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Don't be fooled by for-sale homes that are 'staged'

Real-estate agent Veda Fields has seen just about every trick in the book, including, among other things, yards sprayed with turf-green paint, solar lights that were the color of the house trim, even a fountain in a bathtub that gave the illusion that the tub was jetted.

But the one that takes the cake, at least in Fields' experience, was the back-yard doghouse custom-painted to match the house itself. It had an address, just like the house, shutters, a carpeted floor, a resting mat at the front and flowers in the back.

"It was an oversized doghouse, like the kind you can buy at Lowe's or Home Depot," she recalls. "It was presented very well, but it added no real value. However, my clients were dog lovers and felt if the owners took that much care of the doghouse, their house must be stellar."

Fields, who covers Prince George's County, Md., just outside of the nation's capital, for ZipRealty, had to talk her clients into obtaining an all-important home inspection. But she couldn't talk them out of buying the house, which the agent says was at least \$50,000 overpriced.

"They bought the house because it was 'staged,'" she says. "They bought into eye candy."

Welcome to the wonderful world of staging, which is defined at the Web site homestagingresource.com as "the preparation of a home to sell by a professional who specializes in this form of decorating."

Staging works its magic on two levels. One is basic staging, which involves, among other things, cleaning up the clutter, throwing on a fresh coat of paint inside and out, removing personal items, taking care of any deferred maintenance, removing excess furniture and pushing what's left back to the walls so the room looks more spacious.

Then there's emotional staging, which is more of an art form that attempts to compel would-be buyers into seeing themselves actually living in -- and loving -- the house.

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 with two wineglasses on the floor in front of the fireplace. Or to suggest a family gathering at mealtime, they might show place settings at the dining-room table, maybe even with some wax "food" and possibly a drip or two of vanilla heating in the oven.

See through the tricks

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. According to a new report from the National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (NAEBA), however, most buyers can't.


A survey of the group's 500 members, who represent buyers and only buyers -- they take no listings -- found that more than four out of five house hunters are likely to be distracted from important issues when

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they tour a staged home. Worse, though, is that 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."

What's the difference between staging and decorating? Simplistically, decorating is how the homeowner actually uses the house, while staging focuses on how a potential purchaser might use it.

Make no mistake: Staging is big. Stagers claim their handiwork can result in a serious payday for sellers. One says a staged house typically sells for a 6 percent premium, while another tells of one seller who spent \$2,000 on staging and netted a \$31,000 increase in the selling price.

No wonder staging has been the focus of programming on HGTV and the subject of dozens of books, articles in trade publications and industry seminars. 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.

"One of the fundamental rules of staging is that the way someone actually lives in the home is not the way they should be selling the home," the NAEBA report says.

"As a result, homeowners themselves are rarely effective at staging because they have difficulty removing themselves from the way they have lived. Professional stagers, on the other hand, have never lived in the home, so they can visualize and present the home as a sales "showplace."

Distracting the eye

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

Staging takes your eye away from what you should really be looking at, says 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.

"Staging is a good thing because it helps buyers' imaginations," she says. "But it's all just decoration. It adds no real value. Yet I'm seeing a lot of people buying into the illusion."

Fields isn't the only one who sees how the tricks work. Ann English, another ZipRealty agent who works in San Francisco's East Bay area, often finds small bedrooms with a bed and maybe a chair but no dressers or accessories, or no closet doors. "It's all very psychological," she says.

Other 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. Turned-down beds, fresh flowers, canned scents and relaxing music are also part of the stager's arsenal.

Covering up

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 huge portrait hid a "huge diagonal crack" in the bedroom wall.

One respondent told of pulling back brand-new satin-tasseled drapes to find a single-pane, cracked window that refused to open and was sealed with duct tape. This was one of a number of issues, yet her client was "disappointed" when they were pointed out to her.

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.

"Many times, staged homes take advantage of the staging to cover up deferred maintenance issues and improper construction and repair issues," it says.

"Do not assume that an attractively presented house has been well maintained," the report added.

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