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Starting With Nothing

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Starting With Nothing -- Four Approaches

In design school, we are taught a process of evaluating the property and evolving a sensible design from that analysis. But in modern golf architecture, all too often the given property is almost void of natural interest. What then?

I believe I have identified four distinct approaches to the problem. The most common is the temptation to move heaven and earth to try and build the designer's vision of "the ideal course," as Pete Dye did at PGA West, or Rees Jones at Atlantic Golf Club. This is also, from my observations, the road to disappointment. By nature it is a derivative enterprise, trying to recreate or even improve on ideas one has seen elsewhere -- but even with an unlimited budget, our imaginations are seldom broad enough to create the nuances which give a hole or a course "character."

A second, more successful approach is the sculptural method, generally practiced by Pete Dye. If there is nothing there on a hole to give him an idea, he simply instructs the earthmover to make a mess. Then he'll have something to work with, and he can mold the ground from there once he has an inspiration. I am sure we would have more good original designs if we simply moved earth on a flat site at random and then adapted the routing of the course to fit, instead of the other way round; but undoubtedly some would decry the inefficiency of this method.

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The third approach is to come up with a "big concept," and let it mold every aspect of the design. This often proves quite successful, whether it is to create a North Carolina-style course in the desert [Shadow Creek in Las Vegas], or a Scottish-style links [as at Spanish Bay or The Legends (Heathland)]. The projects which are less successful are those which forget their big concept halfway through, and devolve into hybrids between the original concept and the architect's usual work, as was the case with many of the other botched "neo-Scottish" courses of the 1980's.

The fourth approach is the minimalist viewpoint -- that there's always something to expand upon, if you just look hard enough. Even on barren land with minimal topographic interest, the natural ground cover [be it trees or shrubbery] can be used as hazard. The depth to the water table dictates a range of variation which can be obtained when moving dirt. A small bump can be exaggerated and brought into play around the green. The direction of the prevailing wind may suggest a particular kind of approach shot around which a hole can be designed. Even just the exact length of bare property which presents itself will suggest certain types of holes which are more suitable to that particular distance.

Each of these approaches has merit, as long as the designer sticks to it and struggles to make it succeed. Without that effort and commitment, even the most brilliant of ideas is doomed to mediocrity.