

BIZBASH New York

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Common Threads

Diffa's shrinking Dining by Design benefit piggybacked with Architectural Digest's huge show to gain a wider audience, boost fund-raising, and broaden awareness. And it still served as a treasure trove of event design ideas.

On Monday night, Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (Diffa) hosted its annual Dining by Design gala at Pier 94—the culmination of five days of events based around tables created by artists and interior, event, and fashion designers. This year, the organization was approached by *Architectural Digest* to be a part of its home design expo, affording showgoers a chance to also check out Diffa's installations. "I think running concurrently with the *Architectural Digest* Home Design Show is an incredible experience in every way. People who are coming to the show are interested in design, but might not have known about us," said Peggy Bellar, Diffa's director of special events.



This time the number of tables dipped from 39 to 32, but pairing with *Architectural Digest* and lengthening the public viewing time to three days helped double foot traffic. "Certainly, this year is a tough year for everyone, and it is great to join forces and

expand opportunities for exposure," Bellar said. Diffa estimates the amount of money raised, however, dropped from \$1.031 million to \$750,000.



Bellar worked with Steven Williams, Diffa's director of community relations and operations, and special events associate Julia Dexter to organize the spate of events, which included public viewing days, a cocktail party, and a gala dinner. Sectioned off from the home show, Diffa's installations were on view Thursday through Saturday, with combined ticket packages offered at the door: Visitors could opt to pay \$30 to go to both the expo and the Dining by Design displays (the price of a home show ticket alone was \$25). An opening cocktail party on Thursday drew 700. On Sunday, the Table Hop and Taste party for 1,200 included light food offerings from local restaurants for \$50 (\$60 with access to the home show); eateries including Estiatoria Milos, Illi, and Tribeca Grill served food. Finally, Monday's gala dinner drew more than 350 table designers, sponsors, and other design industry folks to dine at the actual tables.



Bellar pointed out that because the event is so design-focused, it's easy to forget that it's a fund-raiser for an AIDS charity. This go-round, a larger number of installations

emphasized the message behind the organization. Students from the Fashion Institute of Technology, mentored by David Beahm, created a wishing tree with messages of hope and concern about the disease. Designer Michael Tavano's dining room for the New York Design Center mixed elegant tabletop settings with graffiti wall art by Christian Avila that used a ninja and a sad clown to depict AIDS as a silent killer and the seriousness of the disease, respectively.



For the first time, a donation table for AIDS-related charities was offered throughout Dining by Design, making it possible for viewers and party attendees to pledge funds for Gay Men's Health Crisis, Bailey House, God's Love We Deliver, and Alpha Workshops. As an added avenue for raising funds, retailer Michael C. Fina, which lent tabletop goods to five designers, planned to host a thank you event Wednesday night with scaled-down versions of the displays and 20 percent of the evening's profits going to Diffa.



So—what about the tables? Decorative looks included a preponderance of black flatware and heavy, ornate patterns, as well as a sampling of ceramic dishes with a handmade feel. Unusual lighting treatments, like David Rockwell's glowing LED lamps, and Shelly Sabel's sculptural umbrella light fixtures, also dotted several tables. There were notably fewer flowers this year, perhaps due to cost, perhaps due to the longer exhibit time—

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designers such as Brad Ford refreshed their live blooms, while others, Tavano among them, chose to use fruit, which was colorful and stood the test of time.

