

COURSE DESIGNER **KRISTINE KERR**

An eye for Beauty

Precious few women have featured as golf course designers, but New Zealander Kristine Kerr is making her mark in this specialised field. Editor **Heather Kidd** has the story





“Golf course architecture is one of the world’s most expansive but least recognised art forms. Yet this curiously obscure profession can help shed light on mainstream art, sociology, and even human nature itself, since the golf designer, more than any other artist, tries to reproduce the primeval human vision of an earthly paradise”

From *Bauhaus to Golf Course: The Rise, Fall and Revival of the Art of Golf Course Architecture*, by Steve Sailer

Read the above quote and it’s not difficult to see why golf course architect Kristine Kerr lists art and painting among her interests, along with running half-marathons in what she describes as “scenic places” such as Queenstown, Queen Charlotte Track, Abel Tasman and Buller, and that she also enjoys the beach, fishing and boating, all pursuits with a strong visual element to them.

Ask the fresh-faced 40-year-old about the best part of her job, to sum it up in a few words, and she doesn’t hesitate to answer, “I am designing something beautiful.”

Kerr readily admits that she is both artistic and spatial, the latter a quality not readily found in females. A background that involved the farming and construction industries and her “tomboy” inclinations, plus moving from New Zealand to Australia’s Gold Coast when she was 10 years old (her parents were involved in the development of Palm Meadows Golf Club), created an environment that led naturally to the next step, university. She graduated from the Queensland University of Technology with a Bachelor of Applied Science, Built Environment – landscape architecture/urban and region planning.

That was in 1989 and after a year working in town planning she set off on her OE. Three years later she arrived home, except that by now her parents had relocated to Singapore.

“Golf was booming in Asia at the time,” she says. “I worked for a landscape company that embraced golf as well. I loved it and then I went

to work for a company that specialised in golf course design.”

Since then Kerr has been honing her skills on a truly international scale and with some big-name golf course architectural firms: Gary Player Design Company; Nelson-Wright-Haworth; Peter Dalkeith Scott & Partners; EDAW, London and Colmar, France; EDSA Orient, China; Boffa Miskell, Christchurch.

Kerr was recently elected a member of the Society of Australian Golf Course Architects. She is particularly thrilled about the honour because it acknowledges her standing in the profession. And it comes at a good time, just months after she struck out on her own, setting up her company Kura Golf Course Design. Kura, the company brochure explains, is a symbolic Maori word translating to beauty in relation to the land.

Just as ‘beauty’ is a word that is intrinsically linked to golf courses, so too are the words ‘rhythm’ and ‘flow’, and of course the dastardly ‘b’ word – budget. How does Kerr juggle the requirements to conceptualise, design and construct a golf course within financial limitations and, increasingly, to ensure any residential developments are situated in prime locations without compromising the course layout.

“Naturally, golf course designers want the best land for the golf course,” she explains, “but we understand that in the overall scheme of things any housing needs to have views of the golf course, but that they are not visually obstructive.

“Often, there is a large area of land and you have the opportunity to walk it and choose the sites that are best for the golf course. And yes, it’s true these days that golf courses are more intertwined with residential and resort communities – it’s an economic thing. My job is about putting part of a jigsaw together, fitting it with all those things.”

To Kerr, her work is about having a feel for the land. “I always have in my head pictures of the holes,” she says, adding that she intuitively decides

where holes should go while also taking into account that the course must have the all-important rhythm and flow. She must also be aware that she cannot create, for example, five par 4s in a row.

Consultation with the client comes next and once they are happy with the layout Kerr gets to work on the detailed design of the strategy of each hole as well as the necessary earthworks and drainage. The latter might be as far removed from the aesthetics of golf course architecture as can be imagined but it's an integral part of the design.

The aim, generally, is to try and disturb the land as little as possible. While the modern-day approach is for more natural-looking courses it is a trend with a pragmatic touch; less earthworks means less costs.

Kerr says that although clients usually have a budget in mind costs don't generally tend to decrease. "There might be constraints with the land that will make the course more expensive to build and sometimes either the designer or the client will come up with different ideas during construction that will extend the budget. Sometimes too, you'll come across things like rock underground, the extent of which you might not have known."

Along with providing detailed designs and specifications for construction methods, Kerr also makes the decision with regard to materials selection, ie grasses, bunker sand and the gravel or sand used for the greens.

The design aspect of the job can take six months from start to finish and construction is usually two years.

"I supervise construction to the extent of it achieving the design intent and to a certain degree the quality. I make sure the team is building the course to accepted standards," says Kerr.

Some of the great joys of her job also create the biggest challenges – working with different cultures in different environments and sourcing quality construction materials. How does she cope when she has to explain what she wants to groups of non-English speaking males?

"Because the job is about land and shapes, I use my hands a lot," she laughs. But it's not always fun, and although crews in far-flung places are often ex-pats, it isn't always so.

"The most challenging project for me

In a nutshell

Favourite golf course? "That's a hard question to answer but one of my favourites is Shinnecock Hills, Long Island, USA. I love its history and its style as a golf course. It has a natural feel about it and it is quite strategic."

Favourite golf course designer? "Potentially to work with, it would be Guy Hockley who is architect partner to Nick Faldo. Hockley is one of the new generation of golf course architects coming through."

How would you describe what you do? "To me, it's all about shaping the land. My preference is for courses designed to suit the environment rather than imposing a particular style on the land."

Why have you set up your own company? "Being a golf course specialist is what I want to focus on. I also want to raise the profile of golf course architecture as a profession."

Do you play golf? "Yes, but not as much as I would like to. I love to travel and I usually play golf wherever I go."



to date was in China where I was on-site full-time as the design coordinator for Gary Player. I didn't speak Chinese and the client didn't speak English. Quality and standards were crucial but the project managers just wanted to get it done as quickly as possible. I didn't know what they were saying about me."

Her wry smile suggests she didn't think it was complimentary. "It was tough," she admits.

Kerr's offshore apprenticeship was about as global as you can get involving course design and consultancy work in China, Singapore, Italy, Egypt, India, France, Malaysia and Vietnam. But three and a half years ago Kerr returned to New Zealand to take up the role as golf course designer and masterplanner with Christchurch firm Boffa Miskell, working specifically at the Mapleham Golf Course, an integral part of the Pegasus town development in Canterbury. The 18-hole course is due to open at the end of this year.

Kerr has enjoyed the project, especially its latter stages which found her getting up in the mornings and pulling on her work boots and spending her days outdoors supervising final construction details.

What happens post Pegasus, and is the recession affecting golf course development and therefore her livelihood?

Kerr is upbeat. "Certainly, there has been a bit of a slowdown everywhere. Most people I talk to in the industry are optimistic about ongoing work and new projects but there is a slowdown while clients take stock of what is going to happen. Someone commented to me recently that the current situation means people have more time for golf than might have been the case.

"Although it's slightly unrelated to the questions, I think golf courses provide a great way of preserving the environment, preserving it as green space, and that they can bring economic prosperity to an area by creating jobs for people - from construction through to the running of it - and then creating a destination people are going to continue to come back to."

At present, Kerr has a number of projects on the go. She is working on conceptual designs for a project in New Zealand and is in talks with a couple of golf clubs about doing some remodelling work for them. ☺



A rare breed

Golf course architecture is not a mainstream career choice but it is an old and much respected occupation, with names such as Dr Alistair MacKenzie and Robert Trent Jones spoken about in almost reverential tones.

Given that golf is an unashamedly male-dominated sport, it is not surprising that when it comes to the matter of golf course architecture, numbers of influential women are hard to find. But there are a few.

American millionairess Marion Hollins, the 1921 US Amateur winner and captain of the first US Curtis Cup team, is credited with the creation of the famed par-3 16th at Cypress Point.

In the book *Marion Hollins: Champion in a Man's World*, biographer David Outerbridge writes: "She created the Cypress Point Club and organised its original membership. When the architects Seth Raynor and Alistair MacKenzie advised her that its famous 16th hole was too long for a straight carry par-3, she said they were wrong, picked up a brassie, and sent the ball screaming across the ocean. Where it landed is the green, the most photographed hole in all of golf."

Later on, MacKenzie would also

record, "Except for minor details of construction, I was in no way responsible for the hole. It was largely due to the vision of Miss Marion Hollins."

Alice Dye, wife of famed golf course designer Pete Dye, is known as the First Lady of golf course architecture in the United States. An excellent golfer with many amateur titles to her name, she took her playing prowess into her design work and her collaborations with her husband are world renowned, none more so than TPC at Sawgrass.

In 2004, Dye won the PGA's First Lady of Golf Award.

Other females making their name in the field of golf course architecture are former players Nancy Lopez, Amy Alcott and Australian Jan Stephenson, winner of 16 LPGA titles including three majors. Stephenson, aged 58, is fast gaining a worldwide reputation as both a golf course architect and someone who takes the environment into account.

"I've really gone to the level of doing everything green," she told *The Australian* in 2007. "I'm probably the only course designer that does green. And I've just got three huge jobs because of my green technologies."