

REAL ESTATE



Mary Umberger

Realty TV just got a bit closer to reality TV

Whenever I watch "House Hunters" on the HGTV cable channel, I find myself yelling at the television.

The show takes a stab at capturing the stresses of buying real estate, except that it's the Little Golden Books version: No buyer ever frets that the furnace is an antique and the roof looks like it will blow away in the next storm. The real estate agent never has to referee a hissy fit over whether the chandelier stays with the deal or goes with the sellers. And, amazingly, the buyers always qualify for a mortgage, just like that.

Reality TV is one thing, realty TV is another.

But television hasn't given up. A few days ago I witnessed the taping of a segment of A&E's new series, "Sell This House!" and I guess you'd call it progress.

The premise is that "desperate" homeowners (in the words of the show's promotional material) get a bunch of buyers to blurt out, on camera, just what they don't like about a property.

And "the cattier the better," as a producer explained to visitors waiting to tour a pleasant house in North Barrington that has been on the market since May 3, with but two dozen showings and not a single offer.

The next day, a crew comprising homeowners Kathy and Chris Brady, Baird & Warner real estate agent Inga Sosnowski and assorted friends joined an interior designer in pulling off a one-day guerrilla makeover — on a \$300 budget — of rooms that got the harshest reactions.

In this case, particular attention will be paid to the master bath, which seems to merit Scarlet Letter revulsion because it's "dated." The SWAT team will prime and paint over its wallpaper and add accessories. They'll remove the master bedroom's wall-to-wall carpeting to expose the hardwood underneath. And, they'll bring in new bedding.

The comments of the visitors and the show's designer, Roger Hazard, had me ready to believe that one bedroom was so offensively cluttered that the original "Odd Couple" could have been filmed in it. But when I saw it, I was disappointed to find it a typical teen space — tidier, in fact, if my own home is any barometer.

The show's makeover philosophy, according to Hazard, is not unlike what guides the decor in model homes.

"We want drama so people will remember the house," he said. "Each room should have a surprise element, something that strikes an emotion, so that it will stick in their minds."

"Most people previewing homes are women, who see it before they bring their husbands," explained Hazard, who has been "staging" homes for sale for a decade. "The house should be what women react to — beautiful bedrooms, master suite and kitchen."

The results will air sometime in September; the new show is now seen at 1 p.m. Saturday and 4 p.m. Sunday.

I'm sure that, like most decorating shows, "Sell This House!" will have plenty of handy tips for the masses, and I don't even quibble with the premise that buyers these days are picky, picky, picky. I hear it all the time from agents.

But since when did having dark green floor tile become the equivalent of being a serial killer? When did "dated" become code for "Send in the wrecking crew"?

I rushed right home from the taping to contemplate this in my pink-and-blue, circa 1954 bathroom. I'll let you know if I finally make sense of it.

Hear Mary Umberger on WBBM Newsradio 780 at 6:21 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 7:20 a.m. each Saturday and Sunday.