

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INTERIOR DESIGN

SEPTEMBER 2004

DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES





Roger Thomas

THE BELLAGIO'S DESIGNER GOES MODERN IN LAS VEGAS

Architecture by Mark Mack
Landscape Design by Bruce Anderson
Text by Nancy Collins
Photography by John Edward Linden



The reason I built this house was because I had divorced and come out as a gay man,” interior designer Roger Thomas cheerfully admits, explaining the impetus behind the spectacularly modern Las Vegas pad that he dreamed up with architect Mark Mack. “While we were building, we talked a lot about interior colors, and one day Mark called and said, ‘What do you think about an all-lavender interior?’ I said, ‘Mark, I don’t know if I’m *that* gay.’” He laughs. “‘But if you want an all-lavender interior, I’m game. I can work with anything.’”

Indeed. As the executive vice president of Wynn Design and Development, Thomas, in a place where excess is the norm, has created some of Las Vegas’s most tastefully showy interiors—landmark casinos like Treasure Island, The Mirage (see *Architectural Digest*, September 1992) and Bellagio, whose ornate interiors he likes to call “bigger than life.” When it came to his own new life, however, Thomas was looking for the diametric opposite—“the complete cohesion of spatial architecture” he discovered when he stayed with Reno friends Peter and Turkey Stremmel (see *Architectural Digest*, December

1995). “I walked in that house and couldn’t find a misalignment or a collision of angles or surfaces. Everything was beautifully married. I said, ‘I have to live this way.’”

So he called up Mack, whose work renders Thomas rhapsodic. “Mark’s spaces are exciting, because his sense of scale is charged with so much energy, economy and perfection of detail,” he explains. “In such spare structures every detail counts, because nothing covers up any of the edges. Everything is brutally honest.” He pauses. “And our personalities meshed immediately. I told him, ‘We’re both designers, which is one too many.

ABOVE LEFT: For his own house in Las Vegas, Roger Thomas—who designed the rooms at Treasure Island and Bellagio—worked with Los Angeles architect Mark Mack to create a modernist aesthetic. Local landscape designer Bruce Anderson added drought-resistant plants.

“The design is directed inward, for privacy,” says Thomas (opposite, in the walled courtyard). ABOVE: Asian sculptures—most depicting bodhisattvas—adorn a Jean-Michel Frank-designed credenza in the gallery, which leads to the living/dining area. The painting is by David Kessler.

The architect presented a floor plan
and “exquisite watercolor renderings” of
a 5,000-square-foot structure that
“looks like twice but lives like half its size.”



The Death of Polyphemus by James Morpheus is a focal point of the gallery. Central to the house's character is the interior courtyard, at left. The library is at right. “Light floods in from the courtyard and bathes the colorful Venetian stucco walls and the art,” notes Thomas.



This is your project—though, as a client, I’m going to be very specific about the input.”

Toward that end, Thomas drew up a “written program,” laying out what he had in mind: a courtyard house, unable to be seen from the street and vice versa, with public and private wings joined at an entrance, which would include a library. There were also to be thick walls, 12-foot ceilings, the sounds of water throughout (preferably reflective water, contained in dark vessels), no other views of architecture available from any window, and lots of natural light—“I wanted to be able to use the rooms all day without turning on lights. And though there’d be bedrooms for myself and my son, no guest room. At the time, I had signing privileges for 8,000 guest rooms, so why would I need that?”

Two months later Mack presented a floor plan and “exquisite watercolor renderings” of a 5,000-square-foot struc-

ABOVE: Among the artworks Thomas displays in the open living/dining area are an acrylic-on-canvas portrait Andy Warhol did of him in 1980 and a Donald Judd piece over the fireplace. The Roman marble torso, dating to the 1st century, is from Sotheby’s. Glant sofa cotton.

BELOW: In the library, Mack made a special recess for Thomas’s 18th-century Moroccan ceiling fragment. *Sweet Memory*, 2001, by Tim Bavington hangs at left; a 1982 black-and-white portrait of Thomas by Robert Mapplethorpe is at right. Clarence House Roman shade fabric.



ture that “looks like twice but lives like half” its size, with a walled courtyard glimmering in primary colors—brilliant yellow, blue and red (a color scheme subtly continued inside with the rust-red corridors, the pale yellows and the periwinkle blues of the rooms).

“Roger didn’t need a conventional house,” says Mack. “But he wanted privacy and a big room for entertaining friends.” Consulting with the architect of record, Las Vegas-based Eric Strain, Mack planned the U-shaped residence around the courtyard, adding a large main living area “to serve both formal and casual functions.”

Thrilled with the realization of his ideas, Thomas thrived on the mutually respectful collaboration that happens between two consummate professionals. Though Thomas brought his own favorite tricks to the table, it was Mack who always got final cut—as in the surfaces for the kitchen and



“Being in the business of decorating those casinos, Roger needed a more reduced, simple approach for his home,” says Mack. ABOVE: The architect devised a floating roof to shade the courtyard. “The oculus acts as a sundial, tracking the desert sun across the walls,” says Thomas.

RIGHT: *Purple Curve*, a 2000 lithograph by Ellsworth Kelly, rests on a 1930s French mahogany desk in the master bedroom. The armchair, which Thomas covered in blue leather, is 18th-century Venetian. Glant cottons on headboard and chair in foreground. Schumacher rug.



“I absolutely adore it,” says Thomas. “Living in this house is like living on vacation because it’s so different from the projects I do.”



baths. “I’d collected a packet of materials I liked, including the white concrete with abalone shell in the bathroom,” Thomas says, “but I let Mark have first choice.” In the kitchen, he adds, Mack eschewed his signature concrete tops in favor of granite, “choosing from four or five samples that I loved.”

Taking from his experience with “my past houses, which had living rooms, dining rooms and family rooms that nobody used—I’d have catered dinners and end up sitting in the living room by myself with friends in the kitchen”—Thomas decided that “this time I’m furnishing the kitchen. After all, that’s where all the good stuff

—preparation, good smells—happens. But since I usually serve buffet, let’s put a pantry behind the kitchen so the good stuff stays in the kitchen, while the bad goes to the pantry.”

The master suite is similarly geared not only for beauty but comfort, starting with the woven-abaca-fiber rug. “Unlike sisal, which can be prickly to the feet, this, being so thick, has a very soft, cushy feel,” says Thomas. Equally and evocatively comforting are the room’s tame yellow hues and the surprise of its single deep-rouge wall—“the color of barns in kids’ textbooks from when I was growing up, further enriched by the

Venetian stucco, which always adds depth.”

Abutting the bed is an imposingly beautiful mahogany desk—part night table—whose saber legs caught the designer’s eye. “At home, the only thing I use desks for is writing notes, so I like having part of the boudoir experience be literary,” he says. “A lot of great notes were written in men’s and women’s bedrooms. It’s a romantic image that really speaks to me.”

In fact, when it came to all his furnishings, it had to be love at first sight. “All the pieces included had to be a love affair,” he says. “Because as a designer I see so much, I

A view across the pool to one end of the courtyard, which intersects the public and private spaces. At right is an angular sculpture by Joel Shapiro. The bronze on the pedestal is from Niermann Weeks. “The courtyard is one of the most used ‘rooms’ of the house,” says Thomas.

had to still be thinking about a piece two weeks after I'd seen it. Originally, the house was designed to use what I already owned, but in the end, the furniture ended up being a reaction to Mark's architecture. I travel a lot, so I'd see something, say, 'That's perfect for the room,' and get rid of what I had. By the time I moved in, the only things I owned that got into the house had to be more than 400 years old."

For the floors, meanwhile, the duo settled on something decidedly more current: Ardex—smooth, white concrete, poured, marked, hand-cut, stained and sealed to create a dazzlingly aged-looking parchmentlike surface, complete with the odd crack. "I expected that," says Thomas. "But they're the kind of cracks you find on

good, old vellum. It's not easy to maintain but very durable and hard," he pauses, chuckling, "making for a lively house acoustically."

And how did his boss, Mr. Wynn, the czar of traditional Las Vegas style, respond

"At the time I
had signing privileges
for 8,000 guest
rooms, so why would
I need one?"

to this pared-down version of Mr. Thomas? "He stayed three hours for dinner and loved the house so much that

he insisted on returning the next day—for four—to see it in the daylight. Steve is very analytical. He doesn't just look at things, he absorbs them, figures out what's attractive, stores it and is always going back to it again."

As for the home's owner, he is clearly over the moon about his new digs. "I absolutely adore it," says Thomas. "Living in this house is like living on vacation because it's so different from the projects I do. I always thought that I'd have Mark build this house and then have another great architect do the next. But this experience was so magical I'm going to have Mark build the next one as well."

Build *another*?

"Of course," he laughs. "There's always another house." □