

LAS **Vegas Life**

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Super Structures



Three designs that are building the city's architectural momentum

by Bill Fox
photography by Jeffrey Green





Drive-by blandity kidnaps my attention as I drive around Las Vegas to visit its best buildings. The town has grown so fast that a single recent technology, frost-resistant stucco, has captured virtually its entire look. The textured buff walls and endless acreage of red tile roofs now rival the Red Rock cliffs as geographic features of the Valley and diminish the Strip to a thin dividing line between subdivisions.

This rapid growth, however, equals a massive inflow of construction funds, which sooner or later attracts interesting architecture. Las Vegas is no exception, and within its private, public and commercial buildings you can find leadership structures that provide responses to the landscape other than shoddy miniatures of Mediterranean villas.

Summerlin, one of the larger and more expensive subdivisions in the West, hosts gated enclaves for people with enough money to commission genuine architectural intelligence. Most of the residents, baby boomers brought up on Disney films, instead opt for bloated tract homes that consume their sites. They cloak these generic floor plans with details fantasized out of Tudor or Georgian or vaguely Sevillean traditions, then cram intense and inappropriate foliage around them. The results, which I pass by on streets lined, absurdly, with everything from Scotch pines to exotic hardwoods, are ostentatious instead of

impressive, their front doors smirking with wealth. The rigorously spare residence of Roger Thomas, designed by internationally renowned architect Mark Mack, is a rare exception.

In comparison to its neighbors, the house is modest: a single-story assemblage of rectangles containing only 4,000 square feet and sited well back from the street behind seven agaves and other arid natives. Driving up to it, I'm afforded a profound relief by encountering a house that actually belongs in the landscape. The pigment-impregnated stucco glows in red, straw and white, a savory geometry. The front door, a massive steel sculpture riveted together in the architect's trademark pinwheel design, is barely visible from the street.

Entering the home, the sound of water greets me, and I find three wings defining a courtyard that contains both decorative and functional pools. Where I expect to see a fourth wing at the far end, instead, a wall has been lifted up on

its side to bridge the tops of the two facing wings. This floating slab, pierced by a circular cutout through which a large disk of sunlight slowly paces around the patio, turns the house into a variation on the oldest dwelling design on the planet, a Mesopotamian paradise garden aligned at right angles around the interior life. The house is proportioned so perfectly inside and out that I forget that its walls are 20 feet high, a trait peculiar to Mack's houses, which are comfortable despite their large dimensions. It is a design that encourages protocol, but also music and laughter; it shields you from the desert and is an enclosure I leave with reluctance.

The architect, who lives in Los Angeles, has built his reputation around bold houses with memorable palettes and exacting finishes; his clients tend to be people who know enough about architecture to trust how he will resolve their personal needs to the demands of the site. The house that Mack has designed for Thomas, one of Nevada's more urbane citizens, is perhaps the single most successful residence in Southern Nevada. As I drive out of Summerlin, I'm thinking that if it looks out of place to some of the neighbors, they should consider tearing down their own houses and starting over.

In the middle of the city, but at the other end of its architectural spectrum, are many of its public buildings—libraries, schools, courthouses. Las

The clean, spare lines of Roger Thomas' house in Summerlin, far left and top center, are a perfect complement to the sun-and-sand-scoured feel of the desert Southwest. The Tate & Snyder building, below and bottom center, adapts a similar appropriate-to-the-land approach to the greater complexities of a commercial building.



Vegas had an undistinguished history of civic construction until the library system commissioned noteworthy artists such as Antoine Predock and Michael Graves in the mid-1980s to transform the otherwise moribund civic infrastructure into landmarks that could hold their own with the escalating visual excesses of the Strip. Unlike City Hall—the hulking marble facade of which turns its back to everything around it—the libraries opened up the local vocabulary enough for the more successful buildings that would follow, most notably the Clark County Government Center.

Constructed of red sandstone and organized in a semicircle that faces Red Rock Canyon, the Government Center is the antithesis of City Hall, and I feel welcomed as I walk out into the public amphitheater at its center. Offset left behind its stage is the hundred-foot-high County Room, an atrium 80 feet in diameter that was inspired by both Anasazi architecture and Mouse's Tank in the Valley of Fire. A low pyramid behind me houses the cafeteria and echoes the footprint of Lone Mountain. I'm embraced in back by a curved arcade that completes the spiral design of the atrium, a motif echoed in the petroglyphs scattered about the walls.

Marooned in the abandoned rail yard between casinos, commercial streets and Interstate 15, the center commands your curiosity when first seen, and it has sustained my interest during repeat visits. The Domingo Cambeiro design is asym-

metrical and detailed enough to provide a continual sense of discovery. And where City Hall presents government as a cold modernist machine, the county complex feels as if you are entering a civilization rooted in deep time and large space, a perfect foil to the Euro-inspired frenzy of the Strip.

By now it should be clear that I'm defining the best buildings in Las Vegas by how well they openly address their situation in the desert with a distinctive style, no matter the source of inspiration. There's nothing wrong, per se, with Tudor mansions and Mediterranean villas. It's just that the former make more sense when their surroundings are the forest from which they derive their timbers, and the latter when they are situated in a landscape balanced by a large blue expanse of water from which cool breezes arrive. This isn't just a matter of visuals, but of economic and environmental common sense. And where better to find a commercial building that reflects this philosophy than the offices of a local architectural practice.

The growth of Las Vegas has nurtured some of the healthiest architectural firms in the country. Tate & Snyder, one of the largest in town, employs 60 people who work in a building designed by one of the principals, Windom Kinsey. Its architects are responsible for many of the better designs in Las Vegas, including the new terminal at the airport, Horizon High School and the community college buildings on West Charleston Boulevard.

They're good enough, in fact, to reverse the traditional flow of design inspiration from Los Angeles, having been commissioned recently to do a signature building at Cal State-Los Angeles, the first Las Vegas architectural firm to work in the movie megalopolis.

The Tate & Snyder building, built in Green Valley in 1994 and expanded two years ago, shares with the Mark Mack house a functional geometry not obvious from the outside, but immediately apparent as I enter. What appears from the parking lot to be a simple one-story building—albeit one dressed in desert-inflected colors akin to Mack's, and with minimalist windows—drops dramatically out from the mezzanine level of its reception area into a two-story open studio. Exposed structural steel and mechanicals, embellished with carefully detailed railings and models of various projects, provide an instant work plan for the building. Walking into this workplace, you know instinctively where everything is and how ideas flow from the conference room to the work floor and copying machines.

This is complemented by the handsome engineering of the south wall, where four rows of eight-deep cubicles are raked out over the downhill side of the site. The regularity of the wall reinforces our sense of the building as a design factory while helping to regulate the interior light and temperature with a passive solar system.

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The bank teller is puzzled. "Can I help you, gentlemen?" she calls across the lobby to where the two of us are standing. "No," Eric Strain replies. "We're just out looking at some buildings." Hmmm ... two guys idling by the door (one with a note pad), examining the interior, pointing at its high ceiling and generous windows (or maybe the security cams) ... She'll be on yellow alert for the next few days.

Thing is, we are casing the joint. The First Security Bank in Green Valley is

The Lied Library, UNLV. This is one big building. One big, impressive building: five stories, 301,000 square feet. Although it's still under construction at the time of the tour—under the watchful eye of Welles Pugsley Architects, which revamped the original design—its main features are obvious: a steeply curved roof and a huge, five-story atrium with full-frontal glass.

The curve will bounce natural light into the atrium, while the wall will make visible the building's guts—book stacks,

one end is sheathed in a different stone, lending the whole structure a pleasingly complicated appearance. A screened-in courtyard up front is a swell touch.

"It doesn't try to be more than it is," Strain says. At the same time it seeks to be the best of what it's supposed to be.

Community College—West Charleston Campus (pictured). Strain favors color in architecture, partly as a response to the limited palette used by local developers (his own house was described on the House and



part of a tour that Strain, an architect, hosts when asked by visiting architects. Its aim: to show off some of the city's better locally designed buildings. (He fields inquiries through the Las Vegas chapter of the American Institute of Architects; he's next year's president.) He's giving *Las Vegas Life* a preview.

The dozen or so structures, from custom homes to government buildings, have all won awards in AIA design contests, and none are resorts; architects don't need help examining the Strip. A few selections are obvious—the new terminal at the airport—but most are not. Some highlights:

Timothy Reardon's dentist office. This building, by Holmes Sabatini Associated Architects, isn't much at first glance. Just two short, facing rows of glass-fronted offices, quite utilitarian. But it embodies a concept. Between the rows, where the spacious hallway should be, is an outdoor walkway. Shaded, landscaped, open-air, it pulls the outdoors into the design.

Of course, local convention is to leave the outdoors out; as you may have heard, this is a desert. "But the temperature is actually livable much of the year," Strain notes. "At least it's not 10 degrees half the year, the way it is in Minnesota." This particular building may not take a breakthrough step toward an indoor/outdoor aesthetic, "but at least it's a gesture to what could be," Strain says. "It's something that should be looked at."

Drive by Architecture

Two guys looking at some cool buildings

by Scott Dickensheets • photography by Jenna Bodnar

computer stations. From within the atrium you'll be able to view what is perhaps the building's most curious feature, an automated book-retrieval system. Books that haven't been checked out in five years will be housed in a special room. At the push of a button, robotic cranes will grope for and fetch a bin containing the old volume you want. In its depiction of information being moved from one location to another, it will, when you think about it, be a literal simulation of a brain.

It's due to open for the spring semester.

North Las Vegas Maintenance Facility. Strain included this one, designed by Tate & Snyder, because of what it isn't. It's neither a lavish civic statement, à la the County Government Center, nor a drab hunk of municipal plop architecture.

This one neatly articulates its space, with high windows that admit natural light without roasting the occupants in direct sunlight. Inside, the layout is efficient, while outside, the stone materials are an appealing departure from the usual office-building look. A room at

Garden cable channel as "the color box"). So the eye-popping, traffic-slowing color scheme here makes this a natural for his tour.

"You must love this," I say as we walk amid the totally rad purples, blues and yellows of the new, modernish campus buildings designed by local firms Carpenter Sellers Associates and RAFL.

"Not really," he admits. It spazzes! It's too much! He applauds the do-something-different impulse behind the attempt—led by college president Richard Moore—just not the result.

"My idea of a campus is that it should be more than a single idea," Strain says. The diverse student body and brew of ideas associated with a college should be made manifest in a group of individual buildings, rather than trying to link everything by an overbearing color scheme. The community's mixed feelings about the buildings seem to second his emotion.

Home sweet home. One of the most engaging stops is ... Strain's own house. The color box! Of course, you can't tell

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buying art

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too, likes to see a third down, "with monthly payments for six months or so."

And why is art so damn expensive?

As Beckmann points out, what we think of as "art"—a painting, a sculpture—is really the end product of what art truly is: a creative process between artist, materials and ideas. It's hard to put a price tag on that sort of thing.

"I usually base it on what I've sold similar pieces for in the past," he says. He also factors in parts and labor, research time and his own educated sense of what each piece is worth.

"We'll tell the artist if we think it's too much or too little," Stanford says. "But we can't ask him to change his prices."

How much does the gallery tack on?

According to Maly, a piece you buy from Art Encounter for \$500 probably cost him \$250 or \$300. The gallery's cut varies at Smallworks. "The last few shows we've done we haven't made anywhere near 50 percent," Stanford says. He declined to identify a specific markup, because there isn't a specific markup. "It varies on almost everything," he says.

A nonprofit gallery typically keeps even less, 20 percent or so.

Can I try to haggle 'em down a little?

You can try all you want. Just don't expect it to work. "We as a gallery are pretty much set," says Maly. "We rent the spaces to the artists and they set the prices. So it's pretty much as marked."

Or else expect it to work. "Sure, we'll negotiate," Stanford says. "Some things we can haggle on better than others; some things we can't. But we're not offended if people want to talk price."

What if I get it home and it icks up my house? Can I take it back?

Smallworks: Yes, within 30 days.

Art Encounter: Buyers have "a reasonable time," 48 hours or so, Maly says. "They should know that quickly if it's not working."

Sounds like we're on our way to a little economic impact!

Indeed. "We've seen some signs of improvement," Stanford says. "Such as sales. We've had some!" ♥

drive by architecture

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that from the outside. Outside, it's a basic tract job, one cookie-cutter house in a neighborhood like a cookie sheet.

Inside, the walls and cabinets are painted bright, interlocking colors. Art hangs on the walls. The furniture is whacked-out custom stuff (a stainless-steel table, a crazy-leaning drawer unit). Part of the floor is simply the foundation concrete, stained. Even their daughter's room gets in on the fun with different colors splattered on the walls and ceiling.

So, within this utterly conventional shell exists an utterly customized environment. In a town where the housing choices amount to picking a variation on the same theme wherever you go, it's a valuable reminder. It points the way to decorating individuality in our CC&R'd-to-death suburban fastness: Pick up a paintbrush and a bucket of, say, red—better yet, splatter that paint around. Peel up some carpet. And maybe touring architects will stop by your house, too. ♣

super structures

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Anchoring the east end of this overhang is a red, two-story fin with a large square cut out of it. As opposed to the trendy nonbearing walls projecting out of other buildings around town, a concession to contemporary fashion, this element actually contains a hallway, running from the reception desk past the conference room, and a stairwell. It's a functional focal point, not a gratuitous one.

The opposite end of the building is now balanced by an addition, its southern windows gridded internally with a shade system, and its blunt west face clad in corrugated metal, which reflects heat away from the building while balancing the exterior textures. This is one of those very few buildings in America actually improved by an addition, versus suffering a subtraction from its original design.

All three of these are buildings to which I'll return with a sense of longing fulfilled. None of them substitute over-scaling for intelligence in a presumptive attempt to impress, a mistake made as often in New York and Los Angeles as along the Strip. These are structures coherent in their shape and function; they

offer compelling detail up close and serve their purposes humanely in an environment hostile to humans—but none of them were achieved easily, each requiring a unique developmental process. The Thomas residence benefited from the cooperative intelligence of a client who is himself a design professional. The county complex took years for a public commissioning body to select an architect, another kind of acquired knowledge. And the office building had to answer as a show-place to clients as well as be a performance space for its inhabitants.

I would guess that Las Vegas has a higher ratio of available funds to building projects than any other city in the world as we go into the next century. Instead of leading the world in architectural stage sets catering to the lowest common denominator of media-inspired fantasies, it can afford to become the most aesthetic and efficient desert city on the planet. Or so these three buildings compel us to hope. ♦

show rooms

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designer Leslie Parraguirre of Colours Inc., the smooth white adobe walls, heart pine floor and tongue-in-groove Douglas fir ceiling form the perfect backdrop for dark leather sofas, a set of comfortable wing chairs and rich burgundy, forest green and navy textiles. The built-in media cabinet, fashioned out of pine and willow twigs by a craftsman in Utah, holds a reproduction Frederic Remington bronze. A William Matthews watercolor of two grizzled ranchers hangs in a niche beside the beehive fireplace. Above, lodgepole pine rails that local artisans tied with rawhide ring the room on the second floor, which affords an excellent view of the wrought-iron and mica chandelier topped by an elk-hide tepee.

Here and there, memorabilia such as Gary's childhood rocker, his father's antique rifles, friends' used chaps, an old branding iron and a Navajo blanket lend an air of lived-in authenticity. These objects are more than mere stage props or museum artifacts, however. For the Crowes and their two young children, they're tangible connections to the past. As Susan puts it: "Las Vegas used to be a dusty cowboy town, so we wanted a home in keeping with its history." And their own. ♦