

The 19th Hole Goes Back to Golf

All-Purpose Clubhouses Are Giving Way to Havens More Focused on the Game

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



The earliest golf clubhouses in the U.S., like most of their predecessors in Great Britain, were golf-only affairs. The elegant Shinnecock Hills clubhouse on Long Island, N.Y., designed by Stanford White in the early 1890s, was the first U.S. structure purpose-built for golf, and it still keeps watch, relatively modest in size, over the great links-style course there.

It didn't take long, however, for most golf clubs to morph into country clubs with stupendous clubhouses that offered fine dining and access to other recreational pursuits. (Country clubs built around hunting, boating and carriage-driving actually predated golf in the U.S. by several years.) There have always been a few like Shinnecock, however, that kept strictly to golf, and such pure golf clubs are making something of a comeback these days because for people whose primary interest is golf, they suddenly make a lot more economic sense than do the grand old behemoths (about which more later).

You could see the trend beginning in the early 2000s, just as the golf course building boom was ending, with the opening of such clubs as Dallas National in Texas, The Dye Preserve in Jupiter, Fla., Friar's Head on New York's eastern Long Island, and the Chechessee Creek Club in Okatie, S.C. All of these have relatively small, understated clubhouses, superb golf courses (those at the last two designed by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore), and no swimming pools or tennis courts. It's all about the golf.

Whisper Rock in Scottsdale, Ariz., which opened in 2004, is another good example. It's expensive, with initiation fees running now at \$130,000, and, as an all-male club, politically incorrect. (Women and children are allowed to play golf there several days a week.) But its casual atmosphere (club motto: "It's all about the hang") and two highly ranked courses have attracted an enviable membership that includes something like 40 current or former PGA Tour players, all of whom pay the full initiation fee and regular dues. During a recent lunch visit there, I spotted Paul Casey, Gary McCord and Peter Kostis.

The low-handicap membership and high expense makes Whisper Rock something of an outlier, but the clubhouse, confidently done in Arizona-desert style, is to the point. To the left of the entrance is an intimate, open locker room. To the right is the grill room with large circular tables. Except for the pro shop, that's about it. Architecturally, everything feeds out to the putting green, the driving range and the courses beyond.

None of these pared-down golf clubs has anything approaching fine dining. "The big formal dining room, where men wear jackets and ties and women get somewhat dressed up, just doesn't work anymore," said Richard Diedrich, a clubhouse architect from Atlanta. Yet most of the big, old-style golf clubs and country clubs are saddled with huge dining facilities. Joe Webster, who developed and manages The Dye Preserve, put it in dollars-and-cents terms: "Most clubs that are open for dinner at night are losing seven figures on their food and beverage operations." There's no way to know this for sure, but it jibes with

anecdotal lore.

Those losses are folded into dues. Mr. Webster said that a typical club with 300 members might spend \$1.5 million a year on course maintenance, or \$5,000 per member. "Everything you pay in dues above that is basically so you can have lunch," he said. Lunch is his shorthand for the cost of supporting a kitchen, other services such as the locker rooms, and clubhouse staff—essentially, all the non-golf amenities that a club offers.

Dues at Dye Preserve, which has a 15,000-square-foot clubhouse (and is not open for dinner), are \$9,000 a year. "So that's \$4,000 for lunch," he said. Another Florida club, with a 50,000-square-foot clubhouse plus a pool and tennis, charges \$21,000 in dues. "So those members are paying \$16,000 to eat and for the other stuff," he said. Yet another club in the area, built in the go-go 1990s as a real-estate play, has an even bigger clubhouse and is operating under bankruptcy protection.

Certainly there will always be some people able and willing to pay for the super high-end experience, as well as demand for reasonably priced, family-oriented country clubs. But smaller economic models, whether for full-bore country clubs or stand-alone golf clubs, are likely to dominate if and when new private development picks up again.

The grand old heaps remain, though, and many of them can be explored in Mr. Diedrich's recently-published coffee table book, "The 19th Hole: Architecture of the Golf Clubhouse." It includes photographs and site-plan sketches of 62 of the most famous and sumptuous U.S. clubhouses, some of them quite recent.

Many of the great early clubhouses were modeled after English country estates, complete with liveried staff, that the rising upper-middle classes in America aspired to but couldn't afford. Soon, clubhouse architects struck out in new directions. Medinah Country Club west of Chicago, with its colorful Moorish domes and Byzantine structure, is downright imperial. The iconic stone Winged Foot clubhouse in Mamaroneck, N.Y., completed in the 1920s, was expressly designed to "inspire spiritual feelings."

As golf spread, regional vernaculars developed. The Mediterranean vision of developer Addison Mizner, with terra cotta roofs and wrought iron elements, swept through Florida. Desert Highlands in Scottsdale, from the 1980s, incorporated ancient pueblo structures into a design that melded almost seamlessly into the surrounding desert rock formations. In the mountain West, timber beams and stacked raw stone became the standard.

It's striking, given the large available budgets and the presumed desire of developers to make a name for themselves, how few clubs ever risked avant-garde designs. There have been a few recently, notably The Bridge in Bridgehampton, N.Y., and Liberty National on New York harbor, but most of the interiors look like homey extensions of the living room. Comfy chairs surrounding a big communal fireplace seem almost to be a requirement for clubhouses, even in the heat of the Deep South.

The most effective overall designs, Mr. Diedrich said, are those that best integrate the clubhouse and the golf course—terraces, for example, that offer sweeping views of the finishing holes. From the golfers' point of view out on the course, the clubhouse, especially when it's all aglow at twilight, is home port.

"That relationship between the structure and the course is the essence, that's the constant, and I hope it never changes," Mr. Diedrich said.

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