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FLOWERS BY BOTANICALS INC., CHICAGO

THIS OLD (NEW) HOUSE

A venerable Chicago venue gets an image update

MODERNIZING A HISTORICAL EVENT venue often isn't about altering property, merely perception. Marta Michulka, who manages the 19th-century Dewes Mansion in Chicago, had this in mind when she called on cutting-edge floral designer Casey Cooper, president of Chicago-based Botanicals, to help spice up the site's image. "We really wanted to expand people's mind-set about the mansion," says Cooper, who worked with Chicago caterer Food for Thought to showcase the venue's possibilities at an April open house.

The goal, Cooper says, was not to mask the multi-level mansion's age, but to cast its regal interior in a different light.

To build on the site's history, she used many "seasonal, local flowers that would have been available in the late 1800s for the lady of the house to go out and cut." These went into contemporary arrangements that drew attention to the mansion's period features. Highlights included a row of stark pussy willows soaring up from a bed of Queen Anne's lace on a drawing room mantle, and a

hallway "gallery" of elaborate gilt frames containing avant-garde floral artworks.

Perhaps the most stimulating mix of past with progressive was a series of upstairs "boudoirs" where performers in period costume hand-fed guests haute cuisine in bed. "We wanted it to be sexy, kind of risky," Cooper says.

Just as important to the \$54,000 event's success as design and food, according to Cooper, was a fresh take on the idea of "open house." The gathering, she says, was "small and exclusive — a very specific working event." A carefully compiled guest list of 225 corporate event planners, wedding planners, DMCs and Chicago socialites ensured "a really targeted group of individuals who would be in a position to bring repeat business to the Dewes mansion." Also, designated press tables allowed guests to interact with invited media, both enhancing the prestige of the event and guaranteeing a good scoop.

The careful planning worked, Michulka says. "A lot of people were totally blown away not just by the physical setup of the house, but the entire concept," she says. "It was tremendous exposure." ■