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Staged property: Buyers beware
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—SELLERS! Would you like to unload your house faster and for more than you expect?

That, in rough terms, is what home stagers promise.

My farmhouse, I will disclose, is as backstaged as it gets. Books fill the bookcases. (This is a big no-no in the staging profession.) A vicegrip is as likely to be on the dining room table as a floral centerpiece. (A vicegrip is not a character flaw.) My idea of decluttering is to straighten the pile of read newspapers by the couch.

Now I find nothing wrong with a seller doing clean up, paint up and fix up before offering a property for sale. I would not be the first to do any of those activities, but I endorse putting one's best foot forward...given the alternative, with which I have had more experience.

Staging property is like set design in the theater. It leads the audience to look at focal points in ways that lead to certain feelings about the play. Good sets invite the audience into them by invoking emotional responses.

House stagers do the same. They use props like plants, smells, visual accents, empty space, angles, lights, colors, textures, airiness and furniture to lead a buyer to imagine living in this set.

They deploy tactical rental furniture and art in empty houses to create the imaginative magic of theater. Staged properties are clean, clutter-free, spruced up and depersonalized. Staging is intended to draw the buyer into its pretend world.

The object of this mind-tweak is to get buyers to become emotionally invested in a staged house, then make a spontaneous offer, then pay more than they should.

Staging is now an industry that describes itself as "self-regulating." Stagers can become trained, accredited and join a professional group, such as the Real Estate Staging Association at www.realestatestagingassociation.com. Hundreds of thousands of real-estate agents and others have been trained (www.stagedhomes.com).

Staging is sophisticated, customized marketing. It works. It's not dishonest in the sense of pulling a rug over termite damage in hardwood floors.

But it is intentionally manipulative. Stagers orchestrate the presentation of space to twiddle with a buyer's mind so that he does something that he might not otherwise do. Admittedly, our way of doing business with each other often tries to convince buyers that the seller's deal is better than it is.

So how can buyers defend against a MarthaStewartly correct Ficus benjamina in the entrance, a potted tree so disgustingly symmetrical and repulsively tasteful that sunbeams dance in marching-band formation on its just-spritzed leaves?

Educate yourself about staging, its purpose and how it's done. An Internet search will lead buyers to informative articles. Stagers have written books. An agent working for the buyer should be asked to ring a staging alarm when entering a magic kingdom.

Identify stage props as a way to strip them of their persuasive power. Note fluffy bath towels, linens, greenery, wild flowers in dark rooms (they suggest sunlight), yellow roses on a dining-room table, compulsive decluttering, clean-plate closets, new furniture, non-casually tossed toss pillows, items arranged in threes, cleared-off counter tops, furniture angles that draw you into a room, a bowl of limes and lemons and other focal points that thrum "Look at me!" using a low C in a harp's bass clef.

Outside note fresh paint, recently whacked shrubs, new shutters, fancy grill, ceramic yard frogs, rope hammock, an antique-looking weathervane and a new picnic table. The last five vanish at closing, if not before.

The power in these props is that, together, they represent the lifestyle that home-style magazines and television shows teach us to aspire to.

The stager scrubs away dirt and traces of the current occupants. The stager wants the buyer to think of the seller's house with all props in place, not empty and not full of the buyer's stuff.

Once a buyer recognizes staging, it becomes transparent and funny. "My, my, what a fetching woven rug with bulging knots! Is it really pre-Columbian? The limes, the limes. [Kiss your finger tips.] Quel limes!"

Consider not looking at staged properties. Stagers boast that their properties get three to ten percent more than unstaged properties. I believe them. On property that is worth \$500,000, staging puts an extra \$15,000 to \$50,000 of buyer money in a seller's pocket. Some of that extra might go for paint and shrubs, things that convey to the buyer's benefit.

But the buyer pays most of this staging premium for looking at props like

candlesticks and couch pillows that will disappear like a traveling peep show. Staging succeeds in getting buyers to pay for something that often amounts to nothing.

Since all of us are equally vulnerable to the stager's skills, perhaps a buyer should tell agents to eliminate staged properties from his look list.

Agents working for buyers might discuss ways to evaluate staged properties with their clients.

Don't look at the props. If a buyer visits a staged property, imagine the house buck naked and completely empty. That's what you're buying.

Working farms usually are well organized with a few rough edges. If you find no edges in a farmyard--piles of weathered materials, pieces of equipment, scrap from the last century—I'd be suspicious. Farmers always need such backup.

Some farms are perfectly maintained in every nip and tuck. These farmers take great pride in neatness and upkeep. If you see every fence as tight as a prison door, every road newly graveled, every gate painted—that's great. Be prepared to pay for perfection. This isn't staging; it's compulsive-maintenance disorder.

The reasons to cross off staged properties is that you will pay too much for what you're getting, and you're likely to be competing against stage-struck buyers who have fallen under the stager's Spell.

The seller has paid for the stage show, usually a minimum of several thousand dollars but often much more. Statistics from www.HomeGain.com indicate that for every dollar invested in staging, a seller gets \$4 to \$5 back in additional sales price. Where, a buyer must ask, do those extra dollars come from?

Staging raises seller expectations. It's hard to negotiate with a seller who's both out hard cash and hopeful to boot.

Since staging works, it is ever more common. My advice to buyers is to factor out staging and stick with a price that makes sense to them.

For buyers: All of what you see is not all of what you get.

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