



An award-winning barn designed by Leah Palmer for show rider Conor O'Regan.

Leah Palmer: A Horse Happy Designing Woman

By Ali Patusky

The turn radius of a tractor trailer may not seem like important information for a barn designer to know, but Leah Palmer recognizes that this is the type of detail that's actually essential to consider when designing equestrian spaces.

At her Middleburg-based firm, Horse Country Design, she combines a lifetime of horse experience with design and project management expertise to create a streamlined experience for her clients.

When professional show rider Conor O'Regan needed to build a new barn, it's no surprise she was ready for the job.

Palmer, a New Jersey native, moved to Middleburg in 1993 as a rider and barn manager. At 30, she enrolled at Catholic University in Washington to take architecture classes, galloping race horses in the morning to pay for the gas for her commute.

"As a single white female over 30 and not Catholic, I was in the minority, and they gave me a scholarship," she said. "Engineering was always kind of in me. Physics was why I was a good horse trainer, seeing the structure and how it moved and how the energy works. And then I honestly just woke up one morning and went 'that's what it is, architecture.'"

When the O'Regans sent Palmer a "pencil sketch" of a polo barn she had designed at Woodrow Farm in Middleburg with a few edits for their show jumping operation in Upperville, she immediately was "all in."

The two-aisle barn was completed in April, 2025 and features 24 stalls, four grooming stalls, a powder room big enough for easy clothing changes and well placed view lines so that the horses can be seen clearly in the ring, grooming stalls and paddocks from the tack room.

"One of the most interesting things about doing a barn like this is you kind of have to

start with the details and work your way back out," Palmer explained. "They have these travel grooming trunks, and they're a certain size. So we designed the grooming stalls so the trunks could just wheel in and fit right there in the front like they're supposed to be there. We've also got the deliveries into the feed room through a door from the outside, so feed never has to come through the barn and disrupt your operation."

Backpack hooks, space for two freezers for ice boots, and storage spaces hidden behind sliding doors that blend into the walls were other details Palmer made sure to include in the barn's design.

She even pulled from knowledge of how windows in libraries are often north-facing to avoid glare in order to have "really good light" throughout the space, especially in the grooming stalls.

"It's like lighting a warehouse," she said. "You're looking at a horse in its stall or you're mucking the stall, and you need to see everything. It can't be dim. And in Conor's there are four groom stalls. The windows behind them face to the north so there's never any glare. If there's sunlight streaming in your face while you're trying to figure out if the horse is clean or not, it's harder."

In addition to her design work, Palmer offers stormwater pollution prevention planning, permit expediting, and project management and planning services to clients to provide a consolidated process from start to finish.

"I manage the big picture for the client and all the pieces that would be missing if they just hired an architect," she explained. "An architect would say 'it should go here' on a site, but they're not working with Dominion Power for six months to get you electric. They're not even going to tell you where to put the drain field, or the well, or probably not even the driveway. They might show a driveway, but there's a difference between showing it and designing it."

The O'Regan's barn was completed after just seven

months, right in time for their horses to return from Florida.

"It just flows really nicely," said Julia O'Regan, adding that she and Conor tend to ride four to six horses each per day, a process which the barn's efficient design simplifies.

And for Conor O'Regan, the "stability" of having such a well-planned space during his transitions between the Florida and Virginia show seasons is secondary only to the "happiness" of the horses when it comes to his favorite parts of the barn.

"The most important thing was that the horses were comfortable," he said. "Having it quite bright and airy, good ventilation, and then obviously with this being a professional set up, to make sure everything logistically worked well for the staff, for the clients, for myself. More functional than flashy."

He also appreciates "the view from the central aisle right out to the ring and the paddocks. You can see everything going on, so that part of it is probably my favorite."

And he credited Palmer for making their vision come to life.

"Trying to get what you are thinking in your mind on paper is probably the easy part," he said. "But then putting it into reality is hard, and that's exactly how it all went. There's nothing I would change with the design and set up of the barn ultimately."

The barn also won the National Frame Building Association's competition for Building of the Year, attesting to the quality of Palmer's work. With her lifelong experience with horses and range of design and project management abilities, Palmer is prepared for any project.

"I've worked in and walked so many steps through different barns and operations," she said. "I think having an understanding right out of the gate of what that particular group of horses does for a living and how they operate gives me a big advantage over how I set up the building."



Leah Palmer definitely knows horses.