

On Second Thought

If doctors, lawyers, and other professionals can give second opinions, why can't consulting architects?

One of the main reasons I've never applied to join the American Society of Golf Course Architects is that I disagree with one point in their professional code of conduct – the part where they forbid architects from talking to a club where another member is engaged as a consultant.

It's not as if I'm out there looking to steal work away from my fellow architects. Clubs looking to change direction call me all the time about my interest in new assignments, but I have pretty much stopped taking on new clients because I only have so many days a year to devote to consulting (that is, work to be done modifying an existing course rather than making a new one). Still, I do believe in the club's right to ask.

The ASGCA rule presents a huge contrast with the code of ethics in the medical profession. Doctors accept as standard practice that patients have the right to get a second opinion on their condition and the proposed treatment; a doctor who's unsure of the correct treatment has a duty to seek assistance from his fellow professionals.

So why shouldn't a golf club get a second opinion before embarking on million-dollar surgery?

The longer I've been in the business, the more I've realized it's not just the architects but the green committee and the boards of clubs that don't want to open the floor for questions. Club committees get so fixated on selling their plan to the membership, they don't want anyone casting doubt by expressing other views, even if they have doubts themselves. Pete Dye told me decades ago that everything in golf is a matter of opinion, and clubs are full of members with differing opinions – so the master plan must be presented as the work of a professional whose qualifications cannot be challenged by ordinary golfers.

One reason the word "restoration" is bandied about at many clubs, even when big changes are proposed, is that it's hard to argue with the ghost of a famous designer.

The only chance for second opinions today is in the interview process, when a club may call several architects to come in and discuss their ideas. But the membership at large doesn't get to hear how different those recommendations might be. Often, the green chair or president of a club has his own ideas of what needs to be done, and looks for an architect who agrees with him.

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On my very first consulting interview, at Garden City Golf Club thirty years ago, we were a couple of holes into a walk-through of the course when the green chair, Tom Poole, told me that the last architect they'd interviewed sidled up to him at this hole and asked Mr. Poole what he thought should be done there. Mr. Poole, shocked, told the prospective consultant that the club was seeking the advice of professionals, and that by asking for the answers to the test he had basically disqualified himself from consideration.

It's difficult for an architect to resist club politics and the wishes of the people they're working with. If the superintendent wants a certain kind of bunker liner, it's hard to say no, because he's the guy who'll take care of your bunkers when they're finished. Some green chairs keep the process very secretive, and even others on the committee don't know that the architect is being pressured to recommend certain features. If the architect wants to stay on board, he may go along to get along, even if he disagrees. (My approach is that I answer to the membership, not to the green chair, so the members should hear all of my recommendations before deciding which of them to take on. I'm not big on people who are quick to declare an idea "politically impossible" without asking the members themselves.)

In my society of golf course architects, second opinions would be common, and I'd be happy to make time to give them at courses I love. Maybe I would see a solution to a problem in one corner of the property that another designer didn't, advice that would help make the course better even though I don't have the time to supervise the work. Maybe I'd second the designer's plans for the course, but suggest an alternate green site for the ninth hole, as Hugh Alison did when asked to review the plans for Pine Valley after the death of George Crump.

Or maybe I'd tell them what Mr. Dye told one club many years ago, when they asked him to take a look at their "unfair" 14th green. He walked out to the green with a group of members in tow, stood and looked at it in silence for five minutes, and said, "Man, I wish I could get my crew to build greens like that." It's still there to this day. ■