

Nick's Tips

Clubhouses

Laying the Groundwork before the Foundation

by John Nick

When it comes to clubhouses, I have seen the good, the bad... and the ugly.

There is no magic formula or set of rules for the uninitiated to follow or refer to when faced with the daunting task of either renovating an existing clubhouse or constructing a new one. Hiring an architect will not in itself provide you with all of the answers, nor to be fair, should an investor or operator expect it. Therein lies the paradox.

An architect must rely on information from an army of experts including a host of engineers, interior designers, lighting and sound contractors, kitchen planners, bar designers, security system specialists, computer analysts and the list goes on...and on.

The irony for those of us who have endured the spectacle of clubhouse development is that you quickly realize that none of these experts have managed a clubhouse. It is you, as the owner or operator, who has to live with the results. And there's nothing more infuriating than spending good money after bad, rectifying errors or omissions that you or the experts should have considered.

I'm not a fatalist per se, but every time a project bounds along without a hiccup, up pops Mr. Murphy when you least expect him, just to remind you that nobody's perfect. Getting it right the first time is always paramount but seldom occurs. After 30 years of experience renovating properties, I've become more of a realist.

It's only natural to be full of enthusiasm and ideas in the early stages of planning a renovation or new clubhouse, and that's OK. Part of the planning process is to get all of your ideas down on paper, at the beginning of the project and not half way through it! The emotional roller coaster starts when financial budgets separate the investor/s needs from the wants.

There is little harm done if you change your mind at the beginning of a project when the schematic drawings are being developed. If you are uncertain of what you want or how the finished product will look then tender the schematic drawings out to two or three architects for a negotiated flat fee. Then select the architect you are most comfortable with. If you are building a new clubhouse, spending a few thousand extra dollars in the selection process will often prevent future headaches and prove to be money well spent.

All too often I am asked to critique clubhouse plans after the local authorities have approved them. Any changes at this stage can prove to be very costly.

Frustration envelopes all of those involved and, you've guessed it, Murphy's right there in the thick of it.

Another critical part of the initial planning process is research. Visit other recently renovated or newly constructed clubhouses and talk to the owners and operators and ask them what they would have done differently or could have improved. When you see something you like ask permission to take pictures - I've rarely been turned down and there's little point in reinventing the wheel.

Several months ago, I reviewed a number of clubhouses at recently-constructed notable golf courses across Canada. My research took me from the Pacific shores to the Atlantic Ocean with stops in Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. It was refreshing to observe the different styles of architecture. What was intriguing was that all of the clubs chose to build smaller clubhouses and cater the large corporate tournaments under a variety of marquees. This reduces initial capital costs and provides an opportunity to reduce future property taxes on a larger clubhouse.

The Final Word:

Statistically it's the first-time owners who develop a golf course who are more likely to fail. It's often the second and third-time buyers who pick up the pieces and are able to service a smaller debt, who succeed.

Investing unnecessary dollars on an oversized clubhouse just increases the likelihood of failure. My advice to most golf course investors is to focus on developing a great golf course and operate a modestly-sized, well-appointed clubhouse that reflects the quality of the golf course. Simple... but sound advice.