

Rhapsodies in Blueprint

When it comes to housing equines, these designers are masters of air, space and light.

BY CRAIG WEBB

Paint falsely, then add the accent of nature," counseled the Impressionist master Edgar Degas. For the nation's premier equine architects, it's advice that's been taken to heart. After all, horses would be perfectly happy if they never saw the inside of a barn, and when most humans think fondly of their farms, their mind's eye tends to put their equines on open pastures, not cooped up in a stall.

So an architect's task is no picnic. Our designers of distinction meet that challenge in diverse yet consistent ways, showing respect for the land, local tradition and equine lore—the accents of nature that make a barn memorable. Here are word and photo portraits of five men and women whose work is as strong as it is subtle.

JOHN BLACKBURN, BLACKBURN & ASSOCIATES, WASHINGTON, D.C.

John Blackburn talks a lot about hot air. He'll expound on prevailing winds, heat gain and overhangs. He'll point out how airflow should differ in foaling and stallion barns. And he'll check the weather charts to see how the breezes shift each season.

It's only partly ironic that Blackburn has built a reputation as much for his work with what can't be seen as for what can. In a sense, subtle corruptions of nature are what Blackburn & Associates does best. The firm's understated, naturalistic barns actually are carefully engineered machines designed to make owners happy and horses content.

"You design the barns to take care of the animal and use the environment to your advantage to re-create exterior conditions as much as you can," he says.



BRANT GARHA PHOTOS



Previous pages: Lane's End Farm in Versailles, Kentucky, was designed in the mid-1980s by John Blackburn and his then-partner, Robert Smith. Inset: Blackburn, here at John Kluge's Morven Stud in Charlottesville, Virginia, says that "every barn is designed with a different site, manager and owner in mind."

Still crisp in his white oxford-cloth shirt on this unseasonably warm Washington morning, Blackburn exudes the same cool as his buildings. He first got acquainted with horses in Tennessee, where he grew up riding his sister's Tennessee Walking Horse. Today, his firm is one of the few architectural firms specializing in equine work.

The firm's most recent raves came in 1994, when what was then known as Smith Blackburn Stauffer won the 1994 Award for Excellence in Architecture from the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for its design of Morven Stud in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"Morven was a good case where the materials were right, and the buildings fit into the landscape handsomely," Blackburn says of the John Kluge estate. "They're on top of a ridge for good ventilation, and each stall door leads to the exterior. And the heavy wood decking insulates you from heat gain on the roof."

Other notable projects Blackburn has worked on lately include Robert Wood Johnson IV's spread in Bedminster, New Jersey, known as The Farm, and Mitchell Rales' Glenstone Farm in Potomac, Maryland. The graduate of Clemson University and Washington University in St. Louis also has a continuing relationship with two Kentucky showpieces, Shawnee Farm and Lane's End Farm.

Lately he's spent much of his time serving as principal-in-charge of the barn and staff residence at Meralex Farm, a new complex near Tampa, Florida, owned by Bryan Baldwin. "It's in sort of a Caribbean-French style, with expressed ribs and dormers," Blackburn says. Again, hot air is

on his mind, and he's exploring such remedies as a ceramic tile roof, four-foot roof overhangs and louvers to bring air through the overhangs and into the barn. But the owner also is kept in mind; the aisles run across the width of the barn rather than down its length to provide easy access to the main jumping field. And the hay storage has been discreetly placed on the side away from the main house, so the bales won't spoil the owner's view.

"Every barn is designed with a different site, manager and owner in mind," Blackburn says. "But the horses are the same."