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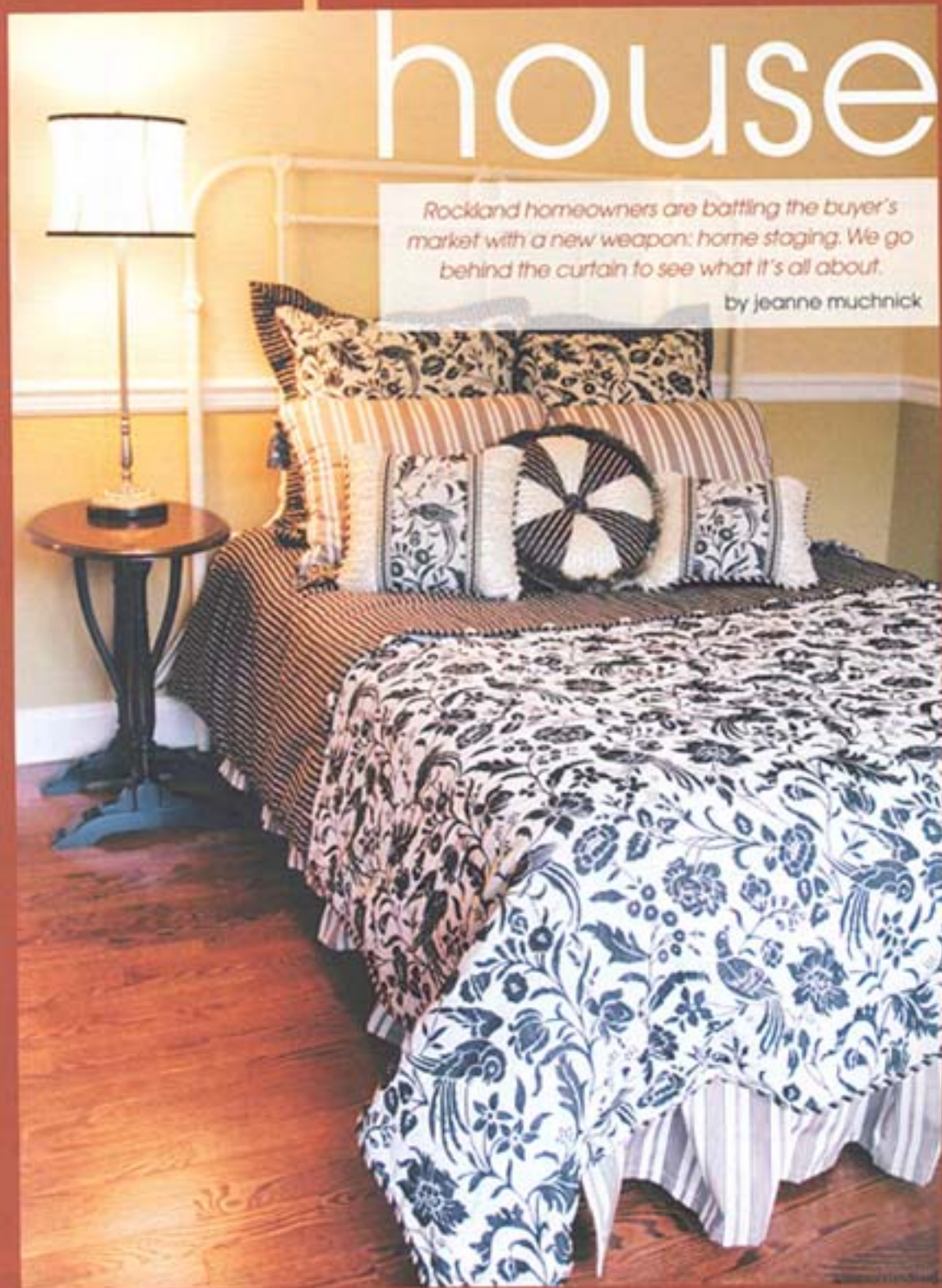
The Home Issue



this perfect house

Rockland homeowners are battling the buyer's market with a new weapon: home staging. We go behind the curtain to see what it's all about.

by jeanne muchnick



before



Before and after photos of a Suffern living room recently staged by Ossining-based First Impressions Home Staging.

Rita Auster likes watching home-and-design shows on TV. And the knowledge she gleans from them is about to pay off. So believes her husband, Arthur, who was convinced after watching them himself, that the couple needed to call in a home stager to sell their New City Cape Cod-style home. "We're looking to retire," he says. "And I have to tell you, after looking at a variety of homes, we were always most impressed with the one that looked spacious and pristine—much like a model home. We wanted ours to look the same—especially with the market tightening. We really needed to do something to make our house stand out."

And so, they cleaned out 98 percent of their clutter, moved furniture around (and out!), and put in some new (modern) accessories and props. "When I came home after the day the stager was there, my jaw dropped. It looked like a different house," he says. And while it was still on the market at press time, he feels confident the new look will bring in the right bid.

Staging can add from \$30,000 to \$60,000 to the final sale of the home.

In case you haven't tried to sell your house recently, home staging is the business of making your house attractive enough to

buy (think Pottery Barn catalog-esque). Just as makeup artists work their magic on fashion models, stagers are brought in, usually at the urging of a real-estate agent, to bring out a home's best features. A stager might turn a barren front porch into an inviting veranda, complete with a set of matching wicker rockers, or transform a worn family room into a virtual entertainment center. Stagers often have a retinue of haulers, painters, and tile refinishers at the ready who are able to do the job quickly and efficiently. They also have a huge inventory of lampshades, plates, rugs, candles, and vases, that they can easily access. According to experts, such staging tricks can add from \$30,000 to \$60,000 (or more) to the final sale of the home.

"The way you live isn't necessarily how you'd prepare your house for sale," explains Jennifer Stoltz of Ossining-based First Impressions Home Staging (fihomestaging.com), who has many clients in Rockland. "For the most part, buyers respond to a look which is tasteful and neutral." And that means getting rid of your treasured collections and taking the photos of your adorable kids off the shelves and packing up at least half of your stuff and putting it in storage. The job of a stager includes paring down furniture, adding props (window treatments, florals, rugs, and lamps are big),

and often even shifting rooms around to show off their "true space" (e.g., changing a playroom back into a formal dining room; a family room into its original intention as a first-floor master bedroom).

"You want each room to tell its own story without too many extra things getting in the way. And that requires a ruthless objectivity that the homeowner doesn't have, and that the Realtor often can't say (because of the relationship she's built up with the homeowner)," adds Maureen Henry of Sparkill-based Rockland Home Staging. She says she recently broke the news to a family of six in Orangeburg that they'd need to start packing their stuff in order to show their four-bedroom Colonial. "It's a gorgeous space but they have four kids and a dog, so they need to clear the clutter," she says. "De-cluttering is key."

Indeed, in a competitive market like Rockland, staging a home to create the right mood is a phenomenon that's catching on. The concept has been big in Northern California for seven years and has, within the past three, moved east (thanks also to the popularity of various home shows on TV). National statistics from Barb Schwarz, author of *Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money* and the president and CEO of StagedHomes.com, who's been in the business for 20 years (and



first coined the phrase "staged home" to the point of trademark) support this claim: According to statistics she's compiled, staged homes, on average, sell 32 percent faster and at a higher price than un-staged homes with an average \$38,000 difference. Plus, staged homes spend 50 percent less time on the market.

Owning the Market

Granted, if you're selling your home, you'll need to spend money to make money. Though staging fees vary, depending on the range of services, you can typically expect to pay between \$1,500 and \$2,000 for a picture-perfect home (though consultations are much less: from \$300 and up). According to Karen Fierstein of The Well-Staged Home, Inc. in Tenafly, New Jersey (wellstagedhome.com), whose main clientele is in Rockland, total staging costs can go as high as \$5,000 depending on the number of rooms that need staging and whether or not rental furniture is involved. Beau Roberts, who recently sold his condo in

Valley Cottage, says he spent about \$2,000, when in reality, refusing to stage his condo could have robbed him of hundreds of thousands of dollars. "To stage your house costs much less than your first mark-down and helps moves the property faster," he says. "I would definitely do it again if I had to."

Staged homes sell 32 percent faster and at a higher average price than un-staged homes.

Patricia Williams, of West Nyack, also believes the money spent thanks to the suggestions of The Well-Staged Home, Inc. will help her with her investment. Her home was recently de-cluttered and new furniture was brought in. "It's been great," admits Williams, who says much of the rugs and furniture was so nice that she wishes she owned it herself. And, in fact, she has enjoyed the experience so much, she has already asked Fierstein and her partner, Donna Thomas, to help her with ideas for her new Blauvelt home.

But don't let expense deter you. Sheryl Vogel, a licensed associate broker with

Clearing away the clutter was key for this Rockland home, says Jennifer Stoltz.



INVESTMENT RETURNS

A 2003 HomeGain survey of 2,000 real-estate agents nationwide found that moderately priced homes yielded the highest returns when a house was sold. Here are some of the returns you can expect on various home improvements.

Staging

Typical cost: \$212-\$1,089

Increase in sales price: \$2,275-\$2,841

Average return: 169 percent

Clean and de-clutter

Typical cost: \$305-\$339

Increase in sales price: \$2,093-\$2,378

Average return: 594 percent

Fix plumbing, electrical

Typical cost: \$338-\$381

Increase in sales price: \$922-\$1,208

Average return: 196 percent

Landscape and trim

Typical cost: \$432-\$506

Increase in sales price: \$1,594-\$1,839

Average return: 299 percent

Kitchen and bath upgrades

Typical cost: \$1,546-\$2,120

Increase in sales price: \$3,823-\$4,885

Average return: 138 percent

Repair flooring

Typical cost: \$1,531-\$1,714

Increase in sales price: \$2,267-\$2,589

Average return: 50 percent

Paint exterior walls

Typical cost: \$2,188-\$2,381

Increase in sales price: \$2,907-\$3,233

Average return: 34 percent

Replace carpeting

Typical cost: \$2,602-\$2,765

Increase in sales price: \$3,585-\$3,900

Average return: 39 percent

Source: Barb Schwarz, author *Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money*.



STAGE YOUR HOME

Here, tips from Karen Fierstein and Donna Thomas at The Well-Staged Home, Inc. (wellstagedhome.com):

◀ **Pull furniture away from the walls to create more-convenient groupings.** Homeowners tend to line up pieces along the walls of a room, and people end up too far apart to talk easily or set their drinks on the coffee table.

◀ **Keep your furniture to scale, and feel free to break up a set.** If your living room is too crowded, take one chair up to the master bedroom.

◀ **Rehang the artwork—most people hang them too high.** In a room where you're sitting most of the time, they should hang at eye level when you're seated; put them a little higher in a hallway, where people will be walking past.

◀ **Pick one focal point for the room, whether it's a fireplace or a view.** Group the furniture around it and play it up with accessories.

◀ **Let there be light!** Even if you have a ceiling fixture or track or recessed lighting, you still need a couple of lamps for more-focused work and ambiance.

◀ **De-personalize your space.** Potential buyers want to be able to picture their things in the house, not yours. Put away your family photos, cute collections, and your kids' toys and drawings away.



LEFT: The Williams home post-staging in West Nyack. ABOVE: Karen Fierstein and Donna Thomas.

Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in New City and an accredited staging professional (rocklandhouses.com), says staging doesn't have to be expensive and can run in the hundreds, not thousands. "Basically I tell my clients to get a bunch of inexpensive baskets and put three-quarters of their stuff in storage," she says. With one house she did in Chestnut Ridge, it took rearranging the furniture, taking leaves out of their dining room table and sprucing up the outside with pumpkins and a wagon to make it look autumn-cheery. She also changed a first-floor office into a playroom and moved the office to a bedroom upstairs. The house sold days later.

"The way you live isn't necessarily how you'd prepare your house for sale," explains Stoltz.

"It (the staging process) is very variable," adds Fierstein. "It honestly all depends on the size of the house and what needs to be staged." (She and her partner have an alliance with Christopher's Warehouse in Nyack, from whom they rent furniture.) Still, real-estate agents believe it's worth

the expense, and some are even willing to split the bill with homeowners.

For the past four years, the market was crazy, anything could sell—but now it's different, stresses Vogel. The fact that rising interest rates and sticker shock have slowed the market down has made staging, which is particularly important in builder-built homes and those that are vacant, take on greater importance. "No home should be shown empty," she says. "It makes it look too cold and impersonal."

At the same time, a house needs to look spacious, with clean lines that show off its assets. Vogel says she'll often take photographs of the home's interior and then show it to the seller on her computer monitor. "It gives them another view," she says. "The truth is, we're all oblivious to what we see every day, but when they see the inside of their house on a 17-inch monitor, they can finally see what the buyer sees."

"It's all about first impressions," she adds. "Think of those blind dates you used to go on. You gave the guy about two minutes, tops, just looking at his shoes, right? It's the same thing with a house." Many stagers liken the experience to detailing your car. You vacuum your car, paint it, and clean it out before you sell it, so why not do the same for your home?



Before and after photos of a bedroom in Suffern, staged by First Impressions.



All the Home's a Stage

Staging works because not everyone has vision, explains Henry. "If people walk into a space that's cluttered, they can't see it for what it truly is—no matter how attractive it may be." Julie Sovia, whose Center Hall Colonial in Orangeburg is currently being staged by Henry's newly formed Rockland Home Staging, admits she needed help to make her home presentable. "When you move into your home, you personalize it and make it yours," she says. "Which makes it hard to *de*-personalize it now, so others can imagine themselves living here."

Aside from removing clutter, it's also important to keep your home up-to-date with today's trends. Beau Roberts admits that his condo was "1970s dated" and didn't appeal to today's buyers until it was modernized. Changing the fixtures was a big part of the work there, according to Jennifer Stoltz, who consulted on the property.

Of course not everyone agrees that home staging works. Naysayers argue that a staged home isn't "real" and that such homes can look "too perfect." "I've sold houses before and I know from my Realtor's advice and basic common sense that I need to get rid of my clutter," says a seller in Blauvelt who wished to remain anonymous. "I honestly don't know much about home staging, but it's never crossed my mind. I think if someone watched those home shows on HGTV, they could

get the advice they needed. I don't see the reason to spend extra money."

Another anonymous seller said brokers constantly told her that her kitchen was too small and that it was a deterrent to selling. Once she took out her kitchen table, the house sold—"But obviously, you need a kitchen table," she says. In another home she saw, thanks to stagers, the house didn't even have a refrigerator—but the table with fresh lilies that replaced it made the kitchen look fabulous.

In the end, it's all about money. It comes down to what people want to fix and what they don't, explains Maria Fleming of Joyce Realty in Nyack. A lot of folks don't want to spend hundreds to paint their house and then not get back their investment. They're afraid the staging effort will be for nothing. Others just haven't been coached properly about the benefits of this technique. And still others feel that marketing their property "as is" will bring the necessary buyers. "The way I see it," she says, "whatever works."

Williams agrees. "I don't see a downside," she says. "In fact, now that half my packing is done, I don't have that much to do."

Though it's premature to say if the hard work the Austers of New City have done will

bring in a higher bid for their Cape, Arthur says home staging makes a lot of sense. "The way I look at it," he says, "especially with the way the market is now, it can't hurt" (though in the same breath, he admits it's tough keeping it in pristine condition while he and his wife are living there). Julie Sovia says the same thing about her home with four kids and a dog. "That's one of the challenges of staging," she says. "But hopefully you won't have to do that for too long." ✂

STAGING | RESOURCES

First Impressions Home Staging, Inc.:
914-263-1267; fihomestaging.com

Rockland Home Staging: 731-9510

The Well-Staged Home, Inc.: 201-568-8917; wellstagedhome.com

Sheryl Vogel, Coldwell Banker:
638-1081; rocklandhouses.com

Decorating With Fabric: 352-5064;
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