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Extreme Makeover: White House Edition

In surprise move, the Obamas select a high-profile L.A.-based designer to redo family quarters

By **[DOMINIQUE BROWNING](#)**

Style watchers are buzzing about Michael Smith, the L.A. decorator to stars, models and fund managers, who is joining the Obamas in Washington to design the family quarters. He's a surprising pick, if only because he is associated with clients like Cindy Crawford and Steven Spielberg, for whom the concept of a budget is impressionistic at best. (Rupert Murdoch, chairman of News Corp., which owns The Wall Street Journal, is also a client.)

Michelle Obama's press office praised Mr. Smith's "family-focused and affordable approach," but I doubt even he can remember when he last accepted a \$100,000 limit -- that's what is earmarked for the presidential family quarters -- unless that was the budget for window treatments. Private donations will subsidize this project; that's how Nancy Reagan got her \$210,000 worth of Lenox place settings. The connection to Mr. Smith was made through incoming White House social secretary Desiree Rogers, a friend of one of Mr. Smith's important Chicago clients, realtor Katherine Chez and her companion Judd Malkin, an important Democratic Party donor.

Mr. Smith is a national star. He makes classic rooms that look like their owners have inherited money and furnishings, and he mixes things up with tastefully hip pieces -- just as he wears Keds and John Lobb custom shoes. Were the economy in better shape, we might look for an uptick in sales of his signature scents (\$55 for a 7-ounce candle, \$110 for air fresheners), a relatively cheap way to get a whiff of society decorator. The Obamas made it clear during their campaign that they would not tolerate divas, another reason Mr. Smith is a startling pick, but he's smart enough to know when to respect protocol. Mr. Smith declined to comment.

The Lincoln Bedroom, renovated by first lady Laura Bush and White House curator Bill Allman

As goes the cabinet, so goes the cabinetry. Mr. Smith's qualifications are strong: this is no time for the inexperienced, particularly if the at-home style of the Obamas reflects anything of their public personae. We can expect that the private quarters will embrace what in decorating parlance is called an eclectic style -- America's favorite in every survey. That sounds like anything goes, but is far from it, quite difficult to pull off

gracefully. Mr. Smith's look is sumptuous without being too fussy; he buys the finest quality, most expensive fabrics, carpets and antiques. Mr. Smith has a large, well-organized operation; he'll whip things into shape quickly. For the past month he has blazed a trail through New York's most exclusive dealers.

Mr. Smith said in a press release he plans to bring "20th Century American artists to the forefront." Let's hope he also turns to America's artisans, such as potter Frances Palmer, weavers Jamie Gould, Elizabeth Jackson and Angela Adams, and designers Stephanie Odegard and Katie Ridder. But for now, you can expect to hear lots of talk about shopping at Ikea and West Elm, at least for the girls' rooms; Mr. Smith is savvy enough to know that it isn't in the Obamas' interests to give the impression that they have launched a bailout for the high-end design industry.

There is good karmic reason for the Obamas to have rooms of their own; you know what they say about if walls could talk. Those quarters will be the family's sanctuary during difficult times. There will be days during which they feel that the only thing in their control is how their home looks and feels; it should bring them joy and serenity. In choosing Michael Smith, they are showing a distinct taste for the high life. But what about the good life?

Apart from the Oval Office, I'd like to submit a vote that, unless things are in tatters, the public rooms be left alone. If refreshing is needed, the White House can be a model of what I'm calling the Borrow Economy -- sharing the stuff in our closets. The White House collection fills warehouses. They would be a good place, while we're on it, to find a different presidential desk; with all due respect to Queen Victoria and Rutherford Hayes, we've had enough of looking at the HMS Resolute.

Instead, the Obamas should invest their \$1.6 million restoration budget in...yes, infrastructure! They can become leaders in green living. Our homes are laboring under outmoded systems. While campaigning, Barack Obama stated that we should achieve an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Home is the place to start: Mr. Obama can advance his agenda; lower White House operating costs; and, best of all, support American industry, starting in the place that needs it most: auto-industry-wracked Michigan.

First up, a thorough audit of the White House carbon footprint -- with a public accounting. Show us where to look for the big energy drains in all our homes.

Next, the low-hanging fruit: Find the hundreds of ways to be more energy efficient. The White House can upgrade insulation and install more light-emitting diodes inside -- it uses a third the electricity of compact fluorescents, and contains no toxic mercury.

The Obamas can also get serious about energy production. What about digging under that expansive lawn and installing a geothermal system to generate energy using heat stored in the earth? According to Jackson Robinson, who manages Boston-based Winslow Green Growth, which invests in sustainable public companies, "the technology already

exists to lower heating and cooling costs by 70% -- and it is American technology. The two leading geothermal-heat-pump companies are based in our heartland, in Indiana and Oklahoma." The Obamas could document the work online; the White House Web site is filled with pretty pictures of tulips, but it could do more to show us how to live responsibly. Let the building industry teach -- and learn. Not as "sexy" as the color of the sofas? These days, "worthy" has more appeal.

Then climb to the rooftop, and shout it out: thin film solar! Remember when President Carter put in solar panels, which were admittedly ungainly -- and the Reagans took them out? Now there is technology for wrapping the rooftop with sheets that unobtrusively take in solar energy, and can withstand Category 5 hurricanes. And, drum roll, the best available flexible thin film in the world is being made in Michigan, by Energy Conversion Devices, one of the fastest growing new energy companies.

A few green acres carved out of that gloriously sunny lawn (irrigated with a "gray water system" that uses water from the showers and sinks for the lawn and gardens) will supply enough organically grown fruits and vegetables to feed the first family and friends -- send the surplus to food banks or schools for their lunch programs. Let's hope the Obamas become "locavores," getting their meat and poultry from the area's small farms. And is there a beekeeper handy? The Obamas can kick off another Victory Garden movement in America's suburbs, but it needs a new name, as the original one grew out of war shortages and implies a vanquished enemy. To kick off the discussion, try Sunshine Gardens, symbolizing a return to sustainable farm practices using a plentiful energy supply.

Environmentalists have a culture war on their hands, whether or not they acknowledge it. Their values haven't yet been translated appealingly to enough people. But we're now in times when we can surely appreciate what most of this boils down to: habits of thrift, modesty, order, and discipline. They're still part of our national DNA, though recessive, perhaps.

Finally, let's talk trees. They absorb carbon -- remember how plants extract CO₂ from the air, use the carbon to build tissue, and return oxygen to the air? Right in the Obamas' new backyard (sort of), in Virginia, the American Chestnut Foundation is fighting valiantly to return the mighty chestnut tree to our eastern woodlands by breeding a new, disease resistant strain. The old giants have been nearly wiped out all over the east coast. Chestnuts would be a good way to start, in planting the seeds of change. We need a values shift of epic proportions. A green lifestyle shouldn't be an unaffordable status symbol; it has to become mainstream. With the Obamas' leadership, America can trace a path to a more compassionate, respectful, sustainable way of keeping house.

- *Dominique Browning was the editor in chief of House & Garden magazine. Her most recent book was "Paths of Desire: The Passions of a Suburban Gardener."*

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