

Planning to succeed

Meticulous planning is one of the hallmarks of golf design projects that are completed on time and within budget. Toby Ingleton finds out more.



Photo: PeopleImages/istockphoto

Much like the graceful swan, when you play a great golf hole, it's not apparent how much hard work has gone into making it so. For ASGCA members, that work begins long before a shovel has been wielded. The planning phases of golf course architecture can be the difference between project success—great golf delivered on time and within budget—and expensive failure.

So where does the planning process begin?

"I passionately believe that you have to spend a tremendous amount of time getting to know the site," says Raymond Hearn, ASGCA. "I feel that the inventory analysis and site reconnaissance stage is by far the most powerful of the design process."

ASGCA Past President Rick Robbins, ASGCA, agrees. "The first critical step in the planning process is to have a complete understanding of the site and all of the physical features that may affect the design. While the use of maps and printed information about the property is very helpful, there is no substitute for thorough on-the-ground examination of the actual site conditions. Only being on site personally will such things as views to distant landmarks, heritage type trees, quality water features and many other features be able to become incorporated into the design."

"There are always parts of the land which are better than others when you route a golf course," says John Fought, ASGCA. "The mix of the holes, the stops and

starts and the overall theme of the property helps me understand how to develop the best plan.”

“I try to listen more than talk on that initial visit, so I can find out what they want to achieve. I’ll take dozens of pictures and make copious amounts of notes,” says Nathan Crace, ASGCA.

For renovation projects, site visits are an opportunity to see how the course plays.

discover the issues to be addressed, and work with the client to set a particular scope-of-work,” says James Cervone, ASGCA.

“I don’t think this should be done in a vacuum,” says Wilczynski. “If there’s a single owner, it can work that way. But most of my clients have been private clubs, so we put together a committee that’s a well-rounded representation of the entire golf club—eight-to-ten people, maybe

have a few leaders who are go-getters and will help sell the thing it really drives the project forward. Once the plan is developed, I’m relying on them to push it forward and keep it top of mind.”

“As is the case with many sports, a team is only as strong as its weakest member. It’s really important to have total buy-in by all who are closely involved. Projects are only successful when this is the case. A single weakness causes the house to fall. So assembling a strong team is always vital,” says Rogers.

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“I’ll play the course, then monitor different groups, to get a feel for how very low handicap, mid-range and high handicap golfers approach the course. I’ll spend a lot of time walking the site, measuring distances, examining holes from back to front,” says Hearn.

“I need to really get to know your property,” says Chris Wilczynski, ASGCA. I walk the golf course several times, play it and really get to fully understand it.”

Defining project goals

Site reconnaissance provides an opportunity for the architect and client to define and develop goals for the project. “The architect must

half women, half men, including seniors, younger members, middle-aged people, and different handicap demographics. I use them throughout the process to help develop the vision. If we all work together then the final vision represents the entire facility.”

“In renovations, there is also great reliance on one, key voice, someone with tough skin who is not swayed by isolated negativity and will represent the future of the facility. It also helps to have a very strong, experienced superintendent in place who will advocate, educate and implement, as well as a seasoned, trusting general manager,” says Drew Rogers, ASGCA.

Wilczynski agrees: “Leadership on their part is really important. If you

Developing a plan

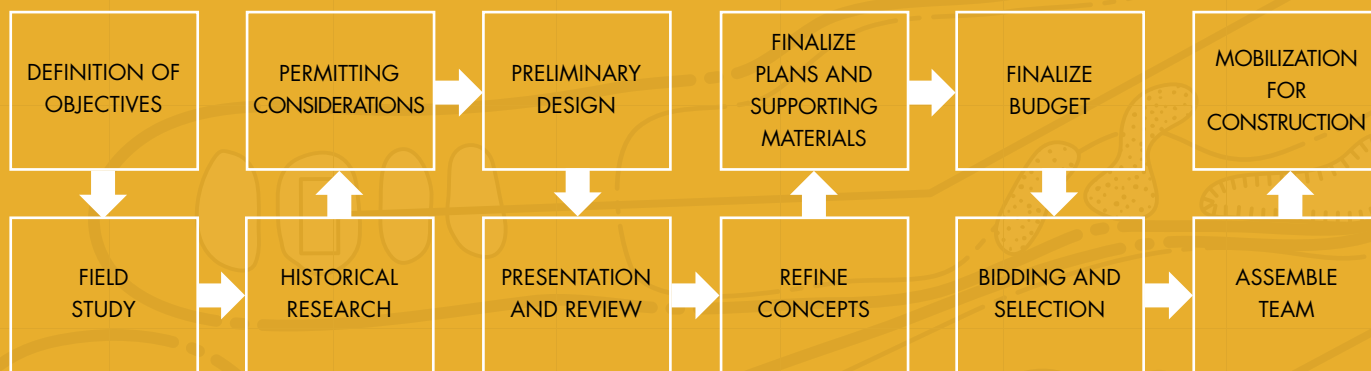
“With an existing golf course, it’s really important to get everyone to understand the ‘why?’ Why we need a master plan, why we need to improve the golf course. It’s key to educate people, and continue that throughout the whole process,” says Wilczynski.

“A part of the communication process is providing visual materials that everyone can understand and help clarify ideas. There is a multitude of plans, drawings, and other materials we use to depict our proposed concepts. These materials must be persuasive and descriptive to help allow the client to ask questions and make decisions on how best to proceed,” says Cervone.

“I draw my thoughts over an image of the existing hole on tracing paper. I visit the site, work with the committee and staff to understand the problems before I finalize a

THE PLANNING PROCESS

There is not a single formula applied by all golf course architects to all projects, and there will be significant differences between planning for new builds versus renovations, but the process typically includes:



plan,” says Fought. “I often develop Photoshop images, existing and proposed, so the committee can understand my concept for the hole.”

“There’s so much modern technology and software available now to help us in the paper stage. I feel if you complement that with going to the site a lot, it’s a home run, and helps you avoid expensive changes in the construction phase,” says Hearn.

“In the preliminary phases of a new golf course design, I tell my clients to focus on the foundations of the design, the routing and flow of holes. Once we get that done, we can go into strategy, angles and options, golf course feature development,” he adds.

New golf course projects are often underpinned by real estate, and it’s crucial for the golf course architect to understand those economics.

“A complete understanding of the market for both the housing and golf components of the project must be gained before beginning the design work. Items such as the price ranges, types of lots, total number of units needed and other facts about the real estate demand must be considered in the planning in concert with the golf market factors. Making sure that the style, cost to build and operate, type of memberships to be offered and relationship to layouts for maximum housing value of the golf amenity are all incorporated into the design,” says Robbins.

“The golf course design and master planning both need to be done with the same attention to sustainability and environmental preservation. Criteria for environmental planning should be set for all design elements of the project so the required permits and approvals can be more easily acquired,” he adds. “Good planning must account for both the creation of value for real estate and the necessity to operate the golf amenity as an independent business.”

Scheduling and costing

Once a golf course architect has a thorough understanding of the site and has worked with the client to define goals, their project management skills are put to the test.

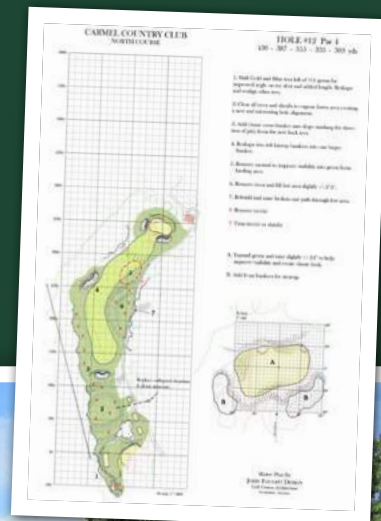
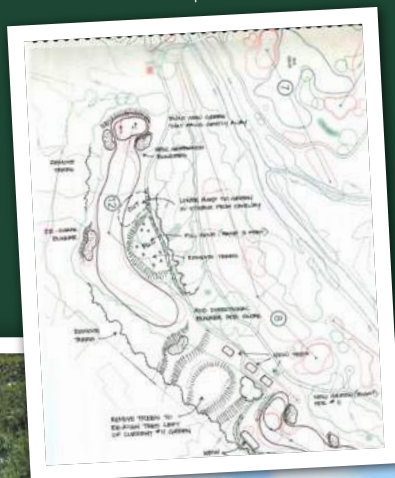
TUPELO CC

At Tupelo CC in Tupelo, Mississippi, golf course architect Nathan Crace, ASGCA, master planned the entire property to be phased-in over a period of several years. Phase one was a new practice facility including driving range, short game area, putting green, and a six-acre short course with two double greens and a triple green so members can ‘wander and play,’ play golf with their children, practice, or just have fun. Phase two was the total redesign and renovation of the par-three eighth hole to demonstrate to members what the entire course could look like when they approve the renovation of the other 17 holes. Since the development of the plan, membership numbers have soared from the mid-200s to nearly 650.



CARMEL CC

For the 2016 renovation of the North course at Carmel CC in Charlotte, North Carolina, golf course architect John Fought, ASGCA, prepared initial thoughts for each hole on a sketch pad. After consultation with the club’s committee, he prepared final detailed plans for each hole, often accompanied by visualizations of the proposed changes, to help the committee and club members to fully understand his concepts for each hole.





Golf course architects will educate clients and members throughout the planning process

“I put a schedule together from the very beginning, starting with the first kick-off meeting,” says Wilczynski. “I find it useful to lock in dates early for committee meetings when you are trying to coordinate people, often busy professionals.”

worksheets, and I break out labor and materials, so we can have meaningful discussions about additions and deletions,” says Hearn.

“The architect’s involvement helps save money by providing the information necessary to determine

“Some clubs can go through the process of totally ripping up the course and shutting it down for a year, but most can’t do that, especially where there’s a short season, so I think it’s really important to have a plan that’s feasible and realistic,” says Wilczynski.

For Rogers, the key challenges during planning involve educating the client and members. “Getting them to see and understand the value of the proposed solutions—and gaining approval by the majority.”

“It can take time to build trust in you as an expert. I play golf with committee members and that gives you the chance to spend four hours with somebody, talk to them, get to know them more on a personal level,” says Wilczynski.

“Doing it right the first time is always less expensive than doing it twice

“Much of proper planning is also to do with funding or financing a project,” says Cervone. “The golf course architect not only helps determine the proposed work or improvements, but also develops cost estimates and scheduling of the construction. Without this information, the client won’t know what things will cost or how long it will take to implement the work,” says Cervone.

“Often a client will ask for a plan that meets their budget, but also wants to know what else you might recommend. It’s great to dream big but can lead to clients saying: ‘I want all of this... within my original budget!’” says Hearn. “Each feature on every hole is itemized in my

the proper scope-of-work, costs, scheduling, and oversight during the construction process,” says Cervone.

Common challenges

While each project is different, golf course architects encounter common challenges.

“The most common is managing client expectations,” says Crace. “That’s why you have to be brutally honest. A client may want to start quickly, but if they must obtain permits, secure funding, or the time of year is not right to meet the grassing window, you have to explain that it is important to perform due diligence. Doing it right the first time is always less expensive than doing it twice,” says Crace.

Leadership skills

Golf course architects drive forward projects by providing a vision, and strong leadership.

“The golf course architect must always lead the way when the golf course is the centerpiece—as we’re the sole resource who possesses the expertise and experience of having navigated the process repeatedly and successfully,” says Rogers.

“I see myself as the quarterback, the one that is guiding the whole

process,” says Wilczynski. “They’re looking to you to lead the process and the more you do, the more confident you get, and the better you get at it. Helping them to understand the ‘why?’, helping to educate them, continuing to educate them and answer their questions.”

“The golf course architect is the client’s representative on the project. We provide the necessary expertise and help protect the client’s interests. We secure the overall ideas and make sure everyone understands or authorizes what will be done. We develop the necessary materials to do the work, and facilitate bringing in the appropriate professionals to implement the work. We look out for the client to ensure the work is being done properly, on time and on budget,” says Cervone.

“We’re part artists and part engineers. We’re visionaries. We help the client see what they cannot see,” says Hearn.

“From the first time I’m on the property to the whole masterplan process, my job is to come up with this vision—along with their help—to improve this facility. I look at the big picture, from the moment you pull into the parking lot, around the clubhouse, defining this vision for how it can be improved then trying to communicate that to them to get them to see it,” says Wilczynski.

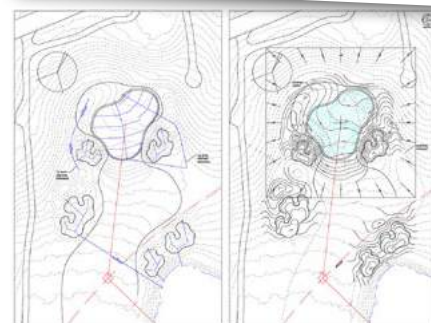
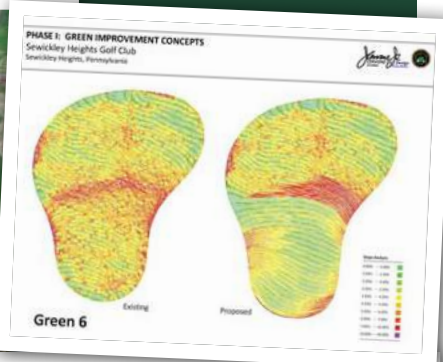
“We often come up with ideas that the owner hasn’t even considered such as re-aligning holes, addressing safety issues, and balancing cut and fill. You would never invest millions or even hundreds of thousands of dollars into a building without an AIA architect. Why would you do the same to a golf course without an ASGCA architect?” says Crace.

“Getting an ASGCA architect involved early helps to avoid common pitfalls. We’ve all seen mistakes made by clients over the years and can help a client avoid those same issues.” ●

Before you proceed with your next golf design project, review our free guide, [Selecting Your Golf Course Architect: Questions & Answers](#).

SEWICKLEY HEIGHTS GC

Sewickley Heights GC in Pennsylvania, wanted to retain as much of the ‘flavor’ of their existing putting surfaces as possible, but realized they needed additional pin locations due to severe slopes. All the original greens were surveyed and golf course architect James Cervone, ASGCA, was able to utilize that information to create before and after ‘heat maps’ (showing color coding of the variation of percentage of slope). He also created 2D renderings and 3D modeling to aid in presenting designs.



COMPASS POINTE

The Compass Pointe development in Leland, North Carolina, began planning and construction in 2006 and the project, master planned by ASGCA Past President Rick Robbins, ASGCA, was just getting underway when the recession of 2008 hit. Construction of the golf course was put on hold but the housing portion continued at a slow pace until the golf course finally resumed work in 2013. The resumption of golf course construction, along with an improved economic outlook, have seen home sales increase from 25-30 annual sales to almost 200 sales in the past 12 months. [Read more about Compass Pointe in the Design Excellence special edition of By Design from February 2018.](#)



Photo: Dave Sansom