

Home staging worth money, time invested

An attractive, uncluttered space makes a property more appealing to buyers

BY DONNA NEBENZAHL, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 24, 2010



Home stager Sveta Melchuk decorates a condominium for sale in the NDG neighbourhood of Montreal. Photograph by: JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

It helps to sell your home if prospective buyers feel welcome when they step inside, so don't turn them off with family photographs on the walls, or religious fixtures.

People react to an attractive space in which they can see themselves living, says home stager Sveta Melchuk. Even if your kitchen or bathroom are outdated, your house will sell if it's uncluttered and refreshed.

Home staging is worth the time and money you invest, says Melchuk, whose company, Home Staging Montreal, was launched in 2005.

In about three weeks, a home can be ready for showing.

But only a small part of the process is rearranging furniture.

"It's the preparation that matters," Melchuk says. "There's no point in staging a house if it's cluttered and there are cracks in the ceiling."

The priority, Melchuk says, is plastering, repairing and painting. Then comes the daunting task of de-cluttering. "Most of the time, a major renovation won't pay off. The place has to be clean and livable."

Once those things are done, the place is ready for presentation, which shapes the ambience that buyers feel when they enter the home. "It's most important that potential buyers feel good," she says.

Home staging starts with curb appeal, Melchuk says, which means the civic number and mailbox, the outside light and the walkway are clean and fresh, no cobwebs.

Because it's so important that the first impression is one of cleanliness and welcome, the next most important space is the inside entrance or vestibule. After that, priority goes to the living room, dining room, kitchen, master bedroom and master bathroom.

Once the plastering and minor repairs are completed, it's time to focus on the painting. "A good paint job can change everything," she says. "I can repaint an entire house sometimes."

Her advice: lighten up dark colours with neutrals or other pastels. "They make spaces bigger and the buyers will be able to visualize their furniture fitting in."

After the paint job, she will change light fixtures, which she believes makes a good impression and can rejuvenate a room. "Often people don't have enough lighting," she says. "And I will advise to show a place with the curtains open and light coming in."

Clutter is the number one problem that must be dealt with, Melchuk says. "People who are looking at a house want to see space, so you've got to get rid of clutter, and that means inside closets as well. That turns people off."

First, she motivates clients to sort out their goods, give away, sell or store.

This way, they can start packing, she says, keeping just what they need for the next few months.

"Usually people find their own solutions, like using the garage for storage or a storage facility."

Second, they've got to depersonalize the space by removing photographs, diplomas, collections, religious or political symbols.

"You don't want people to feel they're invading your personal space," Melchuk says.

When she is hired for a home staging, Melchuk will go through a house, room by room, listing what needs to be done.

A home staging will average one to three weeks, she says, and the cost to the seller is usually about one per cent of the selling price. "So if a house is being listed at \$300,000, I recommend spending \$2,000 to \$3,000 on renovation, including accessories."

If a client can't spend that much, then she will prioritize the work. She will reuse what's in the home as much as possible, or will rent items from her own inventory that includes area rugs, coffee tables, lamps and pictures. Members of her team will do the packing, decluttering, renovation and furniture reorganization.

Sometimes she has to furnish vacant properties belonging to real estate investors or people who have had to move without selling. "These places don't show well when they're empty," Melchuk says.

The time to stage, Melchuk says, is as soon as you're planning to photograph the home for the MLS listing. "It's psychological maybe," she says, "but if I see disorder or dark colours in the MLS photographs, I can't get past it. I'm adamant about the quality of the photographs on MLS."

She's also adamant about one problem she must face at almost every staging -the huge TV in the living room. "I recommend getting rid of the TV, although sometimes I have to compromise and rearrange things so the TV is no longer the focal point," she says. "It's a big challenge."

Sveta Melchuk on using a home stager:

1. How is home staging different from decorating?

Home decorating takes into account the tastes of a homeowner. Home staging is only concerned with what will please prospective buyers.

2. What is the best time for home staging?

As soon as you're ready to put your house up for sale. Staging has been shown to shorten sale time and might even increase selling price.

3. What does the home stager do?

Anything from simple consultation with no followup to full project management and furniture rental. The home stager can also provide a team of handymen or renovators to take care of those small cosmetic jobs.

4. Which home stager should I choose?

You need to feel comfortable with the home stager on a professional and personal level, which means being able to ask questions and obtain references. Discuss the work methods the stager uses, services offered, and check the stager's website for "before" and "after" photographs. There is no accreditation for home staging, so professionalism and competency are all important.

5. How much will it cost and who will pay for it?

Exact pricing is difficult since each house is different. Although on average around one per cent of the sale price is a good measure, a small house could take lots of work while a big house could be in excellent shape with little to do. In some cases, a real estate agent is willing to contribute at least part of the cost, since this work could add to the speed and value at which the house is sold.

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