

LISTENING TO THE LAND

Integrating Architecture into the Landscape

By Jim Carson

Resort properties are largely defined by their landscapes. Therefore, it is important for owners, design architects, landscape architects and contractors to work together to respect the existing environment. Here's how one team did just that in Hilton Head Island, S.C.

In today's competitive timeshare environment, developers must make the most of every detail. This includes the natural amenities of their sites. Features such as moss-draped oaks, mountain views and ivory beaches can add a sensory quality to resorts, create a strong sense of place and spur sales. In fact, they often make the difference between successful and unsuccessful properties.

But to retain these native qualities, developers must find design architects, landscape architects and contractors who respect the land and understand its intrinsic value.

Consider, for example, Hilton Head Island, S.C. This 42-square-mile island's forests, marshes and wind-shaped oaks paint a scenic backdrop, but they also challenge architects charged with incorporating buildings, amenities and service areas into the setting.

A team forged by Marriott Vacation Club International did just that in two timeshare projects designed and built on the barrier island: Marriott's Grande Ocean and Marriott's Barony Beach Club. On both, Marriott needed to yield the most from the acreage yet maintain the resort experience. This required a team of architects willing and able to let the natural environment and the owner's needs guide their designs.

Landscaping Reflects the Uniqueness of the Resort

By letting the landscape play center stage, architects can design unique resorts that seem to take guests to another dimension. "When it comes to defining quality in a resort, studies show that people have different preferences when it comes to the resort's buildings and amenities. But everyone consistently per-

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ceives great landscaping as a feature that adds value to a property," says Stephen Withers, Marriott Vacation Club International's vice president of architecture and design.

Therefore, architects should view the site as a piece of environmental art into which they must incorporate man-made structures that will work on both an aesthetic and practical level. The finished project should deliver the "wow" effect yet be functionally seamless.

A Team Approach Results in Success

Designing and building such resorts does not necessarily cost more, but it does require experienced professionals, good communications and a strong working partnership. Each member of the team plays a distinct role, yet their roles also overlap as they must coordinate their efforts to achieve success.

The owner commits to the idea of preserving the environment, sets the tone for the project and forms a team dedicated to respecting the natural landscape. "Everyone involved must understand that development and trees are compatible," says Withers. With that in mind, Marriott began both projects by commissioning arborists to perform tree surveys in which every tree was identified by species and size. They then identified those trees that had to be saved to maintain the character of the land.

The landscape architects, Wood + Partners of Hilton Head and Robert Marvin of Walterboro, S.C., took stock of what the sites had to offer in the way of vegetation, topography, sun angles



and wind flows. Working with the design architects, they performed capacity studies to meet Marriott's development goals and determine the best configuration of buildings. They spearheaded efforts to position roads, parking, pools and other site amenities.

The design architect, on the other hand, positioned the buildings to create pleasantly scaled landscaping and amenity spaces between them, maximize the views from all units and allow for the smooth flow of vehicular, service and pedestrian traffic. The buildings were designed to be constructed of materials that blended into the environment. They framed the gardens and formed a textural backdrop for the soft surfaces.

The design and landscape architects then put their heads together, refining the concepts and adjusted buildings, roads and other hard surfaces, positioning them around the trees and using the existing grades as much as possible as trees cannot survive drastic changes in elevation.

Hardin Construction of Atlanta, the general contractor for Marriott's Barony Beach Club and the last eight buildings of Marriott's Grande Ocean, acted as site policeman on both projects, ensuring that the plant life was respected. They made sure construction personnel understood the importance of guarding plant materials.

Hardin employees barricaded the existing vegetation with rigid orange vinyl fences before workers came on site. They also built construction roads and pathways into the site and insisted everyone use them. Moreover, they spelled out the need to protect plant life in their subcontracts, reiterated it in frequent site meetings, and established penalties for tree damage. Finally, they continuously reminded workers of small things, such as not splashing masonry water which contains lime, on the shrubs near buildings.

Through this active partnership's design capabilities and attention to detail, Marriott created two highly successful resorts.

Marriott Vacation Club International's Grande Ocean was constructed between 1993 and 1998 on the site of the old Hilton Head Inn, once a Lowcountry landmark. It consists of 11 buildings that house 290 two-bedroom villas.

One of the main challenges the team faced was in merging the two sections of the site. The north garden was heavily wooded, while much of the south garden was barren as it had been beneath the buildings that were demolished. The team joined the areas by creating two separate experiences, designed by different landscape architects, connected by an ocean-front promenade.

Into the oaks and shrubs of the north garden, landscape architect Robert Marvin wove a network of lagoons that reflects the feel of a barrier island. Infused with 10 varieties of blooming water plants, he created an introspective area that also features gazebos, spas and swings. It is a space designed for reflection.

The south garden was designed by Wood + Partners to invite activity. This once barren area was transformed into a recreational site subdivided into separate "outdoor rooms," with ease of movement from one to the next. It includes a 4,600-square-foot pool, shade trellises, barbecue grills, lawn games and outdoor dining spaces. The family theme is reinforced by a nine-foot sculpture of three playful dolphins leaping out of a multi-tiered, cascading fountain. It earned the tri-state (Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina) American Society of Landscape Architecture award for 1999.

Both areas are framed by elevated stucco buildings of five stories, the maximum height allowed by the town. Elevating the buildings helped achieve project density by allowing parking beneath the structures. It also met flood zone requirements, reduced hard surfaces and increased landscaping flexibility. The buildings were configured to minimize the impact of the density and painted in two earth tones compatible with the Hilton Head character. This broke the scale and added visual interest. Moreover, the design passed the town's strict aesthetic review process. Lower level roofs, applied trellises and landscape screening added texture and human scale to the ground plane and created a more interesting background for the gardens.

During demolition, the team identified an oak tree approximately seven feet in diameter supported, in part, by one of



Marriott's Grande Ocean Club

the buildings being razed. The workers hand dug around the roots of this tree to avoid damaging it when they were putting in the foundation. Marriott won a National Arborist Award for their efforts in saving the tree.

This obsession with environmental details paid off. Marriott's Grande Ocean's sales exceeded both the construction pace and Marriott's original sales forecast. Moreover, it earned Marriott Vacation Club International's Award of Excellence as well as the American Resort Development Association's 1996 ARDY award.

Marriott Vacation Club International's Barony Beach Club was begun in 1997 and is now in its final stage. The property is composed of two sections separated by the resort's main driveway. It was built on one of the last ocean-front parcels in Hilton Head, with the short dimension of the rectangular site overlooking the Atlantic. The resort offers 255 two-bedroom villas in seven

earth tone buildings of five floors each. Wood + Partners served as the landscape architects.

While the villa buildings are similar to those at Grande Ocean, the design was modified to meet budgetary constraints. Barony Beach Club's villas are smaller than those at Grande Ocean, with slightly different configurations for garden and ocean villas. The five villa buildings on the ocean side of the site were set

back from the water and positioned perpendicular to the sea to capture angled ocean views from more rooms.

The team then created a recreational area between the buildings and the ocean. A 4,500-square-foot pool, raised above the existing grade and flanked by three terraces of varying heights, anchors the area. Fountains, spas, big umbrellas and plant materials add scale and visual interest. The area also features an indoor pool overlooking the dunes. Working together, the design and landscape architects stepped this pool down from the building and narrowed the deck at its end to discourage guests from placing chairs in front of the main glass wall. This integrated the pool into the landscape by providing a clearer view of the garden. It also demonstrates how the design and landscape architects can fine tune a design and add value to a finished project.

Since Barony Beach Club's inland section has no ocean view, its two villa buildings were focused inward to overlook a courtyard garden with a pool, spas, an artificial putting green and grilling areas. The team worked together to save a row of pine trees, which they used to buffer the tight site from buildings on an adjacent property. They snaked a stucco wall covered with fig vines through another stand of trees to shield the site from a nearby roadway, adding an air of privacy and seclusion to the property.

The End Results?

By forging a team of professionals willing to take their cues from the land, Marriott Vacation Club International realized their goals of developing high yield properties that invite relaxation. "Both Grande Ocean and Barony Beach Club have had record sales," Withers says. "The architects' sensitivity to creating the vacation experience and ability to work in partnership was critical to our success."

The team seamlessly wove buildings and other hard surfaces into the natural landscape. As a result, they created functional resorts that deliver exactly what owners and guests are seeking -- physical and emotional shelter. **D**

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