductor.”

A golf course architect must be capable of overseeing and offering input on every aspect of taking a golf course project from concept to reality. That means market analysis, site selection, cost estimation, permitting, master planning, detailed design, construction and grow-in. Oh yeah, they should also know the game of golf better than Johnny Miller.

Clearly, this is not a job for the Scotts Turf Builder guru next door who has himself within a couple putts of being a scratch golfer.

As a boy in Framingham, Brian Silva fancied himself the second coming of Johnny Bucyk. Hockey was his passion and he reckoned he was pretty good. Then his father, John, a golf course architect, took him to Worcester's now-defunct Eastern Hockey School.

“After 15 minutes on the ice with kids from Canada and other hockey hotbeds, I realized my hockey future was on the pond,” recalls Silva, 53, Golf World Magazine's Architect of the Year in 1999.

In the case of Brian Silva, hockey's loss was golf's gain. Courses like Cape Cod National, Shaker Hills, Black Rock Country Club and Waverly Oaks have sprung from Silva's mind.

His dizzying resume notwithstanding, Silva refuses to label himself an architect. The guy got his first job in course design 23 years ago, but he insists that the work he does is too much a work in progress to have earned such a title yet. This does not mean, however, that Silva lacks strong opinions about his vocation.

"It's easy for this profession to be too superficial," says Silva. "It's not about the features. The bunker sand, the super-fast greens, the waterfalls and the stone walls: Those are the pews. Every church has pews. The overall structure and makeup of the golf course is what's important. The skeleton. The muscles and skin may be gorgeous, but if you don't get the skeleton right, you're doomed to mediocrity."

Keep Silva talking for more than an hour and he starts to sound like a hybrid of Darwin and Da Vinci. But what resonates more than anything else is his passion for the game of golf. He believes course designs that lack attention to golf strategy are course designs devoid of soul.

"A good course has to be correct structurally," explains Silva.

"From the birds-eye view. Look at the tops of the tees, the fairways and the greens. Is there variety? Variance in the angles of play, the routes a golfer can take, the way players are given an opportunity to 'fail positively.' That's attention to golf strategy.

"Producing a course is about doing layer upon layer of tasks and if you get one layer wrong, it all collapses," he adds. "You can change external things fairly easily, but if the golf course isn't correct structurally, it's like a beautiful paint job on a car that doesn't start six days out of seven."

If you ask Brian Silva, the actual design and construction of a course is the easy part; the craft within the art.

“We have bulldozers, we have sophisticated irrigation and drainage techniques and, hopefully, we have our wits about us,” says Silva. “Sure, it’s difficult. But issues like how do you get a dogleg around an existing water feature or how do you meet a new financial challenge or how do you build a course within the requested timeline – these are things within our control and means.

“Those things aren’t problems, they’re why the craft exists,” he continues. “If those issues didn’t arise, any guy who designs cemeteries could, with golf knowledge, design golf courses.”

The trend of designing to the lowest common denominator – yet with enough length to keep courses from being over-exploited by pros – seems antithetical to the basic rules of golf. As Silva is all too happy to point out.

“Golf has the greatest equalizing system in all of sports: the handicap,” says Silva. “Because of it, I can play Tiger Woods in a round and have a chance. Why take the character out of all these courses – those unique, quirky, innovative touches that can only come from an architect – just to quadruple the impact of the handicap?”

With as many as 500 new U.S. courses projected to be built by the end of this decade, it remains unclear what the future holds for the changing face of golf course architecture. What is certain is that the profession will forever be a sanctuary where golf passion and golf lunacy can commingle.

“Let’s be honest, this is the greatest gig you could ask for,” says Silva. “You couldn’t hope to have a better job than this.”

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