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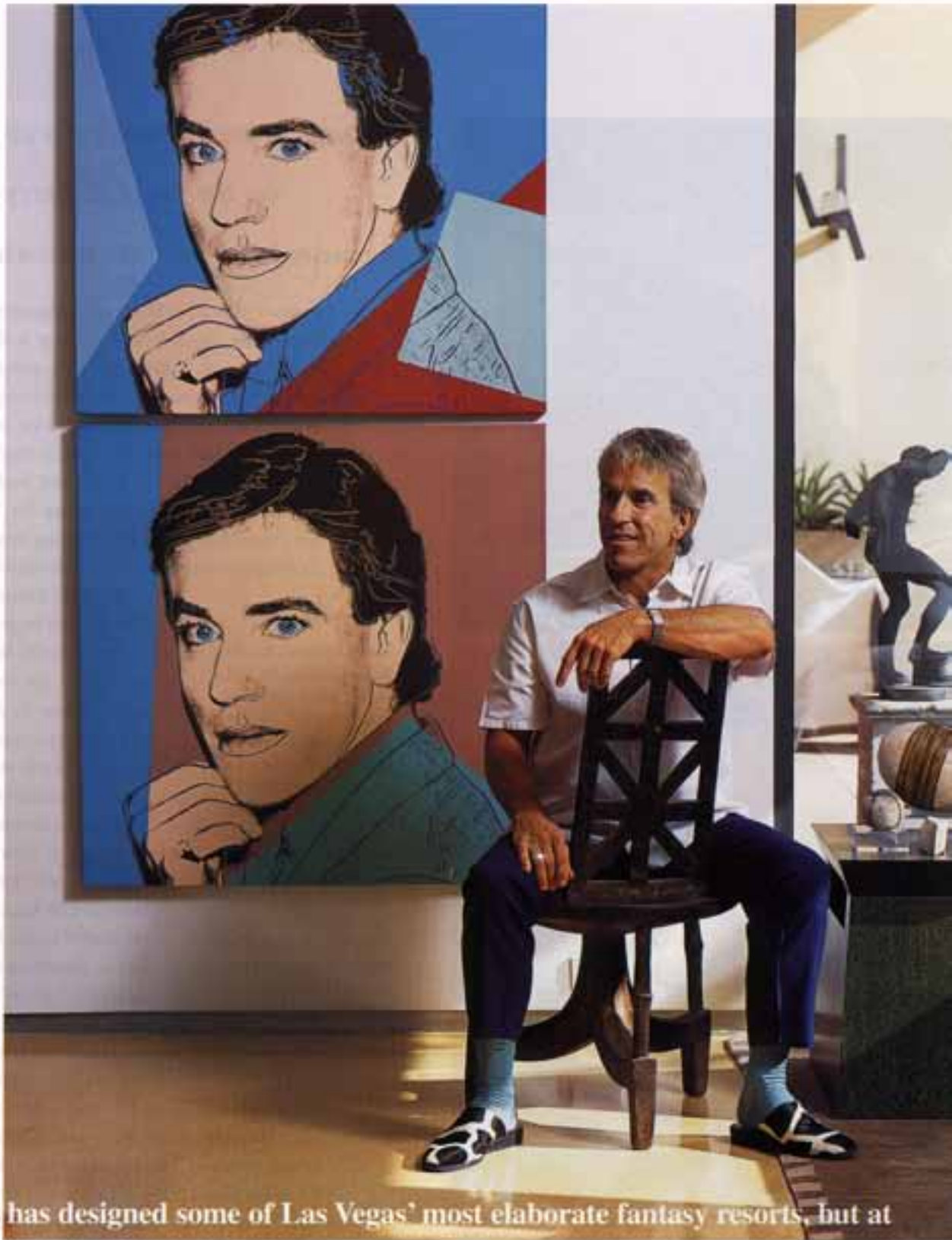
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A Modernist's Mirage

by Jill Kirchner Simpson Photographed by Gray Crawford

An outdoor fireplace casts a romantic evening glow on the terrace of Roger Thomas' Las Vegas home. Thomas, opposite, sits in front of a pair of portraits that Andy Warhol made of him in 1980.



Roger Thomas has designed some of Las Vegas' most elaborate fantasy resorts, but at home, he retreats to a quiet modern architectural gem that saves its drama for the inside



Though Roger Thomas grew up in Las Vegas

(as the son of E. Parry Thomas, the influential

financier known as “the man who built Las Vegas”),

he never planned to live here permanently. “Growing up, I hated Las Vegas—the way it looked, the way it felt, the reputation it engendered,” he says. “I knew if I participated in anything here, it would have to be a revolution.” That “revolution” came in the form of Steve Wynn, who completely reinvented the concept of what a Las Vegas resort and casino could be when he first built The Mirage, then the family-themed Treasure Island, and finally the ultra-plush Bellagio. As the director of interior design for Wynn’s company, Thomas has played a pivotal role in creating these high-end fantasy worlds, significantly raising the bar for all casino resorts that followed.

“I always thought I would leave Las Vegas after the next project,” says Thomas. But, after he had a child, he realized it might finally be time to put down roots. He decided to build a house in the gated suburban enclave of Summerlin, primarily to be close to his ex-wife and son, as well as one of his brothers. Though Summerlin is generally populated by mansions in European styles that seem to exist in denial of their desert environs, Thomas chose a noted modern architect, Mark Mack, based in Los Angeles, to design a very different kind of house. Instead of boasting a showy façade, this house turns inward, away from its neighbors, while simultaneously embracing its setting near Red Rock Canyon.

Thomas’ primary requests to Mack were that he didn’t want to see other homes from his house and he didn’t want others to be able to see in. He wanted to have a courtyard, and he wanted to include water—“its sound, reflection, movement are all important to me, having grown up in the desert.” Mack’s response, as he puts it, was “to design more of an Islamic house, where everything is oriented around the interior courtyard, away from the street. It’s almost like an inside-out house, because the grandest gesture—the suspended roof over the courtyard—is not on the front of the house but in the

The whirlpool, top left, is demarcated by brilliantly hued walls and stone “bowls” filled with rocks, a collaboration between Thomas and landscape designer Bruce Anderson. Deep reveals in the walls and a cutout in the canopy, left, create an ever-changing play of light on the terrace. Purple-leaf plum trees, opposite, are planted in a grid interspersed with silvered mouth-blown glass spheres.





back." Mack created a series of walls and shifting planes to provide privacy and imbue simple modern rectangles with a sense of mystery. "In order to enter the house," he explains, "you have to go right and then left. You don't even see the front door at first. It's a Chinese-like entrance."

Guests are welcomed to the house with the gentle sound of falling water behind a wall, from a fountain that can be seen from the living room. To the right is the entrance through a monumental pivoting steel door, set in an 18-foot-high slab, though the actual door itself is only 8 feet high. Just inside is a view across a koi pond to the interior courtyard.

The house is organized in a U shape around the courtyard with the entrance hall and library at the base of the U. The public spaces—an open living/dining/kitchen area—run along one wing. Opposite it, a more private wing contains the bedrooms. The two wings, or prongs of the U, are connected at the end by a floating roof. Punctuating the roof is a large circular cutout that serves as a lens to focus disks of light and shadow across the terrace, tracing the sun's trajectory across the sky.

The pigment-impregnated walls in shades of brick red, straw, and blue, as well as the concrete floors, both indoors and out, are signature Mack elements, their colors tweaked to echo the canyon palette. The outdoor living space is nearly equal in both size and importance to the interior. Pools and fountains, desert gardens, colored walls, and exterior lighting delineate the space into "rooms" as distinctive as those in the interior. Thomas worked with a friend and colleague, landscape designer Bruce Anderson, to hand-pick every plant, tree, and rock. "Though I often wish I weren't living in the desert, this time I said, 'I give in—I live in the desert. It should look like the desert.'"

This being Las Vegas, the interior is, of course, air-conditioned, but Mack did his best to encourage natural ventilation and have the house flow easily between indoors and out. "It is a great party house," says Mack. "Everything opens up and flows well; there are no bottlenecks." Whether he is hosting a small dinner party for eight or a large museum fundraiser (he is a noted patron of the arts in Nevada), Thomas has found that "people always congregate in the kitchen," so he asked Mack to essentially "furnish the

Two of the many contemporary paintings in Thomas' collection, opposite, punctuate the entry: *Patriot's Throne* by Larry Bell, in the foreground, and *Death of Polyphemus* by James Morphesis, at the end of the hall.

The concrete floors throughout the house are stained and polished. The oxidized Corten steel door, top right, set within an 18-foot-high steel slab, pivots to reveal a captivating view of the koi pond and interior courtyard. The library, right, looks out to vibrantly colored walls that create a stage-set backdrop for the terrace.





kitchen." Mack complied by incorporating elegantly finished cabinetry, an unusual Vesuvius aubergine granite Thomas suggested for the countertops (Mack usually uses concrete), and a chandelier over the island. An adjacent butler's pantry provides an ideal staging and clean-up area, so mess is kept to a minimum in the open kitchen. Thomas even outfitted the garage with finished floors, good lighting, a restaurant sink, and lots of outlets so that caterers can use that space as well—again, keeping the kitchen free for entertaining.

Even though Thomas obviously has a lot of experience designing architecture and interiors, he was the ideal client, according to Mack.

As Thomas explains, "Once you make a decision to hire a talented architect, you're a fool not to leave him alone. Two designers is one too many. The house worked out beautifully. Five years later, it still has a certain amount of wonder that hasn't gone away." Of course, Thomas was involved in the interior design, "but in this house, the interiors are sublimated to the architecture," he says modestly.

When Thomas was building the house, he also couldn't get overly involved in the design because he was working around the clock on Bellagio. Now that Wynn has sold his company, Mirage Resorts, to MGM Grand, he and Thomas are already deep into their next project, *Le Rêve* (The Dream), named after a Picasso in Wynn's collection. "With Steve, there is a constant escalation of expectations for each project," says Thomas. How will they improve on Bellagio—their attempt to create the *ne plus ultra* of luxury in Las Vegas rather than a theme hotel? "We're always trying to refine the experience," Thomas says. "Le Rêve will be more intimate, romantic, and dramatic. What the theme resorts do is what I call 'replitecture.' I call what we do 'evocatecture.' We try to create that 'once-upon-a-time' experience that lets you feel both connection and total escape."

And just as the windowless façade on Thomas' own home creates a sense of mystery, *Le Rêve* will have a huge mountain in front that will draw onlookers inside. "It's like an exquisitely wrapped package that you're dying to open up," he explains. As he warms to the subject of his next project, it's clear he isn't leaving Las Vegas—or the resort business—any time soon. "I love doing this. Steve is the ideal client, and this is absolutely the best job on earth." ■

A custom-designed mix of cabinets in anigre, ash, and mahogany, opposite, allow the open kitchen to mesh easily with the living area. A Wendell Castle dining table of sapele wood, top right, is surrounded by ceruse oak and leather chairs designed by Christian Liaigre for Holly Hunt. Custom-built cabinets in anigre, ash, and mahogany, right, were designed by architect Mark Mack. The armchairs opposite the sofa are French, circa 1951, by Paul Dupre-Lafon. A Navajo serape bought in Santa Fe, circa 1860, bottom right, covers the bed in the master bedroom.

