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RENOVATION STYLE GUIDE

RENZO PIANO REINVENTS
THE WHITNEY MUSEUM

SAVING GRACE

ONCE DILAPIDATED, NOW SENSATIONAL, AN ECCENTRIC 1970s HOUSE IN
THE CALIFORNIA DESERT HAS BECOME A BELOVED HAVEN FOR DESIGNER
MICHAEL S. SMITH AND DIPLOMAT JAMES COSTOS

TEXT BY MATT TYRNAUER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER DAVIES PRODUCED BY ANITA SARSIDI



Interior designer Michael S. Smith renovated an early 1970s Howard Lapham house in Rancho Mirage, California, as a weekend retreat to share with his partner, James Costos, the U.S. ambassador to Spain and Andorra. The pool area, offering dramatic views of the desert surroundings, is furnished with custom-made Brown Jordan tables and chaise longues, the latter cushioned in a Kravet fabric. For details see Sources.



Left: Ambassador Costos (standing) and Smith at the residence's entrance; landscape design firm Mia Lehrer + Assoc. revamped the grounds, including the forecourt behind them. **Above:** The house, named Ichpa Mayapan, features Mayan-inspired embellishments on many of its exterior surfaces; hanging at the entrance is a lantern by Julian Chichester.



Mayan-themed architecture in Southern California is typically associated with Frank Lloyd Wright's astonishing 1920s textile-block structures, among them his Hollyhock and Ennis houses, both distinguished Los Angeles landmarks. But in the early '70s, architect Howard Lapham, an admirer of Wright's, created his own impressive take on Mayan Revival style, high on a desert hilltop near Palm Springs. Called Ichpa Mayapan ("exclusive estate"), Lapham's 11,000-square-foot glass-and-stucco fantasia features a hand-carved Mayan calendar in its entrance court, a façade richly embellished with stylized Mesoamerican motifs, and a keystone-shaped pool presided over by a colossal Mayan-inspired stone figure. The property, located within the Thunderbird Heights community in Rancho Mirage, offers commanding views of the improbably emerald valley floor and its many

golf courses, as well as of Sunnylands, the former Leonore and Walter Annenberg estate designed in the '60s by A. Quincy Jones at the junction of Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope drives.

A few years ago, when L.A.-based designer Michael S. Smith was working on a new visitors' center for Sunnylands (now a museum and unofficial western Camp David), he found himself captivated by Ichpa Mayapan. "I was constantly looking at this house up on the mountain, the highest-elevation home in Rancho Mirage," says Smith, who notes a kinship between Sunnylands and Ichpa Mayapan in their "clean lines, broad roofs, and green lawns—a great refinement and opulence in the middle of this harsh wilderness."

Ultimately Smith and his partner, James Costos, the U.S. ambassador to Spain and Andorra, decided to buy Ichpa Mayapan as a weekend retreat. Over the past two years they have meticulously restored its exterior, while Smith has thoroughly reimagined the dilapidated interiors based on a "movie in my head," as he puts it. "I became fascinated by the era that the house embodies," he says. →



Left: In the dining room, a Jean de Merry light fixture shimmers above a vintage table ringed with shearling-clad chairs by Jasper; the curtains are of a fabric from Michael S. Smith's Templeton line, and the Smith-designed rug was made by J. D. Staron. **Opposite, from top:** An expanse of silvered mica panels over the fireplace offsets the living room's travertine walls and floor; the table and chairs at left are vintage Jansen designs, the daybed is 1960s, the sculpture on the landing is by Rod Kagan, and the carpet is a Smith design by J. D. Staron. The couple's Bedlington terrier, Lily, relaxes next to a seating area with Jasper club chairs and Lawson-Fenning cocktail tables; in the background, a banquette covered in a Brunswick & Fils fabric is joined by a trio of vintage Milo Baughman lounge chairs.



"It reflects a certain type of Hollywood glamour from the lotus-eating period of the late '60s and early '70s, not the more vaunted and thoroughly enshrined Hollywood of the '50s."

The home's original owner was a socialite named Maxine Cook—"a scratch golfer and very prominent on the Thunderbird Country Club links," Smith notes—whose neighbors included Bing Crosby and Betty and Gerald Ford. "I like to imagine her as a woman who had a closet full of Pauline Trigère dresses and spent the afternoon on the golf course," the designer says. "For me this house is that idea of Southern California as a very sophisticated place."

There was an aesthetic shift in that era, when the wives of Reagan's Kitchen Cabinet broke free of their Spanish Colonials and had the celebrated decorator William Haines running wild for them in contemporary houses in Bel Air and Beverly Hills as well as vacation homes in the desert. "I kept thinking that this could be the house of someone like Lee Grant's character in *Shampoo*," Smith remarks, "obsessively getting her hair done and driving a white Bentley."

The reality of Cook's residence, as Smith learned when he found photographs of it in an old issue of *Palm Springs Life* magazine, was

not quite all that. "It was chic but not really the movie I wanted to see," he explains. For starters, she had had every room outfitted with wall-to-wall carpeting, which Smith promptly pulled up and replaced with acres of travertine. The variegated stone now runs throughout the single-story dwelling, its colors ranging from pale lapis to olive, khaki, and off-white.

Those hues, in turn, dictated many of Smith's choices for the decor. Take the sunken living room, carefully graded in ecru, beige, and caramel tones that pick up on the palette of the majestic desert landscape visible through a vast window wall. The furnishings include vintage standouts—a '70s brass table and chairs designed by Jansen, a '60s Adrian Pearsall daybed—blended with contemporary pieces from Smith's own Jasper line. Everything rests atop a graphic striped rug that he had custom made for the space.

The living room, where Smith and the ambassador often entertain guests, is in many ways the heart of the house. "As I was conceiving the rooms," Smith says, "I kept thinking of Joan Didion's essay 'In Hollywood,' from *The White Album*, where she describes important

Overlooking the pool is a sculpture of a Mayan figure holding torches, which are lit in the evening; the sunshades are by Brown Jordan, and pillows in a Kravet fabric accent the custom-finished Brown Jordan chaise longues. **Opposite, from top:** In the family room, a Philippe Anthonioz light fixture is suspended above a Dransfield & Ross screen, a Jasper sofa, a pair of armchairs with cushions upholstered in a Lee Jofa fabric, and an ottoman by Ralph Lauren Home; the curtains are of a Jim Thompson fabric, and the striped rug is by Vaughan. The kitchen is equipped with Poggenpohl cabinetry, a backsplash of Heath Ceramics tile, a Viking range and ovens, and Kallista sink fittings; Lawson-Fenning stools are pulled up to the island, which has a Caesarstone top.



homes of the period as being ‘filled with white phalaenopsis and cymbidium orchids and needlepoint rugs and the requisite scent of Rigaud candles.’ That is the spirit we’re channeling.”

This being essentially a pavilion-style villa, the indoor spaces flow seamlessly to the outdoors, with numerous openings to the long terrace that spans the back of the house. Broad steps cascade down to the showstopping pool, where the Mayan figure at the far end holds torches, which are lit for added drama in the evenings. It’s an undeniably compelling spot. “From here you can’t see any other houses,” notes Costos. “We’re situated perfectly in a notch in the mountain—rolling desert hills to the north, jagged peaks to the south—so it’s totally private. Then you have the constant play of light across the Coachella Valley. It’s just the right amount of change to keep you peacefully stimulated.”

The pale beige of the terrace’s paving stone is echoed in the contiguous master bedroom, which is dominated by a canopy bed soaring nearly to the height of the 15-foot ceiling, with colorful accents coming primarily from the blue borders of the linens and the blue floral shams. For the guest rooms, however, Smith decided to get a little splashier. “I wanted to do whole rooms in prints, like Billy Baldwin did for Mary Wells Lawrence 45 years ago,” he says. “It’s the 18th century fast-forwarded to the 1970s. You might think the effect would be old-fashioned, but to me it feels modern.”

In the main guest room an exuberant green-and-white Brunschwig & Fils fabric is used on the walls and for the curtains of another high canopy bed, joined by a pair of sculptural pagodas designed by Tony Duquette. “Going all-in on a print is interesting,” Smith says. “I’m making a statement. In an age so influenced by

midcentury, let’s go the other way. It’s risky. I don’t know that I’d feel comfortable doing it for other people, but it’s great for me.”

As is well-known, Costos and Smith have close ties to Michelle and Barack Obama. In addition to the ambassadorial residence in Madrid, Smith redecorated both the Oval Office and the First Family’s private quarters at the White House. And since Costos and Smith settled at Ichpa Mayapan, the Obamas have been among their guests. “When they were here, it occurred to me that more than 50 years ago JFK had stayed just down the road at Bing Crosby’s home,” Smith says. “The President and Mrs. Obama basically woke up in the morning to the same view of the valley. There was something lovely about that thought. It made me contemplate all the change that has taken place in those decades, contrasting with the timelessness of this beautiful desert landscape.” □