

The Obamas put their stamp on the White House interior

The Obamas must do more than measure the drapes to put their stamp on the White House

By Karen Hosler | Special to the Baltimore Sun
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**The State Dining Room of the White House
(AP/White House Historical Association, Bruce White / December 30, 2004)**

Barack Obama, his wife, two daughters and mother-in-law are set to move Tuesday into a big old barn of a house that is not exactly homey.

The White House contains two floors of ceremonial, museumlike rooms topped by two floors of family quarters filled with someone else's stuff. It's something of a cross between a fancy hotel and a furnished rental with staff.

"The rooms are too big," said William Seale, an author and historian for the White House Historical Association. "The whole place is like a machine, like a very big nickelodeon."

The staff is primed to make the president's job easier by attending to his family. Yet the White House is confining, Seale said. Especially for children the ages of 10-year-old Malia and 7-year-old Sasha.

"They will miss running and playing outside," he said. "They'll do it for a while, and it will be fun, but like with [Bill Clinton](#) jogging through Washington, the Secret Service will find it easier to be done someplace else."

Thus, the challenge likely to fall heavily on first lady-to-be [Michelle Obama](#) is to do what she can with those private rooms while avoiding the minefield of second-guessing that comes with making changes to a national monument.

"Everything about that house, including the entertaining rooms, takes on a political importance that is not just about entertaining," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library and author of a dozen books on the topic. The Obamas, he said, "are being very careful about that."

Michelle Obama announced this week that she has hired California designer Michael S. Smith to "add our own touch" to the first lady offices in the East Wing as well as the family quarters. The two said in statements that they want to promote new perspectives from 20th-century American artists and designers while using affordable brands and products. They also have warehouses full of previously owned presidential furnishings to choose from.

The modern America approach ensures the result will be multicultural, featuring an eclectic mix of art and housewares that complement [Barack Obama's](#) campaign message of inclusiveness and change, as well as fit the mood of the country.

"There's a lot of good will," said Sheila Tate, who served as [Nancy Reagan's](#) White House press secretary. "It just feels so good to see so many people who didn't support the Obamas who want them to do well."

The mansion that serves the first family as both showplace and sanctuary has evolved substantially over the years, mostly since the mid-20th century.

[Harry S. Truman](#) gutted the building after daughter Margaret's piano leg broke through a floor, calling attention to long-ignored structural problems. [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) created the museumlike public rooms, for the first time giving visitors a sense of the building's rich history. After the place went to seed again, Nancy Reagan stepped in, using private funds to restore piping and strip old paint off the doors, but is forever tarred for also buying fancy dishware.

Michelle Obama, who celebrates her 45th birthday today, is young and stylish enough to offer a marked contrast to her recent predecessors' matronly pantsuits. She is sure to inspire some fashion trends, not unlike Jacqueline Kennedy's sleek sheaths and pillbox hats.

Conversely, White House decor tends to mirror whatever is popular in the rest of America. For example, photos of the family quarters during the Eisenhower era call to mind the plain, utilitarian taste of the 1950s. And while Kennedy sparked a new interest in antiques, her elegant improvements to the White House weren't copied anywhere except perhaps in a few of Washington's aristocratic salons, Seale said.

Presidents also follow their countrymen in technological advances and cultural trends. Anthony recalled that Warren G. Harding brought the first radio into the White House in

the 1920s; the Eisenhowers first ate off TV trays; the Kennedys first acquired a turntable radio combination called a hi-fi set; and the Carters installed the first VCR.

In putting their personal stamp on the White House, chief executives frequently bring in their favorite form of exercise equipment. [John F. Kennedy](#) and [Gerald R. Ford](#) both put in pools. [Richard M. Nixon](#) added a bowling alley. The first [President Bush](#) installed a horseshoe pit, and Bill Clinton encircled the South Lawn with a jogging trail.

Nothing is official yet, but the new president is expected to put in a basketball net or two.

The first priority, though, says Michelle Obama's spokeswoman, Katie McCormick Lelyveld, is that "the girls are comfortable from the first moment they walk in."

That means, in part, that their bedrooms - likely the same ones used by a series of presidential offspring - are first on designer Michael S. Smith's list.

But it's also a matter of making a very abnormal life as normal as possible. Designer B. Smith is confident Mom and Dad can keep their heads.

"They are down-to-earth; even the fact that the mother-in-law is there says this is a real American family," Smith said.

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the new designer

Michael S. Smith, who was named Tuesday as the new White House decorator, is a Californian whose style is steeped in European tradition.

Smith was one of three finalists in the designer selection process, according to Katie McCormick Lelyveld, spokeswoman for Michelle Obama. The Obamas selected him to redesign the private quarters, she says, "because he had a similar vision of what they were looking for."

Based in [Santa Monica](#), Smith, 44, works on residential and commercial properties around the world. He was named one of *Architectural Digest's* top 100 designers in 2002 and 2004 and was *Elle Decor's* designer of the year in 2003. His celebrity clients include [Cindy Crawford](#), [Steven Spielberg](#), [Rupert Murdoch](#), [Dustin Hoffman](#) and [Michelle Pfeiffer](#).