

An indoor swimming pool. Michel Arnaud

Book

# The Enduring Legacy of the Greenbrier, Dorothy Draper's Famous Hotel

Carleton Varney lifts the curtain on the design of a legendary property in a new book

By Allie Weiss

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For decorating aficionados, the [Greenbrier](#) hotel needs no introduction. The postwar redesign of the historic resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, was famously led by Dorothy Draper, whose office has long been run by [Carleton Varney](#). Ever since he started at the firm in the '60s, he has been involved with the Greenbrier—the sprawling and still-popular hotel that, Varney explains, requires daily design maintenance work. (No surprise there: It has more than 900 guest rooms.)

Varney has nearly six decades of Greenbrier design stories and memories to share, so it's only fitting that he would write a book about it all. Out this month, *Romance and Rhododendrons: My Love Affair With America's Resort* is Varney's 37th book, and is required reading for anyone enamored by the highly saturated Draper aesthetic. "There is a Greenbrier look, and a Greenbrier style," Varney says. "I wanted everyone to understand what this place is all about."

Below, the designer speaks with AD PRO about what surprises he uncovered while working on the book, and what the hotel's upkeep looks like today.



Carleton Varney. Gordon Beall

**AD PRO: What was it like working on this book? How did it differ from the experience of writing the others?**

Carleton Varney: It was a longer time in creating [this book]. There's so much involved with it. It's 53 years of me working with this project. It's so integrated in the

photography, and it so involves Dorothy, and it so involves all the people who have worked with me to create this institution.

We have 14,000 acres. The property is really a little town in itself. There's everything here: an indoor pool, outdoor pool, bowling alley, three golf courses. All the presidents that have been here. There's so much here that it overwhelms the mind.



Left: the Greenbrier Avenue concourse. Right: the Presidential Suite. Michel Arnaud

**AD PRO: Did you discover anything new about the hotel when going back through the archives?**

I haven't lived here since the 1800s, so there's always something new to discover. Once, when a foreign prince was here, his wife said, 'I never knew the White House had golf courses.' Because it has big white columns, it looks like the White House, except a bigger version.

We have an airport here [that] handles Air Force One. You can roll in here in a supersonic jet and land because the runway is that long. The heads of state often do come here.

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**AD PRO: What might a reader be surprised to find out about the property?**

The **bunker** that's underneath the building [was built to] house the entire federal government. Our office was involved in doing the interior and the coloring. It could sleep the federal government, all the congressmen. People come through to just take that tour of it.



The Lobby Bar. Michel Arnaud

**AD PRO: As the hotel's official curator, what does your relationship with the property look like today?**

There's always rooms to redo here. We maintain an office as well here. The maintenance is constant. You have to keep your teeth up by going to the dentist; you never can stop because if you stop, you know what happens. It's 24/7, 365 days a year.

You never know who's going to check into these rooms and spill coffee all over the floor.



Left: a Copeland Hill cottage. Right: the corridor outside the Crystal Room. Michel Arnaud

**AD PRO: What made you want to write the book?**

I have spent 53 years of my life following Dorothy Draper, opening the windows of America to color. The current situation is what I call “empty refrigerator” interiors—white walls, some trays of metal, and maybe an orange. I am not an enthusiast of anything all white, beige, or gray.

Mrs. Draper had a theory: When I went to the office in my 20s, Dorothy would come around and look at everyone's station and she would say, "Show me nothing that looks like gravy."

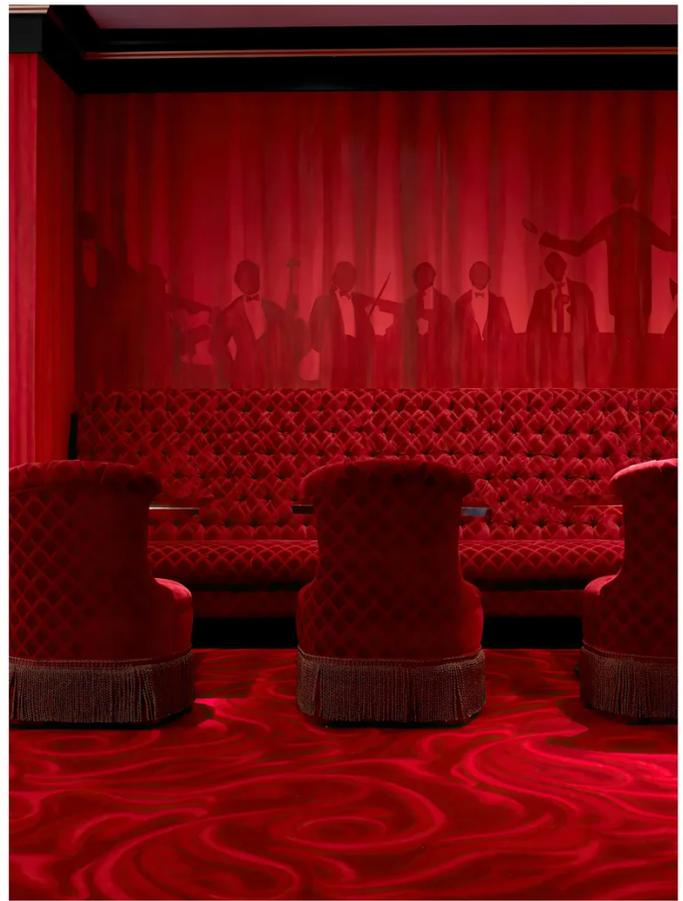
I sometimes wonder if we're winning or losing. I believe that color makes people happy. I don't think white rooms do. This place is a happy place—it's a Technicolor Kodak moment. People walk around here with cameras.



Guest rooms in the Windsor Club. Michel Arnaud

**AD PRO: How does the Greenbrier compare to the new hotels of today?**

Today's hotels are bedroom factories—one on top of the other. They do all the rooms with one or two schematics. The [Greenbrier] rooms were all done as if you were checking into somebody's beautiful country house: Each room has its own personality and it has patina. We're very particular about what hotels we do; we don't do 50 rooms alike.



Left: the Victorian Writing Room. Right: Carleton's Cafe. Michel Arnaud