

# MID-CENTURY MODERNIZED

Designer Michael Smith recognizes Palm Springs's legendary past. He helped two friends reinvent their home.

INTERIOR DESIGN BY *Michael S. Smith*  
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**PALM SPRINGS HAD** its Golden Age. During that era in the 1950s and 60s when stars such as Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Dinah Shore and others made the desert town their home away from their Los Angeles homes, Palm Springs became not only a glamorous locale, but also one in which the mid-century Modern house flourished. Some claim that it was born there. But Palm Springs's glory days are far from over, especially when the likes of designer Michael Smith adds his imprint there.

Upon undertaking the interior design for a classic, circa-1960 mid-century Modern home owned by longtime friends of his, Smith says, "A lot of sophisticated people lived in Palm Springs during its Golden Age, and we wanted to reflect that sophistication in these interiors in a way that says, 'We are people of the world,' rather than creating a cliché of what the town is supposed to be."

Apart from the furnishings, accessories, and artworks Smith chose for the project, he had ample free use of air and sky, two of Palm Springs's most abundant attributes. The house, situated high up in the Coachella Valley, was so thoroughly renovated at the time of sale that it was essentially a new house. "It's at a high altitude," says the Los Angeles-based Smith, "with a view down to the valley below. There's really beautiful air movement up there, a bit of a breeze, along with a great view. Ultimately, a view really does affect your quality of life."

The single-story structure had originally been configured as an open C shape until Smith and his clients decided to add a bedroom that closed the form, creating a glass-framed interior courtyard. That outdoor room of sorts features a modern sculpture visible from several perspectives within the home, while the comfortably furnished interior rooms Smith created for his friends work as a series of inviting, gallery-like spaces in which the couple relaxes, entertains, and enjoys their eclectic art collection.

Smith insists that working with friends isn't particularly different from working with other clients. "You may approach the starting point with more information when

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—Michael Smith

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working with friends, and they may trust you more, but it's not a radical departure from working with any other clients. The pitfalls are the same for everyone. It's really just about being sensitive to what people say and listening very carefully."

It's not every client, though, who gets the privilege to work with Smith. Over the years, he has received numerous honors and awards for his work, including being invited in 2008 to design the private White House quarters for the Obamas, a commission that led to his appointment to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and an invitation to redesign the Oval Office itself. Then as now, Smith adhered to the same philosophy that has earned him respect throughout the design community and among his international clientele: "Live with what you love."

"I really don't strive for perfection," Smith insists. "Having an emotional connection to the things that surround us in

Opening page: Michael S. Smith designed the pool and interiors of a mid-century Modern house in Palm Springs. Janus et Cie chaise lounges, upholstered with Delany & Long fabric, are grouped with a Santa Barbara Designs umbrella in a Sunbrella fabric. Left: The living room features a Spanish baroque mirror, Jasper ottomans covered in suede, and a P. Tendercool coffee table.



Following Smith's architectural changes, the house's living room incorporates a view into an interior courtyard. Furnishings are arranged to encourage conversation, since the clients entertain often. A striped Mattaliano sofa in a custom Chapas Textiles fabric faces a pair of Paul Dupré-Lafon-designed

armchairs, also upholstered in a Chapas fabric made of cotton, wool, and Alpaca. The solid Jean Michel-Frank-style sofa is custom and features a Templeton fabric. In the foreground, the circa-1970 white plaster tripod table is by John Dickinson; the side table in the background is Jasper.

The walls in the breakfast room are covered with cerused oak panels. A Louis XIII-style settee faces a custom parchment top table. Playful Picasso ceramics are displayed atop a console designed by Damian Jones; the untitled painting is by Esteban Vicente. Right: A pair of Jasper Modeux stools are positioned on an antique Tabriz rug. The painting is by Michael Goldberg.





A blue and white cotton dhurrie establishes the palette of a guest bedroom. The curtains and bed skirt are Rogers & Goffigon and the pop-up TV cabinet is upholstered in Jasper fabric. Right: Picasso ceramic plates surround an antique Italian Rococo giltwood mirror. The sofa is upholstered in Holly Hunt Great Plains fabric; antique textiles wrap the pillows; Templeton fabric is used to fashion stripes on the outer two pillows.



*“This project is akin to a portrait or a fragrance, in that it reveals more about itself over time.”*

—Michael Smith

our homes—the furnishings and accessories we’re going to see and live with every day—is far more important than coordinating fabrics.” From his long experience in the industry, Smith recognizes that some homeowners can become overwhelmed by their environments, and that the process of decorating can be intimidating. His approach helps his clients to feel more comfortable and confident throughout the design process. “As long as there are some structural considerations in place regarding scale and continuity, you can surround yourself with the things you have an affinity for—the things you love—and make it work.”

Smith’s guiding design principle is evident throughout, where new furnishings are combined with the homeowners’ existing or reupholstered pieces in rooms dramatically punctuated with art, a mix of sculpture, ceramics, paintings, and rugs incorporating geometric motifs. The clients were interested in a modernist, twentieth-century feel, in keeping with the vintage of the house, and Smith spent considerable time discussing the context of Palm Springs and the desert with them, exploring the aesthetics of what that meant. The clients responded by integrating second-generation abstract expressionist work into the home.

“The pieces we chose are from a time that evokes a relaxed life in this beautiful climate, but it’s not thematic or clichéd,” says Smith. Laughing, he adds, “So instead of just hanging the big Rat Pack picture above the bar—which has nothing to do with the people who actually live there—I felt it was relevant to explore the development of the interiors and the selection of art in the context of living in a desert.”

Smith ingeniously looked to artists like Louise Nevelson who were working in an abstract mode after the initial rush of de Kooning and other earlier masters of the genre. “Of course, the Picassos are great,” he says, referencing the many ceramic works by the artist that are scattered throughout the rooms. “They’re great things to collect—those pieces are beautiful and whimsical, almost magical. But then in the entrance hall you see a painting from Antonio Saura, another Spanish abstract painter. The artists are all from

the same period and may even have known each other, so there’s a kind of dialogue going on from room to room.”

Smith’s early studies at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum refined his curatorial sensitivity and helped shape his approach to designing interiors, but he says traveling and living in Europe has had an even greater impact on him. “Travel in general has always been incredibly illuminating, and it’s exciting for me to see things in a different framework.” Wherever you are, Smith claims, if you’re open to it, you’ll find inspiration in movies, museums, magazines—anything and anywhere outside your norm that helps you see things in a different way.”

And in matters of design, he feels that the proverbial rules are meant to be broken. “Breaking the mold is much more intriguing and interesting to me, and mixing the components of the home in a way that’s distinctive. When you’re confronted with fabrics that match, it’s usually better to pick the more interesting or beautiful option over the one that coordinates.”

Professionals in the design field often say the most interesting houses are decidedly personal, as evidenced with this project. “This is a very comfortable home, and one that’s also very lived in,” says Smith. “It’s a home that supplies a kind of visual archaeology, meaning, you get a sense of who lives there and what they’re about.”

Smith enjoyed the challenges inherent in designing these interiors that could have easily been hard-edged and cold, to which much mid-century Modern design can skew. “The couple who live in this home have very diverse interests; in a way, it houses their personality and their charm. In that sense, it’s really a form of portraiture.” ■

“Anything can be defined as a ‘style,’ but few people can explain what that means,” says Michael S. Smith who always makes it a point to discuss with his clients their meaning of that word before beginning a project.

