

Urban Living

Clutter Busters Set the Stage for Selling People's Homes



By Angela Murrills

Erasing what you consider to be the comfy "personality" of your home may not be a bad idea at selling time, as these before-and-after images prove.

There's only one time I could ever imagine allowing John Carter past the front door of our eccentrically furnished, colourfully decorated, and undeniably cluttered house. And that's when we sell it. Because what Carter and his colleagues at DEKORA do, using their various backgrounds in set design and marketing, is change your home around so it finds a new owner as quickly as possible. The idea of living on a movie or TV set seems a bit Stepford homeish, but then I remember open houses and being immediately turned off by grid-system shelving, empty bookshelves, and scary Spanish Provincial coffee tables. Maybe he has a point.

The technical term for the transformations wrought by this West Vancouver based year-old company is home staging. "You can embrace it or ignore it," says Carter over coffee at White Spot, "it" being the first, vital impression that your place makes on potential buyers. "The downfall of ignoring it is a slower sale or lower price," he says. A 1999 study done by Coldwell Banker Realty in California reported that staged homes in the Los Altos area sold more quickly and for higher prices than unstaged homes. Carter cites one Tsawwassen house that sat on the market for two years before some astute rearrangement hooked a new owner.

The painful truth is that everything that gives your rooms their personality--family snapshots, shelves jam-packed with vintage finds, the dark green you agonized over in the paint store--can be anathema to other people. Doesn't it feel like slaughtering your firstborn to lose all that? "The way you sell your house is not the way you live in it," says Carter. Besides, you've already made the emotional break, you're going to be packing stuff anyway, and it's just a case of getting rid of that flaky old sofa now instead of a month down the road.

DEKORA works directly with homeowners, with or without their realtor present. (Realtors love home staging, no prizes for guessing why.) A consultation is \$95 an hour (two to three hours is normal), which gets you a written report suggesting, for instance: "Lampshades on existing lamps should be replaced with new, un-pleated shades in a natural linen or homespun fabric... If possible, take the speakers down from the valances, and remove dog beds and the like when showing the house." New paint is a common recommendation. "We try to stick to neutral palettes to appeal to as many people as possible," says Carter.

DEKORA is not in the major-renovation business, but it does organize minor cosmetic changes like replacing scuffed Arborite counters with new ones (or *Maxim* with *Architectural Digest*). The company can also provide a free estimate with room-by-room pricing based on them doing the work.

"We're totally up-front and honest," he says. "We may even love the way...[the owners have] decorated but it's not appropriate." They may also point out that 15 years' worth of newspapers and receipts lying around isn't appealing either. They handle the flip side, too, when someone has already moved, leaving bare rooms that need to be dressed with rented furniture.

Carter turns on his laptop to show some case studies. Here's a before shot of a 750-square-foot West Side apartment with a funky old blue armchair heaped with cushions. It looks personal and lived in...by someone else. "We're taking the show-suite mentality," he says (as developers do with brand-new buildings), which, in this apartment, meant installing different furniture, including a smaller-scale coffee table and wall mirror to give the impression of more space.

Looking at more visuals emphasises the positive--or negative--impact of ostensibly minor details. Replace that froufrou bedding with crisp tailored linens in brown and off-white, as DEKORA did for one client, and you have a setting that looks cool and modern rather than Tammy Wynette wannabe. A living-room after has less on the coffee table, colour splashes via small crimson cushions, and a big fern in the corner. The faux Vincent van Gogh over the fireplace stayed (!), but overall the place looks cleaner and tidier. Before: a whale-printed shower curtain, a tropical-fish-printed bath mat, and hair products uncaged; after: reeds in a glass vase, towels (white) neatly rolled in a wicker basket, and a tasteful botanical-print shower curtain. It's as anonymous as a hotel bathroom, but to the next possible owner, this is a good thing. Carter compares home staging to a job interview: "It's like putting a shirt and tie on..."

Projects take from a few hours to five days and, ballparking it, you're looking at \$3,500 to \$5,000 for a completely redone and redecorated 750-square-foot apartment. Still, this *Extreme Makeover* approach can definitely pay for itself (info at www.dekora.com or 604-876-4355), and there are tricks you can do yourself to make a place more salable. "Edit and clean," says Carter. "If you don't do anything else, do those."