



New life for This Old House

CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF



THIS OLD HOUSE

A GRAND OLD LADY: Left, Dina, Harper and Lee Elmslie pose in front of their historic Palmetto Bay home. The Mediterranean Revival house was saved from demolition by the TV show *This Old House*.

After hurricane damage and a demolition date, owners are restoring a 90-year-old South Dade architectural keepsake.

BY JODI MAILANDER FARRELL
jmailander@miamiherald.com

Children play once again near the fish pond that famed botanist David Fairchild built in the yard. Fresh paint gleams on the house, inside and out. The aging roof of the porte-cochere, too narrow for today's SUVs, has been raised and repaired.

If a house could breathe a sigh of relief, the 90-year-old walls of this tidy, two-story historic home in Palmetto Bay would visibly expand in gratitude. It's been a long, uncertain life — the house was devastated by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, then saved from the wrecking ball by the PBS-TV series *This Old House*. Now new owners are painstakingly restoring the home to its rightful place as one of South Dade's architectural keepsakes.

This is one well-hidden treasure. Once the lone estate amid 30 acres of pines, the Mediterranean Revival house currently sits on a single acre amid sprawling 1960s rambler-style houses and sleepy suburban streets. Its decorative exterior moldings, scroll-topped pilasters and parapet roof with barrel tile coping make the place an anachronism.

"Even people who live in the neighborhood don't always know the house is here," says Dina Elmslie, who bought the three-bedroom, three-bath home on Southwest 153rd Terrace with husband Lee three years ago. "When people for Brownies or the PTA come over, they ask, 'What is this doing here?'"

It's been 15 years since Hurricane Andrew almost turned the house once called "Paradise

*TURN TO OLD HOUSE, 12H



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

OLD AND NEW: Above, the "fish room," once a porch, was enclosed by a previous owner. The arched windows are new; ceramic fish line the shelves. Left, the '60s metal handrails will be replaced with wooden spindles.

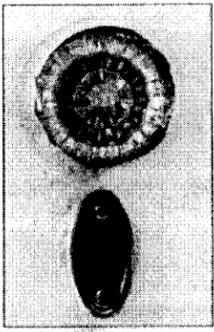
■ OUTFITTING AN OLD HOUSE, OLD HOME TOURS, 12
■ HISTORY OF HOUSE, 13

A new life for this old house, 90 years old

• OLD HOUSE, FROM 1H

Grove" into Paradise Lost. The Category 5 storm shattered most of the house's 58 windows, ripped plaster from walls and peeled off the roof. Months later, *This Old House*, the popular TV show that restores old homes, swept in to wring water from the attic insulation and rescue the home from demolition.

The show, currently running episodes on its 50th home restoration project in Austin, Texas, hired South Florida work crews to outfit the Palmetto Bay house with new windows, a new roof, new kitchen, some new plumbing and plastering and its first central air conditioning and heating system. A pool screen torn down by the hurricane was rebuilt. And some historic features that had been covered over by previous owners — a transom window above the east door and a series of arches above a fireplace in the living room — were restored. The restoration was chronicled in a six-part series. Total cost: \$155,000 in labor and contributed materials combined with \$65,000 in insurance proceeds



ORIGINAL: Glass doorknobs and antique keyhole covers are still on interior doors in the home.

from the homeowner.

But the biggest favor the TV show did for the house was reviving it to the point that Dade County declared it a historic site in 1993. Today, any owners who try to alter the property must seek approval from the county's Historic Preservation Board.

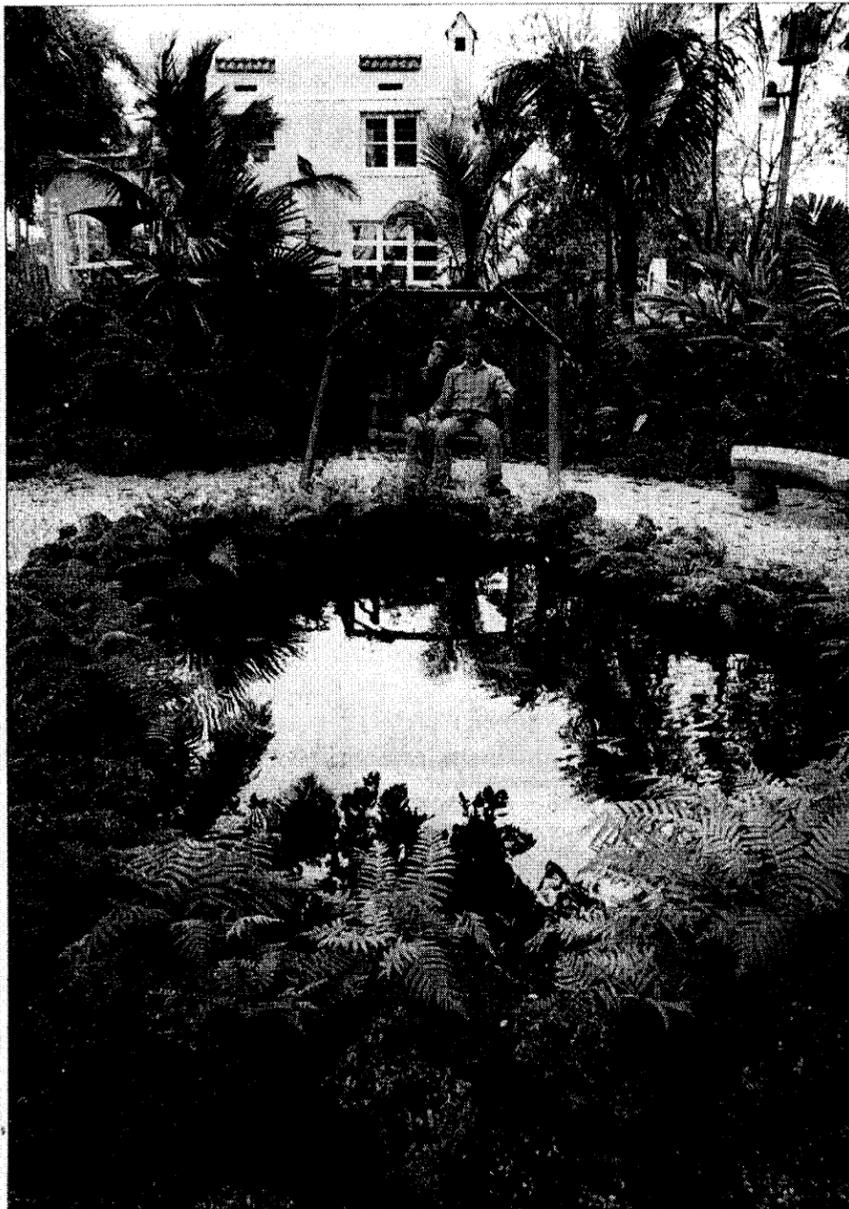
"We thought about taking the insurance money and getting rid of it, but we wanted to restore it so somebody could move in and live with their family the way we did," says Anthony Joseph O'Donnell Jr., 61, a South Florida zoning lawyer who grew up in the house with his three sisters and applied for the historic designation. His mother still owned the place, officially called the Flipse/O'Donnell House, when Andrew hit.

"Realtors told us it was best to tear down the house and sell the place for its land value, but I think you need to preserve the architectural ambience of a community, not just throw it all away."

THE NEW OWNERS

The Elmslies, both 39 and born and reared in Miami-Dade County, have lovingly picked up where *This Old House* left off. The couple paid \$624,000 for the 3,309-square-foot house in 2004. In just three years, the two have erected a fence with coral rock posts and an arch. They've painted the house inside and out. They've added crown molding to many of the rooms and redone the roof of the porte-cochere. They've replaced every light fixture and ceiling fan. They've installed beadboard on the ceiling in one downstairs room and on a wall in an upstairs bathroom, which was outfitted with new fixtures, a toilet and sink.

Dina has spent hours poring over permits and county records. She has become a fixture in the Florida Room at the main public library in downtown Miami. She seeks out historic home tours hosted by The Villagers, a local



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

LIKE A PARK: The Elmslies sit next to the pond, rimmed by oolitic limestone, on the north side of the property. It was built by David Fairchild, a business partner with the house's original owner. Adirondack-style chairs flank the pond, which is filled with koi.

preservation group, to get furnishing clues from other old houses. She has even visited O'Donnell's mother in a South Dade retirement home, paging through the former homeowner's family photo albums to catch a glimpse of the home in previous decades.

The couple also has infused the house with their own style: colorful Haitian and tropical art, 19th century antiques and country French furniture, and custom window treatments made by Dina's mother, Sheila Revell, who owns a 1926 house in Coral Gables.

The walls and ceilings are swathed in a fresh coat of Benjamin Moore Montgomery White from the historic collection, which takes on a light peach glow in the midmorning light. The family's love of scuba diving and boating comes through in the prevailing colors of sea foam greens and blues on the upholstery and in the "fish room," an enclosed porch lined with windows and ceramic fish sculptures that now serves as the

TV room.

In the yard, Lee has pulled out most of the non-native vegetation, replacing it with natives, such as oak trees, thatch palms and bromeliads, as well as exotics like licuala, zombie and old man palms, and a 300-pound stag fern that belonged to Dina's grandmother. Lee is defining paths around the 10-by-15-foot, koi-filled fish pond with large oolitic limestone rocks he salvages from construction sites. The pond's waterfall is back in working order. The couple's three children — son Spencer, 9, and daughters Morgan, 7, and Harper, 2 — ride bikes and scooters down the long, royal palm-lined drive and run around the grassy lawn.

"It's like living in a park," says Lee, a commercial mortgage broker. "Just having an acre around here is a treat. The kids are really aware of the fact this is a unique property."

Dina, a stay-at-home mom, adds, "Some of their friends come over and go, 'Wow, cool

OLD HOME TOURS

What: The Villagers, a South Florida group dedicated to the restoration and preservation of historic sites, sponsors annual tours of significant homes and gardens in the Miami area.

Next tour: Garden Gems, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., March 10. Features gardens of Coral Gables and surrounding area.

Cost: \$20 advance tickets; \$25 at gate day of tour. Mail checks by March 3 to The Villagers Inc., P.O. Box 141843, Coral Gables, FL 33114.

Info: 305-596-1493; www.thevillager-sinc.org.

house."

Just when life became comfortable, Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma delivered a one-two punch in 2005, causing about \$30,000 in damage to exterior stucco, knocking out more than a dozen trees and tearing down the screened pool enclosure.

The family is reluctant to put a price tag on how much it has sunk into the house.

"We have spent a bunch," Dina says. "But it was all done as a labor of love, with an open checkbook. Our goal is to restore the house to the era that it was built in, as well as make it a bit larger for a family of five, plus two dogs. We are not counting the pennies."

The family has won approval to build an addition on the west side of the house, where there are no significant architectural touches. The plans call for an additional bedroom and bathroom upstairs and an expanded kitchen downstairs, as well as a wrap-around porch on parts of the north and west side of the home. The Elmslies also want to change some of the work installed by *This Old House* crews. As a cost-saver, the crews replaced broken custom windows with standard ones, stuccoing now-obvious gaps. The show also kept costs down by replacing clay roof tiles with cement ones dyed to look like clay. The Elmslies are slowly replacing the tiles with real clay ones. The thermofoil cabinets and formica kitchen countertops will go, too.

"They did some things that weren't historically accurate, but they saved the house and for that I'm grateful," Lee says.

BUDGET RESTRAINTS

Russell Morash, creator of *This Old House*, says he remembers the Palmetto Bay house well because it reminded him of a similar Mediterranean Revival house that his grandfather built during the Depression era in St. Petersburg. He says the show had to stick to a budget, with historical accuracy sometimes taking a back seat to practicality.

"Anything you buy to restore a house to its original look is 40 to 60 percent more than something you buy at a local home center," says Morash, who retired as the show's executive producer two years ago. "It's very expensive to do renovations in the purest form — not that it shouldn't be done, mind you, but once you start throwing those kind of numbers around, only a few will do that."

Morash applauded the Elmslies for preserving the house's look and was thrilled with the home's historic designation.

"It's a shame that more people can't bother to fix stuff up in this disposable age of ours," says Morash, who lives in an 1851 Greek Revival farmhouse in Lexington, Mass. "We need to lose this idea of ownership and realize that we are really stewards. We have an obligation to pass a house on to somebody else, a piece of history for the next generation."

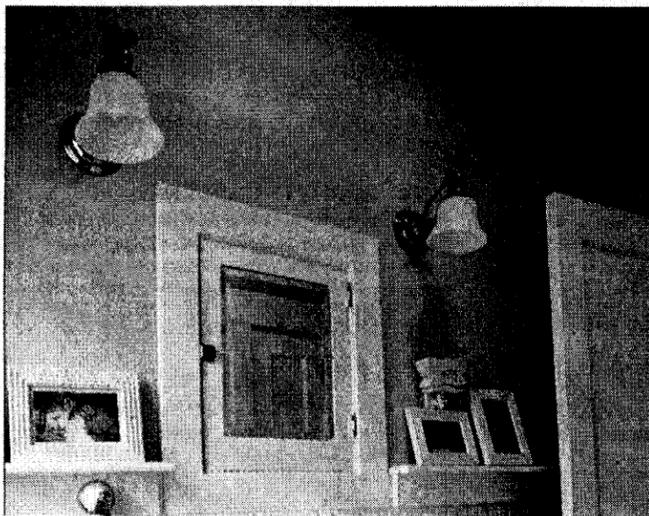
WHERE TO SHOP

Where the Elmslies have turned for fixtures, furniture and art for their 1917 house in Palmetto Bay:

- Bonn & Ashley Antiques, 4600 SW 71st Ave., Suite 102, Miami, 305-667-0969. European and American antiques from the 18th and 19th centuries.

- Provence Collection, 4101 NW 77th Ave., Miami, 305-499-9400; www.theprovencecollection.com. Country French furniture.

- Jacqueline Roch, 305-495-4047; www.jrochfi-neart.com. Miami-based pastel artist of tropical botanicals, fruit and landscapes of the Everglades.





'THIS OLD HOUSE'

A SAD SIGHT: The house was boarded up after Hurricane Andrew shattered windows and ripped off plaster.

THIS OLD HOUSE

1917 home was 'state of the art'

■ It represents an early example in the county of the Mediterranean Revival style before it became popular.

BY JODI MAILANDER FARRELL
jmailander@miamiherald.com

When Louis F. Flipse, an aspiring tropical fruit grower from Milwaukee, built his South Florida home in 1917, the house was considered "state of the art" and people came from all over the county to admire it, Flipse's son Fred told the county's Historic Preservation Board 76 years later.

Louis Flipse and his buddy, William J. Krome, a surveyor and chief engineer for the Florida East Coast Railroad, planted groves of avocados and mangos on the land in what was then called Rockdale. Parts of the wall they built on the north side of the property can still be seen along Coral Reef Drive, which

also was carved out by Flipse.

Flipse and David Fairchild, for whom Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden was named, became business partners in a papaya plantation. Fairchild bought land from Flipse and landscaped the area around Flipse's house, including the fish pond and waterfall, surrounding it with flowering Chinese plum trees.

In declaring the house a historic site in 1993, the county noted that the house "embodies an important transitional point in the architectural history of Dade County."

The only other Mediterranean Revival structure built in the area at the same time was El Jardin, now part of Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, an all-girls Catholic school in Coconut Grove. Built on Biscayne Bay for then-Pittsburgh Steel President John Brindley,

El Jardin is more formal and embellished, with ornate moldings, grille work and Spanish Baroque detailing.

The Palmetto Bay house is much more modest, with a slight Mission influence. The house represents one of the earliest examples in the county of Mediterranean Revival style in a developmental period before it became widely used in the 1920s.

Four homeowners came and went between Flipse and the O'Donnell family, who owned it in 1993 and called it Paradise Grove. Lee and Dina Elmslie became the eighth owners of the house when they purchased it in 2004.

"It's a seemingly simple house, but there is so much work involved," Dina says. "It's a great house. When we're finished with it, it's going to be a knockout."