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DESIGN 2002

## MTV Does Vegas

### The "Real World" cast lives it up in a snazzy high-rise suite designed for intimacy, not privacy.

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LAS VEGAS -- "My house in Cutoff is, like, a country house," says the all-smiles Trichelle, a 22-year-old from an aptly named rural Louisiana town, soon after the opening credits of the season premiere episode of MTV's "The Real World." The cameras-in-the-house show that helped unleash a flood of so-called reality programming begins its 12th season on Sept. 17, set this time in the new youth-oriented Palms Casino Resort just off the Las Vegas strip.

"This," drawls Trichelle, who--like all "Real World" cast members--uses only her first name, "is a *city* house."

To even call the show's setting a house is a stretch. A three-bedroom, full-service high-roller hotel suite is more like it. "Real World's" trademark device is to see what kind of intimacy can result when you make roommates of seven photogenic twentysomethings who first meet in their quasi-dormitory living situation.

As "Real World" moved to the very *unreal* world of Vegas, the producers left behind the Ikea-style décor of their lofts and houses of past seasons. This time, the cast lives in souped-up modern style on the 28th floor of a casino resort, with incredible views out their windows and a relentless 24-hour scene just below.

Las Vegas is a place where what you do away from the bedroom is often more alluring than anything you can do in a room with a bed. As a result, the show's creators had to make their apartment snazzy enough to suit the setting, cozy enough to invite conversation or ... whatever ... and yet still be an unimposing backdrop for "real lives."

"Real World" expects the cast to get out, get jobs, eat in restaurants, have friends drop by, and do normal things like talk on the phone. Part of the voyeuristic appeal relies on the cast living fully exposed lives. And for it to work, the backdrop that is their home--the setting where feelings are confessed and intimacy occurs--is key.

Walk into the "Real World" suite today and it looks pretty much as it did when the cast lived there from mid-February until late June of this year. Palms owner George Maloof has taken care to preserve what the casino and MTV created together, and he is marketing the space to his top customers, personally deciding who can stay there--"high-rollers, celebrities and sports people" being his first choice, he says. A far cry from the wide-eyed aspirants who appear in the show.

Maloof says the project cost him \$2 million. He paid to configure the rooms and decorate the space, and MTV, which won't say how much it spent on the apartment, added some of the fine touches, including artworks and other details.

Maloof used as designers the L.A.-based Jerde Partnership, which had designed the rest of the Palms resort-casino, because he wanted to give the apartment the same signature look. The 2,900-square-foot suite was created by demolishing six hotel rooms, and the entire floor had to remain empty for seven months to accommodate the setup, including 4 1/2 months of taping. An additional four rooms surrounding the suite were used for production. It was a small price to pay, Maloof says, for the exposure that the show will afford his \$265-million on Palms enterprise. Beyond the suite, the resort's high-rise exterior, signage and every bar, dance club and restaurant all become regular fixtures in the show.

There's a definite "wow" effect to Jerde's interior design, created by Sharmila Tankha in partnership with Maloof and Tracy Chaplin, the show's executive producer. The circular suite has three very small bedrooms on one side, two with two queen beds, and a third with three. None of the rooms have doors, just curtains. Quirks abound throughout: The kitchen doesn't have a sink, although the adjacent bar has two, and showers are designed for use by two or more. Three washbasins, all in a tightly fitting row, stand out in the open hallway, just outside the bedrooms, and they all have only small mirrors. A multi-person hot tub gets nearly as much space as the living room, and the dining table is made of transparent plastic cast with dice inside--the only direct reference to gambling.

"The show is about voyeurism," Chaplin says, "and we needed to create unique living spaces for the cast." The sight-lines, he says, drive the flow of the design. In the shower, for example, you can see through windows into the living room and the bath, inviting inclusion--and a bit of intrusion.

There's a pool table, a lounge with a jellyfish tank for quiet time, and a larger living room with enough sofas and chairs for a group chat. Large hanging orange pads create a booth-like space, providing semi-privacy for phone conversations, and the requisite "confessional"--where the psychodramas are worked through--is hidden in its own central, closet-like space.

Frank, 23, who prior to the show lived with his parents in Lewisberg, Penn., and is now entering business school at USC, says he averaged about two confessionals a day for the first two weeks.

"I hated, hated, hated that there were no doors," he said in a recent conversation from his new Brentwood apartment, which he says is nothing like his home on "Real World." "That apartment ruined me for all other apartments," he says, although it had limitations. Sharing bathroom facilities with three women was one, although there were alternatives: "We gave up showering there because we had a huge spa downstairs" in the resort, he said. "If you used the bathroom in the apartment, you had to clean up. It got slimy."

Indeed, the design for a "Real World" apartment does much to determine, even manipulate, how the cast interacts. Not only because it is the best place for surveillance--there's more "control," as producer Chaplin describes it--but also because the distinct spaces naturally lead to different kinds of experiences, the essence of all well-considered design.

Arissa, 23, who grew up in a tough neighborhood of Boston, came to "Real World" from a job at an accounting firm and is now moving to Los Angeles to work as a model. She says she was one of the few who spent a lot of her free time at home in the Vegas apartment, and the sofa that sat in front of the jellyfish aquarium became a favorite spot for her.

"The couch was a big pillow," she says, "I spent so much time there, just reading and looking out the window. That was the one place that was really comfortable that made it a home. From there you could see the hallways, the phone room, the pool table, and there was always something going on. When you woke up from a nap, you could see who's doing what."

Chaplin has worked on eight "Real World" shows and says that by now, he pretty much knows that some situations are going to happen. "I know that two people are going to end up in a shower," he said, "so we create a shower that suits our purpose. Same thing with the communal bath."

Previous casts had sometimes complained that they felt like they were living in a set, rather than a home, he said, so for this production they tried hard to make the space more homey.

Nevertheless, there are limitations, many unexpected, to having seven grown people living in a tight space. And real intimacy is not the only problem when there's at least one camera crew next to you at all times. "I cooked a lot," Arissa says. "The others ate out more than me, but I cooked pasta all the time. And I'd be at the sink pouring out the water, and the camera guy would be right there. I'd have to say, 'Look, I'm going to burn your arm.'"

Reality can be tough.

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