



In the early part of this century, course architecture was dominated by an approach that emphasized minimalist, natural and antique qualities. The phrase often used to describe it, Golden Age Revival, harkened back 70-plus years to the work of Donald Ross, Alister MacKenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, William P. Bell, Hugh Wilson, George Crump and many others. Working very good land without benefit of bulldozers, these designers produced artful, romantic golf landscapes loaded with subtle strategic challenges.

This prevailing attitude—formed in the mid-1990s via projects like Sand Hills in Nebraska (designed by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore) and Bandon Dunes in Oregon (David M. Kidd, Tom Doak et al.), shows no sign of abating. Just look at the last two U.S. Open venues: the retro-refurbished Pinehurst No. 2 and Chambers Bay, designed by Robert Trent Jones II. With the USGA endorsing this style and developers like Mike Keiser of Bandon fame snapping up every last parcel of available dunescape, this movement probably isn't going away anytime soon.

We do recognize that today's predilection for scruffy bunkers, firm-brownish turf conditions and expansive, often-treeless corridors of play was formed in response to the manufactured, super-groomed, super-graded parkland fashions that prevailed during the late-'80s and early '90s. In that regard, it seems fair to ask, "What's next?"

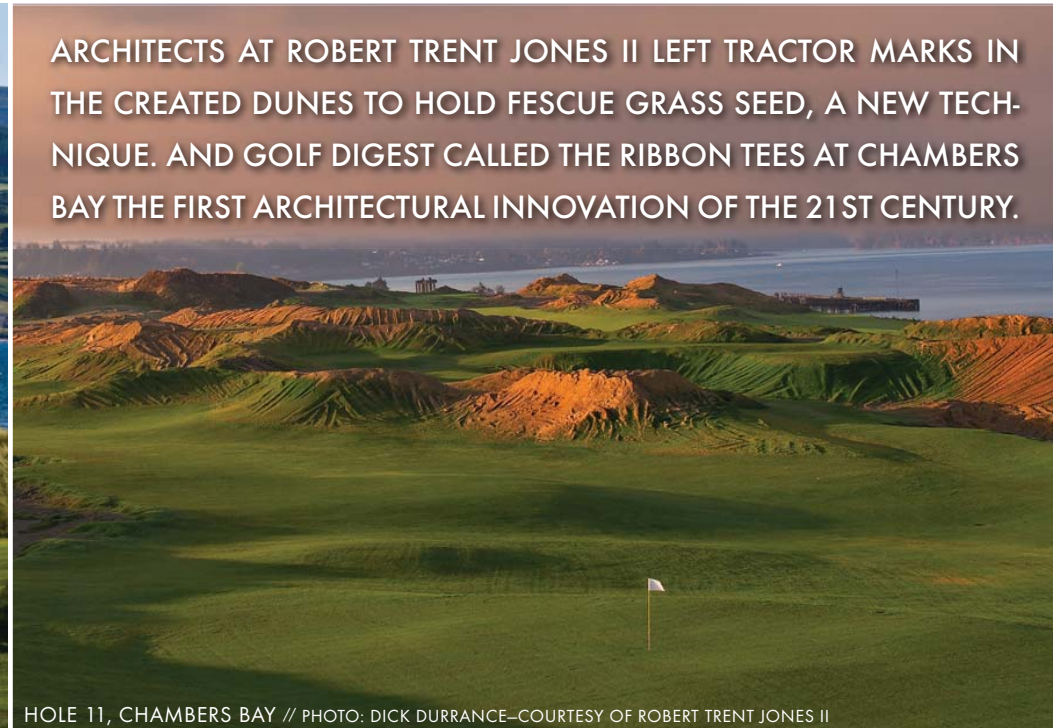
One pivot is already underway, toward compact, flexible "golf experience" facilities. Architect Drew Rogers is involved with a "what's next" project at Canal Shores, formerly an unremarkable 18-hole municipal course that wound through the suburban landscape of Evanston, Ill., just north of Chicago. When it's done, Canal Shores will feature a First Tee segment for beginners, a 12-hole layout of full-length holes that can be played in 3-, 6-, 9- and 12-hole loops, a range and short-game practice area and an 18-hole putting course.

"I hope it sets a tone for other urban course projects," Rogers says, "because it's going to be really cool."

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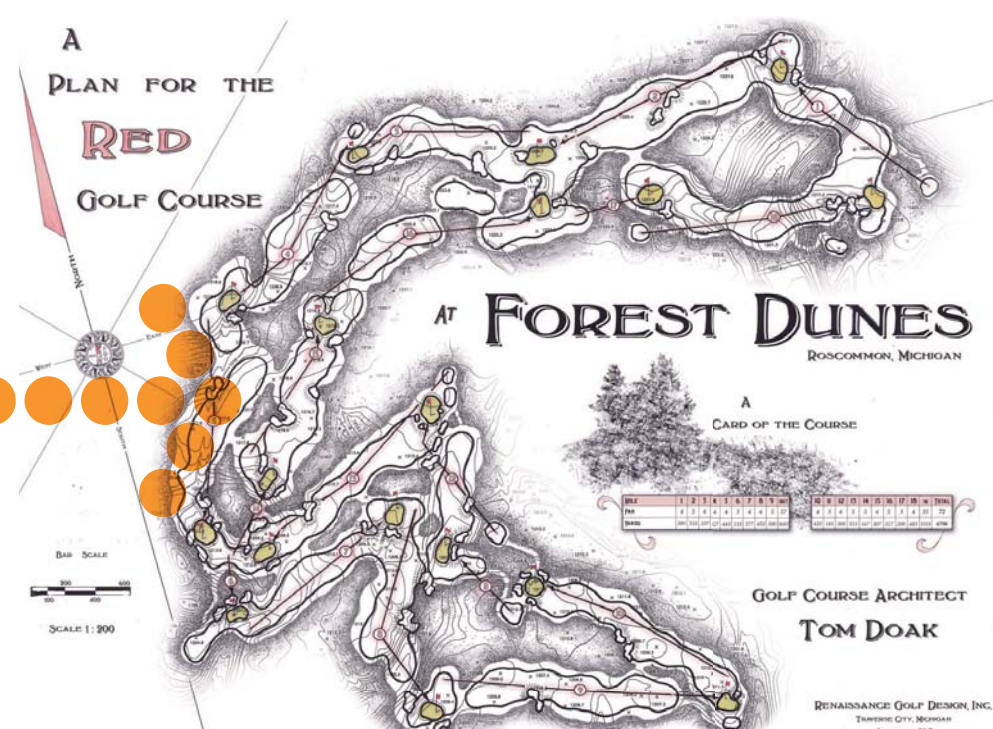
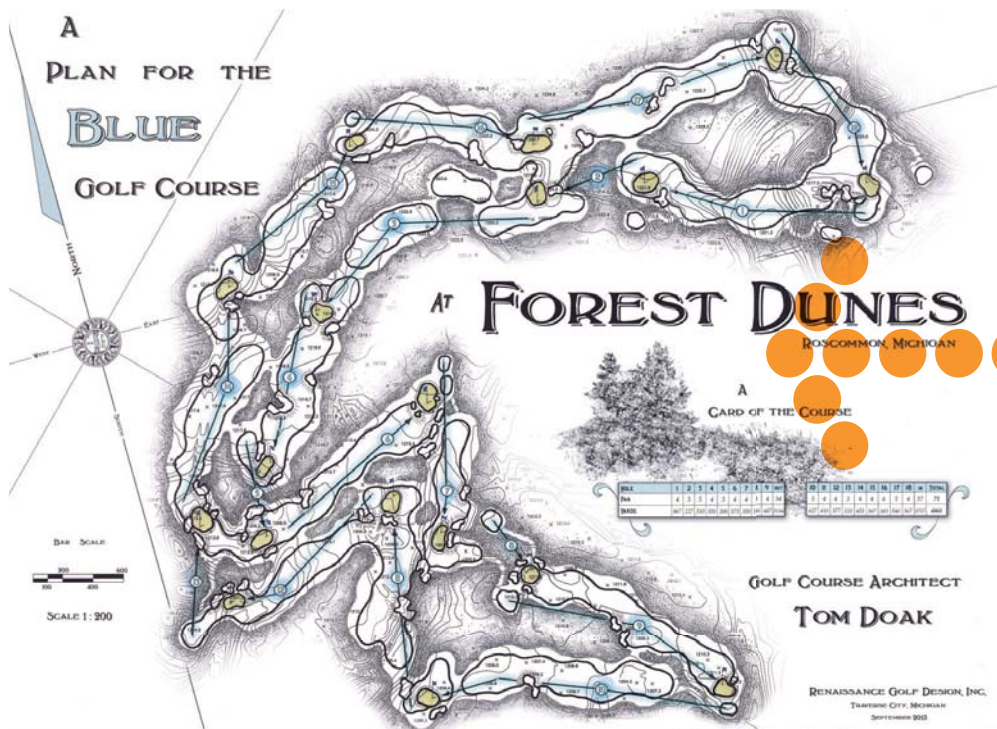


HOLE 14, MACHRIHANISH DUNES GOLF CLUB // PHOTO: COURTESY OF DAVID KIDD, DMK GOLF DESIGN



ARCHITECTS AT ROBERT TRENT JONES II LEFT TRACTOR MARKS IN THE CREATED DUNES TO HOLD FESCUE GRASS SEED, A NEW TECHNIQUE. AND GOLF DIGEST CALLED THE RIBBON TEES AT CHAMBERS BAY THE FIRST ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION OF THE 21ST CENTURY.

HOLE 11, CHAMBERS BAY // PHOTO: DICK DURRANCE—COURTESY OF ROBERT TRENT JONES II



Tom Doak is also thinking innovatively these days, questioning the traditional course format. His 18-hole reversible design will debut in 2017 at Forest Dunes Golf & Country Club, an already successful venue in Northern Michigan. But Doak doesn't feel this idea is much more than a novelty. "For me it's a one-off, something I've always wanted to try that was also a great fit for this client," he says. "It's not going to revolutionize the business, but it does add variety in a real interesting way—a way that might work even better in a nine-hole setting."

In the traditional 18-hole context, Doak is as responsible as anyone for the current naturalist fashion and he acknowledges there will be a broader lurch toward something new, eventually. But he and his fellow architects remain cagey on exactly where the zeitgeist will go, in part because the conditions for artistic change are nowhere to be seen.

"It'll happen, but it's really hard for it to happen when so few courses are being built," comments Doak, who admits that he got lucky in the early stage of his career. Hanging his shingle for the first time in the late 1980s, Doak knew that his personal tastes ran counter to most of what had been built in the middle decades of the 20th century. What's more, a course-building boom was getting started, which gave architects with a rebellious streak—Mike Strantz, Jim Engh and Coore-Crenshaw among them—all sorts of opportunities to do something different. Those conditions don't exist today: Since 2008, only 10-15 new courses have opened annually, compared to 250-300 annual openings from 1990-2005. The next boom is surely decades off in the future.

"I've got ideas on different things we could do, but I don't want to hand them off to someone else. I want to do them myself, and I think it's going to be hard for somebody to stick their necks out that far," Doak says. "Right now, clients are super-conservative. They want something they know will succeed with golfers."

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HOLE 11, PACIFIC DUNES // PHOTO: COURTESY OF TOM DOAK, RENAISSANCE GOLF DESIGN



THE GOLF CLUB AT REDLANDS MESA // PHOTO: COURTESY OF JIM ENGH, JIM ENGH DESIGN



“  
**We can design a much more interesting golf course when the ground game is involved.**  
”  
—DREW ROGERS, COURSE ARCHITECT

HOLE 10, TPC SAN FRANCISCO BAY // PHOTO: COURTESY OF DAVID KIDD, DMK GOLF DESIGN



Most of the course design work underway today centers on the renovation and restoration of existing courses, not the building of new ones. Rogers is one of the busiest course renovators in the country, but he says this work is even more conservative, inherently. It will be doubly difficult for someone to branch out into a wholly new artistic direction in the fix-'er-up context. "Besides, one of the biggest issues in golf today is the shortage of water and the cost of water," Rogers says. "That plays further into the naturalist fashion and you won't hear me complain. We can design a much more interesting golf course when the ground game is involved. I actually get excited when a client says they don't have much water."

And let's be honest: What's in fashion today isn't "new" at all. It's a throwback to links looks and strategies associated with courses that have been around for 100 years. That doesn't lessen the meaning behind today's movement; the Greek

Revival and Beaux Arts movements, for example, drew heavily on established traditions, even as they opened people's eyes with their bold visuals.

Doak believes the business will need to revert in a different way before a new movement can hatch and take hold. "This is going to sound weird, but what will get us out of this rut is the business becoming regional and local again," he asserts. "It's not efficient for architects and teams of shapers to fly to Australia to build golf courses," taking with them their established, now-conventional styles. "There are people with those skills and assets in Australia already. Ultimately, it will be better to hire the people in North Carolina to build a course in North Carolina. Then the fashion will change because it will be adapted to the endemic conditions and culture, instead of trying to make it fit some ideal vision of coastal Oregon." ■

THE GOLF CLUB AT REDLANDS MESA // PHOTO: COURTESY OF JIM ENGH, JIM ENGH DESIGN

