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Kingdom For a Horse

Architect John Blackburn's got horse sense—along with many of the top barn commissions in America.

BY VICKY MOON

In the equine enclaves of Kentucky, Florida, New Jersey and Virginia, it's frequently said that the barn floors are so flawless and immaculately maintained, a dinner party for eight might be served on them.

Quite a few of those surfaces can be found in the horse barns designed by Blackburn Architects P.C., a Washington, D.C., firm specializing in these buildings. Indeed, a gathering of principal John Blackburn's past and present clients would make a pretty lively dinner party in itself: John Kluge, Will Farish, Eunice and Sargent Shriver, and Sale and Robert Wood Johnson IV, among others.

At Kluge's 8,000-acre Morven Stud outside Char-

lottesville, Blackburn and former partner Robert Smith designed a stunning board-and-batten broodmare barn with a slate roof, set into a hillside, inspired by the farm buildings indigenous to the Virginia Blue Ridge. For Will Farish at his Lane's End Farm in Kentucky, they built numerous barns and outbuildings of stucco and blocks, capped by jaunty, windowed cupolas that double as skylights. "I definitely had a few ideas of my own," says Farish of the multiphase project on 2,000 acres, home to such champions as Gulch, Sea Hero and Storm Song. One idea was to have automatic fly-spray systems installed: "It's essential in the summer, and having no bugs is a pretty neat thing," adds Farish.

"In every barn there are four elements to consider," says Blackburn of the work he began specializing in fifteen years ago (he still does residential work as well): "The site,

the owner's wants, the horses' needs and our experience. The one thing that doesn't change is the horses' needs—they're the constant."

Both two- and four-footed clients can appreciate Blackburn's forte, an ability to harness natural light and airflow to make barns more pleasant places to spend time. The vertical ventilation system that he uses sets a barn into the landscape perpendicular to the prevailing breezes, "then vents are installed at the bottom of the building, forcing air up and out," he says.

Another of Blackburn's strengths is an architectural sensibility that values context and refinement over making a splash. "I interviewed five or six architects and saw some of John's work," says Greg Goodman, who eventually hired Blackburn to construct seven barns and restore a circa 1792 residence at his Mt. Brilliant Farm in Lexington. "Barn building is different than doing houses, but John really had expertise in doing both. Our barns are very well organized—that was the mandate—but they're also aesthetically pleasing."

Blackburn's twelve-person firm usually has ten projects in the works at a time. His design fees range from \$1,500 for an on-site consultation to \$100,000 and up; additional building costs range from \$20 to \$125 per square foot. Although his dream client is one who builds big, "I like the challenge of building for all types of budgets," he adds.

Whatever the budget, safety details are a constant concern. Blackburn typically recesses all hydrants, hooks and latches; he often puts casting grooves into stall walls to help horses get up more easily. Several projects even include mitered-and-beveled-oak wainscoting, which not only is safer but provides aesthetic interest as well. After all, nothing is too good for these equine clients, who can—and frequently do—eat off the floor.

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Blackburn (top right); Kluge's Morven Stud (above); Robert H. Smith's Heronwood (right).



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