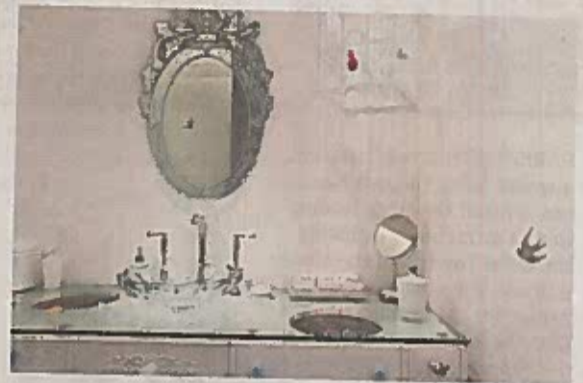


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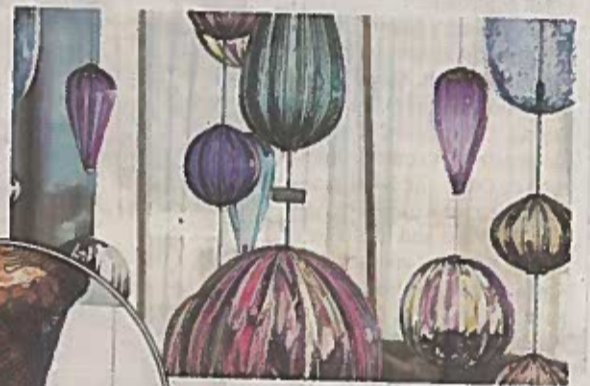
INSIDE STORY

A Penthouse That Is Part Playhouse

An entrepreneur's Las Vegas home has \$3 million worth of surprises: disappearing walls, secret rooms, 'nests'



FOR THE BIRDS The bird-theme bath, above, includes glass-covered holes with twine nests and glass birds. Special guests get their names etched on tags on favorite glass balls, below.



Lisa Coxson for The Wall Street Journal (7)

BY NANGY KEATES

VEGAS STYLE Benson Riseman in his home, above, which has a hidden room off the dining area, below right, hanging chairs, bottom left, and a message by him etched in steel, below left. Inset, a bust covered in pennies by William Braemer.

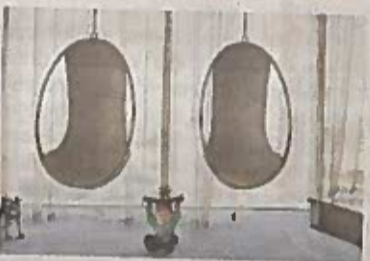
THE FRONT DOOR looks normal enough at Benson Riseman's penthouse apartment on the Strip in Las Vegas: There is a doorknob and a doorbell, both in the usual place. But when it comes time to enter, it isn't the door that opens, but the wall to the right.

"It's all about unpredictability," explains Mr. Riseman, 58 years old, who co-founded Green Dot, the company that pioneered reloadable prepaid MasterCard and Visa debit cards. "There's immediately the feeling that there's something different about this place."

The penthouse has a James Bond-like aura. A one-way mirror behind the bar allows Mr. Riseman to see people in the living room. What looks like an ordinary (albeit leather-covered) wall behind the dining area disappears at the push of a button, revealing a secret room. A coffee table rises and turns into a conference table, and a Murphy bed hides behind a purple sofa.

Conveying a feeling of fun and whimsy was central to the \$3 million, two-year renovation Mr. Riseman undertook on the 3,300-square-foot space he bought for \$2.3 million in the Veer Towers in 2010. The penthouse was an empty shell with panoramic views of casinos and mountains. In what became almost a branding project, Mr. Riseman focused on a design that would reflect his personality and values, as well as how he wanted visitors to feel in his home.

In the entryway, etched on a black metal wall, in large font in Mr. Riseman's handwriting, are the words



"home," "welcome," "friend," "happiness," "appreciate," "adventure" and "comfort." The writing is lit from behind, with the color of the light changing to suit his mood or an occasion (green for St. Patrick's Day, for example).

To the left, dozens of handblown multicolored glass balls hang from the ceiling by wires, separating the entry and a sunken living room a few steps below. Close friends and relatives get their names engraved on a metal tag attached to the wire of their favorite glass ball—an idea Mr. Riseman got from how much clients used to love it when he put their photos on the wall in his office. "I get a lot of hugs that way," he says.

The secret room behind the mov-



ing wall also has a playhouse-like area with a purple rug and a view of the Bellagio fountains. Above it is a glass-walled stairway the Mr. Riseman calls the "stairs to nowhere"; they lead to a platform set up against the wall of windows. It's a place he might put a disc jockey for parties.

"It's another thing for people to talk about," says Mr. Riseman. A huge painting of a 1938 mug shot of Frank Sinatra, by Francine Turk, hangs on the wall.

The room Mr. Riseman believes best reflects his vision of eclectic playfulness is the guest bathroom. The theme is birds: stone tiles on the walls are inlaid with patterns of birds; a custom chandelier is made of bird cages. Three large holes cut in

the cabinets are filled with twine, on top of which Mr. Riseman placed glass birds, lit from underneath to create glowing "nests."

"He didn't want to be that traditional guy. It's Vegas, not the Hamptons," says his contractor, Steve Jones of Merlin Contracting and Developing. Mr. Jones says the tiles took two workers every day for seven weeks to install. The cabinetmaker told him it was too showy, says Mr. Riseman.

The bird nests, like many of Mr. Riseman's ideas, faced some pushback from his designer, Los Angeles based Nicole Sassaman, and architects at Carpenter Sellers Del Gatto. In some areas Mr. Riseman gave in (at one point he wanted the living-room floor covered in AstroTurf).

Others times he prevailed. The chandelier above the dining table is made of broken pieces of china, so "the same pieces you are eating off are exploding over your head," he says.

Architect Rick Sellers says Mr. Riseman's ideas made the project fun. "Even if ideas seem outlandish you don't want to throw them out because it can end up somewhere good," he says.

Getting attention is a skill Mr. Riseman honed in his professional life. He co-founded Green Dot with friend Steve Strelt in Pasadena, Calif., in 1999. The startup became a leading company in its field that went public in 2010. Mr. Riseman was the frontman, responsible for promoting the idea, experience he had from decades spent in radio ad sales.

A divorced father of two, Mr. Riseman was living in Marina del Rey, Calif., when he first went to Las Vegas for a friend's bachelor party in 1996. He saw Nevada as a great place to start a business (low taxes, an international airport close to the Strip), so he moved there for his latest venture—a self-funded online program that he says will reinvent marriage. It is a paid-subscription program that re-connects couples using tools that encourage conversations and lead to agreements.

Mr. Riseman lives in Vegas full time, but still owns a house in Marina del Rey. His daughter Chelsea, 30, says of the penthouse: "At first I thought it was ridiculous, but if you work really hard your whole life, and this makes you happy, then why not?" Her favorite room is the bird's nest bathroom. "It's cool for a dad—just the right amount of craziness."

Illustrations by Lucifina Kovacs