

DIAL M FOR MICHAEL

Like a Hitchcock finale, Michael Smith aims for his finished projects to 'relieve the anxiety' of his clients. The President's decorator drew the analogy at this elegant Hamptons hideaway, whose owners, having employed him 14 times before, certainly knew the man to call. Text: Carol Prisant. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

The rear of the main house, a 21st-century take on a colonial saltbox, is reached by walking down a rough-edged pebbled path created by Arne Maynard





Overlooking the barn-like living room is the clerestory window of an upstairs study. Michael designed the chevron-patterned rug specially for the house.



Top: provincial chairs from Jamb are set round a large dining table at one end of the living room, while a round mirror reflects its fellow across the space. Middle left: beneath another circular mirror by the garden door in the guest house is a Scottish Arts and Crafts chair. Standing in front is a round wooden Secessionist table. Middle right: unusual yellow foxgloves cluster beneath a multi-trunked tree. Bottom: Arne Maynard's choice of lavender and box hedging was informed by a two-day recce of the local area's flora



Top: at the end of the double-height, gabled master bedroom is a large seating area. Hanging above two black wicker Bielecky Brothers chairs (middle left) is Ben Nicholson's oil-and-pencil work, *Sept. 53 (Balearic)*. Middle right: the interior of the canopied bed is dressed in 'Chatham' fabric from Michael's 'Jasper' collection. Bottom: a George Nakashima table makes a grand centrepiece in the main house's mud room. The Swedish kilim was bought from Mansour, while the wall mirror came from New York's Valerie Goodman Gallery





This page, clockwise from top: the main house looks over a stretch of beach known as Double Dune, part of which has been planted with native shrubs; the bathroom and dressing room are fitted with stone surfaces and a rambling chandelier specially commissioned from Ann Morris; on a clear day the pool is almost exactly the same colour as the sea, which is just 150m away; the open terrace with wooden loungers makes a prime sunbathing spot. Opposite: large windows throw the garden's natural light onto a freestanding tub



THREE TO FIVE hours from Manhattan by car, 25 minutes by private plane, the gentle village of East Hampton feels something like New England. It has a village green, a town pond, windmills, for heaven's sake, and swans. Of course swans. East Hampton is the chic Hampton, the old-money Hampton, and some folks live here year round, but most are summer people. Like the clients designer Michael Smith and architect Oscar Shamaian built this house for. 'We wanted to design a house that would be traditional in composition and materials,' says Oscar, 'yet have a clean, rational interior that would nicely align with the clients' and Michael's vision for the décor.' Michael oversaw the process from the start: from the 'agrarian' shacks-in-a-field phase to the size-of-each-room phase to the window-glass and landscape phase. The project took four years, and 'It must have been something like childbirth,' Michael says. 'Hard at the time, but almost forgotten today.'

Multi-tasker that he is, Michael can veer with ease from childbirth, say, to a discussion of Alfred Hitchcock. The director's favourite device, he tells me, was to place perfectly ordinary people in harrowing circumstances. In classics like *North by Northwest* and *Vertigo*, Hitchcock had his viewers identifying so thoroughly with the unexceptional likes of, er... Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant... that they'd become unbearably anxious until, in a terrifying denouement, their anxiety was thankfully discharged. 'Which is really why we enjoy his movies so much,' Michael explains. 'What most of us love best in life, in fact, is not feeling insecure, and a little like Hitchcock, I've always felt that relieving anxiety is a big part of my job.'

Well, he's pretty much nailed it there. And, conveniently for us, this project is a perfect case in point.

Who, after all, could feel even minimally insecure in Michael Smith's commodious sofas, or in his chairs? They look like upholstered hugs. Not clients like the President of the United States, certainly (for whom he did the White House). Not the owners of this weekend house, who are so thoroughly pleased with Michael Smith that this is their 14th joint project. (Check out their handsome Malorcan getaway in *Wol* June 2010.) 'We got exactly what we wanted, and more,' they say happily. 'This house has an old soul, but is still so fresh and young.' They absolutely love escaping here, where the living is barefoot and easy, and where, unburdened by care, they have no antiques to dust, no silver to tarnish. All they have to worry about, really, is whether the glass in the windows will withstand September's hurricanes, and whether those storms will erode any more of East Hampton's perfect beach. With a nice heated pool, however, and all one's glazing up to code...

Actually, there are *two* houses on this property: the main house, facing the water, and directly behind it, the guest house. Running between the two, like a flowery, tapestried belt, are quiet rows of weathered fencing, fruit trees, perennials and overgrown gravel paths. Renowned

landscape designer Arne Maynard (*Wol* May 2015) has lovingly nestled those dwellings on fat cushions of lavender, phlox and miniature box. Tumbled and soft, like the beach grass and sand, they defy architectural rigour. Note the pebbly path with an uneven selvage of verdant shrubbery. It's a garden that makes one smile.

Both houses are in what I call the Rustic Weekend style. 'In some perfect world,' Michael says wistfully, 'I'd hoped to give the interiors a vernacular feel.' What he wound up with, in the living room, at least, was a space that 'looks a little like a barn' (note those limewashed rafters overhead). In the rest of the house, however, he went 'as small as possible, so it would feel more domestic'.

Michael is keen to point out that there's no 'California decorating' here. Now I've always taken that to mean tons of room for entertaining; neutral backgrounds; brilliant accent colours; contemporary furniture and art to match (not a fusty old master in sight); cord upon cord of 'reclaimed' wood (meaning 'used'); acres of windows, pillows and throws and 'ginormous' screening – and great rooms filled with the sort of overscaled, wellless seating that won't leave an impress on sunburned thighs. Family-friendly spaces. Totally. And every one – awesomely, advertently – looking like pots and pots of money.

But he doesn't do 'California' at all, Michael explains. Especially the all-white-beach-house variety. He considers that too obvious. Too white. Too... easy. Here, for example, he opted for 'no colour'. So while these interiors are unquestionably beige-y and blueish, there's nothing overt to remind one of 'beaches or sand or sky'. He adds, too, that right from the get-go, Michael Smith (who's a brand these days) works on the premise that everything he designs – interiors, handsome furniture, versatile fabrics, home fragrances, bath fixtures, lighting – should be a personal challenge. No decorative walks in the park, then. Nothing remotely predictable. 'My best trait,' he admits, '– as well as my worst trait – is that I'm easily bored.' And he obviously delights in making things tough on himself. Which is why, despite his being 'a sucker for brown and white batik', and despite his love of the 1970s, he typically eschews that in his work. He depends instead on what he calls his greatest asset: 'dancing on the edge'.

Okay, I get it now. We're circling back to Hitch. (I feel that, after 900 words, I know him well enough to call him Hitch.) Because it's clear as a crop-duster's sky that what Michael's been telling me all along is that he loves being a risk-taker. He loves being that Cary Grant guy in the cornfield: the guy who replaces the *Torn Curtain* of his harried clients and carpets *The 39 Steps*. He's making and taking the metaphorical heat, so to speak, to keep those clients feeling so secure and so safe in our insecure and angsty world, that they sink gratefully back into 100 per cent down, take a long pull on that large Diet Coke (lots of ice), sigh deeply and try – in a very laidback way – not to spill the popcorn on the sofa ■

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In the guest house, a quasi-Shaker plank table is set between 19th-century walnut benches, lit by Rose Uniacke's hovering 'Bubble' lanterns. Lynn Davis took the photos on the wall behind

