

# Design Re-Districting!

| By Charlotte Safavi | Photography by Powers and Crewe |

Long a bastion of chintz and federalism, the Beltway is hiping-up to the Obama aesthetic. Meet an elite crew—a decorator sexing up our city, a dealer with Brad Pitt on speed dial, and an architectural designer inheriting the mantle—all rocketing DC into the future.

## Ondine Karady

For politicians and the press corps, DC is the world's center stage. Especially now, in the Age of Obama. But for interior designers? Not so much, which makes interiors-authority Ondine Karady, 39, an interesting case. Her very presence in the District is a result of media, politics and the silver screen. She arrives by way of Los Angeles and Manhattan to sex up our city and launch a reality show that will track her efforts to swap chic solutions in place of Washington's trademark staid interior style.

You may have seen her before. Karady was a finalist on Bravo's *Top Design: Season Two*. But that was hardly her first stroll under the stage lights. An insatiable movie buff, she devoured film classes at Columbia University while studying at Barnard College. She grew obsessed with stage sets—and real life played a part. “Mom was an architect. Dad was a scientist and woodworker. They redid our suburban house in New Jersey when I was little,” she says.

After graduating, Karady leaped into a career as a set decorator, working in Hollywood and New York. “Design and film were the perfect meld for my interests,” says Karady. “I worked my way up from low-budget indie movies to high- CONTINUED...



COLOR CODE Bold designer Ondine Karady kicks back in Arne Jacobsen's Egg Chair at her Logan Circle condo.



HOW FLY! Bringing a bit of Hitchcock to her DC den, Karady mixes bold graphics, such as Cavern Home's Blackbird wallpaper, with quirky touches, like the vintage lamp she found when her favorite restaurant went out of business.

"The photo in the dining room was taken by my sister," says Karady. "When I design, I think it's important to have things that mean something to you personally. They make your house warmer."



There is nothing in Karady's 13th Street condo she doesn't love, even if others don't. "I bought the pig paintings for the movie *25th Hour*, but Spike Lee hated them. So I kept them myself." She picked up the taxidermy bird on a whirlwind junking trip through the South, but the West Coast girl lives for surfing and keeps her board close by for inspiration—and storage.



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...CONTINUED budget TV commercials and shows.” Her screen career peaked in *Sex in the City*, where Karady worked with a small group of set decorators. Their most memorable sets include Mikhail Baryshnikov’s urbane, masculine loft and Candice Bergman’s understatedly chic apartment. These spaces are as imprinted on fans’ minds as Sarah Jessica Parker’s Manolo Blahniks. “The show took design to the next level,” says Karady, who worked on the production through seasons four, five and six. “Everything was really high-end,” she says.

Her intense experience on the *Sex in the City* set was like a Ph.D.-level crash course in style. Along the way, Karady fine-tuned her decorating skills, stockpiled a wealth of information and developed her aesthetic. “I have an incredible knowledge of furniture, furnishing stores and products,” she says. “After 15 years, I can walk into a room and tell where everything was bought, down to who made the fabric for the curtains.”

Ultimately, Karady decided to move onto what she calls “real” decorating. In 2004, she set up a boutique interior design firm in Soho. “In set design, you do a room in great detail and give it a lot of thought; some of it gets shot, and some of it doesn’t. Then you dismantle it. The end result is unsatisfying,” says Karady. “On the other hand, it’s so satisfying when you design for real, for someone to enjoy, perhaps for the rest of their lives.” In addition to decorating, she creates a line of custom furnishings, such as silk-screened wallpaper and one-of-a-kind furniture. Her signature style is eclectic. “I like to mix periods and layer in textures and patterns,” she says.

Lately Karady has been spending more time in DC. She bought a place in Logan Circle with her husband, Jim Rutenberg, a *New York Times* White House correspondent. She now works locally on the homes of Dana Milbank of *The Washington Post* and Nina Easton, a journalist and commentator on Fox News. A career high came when Karady was asked to submit her design book to Michelle Obama. The prospect of redesigning the first family’s living quarters would have been daunting to many, but Karady took the challenge in stride, even as she dreamed of adding some Manhattan edge to the Oval Office. “It was such an honor,” says Karady. “I didn’t get the job, but it was great to even be considered. I got a sense of affirmation that I’m doing the right thing with my life.”

Now seems to be the right time for Karady to bring a hipper aesthetic edge to the Beltway. “DC has so much potential designwise,” she says. “With President Obama in office, there’s a feeling of change in the city. People want to be younger and fresher. I sense an opening. There’s a lot of very traditional design and architecture here. I walk into homes and it’s chintz all over the place. In a classic room, for example, with traditional wingback chairs, all you have to do is reupholster them in a fresh fabric and it’s a whole new thing.”

So perhaps Karady—who divides her time between DC and New York City—is not yet over her fascination with Hollywood glam. We’ll find out soon enough if her latest project, a reality show she’s dubbed *Design DC*, gets picked up by a style-savvy network like Bravo or HGTV. In the meantime, she’s busy growing her Beltway business, one client at a time. Whether they’re presidents, pundits or just chic locals, all get the chance to shine under Karady’s stylish eye.

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Clockwise from top: Karady transformed her loft at the Brooklyn Sweater Factory with inset medical cabinets she used in the *25th Hour*. “Either your speakers have to go away or do something interesting,” she says of her Scandyna sound system. Like her home designs, the entryway to Karady’s Brooklyn apartment is a blend of periods, styles and textures.

“Because of my background as a set decorator,” says Karady, “I’ve worked in many different styles, which I enjoy. I can successfully do anything from super-clean Modern, to eclectic Bohemian contemporary, to funky traditional.”



BROOKLYN INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY // JENNIFER KARADY



CAPRICE CLASSICS Karady's New York expanse is dotted with Modernist icons like Saarinen's Tulip table and chairs, as well as found objects, both special and quirky. "When designing the space, I was going through a bright color phase," says Karady. "That space needs pops of color to make it feel happy. Now I'm into more muted jewel tones."