ALL THE HOME'S A STAGE IF IT'S TIME TO SELL

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Home stagers will transform a space for the express purpose of attracting buyers

By Karen Gram

SELLING| When this chaotic, "eclectically" furnished one-bedroom Kitsilano condo was occupied by a tenant, no one cared how it was decorated. Then it went on the market. Suddenly, décor mattered. A lot.

If you want to sell in this market, sell fast and sell high, you've got to look good. Call in the stagers.

"The chaotic styling went throughout," recalls Sandy Arthur, a former set designer turned home stager who transformed the condo into a calm modern enclave that everyone wanted to buy as is. "The furnishings were all too large for the small space, it had only one chair in the living room and it needed to be better defined as a living room."

Luckily the tenant was moving out and taking her furnishings with her, leaving Arthur with a slightly dirty but otherwise clean slate from which to work. But she would have done much the same thing if the furnishings had been the owner's. She'd clear out, re-arrange, fix.

Home staging is the trend in real estate. It takes a home or vacant space and temporarily furnishes it so that prospective buyers can visualize what it could be. It takes the boiling cinnamon or cookies in the oven trick to new heights. And according to anecdotal evidence and one ad hoc study, it seems to work like a charm, selling homes faster and for much higher prices that they would have sold before.

Sometimes stagers just rearrange the furniture and clear out the clutter and the personal effects, such as family photos, collections and ethnic art.

But the other times a lot of work needs to be done, says John Carter, of DEKORA, a West Vancouver-based home-staging company. Maybe there's dog odour and hair, maybe there are really dramatic colours on the walls, maybe the carpet is a disaster. Maybe the design is all '80s peach tones and chrome. Maybe it's eclectic.

The problem with the way we decorate our homes, is that we are so very personal about it. Prospective buyers get distracted; they start to feel like they are intruding into someone else's space. What sellers want is for the buyers to feel like they are walking into something that is already theirs. They also want to minimize the negatives and accentuate the positives.

The Kitsilano condo was fairly dark and small. Arthur knew she needed to come up with a design that brightened it up and demonstrated the best uses for the rooms, without distracting the buyer.

First up was to freshen the paint and clean the carpets. The walls already had a neutral tone, so she just gave them another coat.

Then she carefully furnished the suite with pieces that fit its scale. She knew that people like to see a living room that can accommodate guests and good conversation. So she provided seating for four people rather than the one oversized seat facing a TV that the tenant had there.

She yanked the TV and the large entertainment unit, and used the space for chairs and a small chest. Arthur almost always removes the art from the walls and replaces it with choices that would appeal to most sensibilities. In this case she used monochromatics. It matched the black-and-white theme of the furnishings.

And because people are said to make up their minds within minutes of seeing a place, she always adds all the small touches; the apples on the table, a new welcome mat at the door, a few flower planters hung outside and in a case of a house, power washing the walkway.

Home staging is different from having your home professionally decorated in that it is temporary and doesn't have to appeal to the owners tastes. It is designed to offend no one, while showing off best used ones.

DEKORA generally rents most of its furnishings to keeps the costs down, but in this case, Arthur visited the West Vancouver home of owner Anne Marie DeLuise and selected a few pieces from there as well. As former film set decorators, the DEKORA home stagers know how to keep to a budget and where to find savings. It helps keep costs down, says Carter.

Not that staging is cheap. It cost DeLuise $2000 and because she was one of the first, she only paid for the materials. Arthur threw in her fee as a way to get started in the business.

Carter says the cost depends entirely on how much needs to be done. It can range from $150 to rearrange a few pieces of furniture and declutter to $10,000 to do

major repairs. It also depends on the size of the home.

“A lot of people don’t want to put out that kind of money,” says DeLuise. “But I really believe that small investment will pay for itself.”

In this case, after it was staged, the DeLuises decided to increase the asking price by $10,000. The market was hot and the place looked great. They ended up selling it for $3,000 less than the asking price which was $7000 more than they had anticipated getting before they staged it.

“It was well worth it,” she says.

A real estate agent in Los Altos, Calif., conducted her own study to determine if staging really does improve prices and selling times. She analyzed 2,772 properties sold between March 1 and Sept. 30 1999, in eight Californian cities. Of those, 129 properties, including condominiums, townhouses and single family residences, had been staged. They ranged in list price from $229,000 to $4.8 million.

For the group of 2,772 properties, the average number of days on the market was 30.9, and the average difference in sales price over list price was 1.6 percent.

For the sample of staged homes, the average number of days on the market was 13.9 – less than half of the time for houses in the general sample. The average difference in the selling price over list price was 6.3 percent, nearly four times as much as for the other group of homes. The agent reported that the staged sample was not skewed by one or two outstanding properties. All the homes in the ample were fairly similar in terms of day son the market and net sales difference.

“Staging is great because it allows people to visualize,” says Vancouver realtor Andrea Kavanagh. It is tough for home owners to do it themselves because it is hard to be objective about your own stuff. And because home owners are busy enough getting their kids to soccer and baseball, doing the shopping a living their lives.

“now they don’t have to worry about it. There are people who will do it for you.”

Indeed. The Deluise’s condo sold in less than one week and everyone who saw it at the open house wanted to buy it “as is”.