

**T**he new structure at Rocana Farm sits on a rolling, grassy field, off a snaky country road outside Middleburg, Va. Geese waddle along the lawn in front of it. Its shingled roof peaks above the tree line. As the afternoon sun breaks through the November clouds, the stained wood siding gives off a golden glow.

It could pass as some telecom executive's custom-built country house. But the ranch-style home is off to the left. That's where Nextel Communications Senior Vice President Robert Foosaner lives with his wife, Carol Foosaner, and their daughter, Nellie Ann. This pole-frame structure with tongue-and-groove wood panels, guarded by security cameras, is the barn in which the family keeps its hunter-jumper horses and show ponies.

Behind the new barn, out of sight on the rear edge of the farm, stands the old one. It's a low-roofed, rustic shed, built of gray oak, with four stalls. It looks drab and feels cramped.

The new barn is neither. Light pours through an open door, gleaming on glossy pine paneling. "This place wowed me at first sight," says farm manager Dow Padgett, standing in the wide aisle and gazing up at the vaulted ceiling.

Padgett is flanked by six stalls, three to a side, each 12 feet by 12 feet. Each features glass windows, its own light fixture, an electric fan, and a brass nozzle—which is connected, Padgett explains, to an automated fly-spray system. Olive-green sliding steel gates close off the stalls. Retractable flaps in the bars allow the horses to peek into the aisle or poke their heads out and look at the geese.

The stall floors, barely noticeable under a blanket of wood-chip bedding, are covered with rubber mats. This easily washes clean of urine and manure, Padgett says, unlike the dirt floors in most barns. "You can totally smell the difference," he says.

Down the hall, past two heated wash stalls, a spacious office, and a bridle-and-saddle-storage room, Padgett slides open two tall steel doors. Beyond is the indoor galloping arena, 70 feet by 212 feet. It has its own overhead sprinkler system, he explains, to keep the sandy footing loose.

These equine accommodations are the work of John Blackburn, of the Georgetown firm Blackburn Architects. Blackburn, 56, markets himself as a specialist in equestrian design—drawing up high-end facilities for high-end horse owners. Blackburn has designed horse digs from Virginia to California, from Kenosha, Wis., to Austin, Texas.

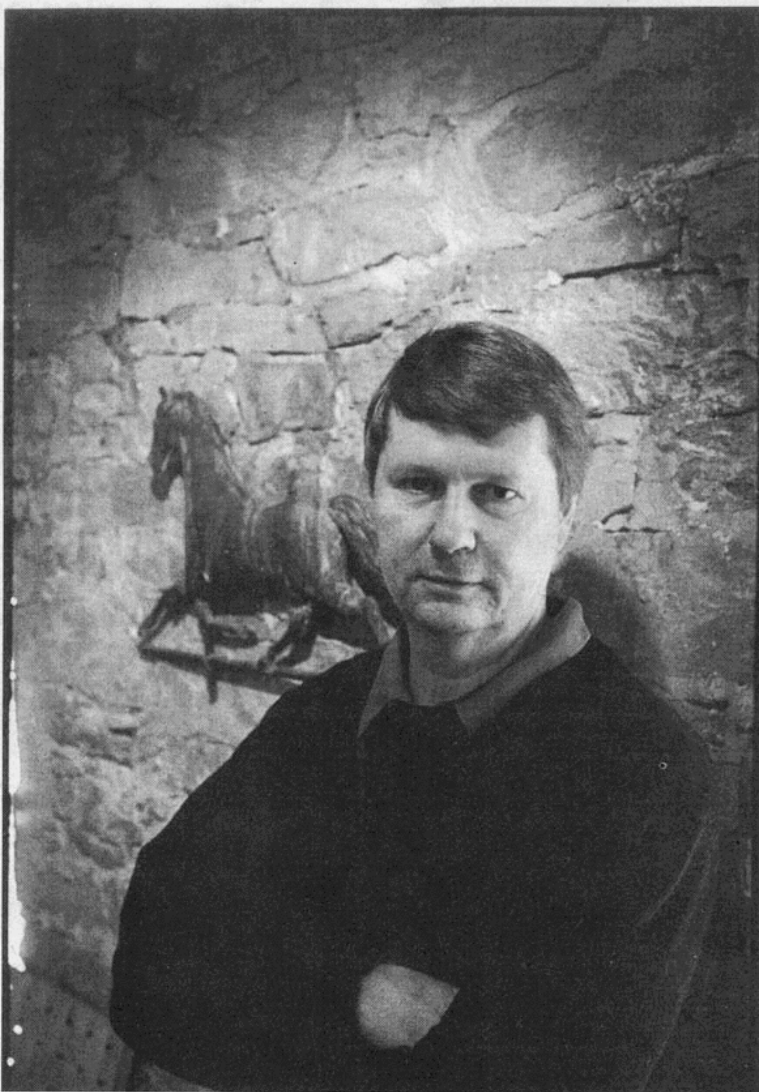
Architects dream of seeing their work crop up across the continent. But Blackburn is designing for residents who don't appreciate the balancing of visual mass or the use of context-sensitive detail.

"Horses, if they had their choice, would rather be outside," says J. William Boniface, a longtime Maryland thoroughbred breeder and trainer.

Potential clients often ask Blackburn why they need an architect to design their barns, he says. His stock response: "You don't." There's a thriving industry in prefabricated barns, which are far quicker and cheaper to construct than custom-built ones. A barn and riding ring of Rocana Farm's size built by EagleSpan Steel Structures Inc. of Loveland, Colo., for instance, would cost less than \$250,000 and could be completed in as little as six weeks.

But for a horse owner "with a bankroll," Boniface says, getting an equine-minded architect can make sense. "There's lots of facets to horse-barn construction that are quite

# Design on the Hoof



High-end buyers pony up for a John Blackburn barn.

By Chris Shott Photograph by Darrow Montgomery

different from, say, building a tractor shed," he says. "There's a lot of details that need to be adhered to, so it's good to consult somebody who specializes in it. Novices might not know that horses will chew on soft wood, or that they need elevation when they rear up so they don't hit their heads."

At Rocana Farm, the Foosaners were looking for something more than overhead clearance. Their goal, Carol Foosaner says, was to get something "beautiful but primarily functional." Blackburn describes the barn as a "modest-budget" project, but the Foosaners say it cost more than their former home in Bethesda—which sold for \$1.15 million in 2000, according to Maryland real-estate records.

"You cannot build an indoor riding ring like ours for less than \$700,000," Carol Foosaner says. "This one cost more, and that's not the [whole] barn, just the indoor arena."

Besides his work for the Foosaners, Blackburn has drawn up shelter for the horses of billionaire John Kluge, former chair of MetroMedia International Group, and Greg Goodman, president of Houston's HGG Investments Inc. The Blackburn customer base is shopping for high functionality with an appropriate hint of luxury.

On the conspicuous-consumption scale, the result is, in some cases, more like a Mercedes station wagon than a tricked-out Escalade. "We did not put chandeliers in our barn," Carol Foosaner says. "But there is a barn in Middleburg that has chandeliers."

"Most of the people we do facilities for are really concerned that they have a nice facility," Blackburn says. "They have very valuable horses, and they want to protect them. We design our barns to be incredibly safe. They're ventilated well and detailed well, so you don't have sharp corners or edges or hooks that could hurt a horse."

Blackburn wasn't always interested in equine well-being. Growing up in Kingsport, Tenn., he says, he was more interested in houses than horses. "My twin sister loved Tennessee Walkers," he says. "She was into showing horses. But not me. I got on the horse occasionally to see how fast I could get it to go. She hated that." Blackburn reserved his real interest for the houses under construction around him. "I played in them all the time," he says.

After bolting the Smokies in the mid-'60s to study architecture at Clemson University, Blackburn "lost all interest in horses." He found his niche in the field by happenstance: In 1983, when he and a business partner had just started their own firm, "we were doing garage additions and every little thing we could," he says. Realtor Robert Smith, now chair of Charles E. Smith Commercial Realty, hired them to design his horse farm in Upperville, Va.

Smith wanted the buildings to blend into the local architecture, Blackburn says. So the firm came up with gable-roofed Federal-style buildings, incorporating stone from an old fence on the site. The barns were vented to allow prevailing breezes to pass through and had skylights that let in sunshine, helping keep the mares' breeding cycles in sync with the seasons.

Eventually, Blackburn says, he hopes to write a book, passing along his knowledge on the art of planning upscale housing for animals that don't know any better. He also mentions branching out into other realms of animal architecture, such as chicken coops and dog kennels. "Well," he recants, "probably not chicken coops." **CP**