A SPLASHY MAKEOVER

For this El Cid show house, designers let their fancies run free.
By Barbara Marshall
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When the local Red Cross chapter last year pulled the plug on its designer show house after 40 years, it opened a vacancy in the world of wishful thinking and aspirational home envy.

Into the breach stepped the 44-year-old Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club Decorator Show House, a New York City institution since 1973.

The day after Thanksgiving, the organization opened its first designer show house outside New York in a historic home in West Palm Beach’s El Cid neighborhood.

“We have been looking for a way to expand,” said Nazira Handal, director of special events for Kips Bay. “We knew there was a void down here to be filled. This seemed a great opportunity to expand the brand.”

Seventeen designers, nine with offices in Palm Beach County and the rest from New York, Atlanta and Chicago, have spent weeks at Villa Belmonte, a 1925 Mediterranean Revival home owned by the Donnelly family of Palm Beach.

The house is secluded behind lush foliage on an El Cid lake block, between Flagler Drive and Olive Avenue. With loggias, courtyards, balconies and a red tile roof, the home has many of the earmarks of Med Rev architecture. Several additions have given the home a meandering floor plan, which adds to its eccentric charm.

While the design theme is loosely tropical, designers have interpreted it in more than a dozen ways.

There’s the on-the-nose, trellis in the “Orchid House” dining room, a restrained lilac and pale pink homage to 1970s’ Palm Beach in the family room, and a string room’s fresh take on the mid-century barefoot chic era, in tart yellow, sharpened

Makeover continued on E2

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Makeover
continued from E1

with pop art.

There are also a few designer fashions of fancy, including a hot pink second floor dog den and a sculptural black toilet with ambient lighting and a heated seat that opens automatically when someone enters the room.

While most of the furnishings will return to retailers and designers’ warehouses, the home owners will keep a sleek new kitchen.

If Kips Bay becomes a regular event on the area’s social calendar, it will introduce a rotating crop of new designers to the deep-pocketed, style-conscious Palm Beach crowd.

While the Red Cross Show House had a reliable stable of mostly local designers who contributed year after year, Kips Bay allows designers from around the country to apply only once every three years.

Handal said the show house has been so popular, with better-than-expected attendance, that the organization would like to return next year, provided someone volunteers a suitable house for designers to transform.

Proceeds will go to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Palm Beach County and Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club in New York City, which together serve about 18,000 children.

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