

FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT

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Sell this house

Staging may help homes sell quicker, avoid price reductions

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staff writer

When Ann McKay's St. Paul home didn't sell after two months on the market last August, her Realtor suggested staging.

Two weeks and a price reduction later, it sold.

Home staging, the editing and adding of furnishings by a professional to make a home more appealing to buyers, was listed as one of the 25 hottest trends in real estate in the December 2004 issue of Realtor magazine. McKay, now a New Brighton resident, just says she wishes she'd done it sooner.

Standing out in the crowd

Staging a home may help it sell quicker and for a higher price, says Brad Hughes, a real-estate agent with ProGroup in Woodbury.

"Homes sell faster if they've been staged professionally," Hughes says, "and homes that sell faster, sell for more money, typically."

Staging is becoming a trend, he explains, because we've entered a buyer's market. With almost three times as many homes on the market today than five years ago, and significantly fewer buyers, sellers need to differentiate their homes from their neighbors' to sell quickly and dodge a price reduction.

"People are looking at 20 other homes — you need to make yours stand out," says Hughes. "When you're dealing with more competition, you want to be your best."

Cue the makeover

A complete makeover was needed at McKay's house, and Sharon Mitchell, founder of Simply Staged in Woodbury, did the work. She pulled furniture away from walls, placed rugs at an angle and added attractive accessories.

Eight hours later, Mitchell had made changes in almost every room of McKay's house. Think "Sell this House," only smaller-scale and no celebs.

"It was like, 'Oh, wow, that looks really cool like that, I would have never thought of it,'" says McKay, who was so impressed with the new look that she later incorporated Mitchell's ideas into her new home.

Linda Conway's Woodbury home only needed some touch-ups. Mitchell staged her home before it went on the market, and within four days, Conway got an offer and sold it.

"I think the staging helped us put

our best food forward," says Conway, who now lives with her husband in an apartment in Woodbury while she waits for her new twinhome, also in Woodbury, to be finished.

Mainly, Mitchell rearranged Conway's family room. She also took down photos ("we had a lot of photos up") and decluttered.

"Stagers do a wide range of things," Mitchell explains. "On the (TV) shows, they have contractors and are ripping floors out and providing furniture. Most stagers don't go that far." Although occasionally, Mitchell will paint.

Some homeowners rent furniture, but neither McKay nor Conway needed to. Mitchell used the furniture and accessories they already owned, although McKay bought a few new things, like a fluffy white bathroom rug, that she used later in her new home.

But for homeowners who need to rent furniture, staging can get a bit pricey — they're likely to pay about \$2,000. For do-it-yourselfers, some stagers, like Mitchell, offer a consultation and a detailed report for a modest \$150. For Conway, staging was free as part of her Realtor's service; McKay's Realtor split the cost with her.

Nevertheless, stagers and Realtors are quick to point out, you'll get more money when the house sells because it won't suffer from a long run on the market and numerous price reductions.

"The cost to stage a home is always less than the first price reduction," Mitchell says, "and it doesn't really matter how much your house is worth."

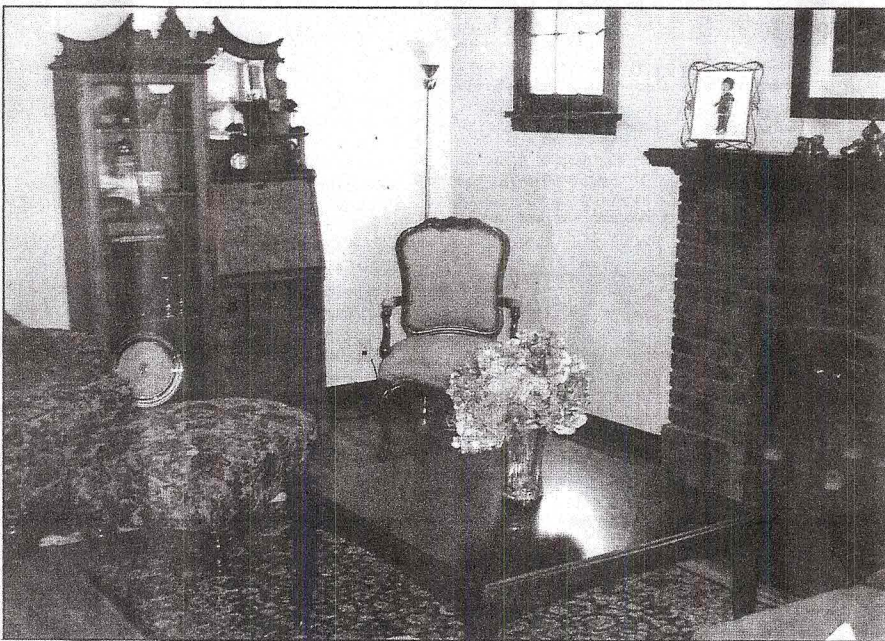
Life on stage

Some houses are vacant or only partially occupied when staged, but both Conway and McKay and their families occupied their houses while they were staged. Both say life on stage is not always easy.

"It was a lot of work," Conway says. Every morning before she left for her job, she had to straighten up, turn on lights, empty the dishwasher, clean the shower and hang up fresh towels.

McKay remembers constantly straightening the staged bookcase in her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter's room. The knick-knacks on a library table behind her L-shaped couch were another of her daughter's favorite playthings.

see **Staging** on page 2B



photos courtesy of Simply Staged
Above, after staging, Ann McKay's living room looked much cozier to potential buyers, and the house sold in two weeks. Right, McKay made a common mistake in her former St. Paul home — pushing all the furniture against the walls.

Setting the stage

How an average home becomes a buyer's dream

Sharon Mitchell, founder of Simply Staged in Woodbury and president of the Minneapolis/St. Paul chapter of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, has been staging homes for about a year.

Home-hunters walk in the door and know within 30 seconds if they like the house or not, says Mitchell. So the transformation begins in the first room potential buyers will see.

The first step is to clear the room of all accessories. Next, Mitchell

considers the entry point in each room — the first view that buyers will get.

Finally, she arranges the room to make it look the most fabulous, she says. This may mean creating a focal point around a fireplace or a window, or bringing in accessories to highlight furniture. Sometimes it's painting over sterile-white walls, removing furniture from an over-crowded living room, or pulling sofas away from walls to create a cozy conversation area.

The goal is to make the room feel

comforting and homey to potential buyers. "What it really boils down to is when (buyers) walk into a house and can imagine it as their home," says Mitchell.

The whole process takes from two hours to a full day. Like many stagers, Mitchell works with what homeowners already have, or offers to rent them furniture and accessories from her warehouse.

Staging can be expensive, so if hiring a stager is not in the budget,

see **Homes** on page 2B

Staging...

continued from page 1B

But the work was worth it, they say. "You don't have a lot of opportunities to sell your home," Conway says, "so you need to make a good impression when that real true buyer walks into your home."

"The way you live in your home and the way you sell your house are two different things," Mitchell says, adding that staged or not, showing a home is just plain difficult.

Mitchell recommends selecting a stager that is accredited; this guarantees the stager has been through some type of training. Also, look at pictures of rooms the stager has done, and ask yourself if it's a room you'd want to live in.

Homes...

continued from page 1B

there are a few things sellers can do on their own. Mitchell suggests:

- **Clear out the clutter.** Pack up anything that's smaller than a fist — this simplifies the room and makes it easier for viewers to "understand" it. When potential buyers view the room, they'll only see the larger, more dramatic accessories, anyway.

- **Pack away any large personal collections,** a.k.a. stuffed deer heads or teapots. Potential buyers react better when a home is depersonalized a bit.

- **Keep it clean.** Make certain there are no pet or cooking odors.

- **Look at color.** White walls are too sterile; beige is a better option. Today's homeowners don't fear color.

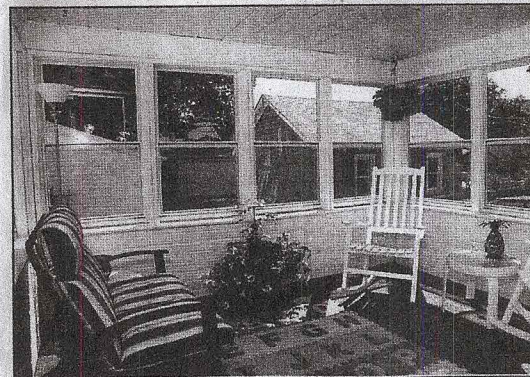
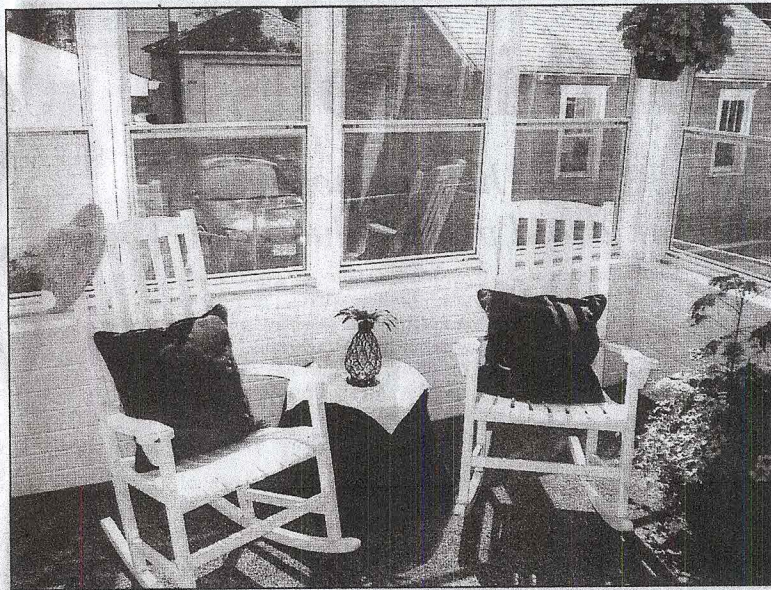
"Clean, color and clutter-free" is Mitchell's mantra. Repeat as often as necessary.

More for the do-it-yourselfer:

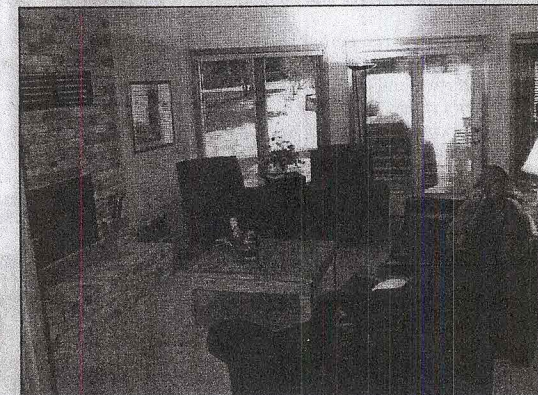
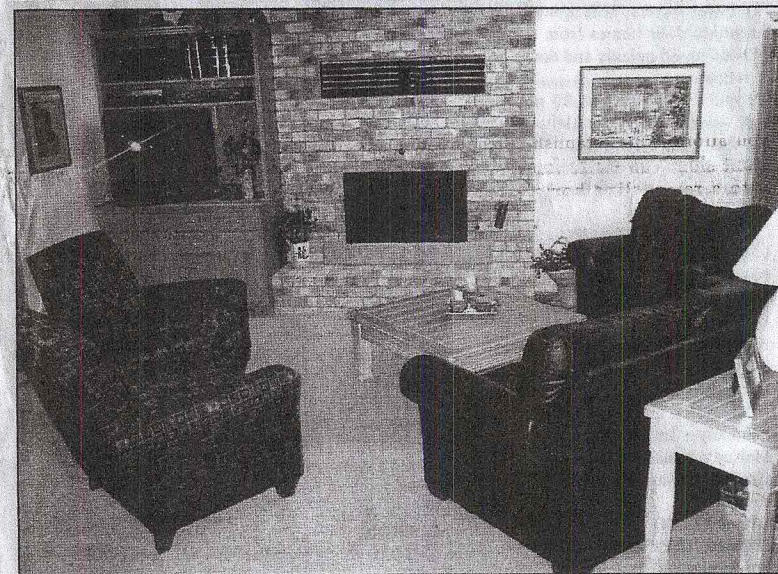
"Home Staging: Creating Buyer-Friendly Rooms to Sell Your House" — book by Lori Matzke, founder of Center Stage Home Inc. in Minneapolis

"Peggy's Corner: The Art of Staging" — DVD and book by Peggy Selinger-Eaton and Gayla Moghanam

"Dress Your House for Success: 5 Fast, Easy Steps to Selling Your House, Apartment, Condo for the Highest Possible Price" — book by Martha Webb and Sarah Parsons Zackheim



photos courtesy of Simply Staged
Above, the children's rug might have been a turn-off to potential buyers, and the glider didn't match the style of the rockers. Left, in Ann McKay's porch, a stager got rid of a children's rug, added pillows for softness, and rearranged rockers, making them the focal point of the room.



Above, a professional stager rearranged the furniture in Linda Conway's former Woodbury home to create a focal point in the family room. Left, Conway's couch blocked the best view of her family room — the fireplace.