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## Seeing Through The Veil of Staging

*by Broderick Perkins*

In the brave new money-tight world of housing, the growing inventory of homes is prompting more and more sellers to stage the deal so it stands out from the pack.

The same shrinking housing market that's putting lenders out of work, is cashing fat checks for stagers who transform houses full of drab rooms into model homes that rival those in a newly built development.

Those who ply the trade say staging is where art meets the real estate deal.

However, a group of real estate brokers are warning buyers a blank canvas may be a better deal than a contrived masterpiece.

Not only can a well-staged home put sparkle in buyers' eyes is can also be used to insidiously conceal defects, according to National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (NAEBA) whose members exclusively represent buyers.

Staging is to the interior of a home what curb appeal is to the exterior -- nipping and tucking, furnishing and accessorizing, buffing and polishing until the place looks like a model home -- without being too clinical. Staging can also include curb appeal -- that same love-at-first-sight appeal applied to the exterior to give a lasting impression and motivate buyers to cross the threshold in the first step toward closing the deal.

With just the right special effects, staging can transform a home into a house of dreams and help potential buyers visualize potential. Done wrong and a home can become a house of screams. Done at all and it could be a red flag, according to the NAEBA's "How To Not Get Tricked By Staging And Potentially Save \$5,645 When You Buy Your Home" a report with an over-staged title.

The NAEBA concedes honest staging can net sellers more cash and faster sales. The report cites a 2003 HomeGain survey of 2,000 real estate agents who said for the relatively small expense of cleaning, decluttering, lightening and brightening, and home staging, home sellers realized an average increase in sales price of \$5,645 -- typically more than the cost of staging.

That's because staging tugs at heart strings which, too often, are connected to the purse strings. Paying more doesn't actually make the house worth more.

Without actual code-complying home improvements, professional painting and the like, staging alone does nothing to improve the value of the home. Once the home is sold, the stager strikes the set and the pieces go back into storage.

"The biggest concern for home buyers is that the staging effects can make a home seem more appealing to the eye. However, the staging does not add square footage to the home, improve the home, improve the quality of the fixtures, improve the quality of the construction, increase the desirability of the floor plan or the views or the neighborhood," the report said.

That's the least of it.

The NAEBA also said 82 percent of its surveyed brokers and agents said buyers typically got distracted from important issues when viewing a staged home.

Visual tricks used to create the distraction included:

- Using small furniture to make a room look larger.
- Placing items to cover up problems, such as rugs hiding damaged floors, lavish curtains covering rotted window sills and artwork hung to hide wall cracks.
- Painting to cover defects and cheap paint jobs that will soon need repainting.

"The whole intent of staging is to get the buyer emotionally involved with the home. Our member agents want home buyers to see things logically, to 'see past' the staging," said Jon Boyd NAEBA president.

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