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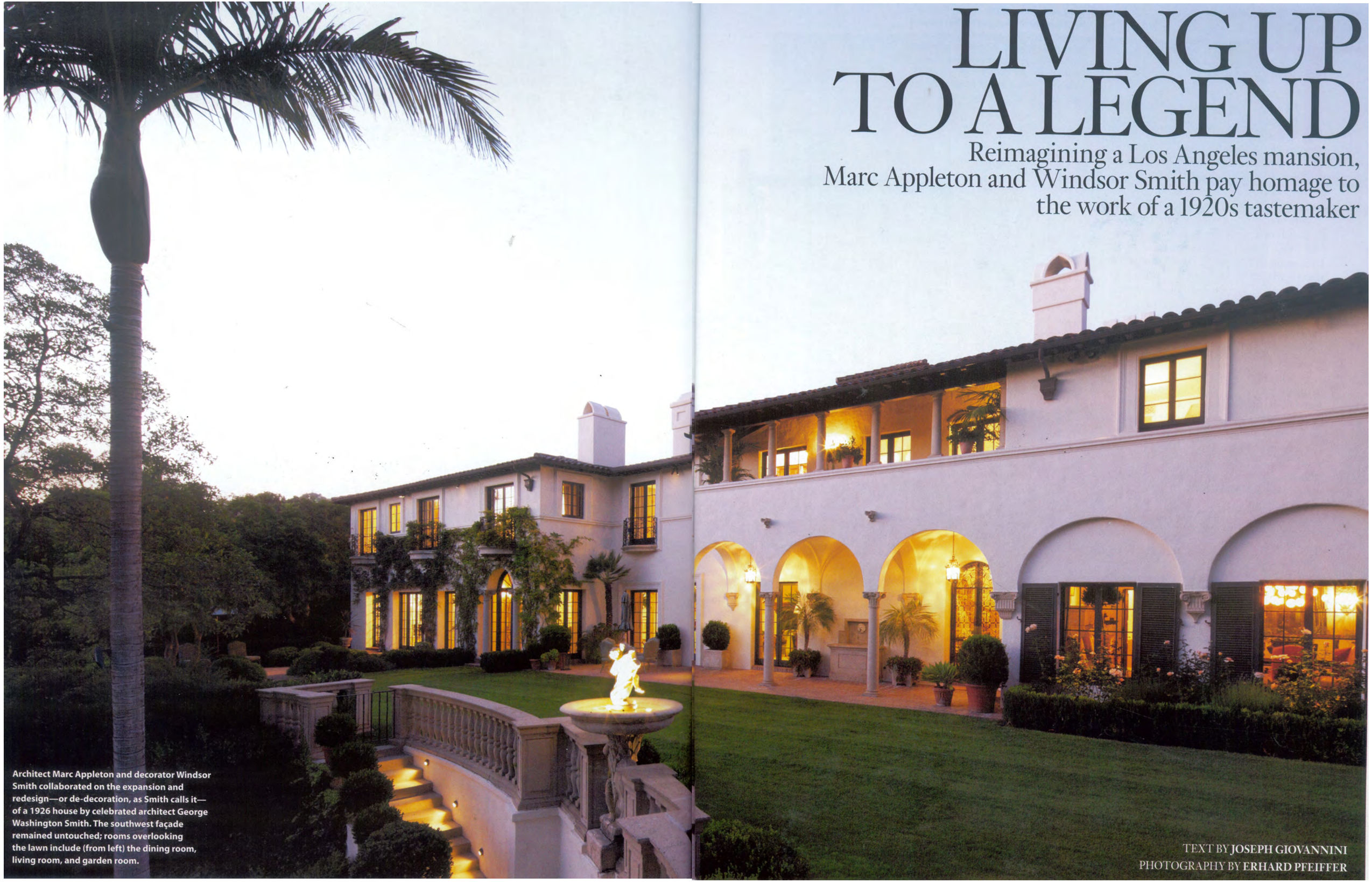
LIVING UP TO A LEGEND

Reimagining a Los Angeles mansion, Marc Appleton and Windsor Smith pay homage to the work of a 1920s tastemaker



Architect Marc Appleton and decorator Windsor Smith collaborated on the expansion and redesign—or de-decoration, as Smith calls it—of a 1926 house by celebrated architect George Washington Smith. The southwest façade remained untouched; rooms overlooking the lawn include (from left) the dining room, living room, and garden room.

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THE STRANGE THING ABOUT SOUTHERN California in the years following World War I was that, even after decades of statehood, it still needed to be invented. And no one quite knew what it should look like. In the wake of the war, as Americans resumed their European grand tours, the haciendas of Spain and the villas of Italy suddenly began to appeal to citizens in search of a romanticized image for the New West. California architects, armed with large-scale picture books that documented these European estates in detail, wasted no time in designing expansive and comfortable houses recalling the Mediterranean. The strong sun sculpted the solid walls into planes of light and shadow; austere stucco surfaces silhouetted exotic plants. It was a go. The houses belonged.

George Washington Smith, a bond salesman turned painter turned architect, had traveled extensively in Europe, and he excelled at picturesque structural compositions that never seemed forced. The Santa Barbara–based Smith occasionally ventured south to Los Angeles, and in 1926 he designed a villa fusing Andalusian and Italian influences in a sprawling two-story plan that represented, in the words of one commentator, "sobriety coupled with opulence."

"Smith never shouted 'ornament,' but in a quiet tone he designed buildings with great compositional balance," says Marc Appleton, an architect who has written a monograph on Smith's work. The L.A. house, north of Sunset Boulevard in Holmby Hills, acquired its own history over the years; most recently it belonged to Rod Stewart. When the latest owners—a prominent producer/scriptwriter, his philanthropist wife, and their four school-age children—bought it, they set about removing the usual additions and changes that sneak up on an old house and compromise the purity of the original. After the restoration, however, the ball game abruptly changed. The property next door, belonging to Véronique Peck, widow of Gregory, became available. The couple bought it and increased their lot size to seven acres, giving them the space to add a properly scaled family wing to their own place and, just as important, reorient the expanded house to face grounds that could now be rightly considered an estate. The children gained the Pecks' tennis court and quirky log cabin in the deal.

In the garden room, a 19th-century Chinese lacquer screen is displayed against silvered wallpaper with hand-painted additions in gouache by Scott Waterman. Furnishings include a Moderne gilded console table with leather shelves by Richard Shapiro Studiolo, a zebra-print stool from Paul Marra Design, and a Parsons-style low table from Eccola.

As an expert on Smith, Appleton was the logical person to design the 1,500-square-foot addition. "My challenge was to pay homage to the original without being intrusive," he explains. "The tail couldn't wag the dog." He decided to position a new wing off the kitchen and service area of the residence, where a family room on the ground floor and bedrooms above would make good sense. The house now possesses a more powerful fourth façade, with stuccoed archways that recall Smith's loggias and overlook the new landscape.

A substantial part of the architect's commission was to extend the reach of the enhanced villa onto the former Peck property. Appleton laid out a symmetrical rose garden centered on a fountain off the new family wing, culminating in a long allée of twisting olive trees that establishes an axis into the green beyond. Geometry serves as a link between house and grounds. Finally, the architect took on a restoration of the original 1926 garden, including a spectacular water stair that hyphenates the upper and lower levels of the original lot.

Enter Windsor Smith (no relation), a Los Angeles interior designer who had done previous work for the family. She addressed the "sobriety and opulence" that still lingered in

Andy Warhol's *Flowers* and a 20th-century Italian chandelier from Bourgeois Bohème enliven the dining room, whose coffered ceiling was carefully restored. Brunschwig & Fils Vendôme strié silk velvet covers antique dining chairs. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: The kitchen, with its vaulted plaster ceiling and terra-cotta tile floors, now adjoins a new family room. The armchairs are upholstered in Rogers & Goffigon's Rondo linen; the Pagoda lanterns are by Michael S. Smith.

the house by turning the design dial toward levity and informality. "My role was to bring their contemporary lifestyle—and the contemporary art collection they've started—into the house," she says. After eliminating the heavy curtains and stained glass windows in the main rooms downstairs, she lightened and unified the colors throughout. "We chose a soft white that had a little age to it—the color of the petals of a peony," she says. "Then we applied a transparent topcoat over a chalky base so that as you walk through, the color blooms. The color seems to expand the space in the light. Without abrupt changes from room to room, the house started to come together."

The designer brought in potted plants and small trees to bridge indoors and out, and she animated the spaces with surprising juxtapositions. In the garden room, for instance, she mixed a pair of zebra-print neoclassical stools with a gilded Parsons-style cocktail table and a Chinese lacquer screen mounted over a plush sofa.

It all amounts to what Windsor Smith calls "de-decoration": editing the interiors to highlight the bones of an indisputably great house. Designer and architect have refreshed a classic, giving it purchase on the 21st century. □

Appleton replanted the original auto court and front entry with tightly pruned boxwood and other shrubs. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A silk carpet by Mansour Modern and custom-made bedding by Nancy Stanley Waud suit a quietly glamorous master bedroom. A newly created loggia, with Gothic dining chairs by McKinnon and Harris.