

Pro tip from the Greenbrier's interior designer: Embrace color and shun beige



The Greenbrier resort in West Virginia is known for its colorful and bold decor by Dorothy Draper. After she retired in 1960, Carleton Varney took over and designed such vibrant spaces as the Casino Club. (Michel Arnaud)

By **Andrea Sachs**

November 27, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. EST

The Greenbrier is anything but subtle. The resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., feels like the aftermath of a paintball game held during a garden party. Whack — mint green. Splat — canary yellow. Oof — teal blue. Sometimes the colors stand alone, but more often they team up with bold and busy patterns, including florals, plaids, stripes and animal motifs. The Greenbrier owes its signature style to

Dorothy Draper, who was hired in 1946 to redo the interiors, nearly 170 years after “America’s resort” opened. The decor became as much of a draw as the resort’s healing waters and Cold War-era bunker. Draper retired in 1960 and handed over the paint chips and fabric swatches to her heir apparent, Carleton Varney.

Since taking over Dorothy Draper and Company, Varney has designed and refurbished countless hotels, buildings, homes and even a presidential yacht, the USS Sequoia. However, the Greenbrier occupies a special place in his heart; as the hotel’s official curator, the 83-year-old maintains an office there. His hardcover valentine, “Romance & Rhododendrons: My Love Affair with America’s Resort — The Greenbrier,” comes out Dec. 5. We spoke with Varney in his Palm Beach office, before he traveled to Washington for a meeting with the National Council of the White House Historical Association. (He’s an appointed member.) He planned to spend Thanksgiving at the Greenbrier, where gravy is a condiment, not a palette. Here are his insights into design and the fabled hotel, plus how color (optimistic orange? positive purple?) can lift our spirits during these gloomy-gray times.

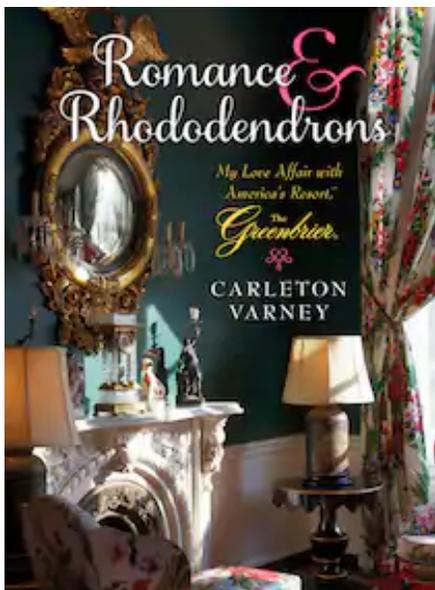


A grand staircase at the Greenbrier showcases its distinctive use of color. (Shutterstock)

Colorful bedfellows: The White House has a bright red room and a green room and a blue room and a gold room. When the Jefferson dining room was done at Monticello, it was a bright gold. They finally returned it to that color.

A beige experience: I once went to a hotel on my way back from Bora Bora, and the carpet was a knobby gray, and the walls were beige with white trim, and the curtains were gray-beige. Even the art was beige. I went into the travertine bathroom, and when I came out, I thought I was naked in a bowl of oatmeal.

Before the beige era: When I came to the office in the early '60s, hotels were not beige and gray. They were colorful. They were pretty. William Pahlmann used to do wonderful hotels. Ellen McCluskey did great hotels. Tom Lee did great hotels. When Mrs. Draper did the Mayflower in Washington, D.C., the rooms were beautiful.



Carleton Varney's latest book, "Romance & Rhododendrons: My Love Affair with America's Resort — The Greenbrier," comes out in December. (Shannongrove Press)

Never change: We've never changed. We've become interesting and special. People come to us because we do color. Our business is the oldest established decorating and design company in America, and we survived the muted [trend].

The Greenbrier is not . . . the Ritz-Carlton. You can tell what they are. They have the panel walls, the matching sconces, the Aubusson-style rug, the round table in the middle, the flowers on the round table, the winged chairs in light blue in the corner. It's all uniform.

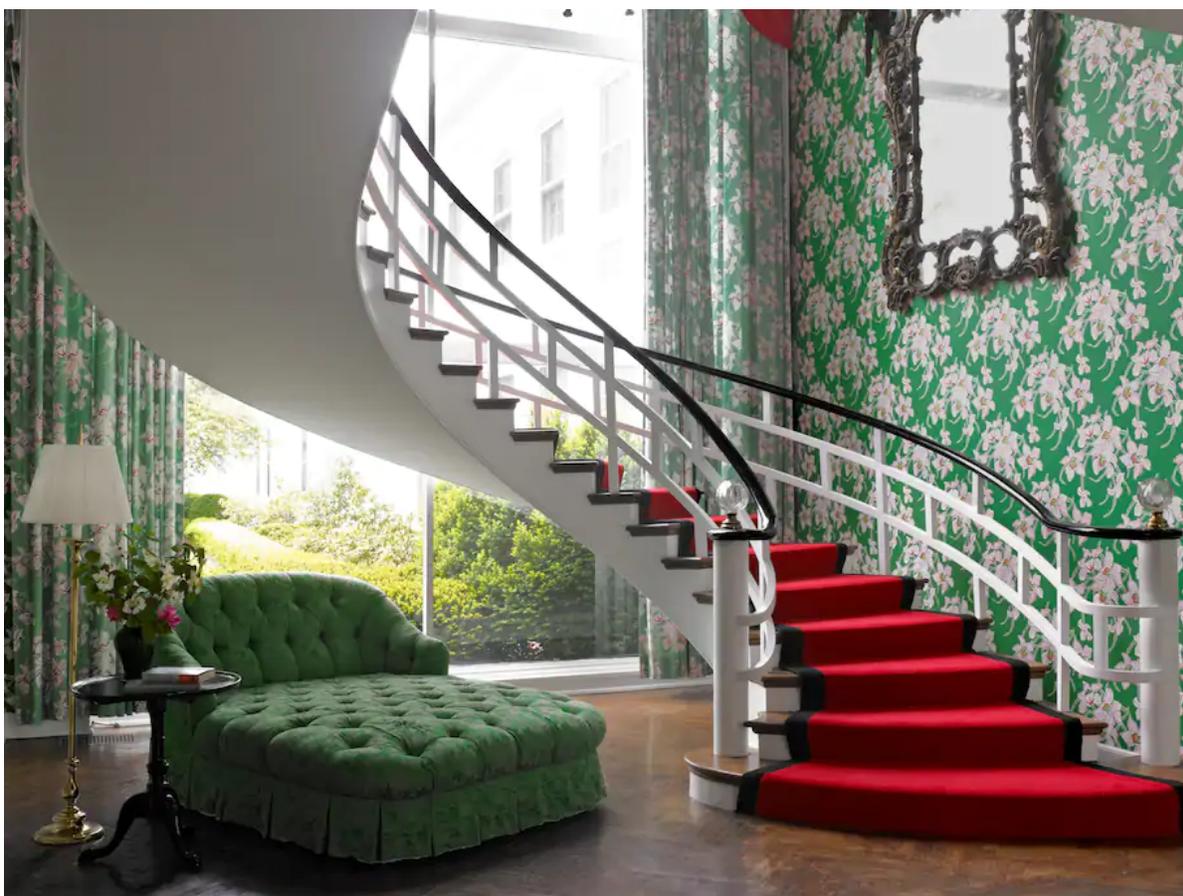
The Greenbrier is . . . special. If you go to a great house in Europe, you don't want to see beige. You want see how one generation added onto the [designs of the] next generation, but they didn't eliminate the previous generation. So the houses are interesting. They're fun to go into, to see the series of people who have lived there. In the Greenbrier, that beautiful Princess Grace portrait I hung in the north parlor . . . you don't have to be a pre-Revolutionary-war person to be hung on the wall there. We honor our past as well as we accept the future.

Beyond rooms: We did a new chapel. Then I did a casino and a sports center. There's always something happening. Gov. [Jim] Justice [the resort's owner] trusts me, and they don't interfere with what we do. It's like my own house.

Just like home: I have been there for so many years, I feel like I know what is in the bottom drawer of Room 1029. That's the room I always stay in. And, of course, they did a suite several years ago, the Carleton Varney Suite, which is on the north end. It looks over the mountains. There are a lot of people who think it should be a convention hotel. They don't understand that it's a country house hotel. I want you to feel as if you are the owner and you invited your friends to stay over. You offer them the yellow bedroom or the pink bedroom or the striped bedroom. But you don't offer them oatmeal.

The White House of West Virginia: It's much like the White House in many ways. It has the columns. The emir of Qatar came here, and when the wife arrived, she said to her husband, "I never knew the White House had a golf course." She thought it looked so much like the White House.

Banana leaf copycats: We did the big banana leaf design for a hotel in Brazil, and then they used it for the Beverly Hills Hotel. It's our pattern, and everybody is using it. It's on bed trays, women's clothes — it's on everything.



Varney uses color and patterns throughout the Greenbrier, from public spaces to the Presidential Suite. (Michel Arnaud)

Shades of blue: Mrs. Draper believed that Jefferson painted the ceilings at Monticello that light aqua blue to deflect the insects and mosquitoes. Dorothy was very unhappy when Tiffany came out with those boxes in blue because she said it was her color.

Hues with benefits: I like to be in a green room because I feel like I am in the mountains of Montana or the jungles of St. Croix. I have always painted small rooms dark colors — garnet red, royal blue, sable brown — because they become more intimate. Mrs. Draper never did a ballroom unless it was pink because pink flatters faces. I worked with Dorothy for seven years. I remember working on a hotel in D.C. called the Sutton House. Dorothy would look at the fabric we were working with and say, "Show me nothing that

looks like gravy.” Nothing that looked it was going to be on a turkey or a piece of meat. It had to be happy.

Executive decorating: I was Jimmy Carter’s decorator when he was in the White House. The Carters had the most wonderful style — down home. I would do tuzzy muzzies on the tables when [then-U.K. Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher came to a state dinner. And then I did their cottage and log cabin in Ellijay [Georgia]. I helped them at the Carter Center [in Atlanta]. I redid the house in The Plains. Speaking of Washington, I was also the Quayles’ decorator when they did the Naval Observatory, and it was very colorful. Marilyn [Quayle] didn’t want any roses like Barbara Bush had. I did a china service for the vice president’s house — light blue and gold. I wanted to find out if Tipper Gore [the subsequent resident] ever used it. I got a letter back that it was in the basement.

Book timing: I’m not getting younger. I felt I owed it to the Greenbrier to write this story so that future generations would know about the color and spirit of the place. There is a whole thing called the Greenbrier style, which I hope the world never loses.

Shop Draper: People like to walk out of the Greenbrier with something that looks like the Greenbrier. We have all these things that we call Dorothy Draper Home. We have pillows, trays and lamps. We opened the store [at the Greenbrier] last July. It is the only one now. We are going to have a couple in other places.



At Draper's Cafe in the Greenbrier, guests feel as if they are dining in a blooming garden. (Michel Arnaud)

Garden variety: I like the colors that come up in the garden and the colors that come from below the earth — the emeralds and beautiful rubies.

Foreign influence: I love Portugal, and I have a house in Ireland. I live in Ireland half the year. I love the Irish green, the countryside. I planted daffodil and tulip bulbs. I plant a thousand every year, so my fields are all yellow. People who plant a garden believe in a tomorrow.

Insta-Greenbrier: The Greenbrier used to be a Kodak moment, but now it's an Instagram moment.

Greenbrier is home: I think people like to go back to the Greenbrier because it doesn't change. They know they're home.