

Making it special

The golf development market has changed dramatically since the world economy imploded in 2008. There's still scope for new development, but 'me too' projects are a thing of the past, says Adam Lawrence

There was a time when developing a successful golf estate project was, if not actually easy, at least a question of following a well-understood formula. The formula depended on the relative ease with which buyers would snap up houses, and it lost its efficacy with a bang in 2008.

Actually, in many locations, the change had come well before the Great Crash. But when things went bad, the regions that had most enthusiastically embraced the golf estate model were, naturally, the ones that suffered most. Many parts of the US, especially in areas like Florida, southern Spain and Portugal and some areas of the Middle East were left with unsold, or at least unoccupied, properties by the hundred or even thousand.

Such an overhang of inventory naturally makes any new development very tricky. Why would a savvy investor, even one who believed passionately in the model and the region, put money into a new project when existing stock can be acquired at pennies on the dollar?

But across the world, developers and masterplanners are adapting to the new reality, and, steadily, are starting to do more business. The business has changed, but the fundamentals are still the same: people like golf, they like beautiful places, and they like good weather.



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The Pegasus resort outside Christchurch is one of New Zealand's largest integrated golf and housing projects

“Projects are inherently different now,” confirms Jim Tinson, CEO of leading land planning and design consultancy Hart Howerton. “People are scrutinising operating costs more. The pattern today tends to be about taking an existing course, taking the asset you already have and upgrading it, and asking ‘How do we make these assets more family-friendly? How do we make them more efficient?’”

Some things, of course, don't change. “The principles are going to stay the same: produce the best environment for golfers as well as homeowners and make the most of the land, using its topography,” says New Zealand-based golf architect Kristine Kerr, who has recently completed one of her country's most substantial integrated golf and real estate projects, the Pegasus estate outside Christchurch. “But I do think estates will be a little more spacious where possible. Some people have tried to cram the houses on and seen it as a way to sell real estate, without thinking too much

about the environment or community you're creating. At Pegasus, one thing people like is how open it is. The fairways are really wide, and then we have a lake before most of the houses.”

In some parts of the world, especially in Asia, the creation of golf estates is one way in which developers are responding to the desire of large numbers of newly-affluent people to move their families to better environments. Space, in countries like India and China, though, is at a premium. “I don't know that the desire for space covers all cultures,” says Kerr. “In China, a small city has four or five million people – they are used to not having much space. That doesn't mean they don't want it, but you can create a good environment without vast amounts of room. And many people don't want to have big lawns and yards to look after. Clients play the defining role, naturally, and if they need a certain number of houses to get a return it can be very difficult to persuade them otherwise.

In maturing markets, maybe in the future people will see that by having a slightly less crowded development, they will have a higher value. But then a lot of golf developers only do one project. That's where experienced land planners and golf architects earn their money. If you think the developer is crowding in too many houses, or that the layout isn't great, it's good to have concrete examples of what properties have sold for. But if it's the first development in an area, that isn't so easy!”

That the model is not fundamentally broken is echoed by Jim Tinson, who says that, even if new build activity in North America is scarce, developers are busily looking at assets and enhancing them. “I'm very confident on how the US market is going. It remains a very strong market for economic growth,” he says. “Many of our clients are asking us to take a new look at their assets and understanding how to repurpose them. We just finished a project with Rees Jones – it was at Montclair Golf

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Palmetto Bluffs: an example of a compact clubhouse

Club in New Jersey, Rees's home club in fact. Rees renovated all 36 holes, while we were asking 'How do the members want to use the club?' We changed it round, so it's a more flexible space, where people want to come with their families. You need to be able to go visit and stay at the club – to be right there. Clubs need to have multiple purposes, not just be for golfers, unless you go completely the opposite way, and do a golf-only project that is very tight, just a pro shop, small locker room and snack bar. At Elea in Cyprus, we were trying to build a whole destination, so we needed more than just a golf clubhouse. But even then, things need to be tight and compact – people don't want to be miles away from the centre of the destination. And flexibility is vital – we are very keen on 2-4 bedroom golf cottages, because they can almost work as a hotel room."

"Now is a 'back to fundamentals time', " says Tinson. "It's about core places, great properties, great landscapes, great locations. In the boom everyone could take second tier properties and make them work. That isn't going to work now. If you're going to do golf, it had better be great golf, and the same goes for the rest of your development." **GCA**

Lean and green

Mike Wood says sustainability and masterplanning must go together

I've been involved recently in work with the Golf Environment Organization to develop the content of the Legacy action programme. One challenge we face is to identify and evaluate the sustainability benefits which golf developments will bring to people and communities. This got me pondering on some fundamental aspects of current thinking from opinion-formers in our partner design professions.

People and places are always thought of and talked about together in these sources, together they form the beating heart of any concept and masterplan. They cannot and should not be separated, right from the very beginning of the planning and design process.

Every place is unique through a combination of two complementary sets of elements: physical and human. From geology and climate, to history and culture, they form the yin and yang of the place's DNA. This much we all agree and understand, and are accustomed to paying respect to in meticulous studies submitted in environmental assessments, from surveys of bat roosts to evaluations of traffic impacts.

It seems to me however, that we sometimes miss a vital piece of the design jigsaw at the next stage. In my view the single most important step in getting the right foundation for a sustainable project is to make the connection from this understanding of the place (with its integral human dimension) to the development of

the concept – how often do we truly go the extra mile to respond to the unique set of opportunities which the site presents?

Embedding the development in its cultural and environmental context, integrating it with existing patterns, from the patterns of economic activity to those of the landscape, is the secret for sustainability success. Get those connections right, and all manner of good things follow smoothly and efficiently – with the minimum of expenditure, both financially and in terms of natural resources.

There is no magic bullet to achieve this, only the commitment to a patient, thorough and collaborative process. Good masterplans flow from good concepts, and good concepts start with a strong, clear, and ambitious vision.

Sustainability principles must be articulated as an integral part of the initial concept, with a clear road-map established for their implementation through the evolution and realisation of the project. The special qualities of a site will never be fully realised by adopting a formulaic approach, with predetermined levels of built footprint, green space and circulation routes.

All good places promote a sense of well-being in their users, encouraging healthy lifestyles for people, and contributing to the healthy functioning of the ecosystem networks to which they belong. A good masterplan works on all levels and scales, from the smallest of natural habitat niches, to what works best for human

comfort levels, and on up to the wider levels of 'green infrastructure'. Golf courses fit admirably with the scale of green infrastructure – the opportunities to build-in new networks, linking with for example transport spines, parks, urban green spaces, adjoining coastal areas, woodlands, and so on are always evident if we take the trouble to understand the niceties of the context.

The functioning of this infrastructure is one of the unseen but vital dimensions of a good masterplan – that requires a wide and deep understanding that is easily overlooked or short-circuited in the design process.

Teamwork is a vital component in success. Far-sighted developers prioritise getting a first class team together right at the outset – one which embodies the necessary width and depth of understanding – before the concept has been determined. The team must in turn look outwards; setting-up and engaging in a transparent consultation process, and then working collaboratively with those who know the site and the place best – the communities, planning officers, environmental authorities, and other stakeholders.

The word masterplan carries connotations of visionary and authoritative oversight. We must look to deliver on those associations by ensuring that it is founded on the principles which will ensure a truly sustainable project.

Mike Wood is a Scottish-based golf architect and environmental consultant



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