

Setting the stage for a sale

Makeover helps homes shine — and fetch better prices for sellers



Sharp decorating touches help Ilaria Barion's clients get more for their homes. For this client, she created an appealing living space at a once-empty Manhattan condo. Photos by Bryan Smith and Talisman Brolin



The look to hook

With discipline, you too can give the home you're selling a makeover. Professional stager Ilaria Barion offered these trade secrets:

- Take special care with first impressions. It takes someone just 90 seconds to decide whether they're interested, Barion said. From the doorway of this apartment, a window with a view of the Flatiron Building is visible. So she places dramatic furnishings in front of the window to draw buyers' eyes — a marble-topped table and chairs by Eero Saarinen, who designed the 1960s-era, landmarked terminal at Kennedy Airport.

- Paint the walls white. "My objective is to avoid anything people might hate," Barion said. "A red wall can be really cool — but somebody is going to hate it."

- White's a great color for furniture, too. The couch, chairs, bar cart and rug she puts in the living room are all white. "Black furniture makes it look too much like a bachelor pad," she said.

- Hide the ugly. Barion covers the fuse box with an abstract canvas she painted herself.

- Small rugs make the floors look bigger. She uses throw rugs made of tiny strips of leather.

- No fake plants — they make a bad impression. She gets a huge fig tree for a corner of the living room and an orchid for the kitchen.

- Expensive bathroom accessories "convey luxury," she said. She spent \$20 for a soap dispenser.

- Avoid visual clutter. The paintings she hangs on the walls are single-color panels. She doesn't use rugs with floral designs.

- Don't be boring. She adds a visual surprise to a bedroom she's furnishing like an office — a transparent acrylic chair paired with an antique desk. She thinks roses are boring, so she fills vases with enormous tropical flowers.

- When buyers look at the apartment you're selling, you want them to see themselves — not you. So she stays away from quirky stuff, such as a dyed-orange cowhide rug. "You want them to think, 'I can see myself entertaining here,' or 'I can see myself here with my kids,'" she said.

Lore Croghan

BY LORE CROGHAN
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Ilaria Barion has come to an apartment near the Flatiron Building to work a little magic.

The trick is to make the empty condo look like a home that someone with deep pockets would want to buy.

Her magic act is called staging — a home-selling strategy popularized by TV shows like A&E's "Sell This House" and HGTV's "Designed to Sell."

Staging is a lot like interior design — artfully arranging furniture and removing all clutter in occupied homes, or placing carefully chosen furnishings in vacant ones. Another mandate: removing family photos and other distracting personal possessions.

The goal is to make the place look large and luxurious, and to show off the view if there is one, so the place will appeal to the broadest range of buyers.

"It's all about first impressions and the 'wow' effect," said professional stager Naim Friemann, who has seen growing numbers of city brokers recommend staging to their clients in the past two years.

Barion, who's 42 and originally from Milan, worked for 16 years in marketing and sales for IBM and other firms before launching a Manhattan-based staging business. It was a natural transition, since staging is all about marketing, she said.

"You want to present your product at its best," she said.

Staging helps sell homes at every

price level, she said, from claustrophobic studios to \$4 million condos, such as the one she staged at 225 Fifth Ave.

Another job entailed making over a \$410,000 one-bedroom on W. 54th St. that wasn't attracting bids. She ripped out carpets and cleared out all kinds of stuff. She replaced the single bed with a double. With its new look, the co-op sold for \$510,000.

In the 15 months she's been staging,



landmarked building overlooking Madison Square Park as a part-time home, but decided to sell because he wasn't in New York much.

In fact, he never furnished it, so Barion filled it with furniture she owns.

Many stagers use rented furniture, but Barion prefers her own sleek inventory, which she stores at a Chelsea facility.

Prices for stagers vary widely, and Barion's aren't cheap, so customers clearly are banking that her taste will lend some sex appeal to a bland (or worse) property.

Barion charges \$3,500 to \$5,000 on average to remake a fully furnished home. Her bill for a vacant one averages \$10,000 to \$25,000 because she charges for use of her furniture.

She's getting \$19,500 for staging Files' apart-



ment plus the unit next door, which he's also selling.

One day this month, Barion arrived at her storage rooms early in the morning, her backpack loaded with sponges, picture hangers, a hammer, light bulbs and cocoa butter (to cover up scratches in wood floors). She's already spent a week picking and packing furniture and accessories.

In the afternoon, three moving men arranged and re-arranged the furniture to her liking. She made some finishing touches that evening while listening to her iPod, which included Mozart and Audioslave on the playlist.

The next day, her client reviewed photos of her work.

"It certainly is impressive, what she's done," Files said. "If people are accustomed to a New York style, a New York look, they'll like what they see."

To be sure, it's different from the decor in his house in Durham, N.C.

"I'm more of a Ralph Lauren, Ernest Hemingway kind of guy," said Files, 60. Hemingway would have felt right at home with furnishings like an elephant's hoof made into a magazine holder that Files bought in New Orleans.

But he feels good about the new look for his condo — and gets an important thumbs-up: from his daughter, Karri Files, 26, a Parsons School of Design grad.

"She told me it's right on the money," he said. "That's reassuring."

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she said 70% of the apartments she's worked on sold at their first open house.

Jeff Files, the seller of the Fifth Ave. condo, was persuaded to hire Barion by his broker, Toni Scott of Prudential Douglas Elliman. "Staging has a tendency to heighten people's awareness of the space," said Files, who owns a wholesale distribution business in Durham, N.C.

He'd bought the three-bedroom at the