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Bungalow Fest lets homeowners show pride in restorations



Jennifer Smith lays pine straw in front of her restored bugalow in Historic Kenwood.

ST. PETERSBURG — Neighbors called it the ugly green house, the worst on the block.

The siding on the 1920s-era bungalow was an aqua-green hue and its front porch was closed off with dark screen. Inside, old carpet covered hardwoods. The tub was sinking and the bathroom tiles were buckling above a rotted subfloor.

“It was absolutely hideous,” said Alexander Smith, whose home will be featured today in Historic Kenwood’s long-running home tour, Bungalow Fest.

Smith and his wife, Jennifer, both 29, knew what they were getting into when they bought the 1,000-square-foot home in June 2012.

The past year has involved contractors replacing “historic” wiring and plumbing, and even rebuilding the back of the kitchen, where the floor gave way to termite damage during renovations. For the couple, it has meant hours laying bathroom tile, rebuilding original windows, searching Craigslist and area vintage stores for furnishings like an old metal desk repurposed as a bathroom sink and, of course, painting the outside with pleasant blue, maroon and bright white trim.

Alexander, an architect at the Central Avenue firm Hayes Cumming Architects; and Jennifer, who recently completed a master's degree, have spent most of their free time these past few months getting the house ready for the home tour.

They also have jumped into neighborhood life, attending monthly porch parties, volunteering for festivals and walking or bicycling to the growing collection of shops, pubs and eateries that are filling up the Grand Central business district just to the south.

The Smiths demonstrate the success of efforts started more than a decade ago in neighborhoods such as Kenwood and Old Seminole Heights in Tampa to renew the faded beauty of these early 20th century homes and bring new life to their cities' first suburbs.

Residents in these two historic communities, many of them enterprising singles and young couples, started hosting annual home shows some 15 years ago to raise money, stoke pride of ownership and show outsiders the areas' potential.

"A lot of people would look at a house in our neighborhood and see these old rundown houses that need a lot of work," said Bob Jeffrey, a former city planner and a leader in Kenwood's revival in the 1990s.

"We felt if we showed off how these houses would look after they were renovated, it would help them grasp what we were doing."

More people bought homes, joined the associations, tore down the screens and started hanging out on each others' porches. Some of them opened businesses.

The result wasn't merely restoring the aesthetic character of these communities.

"I walk down the aisle of Publix and people recognize me," said Evan St. Ives, a former president of the Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association who bought a neglected 1920s bungalow on the cheap in the early 1980s.

"It is a real neighborhood. It's not like you don't know who's next door."

Today Seminole Heights and Kenwood are among the most desirable neighborhoods in their respective cities, where an overhauled 1,200-square-foot bungalow goes on the market for more than \$200,000.

Bungalow Fest has become a two-day event, with four homes on display for Friday's moonlight tour followed by a block party and another nine today during a day of opera performances, synchronized swimming and chain saw art, all meant to underscore Kenwood's reputation as the "Neighborhood of the Arts."

Each year more homes are revamped and added to the tour in this 375-acre neighborhood situated between Ninth Avenue North and Central Avenue, and 34th Street and Interstate 275.

Old Seminole Heights hosts a tour in the spring.

Other communities have followed similar paths. St. Petersburg's Historic Old Northeast, the city's oldest neighborhood between Fourth Street North and Tampa Bay, started a candlelight tour the year before Kenwood's festival. Old Southeast, which fronts the bay south of Albert Whitted Airport on Fourth Street, is seeking, along with Kenwood, to become what's known as an artist enclave, where professionals can offer classes or sell work from their homes.

Many groups in St. Petersburg gather under the Council of Neighborhood Associations, where they share ideas and offer advice on mutual concerns. Jay Marshall, who heads up Historic Old Northeast's association, says he has taken notes from Kenwood on event planning while offering guidance on creating a crime watch program to the Bartlett Park neighborhood.

Seminole Heights and Kenwood, though far apart geographically, have shared similar triumphs and trials. Both neighborhoods are marked by an enthusiasm for parties, music events and any other excuse to get together.

In recent years, both have seen an influx of restaurants and retailers replacing old auto garages and even occupying historic homes, such as Cappy's Pizza in Kenwood and Forever Beautiful Salon & Wine Spa in Seminole Heights.

As Old Seminole Heights deals with a planned Wal-Mart that some residents say doesn't fit with the neighborhood, people there have sought advice from Kenwood, which was successful in pressing the big-box retailer to build in the style of a giant bungalow for a store on 34th Street.

The two neighborhoods also cross-promote each other's events.

"I view Kenwood, really, as kind of the sister or parallel neighborhood to Seminole Heights in St. Pete because they face a lot of the same challenges," said Debi Johnson, president of the Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association.

While events such as Bungalow Fest showcase the growing love people here have for their homes, longtime resident and home investor Kathy Young says what makes her community special is the way her neighbors help each other beautify their properties.

She remembers sweating and scraping ugly pink paint off her first home on Seventh Avenue North and hearing applause behind her. It was Jeffrey, one of the community's leaders, and a group of neighbors.

That's what sold her.

“The bottom line is the people,” said Young, who has renovated dozens of Kenwood homes.

“I could never move.”



Alexander Smith touches up paint in one of the bedrooms in the bungalow Alexander and Jennifer Smith began restoring in December in the Historic Kenwood neighborhood of St. Petersburg. LUKE JOHNSON / STAFF

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