

Decorator in Chief

Tapped by the Obamas to outfit their private White House residence, decorator Michael S. Smith gives *Spaces* an exclusive glimpse of his own Bel Air home and his sophisticated but comfortable style

By Denise Gee



"The best houses, or rooms for that matter, are a little unpredictable—they have a life of their own," says Michael Smith, shown with his beloved Labradoodles, Sport and Jasper. "Objects come in and out. The character evolves. You don't want to over-process and direct. You want to let the house unfold."

On the L.A. scene and beyond, Michael S. Smith has been the "it" designer who's scored many a coup working in the houses of Stephen Spielberg, Michelle Pfeiffer, Cindy Crawford, Dustin Hoffman and Rupert Murdoch. But the California native became a household name on Jan. 13. That's when first lady Michelle Obama announced that she'd chosen him

to redecorate the family's private quarters in the East Wing of the White House. Smith reportedly got the gig for his family-friendly design balanced with a flair for global-minded, old-world chic. (For more, see "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," page 31.)

Smith's path to highest office of accolades began at age 10, when he became fixated on redecorating his room. Within a decade he

Decorator in Chief

was studying at L.A.'s Otis College of Art and Design as well as London's Victoria & Albert Museum. And at age 19 he landed a coveted job with the great John Saladino in New York. Several years later Smith began to make inroads into A-list homes, and by 2002 had made it into *Architectural Digest's* list of top 100 designers.

Nowadays, Smith divides his time between California and New York, overseeing his eponymous 26-member interior design business (which includes eight other designers). He's also involved in a number of commercial ventures, including his furniture and fabric lines for Jasper; a fabric and leather collection with Cowtan & Tout; and bath collections for Kohler's Kallista brand and tile for its Ann Sacks line. Meanwhile there are licensing agreements with a host of other companies, from lighting to home fragrances. Needless to say, the man is busy.

So what does his house in Bel Air look like? Few people except his closest friends and clients get the chance see the 4,800-square-foot home in person. But Smith has opened its doors—and those of many others he's decorated (including homes in Santa Monica, Santa Barbara, Carbon Beach, Encinal Bluffs and Santa Ynez)—in his most recent book *Michael S Smith Houses* (Rizzoli, \$50), written by Christine Pittel and photographed by a number of leading photographers.

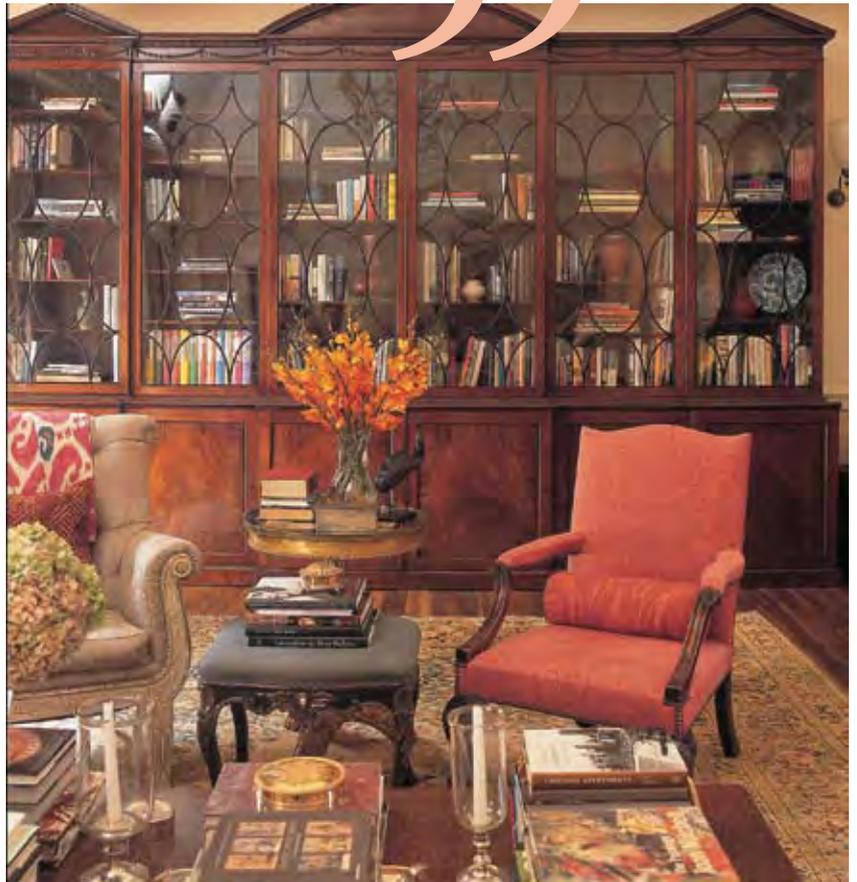
Growing up around Hollywood has undoubtedly affected his style. "Designing a house is a bit like the movies because you're making up stories," says Smith, 44. It's also all about listening. "I've become a very good therapist over the years, and I can tell what people really want, which is different than what they think they want. It's as if I'm directing a movie that was written by someone else. I have to take their vision and turn it into three-dimensional reality."

In an exclusive collaboration, Smith welcomes *Southern California Spaces* into his home—and shares thoughts about its design.





I wanted a big, classically proportioned drawing room. Oscar and I designed it specifically to accommodate a 15-foot-long Gillows bookcase, made in mahogany after a design by Robert Adam. Robert and Richard Gillow were a father-and-son team who ran a thriving furniture business in Lancaster and London, England, during the 18th century. The beautifully carved Georgian armchair is covered in museum-red Fortuny fabric.



I wanted a fireplace in the entrance hall because it instantly makes me feel as if I'm in Oxfordshire [England]. Everything from the limestone floor to the lime-washed ceiling is done in various shades of white—very simple and severe. Creamy white paint—Farrow & Ball's White Tie 2002—picks out the fine lines of the columned cornice and the pediments over the doors.

In John Fowler's English houses, the rooms were often a delicious pinky melon to create a sense of warmth. But the light in California is already so apricot that the walls had to be paler. We mixed a little terra cotta dust into the Venetian plaster to give it a blush. The palette is monochromatic. There are 10 or 12 different textures in the room—Venetian plaster, the Turkish travertine floor, a woven straw rug—but only one color. Even the painting above the fireplace, by Beatrice Caracciolo, is white, with a stone-like texture. The objects on the mantel are very early Bactrian ritual vessels made of alabaster.

*Decorator
in Chief*



Mr. Smith goes to Washington

The big question in the dining room was whether we should open it to the kitchen, given the fact that it's a narrow space and we couldn't make it any larger. But I really did want an actual dining room, so we kept it intact. Now, all I had to do was make it magical. I knew I was going to use hand-painted chinoiserie wallpaper from de Gournay, because I love it and it adds such depth to a room. When you're looking through flowering branches to brightly painted birds, you get a sense of a vista beyond the four walls. It plays with your whole sense of perception.

I hung a George II giltwood over-mantel mirror on one wall and a large-scale photograph—a view of Florence by Massimo Vitale—on the other. It reads as a modern reinterpretation of an Old Master painting and keeps the room from becoming too ponderous. I bought the chandelier in Florence with the proviso that they take off all the pink glass flowers. I put candles in it and use it all the time. The sconces hold candles as well. I think there is nothing more romantic than dining by candlelight. The only electric light in the room comes from a pair of lamps by the mirror.

The table is an English Regency piece made out of particularly splendid mahogany. "Good timbers," as they say in the trade. It's surrounded by the Tyler chairs from my Jasper collection, upholstered in beautiful silk velvet. It's just the sort of thing I love—a petroleum blue-green, peacock-feather kind of color. I like the way it plays off all the neutrals—the paper-bag color in the wallpaper, the cream curtains. It's a fabric that's bright and pretty during the day. Then at night, it turns dark and inky and becomes more dramatic and mysterious.



This extraordinary chair is probably Baltic or Northern European. I bought it at Therien & Co., with the thought of using it for a client but I liked it so much I kept it for myself.

Michael Smith is obligatorily mum on his plans to decorate the Obama family's private quarters at the White House (an area not subject to design restrictions). But at the recent Design San Francisco 2009 event, he did share this: "It's an extraordinary honor, which even I haven't come to grips with, especially for a family I have such respect for. In 10 years I can talk about it, but not now."

Well, that doesn't stop us from talking about it, right?

This we know: Michelle Obama released a statement praising Smith for his "family-friendly style." According to The Washington Post, Smith plans to tackle the bedrooms of Sasha and Malia first, and has begun shopping at kid-focused "everyday retail stores."

Buying off the shelf is a way "of taking the formality and stiffness out of very grand rooms," Smith shares in his recent book *Houses*. For a Santa Barbara home featured in the book, for example, he purchased 200 Indian bedspreads from Urban Outfitters, "chopped them up and put them on the walls and ceiling and used them as curtains and upholstery in the pool house." As Smith puts it, "One of the secrets of good decorating is not to be afraid to be simple. Sometimes all you need is a jute rug from Pottery Barn."

Mrs. Obama walks the same walk. As it's been noted in the press, she's apt to sport an everywoman Gap getup one day and don a gorgeous Narciso Rodriguez number the next. By all accounts, it may be a match made in heaven.

Smith's design work at the White House, however, is unlikely to be on the same scale as the controversial \$1.2 million office renovation of former Merrill Lynch CEO John Thain. In fact, Smith has a budget of only \$100,000.

The kitchen opens to the pantry and the laundry room. I love my BlueStar RNB Heritage Classic range, with six burners, two extra-large ovens, a professional-style raised griddle, and an infrared broiler—but let's just say I'm not the one who usually cooks on it.



This kitchen, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and old-fashioned cabinetry, feels as if it should come with a butler. In movies like "Gosford Park," I'm always looking at all the back-of-the-house stuff, the staff rooms. I wanted to play up the idea that this was a great old service kitchen—masculine English, not pretty English. It's smaller than I would have liked—I was restricted by the size of the old floor plan—but it's very functional. The glass-fronted refrigerator and glass-fronted cabinets also help, because they give you a sense that there's more depth. With solid-door cabinets and a solid refrigerator, you would have felt much more closed in. The hanging lights are from Ann-Morris Antiques. Oscar Shamamian and Joseph Singer designed the hood, with an antique pewter finish. Very Jules Verne meets the Industrial Revolution. The floor is reclaimed fumed brown oak from Baba, a company in North Carolina that sells fine antique floors. The kitchen opens to the breakfast room, just beyond.





It may be unfashionable these days to define rooms instead of leaving it all one giant unformed space, but I think humans like pleasing geometries and regular shapes. The breakfast room is an octagon, just because I think it's pretty. There are five pairs of French doors, and we leave them open all the time—a standard part of the deal in California. The dogs run in and out. It's like a little temple in the garden. I have the pleasant sense of eating outside, while still being shielded from the direct sunlight. With the curtains drawn at night, you get a lovely tented effect. The fabric is Moghul Panel hemp, in burgundy, designed for my Jasper collection. The William IV rosewood table seats four, in George III mahogany chairs. The wallpaper is my own Irina Check for Cowtan & Tout. It just finishes off the space.



It was quite a job to piece together a pile of 18th century hemlock paneling and make it fit this particular room, but it was definitely worth the effort. The paneling adds instant history and makes it feel like a gentleman's retreat. The sofa is upholstered in a Madeleine Castaing stripe with an Indian quilt from John Robshaw tucked over the back. I made absolutely no attempt to hide the TV. I rather like the contrast of the sleek flat-screen Sony and the gilt-and-marble table.

Beds are for lounging, and I always make them super-comfortable, with plenty of pillows and a canopy. In my bedroom, the canopy bed is hung with curtains made of a fabric I designed, Indian Flower hemp, in blue. I couldn't find the perfect four-poster bed, but I found these Georgian posts and built a bed around them. Of course, it had to have a canopy. If you're going to spend a third of your life in bed, it might as well have a sense of ceremony. There's something special about a four-poster bed. It takes me back to being a kid playing in a fort, and fits in with my royalist fantasies. The monogrammed bed linens are by Porthault. The cushion on the floor is meant for my dogs, but you can guess where they inevitably end up. The carpet is a very old Sultanabad, with all those blues I adore.



The centerpiece is definitely the Town tub with old-fashioned fittings, all part of my collection for Kallista. What I had in the back of my head was the kind of English Edwardian temple of bathing that you'd find at a hotel like Claridge's in London. The space was too limited for a dressing room and a master bath, so I had to combine the two, and put the tub in the center of the dressing room. I designed the tub and the fixtures myself. It feels very gentlemanly, with an ebonized tea trolley right next to it for towels and magazines. The tub is oriented toward the view. In summer, I open the French doors and feel as if I'm bathing outside.





I wanted something bold and overwhelming to give the space a sense of drama and found it in a painting by a student of Peter Paul Rubens. It brings a lot of movement and color into the room and somehow revalues the whole space. A big painting in a small room fools you into thinking the room is larger. The whole question of scale is one of the most fascinating subjects in design. I don't quite know how to predict what is going to be right, but I sure can tell when it's wrong. I put a nice big chair right in front of the painting, which also shocks a few people. But if a room is completely geared to a painting, it turns into an art gallery. And then you get that drive-in movie effect that I see in so many beach houses, where every piece of furniture faces the view. That's crazy.

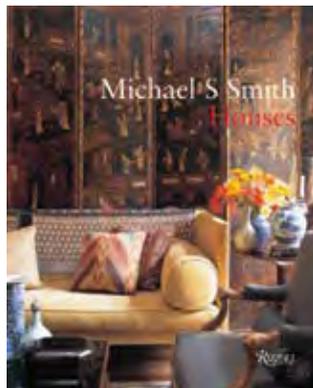
I like to make up a bed with a variety of linens. The red-and-white embroidered sheets and shams are Moroccan and the pillow in front is covered in an African textile. The wallpaper is my Irina Check for Cowtan & Tout.





The double-height sunroom, with its wall of French doors, gives you the sensation of being outside while you're still in the house. The furnishings are eclectic, to say the least. Look at that quirky white plaster John Dickinson table to the left of the blue chair. The coffee table is another unusual piece. I bought it in Brussels but it's probably Japanese. The black lacquer surface is scattered with bits of mother-of-pearl and trimmed in red. I've never seen another like it.

It's a sitting room that really feels more like an indoor courtyard, since you're sharing the space with 15-foot-tall palm trees. The floor is Turkish travertine, which continues out onto the terrace so you're meant to feel half-in, half-out.



Excerpts from *Michael S Smith Houses*—and photography by John Canziani, Grey Crawford, John Ellis, Lisa Romerein and Simon Upton—used by permission from Rizzoli Books.

Smith & Lesson

When *Spaces* recently caught up with Michael Smith at Design San Francisco 2009, here's what we gleaned:

What are you into these days?

I'm obsessed with flowers right now. You used to see lots of them in the '70s so I don't know if I'm too late or too early, but there's something about them that is so fresh. Also, I'm a big wallpaper person. One of my absolute favorites is Chinese wallpaper. It's so unique and so beautiful.

And your favorite room?

My bedroom. For me, having a four-poster bed (with canopy) is magical. There's something majestic about climbing into it. A bed can add such a sense of drama.

And your favorite designers?

There are too many to name. I respect Albert Hadley. And I've always been a fan of David Hicks' bathrooms. He did extraordinary baths that had a connection to the outdoors.

What are the hardest rooms for you to design?

Kitchens and baths. How do you take the spirit of the house and translate it into these rooms? Do you take a Viking stove and put it in a French chateau or a house in the South Hamptons?

Any words of wisdom?

Start with the spirit of the house to promote the feel—not just arrange furniture. In other words, don't just design around a rug. Figure out what is magical to you and bring that to the room. Also, be true to the architecture.

—Kris Carber