

VOICES

Carleton Varney talks Dorothy Draper, Presidential Style, and More

On the occasion of his 34th book launch, *AD* catches up with the legendary designer

TEXT BY HADLEY KELLER

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Dorothy Draper & Company president Carleton Varney, director of design Dan Parker and associate Laura Montalban redecorated a Palm Springs house for a physician whose Cleveland residence Varney worked on two decades ago. Blue-and-white-striped walls in the breakfast room are “in the Dorothy Draper manner,” notes Varney, who gave the space a cabana effect. “The house is in the clouds,” he says, referring to its location overlooking Palm Springs. “The tent is therefore appropriate.” The Lucite chair arms and table base add to the ethereal mood. Photo: Mary E. Nichols

There is perhaps no designer working today who has a better scope of the history of American design than

Carleton Varney. Since he joined the doyenne of American preppy pattern, Dorothy Draper, at her eponymous firm in 1960, Varney has outfitted homes and buildings from Michigan to China, including such storied interiors as West Virginia's The Greenbrier, New York's Plaza and Waldorf hotels, Palm Beach's The Breakers, and a little residence in Washington, D.C., known as the White House. Besides designing interiors and products for his own company as well as the likes of Frontgate, Varney has authored more than thirty books. His latest, *Decorating on the Waterfront* (Shannongrove Press, \$95), just may be his most personal: The designer's love affair with the ocean is well documented, and, in many ways, a book on this subject was long in the making. "I've always lived on the water," the designer explains. "I grew up in Nahant, Massachusetts, and now I'm on the water in my office and home in Palm Beach, and I'm also, crazily enough, on the water in my office in Manhattan. From my windows I can see the George Washington Bridge, and I can also see the East River, so I have a very imaginative view of what's beyond." In *Decorating on the Waterfront*, Varney shows this imaginative view through the lens of his many waterside projects, each masterfully created to channel the ocean's influence. *AD* caught up with the design legend to hear more about the book and Varney's illustrious career.

Architectural Digest: This is your 34th book. Can you tell us a bit more about your writing?



Varney's latest book is the 34th he has authored.

Photo: Courtesy of Carleton Varney

Carleton Varney: Well, I don't do books that are just picture books. There has to be copy that relates to my clients and relates to my life. This is my 34th book; I started in the 60s, and when I wrote my first book, called *You and Your Apartment*, it was a major best seller because at that time there weren't any magazines or anything on the market about apartment decorating for young people. So it just boomed. Since then I've written two novels, as well as Mrs. Draper's biography.

AD: What do you think it is that draws people toward living on the water?

CV: I think part of it is that people know there's a horizon point, and people want to go beyond the horizon point. They want to know there's an escape. When you look at the ocean, it moves you away from

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AD: What do you think it is that draws people toward living on the water?

CV: I think part of it is that people know there's a horizon point, and people want to go beyond the horizon point. They want to know there's an escape. When you look at the ocean, it moves you away from where you are now. When you're inland, you don't feel that there is an escape into another atmosphere or another world. The water transports you into other imaginative places, and I think that's certainly what it does for me.

AD: The ocean is so important to you personally. Can you talk about how it has influenced your design throughout your career?

CV: Well, I grew up on the ocean in Nahant. My father and I would put lobster traps in the ocean to catch our own lobsters and then boil them outside. My mother was a very good gardener, and on our property we had a large garden. Gardens, to me, are as important an element as the interior, especially on the water. When you look out at the garden on your sea coast home, you want to carry the freshness of that to the interiors. As

young children, my sister and I learned every flower at the time it blossomed, and with the knowledge of gardens, I grew up with an awareness of scale. In the garden, you'd have a soft, feathery flower in front backed by something tall like hollyhocks, and they balance each other. The idea that Dorothy Draper had, where she could mix anything, is the same idea. So I've learned that the garden, to me, is also a room. And it's particularly true in seaside settings, where you also have the rhythm and the motion of the water outdoors, which sets the tone for the interior. I believe that in interior design, the furniture is the last thing that's important; the most important part is the background. A house should look finished before any furniture comes through the door. That creates the mood.



A Varney home in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Photo: Michel Arnaud

AD: You've done waterfront homes from Massachusetts to Palm Beach to Michigan to Ireland;

what makes these locations different?

CV: I was a lecturer on a cruise ship some years back and the cruise went down the Great Lakes and then crossed the locks into Canada and came back down the Atlantic. It was wonderful because you really got to see the differences in architecture and in foliage. The waters of the world and the sands of the world are very differently colored and differently foliated. From palm trees in the south to pine trees and birch trees, there are sands that are brown and sands that are beige or pink, and I've done hotels and residences in so many of them, from China to Polynesia to Tetiarola, which was Marlon Brando's island. So with each of these comes a different inspiration from the setting.

AD: Do you think there's a specific American style of oceanside decorating?

CV: When you think of American style, you usually think of New England and Philadelphia; the early settling states. But I was Jimmy Carter's decorator when he was in the White House, and I feel that he really had a touch of Americana in Georgia. I always think there were three presidents of the U.S. who had very interesting tastes and looks. One was Thomas Jefferson, of course, because he was a genius and he is one of the people who I've admired most in my career. He had this wonderful look: the aqua blue ceilings and the Chinese fretwork, which he understood because was a learned gentleman. And his *White House china* was also the prettiest, although *Ladybird Johnson* did a wonderful job as well. The next one was Teddy Roosevelt because you know his look.

It's Sagamore Hill, it's horned heads with dark green walls. And the other one is Jimmy Carter. I think Jimmy could make furniture better than the shakers. I have two chairs of his that he made for my sons, Nicholas and Sebastian. He made them when I did his log house for him in Ellijay, and I treasure them.



A bedroom in St. Croix overlooks the ocean and the property's lush gardens.

Photo: Bruce Buck

AD: You have so much experience, from the White House to Hawaiian resorts. How do you decorate differently for waterfront homes?

CV: Well, homes on the waterfront have a tendency to be more relaxed. New York and Chicago apartments tend to be rather tight because they're in confined space. Houses on the water have more fluidity for that reason. I've always believed that there are certain things in a one bedroom that are a necessity: a place to sleep, a place to entertain, a place for music—but you're trying to put these all in one box in a city.

People can't separate them. When you're in a confined space like that, you don't have that fluidity that carries you past the horizon, so you tend to be more serious about the space: white trim, gray walls. You feel more rigid. So I've tried to show that contrast in the book.

AD: Is it hard to reconcile your client's vision with your style?

CV: I believe that taste is like fog: It rolls in and you can see it and feel it, but you can never touch it. I believe there is not good taste or bad taste, there is only taste. What appeals to one is not the same as what appeals to another. It's finding the measure. Joan Crawford was my client for many, many years, and I went to present to her first when i was in my 20s. And I presented what I thought was the "movie-star approach." I showed the sketches and she said "Unh unh, Carleton, I only want it to be me." And it was finding the *me* that was the challenge. In the course of the time I worked with her, I was able to discover who the *me* was. And that's why we had such a successful relationship. She was the only client who ever intimidated me, but then we got on. She was amazing in her ability to create things that she liked.

But that said, as a client you have to know who you're hiring. One of the genius things Mrs. Draper did was that she developed this contract when she worked with hotels that began: "Thank you so much for agreeing to work with Dorothy Draper, Inc. We should be happy to work under these conditions: 1. Dorothy Draper shall be the sole arbiter of the taste of the interior." Now, you can't achieve that completely with a client, but the

client has to be sympathetic to who we are and what we represent—otherwise they shouldn't come to us. I remember once Mrs. Draper told a story about a woman coming into her office and showing a lot of sketches that she wanted for her house, and she presented a booklet of all things in the style of Ruby Ross Wood, who Billy Baldwin worked for. So Mrs. Draper went and got her secretary to call someone on the phone, and she came back and she said, "I'm giving you this address. Mr. Baldwin's office is three blocks away."

VIEW SLIDESHOW

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A terrace at a home on St. Croix. Says Varney of the outdoors, "Many people do not think of the garden as a room; I do. And it's particularly true in seaside settings, where you also have the rhythm and the motion of the water."
