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IN TODAY'S
COOLING
MARKET, HOME
STAGING CAN
HASTEN THE
SALE

by Julie Foster

Stage Right



The Aura Condos model, staged by local firm Limn, helps potential buyers envision what the Capitol Mall development's units will look like once they're completed.

After their aunt passed away, Diana Correa and her sister Carolyn Carras were faced with the liquidation of her Land Park home. After clearing out personal items and completing minor renovations, their realtor suggested they have the home staged. Correa was skeptical at first.

Staging, done under the guidance of an interior designer or an accredited home stager, involves eliminating clutter, rearranging furniture for better use of space, and using lighting

more effectively. If the space is vacant, the stager brings in furniture and accessories to create a lived-in feeling. This process allows potential buyers to envision themselves in the space.

Prices vary depending upon the size of a home, the length of time it's been on the market, and labor needed to stage it. The cost of a written consultation for a 1,500-square-foot home, with the seller doing the work, can start at \$150. Full staging can run from \$1,000 for a home under 1,000 square feet to \$10,000 for a large home.

"Because this was another cost, I really questioned whether it was necessary," Correa says. "Since we didn't know how long it would take to sell the house, this could eat into any profits we might have obtained."

She agreed to try it for two months. The staging was simple: Up-to-date furniture and modern art added color. A few pieces on the outside patio highlighted the backyard. The fee was \$1,000. The home sold in three weeks, a respectable time in the current slow market.

"This was my first experience selling a house and using a stager," Correa says. "I would definitely recommend this to anyone wanting to sell a house."

Correa's sister, who was familiar with staging, explains why she thinks the process works. "I think sellers need an outside person to look at the house objectively, providing new ideas and a fresh approach," Carras says. "In our situation, when selling our 99-year-old aunt's house, we were trying to keep the precious memories of her alive, and that wasn't the best approach."

Sheila VanNoy of Dunnigan Realtors worked with the sisters. She first heard about staging five or six

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*—Sheila VanNoy,
realtor*

years ago. VanNoy notes that staging works especially well in vacant homes because it makes them warm and inviting; plus, rooms tend to look larger when they're furnished. Sellers are able to pack up in advance since unneeded items are stored, sold or donated, and prospective buyers see an uncluttered home.

Often, staging leads to fresh paint, new carpet and the refinishing of hardwood floors. VanNoy has worked with clients who chose to remain in a staged home and ended up wish-

ing they'd gone through the process years ago, since they appreciate the finished look.

"Homes are filled with memories, and many times we don't see the flaws in our own homes, just the wonderful memories," she explains. "Unfortunately, your memories don't make another person want to own your home. Good staging makes you want to be there."

As a general contractor and the CEO of DarkHorse Golf Club, Ed Fralick learned a long time ago what buyers want. He recalls building his first spec house 25 years ago and thinking if he could ever afford to buy a house like the one he was building, he'd want to pick out his own carpeting. So he completed the home sans carpet, just laying the pad. For two weeks he watched people open the door, look at the pad, turn around and walk out, saying, "This house isn't finished."

Now buyers get the total package. Fralick recently completed construction on a 9,300-square-foot spec home featured in DarkHorse's Street of Dreams event. His stager, Lisa Smith, an interior designer, helped with completion on the entire project, including colors, moldings, flowers, knickknacks, linens, soap, shampoo and bath towels. She brought in a piano for the music room and a billiard table for the downstairs sports bar. Smith also draped a mink across the island in the 20-foot-by-20-foot walk-in clothes closet.

"She puts vignettes in each room to show off the scale, proportion and color," he says. "Building is a very complex business with a lot of decisions, and staging is just one more step in that process. It helps from the standpoint of sales because the home is shown in a professional way with details that add warmth and flavor to the space."

When Jennie Norris, now an accredited master stager, got her first

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taste of the Sacramento housing market four and a half years ago, it wasn't one to savor.

"I was shocked at how the houses were presented to me as a buyer — with unmade beds, dirty clothes, clutter, smells, and crowded," Norris recalls.

She also noticed something else. Staging, while prevalent in the Bay Area, wasn't happening much in Sacramento. She became the first accredited staging professional, or ASP, to start a business in Sacramento. Norris's company, WeStage Sacramento, has now staged more than 1,000 homes. According to Norris, about 15 percent of the market is now staged by ASPs, and that figure is rising.

"Sellers have to do something to make their house stand out from the crowd in a good way, and staging works, since it's a service done for the buyer which helps them envision themselves living in a home that has been de-stressed, de-cluttered and prepared for sale," she says.

ASP's are trained to deal with clients who find it difficult to accept suggestions for staging their home. "We are taught how to properly educate both sellers and realtors to get them on board with staging," Norris says. "We're preparing the house for a buyer we've never met, so it's not personal when things need to be changed. It's to ensure that any buyer of any race, age, faith, kids or not, will find the house suitable for them."

The typical buyer is busy and begins the shopping process by going online to research available homes, according to Cari Zarou, an ASP and owner of istagehomes.com.

"People are busy. They want to move in and get on with their lives, so a house that's clean, has updated fixtures, a fresh coat of paint and curb appeal has a better chance of selling than one that doesn't," Zarou says. "Plus, a home with cluttered, messy rooms doesn't show well on a small computer screen."

Sometimes designers confront staging large commercial spaces. Linn, which specializes in high-end modern furniture and offers design services, has staged LoftWorks on 16th and J streets, Metro Place in West Sacramento, and the sales centers for Aura Condos and the Towers on Capitol Mall.

General Manager Joyce Wolfe, who notes an increase in requests for staging, says staging works because it gives a space an identity. "It's very difficult to understand and relate to a client in a big empty space; the task can seem daunting," Wolfe says. "It's very important to bring out the client's personal expression."

Staging, according to Wolfe, is a form of communication. A good designer will ask lots of questions to determine clients' lifestyle, personality and what they want to express about themselves. "The process should actually be fun, and everyone usually learns a little something about themselves," she says. ©