



Updating furniture and interiors can pay off when it's time to sell your home

Stagers: Ready for prime time

By Chuck Green

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

When it was time to prepare her Mission District duplex for sale, Sue O'Callaghan gritted her teeth and reluctantly took the advice of those who said she needed to give it a new look.

To enhance the marketability of their building, O'Callaghan said, she and her son were encouraged by their real estate agents to make a number of changes, such as replacing her antique furniture with pieces of a different style. "They said, 'If you're going to put (your property) on the market, you're going to have to make it a lot more marketable by updating certain things,'" she said.

O'Callaghan, 68, a retired gift shop owner who now resides in San Diego, didn't heed their advice without some reservations. "I resisted because I didn't want my stuff subjected to possible damage — and I think it's really good-looking furniture. I've had my oriental rugs for years and they aren't cheap. I knew I was being stubborn. I dragged my feet and moaned." The building sold five days after it was listed. "We got our money," she said with a chuckle. "I heard plenty of 'I told you so's.'"

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 39 million Americans — or about 14 percent of the population — changed addresses in 2005. While that is one of the lowest rates in more than 50 years, long-distance moves are becoming slightly more common, the bureau reports.

Even though staging her home ultimately paid off for O'Callaghan, San Francisco resident Michele Spitz and her two siblings couldn't be persuaded to go the same route to sell her parents' home after they died. "We were encouraged to consider painting and removing carpets and what have you," she said. "But it's quite a luxurious home on Marina Boulevard. It's dated, but it's a unique property on a unique street."

Spitz, who has worked in real estate marketing and sales support for many years, said she didn't see the need to plunk down \$15,000 or \$20,000 on upgrades. Her instincts proved correct: The house was on the market for only 3½ weeks before it was bought by someone who had previously lived in the neighborhood. "Granted, she'll probably gut the house, but even if she hadn't been the specific buyer, the home had shown quite well," Spitz said.

The contemporary house had been gutted by her father when he purchased it in 1990, so it needed some updating, she said. Spitz said they rearranged some decorative items and removed some small pieces, but they were generally content with the home as it was.

"We didn't depersonalize it like most people would," she said. "There was an entire photo gallery on the top floor, and we decided to keep those photos."

At first, the agent thought the photos might be distracting, but after several showings, she agreed that they added warmth to the

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home.

Despite Spitz's success, Britton Jackson of Zephyr Real Estate in San Francisco, said, "When a place looks pretty, potential buyers will like it more than when it's vacant or decorated to the sellers' taste." However, she added, "There's a much more important reason to stage. San Francisco's housing stock doesn't follow a pattern like you'd see in the suburbs with the living room, dining room, kitchen and family room on one floor and the bedrooms upstairs. When they're vacant, our Victorians and Edwardians can be confusing. People often wonder if a room is a bedroom, a second liv-

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SUE O'CALLAGHAN,
San Francisco home seller

ing room or a dining room. Staging helps to define the space and give potential buyers one idea of how to get the best use of the space."

The main reason Karl Park agreed to stage his town home in Sausalito is that he had watched other properties in the area languish on the market. "I knew there were other units in my area on the market that sat for several months and went through successive price reductions. I decided if I was going to attract a quality offer and sell my unit in the shortest possible time, I'd have to make changes," said the 50-year-old, who invested \$25,000 to \$30,000 in upgrades, including placing linoleum flooring in the kitchen and one of the bathrooms, a maple hardwood floor on the entire main level and carpet in the lower living room.

"I didn't have a burning need to spend several thousand dollars on the floors and I liked the way the house looked, but a potential buyer might not have. I knew (the work) would get the townhouse in

the condition where it showed better than others in the area," said Karl, a service manager for a car dealership, who put his unit on the market late last year and received an offer a few days later.

Burning need or not, Cindy Lin, owner and principal designer of Staged4more in Burlingame, said a staged home "helps potential buyers to move in mentally and slows down the buyers during the touring process and helps them remember the listing." More importantly, she added, staged homes look better online, where most people start their house hunting. According to the National Association of Realtors, 80 percent of buyers shop online before actually seeing a home.

"A staged home photographs better than a vacant one or a non-staged, lived-in home because it's more edited and styled professionally to appeal to a broader range of buyers and to showcase the pluses and spatial relations of the listings through the photograph," noted Lin. "So staging will help to move buyers to the open houses and increase foot traffic. A staged home also sells faster in any market, no matter hot or cold."

Even while dealing with the loss of their parents, Spitz said, she and her siblings remained resolved to sell their home as they saw fit and believed in its marketability. "Overall, this was an extremely emotional experience. But we were confident it would sell, even in a slower, less-motivated real estate market."

Working with whatever mindset her clients might have, Sarah Kowalczyk of McGuire Real Estate in San Francisco said she tells sellers the consequences of not making changes "Staging can often overcome problems with a home by visually offering solutions that would be difficult to conceive, such as how a space can be used," she said. But, she added, "care must be taken of course to not overimprove for the price point."

Karl, who plans to remain in the area, didn't acquiesce to every change proposed by his stager. "I didn't agree with the paint scheme the stager proposed for the main part of the house," he said. "I preferred warmer colors."

And O'Callaghan wasn't at all shy about expressing her point of view. "It was a totally new concept to me and difficult," she said. "But as much as I knew I was going to be inconvenienced, I figured let's see how it works out. I'd suggest to anyone to just get it done and get your money."

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