

STABLE environment

Equestrian Architecture Puts Horses First

By Sharon M. Reynolds

The box stalls prepared for Man o' War and Golden Broom are large, giving them plenty of room in which to turn and lie down at will. Feed tubs for Man o' War have been specially built by a Lexington tinsmith, precautions being taken to see that the famous racer cannot injure himself . . . at all hours of the night a watchman makes his way to see that no harm befalls any of the racers.

— "Man o' War Tenant of Fine Quarters,"
The New York Times,
Feb. 21, 1921

Monticule Farm

You've heard it said before: Some horses in Kentucky live better than people. Sure, Thoroughbreds have a pretty decent life. Like Man o' War, they're usually "tenants of fine quarters," with a nice dry place to sleep, plenty of food, buddies to hang out with, and medical care and grooming services that come to them. But unlike people, horses would probably rather live outside. That's one reason most modern-day horse barns are designed to bring the outside in.

Not only is this approach more natural, it's also healthier. Thoroughbreds are worth a lot of money. Their owners spend a lot of time and money keeping them safe and healthy. Tapping into the natural resources of light and air through good design isn't pampering a million-dollar baby. It just makes good sense.



"Horses are meant to live in the wild," said Washington, D.C., architect John Blackburn. "When a horse wants to get out of the wind, it runs behind a hill. When it wants to get out of the sun, it runs beneath a tree. It can control its environment. When you put a horse in a barn, in a pack, you're asking for trouble. The barn has to do what nature does. It has to provide ventilation and natural light. You try to duplicate nature."

Blackburn, who has been designing horse barns for 25 years, is known for his unique use of natural light and ventilation and the sensitive placement of buildings in harmony with the land. He credits renowned landscape architect Morgan Wheelock, with whom he has collaborated in the past, with influencing his design philosophy.

Monticule Farm

Several examples of Blackburn's equestrian architecture can be found in Central Kentucky, including the barns at Monticule Farm in northern Fayette County.

Unlike old-style barns that were often built with haylofts, making them dark and cave-like inside, the Monticule barns have 32-foot open ceilings and large dormer windows dropped down to let more light into the stalls. They feature an innovative airflow pattern with cross ventilation and vertical ventilation so that the horses are cool in the summer and comfortable in winter, without stale air.

"The ventilation is very good," said farm manager Dominique Tjhou. "In the summer it's not that hot, but we use box fans."

Blackburn refuses to air condition barns. "It's not healthy, not natural," he said. "An air-conditioned barn is like an incubator, creating disease."

The yearling and broodmare barns at Monticule sit on separate, parallel hills.

"I always place a barn at a higher elevation so the moisture drains away," Blackburn said. "These barns sit parallel to each other so they pick up the prevailing southwest breeze, which is where summer breezes come from."

Except for staff quarters, the barns aren't heated. With their winter hair coat, horses can weather most Kentucky winters just fine, but they are sensitive to drafts and affected by



JEFF ROGERS/ABOVE, PHOTO LEE P. THOMAS

Top, John Blackburn has designed horse barns all over the country. Above, unlike old-style barns that were often built with haylofts, making them dark and cave-like inside, the Monticule barns have 32-foot open ceilings and large dormer windows dropped down to let more light into the stalls. Their design includes an innovative airflow pattern with cross ventilation and vertical ventilation.

a number of respiratory ailments resulting from moisture accumulation and foul air.

Many old-style barns had stall fronts with wooden Dutch doors, allowing horses to stick their heads out into the aisles. At the same time, when horizontal breezes blew, they inhaled each other's germs. Vertical ventilation helps do away with that hazard. Additionally, the open front mesh stalls at Monticule afford the horses a clear view of their neighbors and what is going on in the barn.

Thoroughbred barns reflect a business, Blackburn said. Many times a horse can be worth more than a barn, so it doesn't make sense to house it in a cheap building.

"Thoroughbred barns show pride of ownership," he said. "Atmosphere is important in terms of showing a horse, and putting a nice horse in a dark, dank old barn doesn't appear to be healthy."

Plenty of natural light is especially important for mares because they cycle according to the season and length of day. "You want a foal to be born as early in the year as possible; not Dec. 29 but not in July, either," Blackburn noted. "So you put the mares under lights and, to reduce the cost, use natural light. With the dormers in these stalls, you can turn the lights out during the day and speed the natural process along."

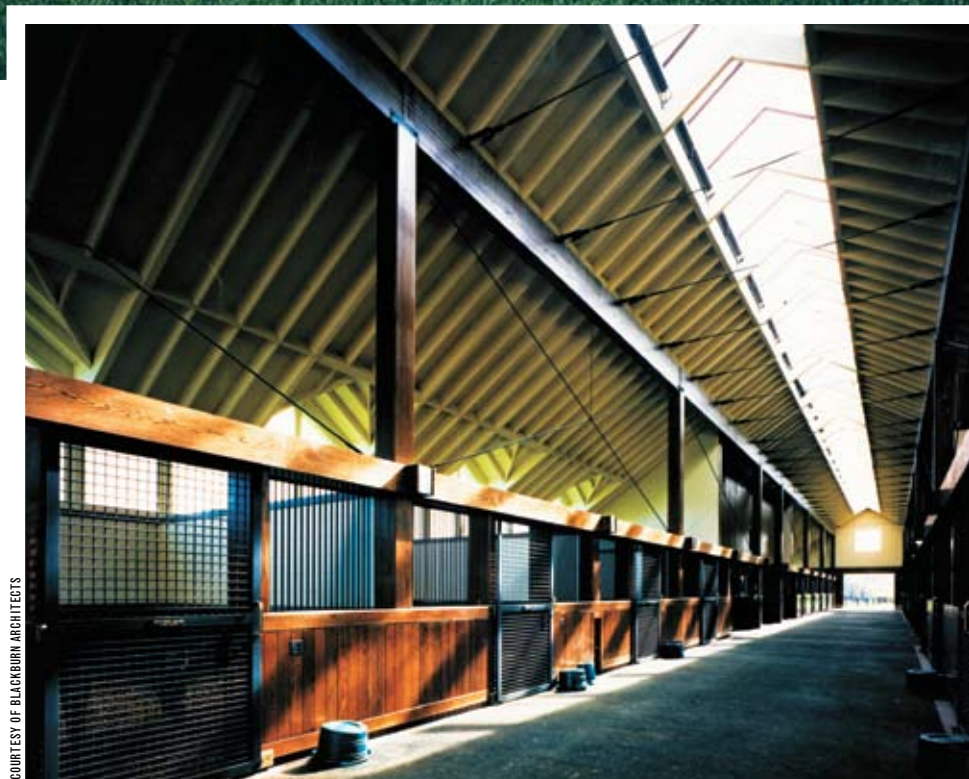
Putting the horse first

"Good equestrian design has to balance the goals of the owner, the demands of the site, and the needs of the horse. The most critical concern is the care and health of the horse," Blackburn said.

He first put his theories into practice at Heronwood Farm in Upperville, Va., in the early 1980s. Owner Robert Smith wanted contemporary horse barns that reflected early 19th-century Virginia hunt country.

"I wanted something low key, aesthetically pleasing, and historically correct," Smith said. "I also wanted to incorporate the latest technology because the best way to breed horses is to have a healthy environment with high ceilings, lots of light, and extra-large stalls. All the facilities have to be top of the line."

Blackburn used heavy timber oak framing and stonyhurst, a blue/gray/tan stone found in abundance around the area, on the exteriors of the Heronwood buildings. Continual ridge skylights and vertical ventilation created a healthy and sustainable environment for the horses.



COURTESY OF BLACKBURN ARCHITECTS

At his Heronwood Farm, Robert Smith wanted barns that are technologically advanced as well as "low key, aesthetically pleasing, and historically correct."

He has designed barns from Virginia to California, and no two are alike, he said. The only constant is the horse. "In Kentucky, you think about barns as homes for Thoroughbreds, but if you went to other areas, they don't put as much money into the design and building," he said.

And designs vary widely according to geography, he said. For example, a distinctly Kentucky feature is the cupola in the Monticule barns. Originally they were used in older barns as a means of letting in light. Today, the cupola is mostly decorative.