

# All the home's a stage ...

... And any homeowner who's having trouble selling his or her home would be well advised to seek out a home stager for help and advice

SUSAN KELLY

Your mind is made up. You're ready to pack up and move on. But first you must sell your existing home, preferably for top dollar.

If you've listed that home with Brian Dutch, a real-estate agent with ReMax Westmount, you might have a surprise in store. He's likely to root through your closets, shift your furniture around, and ply you with paint chips before the first prospective buyer sets foot in the door.

Over 25 years of selling homes, Dutch came to realize that every home could be made more sellable with just a few cosmetic changes. Now every client gets such advice from him, a process known in the real-estate industry as home staging.

Staging makes a huge difference when selling any home, Dutch said.

"If you've been living in your home for a long time, you tend to stop seeing it as others do. So over the years I began to give people more advice on how to showcase their homes for sale."

Today, that might involve advising them to completely repaint the house in an appealing new hue, to buy or rent trendier furniture, or to simply change the artwork and upgrade a few fixtures and door-knobs.

But you've already decorated, so why stage? In order to sell your home it literally has to be picture-perfect, Dutch said. Most buyers go to the Internet to look at properties before calling an agent, which means the first impression they have of your home is a website photograph. It's also why the cardinal rule of staging is to eliminate clutter.

"You want them to see your home's good features clearly — even on a small screen. And the eye becomes confused when a photo contains too many details."

Since agents such as Dutch, who also stage homes, are rare, an increasing number of homeowners are turning to professionals known as "home stagers."

Well established in the United States and



PHOTO BY GUY A. ARCHER

some European countries, this profession was almost unknown in Canada even three years ago. Now home stagers are an accepted part of the Toronto and Vancouver real-estate markets, the stars of home-improvement television shows, and increasingly a presence in Montreal. Many are former decorators who now specialize in using the tricks of their trade to motivate potential buyers to make that all-important offer.

Hiring a home stager can help you see your home through buyers' eyes, says Emma Coates, former theatre set designer and current owner of Stage Set Match in Rigaud.

"Before an initial consultation with a client, I research their area thoroughly," she said, "even going to open houses in the neighbourhood so I can see the competition for myself."

And to assess the market. For instance, you may be a retired couple downsizing from a three-bedroom house. But if you live in a quiet residential area with good schools, young families could be the ones coming up your front walk. In such a case, Coates would advise setting up a young child's room in the spare bedroom, so buyers don't have to work too hard to visualize their tot sleeping there. Conversely, if most of the buyers are single professionals, then the extra bedroom should be staged as a home office or media room.

"You have to take yourself out of the picture," she said, "and give people every opportunity to say 'Oh, yes I can see myself living here!'"



PHOTO BY SVETA MELCHUK

Selling a house devoid of furnishings can be as difficult as trying to sell one that's badly furnished. As the photo at left illustrates, the room shown above looked a lot better once Sveta Melchuk worked her magic — adding some furnishings without creating clutter.

A beautifully prepared home, absolutely clean with no clutter, is the ideal. But you shouldn't remove so much that there's no personality left, Coates said. Since home buying is an emotional process, you want the buyers to come in and immediately have an emotional connection with the space.

On some television shows, staging looks relatively simple. The professionals do a walk-through, then head for the warehouse to find just the right furniture, area rugs, lamps and artwork to complete your space.

In real life it doesn't quite work that way, said Sveta Melchuk, owner of Home Staging Montreal, which provides home-staging services and courses in the craft.

The first consultation with a home stager usually takes place on the telephone. Melchuk needs to evaluate what type of property, whether

it's vacant or lived-in, the client's expectations and budget, and so on. Then there's a first on-site consultation that lasts two hours or so, going room-to-room — from attic to basement.

"I play the role of buyer," Melchuk said, "and point out what I love about the home and what bothers me."

As part of her fee, she draws up a detailed 15-page checklist and helps the homeowner figure out what changes are priority and how to get them done within a set budget. Her clients are then offered the option of making it a do-it-yourself project or hiring Melchuk to oversee either a portion or the entire project. And to benefit from her stable of reliable and competent contractors who can do everything from slipcovering the sofa to adding crown moulding.

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**"You have to take yourself out of the picture and give people every opportunity to say: 'Oh, yes I can see myself living here!'"**

Emma Coates, Stage Set Match

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# Staging | U.S. survey showed positive results

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Most home stagers follow this same basic process, though the fee that's charged varies. Melchuk charges \$325 for the initial consultation, Coates \$200. Melchuk commands a flat fee of \$650 to manage the entire process, while Coates bills by the hour for subsequent work.

If you need additional furniture or other paraphernalia, a stager will help you source it from a variety of places.

Most homeowners don't opt to rent furniture, artwork, dishes, rugs and so forth.

But if you do, to fill even a very small home can cost between \$700 and \$2,000 a month, Melchuk said.

Which is why she now stocks a line of stylish European cardboard furniture, made of recycled materials and sturdy enough to sit on.

"I believe I am the first in Montreal to offer this option," she said, "and it can cut the cost of renting furniture by about half."

Hard statistics on whether or not home staging pays off are difficult to find. HomeGain, a website for real-estate professionals, surveyed 2,000 agents in the United States in 2007. The results indicated that an average investment of less than \$600 U.S. resulted in a 343-per-cent return on investment, with 91 per cent of agents saying they recommended professional home staging to their clients.

Melchuk has tracked the sales figures from 60 homes she's staged.

"My records show that, on average, the homes sold in 30 days and at 98 per cent of the asking price," she said.

## Home staging 101

Emma Coates, owner of Stage Set Match in Rigaud, offers the following tips for any homeowner thinking of selling:

**Before you list.** check out comparable properties in your area and look at the decorating style and colour scheme. If necessary, adjust yours to appeal to the majority of the buying public. "Think less personal, more universal appeal," Coates said.

**Cleanliness counts more than ever.** The home should be spotless for the entire time you're showing the property to prospective buyers.

**Purge your home of clutter.** This means not only the detritus of daily living — such as newspapers, magazines, sports gear, etc. — but also extraneous furniture or decorations. Don't forget the closets; a disorganized one will look smaller, which is not a selling feature.

**Upgrade as many fixtures as possible,** especially worn or non-functioning ones. A simple change, such as new light fixtures or cabinet door handles, can make a world of difference for a relatively modest cost.

**Park your pooch and cart away kitty.** Prospective buyers may have an aversion to even the cutest critter, ranging from simple dislike to full-blown allergies. It's best not to alienate them as soon as they cross the threshold.

**Don't go overboard with staging** some elements, as it could be a turn-off for buyers. "Never set a table as if you're about to have a dinner party, or lay out cocktails in the living room," Coates cautioned. You can plant hints about what areas are for entertaining, which for relaxing, and so forth. But leave the rest to the buyer's imagination.

SUSAN KELLY

ADVERTISEMENT

# Today's bathroom more like a spa

Bathrooms are the new spa. And if the choices of bathroom fixtures, toilets, faucets and tubs are any indication, it's clear that transforming the utilitarian bathroom from a room of necessity into one of luxury has become an industry unto itself.

In fact, most statistics suggest that renovations to your bathroom that are in line with today's contemporary standards can add up to 20 per cent to the selling price of your home, along with a 56-per-cent return on your renovation investment, according to a ReMax report.

At Salles de Bain Masechia in Pointe Claire you can find all these contemporary bathroom accoutrements in a spacious 3,000-square-foot showroom that is tastefully decked out with the latest in tubs, faucets, vanities, showers, ceramic tiles and bathroom accessories.

Owner Gino Masechia arrived in Canada 45 years ago, starting out as a plumber before opening his own bathroom decor store on Décarie Blvd. 18 years ago. In a more spacious location in the Mega Centre in Pointe Claire for the past 10 years, Masechia has continued the tradition of quality products and service, moving with the times and offering the latest in bathroom decor options.

Along with his daughter Leila and his two sons-in-law who head up a team that handles installations, this is a business with a family touch.

Masechia said Salles de Bain Masechia is the only bathroom creation store that has its own renovation crew.

"We have a designer who will model your bathroom according to your ideas, offer layout plans and pricing quotes for free, then build and renovate to your tastes. And if (customers) don't know what they want, I'll go into their home and see what is a good fit."

People are generally looking to make their bathrooms look bigger, he said. Floors can be refitted with larger ceramic tiles from Italy and Spain and, along with some recessed lighting, a bathroom can be transformed without actually changing the dimensions of the room.

Although Masechia offers a range of bathtubs, some with heated backs and therapeutic jets with as many as 45 to 80 holes offering a

comfortable massage-like effect, Leila Masechia said the trend today is to convert the tub to a walk-in shower stall.

With a wide variety of enviro-friendly shower faucets, including some with thermostatic valves for pre-set temperatures, Salles de Bain Masechia has complete bathrooms set up in their showroom so customers can see how that new shower stall might look in their home.

"The bathroom is becoming a spa," she said. "It's more a place to relax now."

"It's looked at as a space to escape and seek peace and relaxation."

Salles de Bain Masechia is all about quality products and service. In fact, they're so versatile they also do kitchen renovations, including cabinets and floors.

"It's really a one-stop place to shop," Gino said. "We've got everything for all kinds of budgets."

Bathroom accessories like vanities serve as a complement to the other necessities of the renovated bathroom. Salles de Bain Masechia has vanities of all shapes and sizes, from classic to modern and Victorian.

But when it comes to toilets, "people tend to go for comfort over style," Leila said.

Sinks come in all sizes and shapes these days, but space is always a consideration when renovating. Salles de Bain Masechia has everything from the traditional pedestal sink, the sunken vanity to the ultra-chic vessel sinks. Again, tradition can be an option with faucets that are standard chrome, but Masechia now features a wide range of finishes — including oil-rubbed bronze, pewter and polished nickel.

Accepting the notion of a bathroom as spa escape, Salles de Bain Masechia wants to make sure customers wind up with a new bathroom that will add to the beauty of their home and offer comfort and style at the same time.

"We're very passionate about our business," Gino Masechia said. "We'll spend three to four hours with a customer in our showroom, helping them imagine and visualize their new bathroom."

"After all, it's not like you can take it up and change it once it's been done."

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- To prime and paint the walls as well as the ceiling.
- The installation of the vanity, toilet, sink, paper holder and the towel bar.

