

A Little Style Works. Just Not Yours.

By VIVIAN MARINO

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R. DIRK SOSTMAN and his wife, Maria Preka, had expected their two-bedroom Upper East Side co-op to be snapped up quickly after listing it last spring. And why not? They had heard myriad stories of bidding wars and sky-high prices throughout the region. To garner top dollar, "we did everything that everyone told us to do," said Dr. Sostman, a radiologist. "We got the windows washed, we got rid of clutter." But the apartment, with an initial asking price of just under \$2 million, languished. "I showed it 55 times in two weeks and I didn't have any offers," said the couple's broker, Jackie Vincent of the Corcoran Group.

Vincent thought that perhaps buyers were put off by its modern décor: the yellow walls and entryway columns, the black granite floors and black leather and chrome furnishings. "We loved it, but the total effect was probably a little too harsh for most people," Dr. Sostman agreed.

Determined to sell, he and his wife reduced the price, by around 15 percent, and at the suggestion of their broker hired Barbara Brock, a "home stager" in Manhattan. Ms. Brock arranged for the walls to be repainted a neutral light gray, removed the bright-yellow columns and rearranged the furniture. She brought in a ficus tree and throw pillows and installed torchiers to illuminate dark corners.

The couple's \$5,160 investment (which included Ms. Brock's \$1,600 fee, \$3,500 for painting and \$60 for the lighting) seemed to pay off: there were eight bids within two weeks, and the apartment sold for close to the recent asking price.

Even in the best of markets, it often takes more than just putting up a "for sale" sign and pulling out the vacuum cleaner to sell a home. Increasingly, brokers are bringing in

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design consultants who charge from \$50 an hour to upward of \$100,000 to give homes a more polished look so that they sell faster and for more.

In most cases, stagers — a.k.a. "home enhancers" or "fluffers" — will work with the homeowner's furniture for a day or two, perhaps adding a few outside pieces here and there. When a place is vacant, or in cases of more taste-challenged homes, rented furnishings are brought in. The goal is to "neutralize," or in essence strip much of the owner's personality from a property. Photographs, knickknacks and other "clutter" typically get stashed away and well-worn recliners are relegated to attics or storage bins. "We encourage the homeowner to look at the home as a product," said Wendy Dilda, a vice president for the Interior Arrangement and Design Association in Dallas. "We try to broaden the appeal of the home, using the furnishings and placement skills to draw the eye to the home's features — a fireplace or a lovely archway."

The staging concept, which got its start on the West Coast, seems to be catching on around the country. Both the design association and its larger competitor, the **International Association of Home Staging Professionals**, based in Concord, Calif., say they have seen a steady rise in interest in their training courses and accreditation programs.

Barb Schwarz, who pioneered home staging as a broker nearly 30 years ago and is the founder of the home staging professionals group, says the popularity of home-design shows like "Trading Spaces" is partly responsible for the growing interest. Ms. Schwarz herself is working on a TV pilot about home staging for the ABC Family Channel. But do average home sellers need to spend hundreds of dollars to hear someone tell them to hide their junk and paint the walls ecru? And besides, can't today's savvy buyers look beyond the superficial to spot a true gem?

"Very few people are vision people," and that goes for both sellers and buyers, said Ms. Brock, who took Ms. Schwarz's training course and whose business, A Proper Place, also provides home-organizing services. "A buyer will form an opinion within 90 seconds, and if they see a cluttered apartment that is not arranged very well, their mind sort of shuts down."

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Dolf de Roos, a real estate investor and author of "Real Estate Riches" (Warner Business Books, 2001), agreed. "You want to make people feel like they could live here," he said. "I'm astonished by the number of people who won't buy a house because there's a rubbish bag in the kitchen."

But Mr. de Roos thinks homeowners can make simple, inexpensive changes on their own. A few ambitious brokers, too, will offer suggestions or help redecorate homes, at no extra charge beyond their commission. "I have my secret closet in the first floor of my house — I have pillows and bedding and little iconic graphic art pieces," said Roberta Baldwin, an agent with Re/Max Village Square in Upper Montclair, N.J. "I don't mind taking pieces of art off my walls and bringing in a side table from my own house."

She had to do just that last spring for Andrew and Frances Steggles, who were selling their three-bedroom house in Cedar Grove. They had moved back to Manhattan and were renting out the house for a year. Ms. Baldwin had the interior repainted and the exterior power washed, brought in some area rugs and made several other decorating changes. The house sold in three days, for \$461,500, about \$12,500 above the asking price, she said.

Shell Brodnax, a spokeswoman for the home staging professionals association, says a recent study of West Coast homes found that 17 out of 25 staged homes sold within seven days and the rest within 30 days. All were at or above asking price, she said. Ms. Brock says that she has had a similar track record, but, "I can't guarantee that."

It took Iris and Alain De La Chapelle, two of her clients, two months to sell their three-bedroom co-op on East 65th Street. "We were asking too much," Mrs. De La Chapelle conceded. But she is hardly upset. She said she learned plenty of useful home decorating and organizing tips, and she got to enjoy her restyled home, which was repainted an eggshell white and practically emptied of furnishings.

"The apartment is so beautiful now," she said, "I almost don't want to part with it."

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BEFORE

This Upper East Side apartment in a desirable prewar building sat unsold for several weeks. The broker said the modern décor, which included yellow walls and pillars, may have turned off buyers.



STAGED

A home stager had the walls repainted a neutral color, removed the pillars to enlarge the space, rearranged the furnishings and added decorative accessories. In two weeks, the owners signed a contract.