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Florida Fresh

Interior designer
Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz taps
into the serenity of the tropics
to tame the grand proportions
of Stanley and Arna Smith's
home on the Atlantic Coast



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In the living room, high ceilings and an envelope of neutrals give sculptural presence to oversized furnishings such as the Fortuny-covered Knole sofa and 4-foot-square ottoman. Interior designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz installed a floor-to-ceiling portiere and propped custom mirrors in the foyer to play off the architecture's proportions. The curved sculpture is 19th-century Chinese.



Born and raised in Puerto Rico, interior designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz naturally finds inspiration in the shimmering light and soothing colors of the tropics. In the Jupiter, Florida, home of Stanley and Arna Smith, the New York-based designer was in his element, relating the interior to the climate and tempering the glitz of soaring ceilings and marble floors. This is the second home that Noriega-Ortiz has designed for the Smiths; he finished their East Hampton summer house in 1996.

Noriega-Ortiz's light-washed, uncluttered rooms reflect his training as a student of architecture and urban design at Columbia University. Previously the head designer for John F. Saladino's New York firm, he launched his own practice in Manhattan eight years ago and has since taken on projects for clients like fashion designer Steven Fabrikant and media mogul Michael Fuchs. Known as much for his interiors as for his design of lighting and furniture, Noriega-Ortiz has mastered the architect's tools of space and light to overcome design problems.

Given the chance to walk through the Smiths' Atlantic Coast home before they bought it, Noriega-Ortiz assured Arna, who collects '50s-era fashion items and Oriental art and porcelains, that the problems she saw were real but fixable. "The scale of the house was monumental, too large for her and her collections of small, precious things," he says, "but there are ways of displaying small objects to make them take center stage and appear bigger in small rooms." Solutions such as changing the flamingo-pink exterior walls and carpeting some floors came easily to him as he walked through the rooms with Arna. "Are you sure this will work?" she'd occasionally ask. He told her, "We'll tone down the shine of the floors, the scale of the rooms, and the color of the walls, and I promise you'll love it."

When Noriega-Ortiz asked for picture references of what Arna envisioned for the house, she gave him over 200 examples. "I was after a



The woven gauze portiere separating the living room in the open-plan house was made with two tiers of thick fabric at the bottom to mimic formal wainscoting. Arna Smith found the bonnet-top wing chair, and Noriega-Ortiz upholstered and grouped her footstools. The well-edited décor extends to a McCoy vase of tropical lilies and a tole tray arranged with Wedgwood dishes and a majolica pagoda. The large ottoman is tufted in a quilted fabric from Gretchen Bellinger.



An informal family room next to the breakfast room is filled with an international mix: French provincial sofas, a coffee table made from a Thai bed, an Oriental teak and mother-of-pearl screen, and a Stephen McKay floor lamp dressed with a Rose Vitow tasseled shade. In the dining room, opposite, Noriega-Ortiz left the shiny floor bare and added a mirrored screen to enhance the light and open up the small space. The bold latticework of the Chippendale chairs is echoed in the patterns of the café curtains and tablecloth.

feeling of what she wanted," the designer says. "The idea of an Italian farmhouse was appealing, but she also liked British colonial furniture. She wanted to use the 19th-century English furniture she'd inherited from her mother," he says. "Arna liked pattern and texture rather than pure color, but certain tones of green and gold surfaced again and again. She saw a dried bouquet of roses in my office and said, 'That's my color scheme for the bedroom.'" The different style directions were inspiration for Noriega-Ortiz, but he was after a look that was uniquely hers. "I still have the dried roses," he says. "I keep them as I would any document or swatch for a job."

As he worked, he gave the rooms more definition since so much of the interior was open and paved with high-gloss travertine marble. The ceilings were 18 feet tall, creating cavernous spaces devoid of human scale. It was the Smiths' traditional mahogany furniture that helped him find an elegant ratio between décor and open space. "The scale of those pieces took the rooms to their proper proportions," he says, indicating that well-designed furniture can help establish a good foundation for a room. In addition, he added a diaphanous floor-to-ceiling curtain, or portiere, to formally close off the living room's open end. Traditionally placed in front of a door, the portiere is used here to reflect light in the living room and form a gossamer backdrop. And like a wall, it relates to the mahogany furniture as architecture: Two tiers of thick fabric at the bottom create the illusion of formal wainscoting.

To emphasize the lines of individual pieces and give furniture sculptural presence, Noriega-Ortiz avoids clutter. When arranging the Smiths' furnishings, he nested two antique footstools in the living room—one covered in leopard from an old coat—to make a bigger statement. "Singly, they'd be dwarfed," he says. Using textures and patterned fabrics, he draws the eye to the small pieces in the room. The sofa's Chinese-motif Fortuny upholstery complements a carved Oriental sculpture nearby. In the dining room, the latticework of the Smiths' Chinese Chippendale chairs is bolder beside grid-work fabric patterns in bright yellow that he chose for the tablecloth and café curtains.

The large bay window of the master bedroom





Noriega-Ortiz placed the Smiths' four-poster bed in the middle of the master bedroom facing the window and hung a taffeta curtain behind the headboard from a 9-foot-tall metal frame. The curtain's placement sets off the Edwardian-style settee upholstered in silk taffeta. At the foot of the bed, 19th-century English chairs flank a curvy Baker daybed covered in Coraggio velvet with a Bruntschwig & Fils striped silk cushion. "I bet my client she'd love my chicken-foot lamp," says the designer, who created the turkey-feather lampshade "like a hat Audrey Hepburn would've worn in the '50s."

tempted Noriega-Ortiz to create a bit of theater. "Yes, it was difficult to convince my clients to put the bed in the center of the room facing the windows. But the taffeta curtain I wanted to hang from a 9-foot-tall metal frame on the four-poster was a chance for real mystery," he says of the translucent drapery hinting at the bed and view beyond.

The Smiths not only went for his idea, which gives their 19th-century English furniture pride of place on the other side of the curtain, but they also took his dare to try out the chicken-foot lamps with turkey-feather shades he'd concocted for the bedside tables. Outlandish, but, "Arna called me from Florida, hysterically happy when she saw them," he says. Not surprising for a designer whose use of light and respect for space never fails to delight his clients. ♦

For design details, see Sourcebook.

