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# A Big Night in the Big Easy:

Stefan Beese on A Night to Make It Right



Ellen Degeneres on stage at the gala.

Brad Pitt's long-term interest in architecture and his dedication to New Orleans reached a new level this spring when he spearheaded A Night to Make It Right, a star-studded charity gala designed to develop sustainable housing in the Big Easy and elsewhere. (In 2007, the star founded the Make It Right Foundation, which resulted in an effort to build 150 homes in the areas of the city that had been most devastated by Hurricane Katrina.) The money raised by A Night to Make it Right was geared toward achieving this goal and will also promote similar projects in Newark and Kansas City.

Speaking to *The Hollywood Reporter* about the project, Pitt said, "There was a responsibility to make it right, which was not being answered wholly, so I decided to make that a focal point and help families return home—and in the process we started discovering the inadequacies in low-income housing, that it actually keeps a family trapped at a low-income level. There are a lot of shoddy appliances that drive up utility bills to hundreds and hundreds of dollars, and that can make or break a family."

Once again, Pitt brought on board Rehage Entertainment, the live event company that produces, among other things, New Orleans' Voodoo Experience, and production designer Stefan Beese, founder of the firm RE:BE Design, who served as executive producer of The Pink Project, an earlier effort of the Make It Right

Foundation. (Stephen Rehage, of Rehage Entertainment, is Beese's partner in RE:BE.) The event, with 1,200 attendees, was hosted by Pitt, Ellen Degeneres, and New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, featured a cocktail hour, seated dinner, performances by Sheryl Crow and Rihanna, and a live auction. It took place at the Hyatt Hotel, located in downtown New Orleans.

Beese came on board only six weeks before the big night, and immediately focused on using colors and identifiable forms to give a unified identity to all aspects of the events. Noting that he "wanted to approach the design from the perspective of the guests," he create an axonometric diagram, which followed the flow of attendees from the point of arrival to the after-party, which was hosted by Azizi Azari and featured Kanye West, Snoop Dogg, and Seal.

Guests arriving at the Hyatt encountered an amber-washed façade, Sky Tracker lights, and a large-scale projection reading "A Night to Make It Right." Entering the hotel, they traveled a red carpet lined with Make It Right model homes. As Beese notes, "You don't expect to see Dr. John sitting at the piano bar when you enter the hotel." But there he was, performing next to the grand staircase, in front of a mural, by the German artist Stephan Wanner, made out of thousands of recycled Mardi Gras beads—making a statement about sustainability. Traveling up the staircase, guests entered the VIP reception, where the

Preservation Hall Jazz Band performed.

The stage design for the gala was based on the utilization of the angular, overlapping lines of the Make It Right houses and the deeply New Orleans concept of the front porch. Beese was required to create separate areas for Rihanna and Crow's performances, Degeneres' interviews with Pitt and the Make It Right families, and the hosts.

Upstage was a 15mm video wall masked by scenery built by John Himmaugh and Co. The front wall piece, which resembled the abstract outline of a house, created entrance and exit spaces for the performers and served as a projection surface. Video content was created and mapped by Besse and Jonathan Foucheaux, of the Solomon Group; the latter also provided the lighting, which was hung on three truss sticks over the stage. The stage deck, built by Freeman, was covered with white and gray carpet.

One major challenge, says Beese, involved working with the projections, especially mapping them to the peculiar dimensions of the set. "We had four 20K Barco projectors," he notes. "They were on a horrible angle, due to the low ceiling height. We had to do a lot of tweaking because, during rehearsals, we found that if you were standing on stage you were looking at big projector beams. The masking of the images was complicated, especially because some of the content arrived at the last minute. We were tweaking it right up until the doors opened."

For the after-party stage design, Beese took a simple line

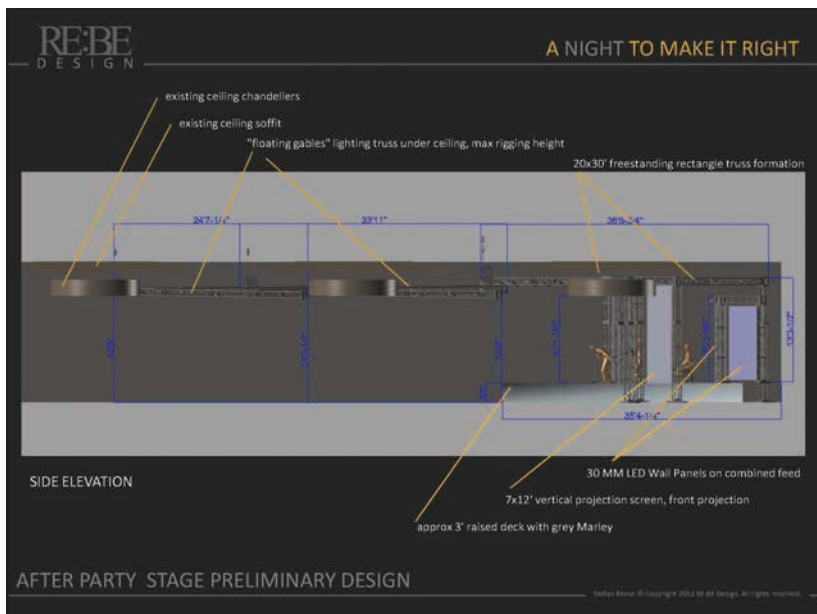
drawing of a Make It Right house and abstracted the form. "We used the truss to create a freestanding structure that we could hang lights from, and to introduce floating gables," the latter providing another link to the Make It Right houses. The upstage LED wall, consisting of 30mm tiles, was assembled by Solomon Group and was hung from a vertical truss to emphasize a sense of verticality in the low-ceilinged room. The 30 x 60 stage deck was turned toward the audience, creating a triangle thrust that allowed guests to wrap around the stage from both sides. There were projection screens at stage right and stage left.

Patrick Theriot, of See Hear Productions, contributed the lighting and programming for the after-party. "I knew Patrick had these Bright Stripes [LED tubes from Mega Light], which I had always wanted to use." These became the flying gables previously mentioned. "With so many people coming in and the short time frame, Patrick said, 'I'll try to make [the Bright Stripes] happen, but if I run out of time, I may have to skip them.' But, the night before, he programmed them, and they made a big difference."

The lighting for the gala included eight Martin Professional MAC III Performances, 16 Mac 700 Profiles, eight Mac 350 Entours, eight Mac 101s, 72 ETC Source Fours, 72 Chauvet WELL uplighters, and 36 Chauvet COLORado 72 battens. Video was delivered by a Martin Maxedia Pro media server and cued off a Martin M1 controller. Lighting for the after-party included 70 GLP Volkslichts, 16 Mac 700s, six Mac



Above: The set design for the gala drew on the contours of the Make it Right houses and the New Orleans concept of the front porch. Opposite: The finished set.



Beese's design for the after-party, seen in the drawing above, made use of Mega Lights Bright Stripe LED tubes to outline the ceiling's flying gables (photo, below).

2000s, 14 Mac 250s, and 16 Martin Atomic 3000 strobes. Media was controlled by a Maxedia; all video panels at both events consisted of Solomon Group's own product. Lighting at both events was controlled by a Pearl Expert. Swank Audio provided audio gear and IMAG screens. VER Audio provided audio gear for the after-party, with rigging by Corporate Lighting and Video.

Other personnel included Jensen Killen (design assistant), Megan Grant (production manager), Scott Buford, (video director/engineer, gala), and Jay Taylor (LED technician). According to news reports, the event raised over \$5 million. 📶

Photo: Courtesy of Stefan Beese



Photo: Courtesy of Chase Kenner