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# DESIGN FOR THE THIRD ACT



by Deveron Timberlake

RETIREMENT has given way to reinvention, starting with home design that's timeless and ready for action. For these couples, there's not a rocking chair in sight.

The old rules about winding down toward retirement no longer apply. Those in the third act of life want to be active, engaged, optimistic. They see change as good. They launch into home-building projects their grandparents wouldn't have dreamed of, and jettison the notion that getting older means giving up the ghost. These three Virginia couples say they aren't even close to slowing down, and they've designed spaces that let their after-work passions fly.



## BEN AND NANCY HARMON

If there is a fountain of youth, it comes on two wheels, when the wind in your hair makes you feel forever 12 years old. Armed with that mantra, mountain biker Ben Harmon pulled in the man who spoke it, Merrick Tracy of Hill & Holler Bike Works in Lewisburg, West Virginia, to build a trail that would connect him to a wider universe.

Harmon, 61, an attorney based in Goochland, and his wife Nancy, a banker, completed their second home at The Greenbrier Sporting Club almost a year ago. "We decided that life is short and we wanted a place to get away to," Ben says of the decision to build. "There is so much to do there—swimming and horseback riding and mountain biking, which is pretty unusual. The trails that I have access to are rocky and steep, and it's challenging with beautiful views of the mountains and the [Greenbrier] hotel, and I can ride year round."

Tracy constructed an 800-foot access route on the Harmon's property to connect with the club's system. "He didn't just hack a trail, he designed and constructed it for somebody who knows what he wants," Ben says. The Harmons chose a building lot "that has some of the most spectacular views in Greenbrier County," notes their architect, Madison Spencer of Charlottesville, likening it to scenes in Dorset, Cornwall, or Norfolk, England. It's augmented with the privacy of an old growth forest. "What more could somebody ask for?" says Spencer. Amenities at the club include golf courses, medical and spa facilities, the

hotel's acclaimed restaurants and shops, and the easy familiarity of residents who've become a new set of friends for the Harmons as they anticipate more time there in coming years.

Spencer designed a stone and board European country house with a linear arrangement that fit the ridge line setting, with spacious, view-oriented public rooms and a master suite on the main level. Broad porches give easy access to outdoors, and with a 3,000-foot elevation, "we probably have more pictures of sunrises and fog in the valley than of the house itself," Ben notes. "Sometimes we're above the clouds."

Decisions came easily, all agree, and the resulting appeal is tangible. "You get to a point that if you don't plan for your future you could just sort of whittle away," Nancy says. "The act of physically disengaging from Richmond and going someplace different feels like a mini vacation that has been so good for us, to enjoy what we want to do."

Responding to that desire drives Spencer's philosophy. "It's not just architecture—it's about the theater of life, and how to make that play beautiful. They have everything they need to live well ... I'm trying to cast an appropriate stage and then get the hell out of the way."

Opposite page: Ben Harmon utilizes the access route from his home to The Greenbrier's system of mountain bike trails. Above, left: Ben and Nancy Harmon; right: the façade of the Harmons' stone and board European-style home.

*"We want to enjoy it now even though we're still working. When we go, we leave a lot of things behind, and it's just a great feeling."*

—BEN HARMON