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For Many, the Pandemic Has Led to the ‘Discovery’ of Golf

And homes on courses are the place to be now, not something you save for vacation or retirement.



Homes at Silo Ridge in the Hudson Valley, once expected to serve as weekend refuges for New York City residents, have become primary residences. Jeff Lipsky

For the first 15 years of his career developing real estate focused around golf courses, Mike Meldman had never really played. “I didn’t golf at all. The golf was an amenity to sell the real estate,” he confided, noting that his naïveté was fundamental to an approach that has distinguished his dozens of projects from the standard template.

“If I’d grown up like a golf snob, none of the fun I’m trying to create at our places would ever have happened.”

Now chairman and chief executive of Discovery Land Company, Mr. Meldman has more than 25 years of experience developing residential golf communities across North America, in the Caribbean and soon in Europe. He shared some thoughts about how the pandemic has reshaped their use, and what it presages for golf communities in the future. This interview has been edited and condensed.



Mike Meldman of Discovery Land Company is making kitchens and dining rooms larger as younger residents with families move in.

How has your business changed over the last three decades?

When I first started with [Estancia](#) [a golf club in Scottsdale, Ariz.], people were buying empty lots, figuring they'd move in during their retirement. Now a lot of people aren't buying for retirement, but the lifestyle today — our buyer has gotten younger, and there are a lot of 30- or 40-year-olds with their families. So now we're more of a home builder, because people want to use these places immediately. It's very positive for these communities. There used to be more speculators who bought a lot to flip it for two or three times their money.

The pandemic has reshaped so much. How has it affected Discovery's communities?

We're more full today than we ever have been, because everyone has escaped. We have fairly stringent Covid policies, and we encourage people not to really leave the property; they don't want to anyway. We thought [Silo Ridge](#), just outside New York, would be a weekend home for people in the city, but it's become their primary house now for many. It's taught us that low-density projects that are secure and protected from the outside have real value. People just feel more secure there right now.

Your company is focused on creating a social community, as much as a physical one. How did that evolve?

Thirty percent or higher of our members have multiple properties. Once people have these places, they tend to use them a lot more than they first say they will. It's the biggest question people ask me: Will we use it enough? In the early clubs we did, we had to increase the size of the kitchen and dining rooms because people were there every night.

In your communities, which is more important — the houses or the golf courses?

We purposely design it so the homes don't impact the golf experience — we're fairly low density compared to most golf communities, with 200 or 300 homes rather than 800. We have wide fairways and big setbacks, and the houses are designed to see the golf course, but not be a part of it. Balls aren't hit into your patio or your pool all the time. At Chileno Bay Golf and Beach Club, in Los Cabos, Mexico, there aren't even homes on the course.

How have you selected a site for your next project? And how will societal shifts from the pandemic affect your strategy?

It would be great to do one of our projects in Beverly Hills or San Francisco, but we can't because there just isn't the land. So we end up in more rural or underpopulated areas: the minimum property acreage would be 450 to 500 acres for us; the Yellowstone [Club] is 14,000.

We made a conscious decision about five years ago to go to tax-free states, so we've made big commitments to Las Vegas, Nashville and Austin. They have become hotbeds, not just for locals moving there, but we're getting a big influx of Californians to Las Vegas, for example.

We have a big project we're starting near Jupiter, Fla. If we were open today, we'd sell out overnight; so many people on the East Coast are moving there.