

Equine Design

FROM HOMES FOR PEOPLE TO HOMES FOR HORSES, JOHN BLACKBURN HAS DESIGNED COUNTLESS INTERPRETATIONS OF AN AMERICAN CLASSIC.

By Elizabeth Exline



PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAUL SCHRAUB

T“THEY’RE PART OF AMERICA,” declares John Blackburn, senior principal of Blackburn Architects in Washington, D.C. “There are lots of different types, and people are fascinated with them.” Blackburn could be talking about anything—apples, cars, his own architectural projects, which include commercial, residential, equestrian and renovation/adaptive-reuse designs. But if you know him in the slightest, you know that only one subject could so wholly capture his curiosity: barns. That’s right—dark, dusty, malodorous barns. Except, for Blackburn, such a description is as antiquated as a horse-drawn carriage.

“You can walk into one of our barns, [and] you can

work all day without electric lights,” he says, summing up the essence of his light-filled, airy designs. That’s because Blackburn’s trademark style involves positioning each barn perpendicular to the site’s prevailing breeze, allowing air to enter the structure through low openings and exit via high vents. He then showers the building with a bevy of skylights, and finishes it with such materials as exposed concrete (in the “people” spaces only) and bamboo floors. “A horse is meant to live in the wild,” Blackburn explains, “so you need to design a building that works with nature...You have to provide natural light and ventilation, and control it for the horse’s health and safety.”





JOHN BLACKBURN *on...*

**BEST BARN ELEMENTS TO
INTEGRATE INTO RESIDENTIAL DESIGN**

Wood, heavy timber, natural light
and ventilation, green design.

FAVORITE SPACE AT HOME

Relaxing on the front porch.

TRADEMARK OF HIS DESIGN

Contextual design.

MOST VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION

HE HAS MADE SO FAR

In equestrian design, it's having
focused the design on the health
and safety of the horse. In residential
design, it's the bond between
the building and the site.

FAVORITE ASPECT OF

WORKING ON THE WEST COAST

The designs are more reflective of
the site and environmental conditions,
and less tied to 'colonial traditions.'
Western clients are more open to new
ideas, environmentally sensitive
design and connection to the landscape.



Blackburn got his big break with barns, which helps explain the gusto with which he now designs them. In the beginning, he and his former business partner were toiling away on garage additions and porch enclosures, so they were eager to oblige when a potential client called them up to bid on a horse-farm project. They studied the context of the Middleburg, Va., setting, taking pictures, sketching buildings and developing a design that would harmonize with the surroundings. "He loved it," Blackburn says of the client, "and we were hired on the spot. We had seven buildings to do, we had no employees, and it was just amazing."

Thus was Blackburn, a veritable architectural debutant, launched into proper horse society. Lauded for his beautiful and efficient equestrian-facility designs, Blackburn injects his creations with a surprising degree of crispness. His immaculately lined barns look like puzzle pieces nestled inside boundaries of succulent grass and Technicolor skies. As a result, Blackburn's architectural practice of now 24 years and counting owes 70 to 80 percent of its business to equestrian facilities. And Blackburn doesn't stop at the barn, either. "We plan out the residence, the staff housing, lay out the paddocks, all the roads, all the buildings, lay out the barns, the arena—we do everything," he says.

That Blackburn does his job well is evidenced by his high-profile clients like Eunice and Sargent Shriver and Barry Waitte, formerly of Apple Computers, as well as by the actual projects that come his way. He is heading up the renovation of Sagamore Farm, for example, which was originally owned by Alfred G. Vanderbilt II. It's an undertaking that marries two of Blackburn's passions—barns and restoration. "I've always been one who does not like waste," Blackburn says. "I came to Washington... to work with older buildings, because I really liked saving [them]. I hate to see buildings torn down. There's a lot of energy, a lot of materials in those buildings."

Sagamore Farm reflects yet another of Blackburn's causes: sustainable design. For as long as he has practiced architecture, Blackburn says, he has opted for green

materials like recycled rubber for floors; wood or reclaimed lumber instead of steel; and local materials like the indigenous "Austin Stone" he used in a Texas project dubbed Oakhaven Farm. For him, eco-friendly thinking extends to residential design as well. In Aptos, Calif.'s Devine Ranch, Blackburn outfitted the hilltop home with heated floors, high ceilings, skylights that discourage using electric lights and enough windows for cross-ventilation that the homeowners decided against installing air-conditioners.

Because Blackburn has a vested interest in seeing "buildings get built," he has developed a code of operations he calls The Blackburn Process. The objective, he says, is to comprehensively address a project's factors—economic, aesthetic, functional—at the outset. This effort to eliminate miscommunication and wasted time appeals to clients across the country, for Blackburn now enjoys a bicoastal practice with offices in both Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. In fact, he has more clients in the Bay Area than in any other single place in the country. And that's nothing this Tennessee native is complaining about. He relishes the novelty of California's indoor-outdoor site context, and he appreciates the creative freedom his West Coast clients afford him. "I guess they got the old pioneer spirit," he laughs.

No matter where his clients live, however, Blackburn's experience continues to reinforce his observation that barns are integral to the fabric of this country. He has even had people approach him to build barnlike homes when they don't own so much as a horseshoe. "A lot of times, people who have seen a barn say, 'I like the look of a barn. I want to live in a barn, but I don't have horses. I've come to you because I like the style of architecture, and I like what you do.'" With any luck, Blackburn will ride that horse for many years to come. **EW**

to learn more

Blackburn Architects, 202.337.1755
(Washington, D.C.) or 415.439.5203
(San Francisco), www.blackburnarch.com.