

A wide-angle photograph of a golf course at dusk. The foreground is a lush green fairway with subtle undulations. In the middle ground, a white picket fence follows the contour of a hill. Beyond the fence, a large, dark tree stands prominently. In the background, a city skyline is visible under a twilight sky, with lights from buildings and streets glowing. The overall mood is serene and scenic.

ON SITE

Big dig

At Rolling Hills in Los Angeles, David McLay Kidd and his team have just completed a huge engineering project. Oh, and they built a golf course too. Adam Lawrence reports

The fifth and eighth holes occupy a narrow spit of land. Kidd and his team opted to connect the two holes in one large area of short grass to give enough width to create strategic interest

Brand new golf courses in major metropolitan areas don't happen too often. And when they do, they usually require a special set of circumstances to align; it isn't easy to find the 150-200 acres typically required for an eighteen hole course today within the boundaries of a major city, let alone the considerably larger area needed to develop something alongside the golf, to make it pay.

Consider three courses built in and around New York over the past decade or so; the municipal Ferry Point project in the

Bronx, involving the capping of a landfill, and costing NYC taxpayers almost US\$240 million to build, or the private Bayonne and Liberty National clubs, right across the water from Manhattan, both built on recovered brownfield sites, Bayonne by way of 250 trucks every day for five years, dumping construction spoil, Liberty National in a similar fashion, at a cost to developer Paul Fireman of somewhere between US\$250-300 million.

On the other hand, when the stars are in alignment, and such a project does come to



Photo: Modern Take

Rolling Hills has a remarkable view over the city of Los Angeles

fruition, the rewards are often substantial. Major metropolitan areas typically have plenty of affluent residents, willing to pay big money for golf and associated items such as housing. And any golf architect who gets to build in the city in this way knows that it will be among the highest profile projects of his career, guaranteed to attract a pile of attention from media and golfers alike.

The story of the recreation of the Rolling Hill Country Club course in the area of Los Angeles known as Palos Verdes is, even by the standards of golf development today, a long one. Founded in 1965, Rolling Hills occupies a prime location on the hill of Palos Verdes, even for Los Angeles a wealthy area, and thus the club became successful. But its course, squeezed in between houses, roads and hilly land too steep for golf, was at best adequate. The original course, a nine hole par three layout, occupied only 14 acres, while in 1972, the club leased another 66 acres from the Chandler family, who operated an enormous sand and gravel quarry on the site. Still very tight, the club managed to get an eighteen hole course, designed by architect Ted Robinson, which served it for the rest of the twentieth century. But in 2000 came a bombshell: the Chandlers announced a plan to sell the quarry, and all the additional land it owned in the area. Although the club's lease ran until 2022, its long term prospects were bleak.

After long negotiations, in 2008 the club,

partnered with developer John Laing Homes, announced it had struck a deal with the Chandlers, and the dozens of regulatory bodies that had oversight. The golf course property would be combined with the quarry, and a new golf course, along with a

to build something good, it also meant that sand – the golf architect's best friend – would be plentiful.

So in August 2015, the construction began. And now we get to the meat of our story, because the construction of this course

“Not only did the quarry give enough space to build something good, it also meant that sand – the golf architect's best friend – would be plentiful”

substantial residential development, would be built. Arnold Palmer Design was signed up to create the new course. But then, disaster: the Great Recession saw Laing file for bankruptcy protection. The deal was dead.

And dead it stayed until 2014, when developer Chuck Lande, a Palos Verdes native, got involved, and talked architect David Kidd into doing the new golf course. “I turned up at the current clubhouse and thought ‘oh, this might not be all I hoped,’” says Kidd. “It was obvious that the course had been cobbled together. But as I got to the top of the golf course, I looked down into the sand quarry.”

It was the sand quarry that convinced Kidd that the Rolling Hills project had legs. Not only did the quarry give enough space

is a real doozy. To summarise: sand was extracted from the quarry to cap the rest of the property to a considerable depth. Huge machines cut down the rolling hills after which the club was named, to produce ground sufficiently level for golf, and to fill the 240 foot deep quarry. Cuts of up to 120 feet were necessary, giving houses at the top of the property a view over the panorama of Los Angeles for the first time.

We should note that Kidd, in recent years, has preferred to handle his projects on a turnkey design and build basis. Now, when you're building among sand dunes, as he and his team have been doing at Mammoth Dunes in Wisconsin simultaneously to Rolling Hills, that's not too difficult. But to operate as main contractor, as well as

golf course architect, on a project where 6.5 million cubic yards of dirt needs to be moved? Well, that's a wee bit different.

And the enormous earthmoving – itself pretty remarkable for a firm that has always been thought of as part of the minimalist movement – is only the first part of the story. Perhaps even more remarkable is the enormous civil engineering project that the build required. Two large canyons at the western end of the Rolling Hills property drain across the course, and, previously, emptied into the sand quarry, which acted as a giant storm drain, protecting much of south-west Los Angeles from flooding. But, with the quarry being filled, this drain was going away. So Kidd and his team – led by his key associate Nick Schaan, who has lived on the property for two years – had to construct

a vast alternative drain network. Located under the sixteenth green – which is in the middle of where the quarry used to be – are nine enormous pipes, 240 feet long, which take storm water down into the aquifer.

So that's the construction story, and what a story it is. Now, let's turn to the golf course itself. Los Angeles is a pretty strong area for private golf, with clubs like LACC, Riviera, Bel Air and Wilshire all world renowned names. But these are almost all found on the north side of the metropolis. The southern part of the giant city is much less well supplied with great golf.

In this context, Rolling Hills promises to be a game changer. The new course is extremely strong, with holes ten to fourteen, which run along the top of the newly-created main body of the property,

perhaps the best stretch. The tenth, a fine par five, has another of Kidd's (soon to be patented?) 'Redanarritz' greens, a hybrid of the two famous templates. First seen at Guacalito de la Isla in Nicaragua and also used at Gamble Sands in Washington, the idea may sound wacky, but the reality is very clever. To hit a running approach onto such a green that catches the kicker slope and feeds to the flag through the swale is to put a big smile on a golfer's face. The par four eleventh, which plays into a canyon right at the top of the site, incorporates a fiendish bunker cut into the canyon wall on the left side of the fairway. Carry it and the green opens up, bail out and the approach will be much harder.

The final punch comes on the eighteenth, a big hole with a huge, extravagantly contoured green. And the size and contours are needed, because right in the middle of the green area sits a bunker, described by Kidd as 'Nick Schaan's homage to Riviera'. I spent fully an hour putting on this green, and there are innumerable possible pin locations, with many different ways to access them. It's a spectacular finish to a pretty remarkable golf course.

Next April will see the course's first big test, when the Pac-12 finals are played at Rolling Hills. Contestants will find a practice facility on the grand scale – 400 yards long, 100 wide and double ended, with three tiers of teeing area facing the LA basin, and nine replicas of famous British greens serving as targets. **GCA**



The top of the course plays into a canyon



Photos: ModernTake

Kidd and team have built a varied and interesting set of greens at Rolling Hills