

## Act II for Home Stagers

**Sellers hire them to declutter and rearrange. Now, buyers are turning to them, too**

By Michelle Andrews

Posted 5/29/05

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When Ilse Hadda sold her roomy, three-bedroom house a year ago to move into a two-bedroom condo in Berkeley, Calif., she struggled to arrange her old furniture in her new space. Familiar pieces that had fit together so naturally before no longer connected in the same homey way. Nothing seemed to work: Her seven large wooden bookshelves, standing together in the living/dining room area, looked awkward and a little overwhelming. She couldn't find a space for her favorite leather chair amid the other furniture grouped around the living room fireplace. In an alcove off the master bedroom, her desk felt out of place and got in the way of the in-wall ironing board. "I was frustrated because it looked awful," she says.

Hadda turned to a surprising source for help: the "home stager" she'd hired earlier to strip the personality from her old home so it would be more attractive to potential buyers.

It's not as strange as it sounds. Real-estate agents often recommend that sellers hire a home stager (also known as a real-estate enhancer) to whisk through their homes and "neutralize" them before they go on the market. When "staging to sell," a home stager, sometimes with the help of a team, stashes away personal items (your collection of antique dolls, for example, or the model boat on the mantel), repaints aggressively colored walls, and rearranges furniture and accessories to draw attention to a home's best features. "Staging to live," as it's called, is the logical next step. Having come to appreciate the clean, uncluttered look the stager achieved in their old homes, sellers are rehiring stagers to work the same magic in their new home. But this time, instead of seeking to depersonalize your abode, the emphasis is on organizing, decluttering, and rearranging to "de-stress" the environment, says Barb Schwarz, who's been staging homes for more than 30 years and founded the International Association of Home Staging Professionals four years ago.

"It's visual therapy," says Schwarz. "It's about fine-tuning a space to improve its energy and the flow from room to room," she says. Schwarz estimates that about 40 percent of her staging-to-sell clients ask her to stage their new homes.

Staging is also about getting rid of familiar objects that homeowners are overly attached to, says interior designer Pat McMillan, coauthor of *Home Decorating for Dummies*. A stager "can be brutally honest" about disposing of clutter--and relegating tatty family heirlooms to the closet. (Just be sure to rehang Aunt Irma's needlepoint before her annual visit.)

**Traffic cop.** Anyone can hang out a shingle in this rapidly growing field, though a three-day course at one of Schwarz's Staging University training programs, which covers such topics as traffic patterns, furniture

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arrangement, and "family lifestyle," earns graduates the right to call themselves Accredited Staging Professionals. Fees vary widely but typically run about \$75 a hour. Depending on the number of rooms, the total fee to stage a home may range anywhere from \$750 to \$3,000, says Schwarz.

Skeptics may scoff, but there are plenty of satisfied customers, like Ilse Hadda. Confronted by those confounding bookshelves, she called in Kym Hough, who had staged her old home before she sold it. Hough moved the shelves to different parts of the house. She placed two of them near windows in the living area and put the orphan recliner in front of them with a small table and a lamp. *Voila*, the nook felt like a mini-library. Saying that a desk doesn't belong in a space designed for rest, Hough relocated it to the guest bedroom. The whole process took just a few hours. "Now everything fits right in," says Hadda. "There was nothing she did that I didn't agree with in the end." The price was also right. Instead of cash, Hough accepted a bed and a few bookshelves left over after the staging. Of course, most stagers don't take payment in kind. So what do you do with the leftover stuff? Two words: yard sale.

### STAGER DIRECTION

Want to hire a staging pro? Here's how to do it.

**Search:** Your real-estate agent should have names. *Stagedhomes.com* lists grads of a three-day training course.

**Vet:** Look at photos of rooms and homes they've staged, and talk to previous customers.

**Price:** Get a written bid, stating what will be done and how long it'll take.

**Insure:** Make sure the stager has business insurance to cover broken china (or a broken leg) in the line of duty.

Stager Direction

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