



# THE FINE ART OF STAGING

## Designer can help to set stage for home buyer

BY PATRICIA MOORE  
Of The Patriot-News

**Y**ou need simple lines on a neutral canvas, a bare-bones aesthetic, an objectivity that borders on indifference.

And absolutely, positively no carpet stains.

If you want to sell your house for top dollar, designers say, think of it as a work of art-in-the-making, a blank sheet. The buyer is the artist, the seller is the paint and muscle, and the finished work is a signed sales contract.

This art form, if you will, is called staging, and it is starting to catch on in the midstate thanks in large part to such popular TV shows as A&E's "Sell This House" and HGTV's "Designed to Sell."

As the calendar heads into the biggest home-selling months, May and June, staging is sure to grow more popular even in a strong seller's market. Once fully understood, it's a

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valuable tool for getting ahead of the competition.

### Staging fetches top dollar

"Staging means creating a home environment that will sell," said Roger Hazard, designer, professional stager and star of "Sell This House."

Lisa LaPorta, designer and co-star of "Designed to Sell," agrees.

"It's about presenting your home to the buyer in such a way that you can ask for top dollar," she said.



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# HOME: Staging will bring top price for house

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Tracy Susick, a Saegertown home designer, has her own definition.

"A stager works for the seller by thinking like a buyer," she said.

Even though your name remains on the mortgage, the house, philosophically speaking, is no longer yours. It belongs to the person who will be buying from you.

## Put away family photos

Call it the anti-decorating. Prospective buyers do not want to see your house as you have lived in it. They want a plain background on which their imaginations can sketch their own lives.

"How you sell your house is not the way you live in it," LaPorta said on the phone from New York City, where she and "Designed to Sell" co-host Clive Pearse were making the rounds of talk shows.

So put away the family photos, the framed certificates, the refrigerator magnets and grandma's afghans. Pack up the computer, last season's clothes, your collection of bobblehead dolls and a good portion of the kids' toys.

And, maybe, half your furniture.

The things that make a house your home are just clutter to others. Don't assume a would-be buyer can see beyond personal items to the good bones beneath. The client is just as likely to base his decision on your ratty old futon as he is the stately fireplace in your master suite.

Listen to the designers:

"Ninety percent of the time, prospective buyers are working from emotional reactions," Hazard said.

"It's not about the homeowner's personal items or interests," said Cheri Petrina, a designer from West Hanover Twp.

"Staging depersonalizes a house to appeal to the broadest range of buyers possible," said Beth Fowler, a designer and home stager from York.

Staging doesn't necessarily turn your home into an impersonal hotel suite, but it's close.



TONY MITSASAKI, HGTV

Lisa LaPorta, host of "Designed to Sell," says you don't sell your home the way you live in it. So put away the family photos and your collection of bobblehead dolls.

## ON TV

■ "SELL THIS HOUSE," at 5 and 5:30 p.m. Sundays on A&E.

■ "DESIGNED TO SELL," 6 p.m. Sundays on HGTV.

Pay special attention to animal odors, advises Alice Winner, who owns a decorating and staging business in Derry Twp. You might no longer smell the litter box, she said, but someone new to your home will.

## STAGING IDEAS

■ Clean everything. Then clean everything again. Pay special attention to the kitchen and bathrooms. Shampoo all carpets. Polish all the wood.

■ Make all necessary repairs, such as cracked tiles, broken shutters and missing drawer pulls.

■ If the walls are beyond cleaning, cover the dirt. A few dollars of paint can go a long way toward freshening up a tired-looking interior. If it is the floors that are stained beyond repair, consider throw rugs.

■ Clear all pathways and surfaces of nonessentials. Remove dead foliage and weeds. Trim overgrown shrubs and trees.

■ Focus on the entryway and foyer. Like the old adage says, there's no second chance to make a first impression.

Patricia Moore

Make all necessary repairs — broken shutters, cracked tiles, loose knobs — so that the prospective buyer has fewer things to worry about. And lastly, let in the light.

"I've never heard a buyer complain about a house having too much light, too much storage, too much space [or that it's] too relaxing," Susick said.

## Clear of clutter, home sells

The results of home staging can be astonishing.

On a memorable episode of "Sell This House," a young Seattle couple were trying to sell their condo. Even on the West Coast, where homes sell almost before they're listed,



HAZARD

the condo had been on the market for a year.

It was easy to see why. The apartment was cluttered with too many books, too many toys and way too much furniture.

Hazard came in, did his usual thing, and, he says, it sold within days for the asking price.

A few years ago, Winner had a client, a collector, who found himself moving to a retirement village sooner than expected.

He asked Winner whether she could "straighten up the basement." Little did she

know what a job it would be. "I could not see over the boxes to the back door," she said.

She worked frantically for six months just to make a few paths through the mess, taking out bag after bag of trash. With only a month to go, the collector arranged to have a

large truck haul away as much as possible and a moving company to pack up anything they did not have time to sort and purge.

"Everyone was out of stamina and steam by this point, but the house was put on the market, and it sold within a week," Winner said.

## Time to update your home

Is your house cluttered? Dirty? Out of date?

A fresh coat of paint, a new slipcover for the sofa or an area rug in the family room can suddenly bring your home into the 21st century.

"If you haven't updated in the last 10 years, you need to know the current trends," Hazard said on the phone from New Orleans, where he was taping an episode.

For instance, he said, dark, floor-to-ceiling drapes are no longer in vogue. Natural blinds or drapes in light, neutral colors are in at this time, he said.

The same with paint. You might love the red faux finish in your dining room, but a buyer might find it garish. Better to go with white or something light.

"Neutral colors give a bigger canvas," Hazard said.

"I recommend dramatic and warm colors — not strong colors — but neutral at the same time," LaPorta said. "I would not pick sunflower yellow, but would go down the color palette to [a yellow] that's softer, grayer, beigeier."

Just as art goes through periods, a home can be linked to certain eras. But unlike art, your decorating style doesn't rise in value through the years. (Remember the harvest gold of the 1970s?)

Move out excess furniture, too. Keep just a few nice pieces in each room. You want to create the impression that the house is spacious.

"People sooo over-furnish," LaPorta said.

## Wipe, polish and scrub

When selling a home, cleanliness is essential, especially in the kitchen and bathrooms. No buyer wants to see blackened burners, dirty grout or rings around the tub.

"It doesn't take a genius to tell sellers to clean up the kitchen, make the beds and stash the dirty laundry out of sight," Susick said. And while you're at it, she advised, take your nightgowns off the back of the bedroom door.