

ELLE DECOR

APRIL 2023

THE DESIGNERS AT HOME ISSUE

Interiors Ace
Michelle R. Smith
Ushers in an
Age of Elegance



Big Easy

At home in New Orleans, interior designer Michelle R. Smith's decorating secret weapon is restraint.

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Elegance

Michelle R. Smith, dressed in Attorse, her son, Bash, and their dog, Ingy, in the living room of their 1865 home in New Orleans's Garden District. Custom chair in a Pierre Frey fabric; custom sconces by MRS Studio; Persian Agra rug; artwork by John Rosis.

OPPOSITE: The front porch of the Greek Revival house. For details, see Resources.

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uilt in 1865, the Greek Revival house in New Orleans that interior designer Michelle R. Smith calls home is a beacon of ease and refinement. Designed by the society architect Myrlin McCullar, the home's well-preserved period rooms were a draw for Smith when she decided to relocate from New York City with her young family. And when it comes to impressive architecture, she's in good company. "All the houses on this street are different," Smith observes of her neighbors in the city's Garden District. "Every time I take a walk, I notice a new detail."

Smith grew up in Berwick, Louisiana, where her parents still live, about an hour and a half outside New Orleans. She moved to New York City 15 years ago for law school, then, after a year as a practicing litigator, pursued a graduate degree in tax law. "It was really just an excuse to come to New York," she says of that period in her life. "I worked long enough at a law firm to understand what that future looked like, and I couldn't see it for me."

So Smith went in an entirely new direction. Determined to pursue her growing interest in interiors, she interned with Daniel Romualdez, learning everything she could before starting her own design firm, Studio MRS, in Brooklyn in 2013. Since then, she has built a reputation for timeless interiors that are as livable as they are interesting. "Her work is comfortable and approachable, but in nearly every space there is something curious, something

remarkable," says Shane Robuck, the Atlanta antiques dealer who is one of Smith's go-tos.

In November 2020, Smith and her partner, the documentary filmmaker Sebastiano Tomada, made the move to New Orleans with their son, Bash, now four years old. The idea was for Smith to commute to her office in New York City, allowing Bash to spend more time with his extended family down South. "I grew up near New Orleans and went to Tulane," Smith says. "With my parents close by and a big friend group with kids my son's age, it was easy to make the switch from New York to New Orleans."

Smith wasted no time in drawing up plans for a renovation. Wanting to preserve as much of the historic house as possible, she kept alterations to a minimum. A few walls were moved, some bathrooms were redone, and a dark, paneled study leading to the garden became a bright and airy kitchen. Six months after she closed on the house, Smith and her family moved in.

Everything had gone so smoothly that surely something would go wrong—and it did. When the moving truck arrived from New York with her furniture and possessions, "every single thing was either broken or covered in what looked like animal fur," says Smith. "Every chair had three legs. It was madness!"

She salvaged and repaired everything she could and was able to save most of her cherished belongings. Today, the house is filled with memories: A guest room's vintage brass bed has been in her possession since she found it soon



RIGHT: The entry to the home, where the front door is painted in Benjamin Moore's Limestone.

OPPOSITE: In the dining room, the chandelier is original to the house. Vintage chairs and tablecloth in Pierre Frey fabrics; curtains of a Fortuny sheer; photograph above mantel by Hong Lei.





Smith transformed a dark wood-paneled den into a light-filled kitchen that opens onto the back patio. Custom island; fittings by Dornbracht; Mario Bellini stools by Cassina; vintage pendants.

OPPOSITE, LEFT: Vitre wall shelving holds tableware in the dining room.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT: The powder room's walls are covered in a textured tile by Quemere Designs. Custom vanity in Nero Marquina marble with fixtures by Barber Wilsons.

after moving to New York. "My mother and I carried that bed frame for blocks," she recalls. The Baker chairs in the primary bedroom have been with her since she was in law school. An ornate Italian center table from the 1940s draws attention in the corner of the family room, just as it did in her Brooklyn townhouse.

Both she and Tomada favor a mix of old and new. "Growing up in Italy in a house filled with 16th-century furniture, I've always had a need to add modern accents," he says. "Michelle knows how to incorporate that classic European style with the comforts of modern living."

To that end, the couple acquired a few strategic new pieces for the house, the most dramatic of which is the living room's nine-foot-long sofa. And if its size isn't

impressive enough, the sofa's striped Loro Piana upholstery adds even more drama. But in Smith's magical hands it all works; even a boldly striped giant can live in harmony amid the subtle charm that old objects bring. "You can't have a whole room be new," Smith says. "You want things you won't see everywhere. You need things with character." ■



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—MICHELLE R. SMITH



LEFT: Garnet Hill quilts cover twin beds in Bash's room. Vintage cabinet by Carl Malmsten; pendant by Artemide; curtains of a Fortuny linen; rug by Patterson Flynn.



BELOW: In Bash's bathroom, the oil painting is by his paternal grandfather. Custom tiles by Quemere Designs; fixtures by Barber Wilsons.



In the main hall, the under-stair cabinet was updated with a Nero Marquina marble top. Macramé light fixture from Wyeth; stair runner by Woodward & Greenstein.



OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: A guest room is sheathed in a striped wallpaper by Lewis & Wood. Vintage Mastercraft bed topped by a Bella Notte velvet quilt; vintage side tables, lamps, and artworks.



A four-poster bed by Ironware International in the primary bedroom contrasts with skirted slipper chairs covered in a Rose Tarlow linen. Quilt by Garnet Hill; curtains, Kravet linen; vintage lamps; vintage May Company Wilshire ceiling pendant.

OPPOSITE: The corner tub by Albion Bath was custom painted in Farrow & Ball's Orange Coloured White. Fixtures by Barber Wilsons.