

Cityscape

Horse Sense: The New Breed of Barn

By Benjamin Forgey
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Despite the coats of sparkling white paint, the barns of Morven Stud look like they've nestled in the Blue Ridge foothills for years and years. They fit the rolling land, and the land fits them.

Yet they're new, and—unlike the barns of yore—they were designed by professional architects. The multipurpose Washington firm of Smith Blackburn Stauffer has carved out an equestrian market niche since its founding a dozen years ago.

It's ironic, barns are perhaps the most prized of all American vernacular buildings. For centuries they were constructed communally, in time-honored form by time-honored methods. But the old barns are fast disappearing, along with the family farms that nurtured them.

Most new barns, by contrast, are made from prefabricated kits. Often called "pole barns" because of their simple, economical structural system that relies on telephone-pole pillars as primary supports, they're crudely functional but not beautiful. The design is a common industrial product that fails to acknowledge either the history or the lay of the land.

The best of today's barns are being designed by professionals. This is a high-end market, by and large. Typical of the dozen or so design firms doing this kind of business nationally, Smith Blackburn Stauffer got its start during a boom in the thoroughbred horse market fueled by corporate types chasing the cachet of a country estate—and the prestige of breeding the fabulous animals.

The barns of Morven Stud in Charlottesville are superb examples of the firm's work. Recently honored with a design award from the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the buildings illustrate how a city-bred design philosophy emphasizing local context can be applied in rural surroundings.

Founding partners Robert Smith and John Blackburn both spent apprenticeships in the D.C. firm of Keyes Condon Florence (now Florence Eichbaum Esocoff King), where analysis of a building's surroundings often precedes its design. In similar fashion, SBS architects usually begin their equestrian projects by careful study not only of the natural setting, but also of local and regional building systems, forms and materials.

This, as well as innate design skills, explains why the spacious Morven Stud compound is such a success. There are three new buildings—a large, 20-stall barn for broodmares, a compact barn for foaling and a midsize unit for yearlings. They bear a family resemblance and also resemble older buildings nearby. The pitched slate roofs, extended



BY MICHAEL DERSIN

A clean, well lighted place: The broodmare barn at Morven Stud farm designed by the Washington architectural firm of Smith Blackburn Stauffer.

eaves, board-and-batten siding and wooden truss support are direct adaptations of local idioms.

But, though the look is effortless and old, the barns are functionally up-to-the-minute. "The primary consideration is the horse," says Blackburn. "Everything is there to protect the health and safety of the animal." This stands to reason. The buildings are not cheap—at Morven Stud the average was in the half-million-dollar range—but the fetching price of one superior thoroughbred can dwarf that sum.

The natural ventilation system is a major innovation. Applying the theories of Boston landscape architect Morgan Wheelock, SBS architects habitually top their barns with a long, open spine at the roof ridge: This pulls air up and out, significantly enhancing the flow-through circulation from the conventional open doors at either end of the barns.

Horses love the outdoors and thus must like these barns tolerably well: On a recent visit, the air inside the barns was every bit as frigid as that of the rolling paddocks outside. "We bring them in only when it gets extremely cold or windy out there," explains farm manager Dale Holly. In any case, the improved ventilation helps to curb the spread of diseases. Lighting is another improvement. Thanks to plentiful windows (including the low dormers on the roof) and stall openings, these buildings aren't as gloomy as most older barns and stables. This contributes to a smooth fertility cycle, Blackburn says, noting that it also pays an aesthetic dividend: The rhythmic parade of dormers adds something to the barns' allure.

Concern for the horses' safety is evident in the stall sizes—spacious enough for a comfortable turnaround—and extends to myriad details. There are no sharp corners. There are no wooden bars on the gates for the horses to chew on. Nothing

projects from the walls of the stall; after use, rings for feeding buckets drop easily into tiny niches.

It almost goes without saying that all of this is aesthetically pleasing. It's sort of an object lesson in the modernist saw: Form follows function. At Morven Stud, architect Smith (who has since moved on from the firm) invented a stunning form for a function no one had thought much about: the beautiful rounded end of the foaling barn, which provides a place where the spindly young horses can exercise without danger when the weather is really bad.

Smith Blackburn Stauffer has a few dozen thoroughbred farms in Virginia and Kentucky—at the same time that it has been commissioned for such projects as designing the renovation of Washington's DAR Constitution Hall. In recent years, as the market for pricey horse barns has contracted, the firm has expanded its practice to other types of equestrian facilities, including research barns and indoor and outdoor riding arenas. (A team headed by SBS placed second in the national competition to design the equestrian venues for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta.)

Perhaps this healthy expansion has broader applications. One example: On Sullivan's Mill Road near Middleburg there are a couple of new buildings—a barn and a structure that's half barn, half offices—the Agricultural Experiment Station for Horse Research that SBS designed for Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Constructed with concrete block and totally lacking in luxurious touches, these buildings cost about as much as the ubiquitous pole barns. But they're both simple and beautiful. They stand harmoniously in the land. The prefab manufacturers (and customers) could learn something here: Why clutter up the landscape with wretched units when handsome ones would do as well?