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HOUSING SCENE

Bedazzled? Beware. Staged homes can trick the eye

Bedazzled? Beware. Touches such as pretty pillows don't mean the house is in good shape.

By Lew Sichelman

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WASHINGTON -- Maryland real estate agent Veda Fields has seen just about every selling trick in the book, but the one that takes the cake, at least in Fields' experience, was the backyard doghouse customized to match the house. It had an address, shutters, a carpeted floor and flowers in the back.

"It was presented very well, but it added no real value," said Fields, who covers Prince George's County, Md., just outside the nation's capital, for ZipRealty. "However, my clients were dog lovers and felt if the owners took that much care of the doghouse, their house must be stellar. They bought the house because it was staged."

Like designers who decorate model homes, stagers create scenarios or vignettes. To imply a romantic evening around the hearth, for example, they might throw some pillows on the floor in front of the fireplace and set out wine glasses. Or to suggest a family gathering at mealtime, they might show place settings at the dining room table.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with trying to put your best foot forward. But if you are a buyer, you have to be able to see through the tricks. And according to a new report from the National Assn. of Exclusive Buyer Agents, most buyers can't.

A survey of the group's 500 members, who only represent buyers -- they take no listings -- found that more than 4 in 5 house hunters are likely to be distracted from important issues when they tour a staged home. Worse, more than half of the respondents said that staged homes often cover up defects, including structural damage.

Staging "can make a home seem more appealing to the eye," but it won't appraise for more than the same home that hasn't been staged, the report warns. "Staging does not add square footage to the home, improve the home's location, improve the quality of the fixtures, improve the quality of the construction, increase the desirability of the floor plan or the view of the neighborhood."

Make no mistake: Staging is big. But all the focus -- so far, at least -- has been from the seller's point of view, not the buyer's.

It shouldn't be hard to spot a staged home, though, because a professional usually does it, or at least an agent trained in the art.

Sometimes stagers miss the mark. But for the most part, the buyers' agents and brokers surveyed said they are quite effective at breaking down the logical mind and getting buyers to feel emotional about a house.

Staging takes the eye away from what a buyer should really be looking at, said Maryland agent Fields, who just the other day had a client who was going back to his lender to try to borrow more than he was approved for because he fell hook, line and sinker for a staged house.

Tricks include using small, apartment-sized furniture to make rooms look larger. Or using see-through furniture -- tables with glass tops, for example, or chairs with slatted backs -- to accomplish the same goal.

More worrisome, though, is the survey finding that stagers or sellers often use furniture or wall hangings to cover up or direct a buyer's attention away from damage. In one case, the study reports, beds were used to cover up carpet stains in an otherwise vacant house. In another, a portrait hid a crack in the wall.

One agent told of pulling back brand-new satin-tasseled drapes to find a single-paned, cracked window that refused to

open and was sealed with duct tape. Another disturbing finding is that buyers tend to buy into the notion that if a house looks good, it must be well maintained. But the report warns, "This is often a false and potentially dangerous assumption."

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