

THE COMPLETE COURSE IN INTERIOR DESIGN

REAL ESTATE STAGING

New York Institute of ART+DESIGN





Atlanta Home Staging
(www.homestagingatlanta.com)

Take a look at the rooms on pages 24 and 25. The pictures on the top are unfurnished rooms, and the pictures below them are the same rooms fully furnished by Atlanta Home Staging, a professional staging company. The difference is night and day! The furniture highlights the space in each room and the rooms' potential uses. It's all tastefully decorated in neutral tones. Who could have guessed all that beautiful furniture could fit into these rooms? Most potential buyers don't have that kind of imagination, and that underscores the need for real estate staging. In this lesson, you'll learn all about this fascinating and popular field.

Acknowledgments: New York Institute of Art and Design (NYIAD) Course materials are written by NYIAD staff, project managers, subject matter experts, and faculty. *The Complete Course in Interior Design* was written by NYIAD faculty and staff along with NYIAD Director of Education Jay Johnson and NYIAD Curriculum Developer Steven Evans. The Lessons were designed by Ondine Bue and NYIAD Curriculum Designer Keith Gallagher.

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PRESENT A HOME

PRESENT A HOME

Real estate staging is the art of presenting a home that is for sale to its best advantage, using carefully planned lighting, props, and expertly-arranged furniture to highlight its best features and minimize its faults.

Home staging is an art that was developed in the late 1970s, a decade of turbulent recessions. The term "staging" was coined by a California real estate professional, Barb Schwarz, who recognized a growing need for assistance among homeowners who were having trouble selling their homes. Using her background in theater set design, she helped them to "set the stage"—preparing a property to be sold for the highest amount of money in the shortest amount of time.

When the real estate market is slow, the art of staging becomes especially important. A staged home typically sells much faster than a totally empty home, and sometimes for more than the asking price. Many of the example photos in this Course are of interiors that have been staged.

You will find many similarities between this lesson and the lesson *Room Redesign,* but staging is different in certain key ways. Decorating and redesign are all about personalizing a space to reflect the occupant's own tastes and lifestyle; staging is meant to show off the space in a house in an appealing but non-personal way that all viewers can envision themselves moving right into.

Staging is partly an artful presentation of a room and partly psychology. You might say that the goal of staging is to create a fantasy of a life without chaos or clutter, an idealized existence that is supposedly possible within the house you're showing.

CREATE CURB APPEAL

This lesson will interchangeably refer to "you" and "your client," and staging can apply to any house, condo, co-op, or apartment owned by you or a client.

Before we even start talking about staging the interior of your home, let's address the exterior. If your house looks terrible from the curb, many potential buyers will simply drive away without a second look. Attract more viewers by making the outside look appealing.

Take a picture of the house from the street. Analyze the picture. Is there shrubbery covering the windows and blocking light from the inside? It may need to be trimmed. Are there bald patches on the lawn? Resodding might be in order. Clip low-hanging branches from trees that obscure the view of the house. Pull weeds and remove dead foliage. Any dead or wilting potted plants should also be removed from the front or back yards.

The house's exterior might need a new coat of neutral-colored paint. The door should be a solid wooden or metal door, not a thin flimsy one, and unless it has ornate carvings, paint it a bright color, such as red or blue to bring the eye to the house's entrance. All garbage cans and recycling bins should be moved to the back of the house. People don't want to be reminded of chores when they're first visiting a potential new dream home. Eliminate low-end plastic or rusted chairs. Any lawn furniture should be of good quality. There should be no toys or litter strewn in the yard. An outdoor mailbox should be repainted or replaced if it's chipped or rusted.

Check the condition of all fencing and gates. Worn-out wooden fences should be repaired, sanded down, and repainted. Rusting iron fences or gates should be stripped, primed, and repainted. If any of the gates are sagging, their hinges should be replaced.

If you have an outside wood deck, make sure the wood is not rotting or chipping away. Replace any damaged planks. If the deck is simply worn, have it resanded and varnished. For homes with paved terraces, make sure there aren't any broken or cracked stones that visitors could trip over. Fill in any gaps.

Examine the driveway and the garage floor, too. There should not be any oil spills on the ground. To remove oil, sprinkle baking soda liberally over the spill, leave it for a few minutes, pour boiling water over the area, and then scrub it with a stiff brush. Repeat these steps as often as needed.

Lastly, evaluate all outdoor lighting for the house. There should be a working light above the entrance. The house numbers should be clearly visible. If you have a large front yard and an extensive driveway, make sure you have the pathways illuminated. You don't want your visitors to trip and fall over a shadowy step. After all, you may have potential buyers visiting your home in the evenings.



This house has an uneven-looking paint job, is nearly covered by unruly bushes, and the lawn is spotty. Most house hunters would just drive on by.



This house is much more appealing, the yard is uniformly green and the shrubs are neatly sculpted.



Evaluate all outdoor lighting for the house.



Fencing and gates should be in perfect condition.



Check the condition of decks. Make sure there are no loose or rotten planks.



Walter may be your prized trophy buck, but he needs to go into storage while you're selling the house. The plaid wallpaper needs to come down, too.





DECLUTTER AND DEPERSONALIZE

Staging a home that is empty requires less initial effort than staging one that people still inhabit. In the first part of this lesson, we'll discuss what needs to be done to stage a home that the owners are still living in. Later on in the lesson, we will discuss staging an empty house.

Regardless of how you intend to stage the house, you must first clear it of clutter, personal objects, and excess furniture. Empty the house of newspapers, magazines, and knickknacks. Pack up all family photos, trophies, cross-stitch projects, and photos of people. Buyers need "placeholder" art: some framed photographs of a neutral subject, such as sailboats or plant studies. Seeing this kind of display gives potential buyers an idea of where artwork would look best in the room and encourages them to envision their own *objets d'art* in the house. Too many personal items make it hard for visitors to imagine their possessions in the home, and can also distract them from noticing important features of the house. For example, if the homeowner has a collection of Beanie Babies on top of the fireplace mantel, the viewer will probably not notice the beautiful wood or intricate carving on the mantel.

Remove any decorations that may be perceived as controversial, such as animal trophies, nude artwork, gun racks, religious items, or political advertisements. Your goal is to sell the house, so the aim is to appeal to every potential buyer in your market. You don't want to alienate or offend anyone!

Work by room. Clear everything out, then pack up everything you don't need; either get rid of it or put it into storage. Simply shoving everything into the attic or basement won't work because buyers will look at every part of your house, and they'll be turned off by all the "hidden" clutter. Don't forget to clean out all cupboards, closets, and even the dishwasher. Refer to the lesson on *Decluttering, Storage, and Organization* for specifics on decluttering strategies and sorting systems.

CLEAN EVERYTHING

Pretend your most fastidious relative is coming to visit: You must rigorously clean every inch of the interior. This means vacuuming and steam-cleaning carpets, scrubbing the floors, and getting every speck of dirt out of every corner.

Your floors should be clean enough to pass the "baby test": If you had a baby, would you feel comfortable letting it crawl around on the floor of this house? If not, it's essential that you do whatever is necessary to make it spit spot.

Nicks, dents, and scratches in walls and baseboards should also be repaired, and give the walls a fresh coat of paint in white or a neutral color. This will make the house appear well-cared-for to potential buyers.

CHECK COLORS

The biggest rule of all to keep in mind when staging a home is to stick to a neutral palette. This also can mean black and white.

Add splashes of color here and there with throw pillows or wall artwork. No one bold color should dominate a room, because you may upset the personal preferences of your visitors.

Color distracts buyers from appreciating the features of a house. They could be too busy marveling at or detesting the bright paint job to remember any of the features you showed them.

Showcase the house, suggest the best way to arrange furniture and where to place decorating items such as artwork and plants, but leave the decorating and personalizing up to the ultimate buyer.



STAGE CLOSETS AND CABINETS

Even storage space must be given careful staging consideration—in fact, these spaces can be some of the most important selling points in a home. Closets should be neatly organized and only half full in order to showcase storage space. Organize the clothes as they do in department stores. Group the same type of clothing together— shirts with other shirts, pants with other pants. A crowded closet makes buyers think the house lacks storage space.

Psychologically, staged closets will give the impression that there will always be enough room to fit the buyer's many possessions. Avoid claustrophobia at all costs, and open up all storage spaces. The same goes for cupboards and cabinets. Each cabinet should display a small number of items that relate to its storage purpose. This will give the feeling of a lived-in kitchen, bath, or laundry room without any reminders of the drudgery of everyday life.

CREATE VIGNETTES

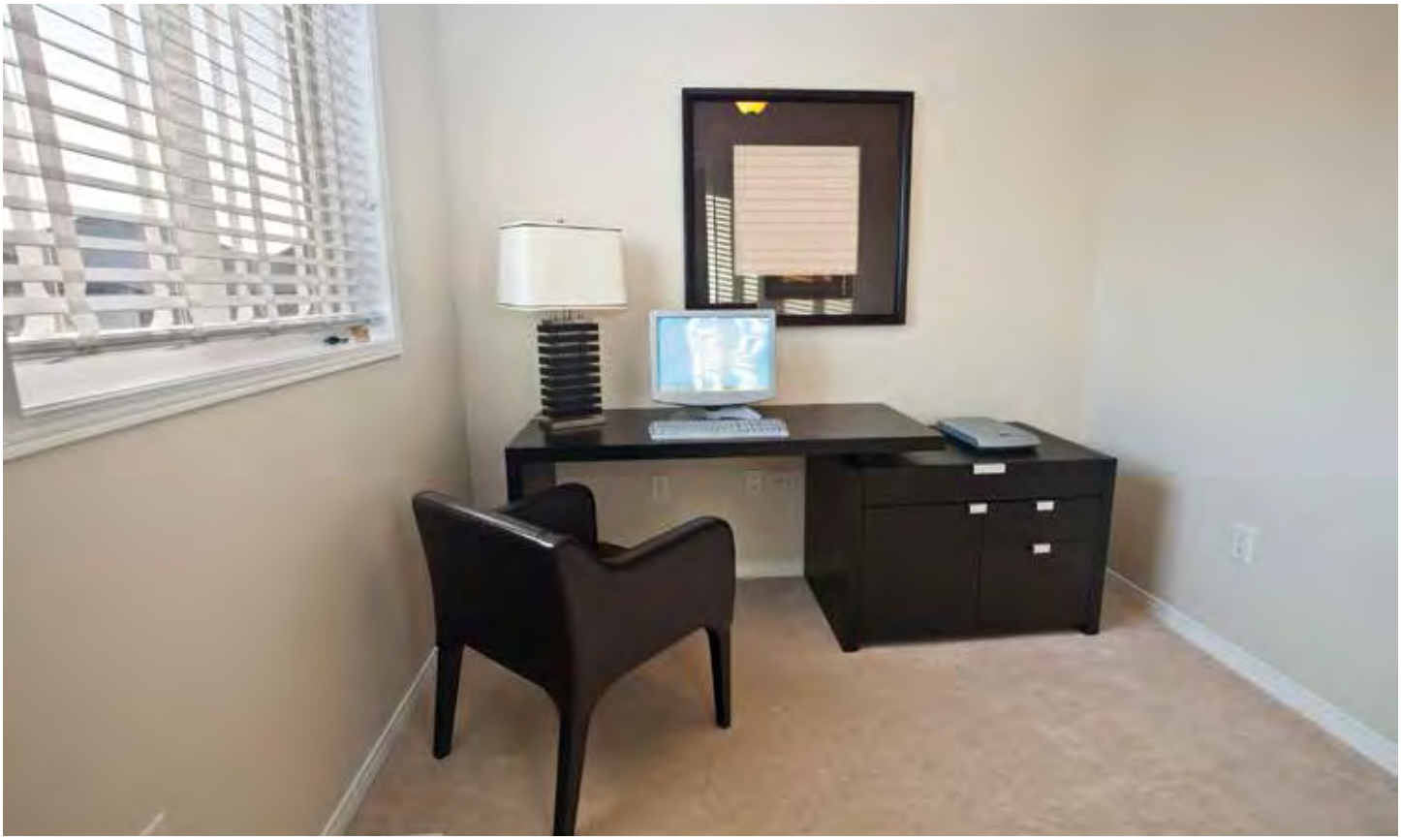
The term "vignette" is borrowed from the theater. Vignettes are small groupings of furniture and related items that set a scene. These small scenes give a concrete idea of purpose and what kind of person uses the space. This concept is at the heart of the staging process. Hint at the purpose of each room, show the possibilities of what can fit in the space, and display how the room works best.

While potential buyers need some blank space, too much emptiness is what staging is designed to avoid. Hint at a playroom's purpose with one piece of furniture and a few other objects, such as an antique rocking horse and a few large, colorful play blocks. A home office might contain a desk, chair, and a desktop globe. A few small plants and knickknacks on shelves add a friendly touch.

To draw attention to features in the house that are unusual or that you think buyers will find appealing, consider using small placards to highlight them. Don't go overboard: use no more than five to ten in the whole house.

Think about the features that might set your house apart from others in a positive way. For instance, if you have a teak fireplace mantel or a dumbwaiter, put a card out that describes these unusual features. If you have installed an environmentally-friendly bamboo wood floor, definitely call attention to it. In an apartment, condo, or co-op, there might already be double-glazed windows to reduce outside sound, or a homeowner may have added extra insulation in the attic.

Mention special features to leave lasting impressions in a buyer's mind. They're always appreciative of historical or custom design elements and energy-saving features.



This desk and chair set is an example of a vignette.



Call attention to special architectural features in a home by placing note cards on objects to identify them. Use these sparingly, or the viewer will be overwhelmed with information.

MINIMIZE FURNITURE TO MAXIMIZE SPACE

You can use your client's furniture to stage the home if it is reasonably new, classic in style, and in good condition. However, if pieces look dated or worn, you may also choose to take them out of the house and rent furniture from a supply warehouse. The furniture you do use should look comfortable but not be too bulky in size, and you should limit it to a select number of pieces.

A few pieces of smaller furniture make a room look bigger. The arrangement should stay away from walls in small groups to allow for traffic flow and a sense of space.

The style of furniture you choose should have clean lines and look generically pleasant. Furniture for the staged home should conjure the idea of a "comfortable house," but not "someone else's house."

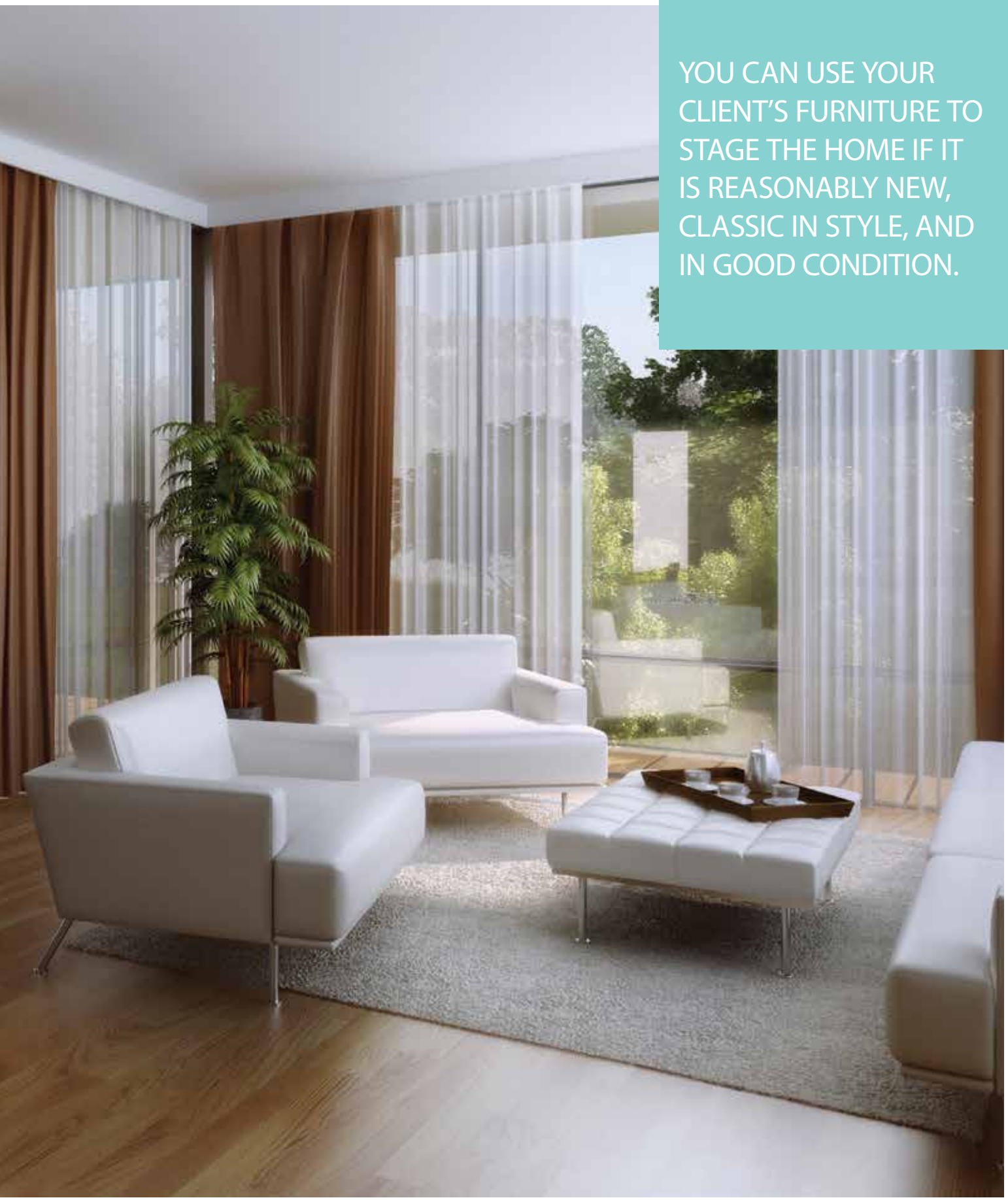
For a refresher on furniture arrangement, reread the Lesson on *Furniture Arrangement* in *Basic Concepts Four.*

Left: The client's own furniture can be used to stage a home if it's reasonably new and of a classic style.

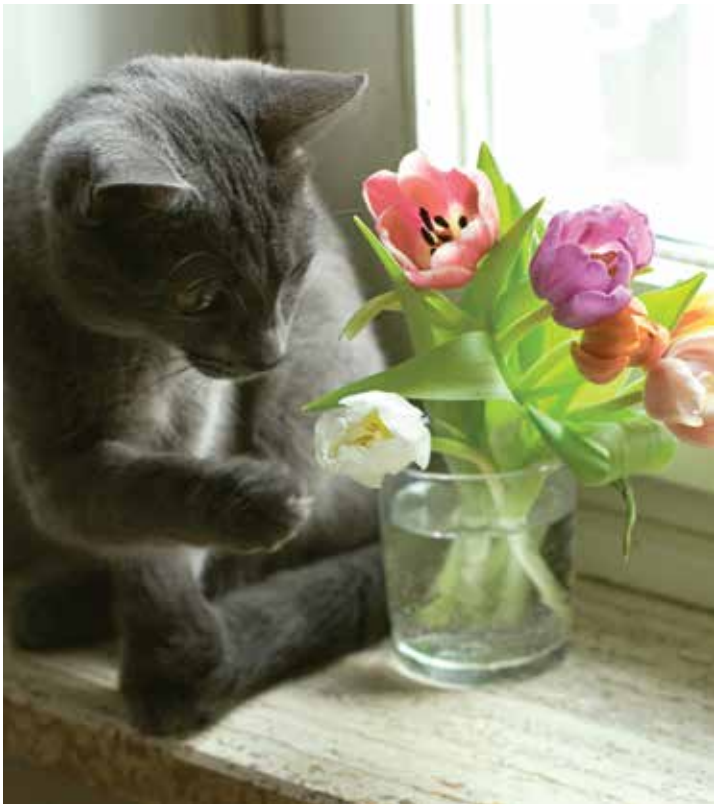
Right: Use a minimal amount of furniture to allow for easy traffic flow and to give the illusion of a large amount of space.







YOU CAN USE YOUR CLIENT'S FURNITURE TO STAGE THE HOME IF IT IS REASONABLY NEW, CLASSIC IN STYLE, AND IN GOOD CONDITION.



You may think your house pet makes a charming addition to the house's ambiance, but an allergic buyer will disagree. Keep any pets elsewhere.



Filling a house with the scent of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies is a time-tested method of pleasing potential buyers.



A good rule to follow in lighting a house is to provide 100 watts of light per 50 square feet of space.



Play low-volume music to create a relaxing mood.

DEODORIZE AND "SCENT UP"

Expert opinions differ when it comes to using scented candles, plug-in air fresheners, or essential oils in rooms to add ambience. Some say a completely blank olfactory canvas is better, since people associate particular scents with certain life events.

What scents are generally regarded as pleasing? Boiling cinnamon sticks produces a pleasant aroma. Many people swear by the age-old trick of baking bread or chocolate chip cookies during an open house. They seem to be universally pleasing scents that put people in a good mood and make the house feel welcoming and homey. If you choose to use scents in the house, stick with natural ones; some people have allergies to perfumes.

Everyone agrees there should be no residual odor from pets, cooking, or smoke. Use an air purifier and get all carpets and rugs steam cleaned first, then open the windows for a few hours. If smells linger, old carpets may need to be replaced. It's worth the expense to have an odor-free home. Most people who smoke in the house have gotten used to the scent, so they don't notice it anymore. For many buyers, any evidence that a house has been smoked in is a deal breaker.

There must also be no pets in the house. Simply putting them in another room or hiding the litter box is not a viable option, since viewers will want to see every inch of the house. Buyers with allergies to certain household pets will immediately be aware of their presence. It's also a lot of work to continually clean the house of pet hair, and that's a must since the house needs to be immaculate at all times.

MAXIMIZE LIGHTING

There's a saying that what sells people on a house is space and light. Dim lighting makes a space feel small and depressing.

Open all the window shades and curtains, and add as much extra lighting as you need to make the space feel bright, large, and open. Use 100 watts of light per 50 square feet of space.

Layer lighting, placing lights at different heights throughout the room. Battery-operated LED candles are a great, fire-safe way to create flickering ambiance.

The only reason you might want to keep a curtain closed is if the house next door is too close or if the outside view is particularly unappealing. Hang a translucent shade and compensate for the light loss with extra interior lighting.

ADD MUSIC

Many real estate stagers recommend playing soft jazz or easy listening music at a low volume while potential buyers are viewing a house.

While some people can't stand soft jazz or easy listening music, the number of people who are offended are far outweighed by the number of people who don't mind it. It's all in the name of creating a relaxed ambiance, and it's a good way to highlight house features like built-in speakers or a home theater.





PRETEND THAT YOUR BATHROOM MUST BE USED AS AN OPERATING ROOM—IT SHOULD BE CLEAN ENOUGH TO PERFORM SURGERY IN!





STAGING TIPS BY ROOM

On the following pages are a few staging tips specific to rooms found in most homes.

BATHROOM

Pretend that your bathroom must be used as an operating room—it should be clean enough to perform surgery in! Scrub every inch of the tile, toilet, mirror, shower, and floor. The shower should be sparkling and completely free of grime. Dirty or crumbling grout must be replaced. Apply a fresh coat of paint to the walls in a neutral or classic color scheme (white with navy blue accents is a common favorite color scheme for bathrooms) and accessorize accordingly.

BATHTUBS, TOILETS, AND PLUMBING

Review your staging options if you have an older home and the bathroom is looking worn-out, the walls are discolored, and the plumbing system leaves a lot to be desired. Check to see that everything is in perfect working order. If the faucet is leaking, it just may need a new washer or it may have to be completely replaced. The sound of dripping water is not a good signal to potential buyers. Make sure that the toilet flushes properly, that the water doesn't flow continuously, and that the handle returns to its original position. Replace broken handles and chipped, cracked, or discolored toilet seats. Consider replacing the toilet (many models are available for under $200) if the mechanics are irreparably faulty. Any defective plumbing highlights the age of the home and just adds to the expense of the purchase.

According to the principles of Feng Shui—the Chinese philosophy on how to live harmoniously with your environment—an exposed toilet represents a drain of wealth. On a practical note, a closed toilet is just more hygienic, and keeping the lid down is simply a polite practice. Therefore, always keep the lid down!

If your bathtub is discolored due to mineral deposits or just has a dingy look, try scouring it with baking soda or use commercial cleaning products. If it still looks bad and replacement is too expensive, consider resurfacing the tub. There are professionals who you can hire to paint over your bathtub and give it a fresh look.

TILES

Any chipped or broken tiles should be removed and replaced. If finding the exact color tile to match the existing tiles proves to be impossible, consider using a contrasting color tile with a graphic illustration, e.g. seashells or flowers. A few contrasting graphic tiles can give new life to the old tiles and solve the problem of matching colors.

If the color of the tiles is particularly dated and complete tile replacement is too expensive, use as many neutral-colored accessories as possible to tone down the old color. Use a large neutral shower curtain to camouflage the bathtub area, a few neutral rugs to cover the floor, and neutral artwork and large spa towels to hide the walls. Remember that tiles can also be painted over. Refer to the lesson on *Room Redesign* for instructions.

Regardless of the condition of the current shower curtain (unless you bought it last week), replace it. Buy a bathmat (nothing too shaggy) and hand towels in a corresponding color. Your choice of decoration—and this is true of every room in the house—should be gender neutral, appealing equally to both men and women. Minimize the amount of toiletries on the vanity counter. A soap dish with some new bars of soap and a simple floral arrangement is enough. Don't go overboard with accessorizing or clutter will occur.



One shiny, new appliance, such as this side-by-side stainless steel refrigerator, will make a big enough impression that viewers will overlook most minor flaws in a kitchen.



Stage dining rooms simply with an area rug, a tasteful chandelier, and a table set that complements the space.



A bright, warm, inviting kitchen helps sell any house.



Remodeling a kitchen in the latest colors is an expensive and foolhardy exercise when trying to sell a home.

KITCHEN

The kitchen is commonly regarded as the most important room in the house since its ease of use and size are critical to preparing meals and eating. It's also the most expensive area of a house to remodel. But remodeling a kitchen is a wise investment that will yield a higher return on the overall selling price.

People will pay more for a house with a beautiful, updated kitchen, partly because the trouble of fixing things up has already been dealt with. Don't attempt to redo the kitchen in the latest style. If magenta is the hot color this season, you can be sure it will be out of style soon. Also forego super high-end appliances, such as a floor-to-ceiling temperature-controlled wine storage rack.

Stick to mid-range improvements that make sense to the common buyer, and your client could see a return on investment in the range of 70–80%, according to a recent Cost vs. Value report in *Remodeling* magazine.

If the cabinets are still in relatively good condition, an easy, inexpensive way to spruce up the look is to give the surfaces a good scrubbing. Over time, kitchen grease builds up on the doors and dulls their original color. If the wood stain or paint is really faded or even chipped, they'll need a light sanding and a new stain or coat of paint—using some neutral colors—to give the cabinets a fresh face. Before the cabinets are painted, remove all hardware to prevent paint from making the door swing sticky. After working on the doors, install a new set of handles and matching drawer pulls.

It pays to spend money on one shiny new appliance, such as an energy-efficient dishwasher (people love energy-efficient appliances), but there's no need to replace every appliance. Here's where psychology comes in: If buyers see one new, flashy appliance, they will think everything in the kitchen is equally new. If you're sticking with the original appliances, make sure the inside of the refrigerator is thoroughly sanitized, as many food odors will linger. Keep an open box of baking soda in both the fridge and freezer sections to absorb any leftover odors. If the freezer has ice build-up, defrost it. The oven should be thoroughly cleaned, both inside and out. Make sure everything—appliances, faucets, cabinet doors—is in good working order.

If there's a table in the room, make sure it's small enough to walk around freely, and place no more than four chairs around it. This will help to maintain the illusion of a large amount of space. Keep the wastebasket stored in a cupboard under the kitchen sink. Sprinkle a little baking soda into the bottom of the garbage and empty it frequently so as to never let any odor emanate from it. The message: This home is clean and odorless, save for the aroma of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies or homemade bread!

DINING ROOM

If the dining room is separate from the kitchen, make the space bright and attractive, and use a table and chairs that fit the architecture and style of the room. Few other accessories are necessary in a dining room. If there's room, a small buffet table would be an appropriate choice. An area rug beneath the table and chairs delineates a space, and a tasteful light fixture above the table is a bright idea. Choose a centerpiece for the table such as a bunch of single-colored flowers or a bowl of fresh fruit.

If the house lacks a great room, media room, or family room, you can re-purpose the living room to make it a combination conversation-and-dining room.

Convert the former dining room into a den with a TV or entertainment system, seating, and a small desk or table. Buyers with children need to see dedicated family room space. Family rooms are more of a priority than a formal dining room.



Placing a mirror above the fireplace mantel creates a good center of focus and gives the illusion of expanded space.

LIVING ROOM

The living room should be open, light, and comfortable. By "open," we mean that there should be ample space to walk around the main furniture grouping. A few chairs, perhaps a loveseat, and a coffee table placed away from the walls give the feeling of a relaxed conversation area.

Always provide a focal point for the living room. Potential focal points include a fireplace, an interesting view out the window, an unusual piece of furniture, or an arrangement of artwork. Use of a focal point adds interest to a room and is a vital technique that encourages visitors to remember the space.

If you're lucky enough to have a natural focal point like a fireplace in your living room, don't hide it. Play up its features. In other words, don't clutter the mantel shelf with too many accessories. A simple painting and either candlesticks or a vase will be enough. If the hearth of the fireplace is covered with soot, scrub it clean and paint it with a neutral color (if it's not made of stone, brick, or tile).

Stage the living room so that it's visually balanced. As your eye moves around the room, the visual weight of the furniture and accessories should be distributed and balanced evenly.

If one wall has a heavy bookcase or armoire, the opposing wall should also have something of similar visual weight to balance out the room.

If there's a large bookcase or display cabinet in the room, make sure that it's not jam-packed with too many books or other collectibles.

The combination of large furniture and numerous knickknacks is known as visual overcrowding, which can overwhelm a potential buyer. Reduce the number of items on the shelves by half—store the rest away—and you'll have a more harmonious display. What a homeowner considers to be treasures, a buyer may consider junk.

For accessories, consider adding a mirror to the room, especially if it's a small space. Large mirrors expand a room visually. Just make sure the mirror is not reflecting a storage closet or something unpleasant or mundane across the room.

Lighting should be ample but adjustable, with either a dimmer switch or several optional table and floor lamps. Unless there's a bad view outside, all windows should have their curtains open to let in light and open up the space. If the view is unpleasant, use translucent curtains, sheers, or rollershades to hide the view but allow light into the living room.

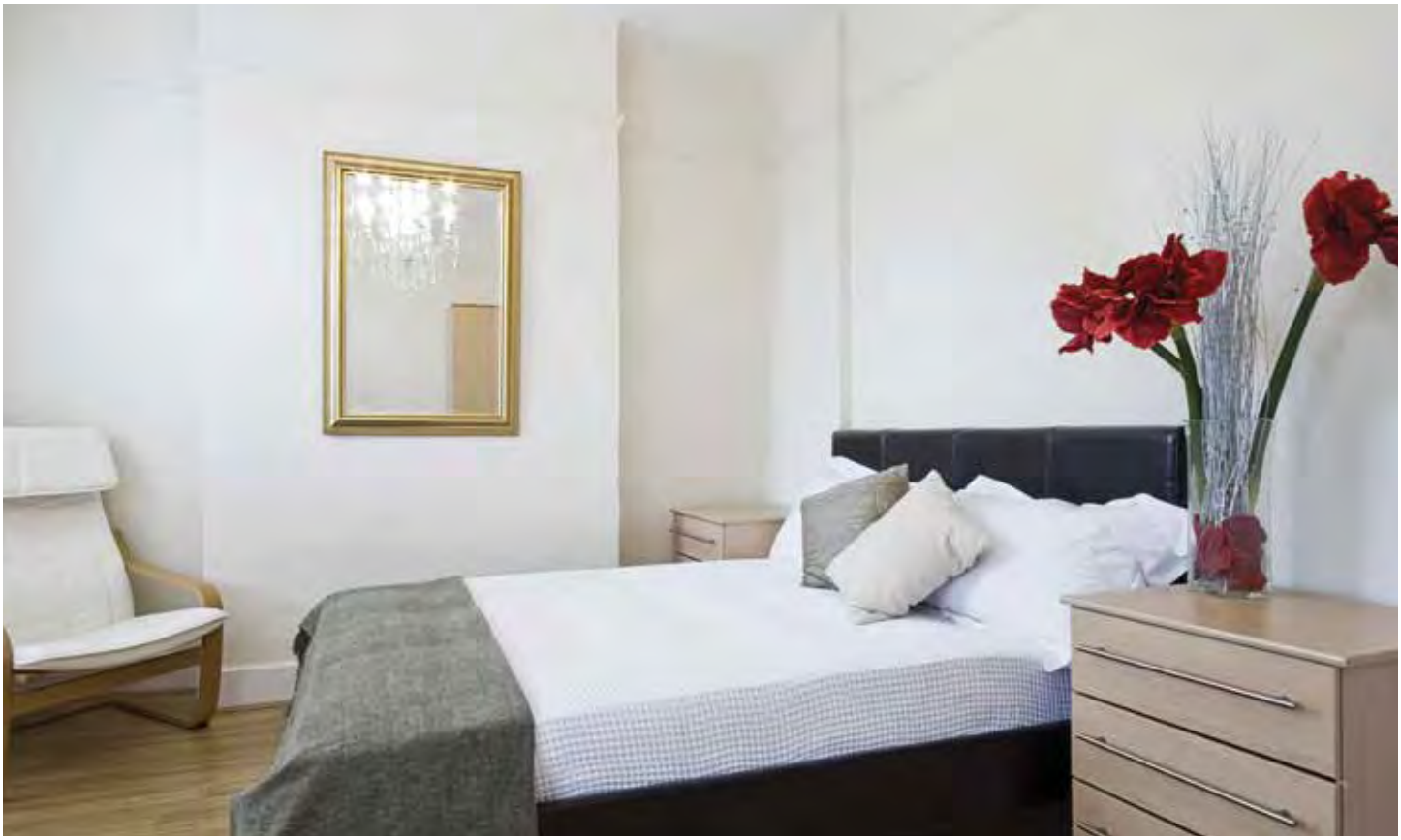


STAGE THE LIVING ROOM SO THAT IT'S VISUALLY BALANCED. AS YOUR EYE MOVES AROUND THE ROOM, THE VISUAL WEIGHT OF THE FURNITURE AND ACCESSORIES SHOULD BE DISTRIBUTED AND BALANCED EVENLY.

This bright, welcoming living room features lots of light and LED candles in the wall sconce to add extra ambiance.



Natural light is prevalent in this room, but once the sun goes down, additional lighting should be utilized.



BEDROOM

The first thing to do when staging a bedroom is to choose a bed that's in good proportion to the size of the room. A bed that's too large for the room will make it look cramped, but a bed that's too small can make it look awkwardly large.

Place a nice bedspread or quilt (in a neutral color, of course) on the bed, and avoid large, distracting patterns. Buyers can focus too much on the bed linens and not notice the rest of the room.

Set a small nightstand with a lamp beside the bed and turn on all the lights in the room. Draw the curtains open—always make sure the room is bright.

This room, like the rest of the house, should be decorated in a way that appeals to both men and women.

If the owners of the house are still sleeping there at night, advise them to keep a storage bin under the bed to stash pajamas, toothbrush, and personal items during the day while people are coming over to view the house. Anything on the floor that isn't necessary—magazines, books, toys, shoes—should also be removed and stored away under the bed or in a decorative, locked chest or steamer trunk.

If you have other bedrooms that have been converted to specialty rooms, like a music room or an exercise room, convert them back into bedrooms. You don't want a potential buyer walking away thinking that there aren't enough bedrooms in the home. We'll talk about exceptions to this rule in the section on *Staging for a Certain Demographic*.

Guest bedrooms and children's rooms pose the same staging challenges as the master bedroom. Keep beds in scale to the overall room space. Keep artwork, paint colors, and accessories neutral and as gender fair as possible. Reduce all clutter, but use items that skillfully suggest the purpose of the room, e.g. a yellow stuffed animal bunny or a breakfast tray with mug and teapot.

A large master suite can be fun to stage! Spacious rooms can accommodate a king or queen bed—even a canopied bed if the ceilings are high—and possibly a writing desk and chair, a loveseat/reading area, and/or a dressing table. Communicate clearly that this room is an adult refuge from the rest of the house, but avoid clutter and keep walking and traffic areas open. Large mirrors open up the space and provide a handy dressing aide. A rich area rug adds texture to the room and underscores its comfort.



Even a garret bedroom can be made to look charming with the right touches.



A large, abstract painting hung behind the bed makes a grand presentation in this modern bedroom.



Patterned wallpaper may be pretty, but it can easily date a room.



Neutral paint makes the wall look less busy and helps buyers concentrate on the features of the room. A bouquet of flowers brightens the room and gives it a welcoming feel.

WALLS

If any room has heavily patterned wallpaper, remove it and apply plain paint or textured plaster to cover the walls. Most patterned wallpapers will date the room and keep it from looking fresh and current. Stencil or wallpaper borders around the wall perimeter should be painted over as well.

Also examine the baseboards. Because of the heavy traffic in most rooms, the corners and edges of baseboards tend to become worn out and scuffed. Replace them or at least sand and repaint them if they're not heavily damaged.

ACCESSORIES

Keep the accessorizing on any countertop or table to a minimum. A bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers is all you need. Store all supplies, food, and collections away in cabinets. Remove any magnets or personal items from the door of the fridge. Take down teen posters. Ditch the pile of magazines in the bathroom!

FINAL ROOM TIP

Make your rooms as airy and spacious as possible. Remove any valances, swags, or heavy curtains from the windows and let the sun in to brighten the room. Thoroughly clean the windows until they sparkle. Leave a window open to air out the room. A sunny space will make even the smallest room look bigger.

FLOORING

Floors take a lot of abuse since they're the most used element in the home. Kitchen floors, especially, can suffer from water damage, food stains, and wear and tear from heavy traffic. If you have vinyl or linoleum floors, consider ripping them up and replacing them completely as these types of floors are relatively inexpensive and the resulting transformation is worth the trouble. The vinyl floors on the market are better quality than those offered twenty years ago and many resemble tile or other high-end flooring.

If you have wall-to-wall carpeting and it has no noticeable stains, then a general steam cleaning is all you must do. Rent out a steamer from your local hardware store or hire a professional carpet cleaner.

If you do have stained carpeting that no amount of cleaning can restore, then check what's under the old carpeting. If it's a hardwood floor, have it sanded and refinished.

Hardwood floors are much more in demand than wall-to-wall carpeting. If you have pressboard or plywood underflooring, consider applying wood or laminate parquet tiles or engineered wood over the existing floor. These options aren't as expensive as strip wood flooring.

If you still prefer to replace your old carpeting with newer carpeting, you don't have to spend a fortune. Instead of buying high-grade carpeting, purchase a more affordable Berber or sisal carpeting and install good-quality padding underneath to obtain a high-end feel.

Just as painting your walls will give an instant lift to the room, replacing worn flooring will do the same. After the walls, flooring is the next biggest element in a house's overall construction. A new or renovated floor will add to a home's resale value.

FLOORS TAKE A LOT OF ABUSE SINCE THEY'RE THE MOST USED ELEMENT IN THE HOME.



Low-pile carpeting is easy to take care of and reduces the accumulation of household allergens.



Old, dated linoleum has no place in your staged home!



After

STAGE AN EMPTY HOME

Staging new construction or an empty house or apartment is in some ways much easier than staging one that's already furnished. There's no clutter to hide or to remove, and no furniture to position to a better location.

An empty home is a blank slate. While we've talked before about "depersonalizing" a home, we don't want to reach the stage where a potential buyer can't even imagine living there. Renting out a few pieces of furniture and positioning them around the house will help buyers picture how they can arrange their furniture. It makes it easier for them to connect to the space.

Furthermore, in an empty space, prospective buyers may end up getting bogged down on negative details such as, "Why is there only one window in the room?" or "Why does the wall look uneven?" Staging shifts the focus on how the furniture fits into the space.

There are several companies which allow you to rent furniture for short periods of time. Cort, Rent-a-Center, and others have a national presence and a wide selection of styles. You can rent pieces individually or as a set for a period as short as a month. A living room set can be rented out for as low as $150 a month. Besides furniture, you can rent silk plants and accessories such as mirrors, televisions, and lamps.



Before

If it's an empty house you're staging, you don't need to fill all the rooms. Just a few of the main rooms such as the living room, master bedroom, and dining room is usually enough. Add a bowl of fruit in the kitchen or a vase of flowers in the bathroom to give that homey touch.

Professional stagers usually buy some key accessories instead of renting them—a vase, a fruit bowl, a silk plant, artwork, linens, throw pillows, a welcome mat—and they'll reuse them again and again in the homes that they stage.



Before

ALL ROOMS ON THIS AND THE FACING PAGE WERE PROFESSIONALLY HOME STAGED BY HOME STAGING ATLANTA. THE BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOS SHOW A DRAMATIC TRANSFORMATION.



After



Limit dinner tables to four chairs, but when showing a house in a neighborhood popular with large families, show a larger table with more chairs if the dining room is spacious enough.



This room features a two-person work area, which would be a good choice in a neighborhood popular with couples who work from home.



The chocolate-colored walls and orange wall art may seem a bit edgier than most of the homes pictured in this lesson, but the palette is still neutral. Bolder hues tend to appeal to younger buyers.



A Florida condo gives the image of cleanliness, relaxation, and ease—the right mix for retirees.

STAGE FOR A CERTAIN DEMOGRAPHIC

Up until this point, we've talked about staging in the broadest terms possible. But whenever a house is on the market, it's generally situated in a particular area where a certain type of buyer is likely to be looking for a home. In this case, staging with an eye toward the general taste of the local homebuying demographic is an even better option than staging it for everyone.

Think about a Florida condo. The market is mostly retirees who want to have a calm, peaceful home with an ocean view. The carpet is generally cream colored, the walls are a pleasant, light sand tone, the paintings have seashells in them. The staging message is "relaxing, immaculate, effortless."

If you know that the neighborhood your house is in attracts young families, you should highlight all the features in the house that cater to the care of young children. Add a safety lock on the refrigerator, safety plugs in all the sockets (this should happen anyway), a high chair at the table, and a lovely antique or modern crib in the nursery (which perhaps used to be a study in the house's former life). This is one of the special circumstances under which you might want to transform one of the spare bedrooms into a nursery or children's bedroom/activity room. Converting a formal dining room to a family room is another staging trick if your house lacks such a space.

If the home is in an area popular with single people in their late 20s, skew the furniture to be more modern and create lounge spaces within the house for entertaining. Look for furniture at stores this set of buyers is likely to shop at, such as IKEA, Urban Outfitters, CB2, West Elm, and Anthropologie (search for modern furniture websites, too).

If you're showing an apartment in a trendy, upscale neighborhood popular with upwardly-mobile young adults in their early 30s, stage the house with technology. Display an iPod dock on the fireplace mantel. Find the latest gadgets by looking at online tech sites like Cnet.com and the blog Gizmodo.com. But if your homebuyers are mainly elderly, add safety features such as grab bars in the shower and by the toilet, and an easily accessible front porch ramp. For more ideas, reference the lesson on *Universal Design*.

Homebuyers in a certain area are part of a demographic. Know that demographic! If you're going to stage homes professionally, network with Realtors so they can recommend you to clients whose homes are stagnating on the market.

If you're simply selling your own home, do your own research on the Internet to find trends occurring in your neighborhood. Find information on specific demographics at *www.city-data.com* which gives median income, ethnic breakdown of the population, and average price for various housing units.

Begin the process by finding out the median home value for the city that the home is located in. The website Eppraisal.com can give you quick statistics once you know the zip code or city. Websites like Trulia.com and Zillow.com show the latest sale prices of homes on the market as well as the prices of those recently sold. Once you have an idea of home prices, calculate your fees for staging—see *Staging Budgets* on page 32 for details.

Stage a home geared to a specialty market in much the same way you would for a broader audience, but make the appeal to the specific demographic in small and thoughtful ways.



SHOWCASE

Showcasing is about getting your home ready for photographing. Real estate brokers will want to take photos of your house to show to their clients and these photos will most likely be posted on their website.

Always photograph your home during the daytime with all the window curtains and shades open. Fresh flowers, a tasteful accessory, or a bowl of fruit should grace every table in the house. As your rooms are now probably decorated in neutral colors—a pop of color from a vase of vivid flowers will liven up the photographs. Magazine photos of interiors are always styled to their best effect—so copy them! Don't take photos too close up to your composition; step as far back as possible and take a wide-angle shot of the room. Your resulting photos should show bright, spacious, and welcoming rooms.

Most staging is about cleaning the home, doing repairs, storing excess items, and replacing any broken elements. To really sell your home, it's not enough to have just a clean and well-maintained house; you have to make the buyer feel attached to your home. Showcasing the home to best advantage will help propel prospective buyers to make you an offer.

For instance, if it's springtime, a pot of crocuses and other spring flowers strategically placed around the home will help set a good mood. If you're staging a family house, this is definitely the time to use the freshly-baked cookies or bread trick. At the front door, a new welcome mat will make the buyer feel at home. Every light should be on, making each room bright and inviting for guests.

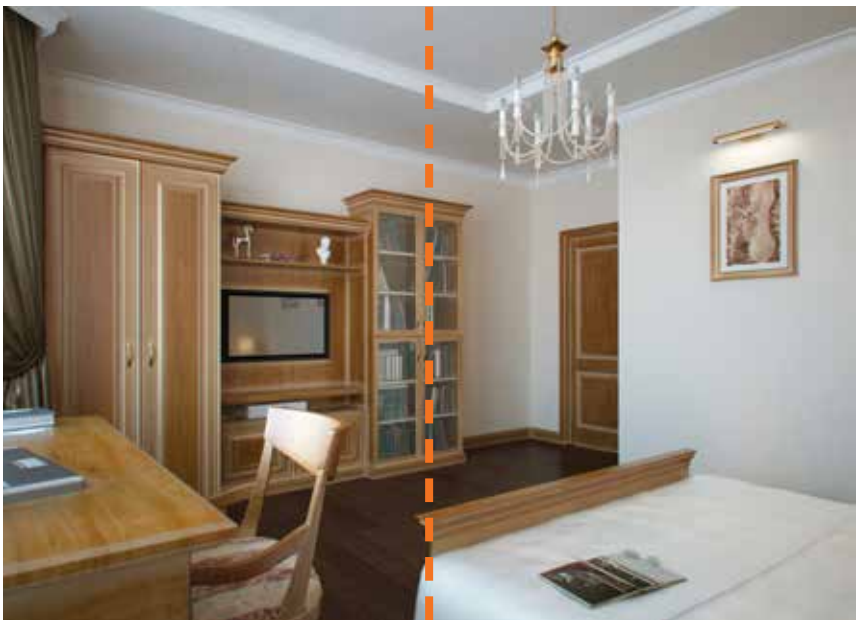
While personal mementos should be removed, there must still be some artwork on the walls so that buyers will see the potential of a room. Artwork of beautiful open spaces—such as gardens, mountains, or the beach—is always a safe and neutral choice. These subjects remind people of vacations or travel, and that's always a mood elevator.

Try to have all artwork framed. Take down any posters or unframed prints as these cheapen the overall look. If you have several pieces of small artwork, group them together so they make a bigger visual impact. If you have only one or two small pieces, take them down and replace them with one larger work. Large artwork makes the room look more spacious. Look for inexpensive art solutions online or at retail stores like Pottery Barn and HomeGoods.









VIRTUAL STAGING

Some designers use computer software to manipulate photos of an empty house to show what it would look like with furniture in it. Sometimes computer software is used to recreate the entire room using the same size specifications and window and door placement of the original home. The photo is shown to potential buyers online, and sometimes a printout of the photo is displayed in each empty room of the house.

The cost of virtual staging is much lower than physical staging. This service is available through specialized companies on the Web, and involves knowledge of various image manipulation techniques and specialty software, such as Autodesk, 3D Studio Max, Photoshop, and Google SketchUp Pro.

Although virtual staging companies are careful to let clients know the furniture doesn't actually exist, many viewers are disappointed when they actually visit the house and see it empty. Using a virtual staging service can be a good way to propose a decorating strategy to your clients. You can decorate a virtual room at certain websites to get an idea of what specific color and material combinations will look like and present them to your clients.

We don't include this type of instruction in the scope of this Course. If you're interested in learning how to create virtually staged images, take a look at the continuing education course offerings in 3D Design at your local community college or adult learning center.

3D RENDERS

Look back at the room in the large photo on pages 10–11 of this lesson. It isn't a photograph of an actual room, but a 3D render, created entirely on a computer!

While many digital renders are obvious, such as those on this page, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between photographs of an actual room and computer-generated images. 3D technology is improving all the time, but the biggest obstacle to making something look real is lighting. Lighting often looks a bit odd in 3D renders, though you can't put your finger on why. It's usually too soft and diffused or, alternately, too harsh. In the picture on the bottom of this page, a clue to its un-reality is the flatness of the wall textures, the unnatural plants in the house, and the strange flames in the fireplace.

Another common clue is the textures of flooring and fabric. Does the pattern repeat perfectly, without any flaws or variation? Does a "hardwood floor" appear seamless, as though made from one sheet of linoleum? The edges of the furniture are another clue—if they're too perfect, or if draped fabric hangs too stiffly or uniformly, it could be a render.

The picture on the bottom of page 30 is another expert-quality render. What's the biggest clue here? The perfect, hard edges of the books on the desk are one small clue, and the side of the desk is not as dark as it would be in normal shadow, which highlights the flatness of the wood texture. The awkward construction of the chair arm is another clue. However, if you were only shown the right side of the picture, it would be much harder to label it a render—use the dotted line as a guide and mask the right, then the left halves to notice the difference.





These are two obvious computer generated images. How can you tell? The main clue in the bedroom is the soft, unnatural light and perfect draping of the bed canopy and bedspread. In the bottom picture, the walls are very angular and the textures on the walls don't seem to have any depth to them. The plant in the window is very bright green and strangely shaped.



STAGING BUDGETS

A simple consultation for staging a home can range from $200–400, but it can run up to $6,000 for large homes. Staged homes generally sell for 3% higher than those homes that haven't been staged. For example, for a $400,000 house, a 3% increase means $12,000, which far exceeds the cost of staging a home.

In a recent study by the Real Estate Staging Association (RESA), both vacant and occupied homes that weren't staged remained on the market for an average of 263 days, or about nine months, before being sold. In contrast, both vacant and occupied homes that had been staged remained on the market for an average of only 60 days, or about two months. In other words, staged homes spent about 78% less time on the market than unstaged homes. When you calculate the additional expenses of the extra seven months to sell the home, such as the mortgage and utilities, you'll find that the cost of staging is worth the price.

To keep costs down, the homeowner can make simple repairs and do-it-yourself painting. The rest of the staging budget can go towards necessary furniture rental and more involved repairs, such as plumbing and electrical work. To save even more money, the homeowner can forego the cost of furniture rental and purchase a few new pieces of furniture which, after the sale, will move to the seller's new home.



A SIMPLE CONSULTATION FOR STAGING A HOME CAN RANGE FROM $200–400, BUT IT CAN RUN UP TO $6,000 FOR LARGE HOMES.



THE PRINCIPLES OF REAL ESTATE STAGING CAN GUIDE YOU WHEN DECORATING FOR INDIVIDUALS AS WELL AS FOR GROUPS.



READY TO STAGE

Although the goal of real estate staging is to make a home on the market appealing to buyers, sometimes the original owners fall in love with their old house all over again when they see how nice it looks after it's been professionally arranged.

Remember to focus on preparing the exterior and interior spaces first. Clean everything, declutter, subtract overly-personal items, create good traffic flows, neutralize the color palette, group items in meaningful vignettes, and tweak your staging to appeal to specific target buyer audiences.

The principles of real estate staging can guide you when decorating for individuals as well as for groups. You can also use these ideas when redesigning homes for others or for yourself.


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