



TOP, ELEGANT BUT HOMEY ACCENTS SUCH AS A TEA SERVICE CAN ENHANCE VISUAL APPEAL. ABOVE, A SPOTLESS BATHROOM IS A NECESSITY.



"I TRY TO CREATE A LIFESTYLE THAT SOMEONE ELSE WANTS, WHERE THEY CAN FANTASIZE THEMSELVES ENTERTAINING, COOKING, PLAYING WITH THEIR CHILDREN," SAYS STAGER GINGER ATHERTON. AT RIGHT, A NIFTY BUILT-IN TIE CUPBOARD ENDS CLUTTER.



ALL THE HOME'S A STAGE

LOOKING FOR AN EASY SELL, MORE AND MORE OWNERS TURN TO DESIGNERS TO SPRUCE UP LIVING SPACES

STORY BY BARBARA DE WITT ■ STAFF WRITER

THE WELCOME MAT is out, the For Sale sign is neatly in place, but there's no buyer in sight.

Oops — did you remember to scrub the tub, straighten the closets and put fresh flowers on the table? Every little detail counts when you're trying to sell a home, says Ginger Atherton, one of L.A.'s top designers who literally sets the stage to attract home buyers.

"I try to create a lifestyle that someone else wants, where they can fantasize themselves entertaining, cooking, playing with their children," Atherton said.

She uses her expertise to study the strengths and weaknesses of a home and then rents truckloads of furniture and accessories to complement the architecture and makes sure each piece is perfectly scaled for the size of the room.

Atherton is part of a new breed of interior designer hired to decorate a house to sell, and her services represent a growing part of the booming real estate business. Fees vary, depending on the neighborhood, the size of the house and the asking price.

Marshall Design Group of Sherman

Oaks charges 1 percent of the asking price with a minimum fee of \$5,000, while L.A.-based Baer & Associates gives estimates based on the amount of work, taking into account obstacles that slow down a job such as flights of stairs.

Baer's minimum fee is \$10,000 and the firm decorates mostly million-dollar homes that are built with prospective buyers in mind.

Atherton, who has staged 60 homes throughout the San Fernando Valley and Beverly Hills, charges a minimum fee of \$25,000, based on a 4,000-square-foot home. She's paid up front, completes the work within 10 days and has helped all 60 of her clients get multiple bids at more than the asking price.

"They all sold except one. The person actually bought everything and stayed in it rather than selling it," she said with a laugh.

When a house is nearly ready to be placed on the market — or has been there too long — real estate agents will often introduce the seller to a stager.

Hopefully, it's a match made in real estate heaven resulting in multiple offers

and a short escrow. But staging a home can backfire if it's not done in a discreet way, said Anthony Marguleas, owner of the Pasadena-based AM Realty agency that specializes in million-dollar homes in Sherman Oaks, Woodland Hills, Burbank and Beverly Hills.

"On one hand, a first-time home buyer will be a lot more influenced by a stager because they have a harder time envisioning the home," he said. "But experienced buyers and investors will recognize that it's been staged and that can turn out to be a negative."

He adds that a good stager gives a house a lived-in look with personal photos and other special touches.

Steve Erdman, whose Encino house was on the market for 11 months with no offers, hired the Marshall firm in a final attempt to move the property. The plan worked; the custom-built house sold in six weeks.

"They dressed it up and gave it a personality and a sense of color and space," Erdman said.

Often, professional stagers are recognized by their design signatures.

For instance, Los Angeles stager Meredith Baer says she always leaves slippers by the side of each bed and a few books, while Ed Marshall of the Marshall Design Group is known for orchids in the bathroom and making small bedrooms look larger.

But a lot of hard work comes before those special flourishes.

Susie Coelho, host of HGTV's "Surprise Gardener" and author of "Susie Coelho's Everyday Styling" (Simon & Schuster; \$30), breaks the art of staging into three winning elements: organization, aesthetics and sensation. And she believes clutter therapy is the first step.

Assuming you're still living in the home, Coelho says to be merciless in your efforts to make closets look spacious because storage space is a key selling point.

Also keep in mind that stagers can set a mood, but they can't change the structural architecture of a house. That means furnishings and other interior decor should match the style of the house.

"If it's a '40s ranch-style home,

inside you're going to have rustic Ralph Lauren looks or Mission-style furniture, but I'd keep colors light with accents of bold color in bowls, pottery and throws," Coelho advised.

Baer says she finds potential buyers prefer "the old-money look," which calls for mixing European antiques with goose-down sofas and custom draperies her company manufactures. Others, such as Marshall, fill the house with traditional furnishings and add outstanding accents such as an oriental screen or a group of live trees in a corner.

All agreed that very few buyers want ultra-contemporary looks, but they all want modern conveniences. So make sure the dishwasher works.

Once you've got potential buyers inside the home, dazzled by enticements such as a tray with a dainty tea cup and plate of cookies on the bed and a bottle of chilled champagne and bowl of chocolates next to the tub, start moving them outside so they will walk every inch of the property, Atherton said. Her trick? Little teasers or vignettes such as a picnic table under a tree or attractive

patio furniture to get people to look beyond the back door.

Coelho suggests lining a pathway with splashes of colorful bedding plants to pull attention away from a sparse lawn or scraggly hedge, and plants such as sweet-smelling jasmine to drift through the window on a warm summer night.

She also stresses the importance of live plants and flowers used indoors. Since buying fresh flowers every time the broker calls can be time-consuming and expensive, she and other stagers often prefer long-lasting flowers such as cymbidium and phalaenopsis orchids, as well as ferns.

If all this sounds like you're staging a theatrical production and it's getting out of hand, at least sweep the front porch, turn on the air conditioning and toss a frozen apple pie in the oven; the wafting scent of cinnamon and apples should entice even the most selective buyers to take a closer look at your home.

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NEAT, BUT "LIVED-IN" COUNTERTOP.

Got a house on the market? You can hire a stager, or do it yourself by using our pros' hints:

1. MAKE IT SPARKLE

Scrub the entire place down. Wash both sides of the windows, the sinks, toilets and tubs — don't forget the light fixtures and all those switch plates.

2. FRESHEN UP WITH PAINT

If it's a really small house or condo, off-white paint will make it look larger as well as clean. But a more upscale home should have a paint job worthy of its asking price. And paint the inside of cupboards and closets because you know people love to peek inside.

3. CLEAR AWAY THE CLUTTER

Prospective buyers don't want to see piles of dirty underwear, unfolded towels and unread newspapers.

4. BATHROOM BEAUTY

In addition to scrubbing the tub and the tile and mirrors, hang a new shower curtain, add new rugs and towels and make it look inviting.

5. CREATE ROMANCE

Script the scene with soft music playing in the background, a fire in the fireplace, a pie or cookies baking in the oven (which can mask the odor of cat boxes and fried fish), candles and fresh flowers.

6. INVITING BEDROOMS

Home buyers are looking for master bedrooms that can accommodate a king-size bed, so do your best to make it happen, even if it means removing most of the furniture. Smaller rooms look bigger with twin beds or decorated as a nursery.

7. CLEAN OUT THE CLOSETS

Make closets look like there's plenty of room for the new owners' stuff, but don't have them completely empty. Consider investing in closet organizers for shoes, ties and folded sweaters. A mirror in a walk-in closet also magnifies the size.



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