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Builder and crew craft a house in Greenbrier

By **Rosalie Earle**
Staff writer

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS — Visitors to Mike Corlis' new house may find themselves stroking the wood columns, rails and banisters like they would a silky-eared dog.

The finely sanded, hand-rubbed wood is cool and smooth to the touch. No one is ever going to get a splinter in this house.

The house is a just-finished, 3,800-square-foot house in the hills of the Greenbrier Sporting Club, the swank private club and residential development near The Greenbrier resort.

Because of the tony neighborhood, Corlis said he and his core crew gambled and built the house they always wanted to tackle.

"We approached the whole house like a piece of furniture," he said, "We were trying to build an heirloom."

He hopes that someone looking for a second, third or fourth home at the Sporting Club will share his appreciation for quality workmanship and have the means to buy it. The asking price is \$2.95 million.

The 52-year-old North Jersey native is on sabbatical from his teaching job at Braxton County High School. He taught building construction there for 23 years. In fact, his core group of craftsmen are among the first students he taught.

About the same time, he formed Corlis Design & Construction Inc. with a division, Signature Woodworks, that builds furniture and cabinetry. He has renovated and built offices and residences in the Charleston area, picking up several awards from the Charleston Area and West Virginia builders associations.

Corlis said he's inspired by the work of architects Charles and Henry Greene, leaders in the Arts and Crafts Movement and contemporaries of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. "It's the combination of good design and good craftsmanship," he explained.

The quality touches in what's being called "the artisan house" are sometimes subtle. The wood grain pattern in the panels above the fireplace match. (The panels rise to reveal a flat-screen TV.) The crown molding is cut from the same board so the wood grain flows in the same direction. The panels on the entertainment center are from a single piece of wood, its drawers punctuated by exposed joints.

"Each door has its own personality," said Corlis, who designed them all. He pointed out how your eye is drawn to a highly patterned door panel because it's framed by plainer wood.

In the kitchen, the top of the work island is a 27-inch wide board. The cabinet doors are 30 percent thicker than average. Even the handles on the refrigerator have been hand-made to match the hardware on the cabinets.

"Can you see that line," Corlis asked as he opened the door of an armoire and pointed to the wood grain along the edge of the door. His crew had cut a slit in the edge, inserted a small, powerful magnet and covered the cut. The doors of the foyer chest shut quietly and securely with no latch.

And then there's the nearly undetectable groove on the bottom of the frieze around the study walls. From there, wires can be attached to hang paintings and photographs.

"The art is in the detail," Corlis said.

On the exterior, Corlis used vertical-grain cedar for the siding and hand-split cedar shakes for the roof. There's about 1,600 square feet of blue stone patio and decking outdoors.

The entry to the house is framed by a gentle curving arch — a theme seen throughout the house.

Peruvian mahogany is used for the paneling, cabinets, doors and molding. The stairs and floors are made from a white pine.

The living, dining and kitchen are one open area, a comfortable floor plan for a second home, Corlis believes. The range hood is made of matching wood panels and decorated by large exposed joints. The bottom of the hood and kitchen cabinets are slightly curved.

Keeping the clientele in mind, there's a wine cooler the size of dishwasher beside one of the two hand-hammered copper sinks.

A wall of windows looks out to a stream and wooded hillside. Small dams have been built along Sugar Creek as it winds down the mountain, creating small pools and waterfalls.

Corlis recalled his first meeting with the architect when they mapped out the design. Corlis looked up from where they were standing and said, "This is where I want the Jacuzzi." He pointed out the master bath window to the view of the upstream waterfall.

And there's another story about the towel rack in the first-floor master bath. "I had to have something in the house by Jeff Fetty," Corlis said.

So the blacksmith from Spencer hammered a round rod of bonze into a craftsman-style squared-off towel rack.

"It's probably the most valuable towel rack in the state," joked Corlis.

The marble selected for the Jacuzzi and bath counters is called rainforest brown and contains a veined pattern reminiscent of slender tree branches.

Beneath the tumbled marble tile flooring are heating mats. Want a warm bathroom floor for a 7 a.m. rising? Just set the thermostat timer for 6 a.m.

The master bedroom, with its large stone fireplace, has a door to a small, private deck. Upstairs, off of the bridge-style balcony, are four bedrooms with private baths. A downstairs study with a nearby bath can be a fifth bedroom.

Corlis would like to work with the buyer of the house to make the furniture for it. He'll also supply an owner's manual that includes — among other information — instructions on the electrical wiring beneath the living room for installing outlets.

Once this house sells, he and his team can begin on another house whose design by the same architects, McConnell and Ewing of Cincinnati, has already been approved by the Sporting Club's architectural review board.

"I think we're supplying something here that no one is," he said. "The core group of us are in our 40s and 50s. At this point, the challenge is to do what we really believe in."

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