

The number of bathrooms in the White House

2,157

The amount of paint required to cover the exterior walls of the White House

\$444m

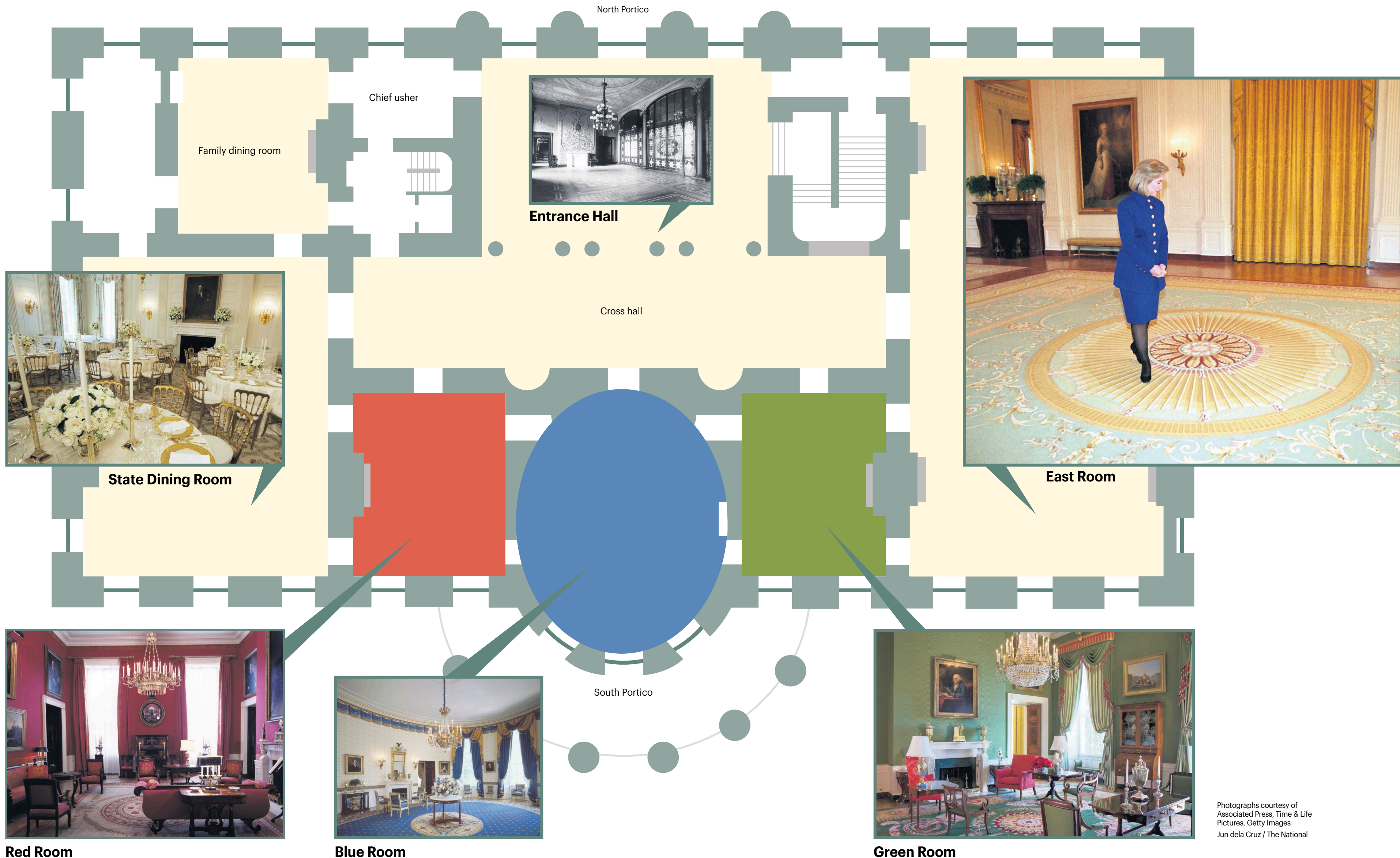
The estimated cost of Nancy Reagan's renovations in 1983

132

The number of rooms in the White House

# Fit for the First Family

As the Obamas prepare to move into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue next week, **Emily Davies** asks four leading interior designers what sort of look they would create for the White House



When five of America's past and future presidents gathered in the White House recently – as President Bush prepares to hand over the keys to Barack Obama – you wouldn't have thought furnishings would figure high on the agenda. But Bill Clinton was clearly heard telling George W how much he liked the rug his successor had chosen for the Oval Office.

How Obama might interpret this remains to be seen. Each new incumbent has reinvented the decor at least partly in their own image and the Obamas' instinctive and easy modern style, exemplified by the way they confidently mix high fashion with H&M for television appearances, seems certain to carry through to their way of living at home.

Regardless of taste, it's a historically fragile chalice, weighty with sensitivities that are only heightened in these financially delicate times: the Washington saying that on Capitol Hill no good deed goes unpunished seems to have long applied, too, to the presidential choice of curtains and candlesticks. (And there's also the in-house curator to consider, permanently stationed on the White House's ground floor.)

While millions never forgave Nancy Reagan for her spending in the White House during the early 1980s recession, Jimmy Carter was so focused on modesty that he underestimated the need for spirits to be lifted in tough periods: "At the same time, it is important to maintain the dignity of the office and national pride," points out the American interior designer, Celerie Kemble.

And, while the Kennedy White House under Jackie's discerning eye was criticised as "too European" instead of recognised for its sophistication, the Clintons' White House was deemed too reminiscent of Arkansas. Aine Mac Dermott, a UAE-based interior designer, winces as she recalls Theodore Roosevelt's decision to remove some Louis Comfort Tiffany screens during his renovations – failing to see them as the modern design classics they were. "He actually took the House back by about a century in design terms," she says.

The redecoration budget is \$100,000 (Dh367,000) and it's hard to imagine that the Obamas will be careless enough to exceed that. Which might be precisely their triumph. As Celerie Kemble says, "All Americans are going to have to do more with less in the coming months. In the go-go times of recent years, one could just spend a lot of money to buy sparkle and good looks, but now we are going to have to be more imaginative and resourceful. And that may not be such a bad thing."

Photographs courtesy of Associated Press, Time & Life Pictures, Getty Images Jun dela Cruz / The National

## Aine McDermott

Head of interior design at Aldar, UAE

I worry that the Obamas will hate living in the White House – being constantly watched and judged by the outside world – and on top of that they have to live in a monument. But it could just as easily be their triumph, and an amazing opportunity to bring change to such a historic building.

Michelle Obama clearly puts her daughters, Malia and Sasha, first – describing to *US Weekly* her desire for "lots of sleepovers" in her new home. So I would make the third floor solarium into a great homey centre, where Michelle, Barack and their girls can watch movies on big curl-up sofas. There should be a place here too for homework and art projects – a big coffee table would be great for that – and I imagine that Michelle will invite girlfriends here to chat and catch up and be normal. Both Obamas work out regularly so for Michelle, a gym on the third floor that looks like a high-end spa with timber floors and ambient lighting, with a treadmill and an elliptical machine for Barack. I'd also put in a Nintendo Wii Fit so the family can have fun working out together – and, of course, a basketball court since Barack loves the game so much.



Aine Mac Dermott has combined Asian references and warm neutral colours in her mood board for the Obamas. Aine McDermott

remind Barack of his childhood years in Asia. I would create a sleek kitchen and a casual family dining room to help Michelle keep things as normal as possible for her girls.

Customised wallpaper is great to personalise a home. For Michelle's office one-off designs can be made from the Obamas' own photographs of Hawaii or Kenya, while Malia and Sasha can get creative and choose their own imagery and create large-scale prints for their bedrooms.

Flowers will be Michelle's key to expressing her taste within the confines of a period building. She should

choose the most cutting-edge florists and insist on flowers that are grown and cultivated ethically.

The Obamas represent both change and current thinking, and the White House should reflect that.

The best way would be to introduce some contemporary furniture – American, of course. I would add pieces from Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, Frank Gehry, George Nelson and Eero Saarinen. Looking at what's in the White House now, you would think that the 20th century was a period void of design – when in fact it was one of the most epic.

## Anouska Hempel

Interior designer, UK

These are difficult times and any redecoration of the White House must take account of that. I feel that there is one overarching look that will suit the Obama's White House perfectly, and it's not traditionally associated with austerity: the Art Deco of the 1920s.

The time is right for a return to the muted and monochromatic tones and textures of that period – the steel-against-soft trend, with heaps of chrome and black against gentle oyster and silver shades. Think of Ertel! It's an incredibly, deliberately modern look and reminds us of a period that was fascinating for America. It's contemporary but classic and will act as a perfect backdrop to the Obamas' modern appeal (though he's so good-looking he would look great anywhere!).

I think everyone is ready for an uplifting change, whether that's in politics or design or how we live our everyday lives, and I'd want to make sure this is echoed in the White House. The Obamas appear to reflect a certain kind of modest luxury, and it's that kind of luxury that I would convey through the Deco style without having anything even close to extravagance. Extravagance is definitely a no-go.

In interior design it's vital to take a theme for the whole property and stick to it, whatever your project. For me, in the Obamas' White House, this would mean continuing the Deco



Anouska Hempel's mood board for the White House draws on the textures and tones of Art Deco. Anouska Hempel Design

theme throughout, with this sense of luxury and modesty, simply adjusting it according to the room. For instance, the bedrooms of the daughters, Sasha and Malia, could have cosy little bunkbeds and fun musical instruments on display; just because they're children's rooms doesn't mean they have to be dramatically different.

The central entertaining space would feature lots of chandeliers and perhaps a splash of colour among the checkerboard effect of all the monochrome, to keep a sense of the jolliness that I feel the Obamas have – a certain lightness and capacity for fun.

I'm also thinking of Ralph Lauren's signature "legacy" style – heavy silver photo frames atop a grand piano in a library for instance – a very American, comfortable style yet also possessing a sense of history. It's imperative that the White House feels American.

I would scatter his entertaining rooms with things that are meaningful to Barack, conjuring up memories from different points in his life, whether that's in sport, music or politics. They would create wonderful talking points, reflecting all the various communities that he has been part of – everything that makes him, him.

## Celerie Kemble

Interior designer and co-author of *Celerie Kemble: To Your Taste*, US

The White House is both a working home and a grand and dignified building that represents American diplomacy, hospitality, and taste. To modernise this great building is to put the character and concerns of our times (safety, efficiency, and environmental conservation) and the First Family's personal imprint upon it without losing its grace or connection to history.

Many sensitivities must be taken into account. Given the current economic crisis, the Obamas cannot be seen squandering money on grand design statements. Luckily, their natural style seems to fit the times perfectly. They are chic but never ostentatious, and choose good manners and graciousness over stuffy formality. This attitude and style should translate into their new home with a more casual, more "livable" style. I'd like to expand the family-room concept and see a few of the formal sitting rooms used for legitimate workspace, more casual and truly dialogue-inducing entertaining, or family use.

My designing style has very traditional bones with flashes of modern fashion and whimsy but always caters to the priorities of comfort, livability, and the infusion of the owner's personal sentiment and character.

I would design both the public and



Celerie Kemble would take this scheme as inspiration for the Obamas. Zach Desart for Celerie Kemble: To Your Taste (Clarkson Potter)

private spaces of the White House with the objective of creating intimate and engaging rooms rather than museums. The awe-inspiring architectural bones of the house, and its collections of important historic furniture and art I take as a lucky pre-existing certainty. From that point I would edit out some of the formal portraiture and stuffy uncomfortable furniture, and add warmth with more upholstered pieces and some more contemporary and larger-scale American art. I'd roll up some of the heavy and fussy rugs and either show off the beautiful wood floors or add more casual sisals and

jutes, and add punches of strong colour – being careful to avoid red, gold-yellow and blue, all of which seem rather overused in diplomatic spaces. I would swap silks for linens, larger patterns for fussy little ones, and simplify many of the curtains. I'd also add plants – trees and potted plants would truly add life to those great rooms.

The Obamas' daughters are of the age where it's difficult to change homes and I would do anything to help them enjoy their new house – I'd let them guide me to what delights them and really give them freedom to decorate their own rooms.

## Andre Fu

Founder of the award-winning architecture and design studio AFSO, Hong Kong

My core desire is to create spaces that are both sensuous and unique – and that is what I have become best known for. For me, the emotional connection between a space and the people who use it is paramount to the function, as well as the aesthetic of everything I design.

One element that I would seek to include in the Obamas' White House would be a dining room inspired by the cult bar and restaurant, Le Fumoir, in Paris – that is very atmospheric and timeless. The concept would be a dining room within a library setting. I believe that with the abundance of literature available in the White House, there would be a unique opportunity to offer such a one-of-a-kind dining experience: the library would be a fully functioning one but would do double duty by providing a backdrop to dining. It would be a great conversation piece and all of those books would create a feeling of warmth and intimacy, as well as reflecting the White House's cultural and intellectual legacy.

While maintaining the essence of the White House's heritage, yet also expressing the sense of a modern White House – and all that means – I think it is important to promote a sense of optimism. One key way



Andre Fu would incorporate the uplifting colour scheme of Silapa Thai into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Michael Weber / Afso Designs

of doing that would be through the colours used. I would use tones that are elegant yet positive and uplifting – for instance, I would like to draw from the colour palette that we used at Silapa Thai Lounge and Bar, a project we recently completed at the Shangri-La Hotel in Chiang Mai. Here, splashes of burnt orange and turquoise are introduced, against a backdrop of brown tones that range from caramel and tobacco to chocolate. The overall effect is relaxed and comfortably chic yet sophisticated, which I think would reflect the Obamas' personal style, as well as

being fitting for the White House. I'd want to keep a continuing sense of place with a new degree of intimacy in the Obamas' White House so that each room keeps its own identity within a coherent whole – and I would combine that with a dash of the international appeal that has become part of their signature. An example of what I mean by this is the Azure restaurant and lounge in Hong Kong, where each salon and connecting space is governed by a base palette of chocolate lacquer and limestone, yet each individual suite is given its own texture and mood.