

Designing golf that works

Forrest Richardson on short courses and modern design trends

Forrest Richardson is the principal of Forrest Richardson Golf Course Architects, specializing in golf course renovations, restorations and master planning projects worldwide. With more than four decades of experience, his work focuses on aligning design decisions with club goals, financial sustainability and long-term relevance.

This past September, he sat down for a candid interview with Golf Inc. at its annual Summit. He shared insight into the mind of a golf course architect and what principles guide his design approach, the rise of short courses, the role technology has in determining design choices and more.

What core principles guide your approach to designing or renovating a golf course?

I think in today's climate of golf course design, renovations are the mainstay of what we do. Every project and renovation is different because every golf course is different. The key is really identifying what the goals and objectives are, how you're going to get the ROI on the project and the investment. One of the things we always focus on is "what's the warranted investment." I think people just throw around renovation, restoration, re-imagination — all the R words. Sometimes people don't focus on understanding the goals, objectives and getting to that number that really starts to set everything in motion. As architects we can design anything imaginable, but it doesn't always pencil. I think the real fundamental key in renovation and remodeling is understanding what the limits are to make it financially appropriate.

How do you view technology — both in terms of construction and in how golfers interact with the game — shaping design choices?

In 2007, the first project I worked on was building a golf course using construction equipment with satellite navigation. It was early in the development of that technology. Today, if we can imagine a golf course and get it from up here [*taps side of head*] into a set of plans that's accurate, we literally can build the golf course robotically with construction equipment to move dirt and sculpt the land. Now, that doesn't mean that the golf architect has any less say about it. You still need a set of plans to instruct those robots. I think from the perspective of technology in golf design, that's the most dramatic. In the building and maintaining of a golf course, the architecture part of the whole world of golf business is really

thinking about how we make those things happen so that our owners can be more efficient when they take care of a golf course with all the new technology coming out.

What are some design features that today's golfers are responding most positively to?

The definition of today's golfer is the most diverse I've ever seen. What are they looking for? I think the common denominator is they want to have fun. They don't always buy into the notion that it's an all-day event. They also want to be comfortable. They don't want to be forced into the regiment of the old school of golf. Now, that doesn't mean the traditional values are thrown away. What it means is we must blend those things and reach a happy medium between the cool kind of legacy club that has a certain feel and spirit to it, but also be comfortable, fun.

I believe that the recreational golfer, 99.5% of all golfers in the world, wants to leave the course feeling good, scoring success. That doesn't mean the course is easy. It just means that every so often they're rewarded by having some amazing thing happen, whether it's a birdie or a putt for an eagle or a chip for an eagle or close to a hole-in-one; it's just making the course conducive to scoring success.

How has sustainability influenced your work in recent years?

There are many moving parts to the environmental sustainability of golf. Golf gets bashed all the time for the environment. However, when you look at all the arguments of golf using too much water or using too much land, golf courses in the United States account for less than 4% of that total lawn area. It's cooling the environment. It's borrowing water. It is using water, but it's borrowing a good portion of the water. Most of that water flows into drainage channels, and often it goes through or to a golf course where all the billions and billions of little blades of grass filter out those pollutants, and then the water goes back where it came from.

Sustainability in golf architecture is really the core goal of golf course architecture. We want to create something that has social and recreation value. When we look at the sustainability of our work, we've made tremendous inroads using less of everything on a golf course: less land, less water, less fertilization. We have made inroads in that, and we're continuing to do it.



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