

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The home that belonged to the 38th US President and First Lady, Gerald and Betty Ford, retains many of its original fixtures, and the current owners wouldn't have it any other way.

BY TIFFANY BAKKER PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANSON SMART



THIS PAGE: in the DEN, vintage sofa by Joe D'Urso covered in Rogers & Goffigon fabric; vintage swivel chair by Jay Spectre covered in fabric from Scalamandré; upholstery by Ian Tyson/Ty-teck; vintage Brueton side table; custom coffee table by Darren Brown; candelabra by Alfredo Barbini; vintage Phoenix Day lights; curtain fabric from Scalamandré; rug from Beauvais Carpets; photograph by Gregory Crewdson. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the OUTDOOR AREA, chaise lounges covered in original fabric and plant pots from Restoration Hardware; Tuuci umbrellas; landscaping by Marcello Villano Garden Design. Details, last pages.





John McIlwee and his husband, Bill Damaschke, would never have dreamed of buying a weekend house in Rancho Mirage when they first visited the quiet California desert city in 2010. “I just thought it would be too stuffy and straight,” says McIlwee. “It was too far east, and all of our friends were in Palm Springs. We just weren’t interested.”

Then in 2012, the couple — both Los Angeles-based entertainment executives — were advised by a broker friend that the estate of former US President and First Lady Gerald and Betty Ford was on the market. They decided it couldn’t hurt to look — just once.

Once was clearly enough. The 650-square-metre, seven-bedroom home — designed in 1977 by architect Welton Becket, the man behind such LA landmarks as the Capitol Records Building and the Beverly Hilton Hotel — had remained largely untouched for close to 35 years. “We looked through and we were like, ‘Wow, it’s all original!’” remembers McIlwee. “Other people were scowling like, ‘Ugh, it’s all original.’”

The Fords had moved from Washington, DC, to Rancho Mirage following Gerald’s 1976 election defeat to Jimmy Carter, and remained there until their deaths, in 2006 and 2011 respectively. The heirs to the estate took a liking to McIlwee and Damaschke and decided to sell their parents’ retirement dream home with much of its original furnishings and decor intact. The couple had some pertinent decisions to make regarding what to keep, what to get rid of and what to repurpose. They were also keenly aware that they were inheriting a significant part of American history. (Among the home’s more distinctive artefacts was a phone featuring the presidential seal and a red panic button in Gerald’s toilet.)

“If something is original you should absolutely try and keep it, and the spirit of it — that’s paramount,” McIlwee insists. “But we also wanted the home to be cohesive and modern.”

To juggle the balance between old and new, the couple called in the architectural firm Marmol Radziner and San Francisco-based designer Darren Brown, both of whom had worked on their primary Los Angeles residence, the John Lautner-designed Garcia House. “It was very dated, so it was pretty obvious what should go,” recalls Brown, who worked on the home for three years. Old leather chairs and sofas that had seen better days were shown the door, and the

kitchen and bathrooms had to be completely redone. A kitchen wall that had originally separated the staff quarters from the cooking area was removed to open up the space, and floor-to-ceiling windows installed to look out over the pool. “We like to hang out in the kitchen,” says McIlwee. “Bill likes to cook; I’m on cocktail duty, so it was very important we had a kitchen that suited us and our lifestyle.”

For the design direction, the couple and Brown decided on ’80s flash. “This is not your mid-century modern,” Brown notes. “We wanted to have a little more fun with it.” Some original gems were perfectly suited for era-appropriate repurposing. The grid ceiling

light in the main bedroom is made from the lightbulbs framing Betty’s original bathroom vanity. The Fords’ living room sofa was reshaped and reupholstered with grisaille fabric. The drapes in the living room now provide the bedspread and headboard fabric in one of the four guest bedrooms, and the old dining room curtains adorn its windows.

One room the couple decided to leave exactly as they found it is the lime-green dining room, complete with its original lattice-patterned chairs, dining table and leafy wall mural hand-painted by American artist Garth Benton. “People get a real thrill out of it,” says McIlwee. “They think, ‘Wow, this is just as it was when Gerald and Betty sat down to dinner.’”

But it’s the two-metre high portrait of Betty Ford, with her trademark bouffant, hanging in the home’s entry that truly steals the show. “We made the determination, you know, it’s Gerald and Betty Ford’s house, put it in the front, you see it, get it out of the way and let’s move on,” says McIlwee.

Providing an element of balance are contemporary pieces such as a Paul Evans table, Jay Spectre chairs, a Joe D’Urso sofa and a number of pieces custom-designed by Brown. Some of the couple’s

impressive contemporary art collection, featuring works by Annie Leibovitz, Catherine Opie, Patrick Nagel, Gregory Crewdson, Jan-Ole Schiemann and Kirsten Everberg, is also on display.

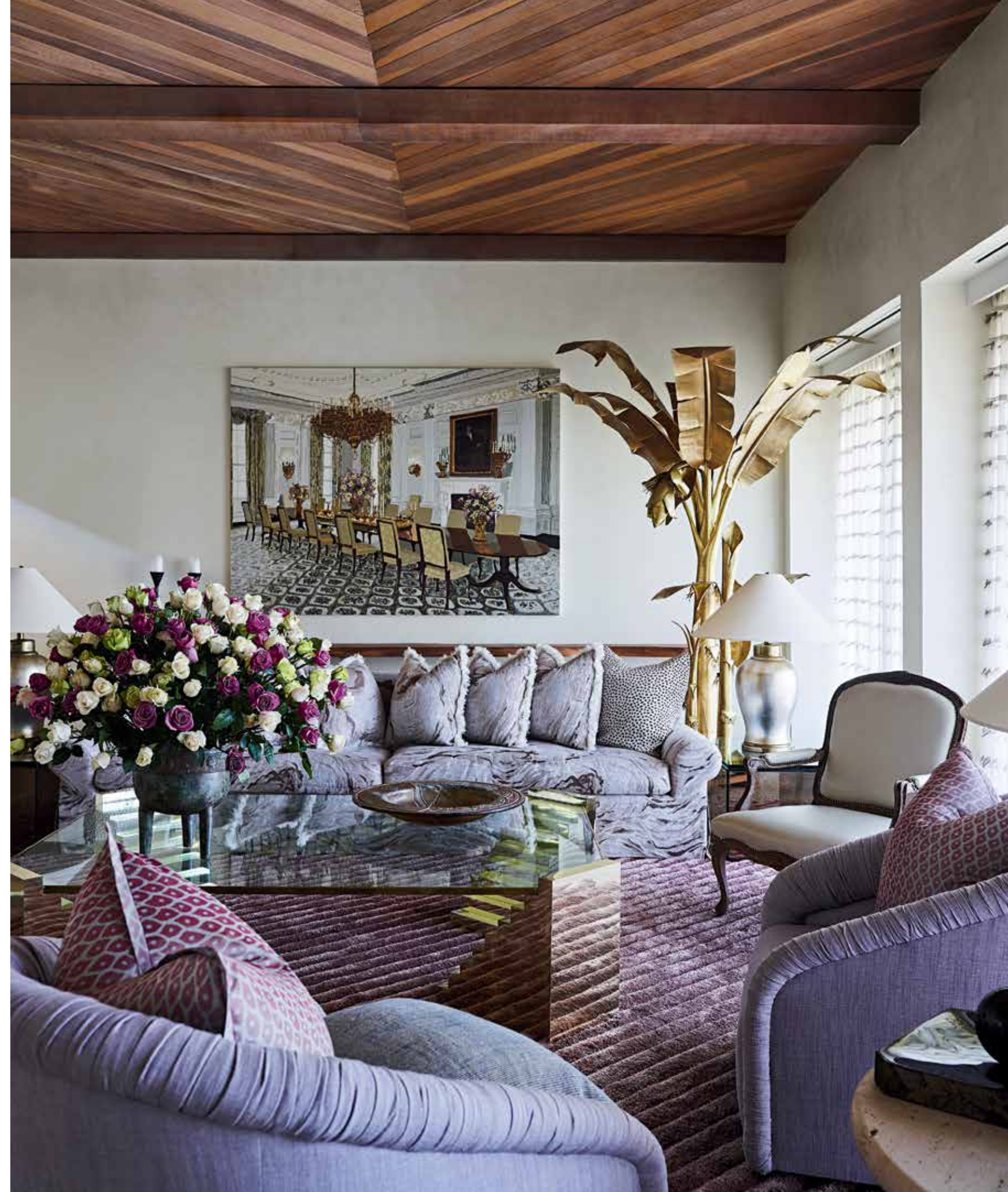
McIlwee describes the residence as “a good cocktail house”, and the couple often host weekend guests. “For us, this is always going to be the Ford estate, but I don’t want people to come and think it’s some weird time capsule,” says McIlwee. “I want family and friends to feel like this is a place they can get up in the morning and jump in the pool. I want people to relax here.” *VL*

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THIS PAGE: in the ENTRY FOYER, owner John McIlwee (left) in a Tom Ford caftan with the home’s interior designer Darren Brown in a Naeem Khan caftan; Betty Ford portrait (1974) by John Ulbricht. OPPOSITE PAGE: in another view of the entry foyer, vintage Marge Carson chair; table by Paul Evans; custom mirror by Darren Brown; vintage Blenko glass vase; 18th-century Chinese antique bowl; rug from Beauvais Carpets; sculptures by Bill Anson.

THIS PAGE: in the GUEST ROOM, 3 Robert Scott armchair and ottoman covered with fabric from Brunschwig & Fils; original bedside lamp; beadboard and bedspread fabric repurposed from original living room drapes; curtain fabric repurposed from original dining room drapes; carpet from Stark. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the LIVING ROOM, custom chairs (in foreground) by Darren Brown covered in Rogers & Goffigon fabric; original sofa covered in fabric from Le Crin; vintage coffee table by Steve Chase; Chinese bronze 19th-century antique vase and 1980s glass platter; French chair, c. 1850, covered in Edelman leather; custom side tables by Darren Brown; table lamps by Karl Springer; Maison Charles et Fils brass palm tree; curtain fabric from Le Crin; Edward Fields Ballet rug from the Legacy Edition (collaboration with Darren Brown); painting of the White House State Dining Room by Kirsten Everberg.





THIS PAGE: in the MAIN BEDROOM, custom headboard and side tables by Darren Brown; vintage table lamps by Steve Chase; bedspread fabric from Brunswick & Fils; Chinese chair by Michael Taylor Collections; curtain fabric from Larsen; ceiling light made from bulbs in Betty Ford's original vanity; carpet from Stark.
OPPOSITE PAGE: in the DINING ROOM, original dining set; Maison Jansen swans; original console by decorator Laura Mako; 19th-century Chinese antique pots; chandelier, c. 1900, from Maison Baguès; original rug by decorator Laura Mako; original custom mural (1977) by Garib Benton. Details, last pages.