



# The Superior Stable

Employing intentional architecture and savvy interior design, Clemson-educated John Blackburn creates exceptional spaces for horses and their human companions.

/ by Sandra Woodward / Photos courtesy of John Blackburn and Clemson University

**W**e usually think of architects as the people who design homes — for people. But Washington, D.C.-based architect (and Clemson architecture graduate) John Blackburn has spent his 35-year career designing homes for horses, aka barns, logging more than 400 projects scattered across the globe — in Canada, Greece, and Chile as well as the United States, including a handful here in South Carolina.

He has designed barns for notable clients whose names are recognizable from the news or from book jacket blurbs, as well as

“regular” folks. And while the word “barn” may bring to mind the do-it-in-one-day community barn-raising, Blackburn’s barns are the result of a meticulous process of client collaboration, site evaluation and, above all, consideration of the horse’s health and comfort. His attention to detail and use of top-quality materials ensure projects that are as aesthetically pleasing as they are practical, whether it’s a sleek, modern barn design such as Pegaso Farm in Mettawa, Ill., (with a lounge and an indoor dressage arena) or the extensive restoration of a historic property with multiple barns,

such as Maryland’s Sagamore Farm.

The bond between horses and humans is documented throughout 4,000 years of history. From Alexander the Great to the little girl with her first pony, people are passionate about horses. That’s why each Blackburn barn begins with in-depth interviews with owners and/or their representatives to tailor each barn to the needs of the people and animals involved.

“Since we can’t really have a conversation with the horses, we rely on their humans to provide us with as much information as possible to help achieve the best result,”



[Left to right] Ketchen Place Farm in York County, S.C., incorporates Southern yellow pine and corrugated metal roofing; a shed row is designed to capture summer wind; John Blackburn visiting Clemson University's equestrian center.

Blackburn said during a recent visit to the Upstate. “For as long as we’ve been doing this, I can honestly say that each project is unique. The needs of the animals and the people who love and care for them vary according to any number of factors, from geographic location and topography to the breed of animal and what it will be doing. We never stop learning and evolving.”

The evolution of barn architecture has been influenced by increased emphasis on sustainability and the availability of new materials. Wood, stone, iron, and brick are the basics, with stainless steel, fiberglass, and other new options added to the mix, as well as solar energy, LED lighting, and other energy-saving factors. Regardless of materials, Blackburn says it is the horse itself that drives good barn design.

“I have devoted my life to creating safe,

comfortable, healthy homes for horses,” he explains. “Yet the irony is that their preferred home is outdoors, running free. Even the best barn is second-best to the horse, so our goal is to provide an environment as close to outdoors as

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— John Blackburn

possible while keeping the animals safe and comfortable.”

Blackburn’s first consideration is finding the best possible location for the barn before design of the building itself even

begins. “We do everything possible to maximize natural light and natural ventilation, siting the barn to take advantage of terrain, cross breezes, drainage, all the physical elements that can make a difference in the animal’s comfort.” While

he uses singular nouns, it is most often the case that the barns he designs will house multiple horses. All the better, he said.

“Horses are among the most social of animals. They prefer the comfort and safety of the herd. So in barn design, it’s important to create a space that allows the animals to see, hear, even smell their companions, to give them a sense of security whenever possible.” Yoke gates and grillwork, design features that allow both visibility and confinement, keep the horses safe while enabling them to see their surroundings can minimize their anxiety.



“Horses are extremely sensitive animals, as anyone who spends any time at all around them can confirm,” Blackburn explains. “It may seem to some people that we are anthropomorphizing horses when we attribute such emotions to them, but after 4,000 years of domestication, we know quite a lot about their nature, and we should pay attention to their needs.”

But barn design is not only about the needs of the animals who live there. People use barns as well, and accommodating them is equally important, whether it’s including a space large enough for barn parties, an apartment or lounge for use by staff or owners, or consideration for building maintenance and animal grooming.

South Carolina has a vibrant and diverse equine culture, from the competitive pursuits of steeplechase, track racing, polo, and dressage to pleasure riding, plus the traditional use of horses as working farm animals. With its varied terrain and mild climate, the state offers horse owners many advantages for year-round enjoyment. The state’s current equine population of 95,000 is likely to grow, and with it the need for new barns.

It’s a pretty safe wager that Blackburn’s barns will grow with them. **ah**



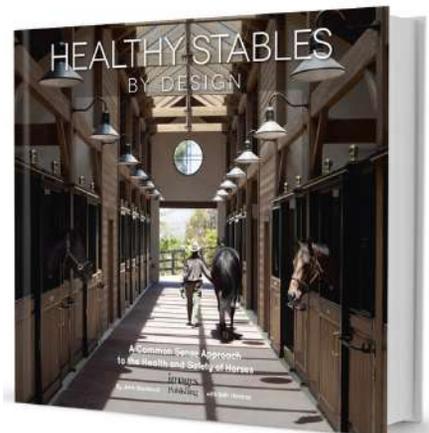
## Close to Home

Clemson University, John Blackburn’s alma mater, is home to three programs that combine to offer a unique opportunity for exploration of barn design: architecture, landscape architecture, and the equine business concentration in animal and veterinary sciences.

Recently Blackburn has been working with Clemson students and faculty in these programs in a combined studio project focusing on master planning and design considerations for the future of the university’s Equine Center. The semester-long collaboration allowed students to make important “real-world” design decisions, to expand their understanding of their own disciplines and to appreciate others. Clemson architecture faculty member Dustin Albright said Blackburn’s role in the project was critical.

“For our students to have access to John’s wealth of knowledge and expertise in this field was invaluable,” he said. “He is a tremendously creative thinker and designer, and it was exciting for our students to see someone as experienced as John continue to think outside the box.”

Learn more about John Blackburn’s work and portfolio by visiting him online at [blackburnarch.com](http://blackburnarch.com).



**John Blackburn is the author of *Healthy Stables by Design: A Common Sense Approach to the Health and Safety of Horses*, cowritten with Beth Herman. The coffee table-style book is a compilation of Blackburn’s award-winning designs along with his critical insights gained over 35 years in the practice of barn design. All book proceeds go to horse charities.**