



HOMES



 Staged Home

FOR SALE



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 **CASH SOLD**

MIKE HENSEN The London Free Press

A growing number of homeowners planning to sell their houses are becoming aware of the advantages of hiring a professional home stager, such as Catherine Brown of London, to prepare the property before it goes on the market.

Looking good

Home stagers can help your home make a good impression on prospective buyers.

BY JANIS WALLACE
Special to The Free Press

Sell faster and for more money is the slogan of home stagers. Home stagers form a growing new group of professionals who help home sellers get their asking price — or more — and in short time.

First impressions count, no matter what you're selling. In the real-estate market, a house has about 90 seconds to make an impression. Home stagers ensure it will be a good one. They create a series of impressions from room to room, highlighting the home's best features and space.

"I depersonalize and neutralize a house so others can see themselves in it," said Catherine Brown, owner of Staged to Move in London.

The difference between decorating and staging is important. People decorate for their taste and lifestyle. But when someone else views a home with an eye to purchasing it, they need to be able to picture themselves in it. And that means clearing the individual quirks.

"The way you live in a house and the way you sell it are two different things," said Jody Wakelin, co-owner of London Home Staging.

"It is hard for sellers to look objectively. Their home is full of memories. It's emotional," said Brown.

Staging a house before putting it on the market helps sellers obtain top dollar. A recent report

indicated 90 per cent of homes in Sacramento, Calif. were staged.

"We're nowhere near that in Canada, but it is picking up," said Wakelin.

As a result of the growing popularity of the service, the number of those persons getting into the business is increasing. There are two accredited associations: Accredited Staging Professionals and Canadian Staging Professionals. Their websites help sellers locate a stager in their area. Training is provided for members.

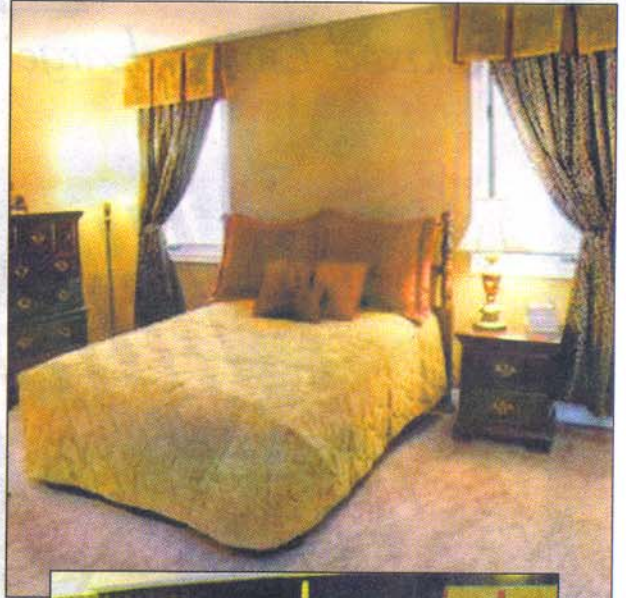
Many stagers are also real estate agents; some are interior designers or decorators. Others come from a variety of backgrounds, including banking, project management, engineering and business.

"My sister, Kristin MacDonnell, and I always had an interest," said Wakelin. "We took the course and started our own business. It's really rewarding to see the before and after photos of a place."

Brown saw the need. "I realized there was a market for helping people ready their homes for sale. After high school, I took merchandizing and design and worked in Toronto. When I moved back, I drifted into other work, but missed the creative side."

Clients are often referred to stagers by their real estate agents. Fluffing and de-cluttering comes after a consultation. The stager looks at the house from a buyer's perspective. They will

Professional home stagers can make a dramatic difference in the appeal a house makes. In the example at right, the bedroom in a Westmount home was given a makeover by Catherine Brown of Staged to Move, who changed the look from dark and foreboding to warm and inviting. Despite the property going on the market during a typically slow period in the real estate business, the relatively inexpensive changes to the home boosted its appeal and helped generate a sale after the first agent open house.



Photos courtesy of Catherine Brown

make notes, take photos and ask the seller questions about budget, time and what they want to do themselves or hire a tradesperson to carry out.

"I write a report and prioritize the top 10 things so the seller can concentrate their time and money, and give them a game plan," said Brown.

If the seller also wants the stager to execute some of the recommendations, they can provide a number of services.

"We strip a room to nothing," said Wakelin. "Then we go back and place neutral pieces to make it look attractive and lived in, but not too personal."

"Kitchens and bathrooms sell most houses," said Wakelin. She suggests walls, flooring and storage space are the projects that will yield most results.

"And cleaning — it's the biggest thing people can do. I can't believe how many people don't do it."

Brown agrees. "People are turned off by other people's dirt and dust. I try to be tactful when I tell them, but that's why a lot of agents hire stagers," said Brown.

In some cases, a professional home stager's input involves little more than a tidy-up of the house, as these before-and-after photos demonstrate.

Photos courtesy of Catherine Brown



"A lot of buyers want something they can move into and live with. They don't have a lot of time or money for a year or two after buying, so the more neutral a place, the more it will go with. They want everything in today's style.

"Painting makes a big difference. I prefer taupes, but not builder beige. A nice, crisp contrast with walls and trim makes it look clean."

New paint also eliminates a dated look, nicks and dents, and freshens a room quickly.

"Walls can be dingy and marked and look tired, or have 10-year-old colours or be too bright," said Brown.

Familiarity makes owners blind. An objective view can provide a new perspective on what needs to be done.

Editing is another important step. Put away family photos, the kids' art on the fridge, the collections and clutter. Brown also suggests replacing dried flowers with real ones. Fresh flowers and fruit represent abundance.

Furniture arrangement can easily expand a room visually. Slipcovers can transform worn or dated styles, or something too floral.

Empty rooms look bigger. But don't just move things from one part of the house to another. Store excess pieces at a storage place, along with boxes of crafts, out of season clothing, collections and anything that clutters the house, making it seem smaller, too personal and crowded.

Light also expands space. Open the window coverings. Create window boxes outside to take the eye beyond the room itself. Larger rooms almost seem more expensive.

A clean, calm atmosphere relaxes a buyer. And staging can help one house stand out from the rest of the homes on the market.

Clients are usually willing to spend to speed the sales process and get top dollar.

"They are surprisingly willing to spend up to \$2,000," said Wakelin. "Always the cost of staging is less than that of the first price reduction. People don't think of that as out of pocket, but it is. So why not invest upfront to save lower bids, price reductions and a longer time on the market?"

Often clients wish they'd made the changes much earlier so they could have enjoyed the clean, uncluttered look.

Home staging services can include:

- ▶ Rearranging or removing furniture.

DO-IT-YOURSELF TIPS

Here are some things you can do yourself to prepare your home for sale:

- ▶ Clean. The place should sparkle, especially taps, appliances and windows.
- ▶ Clear away the clutter.
- ▶ Organize closets, basements and garages.
- ▶ Remove fridge magnets and paper mess.
- ▶ Clear kitchen counters.
- ▶ Update the hardware on kitchen and bathroom cabinets.
- ▶ Clean up the yard.
- ▶ Put a new planter near the front entry and keep it watered and healthy.
- ▶ Make sure all lights work.
- ▶ Do a sniff test. Does your place smell of pets, old carpets, mildew, smoke or cooking? Ventilate and deodorize.
- ▶ Rent a storage unit for extra furniture and clutter.

- ▶ Editing decorative objects and accessories.
- ▶ Colour consultation.
- ▶ Painting in neutral colours.
- ▶ Co-ordinating window treatments, linens, floor coverings and lighting.
- ▶ Fine tuning the exterior for maximum curb appeal.

Extras can include:

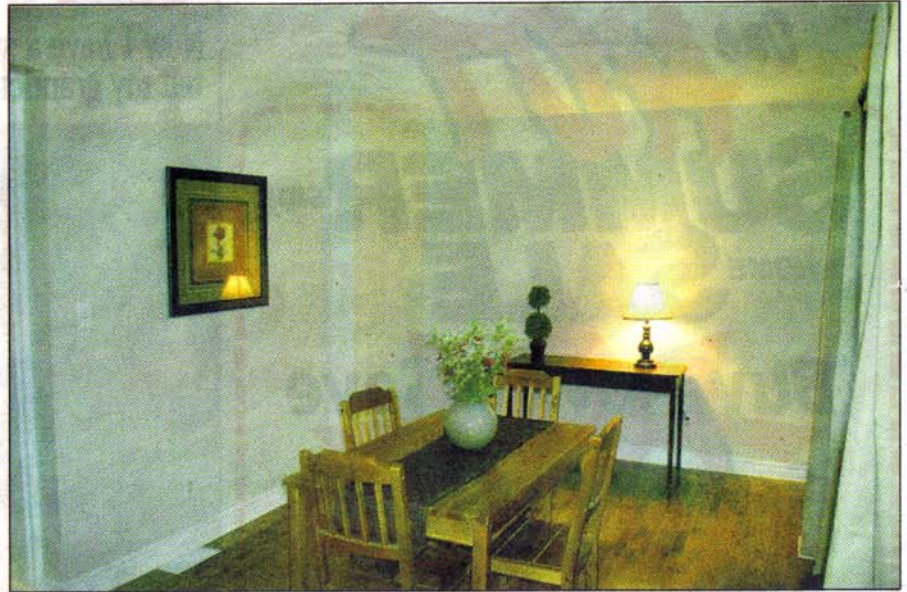
- ▶ Co-ordinating professional services or trades.
- ▶ Organizing packing or temporary storage, auctioneers or junk removal.
- ▶ Provide organizing tips and solutions.
- ▶ Shop for new hardware, linens, accessories.
- ▶ Prepare homes for open houses and showings.

Using the term staging is a registered concept by Barbara Schwartz, an American real estate agent who founded Accredited Staging Professional and StagedHomees.com. Schwartz coined the phrase after comparing what she did to a stage or film set designer.

For more information

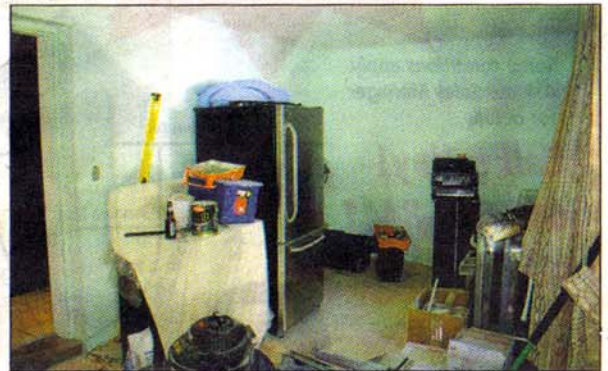
To obtain more details about home staging, contact:

- ▶ Catherine Brown, Staged to Move, phone 519-868-7171.
- ▶ Jody Wakelin, London Home Staging, phone 519-694-4663.



In these photos, Jody Wakelin of London Home Staging made a dramatic change in this client's home. A mudroom/porch area, which had been used for little more than storage, was cleaned up and transformed into a cosy dining area, greatly enhancing the home's appeal — and boosting the potential for a quick sale.

Photos courtesy of Jody Wakelin



Most professional home stagers offer a service that supplies furniture from the firm's inventory to give a vacant home a warmer, lived-in look, as these furnishings, rented from London Home Staging, provided for this client's property.

Photos courtesy of Jody Wakelin

