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HOMES

They Sold Their Company for \$500 Million, Then Went Real-Estate Shopping

The founders of Big Ass Fans have purchased property belonging to prominent names like Malcolm Forbes and Lance Armstrong. But finding homes that fit the bill was anything but a breeze

By Katherine Clarke

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Carey and Nancy Smith toured 41 New York City homes before finally agreeing this spring to pay almost \$20 million for a Greenwich Village townhouse once owned by Malcolm Forbes. Their real-estate agent kept count.

Their search took them to houses and glitzy condos on the Upper East Side, Upper West Side, Tribeca, Midtown and beyond—and into the homes of big-name sellers like Jennifer Lopez and the late Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead. Frequently, they were underwhelmed by what was available.

“You figure you can get whatever you want if it doesn’t matter the amount of money. You expect nice finishes,” Mr. Smith said. “No frickin’ way. Nasty stuff.”

The Smiths, a quick-witted and plain-spoken couple who spent the last two decades in Kentucky, where they originally moved in 1991 for Mrs. Smith’s career, are rethinking their lives following the \$500 million sale of their ventilation company, Big Ass Fans, to

the private-equity firm Lindsay Goldberg in 2017. It was the kind of cash infusion they'd

never expected.

Suddenly, they

were setting up a

family investment

office, dealing with

reams of paperwork and managing a national real-estate portfolio that comprised homes in Kentucky, Texas and New York.

“Every time we went to the architect and the builder, we'd say ‘Thank God for fans!’” Mr. Smith said.

The Smiths, who launched the company in 1999, are well accustomed to answering the obvious question. The Big Ass moniker evolved over time, said Mr. Smith, 67. The ventilation company, which produces fans for residential, commercial and heavy-duty industrial use, some priced (before the company sold) as high as \$10,000, was originally known as the High Volume Low Speed Fan Company. But “people would call and say ‘Are you those guys who make those big ass fans?’” Mr. Smith remembered. After they renamed the company, critics called Mr. Smith to say he was going to hell and that he was contributing to a general coarsening of American culture, he said. “Preachers and ding dongs,” he dubbed them.



A living area of the Smiths' new Greenwich Village townhouse in Manhattan. PHOTO: KELLY MARSHALL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mrs. Smith, 63, is on board for the silliness. “We used to say to people who thought it was more scatological than descriptive that, first of all, they needed to get a life,” she said.



A bedroom in the Smiths' Greenwich Village townhouse. PHOTO: EVAN JOSEPH

The Smiths met in college in Illinois. She was at Northwestern and he was at the University of Chicago studying graduate

economics. They have an adult son, who works for Mr. Smith's new venture capital and consulting firm, Unorthodox Ventures. Mr. Smith is originally from California but moved around a lot. She grew up mostly in Washington, D.C., and San Antonio, Texas. Newly flush with cash, they now envision splitting their time between their townhouse in New York and a new Spanish Colonial-style home they recently bought from the cyclist Lance Armstrong in Austin, Texas, for nearly \$7 million. The Texas home will be their primary residence for tax purposes, and so Mr. Smith can be near his VC firm, which is based there.

Making that dream a reality has been harder than the Smiths thought. House-hunting, renovations and repairs have all been a headache, not to mention selling their longtime home in Kentucky.

But for Mrs. Smith, owning a property in New York City, where both her parents grew up, was a long-held dream.



A rendering of the planned two-floor living and dining space in the Smiths' new Austin home. ILLUSTRATION: CHARLES DI PIAZZA ARCHITECTURE

“One of the things that was funny about looking around properties in New York is that you go in and you go ‘wait, this is J-Lo’s apartment!’” said Mrs. Smith, though the couple weren’t fans of the unit, which Ms. Lopez shared with her fiancé, former Yankee

slugger Alex Rodriguez. “It wasn’t so much that she had photos of her and her family prominently displayed, but on every flat surface there was the magazine Cigar Aficionado with A-Rod on the cover.”

At Mr. Whitehead’s home on Sutton Place on Manhattan’s East Side, the décor was dated and looked like “your grandmother’s place,” Mr. Smith said.

“It was like ‘The ‘90s called and they want their house back,’” Mrs. Smith said.



The bedroom of the Smiths’ Lexington, Ky., home. It features a gold-plated Big Ass Fan. PHOTO: MATT HUBER / MATT MEDIAWORKS



The exterior of the Smiths’ Lexington, Ky., home. PHOTO: MATT HUBER / MATT MEDIAWORKS

One \$67 million townhouse has wood cabinets they could have bought at Lowe’s, they said. One particularly memorable townhouse has an enormous

swimming pool in the living room with a swing. “We felt like we had to take a shower

MR. AND MRS. SMITH SAY...

Carey and Nancy Smith have exacting taste. Here are their thoughts on some of the homes they saw along the way:



Jennifer Lopez's apartment PHOTO: EVAN JOSEPH

Jennifer Lopez's Apartment

Listed at \$24.99 million

The Whitman Condominium, New York

4 bedroom, 6,540 square feet

LOVED: The outdoor terrace

DID NOT LOVE: "The bedrooms weren't nice." Mrs. Smith said.

John Whitehead's Townhouse

Listed at \$14.95 million (Sold to other buyers for \$13 million)

Sutton Square, New York

5 bedrooms, 4,440 square feet

LOVED: A dramatic curving staircase with a large picture window; Mr. Whitehead's extensive art collection; Mr. Whitehead's second wife, Cynthia Whitehead, who was the listing agent. "She was funny as hell," he said.

DID NOT LOVE: The décor

Lance Armstrong's House

Listed at \$7.5 million (Sold for \$7 million)

Windsor Road, Austin, Texas

6 bedrooms, 8,000 square feet

LOVED: The pool area, below a live oak tree

DID NOT LOVE: The chopped-up spaces, staircases between rooms

Malcolm Forbes's Townhouse

Listed at \$28.5 million (Sold for \$20 million)

West 12th Street, New York

5 bedrooms, 9,000 square feet

LOVED: Proximity to Mr. Smith's favorite bagel joint, "Bagel Bobs."

DID NOT LOVE: The furniture

after leaving that place," Mr. Smith said.

Eventually, they settled on the former Forbes townhouse because it ticked most of their boxes; it had a Greenwich Village location and outdoor space. The 1847 Greek Revival house, which spans about 9,000 square feet, had been owned for decades by the family of Malcolm Forbes, the late chairman and editor in chief of Forbes magazine. The family sold it in 2012, and it came on the market in April 2018 listed at \$28.5 million.

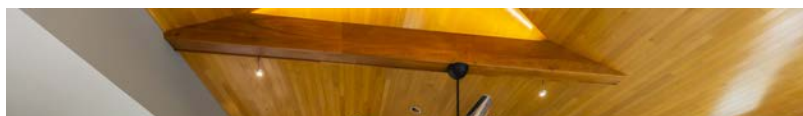
In Austin, the Smiths found the ultrahot market almost impossible to navigate. Properties would hit the market one day and be sold the next. The home they bought required a lot of work, they said. They initially thought they'd rent a condo during renovations but they eventually shelled out \$2.71 million for a temporary home in the Pemberton Heights neighborhood.

They've also had trouble trying to sell their longtime home in Lexington, Ky., which has an asking price of close to \$2 million. Before they sold the company, the Smiths thought it would be their "forever home." They'd customized it to their personal tastes, which aren't the typical Lexington look. The three-bedroom, Japanese-style home has open-plan living spaces, stone walls, and maple and bamboo floors.

"Lexington is very traditional," Mrs. Smith said. "It's all Chippendale furniture and white columns and intricate moldings. That's not what this is."

Of course, almost every room in the house has its own fan, with the pièce de résistance being a gold-plated fan in the master suite. Mr. Smith said he commissioned it, in part, because he thought "it might be interesting to Middle Easterners or Saudis or something."

The original home was built in 2003 and then expanded and renovated around 2016 at a cost of around \$800,000. It's been on the market for almost a year and the price has



The living room of the Smiths' Lexington, Ky., home. It is listed for almost \$2 million. PHOTO: MATT HUBER / MATT MEDIAWORKS

been slashed from \$2.999 million to \$1.949 million.

Mrs. Smith has been living in Kentucky to sell the house, while Mr. Smith resides mostly in Austin these days to oversee the renovation of their new place. "It's hard and we don't get to see each other that much," Mrs. Smith said. "We saw each other in February and then in April and then not again until July." While that might be weird for some couples, it is relatively normal for the Smiths, who spent only seven of their first 15 years of marriage living in the same place.

'It was like 'The '90s called and they want their house back.'

—Nancy Smith

When Mr. Smith first toured their new Austin home, he wasn't particularly impressed.

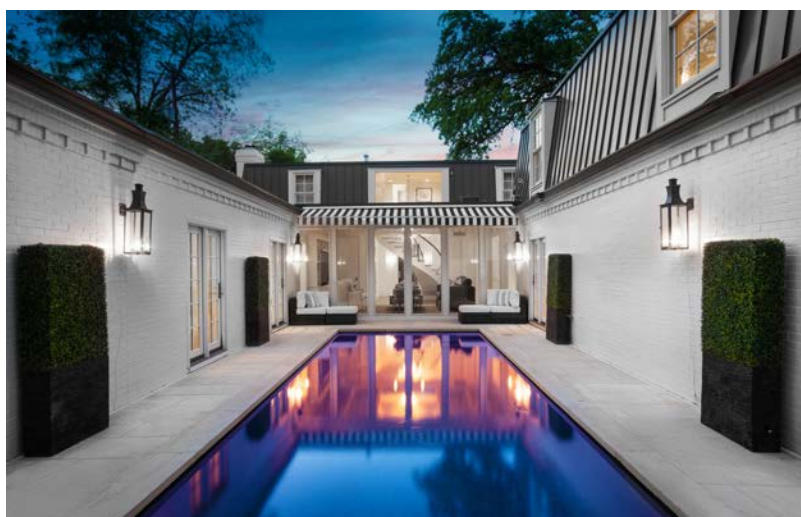
The 1920s-era Mediterranean-style home, located in the historic Old Enfield neighborhood and once owned by Ben Barnes, the lieutenant governor of Texas, was carved up into tight spaces and had small sets of stairs separating the living areas, he said. An extension that had been added by a previous owner cut out some natural light and made the interiors look gloomy, he said.

The couple have tapped a local architect, Charles Di Piazza, to spearhead a \$2 million to \$3 million redo, opening up the ground floor into one sprawling two-story living room and combining the bedrooms for better proportions. They estimate that the process could take about two years.

Initially, they didn't realize the property had belonged to Mr. Armstrong. "In the pool house cabana, there were all these yellow jerseys framed and Carey said, 'Boy, someone must really like the Tour de France,'" Mrs. Smith laughed. "Then he realized they all said Armstrong on the back."

Mr. Armstrong's maintenance of the property wasn't quite up to the Smiths' standards, either. "We called him 'Low Maintenance Lance' because he didn't do much with it, God bless his heart," Mrs. Smith laughed. A representative for Mr. Armstrong said he did about \$1.5 million in renovations to the home.

In New York, the couple plans to replace a lot of the décor. They just bought the



The Smiths purchased this Pemberton Heights home for \$2.71 million to have somewhere to live while they renovate their Austin home. PHOTO: BRIAN COLE PHOTOGRAPHY



The office of the Smiths' temporary home. PHOTO: BRIAN COLE PHOTOGRAPHY

furniture from the previous owners, Mrs. Smith said, so they would have “a place to sit.”

While the New York house has central air, Mr. Smith said he still plans to bring in fans.

“You always need fans,” he said.

Write to Katherine

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