

BUSINESS OF HOME



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Carleton Varney reflects on a colorful career



By [Fred Nicolaus](#)

Carleton Varney was, of all things, a teacher before he became an interior decorator. But his first career didn't last long. After landing a job working for **Dorothy Draper** (he eventually took over her firm), Varney was off and running, bringing his bright, joyous palette to a client list that includes everyone from **Jimmy Carter** to **Joan Crawford**. To say nothing of his 37 books, newspaper columns, TV shows, product lines and a project he's been working on for—wait for it—53 years: The Greenbrier hotel in West Virginia.

In this episode of the *[Business of Home](#)* podcast (sponsored by Chairish and Google), Varney shares stories of working with some of his most famous clients, his philosophy on color, and why, at 82, he's as busy as he's ever been. ("**Clint Eastwood** is 88," Varney points out with a laugh.)

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ADVICE FROM JOAN

Though he's had more than a few iconic clients, one of Varney's most famous was Joan Crawford. She also gave him one of the best pieces of advice he ever received. "Joan told me one thing I'll always remember and was the key to a lot of things I did in my career," says Varney. "She said: 'Look at me, Carleton ... I wanna tell you one thing: I invented me, and you can do the same.' I always remembered that. The challenge was to concentrate. I'm not a person who ever wasted time. If I'm on an airplane, I don't watch movies, I work on my new book or my newspaper column."

BRING BACK THE RAINBOW

Varney generally sees the good in everything—but he draws a line at greige. "I look at some of the design magazines, they show so much white and beige and colorless rooms, that I'm afraid that the next generation will do even less color," he says. "When you walk through a pretty garden that has colorful flowers: yellows, greens, pinks and blues, everybody loves it. Then they turn around and walk back inside and forget that exists, and go back into neutral."

LIFE GOES ON

Varney is a huge admirer of legendary [Architectural Digest](#) editor in chief [Paige Rense](#), and was an early supporter when she took over the magazine in the 1970s. The fact that he published a project in [House Beautiful](#), leading to his banishment from *AD* (Rense famously wanted designers to stay exclusive to her publication), didn't cause any hard feelings. "Nothing in this world is dependent on only one person," says Varney. Sure, it was a blow, but, "it wasn't the only magazine."