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House Beautiful

Entertaining **Day & Night**

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Time and Again

*"There's something
romantic
about a Henry James
kind of house."*



In the living room of a classic New York town house, designer Michael S. Smith chose furniture with classic shapes that never go out of style. The red lacquer Sargent cocktail table and the Mayfair sofa, with a deep seat for comfort, are from his collection for Baker. Custom club chairs from Jasper. Tabriz rug from ABC Carpet & Home. French bronze candelabra from Niall Smith Antiques. OPPOSITE: A late-afternoon still life.



CHRISTINE PITTEL: Edith Wharton would have been very happy here.

MICHAEL S. SMITH: So often these classical Upper East Side town houses are done in a modern, cool way, but there's something quite romantic and beautiful about an old New York, Henry James kind of house.

You have an unusually intimate relationship with the house.

When my friends bought it they said, 'We'd love for you to work on it for us.' And I said, "Terrific—why don't I live in it while I'm renovating my apartment in the city?" So I had the luxury of living here for a year. I've always been intrigued by the notion of camping out in a glamorous way, like Elsie de Wolfe living at the St. Regis, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor at the Waldorf Towers—that sort of spontaneous, on-the-move decorating. At the same time, I was able to use a lot of my furniture for Baker. It really suited the house in a great way.

What was the inspiration behind your furniture collection?

It's very much influenced by the idea of an old-school, traditional house. They're classical pieces with a generous, country-house scale. It's furniture you keep forever, not furniture of the moment.

There is a shadowy aspect to these rooms that seems to enhance the feeling of age. How do you bring that out?

By creating pools of light. You want lamps that cast shadows, the intimacy of candlelight. Intimate lighting draws you in. It's primal, like a campfire. Stairs and tall windows are super-romantic, and candlelight only intensifies that. Fabrics shimmer and woods feel more mellow. Moldings create shadows. The wood-paneled dining room is beautiful because it's shadowy—there's a dreaminess to the paneling. The de Gournay wallpaper in the bedroom creates its own shadows within its pattern, in turn creating a vista that plays with your perception of space. It also emphasizes all the moldings. The effect is dramatic, and really pretty.

I don't see any bright overhead lights in any of the rooms.



ABOVE: "The breakfast room is definitely a morning room," Smith says. It's light and airy, with pale gray Regency armchairs by Noir gathered around Hickory Chair's Gustav table. Zurich lantern by Vaughan. OPPOSITE: The Voltaire server, by Smith for Baker, "is like what the Irish call a dinner wagon. It's so practical and versatile. I'd put it in a bathroom with towels, or next to a sofa, with a lamp on it." Plymouth side chairs and Howard mirror also by Smith for Baker.

Downlighting banishes shadows and breaks the reverie—and it's not very flattering. I've learned from lighting designers that it's better to have light that just washes the walls and gives you the perception of brightness, rather than blasting the room with overheads. You need to have contrast for visual interest.

How about contrast in lighting from room to room?

If every room felt the same, you wouldn't really use every room. The breakfast room feels totally different from the dining room. It's flooded with natural light, and that speaks to this old-fashioned idea that there are different rooms for different times of day. It's great because it means you actually do rotate through the house and use all the rooms. And it's lovely to have a house where there's a progression from room to room when you have people over.

So where do you start when you're entertaining?

We might spread out a buffet on the kitchen island and then eat in the

breakfast room. For a dinner party, we'll have drinks in the living room, and then we'll move across the hall to the dining room. I like to stick to the dining table to the bitter end—that's why the chairs had better be comfortable—because I think the minute you move away, you break it. People start to leave. But on a weekend night, it's different. People will stay longer, and we'll move into the living room and have all these small, intimate conversations.

What's the best party you've been to?

I went to a dinner party in Paris that was amazing. I'm usually good at projecting what a party will look like and how it will go. There's a kind of comfort for me to be able to do that. But this was completely unexpected. The 18th-century house was unexpected. The people were unexpected. The food was unexpected. The first course was a perfectly cooked soft-boiled egg from somebody's farm, served out of its shell in a silver container on a bed of slightly buttered rice. With salt and pepper. It was the most delicious egg, the most delicious rice, something so unbelievably plain and super-simple with everyone in black tie, all lit by candles.

Sounds exquisite.

But it really doesn't matter how fancy your house is or how fancy your food is. I went to a great party in California where the host served takeout Mexican food. What I remember was the graciousness and the effort to make the environment beautiful. And here in New York there was a party in a parking lot behind an apartment building where we all sat on folding chairs and watched *Goodfellas*. Everyone brought Italian food, and everyone was engaged and excited to be there on a hot summer night. It was exuberant. Entertaining is about being thoughtful and trying to create an experience that brings people together to share food and conversation in a way that's fun. It's about doing something special: a parking lot was made magical by stringing up Christmas lights and renting a projector and screen.

PRODUCED BY SABINE ROTHMAN





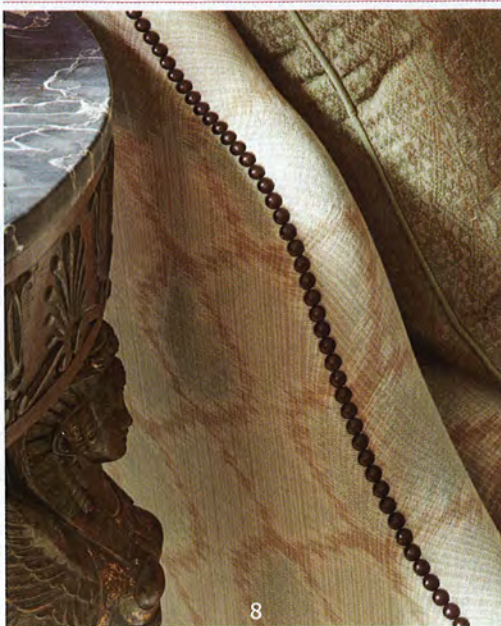
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A town house offers the luxury of various rooms, "almost like stages for particular events at different times of day," Smith says. 1. Candlelight adds romance to a living room corner hung with Qing Dynasty wall panels. 2. In the study, Smith's Humphrey chair by the window has a Regency shape and legs on casters. 3. The Rufino sofa by Jasper "could also be used as a banquette by a dining table." 4. Saber benches for Baker are a convenient catchall at the foot of the bed in the master bedroom. 5. The Surrey armchair has a Chinese influence. 6. So does the Sargent cocktail table. 7. This desk in the living room doubles as a drinks table. Maze armchair for Baker. 8. Brass nailheads outline the arm of the Mayfair sofa. OPPOSITE: The Syon commode for Baker "has the feeling of a piece of neoclassical furniture, with all these tiny fluted elements." Smith also designed the Petworth mirror for Baker.



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There's a lunar aspect to this guest room, with bright natural light on one side and the other in shadow. "The wallpaper panels, the vintage Indian quilt, and the Jasper Kashmir pillows all have this hand-blocked quality, and then you have the graphic strength of the dark black furniture, which helps to hold it all together," Smith says.

Portsmouth canopy bed, Sussex nightstand, and Glebe bedside chest all by Smith for Baker. White walls would have been too stark, so Smith covered them with Jasper's Eton Square.

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