

Buyer beware -- you're in for a home decor scare

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I was browsing homes for sale on the on-line Multiple Listing Service the other day and have been ranting ever since. And not in a good way. I found photos showing decor so overwhelming you couldn't tell where walls stopped and ceilings started. Others were so over the top only a neurotic cockatiel or Victorian-era serial killer would feel at home. Talk about a niche market!

People, you've got to set the stage before putting your house out there! Presumably, those photos are on MLS because the owners want to sell, not because they suffer from some voyeuristic fetish that should have them paging Dr. Phil. Some of those vendors, and I mean this as kindly as possible, need serious help.

It's not that their houses are ugly. The problem lies with how they're presented. Not paying attention to how your house will "read" once photos are posted on-line can lead to a lovely home looking like a dog's breakfast and will stop buyers cold from taking that crucial next step of making an appointment to view it.

Rule one when staging a home for sale is to de-clutter. Potential buyers must be allowed, nay, encouraged, to focus on the architecture, finishes, special features, size, and layout, not your gewgaws, no matter how fascinating you find them. A house I toured last week proudly displayed a collection of stuffed owls. Real owls. It was eerie. Box up those fussy doilies and dust collectors. Less is definitely more when staging!

You have to literally clear the decks so that buyers can look beyond your decor, which may not be to their taste, and imagine how their own belongings would look in the space. There are books written about home staging but here are some very basic tips on what to do:

Remove excess furniture. Stuffed rooms feel cramped and look smaller than they are.

Clear natural pathways for a sense of spaciousness by either removing or rearranging furniture so that buyers can move around easily.

Organize seating into groupings around natural focal points such as a fireplace.

Put away family photos. You want buyers to envision their own family living there. If they're confronted by yours at every turn (gorgeous though they may be), they'll have a harder time doing so.

Remove religious items. They can have a subliminal effect on others and a difference in beliefs shouldn't be a barrier to your selling your home. People from all backgrounds can be made to feel comfortable. Sometimes buyers have a hard time separating the things in a house from the house itself. As the vendor, you can make it easier for them to make that separation.

Remove small, decorative area rugs. They add visual clutter and take the spotlight away from what may be an expanse of beautiful floor.

Put away medications and personal hygiene items including shampoo. No one needs to know about your dandruff problem.

Make sure bars of soap don't have little hairs clinging to them. Enough said.

Give rooms a fresh coat of paint in soothing neutrals. It will make the architecture, not the colour, stand out. Most people have an immediate emotional response to colour. If your home is awash in bright, primary or saturated colours, it may take longer to sell because many people have difficulty getting past the initial impact of specific or strong colours. Whenever I see anything painted pink, my gut response is to run! If you have trouble choosing neutrals, consult a professional. You'll recoup the investment many times over.

Repair or replace anything that is broken, cracked, chipped, stained, or permanently soiled. How far you take this depends on your budget and you may have to prioritize but it can make all the difference in how quickly you sell and for how much.

Ensure that appliances, fixtures, door knobs, smoke detectors, and lights are in working order.

Eliminate safety hazards like loose wires and cables.

Organize and tidy up closets (people do snoop), cupboards, shelves, and bookcases.

Don't neglect the exterior and yard. Weed and add decorative mulch to the garden, power wash the deck, swab the siding and sweep away debris and cobwebs.

Clean like a demon or hire professionals, like Molly Maid, to tackle everything from windows to basement floors, vents, the inside of kitchen cabinets, drawers and appliances. Everything has to be gleaming, spotless and smelling great.

When you've finished, assess critically, perhaps even through the lens of a camera, how the house shapes up. Pretend you're seeing it for the first time and do the same walk-through house-hunters will do. Take your realtor along for advice on things you may have missed.

Does your house look welcoming, cared for and loved, or cold, sad and neglected? Does the decor take centre stage or does the house shine on its own merits? Is it a treat for your senses, or is there an odd odour (wet dog, perhaps) or a clanking sound from the furnace? Is the thermostat or air conditioner at a comfortable setting? Can you spot anything that might offend or turn off a potential buyer? Is there anything pink you need to paint over? (Just kidding).

If it's all positive, let loose the cameras. You're ready for MLS. And you'll be assured NOT to be the subject of one of my rants!

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