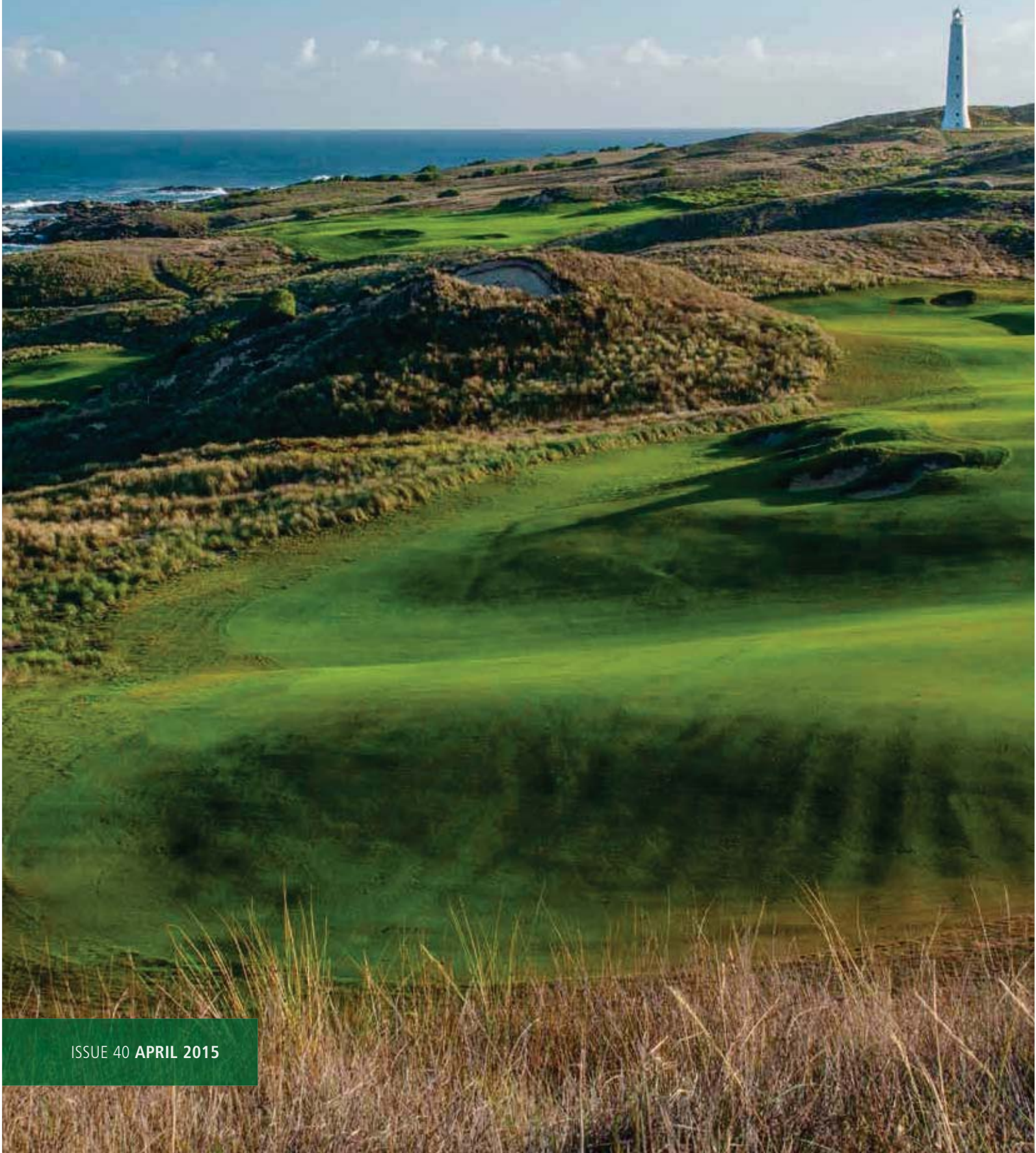


GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

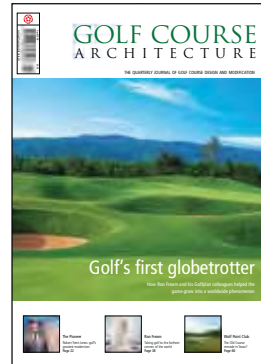
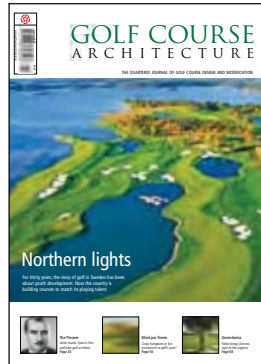
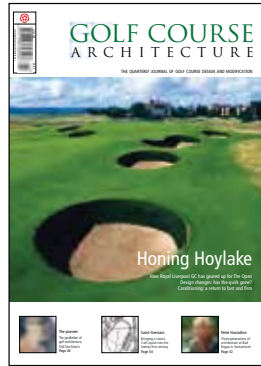
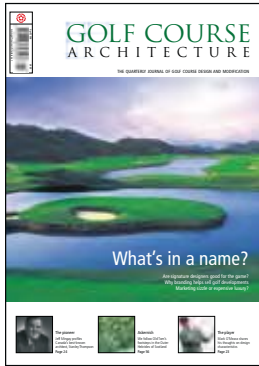
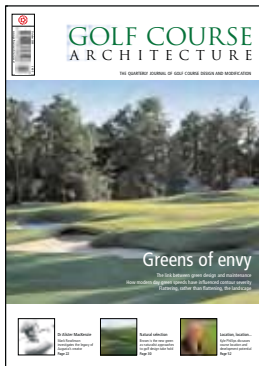
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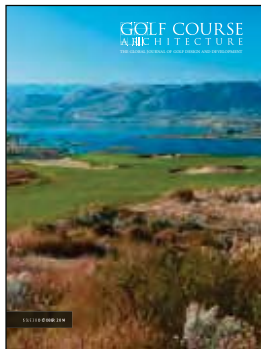


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A decade of design

This fortieth issue of *Golf Course Architecture* sees us celebrating ten years of reporting on golf design. Adam Lawrence reflects on the past decade





Jonathan Davison made a successful new course design debut with the Heritage at Penati Golf Resort in Slovakia



Photo: © Martin Zilka, photomartini.com

Ten years. It feels like a long time, in that I can hardly remember when I was not editing this magazine, yet it also seems only a very short time ago that we produced the first issue of this magazine. We had, as seemed appropriate, the Old course at St Andrews on the cover, and we were dipping our toes into an entirely new market.

A decade on, that market feels like home. Trying to make a living in the golf design industry is far from easy, as any golf architect will testify, and trying to make a living reporting the golf design industry is, perhaps, even harder. But if it isn't lucrative, it is endlessly entertaining and challenging; in a quarter of a century as a journalist, reporting on any number of different industries and subjects, I can honestly say that I have never met such a great bunch of people as inhabit the golf business.

The golf course architecture business of 2015 is radically different to that of 2005. I vividly remember being at a Golf Industry Show press conference in about 2008 at which a National Golf Foundation spokesman presented its most recent survey of the US industry and concluded that golf supply had shrunk in the country for the first time in over fifty years. I am not sure,

but I very much doubt it has expanded in any of the years since, with closures outpacing openings. Many golf architects, faced with the challenge of finding work in an environment like this, have left the industry – some estimates say that the number of architects actively practising may have declined by a third. The large firms have shrunk, with the lesser-known associates forced either to go their own way or join the list of those who have found alternative ways to earn their keep. And the architects that remain have had to acclimatise to a business that, rather than focused on new course builds, is mostly about renovation work to existing courses. Or, alternatively, to get the chance to build new courses, architects have been compelled to target new, more remote locations, such as eastern Europe, South America or sub-Saharan Africa.

English architect Jonathan Davison was just beginning his career in 2005, in the design office of Jeff Howes in Ireland. After a spell with Howes, he moved to eastern Europe to work with Jeremy Ford, building courses in the Czech Republic and Poland, before moving to the Slovakian capital of Bratislava to start up his own operation. His debut course, the Heritage eighteen at the

Penati resort in Slovakia, has been much acclaimed, and he is now working on a number of new course projects, with one in the ground and others in planning. "Big jobs are great, but they are stressful," he says. "You are never sure when they are actually going to start. I have three projects ready to go, but each has taken over three years to get to this point. I have six new builds under contract and two more in talks, but who knows if and when they will all get going?"

American architect Drew Rogers is one of those who has had to find his own path during the last decade. Back in 2005, he was a lead associate for Arthur Hills' firm, but the recession and the shrinkage of that firm forced him off on his own, a move he did not seek, but which he now believes was for the best. "In 2005, I was managing between six and ten new builds and several large renovations," he says. "I was building new opportunities in Iberia, doing lots of routing plans, banking lots of frequent flyer miles. Life was good. Our firm had somewhere in the neighbourhood of a dozen designers and we were fresh off one of our best years – to the extent that we were able to take the whole team on a trip to Scotland. Those were crazy times. Our first born was two years old, and my wife was essentially raising him on her own."



Photos: Drew Rogers

Drew Rogers has overseen a successful restoration of Old Elm in Chicago, originally a collaboration between Harry Colt and Donald Ross

Rogers left Hills during the downturn and has created his own firm, working on projects such as the restoration of the Harry Colt/Donald Ross collaboration at Old Elm in Chicago. "There were many highlights of that life," he goes on. "Producing some damn good courses for very capable clients, and working all around the world. But ultimately, the biggest highlight has been going it alone and finding complete happiness. I give my clients a better service than I did, and it is better for my growth as a professional and for my family. I don't miss anything from that rat race phase. None of that appeals now. I'm not resentful or regretful for having gone through those first 18 years with a bigger firm – it helped shape what I am today. Some have said to me 'You should have done this sooner and, while that might be true, I think the path I took ultimately made me better, and I certainly built my network through all the bumpy times. I don't regret hanging in there as long as I did – the timing proved perfect.'

Some are still in the same place, but even for them life has changed. Rick Baril, along with his colleague Mike Smelek, is still running the firm of von Hagge, Smelek and Baril, but the firm is now minus its founding father, who died in 2010 aged 83.

For Baril, losing his mentor, Robert von Hagge, is naturally the strongest memory of the last decade. "Obviously when someone is that age, we expected and planned for it," he says. "Intellectually you know it's going to happen, but emotionally it was soul destroying. He was a 30 year mentor and

"There is an explosion of growth in the developing world – golf has gone global – even more than it was ten years ago"

also like a father. He was frustrated in those last years, because he couldn't do what he had always done. Even when he was able to travel, the trips were difficult, because he wasn't in control any more. But we were able to work on some amazing projects. Take Les Bordes in France, which we hope will

move ahead with its second course in the near future. We built great relationships with clients that still exist today. We would plan a two week trip and just show up places, somehow it all worked. You can't work like that nowadays. I remember Robert saying to me: 'In this business the money comes and goes but the relationships last a lifetime'. That's a great message and one I have always tried to remember."

Others may be doing similar things, but have seen the market change around them. Belgian-based American architect Andy Dye says: "Ten years ago, I was travelling around Asia, designing and building golf courses. Pretty much the same as now. I've been very lucky!"

But even so, Dye has seen the business change rapidly. "There is an explosion of growth in the developing world – golf has gone global – even more than it was ten years ago. And it is Asia that has led the way. There, you have a middle class emerging that didn't exist ten years ago, when we were building courses for the elite. Golf course owners and developers in Asia are much more knowledgeable now than they were ten years ago. They travel to Europe and the US, they get new ideas and they adapt them to their needs. And Asian golfers have matured – they have a greater understanding



Greg Turner and Scott Macpherson's renovation of the Oreti Sands Links at Southland Golf Club in New Zealand has received high praise

and respect for the game and its history. Environmental golf will be a big story in Asia in the next few years."

Young architects have found it hard to become established in recent years, but some have done so. Dutch designer Frank Pont, who came to golf as a second career after years in the consulting and banking sector, says that 2005 was a milestone year for him. "That was really the first year I made enough money to live on," he says. "Looking back through my invoices for that year, I see I was working on a lot of courses, but basically just in the Netherlands – at Toxandria, De Pan, Ullerberg, Amsterdam Old Course and De Hoge Kleij. I was building the Land van Thorn course, my first nine hole new build, and doing routings for De Turfvaert, which would be my first eighteen holer. Over the last decade, my business has expanded, and my reputation has widened, so I have been able to work at places like Royal Hague, Cruden Bay, Swinley Forest, Broadstone, Le Touquet and Hardelet. And I'm very proud of the new course I built at De Swinkelsche. For the future, my goals are to get strong positions in the important European markets, work with talented local partners, build a course in a heathland or duneland environment, and get my first restoration projects in North America or Japan."

Similarly, Kiwi architect Scott Macpherson was newly solo in 2005. "I started my company in 2004, so in 2005 we were a year old and in the early stages of planning for the Close House project in north-east England," he says. "That has been an amazing experience over the whole decade – working with a very committed owner, and gone through a range of things, up to now, hosting an important seniors event. I've been able to work on some wonderful projects in New Zealand, including the renovations of Oreti Sands, the world's southernmost links and Royal Wellington. What makes me happiest is the great friends I've made along the way. The industry has been brutal, and I'm incredibly proud of being able to keep going. I'm also very proud of the two books I've written, on the history of the Old Course at St Andrews, and on the clubs honoured by the British Royal Family. The funny thing is, I never set out to write a book – both emerged from my sense of curiosity and turned into much bigger projects."

Arizona-based designer Andy Staples says: "In 2005, my company was three years old and we were focusing our work on management and master planning. We were also dealing with the death of a partner, who was killed in a small plane crash viewing the possible site of a new project. We were currently working throughout the state of Utah, including a maintenance contract with Thanksgiving Point outside Salt Lake City. The company's focus was on reduction of maintenance costs, energy and water efficiency and overall savings. And it was in 2005 that we were introduced to the client at

what became our first major design project, Sand Hollow in Hurricane, Utah."

Staples says the industry must become more flexible. "The future for the golf design business will be to focus on ways to be diversified, nimble and open to new partnership opportunities," he says. "Golf will continue to look for ways to bring new players to the game as well as capitalise on ways to get more out of the current group of players. A high priority will be placed on facilities that are viewed as amenities in their communities, and deliver health oriented benefits. Golf may never be the strongest of business models, but courses and their operation can and will be viewed as a greater benefit. Much like cities see values in libraries or parks, golf courses will show value from a health, air quality, exercise and family values."

"I'm still in the same place," says Pinehurst-based architect Richard Mandell. "In my mind at least – I'm still sitting here, hoping I get a specific project, still fighting the fight, but the fight isn't as daunting as it was a decade ago. After more than a decade and a half of hand to mouth, I finally started making some noise in the business in 2005. Since then, business has been great on the renovation side, but few opportunities for new projects, mostly because I was in so deep on specific projects that I did not have a chance to really pursue new projects, even if they were out there to pursue."

"But that said, the past seven or eight years have been the best of my career and the busiest. We were fortunate enough to get some work in China, which was fun, but we also got to work on some great restorations, renovations, and redesigns. We are as busy



Photo: Keith Rhebb

today as we have ever been and are finally getting recognition on a national scale. Our renovation of the Keller course in Minnesota won *Golf* magazine's renovation of the year for municipal projects and the South Carolina Ratings Panel just voted two of my projects as the most improved courses in their respective regions (of four regions) since 2005.

"I also started researching my Pinehurst book back in 2004, but I don't think that has had much impact on my design career. It is a nice gift to give to clients and I have made money on it. It may or may not have opened doors. It is hard to tell. When I point out the details pertaining to Donald Ross that I have proven on the book, it has helped along those lines with legitimacy."

For non-designers too, the decade has been eventful. Kai Hulkkonen, now working with David Nelson in contracting firm Nelson & Vecchio, says that it was in 2005 that he first entered the golf business. "I had been working for the Danish industrial giant Danfoss, but I quit in February 2005 to start work on the Sand Valley course in Poland," he says. "It was my dream to build a golf course. My arts project in high school was a model of a golf course. The reason I was working for Danfoss was that they had bought my father's company. It made sense to build in Poland, as we knew we could do it cheaply – and we had access to land that others didn't as we had done business there before. From the very beginning, I intended to be very involved in the process. Lassi Pekka Tilander and I did the routing together, as well as some of the hole concepts. And then, after the contractor went bust, I brought in Tony Ristola to finish the project. I'm still very proud of what we achieved there."



Photo: USGA/John Mummert

While the number of new openings in the past decade has been relatively low, the quality has been high – cases in point include Lost Farm (top) in Tasmania and Chambers Bay in the United States

The experience of John Holmes of Atlas Turf shows another way the industry has changed since 2005. "Ten years ago I was busy developing our international shipping process for exporting turfgrass," he says. "We were very active in the Caribbean with multiple projects. The work was never more than a few hours flight from home. In 2009 that market all but dried up, prompting us to pursue work in places we could hardly find on a map. Besides boosting my knowledge of worldwide geography, the situation prompted us to fine-tune and perfect the process of efficiently exporting live turfgrass to remote locations. We were able to enjoy the glory days of golf construction in China and are now looking at

other growth markets. While the work is no longer close to home or concentrated in one region, the variety of golf projects and locales keep the work exciting. And the golf boom in China allowed us to place our *paspalum* products in very different climatic locations."

It has, then, been a decade of contrasts across the business. Some have prospered, many have struggled. More courses have closed than have opened, but given the standard of many of the new openings – places like Chambers Bay, which will host this year's US Open, like Machrihanish Dunes in Scotland or Lost Farm in Australia, it's difficult to argue that the average standard of course hasn't got better. Which has got to be good news. **GCA**