



PRIME VOCATION

Despite her love of helping do up houses as a hobby, Michelle Smith was set on being a lawyer. Yet, while training at a New York firm, she found herself more drawn to fabrics and furniture than criminals and court cases. Quitting the bar, she started her own decorating firm, before falling for a Brooklyn brownstone with peeling ceilings and the perfect pantry. Here she tells Augusta Pownall how she found her calling. Photography: Simon Upton

Like the rest of the house, Michelle's living room is very narrow, and none of her existing furniture fitted when she moved in. She custom-designed the small side tables beside the sofas. The white tubular light fitting, which is made of macramé, came from Wyeth, a specialist in mid-century pieces



Left: sconces by Barovier & Toso, made of smoked Murano glass, flank the door into the kitchen, while a Plexiglas coffee table by Alessandro Guemero stands between the seating. Top: toy cars are arranged on a glass-topped Italian table (which Michelle thinks was probably made in the 1940s or 50s), near the door into the hall. She found it on a buying trip to Atlanta with a client. The newel post was specially made to replace a chunky Arts and Crafts one. Above: arranged on the mantelpiece are pots by Nancy Waterhouse Fisher



Top: Michelle's dream pantry was previously a cupboard – all she did was paint it blue. 'I've never seen anything with that kind of potential.' Above: the chairs at either end of her dining room table are vintage, reupholstered in two leathers, while along the sides are slip-covered seats bought for a client, who thought them too 'granny'. Opposite: the decorator left the kitchen ceiling as it was, with flaking paint, after much debate. From it hangs a Charles Edwards pendant light, which Michelle also has in her Long Island home

MICHELLE SMITH claims to be better with Italians than Brits. 'It always takes a minute for a British person to think I'm funny. They take a while to relax.' This makes perfect sense, not least when you learn she lives in her 1890s Clinton Hill brownstone in the heart of Brooklyn's farm-to-table food scene with her Italian boyfriend. And yet the photographer and I – both British – were quickly charmed by her Southern openness and wit. She's soon riffing on a friend's break-up during a recent holiday in Greece – 'Too much information, but then I'm always TMI' – and is wide-eyed that the photographer needs no assistance and will eat *anything*. One gets the impression that this hard-grafter has little truck with the faddy food issues of her adopted city, as she blithely carves out a career as one of its promising new interior decorators.

If there's one thing that New York has more of than decorators, it's lawyers. Michelle first moved to the city to study law and was soon practising at a corporate firm. Since she was the first in her family to go to college, her father was keen for her to get a 'prestige' job, so she plumped for law. She bought her first 'tiny, shitty apartment, which had never been touched' and sold it well, buying another in a prewar building still with its original casement windows on East 10th Street at the beginning of the recession, 'when they were literally giving it away'.

While working long hours on cases, she did it up and helped friends do the same. Initially she thought interior decorating might be a second career, but a partner at the firm saw pictures of her place and commissioned Michelle to renovate his own apartment in her refined but comfortable style. Spotting that her talents lay in trimmings rather than tribunals, he pushed her to take up decorating professionally. As luck would have it, this first client was able to help her secure an internship at Daniel Romualdez Architects, so she quit law and never looked back. Two years training was enough to give her the confidence to branch out on her own. 'I learned how you do the job, how you run a business. Now I'm not embarrassed to send an invoice, or to go to the showroom and choose fabric.'

Suddenly she was in charge of all components of a fledgling firm and couldn't have been happier. Daniel Romualdez had been a well-oiled machine, with project managers and an architecture arm. In such a big company, she'd concentrated solely on decorating, but now she was knocking down walls as well (within reason). 'If you're building something from the ground up you might need an architect,' she says, 'but I have to pick out the plumbing fixtures!' Michelle loves details that whip a space together, such as a neat valance, always raised off the floor. A cool palette and precise pleats in quietly luxurious fabrics crop up across her work. As with an Italian recipe, she opts for a few very good ingredients and doesn't muck them about. This approach would come in handy for her own home. She bought the Brooklyn house in 2014 and renovated for a year while installing a huge project in Albany and planning schemes in Chelsea and New Jersey.





Left: the master bedroom's yellow curtains are made of Pierre Frey fabric, while the canopy that tops the Ironware International four-poster is a Rose Tarlow textile. Above: Michelle has reupholstered these slipper chairs, now in a corner of her room, three times. The lamp between them, which has a crocheted shade, came from a flea market in Florence. Top: the hall table is topped by an Isamu Noguchi lamp. The penwork box on its shelf was made by Sharon Cavagnolo, the mother of one of the designers at Michelle's company



Opposite: all the master bathroom fittings, from Barber Wilsons & Co. are unlacquered copper, while the Charles Edwards pendant is unlacquered silver, which ages quickly and beautifully. Top: Michelle likes the rich terracotta tone of Rojo Alicante marble. The tub came from Hastings Tile and Bath. Above: the porch is situated below the dining room, forming part of an extension added in the early 1900s. Michelle replaced the existing outside walls with screens to bring a little bit of bayou country to Brooklyn

Despite thinking she would 'never, ever move to Brooklyn', the house swung it. Most properties in the neighbourhood are gutted and flipped. This was 'totally untouched, a little bit creepy', she says. 'Someone had scratched "I hate you" on the back of the door - that kind of thing.' Add to that no central heating, peeling floral wallpaper and an asbestos problem - so far, so unappealing. But there were good omens too: a large 'cupboard' that could be painted pale blue and masquerade as a longed-for pantry; an extension she realised could be transformed into a screened porch straight out of the Deep South; and perhaps most of all, square mantels, some of which had an 'M' for Michelle carved into them: 'That felt like a sign.'

She ripped up her own rulebook and didn't plan at all. 'I left the house just to become what it was going to be.' Unlike the studio's projects, she did it all herself, with only a little help from her mum. The girls in her office were already up against it, so she didn't feel she could ask for help on her own home. Michelle even kept her boyfriend in the dark. He didn't want it to be 'full of grandma stuff' like her old flat. 'He's from Florence, so terracotta floors, lots of antique furniture... All the stuff I would die for. He must have said: "White and clean, white and clean" a million times. I figured if I never show him what I'm doing, he can't say no!' The resulting effect is grown-up, but not grandmotherly.

Everybody has their own rules and hang-ups - one recent client bewildered Michelle by saying she wanted everything to be invisible - but for her own home, she followed her instincts, painting the walls with her favourite 'non-colour colours' and sticking to Barber Wilsons & Co fittings in the bathrooms. 'There's not a plumber in the Tri-State area who doesn't hate me. Something about those fixtures is really complicated to fit, but I always use them.' The light above the kitchen table is the same as the one in her fisherman's cottage in Sag Harbor, Long Island. 'I feel like I will always put the same light in wherever I end up living. It's like cilantro [coriander], some people love it and some hate it.' She's anxious to avoid the house looking overdone. The peeling plaster on the kitchen ceiling has stayed, for a deliberate shift in tone. 'The kitchen just feels like a room. Otherwise I get tired of things.'

She grew up in Louisiana's bayou country with equally restless parents, who moved every few years from one town to another. Mother and daughter rented houses as they went to stave off boredom, making curtains with rings and clips, and driving for miles for a superior doorknob. Smith Jr experimented with borders and purple walls straight out of the sitcom *Friends*. The kernel of her future business was undoubtedly there. 'My dad still calls me his lawyer daughter from New York,' she says. 'I let him have that one.' The legal profession's loss is her ever-increasing roster of clients' gain. And with projects in the West Village, Lake George and Europe on the horizon, it won't be long before her father is calling her his decorator daughter from New York ■ Studio MRS. Ring 001 646 596 7678, or visit studiomrs.com

