

Incorporating blinding white bunker sand into environments where it didn't exist is not only expensive, but it takes away that enchanted feeling of playing in a native setting. Worse, it says to the world, "We don't care what anyone else thinks."

Is that a statement golf can afford to make?

Small Greens Are Overrated

It has often been said that architects have designs for 18 greens and that the same ones are used over and over again on the various layouts. A successful architect of today does not follow that system. His greens are born on the ground and made to fit each particular hole.

—William Flynn

There is one particularly irritating form of revisionist golf architecture history that keeps getting in the way of sound course restoration work. It's the belief that small greens were the old time architects' best ally, and thus, small greens must be a sign of sound design in any era.

After all, big greens can't be any good. They're too easy to hit with today's distances and equipment. The old architects surely knew this would happen and designed accordingly.

Wrong!

History purportedly tells us that master designers like Mackenzie and Till-inghamst designed greens on the small side. The telltale sign of genius, is to be found in green size. Big greens are for average courses; small equals greatness.

The old architects did *not* design "small" greens. And they certainly never celebrated small greens as something to be considered the measure of quality, or something to be emulated. Only occasionally did they build a green under 3,500 square feet.

Even with plenty of evidence showing how things used to be, we still hear golf announcers remark that tiny greens have that "old style" character. And there are plenty of everyday golfers, who insist that saucer plate putting surfaces make their course the masterpiece that it is.

With technology making the sport easier, small greens are regarded as a pre-emptive strike against players using shorter irons for their approach shots.

But having too many small greens undermines the character of a course. They make it impossible for significant contours to be built, and the absence of

significant square footage eliminates space for unique hole locations that would add day-to-day variety.

Increased variety and additional options make golfers think, and we all know that thinking makes the game more difficult (in a fun way). And true exhilaration in golf comes from figuring out how to overcome difficulties and actually pulling off the shot you imagined.

Sure, it's fun to approach a small, tightly-bunkered green complex once in a while. Two or maybe three under 4,500 square feet can spice things up. But besides the obvious maintenance benefits of larger greens, it is fun to play on well-designed surfaces that offer as many as ten distinct hole locations. A quick bit of research reveals that many classic green complexes once had fascinating corner hole locations, since lost over time to poor mowing practices or modification by clueless committees. Often these original green sizes are not restored because golfers believe their course is superior thanks to their petite greens.

The small-green myth has taken on even greater significance as modern architects struggle to build large putting surfaces with subtle character. Most modern greens are bulky, clumsily popping up out of the fairway like a tombstone. The precise construction requirements of the "USGA green" deserve some of the blame (the contours of the green surface must be matched on each layer below). Combine that with target golf and the rush to get courses built as soon as possible, and you see a lack of artistry or subtlety in modern green design.

The trick is to create a putting surface in the 7,000 square foot range and make it seem small. Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw recently achieved this at Hidden Creek Golf Club near Atlantic City. Superintendent Jeff Riggs has an average of 8,000 square feet of putting surface to maintain, yet the greens don't look or play nearly that large. The contours are bold but stretch out gently, and the greens tie in beautifully to the fairways, disguising their size.

Pay no attention to good golfers who insist that small putting surfaces make a design better. Bigger makes for more interesting golf when it comes to putting surfaces.

A Thing Unto Itself

Each hole must be a thing unto itself!

—Anonymous

We've all heard golfers proclaim the importance of trees and other assorted oddities employed to separate holes. It's almost as if the each-hole-unto-itself philosophy has some ancient biblical foundation. Perhaps it's Shakespearean.

That's it! A lost scene from "Hamlet," set in a contentious green committee meeting. After hours of laborious debate, one of the pro-tree planting characters jumps from his seat, waves his fist in a fury, and screams, "Thou shalt not tolerate such bland aesthetics; each hole must be a thing unto itself! Thou shalt plant trees for separation, no matter where the place!"

Golfers have believed for too long that great courses are respectable because each of their 18-holes sits by its lonesome. Each hole must be free of views of other golfers, even if it means lining the rear of a green with a straight row of spruces. The "we must not see other golfers from our hole" mentality has killed more turf and ruined more interesting holes than any other single architectural theory in golf.

Ironically, the very same golfers who want to plant lots of trees excessively or who fight to keep offensive and unnecessary trees around, usually happen to be the very same golfers who sit in the locker room playing cards, oblivious to Mr. Havercamp and his leathery body walking naked from the showers to his locker. The sight of men who bypass the towel rack and bare all for the world apparently is not offensive? Yet it's apocalyptic when you can see a threesome over on the eighth fairway while you put out on the fourth green?

The "each hole unto itself" virus has infected golfers because of the influence of a select group of ignorant architects whose design philosophy centers around the belief that hole-to-hole privacy is vital to happiness and peace on earth.

The obsession with plugging every visible gap to satisfy the sacred "each hole unto itself" dictum is costly and makes golf less fun to play by restricting playing corridors and blocking attractive views. More trees also make it tougher to grow grass.

So if it's not Shakespearean in origin, where did this mistaken idea originate? Some blame the creator of Pine Valley.

Supposedly, one of George Crump's reasons for building Pine Valley was his desire "to keep every hole free of view of any other." Yet at great expense he cut down every tree and dug up the roots as construction started. But somehow it has become "gospel" that the world's premier course is the best because each hole is by itself as the architect intended. Actually that's the *least* interesting aspect of its magnificent design. Recently, the club has been removing trees where Crump did not want them.

There have been indications that golfers are reluctantly moving away from the tree-lined hole obsession. Thanks to the educational efforts of many superintendents and architects, golfers are beginning to understand that trees used as frames merely make courses claustrophobic, overly penal and more expensive to maintain.

Fairway is returning to land previously covered by trees. Holes are no longer things unto themselves, and guess what?

The game not only survives, it improves when the trees come out.

Mature native trees, once screened from view, can now be appreciated for their majestic beauty and the legitimate punctuation they give to an open course. Turf is allowed to grow again. Golf can actually be played as it was meant to be. Best of all, golfers are learning that the sun will still rise in the east and set in the west after you remove a few superfluous trees.

Now, if we could just get golfers as outraged about naked men strolling through the locker room, we'd be making real progress.

Las Vegas Showgirl Design

A retired superintendent, Randy Wilson writes a monthly column for *Golfweek's Superintendent News*. In the November 7, 2003 issue, he summed up the beauty of Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore's many subtle modern designs and described what too many modern "signature" designs remind him of: Las Vegas showgirls! Wilson wrote:

"Crenshaw is gently steering us away from 'Las Vegas Showgirl' design, the philosophy that stresses excessive cosmetics, outrageous fathery costumes and artificial, surgically enhanced mounding. While the initial appeal of the showgirl is undeniable, she is an expensive date, a poor long-term prospect and not what we would bring home to meet Mother. We can grow old with the sweet and wholesome girl-next-door, the rough and tumble tomboy who needs little makeup to look good and enjoys the simpler things. The showgirl will abandon us at the first sign of financial weakness.

"It's time to thank Crenshaw for helping us rediscover the sweet and wholesome designs and keeping us from the tempting allure, the siren call of the showgirl golf course."