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Stripping down to a 20th-century shell

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There's more to Vegas than George Clooney-sponsored luxury condos and titillating neo-Burlesque bars. In fact, far from the strip, the once abandoned downtown district is in the midst of a revival, driven by an underground rock scene that is a locals' refuge from the tourist hordes and by an emerging cluster of furniture and design community – turbocharged by a new Frank Gehrydesigned Alzheimer's research facility.

Artist Tim Bavington, 39, lives in the centre of it all. "Vegas amazes me," he says. "It still keeps getting more exciting and there's always the feeling that it's a great place to be."

Bavington was born in the UK but escaped to America straight after his Alevels to study art in California. He ended up marooned in cartoons, spending a decade as one of the team producing Bart-emblazoned spin-off product for *The* Simpsons. But he eventually moved away, enrolling in the graduate fine arts programme at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Through that degree, he rediscovered the conceptual, abstract style he'd road-

tested at university 10 years earlier, looking to Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and especially the stripey op-art work of Bridget Riley as influences. Bavington's own splashy airbrushed canvases match musical notes with colour tones, the width of each stripe corresponding to the length of a note. Now, his work is in collections across the US, including New York's Museum of Modern Art, which recently snapped up "Physical S.E.X.", a piece Bavington describes as "a screaming hard rock guitar solo" inspired by a song by glamrock band The Darkness.

Though his Pop Art-like paintings are acid bright, Bavington himself is a wry, modest man, who still retains a soft British accent even after two decades abroad. And when he talks, it's clear that that he's almost as passionate about his home, and his adopted hometown, as he is about his art.

Tim and his wife, Kim Crisostomo, also an artist, snapped up a low-slung ranch-style bungalow in downtown Vegas eight years ago. This was before retro-minded hipsters repopularised the washed-up glamour of the area, and the couple paid just \$200,000 for the 4,000 sq ft, five-bedroom, five-bathroom space. It was something of a risky bet, but Bavington guessed it would pay off.

[scion of the casino pioneers] lived opposite us for a while and next door is a casino owner who's been there since the late 1950s." The couple's own home is a 1964 mid-century masterpiece, built for a local surgeon, although by the time they bought it, the interior was in a terrible state. "It was done up in a Mormon country house aesthetic, with five chandeliers," Bavington chuckles. "So we stripped it down to its bare bones."

"Downtown was the first swanky neighbourhood," he explains. "Jack Binion

typical mid-century stone fireplaces and brick walls – a major bonus since most contemporary tract homes have wooden frames. Of course Bavington still grumbles about the poor cellphone reception indoors.

The fundamentals unearthed were impressive: tongue-and-groove ceilings,

were a beautiful old cherry mahogany so we restored them to their original, minimal look." There's no question, however, that the house's best asset, for two artists at

least, is the butterfly roof. "It's really, really unusual, even for that period.

"For us, the house is all about its raw materials: a flagstone entryway, wood

ceilings, lots of masonry work," he says. "We discovered that all the cabinets

Normally, roofs are gabled upwards, but this dips down in the middle. It feeds light indoors and the bouncing of the ambient light is really great." The house is indeed shot throughout with sunlight, thanks not only to the roof but also a central courtyard much like the ones in the homes architect Joseph

Eichler built in southern California. "It was originally open completely to the sky with a palm tree shooting up through the middle, but the previous owner put a barrel vault skylight over it that ultimately we'd like to take out," Bavington says. "For now, we have a flowerbed with bamboo growing out of it." As for furniture, the couple have opted for era-appropriate reproduction and vintage classics by Eames, Knoll and others. But aside from some bright blue

sofas and a swirly Paul Smith rug in the living room, the colours are mostly neutral. "It's all about natural colours as the perfect backdrop for the art we collect," Bavington says. In any artist's homes, he adds, it's the walls that really matter. "Most people buy art to decorate the house, but . . . for an artist, it's not decoration. One of the best things about being an artist is I can trade my work with other artists. It's the best way to collect art I can't afford." Soon, Bavington hopes to transform his passion for interiors into a commercial

concern. Having already produced a line of high-end notecards with New York's Industries Stationery, he's now working on wallpaper featuring his bright conceptual stripes. Still, the artist in him winces as he talks about it. "We're not necessarily going to market it as wallpaper," he says. "Maybe sitespecific one-offs here and there." No word on which rock band he'll be using as inspiration. www.timbavington.com

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