

Issue 36 | Winter 2017

BY DESIGN



Excellence in Golf Design from the American Society of Golf Course Architects



Looking
into
the future

Also: Design Excellence • David W. Gordon, ASGCA Fellow • Accessibility





Looking into the future

Adam Lawrence speaks with ASGCA members to find out how they think their profession will change between now and 2030.

Golf course architecture is not, generally, a business that changes too rapidly. Aside from the use of computer-aided design (CAD) systems to produce incredibly detailed construction drawings, today's business would not be particularly confusing to the generation of architects that founded ASGCA in the 1940s.

But change, when it does come, comes in spades, and we may be approaching a tipping point. The

crash of 2007 had a huge impact on the golf architecture business, and its full effects have not yet been felt. Since 2007, because of the slowdown in new course construction across the world, design firms have reconfigured themselves; the big-name 'signature' design firms have shrunk dramatically, all of them, and in general the typical golf course architect has gone from being a member of a firm with multiple designers to a one- or two-man band.

Why is this change coming now? Well, for starters, we are close to a significant generational shift in the design industry. Many of the names that have dominated the business for 40 years are close to the end of their careers.

Evolving skill sets

Back in 2009, ASGCA assembled a panel of members to investigate and map out the skills that the golf architect of the future would require. The panel, led by Jason Straka, ASGCA, and including Ian Andrew, ASGCA, the late John Harbottle, ASGCA, ASGCA Past President Dick Phelps, ASGCA Fellow, and Shane Witcombe, ASGCA, created a set of Core Skill Charts, focused separately on business skills and technical/design skills.

The charts made it clear that requirements change over time: from developments in construction processes, through designing for those with disabilities, to government regulation in general, the successful

golf course architect has always needed to keep his skills fresh.

“Golfers will always want to play golf. There will always be changes, shifts and resets to the game and golf course architecture. That is not new and architecture will

enhancement, water quality and the like. Golf course architecture will be more responsive to the various ecosystems producing more unusual and interesting layouts, promoting matchplay over stroke or medal play. There will be a greater demand for

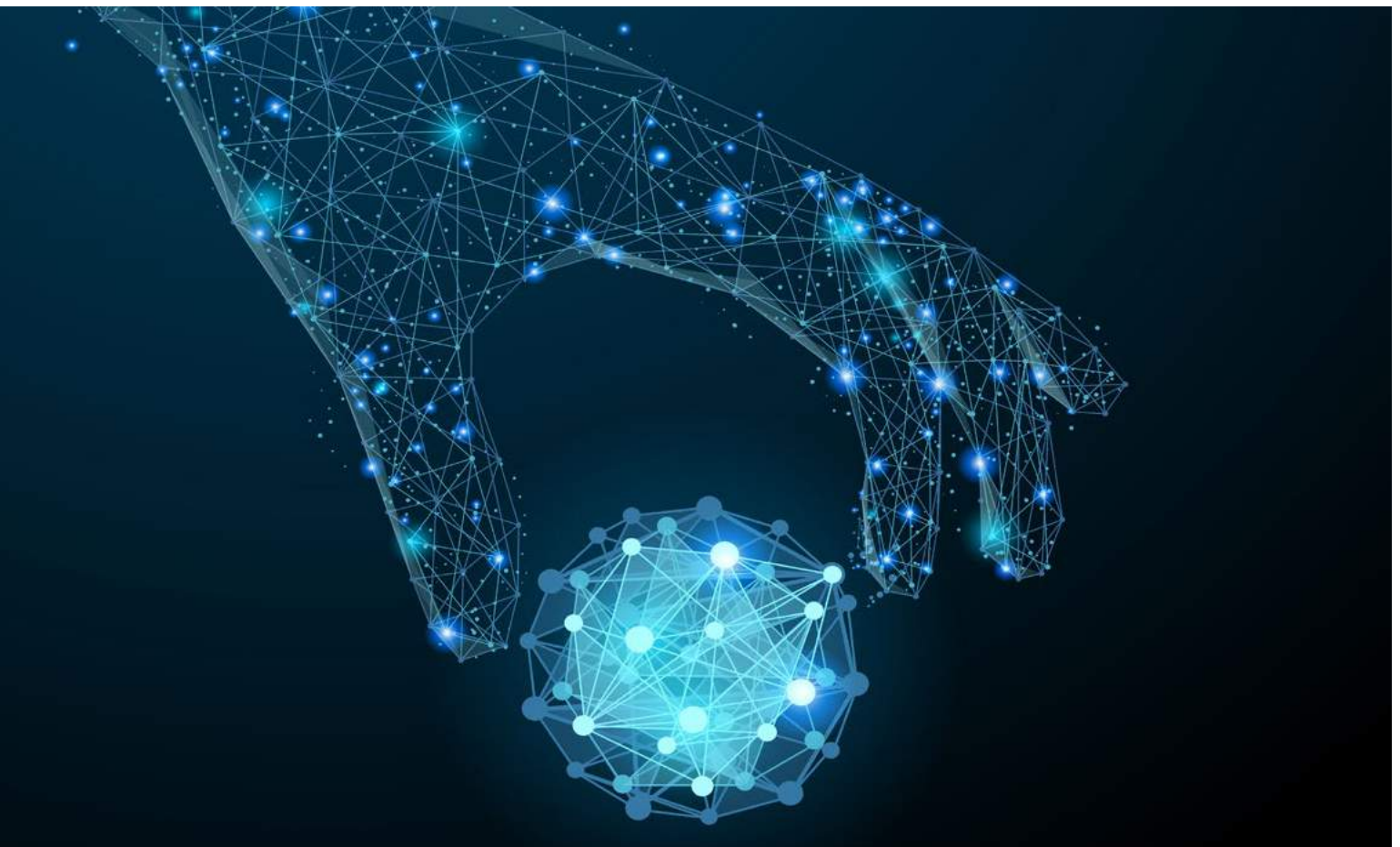
// Golfers will always want to play golf. There will always be changes, shifts and resets to the game and golf course architecture. That is not new and architecture will continue to evolve

ASGCA Past President Greg Martin, ASGCA

continue to evolve,” says ASGCA Past President Greg Martin, ASGCA. “Architects will need to be more responsive to community demands for open space functionality, providing additional benefit for stormwater management, habitat

firm-fast playing surfaces, requiring more width. This will have a dramatic effect on existing facilities that need to widen holes, offer faster surfaces with less inputs.”

Drew Rogers, ASGCA, is a classic example of how the industry has



transformed over the last decade. In 2007, he was a senior associate for the firm of Hills & Forrest, flying around the world and managing a bunch of new course projects. Now, he works for himself, with the support of his wife Alison in business management and marketing, and has a successful practice focused on course renovations. His restoration of Harry Colt's Old Elm course in Chicago has been widely acclaimed, and he is busier than ever.

"The business will continue to become more personal," says Rogers. "More and more of today's savvy clients are realizing that a big-name architect costs more and sometimes yields less in return. They really want to have a collaborative relationship with their architect—someone who listens and works with them, and someone who will help produce something that fits the user and operator first."

"Running a big shop of designers and support staff has seen its day and is likely not coming back," says Brian Curley, ASGCA. "Big drawing production will be handled by landscape architecture and engineering firms when detailed, coordinated plans are needed. Most future great courses will be built on top of mature, existing courses in well-

outweigh any skill factors. Fees from jobs will be irrelevant and the job will be much more of a hobby than a profession. Competition will drive fees down overall."

Technology drives change

Technology is the most obvious driver of change. Todd Quitno, ASGCA, says: "I was just chatting the other day with some friends about the incredible (and somewhat scary) growth in automation and artificial intelligence we've seen in the past decade. I think that growth will continue exponentially into future decades, including within the golf industry," he says. "Thus, for many, the way we design will be influenced by the way we manage golf courses, GPS/drone mapping and spraying technologies, automated infrastructure and equipment, virtual management (from afar), intuitive course handicapping, etc. Of course, this flies right in the face of the history and traditions of the game and its naturalist architecture, so it will be interesting to see how the old melds with the new. That's no different than today, I suppose: those who respect the past while embracing change seem to be the best suited to succeed."

On the same theme, ASGCA Past President Bruce Charlton, ASGCA,

“ With golf course design becoming more digitally oriented, it is my hunch that clients will expect the work product from their golf course architect sooner

ASGCA Past President Bruce Charlton, ASGCA

located areas—with the occasional destination exception—but many of these will prove to be financially unsound and lose their luster with potential developers. In my opinion, the successful golf architect of the future will be a financially independent, well-connected, decent player with enough skills to get by with rudimentary plans. Salesmanship and proper inroads to jobs will

stresses that technological advances imply greater speed. "I think the speed in which golf course design work will be requested will increase. With golf course design becoming more digitally oriented, it is my hunch that clients will expect the work product from their golf course architect sooner," he says. "I also see drone technology being used more in the conceptual phase of routing



DESIGN TRENDS

- 1 REPURPOSING OF EXISTING COURSES**
To focus on playability and environmental sustainability, and carving off land for economic gain or survival.
- 2 MORE ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY**
Understanding the unique aspects of local and community environmental needs and reducing inputs.
- 3 REDUCTION IN WATER USAGE**
Advances in irrigation technology to fully control water and more fully bring the ground game into play.
- 4 SHORTER COURSES**
Which have lower maintenance requirements and enable golfers to enjoy golf within shorter periods of time.
- 5 DESIGN AND BUILD**
Continued adaption of business models to put responsibility for both design and build elements to a single entity.



// Irrigation technology will continue to have an impact as well—the ability to better manage water and distribution of water so that playing surfaces are more complementary of the intended architecture

Drew Rogers, ASGCA

a golf course and initial imaging for the course. Perhaps more golf course plans will be drawn from an oblique perspective with ‘base mapping’ being drone footage?

“It is my dream, and perhaps it will happen before 2030, to design a golf course that can only be played in virtual reality mode; a golf course that is designed on a piece of land that is purely the figment of one’s imagination and cannot be replicated in any way. Therefore, I think the knowledge of ‘moving images’ and how to create them

digitally may come to the forefront in the skills of the future golf course architect.”

Focus on repurposing

There is general agreement that the trends we have seen in the industry in recent years will continue and accelerate. “I don’t believe there will be more new work than what we see now. I think this cycle is going to be very, very long,” says Ian Andrew, ASGCA. “The major trend from 2018-2030 will be the repurposing of existing golf courses. The focus will

be on playability and environmental sustainability (lower input models will be legislated in most areas). There will be lots of carving off land and reducing facilities for economic gain or survival, implying shorter courses—lower par—and no remaining spaces between holes. The underlying theme of the majority of non-elite club projects will be economic sustainability—half of private golf will be in some kind of survival mode. And the architects themselves will all be of the design/build model by this point.”

Andrew’s comment about the primacy of design/build projects is echoed by many architects. There is no doubt that this model has been growing in popularity of late, and lots of designers who come from a traditional contractor-focused construction background have realized the advantages of being responsible for more of a project. But to have a design/build contract on a perfect sandy site is very different from agreeing to one on heavy clay where major earthmoving is required. It remains to be seen how the design/build (or design/shape) model will be adapted to cope with mainstream projects. Andrew is confident it will.

Environment first

“Architects will need to be able to understand the unique aspects of local and community environmental needs and reduce inputs,” says Martin. “Some will gravitate toward more technical expertise, while others will move toward on-site/shaper/field condition value.”

“Many architects have the ability to build their designs as well as design and communicate them graphically and verbally,” says Rogers. “There is a large stable of these designer types out there—and they will continue to do well as their names become more exposed. We’ll continue to see some architects collaborate—combining personal and design-related skills that complement particular project goals. This sort of arrangement, if matched up properly, can produce some incredibly varied and dynamic results.

“I truly believe, and already see signs now, of the length issue changing,

requiring us to look at shortening courses instead of lengthening them. We've already heard from some touring pros that claim that lengthening only plays into the hands of the pro, and that shorter, more strategic holes are often more difficult, especially under pressure. And we certainly know that a longer course has far less appeal for the normal player as well as for aspects of maintaining courses that are stretched out. I just recently finished a renovation in Florida where I purposely shortened five of the holes to improve playability and strategic opportunities. Those back tee areas have now been converted as part of the native landscape—no longer part of the intensive maintenance footprint, and the golfers have not missed them one bit. In fact, the holes that were shortened now have enhanced shot-making choices—opportunities for greater enjoyment. 7,000-plus yards on the card means nothing to anyone, at least it shouldn't. The best courses are the ones that fit and offer up a provoking, memorable playing experience. A long course appeals to few too many golfers to make it worthwhile—and it's too costly otherwise.

“On that same renovation, I removed almost 30 bunkers from the course. Many were strategically invalid and were only adding to the time and cost of maintenance. Today, though, every one of the remaining bunkers is uniquely impacting in the simplest of ways through better design. There are just so many more ways to make golf interesting and challenging than mindlessly plunking in bunkers all over the place.

“Irrigation technology will continue to have an impact as well—the ability to better manage water and distribution of water so that playing surfaces are more complementary of the intended architecture. When water is properly controlled, we have the ability, along with the superintendent, to more fully introduce the ground back into the game. So much can be said about what happens to the ball once it's on the ground. When we can create conditions to promote

that nuance and build opportunities into our designs accordingly, golf will be inherently more exciting and fun to play.”

Reducing footprints

“There is no doubt that environmental issues will continue to have a strong influence on the design and remodeling of golf courses, especially regarding water conservation, habitat preservation and the efficient use of land,” says ASGCA Past President

this medium, as well as how the ball reacts on this type of surface, to design an appropriate golf experience. With the exception of a small number of championship venues where professional events are continually staged, courses will be much shorter. The average rank-and-file golfer will play these shorter courses with a reduced flight ball.”

“The trend of new courses being built more for enjoyment and player friendly courses will continue,” says

“I wouldn't be surprised to see the overall footprint of golf courses begin to shrink, to make golf course operations more efficient, cost effective and environmentally responsive

ASGCA Past President Doug Carrick, ASGCA

Doug Carrick, ASGCA. “I wouldn't be surprised to see the overall footprint of golf courses begin to shrink, to make golf course operations more efficient, cost effective and environmentally responsive.”

“It's conceivable that water may be so precious courses will be totally built of artificial turf,” says Ty Butler, ASGCA. “Architects will have to understand building techniques with

Dana Fry, ASGCA. “I am confident that courses being built using less earthwork, water and chemicals will continue as well. Hopefully the ruling bodies of golf will finally get together and dial the golf ball back. If not, 8,000 yard courses will start to become a reality. I strongly feel the USGA, R&A and perhaps Augusta National will take dramatic steps in the next 10 years. I sure hope they do!” ●

