

Staging lets home sing for a sale; Professionals add touches; broker pays

PAUL RESTUCCIA. Boston Herald. Boston, Mass.: Sep 26, 2003. pg. 048

** Last in a three-part series on how to get the highest price for your home this fall selling season. Copyright Boston Herald Library Sep 26, 2003

Rosemarie Murray's Revere home has been on the market for three months, but the \$549,000 property hasn't attracted much interest.

"It's a nice house with a beautiful fireplace, but it doesn't have the sparkle," admits her broker, Maura Bang, of East Boston's Century 21 Mario Real Estate. "You need something a little more glamorous for this price in Revere."

So last week, Bang brought in Maureen Reddy, a professional home "stager."

Stagers, who are usually trained in such fields as interior decorating or window dressing, help punch up a home's appearance to attract buyers.

They rearrange furniture, bring in decorative artwork and accessories, furnish unused rooms and give advice on how to fix up a home's exterior and landscaping.

Brokers who use stagers usually pick up the tab themselves, rather than passing the bill on to the seller.

"I wouldn't use a stager to sell (an inexpensive home), but it makes sense to do it on higher-end properties," Bang says. "It provides a fresh view. As a broker you develop a rapport with the seller, and it's easier to have a third party say . . . `Your drapes are hideous.' "

For \$350, Reddy - who owns DaVinci Designer Gallery in Winthrop - looked over 56-year-old Murray's house from top to bottom.

Murray has lived in the house since 1979, raising two kids there. But now that they've grown, the would-be seller says the five- bedroom house is too big for her.

Murray hasn't dropped her asking price, because the property includes a 28,000-square-foot wooded lot.

Reddy's assessment: empty-nester Murray needed to furnish empty rooms; rearrange some furniture; add artwork, pillows, window treatments and small furnishings and do some landscaping and exterior painting.

"The house looks a little tired from the outside, but the inside is actually quite nice," Reddy says. For the unused rooms, she suggested furnishing one as a library by bringing in a comfortable chair, bookshelves and books.

Reddy also advised setting up another as a dressing room, "staging" it with a small vanity, stool and soft window drapery.

For the living and dining rooms, Reddy recommended creating more warmth by putting back Oriental rugs that Murray had removed to show off the home's hardwood floors.

Reddy estimates it will cost Murray \$1,365 to tone up the home.

That includes \$560 to rent and install furniture, rugs, pillows and other "props" for three months; \$370 to spot paint the exterior trim and \$435 to weed a patio area, trim hedges and add pots of fresh mums on the porch.

Old advice that 'less is more' holds true in home staging

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Reddy has been staging homes for two years, and has a dozen years' experience in decorating and restoration.

She's also done window displays for Macy's, Pier 1 Imports and Workbench.

Like Reddy, home stager Lori Brasseur, of L.B. Designs in Salisbury, often gets called when a house isn't selling.

She says staging started in California and is starting to catch on in the Boston area.

Merrimac homeowner Charles Card's broker hired her after Card's 7-year-old, split-level languished on the market for four months.

"I was willing to do whatever it took to sell the house," Card says.

After a one-hour, \$100 consultation, Brasseur came up with ideas for rearranging furniture, spot painting and adding potted plants. Card did the actual work himself.

The job came out so well that a prospect who had previously withdrawn a bid on the home ended up buying it for \$310,000 - \$5,000 more than her original offer.

"You don't have to go out and spend a ton of money to enhance your property," says Brasseur, who has a degree in interior design and has been doing staging for three years.

Rather, Brasseur says many clients just have to thin out their existing furnishings.

"Staging is more like 'un-decorating' because you're taking away a lot of personal items," she says. "I tell clients, 'You're selling the house, but taking the home with you.'"

Besides offering advice, stagers often help would-be sellers get work done quickly.

Both Brasseur and Reddy have a network of landscapers, small contractors and suppliers from their decorating businesses that will do jobs on short notice.

"If you need an arborist or a finish carpenter on a day's notice to prepare for (an) open house, you're not going to get services that quickly on your own," Reddy says.

However, the stager adds that she's careful not to ask a seller to do too much.

For instance, Reddy thinks Murray's house has an outdated kitchen, wallpaper and paint, but doesn't recommend doing anything about it.

"The new owners are going to have their own ideas (for redecorating), and it's best to let them take care of it," she says.

Reddy is also sensitive to any suggestion that there's something "false" about staging.

In fact, she prefers calling her services "real estate enhancement."

"The term 'home staging' sounds as though we're trying to trick people," Reddy says.

But in her view, staging "is not about creating a magazine layout or a Martha Stewart fantasy" - just "accentuating the existing qualities of a home."

Looks, books, niches: Touches sell a house

Professional home stagers Maureen Reddy and Lori Brasseur offer these tips to sellers who want a home to show its best:

**** Rearrange furniture.** It's often best to move furniture away from walls, grouping pieces around a coffee table or area rug. Put throw pillows on couches for color and add accessories such as mirrors that are decorative and make rooms look larger. Also, replace any faded slip covers.

**** Steer a would-be buyer's eye to the best features.** Position lighting and room flow to highlight your home's best architectural features. If the fireplace has a beautiful wood mantel and the moldings are elaborate, make sure the woodwork is polished.

- ** Achieve balance. Be sure any artwork is hung at the right height, and also properly scaled to the room it's in and to any nearby furniture. In the master bedroom, balance a large bed by adding side tables. Be sure the bedspread isn't too dark.
- ** Streamline the kitchen. Move items off countertops, polish cabinets and hardware, put an area rug under the kitchen table. Buy shelves to store condiments.
- ** Dress up empty rooms. Create reading niches, computer rooms, small offices or libraries to help buyers envision what can go into empty spaces.
- ** Bring in the light. A gloomy house will turn off buyers. Bring as much natural light as you can, and augment it with artificial lighting to make the home bright. Mirrors also add light. Drapes and shutters should be open when would-be buyers view the property. Add twinkle lights to outside bushes for nighttime elegance.
- ** Stage the bathrooms. Baths are a good place to show that a house is "pampered." Hang a new shower curtain and add rugs, fresh flowers or plants, fluffy towels and baskets of toiletries.
- ** Declutter and depersonalize. Remove excess books and knickknacks from bookcases and shelves and into storage. Closets should have a minimal amount of clothing hanging. Remove family pictures and memorabilia from walls and shelves, so buyers don't feel they're invading your home.
- ** Enliven dead spaces. Add tall plants to dead corners of rooms, and put floral arrangements on side tables. For a quick fix for bare windows, drape long pieces of sewed cotton material.
- ** Use color carefully. Experts suggest decorating a home in neutral colors, but "neutral" doesn't mean "bland and boring." Not everything has to be beige or white. Pottery and other decorative pieces can add splashes of color. Also, a rich color such as yellow ochre or camel can accentuate your home's woodwork.
- ** Perk up landscaping. Make sure shrubs and bushes are trimmed and don't block light from coming into the home. Cut low branches on trees. If your lawn is lackluster, try planting flowers along the borders. Create edge areas around trees and add mulch. Pots of flowers also look good on porches.

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