

RIGHT AT HOME

It's Showtime! Staging a House for Sale

When you put your house on the market, it may start to feel less like a place to live and more like a set to be decorated.



By **Ronda Kaysen**

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My dresser would have to go. Leave two dressers in a master bedroom and a potential buyer might suspect the closets are small.

Spoiler alert: They *are* small.

That wouldn't be the only change I'd have to make if I put my house on the market and opened it up to a parade of strangers. My new bedspread, the one I bought after a year of searching for the perfect midcentury look, wouldn't cut it, either. Instead, my bedroom was apparently begging for a fluffy white duvet with plenty of throw pillows. Throw pillows, you see, are key to selling a house. They should be big, bold and abundant, or so I've been told.

I'd invited my real estate broker over to help me decide whether I should sell my house and buy a larger one. As she toured my home, telling me what would need to be done to make it more appealing to potential buyers, I began to see that readying a house for sale is not unlike decorating a stage for a play, and perhaps just as hard. Consider these two basic rules of home staging.

One: Your house should not appear to be lived in by real people who own stuff.

Two: Buyers, who by their very nature apparently lack imagination, are wowed by "greige," a color neither gray nor beige, but one where personal flair goes to die. (In other words, paint all your walls a pale shade of greige.)

She pointed to a light fixture at the top of the stairs that had been installed by a previous owner and that, I admit, is dated. But who really cares about a small, yet surprisingly effective, fixture at the top of the stairs? Buyers, that's who.

"They'll see it out of the corner of their eye, they might not even realize it," she said. "But they'll think of their grandmother."

And if there's one person you do not want buyers thinking about when they tour your house, it's grandma. "They'll think your house is old," she explained, and trotted down the stairs.

But my house is old, I thought.

And so I began to see my house not as the place where I live my life, but as a set to be dressed so someone else could briefly live out a fantasy as they wandered through it.

And then maybe pay me a lot of money.

Home staging has become big business. What was once an indulgence for the luxury market has trickled down to the middle market, with sellers shelling out huge sums to transform their living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms into (greige) resort-like retreats meant to wow a potential buyer into not noticing that the living room is oddly shaped, with no logical place to put a television, or that the bathroom window looks out on the air shaft from the neighboring apartment building.

A 2017 National Association of Realtors survey found that 38 percent of brokers staged all of their listings, up from 34 percent in 2015, with almost half of those brokers reporting that staging a home increased the selling price.

The trend has been fueled in part by an endless loop of home makeover shows on networks like HGTV, where we watch homeowners burst into tears of joy at the sight of a shag rug and a statement wingback chair. There's a good chance the furniture will be gone with the production crew, just like the furniture in that house or apartment you buy. But somehow, a well-appointed room convinces us that the perfect home is just one oversized brass mirror away.

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"You're creating a dream for the buyer," said Donna M. Dazzo, the president of Designed to Appeal, a New York City home-staging company. "We're just emotional creatures and we're shopping based on emotion."

But the dream doesn't come cheap: Staging an empty property costs around 1 to 3 percent of the list price, depending on the region of the country, according to the Real Estate Staging Association. Sellers typically pay for the work. Even those who don't spend thousands of dollars on a wholesale transformation do spend weeks cleaning, clearing out clutter, repositioning the furniture and, of course, tossing around the throw pillows, all to make their home feel like an idealized version of itself.

Scott Hunter and Joe Fazio spent \$28,000 this summer staging their two-bedroom condo in the South Street Seaport in Manhattan. It had been sitting on the market for a year with no bites, so their broker, Amy Stein of Corcoran, suggested they stage it and drop the price to \$1.995 million.

Mr. Hunter and Mr. Fazio, both of whom worked in finance before they retired, were surprised by the transformation, particularly by how the stager, Studio D, managed to make an oddly shaped foyer look like a useful sitting room with a small sofa and coffee table. They were as dazzled as they hoped some future buyer might be. "We said: Wow!" Mr. Fazio said. "For the first time, that space comes alive."

Between the makeover and the lower price (the apartment was originally listed for \$2.45 million), the open houses have been busier, and the listing has gotten more traffic online, Mr. Fazio said. But no one has made an offer yet.

Staging is ultimately more about theater than interior design. Stagers select an accent chair not because it would make for a great spot to curl up and read a book, but because it's just the right size to make that weird nook look useful. No one expects the buyer to really live that way, and in some cases, you wouldn't even want to try. "Never sit on a staged bed," warned Jane Saidenberg, the managing director of the New York office of Studio D. "Sometimes we have to MacGyver it."

Do some house hunting and odds are your broker (the same one who may have insisted you stage your old place) will spend the day reminding you to ignore the flawless bowl of fruit on the kitchen table, and instead look at the countertop beneath it — the thing you're actually buying.

But who wants to think about boring stuff like boilers and square footage? Instead, staging lets you walk in and "go on a journey," as Ms. Saidenberg put it. It is meant to divert your eye from the shortcomings, so you can see the potential, and maybe have a little fun imagining what your life would be like after you dole out a huge sum of money.

"Why are you O.K. with walking out of Anthropologie paying \$100 for a T-shirt?" my broker, Leslie Kunkin, a sales associate for West of Hudson Realty Group in Montclair, N.J., asked me soon after she toured my house. "When you walk into the store it feels different, and when you get home, you've got that nice waxy bag."

But unlike an Anthropologie T-shirt, you can't return the house if you later realize that it doesn't fit.

As I considered all I'd have to do to package my house properly, I began to wonder about those other staged houses, the ones I would be looking at if I decided to move. Would I be able to see through the theater and actually know if the house was worth all the effort and money it would take to buy it? Or would I be distracted by the shiny objects and get swept up in the fantasy?

So I decided to put the fantasy future on hold for now and continue to make do with my small closets and the two dressers in the master bedroom.

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