

What Signature?

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Across the golf industry, signature design and the existence of a signature hole for a course are hot button topics.

Why? What are the meaningful benefits of signature design or a signature hole? Often, “signature” equals dollars, euros, pounds, yen or whatever the local currency is. Hanging a signature design on a project is sure to raise the overall cost. Signature design, in a few instances, can enhance the product; however, this is not an automatic result. Generally, signature design means that the signature pro will show up for the grand opening and hit a few balls. That signature pro might need a road map to find the course and someone to line him or her up for the ceremonial first drive.

In many instances, the signature or name brand designer knows little of the site, the project or the design solution. The signature does not take the time to learn the local climate, environment or the social factors involved. Often, the input of the signature is superficial or impromptu with little understanding of the basis for the particular solution. Sometimes, the signature visits for the first time on opening day.

As golf course architecture has become more of an art form and science over the past few decades, having a solid university education in urban planning, landscape architecture, ornamental horticulture and turfgrass agronomy contributes more to original and successful design solutions than the distance one can hit with a driver. The ability to make a putt does not equate to a creative or visionary mind in golf course design.

Playing golf well does not make one a skilled or insightful golf course designer. Genetics has not been terribly helpful in passing along golf course signature design originality from one generation to the next anymore than it has playing ability. However, a focused education is a solid basis.

Signature design often has a place when the developer or owner of a project is seeking to broaden the project’s recognition. A “name brand” identity sells well. It



Sentosa Golf Club - Serapong Course - hole 14 greensite
Any course can have a singular remarkable hole, but a truly well-designed course will offer an entire course of exceptional holes to challenge and amaze.
Sentosa Golf Club - Serapong Course - Hole 6 fairway



impresses, but only those who are not fully informed or able to assess the design solution. Repeat play is due to memorable and enjoyable results. The signature only brings paying customers the first time.

Name brand and signature involvement almost always raises the costs for professional fees, construction, turf-

grass maintenance and often yields an excessive clubhouse. All these additional costs elevate the joining fee, monthly dues and pay-to-play greens fees. In recent years, the numbers of playing golfers has flattened or subsided in many markets. Few have connected the dots. Higher costs yield lower play.



A golf course should fit comfortably within its environment to enhance its location. Forcing a trademark design or a signature concept can ruin a course and affect long-term profitability. While hole 3 (above) at Bonari Kogen fits the description of a signature hole, it suits its natural setting well. The entire Bonari Kogen course is situated comfortably and gains from its surroundings.

**Middle image: Hole 17 greensite from rear
Right top: Hole 14 from tees
Right bottom: Hole 2 to green**



In many locations, particularly in new emerging golf markets, the signature marketing gurus promise great numbers of players, high income, and grand events as the payoff for using their name. Particularly in new and emerging markets, high-cost name designers fail to build the market. Affordable and accessible golf is the key to attracting new players. In fact, a very expensive signature project too early into the evolution of golf in an emerging market can present such a bad example of financial excess that what could have been successful, if less ambitious, projects are delayed or halted.

In most cases, name brand pro-signature designers cannot read a scale ruler, a topographic survey map or visualize greensite contouring. Computer design cannot replace one's ability to mentally conceive and visualize golf course sculpturing. The signature is a front man for some young apprentice or project design architect who might have only a few years' on-the-job training and limited experience. These factors generally lead to stereotyped, common results.

How many times does the name brand visit the construction site? Once,

twice, three times? Before construction begins, he or she might appear to sign the contract, collect the first check and pose for photos. He might come briefly once during construction before disappearing again until the ribbon cutting ceremony. Three visits over 18 months or 2 years of construction are insignificant and costly. The golf architect must be a frequent site visitor to obtain maximum value during construction.

Having the signature pro designer tour the course to hit shots and confirm or modify bunker locations is a photo opportunity and adds little of substance to the design of the course. Who else will hit the ball as well as the name brand? Designing only to satisfy an exceptional player's game is a mistake.

A place exists for signature golf design, but added cost has already been shown to have a detrimental affect on golf rounds played. Owners who have no concern for long-term course profitability and hold photo opportunities in high regard are numerous. The signature name will always have a place, but perhaps one less prominent, if financially successful resort and pay-to-play courses are the market.

As for the signature holes, how often do you see a magazine article, marketing brochure or web site focused on one hole of a course. In my opinion, some wonderful signature golf holes exist on courses where the rest of the holes are marginal and boring. Too few courses truly have 18 exciting, visually demanding holes. A signature hole is often the only unique tee shot on the entire course. The golf architect must strive to make each hole the equivalent of a signature hole.

For the long term health of golf, less signatures and more affordable golf is necessary. The actual site and its environment, together with the market focus, should dictate the layout of the course and its features. Creative and visually memorable are essential elements. Signature designers, as with signature holes, are overrated and can be symptomatic of fundamental design weakness and not automatic statements of creative design or financial success.

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A signature designer or relying on the drawing power of a signature hole will not ensure the long-term health of a golf course. To be truly profitable, a course must offer a challenging layout for a good price. The higher the construction costs; the higher the greens fees must be, which cuts players' access.

A Signature name might bring a player once; return visits depend on the course design.

**Left: Shore Gate Golf Club, view to hole 9 green
Right: Shore Gate Golf Club, view to hole 18 & Clubhouse**

