

How do you make a gigantic room look cozy and appropriate for today when it's actually an old Virginia cow barn?

Steven Gambrel, one of America's top-tier interior designers, recently had a chance to consider the question. Although he lives and often works in the most urbane precincts of Manhattan, Steven grew up in Virginia and still has ties there. When the owners of a Middleburg horse farm asked him to convert one of their barns into a place for large, casual parties and just hanging out and watching TV, he took it on with relish—his first barn, and on home turf.

When Steven was delving through history for a decorating theme, he ignored the barn's most recent tenants—cows—and looked further back to the farm's equestrian past when Thoroughbreds and saddle horses were bred there. Middleburg remains an epicenter of foxhunting and a hub for all things equine. Tucked in the rolling foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, it seems at times more English than England.



The classic 1940s cattle barn is now home to human fun and games.

So Steven decided to transform the barn into a comfortable, rustic lair with fascinating horse memorabilia. He aimed for a gentlemanly, clubby sensibility while avoiding cracked, old

riding boots as objects, lamps made out of bridles, and other tired artifacts that tend to crop up in these parts. "The masculine quality comes not only from the fact that it's a great big room but from the aesthetic of Hunt Country and its colors and values," says Steven.

He began by painting the exterior—what else?—a vibrant barn red. He clad interior walls in large-scale shiplap paneling to add dimension, then glazed them in a greige strié for warmth.

The barn already had a concrete floor, so he stained and varnished it the glowing honey brown of burnished saddles.

Then Steven, who loves to evoke history in offbeat ways, made what he refers to as "that funny color choice." After designing crisp X-panel barn doors and X-braced stair railings, he painted them in two wildly unexpected hues: Schiaparelli pink and cobalt blue, the barn's trademark colors during its racing days. Steven lifted the hues right out of drawings of the family's favorite jockey in pink-and-blue racing silks. Against the browns, grays, and flaxes of the barn, the colors seem nearly fluorescent—which is entirely the point. "They do exactly the same thing for this room

A vintage oak-and-steel desk backs up to one of the extra-deep sofas Steven designed. He topped the concrete floor with a geometric sisal rug.



WINNING COLORS

When designer Steven Gambrel transformed a Virginia barn into an entertaining space, he looked to its past for inspiration—and found a romantic, racy chapter



Steven lifted the colors and even the X-pattern of the interior barn doors and stair railings from two drawings of a jockey in the family's collection (opposite page).



"I didn't want the aesthetic in here to be delicate or luxurious. As refined as it is, to me it feels athletic. You're on a farm, a place where everything requires effort."



Steven devoted one long wall to a gallery of photos depicting the family's equestrian history over three generations, interspersing formal pictures with more amusing ones.

RIGHT: The small drinks kitchen has a soapstone countertop and minimally stocked open shelving. **BELOW:** An iron-and-wood bookshelf holds books on hunting and horses.



as they do for a jockey riding a horse," he says. "They provide strong color on a neutral background."

When it came to furnishing the barn, Steven broke down its volume by creating lots of seating groups. When he found a 1940s French monastery table along with 18 matching chairs, he snapped them up, cersuing the wood for a lighter spirit. "They have an almost medieval dining-hall quality but in a cleaned-up, 20th-century way," he says. "Yet they're hearty enough to handle the scale in here."

As the decorating unfolded, the homeowners asked Steven to incorporate more than 250 photographs of jockeys and family members from the past three generations engaging in

equestrian activities. "They're fabulous pictures, every single one," he says. He framed them all uniformly in distressed, rust-colored frames and hung them free-form on a wall that runs the entire length of the barn (about 80 feet).

Making a marvelous gallery out of old family pictures is exactly the way Steven's mind works, and it explains why his chic interiors are never vacuous. "There are elements that I use over and over, mostly things that have to do with comfort and proportion," he says. "But what's really important to me is a sense of place. You can pull spirit from a location, the time we live in, or the lifestyle of the people. That's what I do, and it's my signature." **SL**



Check out Steven's first book, *Steven Gambrel: Time & Place*, available in stores in April or pre-ordered on amazon.com (Abrams 2012). With images and recollections, he shares 10 of his favorite projects.



The leather upholstered bench in the foreground is vintage gym equipment. Steven custom designed the two-tone club chairs.