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Signature

golf designers

HOW THEY AFFECT ME

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In 1980, when I was 16 years old I'd already decided to be a golf course architect. I'd completed my O'levels and in the summer before starting my A'levels (in geography, art and business studies) I went to work in a local fish restaurant in Leeds. I got the job of washing pots in the kitchen, stocking the bar with bottles of mixers, and worked as commis to the head-chef, preparing specialities only rarely seen in Yorkshire.

Little did I know at the time that this place would give me the opportunity to meet an inspiration to me. One evening my boss came bursting into the kitchen

and said "hey, Gary Player's in the restaurant tonight - you're a golfer, aren't you? Do you want to meet him?" Immediately, I said, yes, forgetting that I had a filthy apron on and smelt of a kitchen that primarily only cooked fish.

Two minutes later (having cleaned myself up!) I was sitting at the table next to the lobster tank chatting to one of my golf idols. We chatted about golf, exercise and dedication. He asked me what I wanted to do with my life - I said, "well, my grandmother wants me to be a golf pro (I was 3 handicap at the time), but I really want to design golf courses"

To be honest I wasn't really sure if he was already designing golf courses in 1980, but his advice was simple. "Jonathan if you want to succeed, you have to build up your strength and be healthy - you need to exercise every day - a full suitcase - and 100 press-ups, minimum - you keep that up and you'll succeed at anything!" We didn't really discuss the rudiments of golf course design, or anything more profound. However, it was pretty inspirational stuff, and I qualified as a landscape architect in 1987.

After setting up my own design practice based in London at the



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age of 26, I met up with a friend and colleague from University, Steve Marnoch. We struck up a deal and soon after set up a new golf design business - Gaunt & Marnoch Ltd, with offices in London and Derbyshire. G&M Ltd continued to grow and compete against some of the bigger "signature" names in the industry. We developed a good reputation, but could never be regarded as anything more than 'journeymen' architects.

Since G&M Ltd closed for business in early 2006 the golf business has taken on a different perspective. It now seems busier than ever. The work has (for me) moved into different areas, and I'm now making proposals for projects together with 'signature designers' - either because the project requires it, or because I have been approached to provide support.

Some countries are less interested in bringing 'signatures' to projects. My clients in the Czech Republic for example, have each said that they cannot justify the cost and that the names are not recognisable to the general golfing public there.

Many of the new projects outside of the UK tend to be part of a

resort development, where the golf course is often used as a 'carrot' to encourage investment in the property. This has been going on for many years - take, for example, Wentworth and St George's Hill, near London in UK. Both these are exclusive housing developments built in the early 20th century, surrounded by mansions and villas. But these were only to serve as inspiration for what has happened in the US, Portugal, Spain and numerous other locations.

In Cyprus, Turkey and Bulgaria for example, Gary Player and Nick Faldo are already working on projects. Spain and Morocco are similar, with the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Perry Dye, Dave Thomas and Kyle Phillips. In Portugal, Arnold Palmer is involved with Oceanico at Vilamoura, as is Faldo and Christy O'Connor, Jnr. Conversely, I was chosen to work in Morocco (at Golf Resort Oued Fes and at Tamuda Hills Resort, near Tetouan) purely because I am a British architect and the developer wants to attract British property buyers and golfers to play their courses.

Developers and investors usually choose their 'signature' designers primarily to sell real-estate. This

is certainly the case in Dubai, where all the 8 golf courses have been designed by recognised names. With Tiger Woods now working there it suggests that there is no limit to the fees the developers are willing to pay.

At Jumeirah Estates they are building four courses; Fire, Earth, Water and Wind. Greg Norman has been brought in, alongside Sergio Garcia and Vijay Singh, with Pete Dye, Norman and Garcia working together on the Wind course. Whether the owner will get anything better in design terms than a course that had been designed by one of the many 'journeymen' architects remains to be seen. However, it is highly likely that one (or several) of them is already working away to produce the drawings for Greg Norman and his fellow golf professionals.

A Gary Player, Greg Norman or Jack Nicklaus designed course is going to be high quality, guaranteed. But what surprises me about high profile golf developments is that the properties themselves and their immediate surroundings are not also designed by 'signature' architects and garden / landscape designers. There's no development,

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as far as I know, that has properties designed by the likes of Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid or Santiago de Calatrava, with gardens designed by Diarmuid Gavin, Monty Don or Charlie Dimmock!

Is it the design of the golf course or the design of the property that determines the selling price? It is difficult to say. Is the golfer buying a golf course property male or female? If the golfer is male, how much influence does he have over the design of the property? If the golfer is female, how much does she care about who the architect of the course is? I would say very little.

The main decision maker in a family or couple will certainly be more concerned about the property itself and what's provided in terms of décor, facilities, orientation, rooms, aspect, access to shops, cleaning, gardening, grocery delivery, etc. I'm saying this, because although I would be looking for in a property, I would always bow to my wife's better judgement. If she likes it, then I'm willing to agree!

I do see a value in the 'signature' label, especially as many people are influenced by what they see in adverts, by publicity and by reading magazines and watching TV. The modern culture's move towards 'designer' labels is unfortunate in some ways, but unavoidable - and this has affected golf course development. To attach a label to a golf course gives it some cache, and probably, an indication to the buyer or investor that they will get a good return on their investment. Anyone looking for a 'place in the sun' wants to feel comfortable that they are not investing unwisely. It is a financial decision and if a 'signature' design increases the potential cost at the outset by, say, 25%, then it should, most likely, increase the sales price accordingly by the same percentage further down the road.



In relation to this, there will always be and in the future most probably even more so, the need to develop golf courses and resorts designed by 'signature' designers - this market will not just fade away or disappear. It may be the case that certain areas or regions will be less inclined to use them, but as long as the demand continues for the game of golf to be developed further and further afield the big names will be called upon for their services.

I see this as an opportunity. Often where the big developments are, smaller ones follow. Where this is the case, there can be a chance for me to get involved, and likely to lead to projects in regions where I'm currently not working.

I am already working at Westerwood in Scotland, where Dave Thomas and Seve worked together. Thanks to them I'm charging fees for upgrading one of their courses. This is 'bread-and-butter' mortgage-paying work for me. Then, there's the opportunities of working with 'signature' designers. Without them I would continue to do the work I do anyway, but these projects will provide my company with a considerable financial bonus. So, all-in-all, I welcome the 'signature' designers and I wish them success.

I recently met Gary Player again and reminded him of our previous encounter. He offered the same advice - full suitcase on the back, press-ups, etc. which he still does just as energetically at his age. He wished me success in my work, and he remains an inspiration to me as a golfer and as a 'signature' designer.



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