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Golf course design with a woman's touch

The Gold Coast's own Kristine Kerr, Principal Architect of Kura Golf Course Design is making her mark in the field of golf course architecture. With her first 'solo' design in New Zealand hosting a national Open tournament, she has also become the first female member of the Society of Australian Golf Course Architects. We talked design and projects with Kristine during her recent visit to the Gold Coast.

WG: Firstly Kristine, golf course architecture is not a widely recognized profession, and having become the first female member of the Society of Australian Golf Course Architects, suggests that golf course architecture is a predominantly male domain, is that a correct perception?

KK: Yes, I am one of probably 9 or 10 women in the world working in golf course design. I love it. It's a great combination of design and creativity, sport and the outdoors. You're creating an environment where people are going to enjoy the game of golf as well as the surroundings.

Because being a woman in the profession is a bit of a rarity, people have always been very supportive, and having worked with leaders in the field of golf architecture has given me priceless experience. One of my favourite parts of the job is being on site during construction, as it is so rewarding seeing the course taking shape, as well as fun working with the crew. Possibly not a lot



of women would relish pulling on work boots and wandering around in the mud, but I love being outdoors and for me it's great fun!

Like any job, one needs motivation, inspiration and passion, so gender is not that important.

Being a member of SAGCA is great, it affords professional recognition, and the Society is active in promoting the game of golf, design and environmental standards. As it is a small industry, it's tremendous to stay in touch and share information with others.

WG: You grew up on the Gold Coast, did that have an influence on your career choice?

KK: I was introduced to golf early on by my parents, with my father being a scratch golfer. We moved from New Zealand to the Gold Coast in 1980 where my parents were involved early on in the development of Palm Meadows. I was definitely inspired by growing up on the Gold Coast, surrounded by golf courses and the 'resort' lifestyle – which I have a great affinity with – and it's fabulous that my job allows me to design beautiful places! Completing a degree in Landscape Architecture/Urban and Regional Planning at QUT in Brisbane, I joined my parents in Singapore in 2002 and commenced work with a highly respected golf architecture firm: Nelson Wright Haworth. Golf development was booming, the demand was for 18-hole 'championship' courses and with generous project budgets we could design expansively and create fabulous golf courses.

I was exposed to all aspects of design from initial site selection and master-planning, to detailed design of hole strategies, earthworks and drainage, and grass selection and construction specifications.

WG: That sounds technical!

KK: Ha, yes, because the finished golf course is largely rolling greenery, many people are unaware of the degree of detail that goes into the design process and the number of elements to be considered. Besides the 'strategy' of a hole, ie. length and placement of hazard, other elements to consider are drainage to enable the course to be playable all year round; earthworks quantities so that in shaping the course you are effectively 'balancing' the movement of earth on the site, to negate the need for importing/exporting material which is costly and shouldn't be necessary. Then there are also water and environmental considerations.

WG: You have travelled widely with your career, and worked with some interesting people, including legendary golfer, Gary Player, tell me about that!

KK: I worked with Gary Player Design in both London and China, on projects in Italy, the Czech Republic, China and site visits to courses in Egypt and Singapore. Gary Player has been such an amazing ambassador for golf, he is very charismatic and enthusiastic, which spills over into his design ethos. Working with one of the 'living legends' of golf, one is exposed to some of the best projects and clients in the world – again, all invaluable experience.

I really enjoy collaborating with others, and discussing ideas and hearing tales from one of the most widely travelled golfers in the world is truly inspiring.



Pegasus Golf & Sports Club, Christchurch: Opposite page (top)– Hole 10 island tee, a classic risk reward hole; (bottom) – Hole 11, par 3.

Above: Putting out on the 18th Green, Pegasus NZ Women's Golf Open 2010; (right) Pegasus entrance lake; native plantings are a theme throughout the course.



Kristine Kerr

WG: Whilst you've worked on high profile courses internationally, your most recent design is the Pegasus Golf Course in New Zealand, which at only two months old hosted the 2010 Pegasus NZ Women's Golf Open – an event co-sanctioned with the LET and ALPG. That must be quite a feather in your cap?

KK: It was amazing, a real thrill for my first 'solo' design, and especially with it being such a new course to have a field of the best female golfers in the world play at Pegasus. The feedback from the girls was excellent, including from the winner Laura Davies. She described it as a great 'open' course which suited her game. Pegasus will host the tournament again in February 2011.

The course is a parkland style and part of a residential community, so it was crucial to create a course that truly was suitable for all levels of golfer. Having been open just a year, it is proving immensely popular with local golfers as well as international travellers, so we definitely satisfied the design brief!

WG: And we have to ask, do you design courses that are particularly 'female-friendly'?

KK: No! However, they say all architects design to suit their own game (Kristine laughs) – so I do pay a lot of attention to where I place the ladies tees, because that's where I play from! Historically tees were set out in a 'run way' formation and forward tees for women were an afterthought, and often just 20m forward of men's tees. Leaps in technology mean there is a large discrepancy in how far all golfers can hit the ball. Therefore it's important to place tees at considered distances for the overall hole length as well as in relation to hazards.

I love to design 'strategically', that is to provide golfers with options and challenges. When they stand on the tee they must consider how they are going to play the hole and make that decision in relation to either scoring better or taking perhaps a 'softer' option.

It is important for me to present a 'fair' course for both men and women, as you don't want golfers to finish the round feeling like they've been beaten up. Easy courses are dull, and likewise, too 'difficult' can be exhausting!

WG: You were recently on a panel with Annika Sorenstam at the KPMG Golf Business Forum about women in golf. Do you aim to promote golf for women?

KK: Golf is a fantastic sport for any age, so yes, if I can encourage more people, including women, to take up the game, I'm happy. At the conference we presented to golf course owners and developers, with our overall theme being how to attract more women to the game of golf. In these very busy times, a lot of people feel that they don't have time for a four hour round of golf. I believe that by encouraging facilities – such as country clubs – to be family oriented, the whole family can be in one place together, rather than just the mum or dad being away for golf for the whole day. Golf courses can be designed to be more female-friendly for beginner golfers, by not being too difficult from the forward tees. Six and nine hole courses also provide a great introduction to new golfers, as well as golfers who are 'time-poor'.

WG: We understand that you have secured another large project in New Zealand – no mean feat in these economic times!

KK: I'm currently working on design for the 'Christchurch Golf Resort', an 18-hole 'tournament' course and international golf academy. We're half way through the design and I'm very excited about it. We will be incorporating native wetlands and creating native bush areas giving the course a very natural feel.

I also have two 'remodelling' projects on the go for existing courses, Taitapu Golf Club in Christchurch and Waitangi Golf Club in the Bay of Islands. They're both very different courses and it's really fun to work with Clubs where members are very passionate about their course.

Many Clubs now see the benefits of engaging professional golf architects to improve their courses, as a qualified architect is able to see the bigger picture, suggesting changes that will fit in both functionally and aesthetically with the existing course and will be cost effective.

WG: What's next?

KK: I would love my next project to be in Australia or Asia Pacific!