

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

The Audacity of Taupe



Doug Mills/The New York Times

The new Oval Office features fawn-colored cotton velvet sofas, a mica coffee table and a rug ringed with inspirational quotes. [More Photos »](#)

By PENELOPE GREEN

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THE Oval Office has been tweaked, in a makeover orchestrated by the California decorator Michael Smith. In response, television audiences and the blogosphere seemed to produce a collective yawn: too brown, too dowdy, too ho hum, they pronounced as one.

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An Office Fitted for a President

It is a subtle redo: The desk is still Resolute, a gift from Queen Victoria to [Rutherford B. Hayes](#), built from pieces of a salvaged Arctic discovery vessel. (With the exception of Johnson, Nixon and Ford, every president since Hayes has used it.) The gold silk damask curtains installed by [Barack Obama's](#) predecessor are also unchanged.

What is new? A rug woven with quotations from [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), [John F. Kennedy](#) and others; two fawn-colored cotton-rayon sofas; two elegant midnight-blue lamps by Christopher Spitzmiller; and an extremely contemporary mica coffee table from Roman Thomas, a New York furnituremaker.

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Some context: Mr. Smith, 45, has made lushly elegant, grown-up rooms for moguls like [Peter Chernin](#), the former president and chief executive of the News Corporation, and Howard Marks, chairman of Oaktree Capital, as well as Hollywood demi-celebrities like Cindy Crawford and Gigi Levangie Grazer, the novelist and ex-wife of the producer [Brian Grazer](#). Though known for being tight-lipped and protective of his clientele, Mr. Smith was an interesting choice for the Obamas, being neither too establishment, nor too local — too *Chicago*. (Someone close to him said

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Susan Walsh/Associated Press
Mr. Obama's predecessor's office.
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that the connection was through a Chicago client who was a big supporter of the president.)

Though no taxpayer money was spent — there is a fund fed by private donations for White House décor — there were the inevitable howls of protest on the timing and the taste. Yesterday morning, Ann Curry, the “Today” show anchor, greeted her guest Margaret Russell, the new editor of Architectural Digest and a close friend of the press-shy Michael Smith, by reading a few snarky viewer comments.

“She said someone said it looked like a law office in a strip mall,” Ms. Russell said later. “I said, ‘Oh, my gosh, that’s just mean.’ Everyone is a critic and everyone is a decorator. That room is quintessentially American. America is not gilded or glitzy or fancy-pants. Although it is a public room and everyone feels the need to comment on it, it is also the president’s office and he can do whatever he wants to it.”



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times (left);
Evan Agostini/Associated Press
Stephen Drucker, left, and Ann
Coulter. [More Photos »](#)

And anyway, Ms. Russell added fiercely, “In our business, the client is always right, and from what I’ve heard, the client is happy.”



Daniel Aker/Bloomberg (left); Ruby
Washington/The New York Times
Arianna Huffington, left, and Miles
Redd. [More Photos »](#)

William Seale, a White House historian, thought Mr. Obama had received a very practical redecoration. “The room has been calmed down, perhaps because it is actually used more than usual. It is, in my opinion, more welcoming to a person entering it who is overwhelmed by where he or she is.”

He also pointed out that, historically, the Oval Office didn’t get much tweaking until the Kennedy administration. “F.D.R.’s curtains and upholstery greeted Eisenhower, and he used them; then Eisenhower marked up the floor with his golf cleats,” he said. “[President Ford](#) had the room de-bugged, and the walls were so full of bugging wires he nearly had to tear them down to get them all out.”



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times (left);
Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times
Dominique Browning, left, and Ellen
Lupton. [More Photos »](#)

The Home Section asked decorators, pundits and others for their reactions to the makeover. Here is what they thought.

Ellen Lupton

Curator of contemporary design, [Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum](#).

Patrick Andrade for The New York Times (left);
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times
Tucker Viemeister, left, and Sheila
Bridges. [More Photos »](#)

The rug is this room’s big oval opportunity. If I were judging the changing décor of the Oval Office on its carpet alone, I’d give the prize to [Laura Bush](#) for tweaking its geometry as well as revealing more of the room’s spectacular wood floor. The first President Bush and [Bill Clinton](#) both plunked a presidential seal smack in the middle of their oval rugs; Laura Bush boldly pushed the seal away from the center so it wouldn’t get boxed in by a bunch of rectangles — couches, chairs, tables. Obama’s new rug plays the same game with geometry, but floats the off-center seal in a big, bland field of beige. Among the elements Obama has preserved from the former occupant’s office décor: two drop-leaf, oval-shaped end tables that flank the blocky couches and Rembrandt Peale’s ovoid portrait of George Washington. Oh, I like it.

Arianna Huffington

Editor in chief of The [Huffington Post](#) and author of “Third World America,” out next week.

It's very cautious, neutral, inoffensive, neither one thing nor the other — the Audacity of Taupe. It looks a little like the décor you'd expect to see in a hotel, the Taupe Executive Room at the Embassy Suites. But I applaud the switch from flowers to a bowl of fruit on the new coffee table. In times of great economic hardship, it makes a world of sense to be able to eat the centerpiece if necessary.

I also like the fact that the new Oval Office rug was made in unemployment-ravaged Michigan, creating a micro green shoot of sorts (actually a micro wheat-and-cream shoot, to be more precise). But the decision to festoon the new carpet with quotes from Lincoln, F.D.R., J.F.K., Teddy Roosevelt and Martin Luther King seems a tad Hallmark-y, and a little prepubescent — something Sasha's fellow fourth graders might suggest (Malia's seventh-grade friends would probably find it “lame”). What's next, adding the doodle of a heart with “Barack + Michelle”? And isn't falling back on F.D.R.'s “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” and Lincoln's “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” a bit lacking in imagination? Perhaps the Oval Office bookshelf could use a copy of Bartlett's Book of Less Familiar Quotations.

Sheila Bridges

Decorator.

Overall, I think the Oval Office redesign is consistent with the president's message, and appropriate under the circumstances. I think it would have sent the entirely wrong message had the president and first lady (and their decorator, Michael Smith) chosen a redo that was ostentatious, showy or over the top, given the fact that most of the country is suffering from an economic [recession](#) that just won't quit (in addition to a growing deficit, thanks in part to our involvement in two wars).

The taupe and beige colors seem reserved and muted, and the furniture styles are somewhat understated. I imagine that this was intentional, as if not to take away from the beautiful and historical antique pieces and portraits that have remained in that room during several presidencies. I like the armchairs that were reupholstered in brown leather — definitely a timeless, practical and tasteful choice — as well as the striped wallpaper. Love the blue lamps; every room ought to have a pop of color or something that doesn't fit into the safe-neutral category. Everything looks very comfortable and a lot more casual than it did before. (Bush had much more formal styles in damask on the sofas and a silk stripe on the chairs.) Not sure I love the bowl of fruit — apples? — instead of flowers. Do we really believe that any head of state, dignitary or staff member is going to help themselves to an apple while meeting with the President? Besides, what would you do with the core when you were finished?

Jacob Weisberg

Political columnist and chairman of the Slate Group.

The politics here were 1) not to be seen to be spending money on anything frivolous during a recession and 2) not to be seen criticizing his predecessor's taste. He appears to have avoided those pitfalls. Most visitors will be too mesmerized by being in the Oval Office to notice the decoration anyway. If Obama leaves a mark on his presidency, I don't think it will be through his fabric choices.

Marian Salzman

President of Euro RSCG Worldwide PR, North America.

[President Obama](#) introduced blue into the overall color scheme in a way that conveys his

more holistic commitment to change. Not only is his office warmer — think caramel — but it also gives a nod to the environment with the vibrant shades of blue he uses as accent hues. It's a quick, design-y way to say, "I'm always thinking about the planet and our future generations, even when I am meeting and greeting heads of state, contemplating legislation, or doing whatever presidents do in their private office spaces."

Miles Redd

Decorator.

I can only imagine how difficult it is to decorate an oval room — much less for the government — but I would have to say the room is a success. It is certainly not a paragon of chic, but it hardly could be. What we Americans want is good solid comfort, and I think the room delivers. Pretty sofas, a modern mica coffee table, pleasing stripe on the walls. ...

David Gergen

Senior political analyst at CNN and adviser to four presidents.

I believe it belongs in the category of 'Give the guy a break!' Barack Obama has followed the precedent of several recent presidents by refurnishing the office to fit his own style, and he's done it without using any taxpayer money. Personally, I prefer a more regal office to the muted earth tones of the family den. But so what? I think this is something the president deserves. He deserves to have the surroundings that make him feel comfortable and in which he works best. I don't care so much how he lives; I care how he leads.

Tucker Viemeister

Lab chief at the Rockwell Group.

The two most obvious changes in the redesign are the wallpaper and the fruit bowl. Simple, yet transformative! The striped wallpaper was an easy change with a big impact. It makes the room much more lively — keeps the president up, while the staff probably ignores it. For the visitor, it adds more excitement to the room, which is already a pretty special experience.

What about the fruit bowl? Who's eating in there? The only guy who's biting into an apple is the president. The staff's hands are always full of papers. But what visitor would grab an apple to eat with the president? I know that nutrition is one of the first lady's missions, but it would be easier to have beer than an apple in the Oval Office.

Toby Israel

Design psychologist, author of "Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places."

Bush's yellow sunburst rug jumps out at me and screams, "I am an optimistic ("Mission accomplished"), extroverted, feeling personality type." Obama's more sedate beige rug, complete with inspiring quotes, reflects the message, "Let's slow down and look before we leap" (a more introverted, thinking personality type?). Overall, both veer towards a traditional Preppy President style. Just swap the official seals and you're in the Harvard/Yale presidents' or corporate C.E.O.'s offices.

Sam Gosling

Professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin, and the author of “Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You.”

Even places that by their very nature must be subject to a certain degree of stage management hold clues to the personalities and values of the occupants. In this office, a number of features stand out.

1) The quotes bordering the rug are great examples of identity claims, which are deliberate statements directed toward others (e.g., a bumper sticker) and/or the self (e.g., a tattoo located upside down on the inner wrist). Occupants use identity claims to broadcast their values to others and also to remind themselves of the ideas that they hold dear. The fact that these claims are deliberate does not mean they are disingenuous; in fact, the vast majority of identity claims are authentic reflections of the ideas and values of the person making them (e.g., the quotes that people often append to their e-mail signatures). In the case of the rug, the quotes epitomize leaders who were all forward-looking, progressive people living in challenging times, people who were both dreamers and pragmatic at the same time. Their deliberate and explicit placement here signal the occupants’ core values.

2) The family photos on the table by the window. Rather than serving purely as “social snacks,” as would be the case if the family photos were on the desk facing toward the occupant’s chair, these images serve as identity claims. Their placement shows that they are not merely for the occupant’s own benefit, but something he’s proud of and wishes to project to others.

3) In comparison with the previous décor, which was very traditional and conventional, the new office is more stylish (e.g., the sofas, lamps and coffee table) and more complex (e.g., the wallpaper and the non-symmetrical pillows), which would suggest that the new occupant is higher on the personality trait Openness to New Experiences. Both the old and new offices are inviting, which signal extroverted occupants.

Sally Quinn

Washington Post columnist.

Bush’s room says, “Let’s have a glass of sherry while we sign the treaty.” Obama’s room says, “This is serious. We don’t have time to waste. Double espresso anyone?” The message is this: whoever is in that office has the most stressful job in the world. Whatever it takes to lessen the pressure and create a calmer and more relaxed atmosphere is the only thing that matters. They can decorate the room in all black, all purple or like a circus tent if they like. Whatever works for them is fine with me.

Dominique Browning

Former editor in chief, House & Garden.

All those earth tones. Brown upon rust upon ochre upon ...drab. We’re dangerously close to Harvest Gold here, folks. This office does not inspire confidence. The presidential team is clearly trying to project a laidback, we-don’t-do-decorating image — and why? Design matters. We judge books — and presidents — by their covers, at least at first glance. Obama’s office looks small and subdued; it could be the TV room in anyone’s house. The Bush version could have used tweaking; it is a tad on the fussy, nouveau-suburban side, but at least it is light, airy and elegant, as befits the office. And those blue stripes on the side chairs have panache. The Bush carpet — and each President commissions his own — wins hands down; those radiating stripes are wonderfully bold.

Deborah Needleman

Former editor of Domino magazine and editor in chief of WSJ magazine.

It's an impossible task to redecorate the Oval Office while trying to look like you're not really redecorating and not spending any money. The result seems to reflect Obama's inherent caution and his decent taste. All the individual pieces, like the custom sofa, the mica coffee table and blue lamps, are so much nicer than the pieces in Bush's Oval Office, which were a bit tacky and hotel-like. But I'm not sure the overall feeling or message is improved.

The question to ask is, if you had to go sit on the sofa, put your feet up and read a brief, which one would you choose? Or if you had to assemble advisers to discuss policy? While Obama's is in better taste, from the photos, Bush's feels more stately — the room seems lighter and brighter, and thus more optimistic. These are serious times, but we don't want policy emanating from a room that feels too somber.

Andy Borowitz

Comedian.

First of all, Bush's office had no phone, which confirms my suspicion that he wasn't the one making the important calls during his presidency. But on the other hand, Bush did appear to have more books than Obama, which is shocking. It just shows that you can't read too much into a man's décor. The one thing both Oval Offices have in common is neither man appears to be there in August.

Ann Coulter

Author of "Guilty: Liberal 'Victims' and Their Assault on America."

The Oval Office has just gotten a complete makeover, and I understand some more Oval Office changes are planned for 2012.

Stephen Drucker

Editor in chief, Town & Country.

Decorating is the last subject we need in the national debate right now. Even in the best of times, taste is not a subject that brings people together.

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