

A minimal response to golf design trends and technology

by Joe Jemsek

Today, many would agree that the golf industry is currently experiencing a second Golden Age of golf course architecture lead by "minimalist" designers with retro-inspired strategic designs, despite advancements in golf club and ball technology. Everybody is looking to capitalize on this trend. Unfortunately the minimalist look of blown out, wild fescue-edged bunkers is at home against the back drop of the Pacific Ocean, but looks out of place in Hometown, USA. The challenge for architects is to capture the excitement of the minimalist movement by using the strategic principles and recreating these shot options at any course.

The first step to integrate retro-inspired designs into your existing course is to take a little lesson on your course's design history. As you will find, many older golf courses were designed with classic strategies which have become obsolete due to advancements in technology. Original features also have been lost due to renovations by greens committees or in response to past architectural trends. In case your course wasn't laid out by a famous Scotsman or the course was built more recently, there are many ways to seize the essence of these

new retro courses. Historical aerials, vintage photography, and original golf design plans can help jump start any project, but adjustments can be made to any courses that favor risk-reward and aggressive play, and allow for the enjoyment of all players.

Minimize frontal hazards

Hazards placed in the front of greens require a high lofted shot which offers little challenge for a skilled player armed with modern golf balls and clubs, but are the most challenging for average players and beginners. The designs of the post-World War II era were overly focused on frontal hazards, which have been preferred for tournament- and championship-style courses, but sometimes conflict with minimalist philosophies and lack strategic diversity. Great strategic design gives players the options to take risk or avoid it. To incorporate minimalist features and to improve the flexibility of these designs, frontal bunkers can be shifted forward and angled towards the dogleg or low side of the hole. This opens the high side of the green for less lofted shots, but still offers protected pin

positions for tournament play.

Allow for alternative play

A famous golf course designer once said, "If you get a tour player thinking, you have him exercising his weakest muscle." Indecision and deception are some of the greatest weapons in the golf course designer's arsenal. Strategies that offer multiple lines of play, those that mask portions of the playing area, or change depth perception, add interest and challenge to skilled players without undue pressure on novice players. Adding a second fairway is rarely an option within an existing golf course, but properly placed bunkers, grass depressions and irregular mounding can recreate the alternative play options and adhere to minimalist ideas.

Short par 4s

Increase in golf ball distance has led many courses to add additional length, but in doing so, clubs may have missed opportunities to create strategic drivable par fours. The drivable par 4 or short par 4 isn't a new concept,

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there are several fine examples found on the Old Course at St. Andrews. Closer to home iconic holes like the 16th at TPC Scottsdale and the 10th at Riviera have shown to be some of the most exciting in golf. Elements for a great short par 4 include fairways angled around a hazard, slopes that feed balls towards or away from the putting surface, and separated layup or landing areas. These holes are meant to be fun, creating interest and pleasure to any course.

Keeping the game enjoyable and accessible should always be at the forefront of the golf course architect's design. Following the beliefs of the minimalist by opening green fronts, offering alternative play options and drivable short par fours will keep any course contemporary regardless of the new technology.



An example of a short par 4 (350 yds) without strategic design interest and a par 3 (215 yds) that over emphasizes on frontal hazards.



New bunkers on short par four divide landing area, allowing for both risk reward and alternative play options. Reconfiguration of bunkers on par 3 allows novice players an open green front, while still challenging skilled players aiming at pin.

Joe is the principle at Jemsek Golf Design. Started in 2000 to design, renovate, and restore golf courses around the world. Joe has worked with many other golf course architects, on over 90 projects, in 29 countries. Jemsek Golf Design is dedicated to designing and constructing innovative, accessible, and eco-friendly golf courses worldwide. My goal is to deliver services on time, adhering to a proposed budget, and respecting the surrounding natural environment.

www.jemsekgolfdesign.com