

Home Staging in Twenty-First Century America: Doesn't It Look Like a Happy Place to Live?

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***Abstract:** The focus of this study is the home-for-resale as an agent of social value and a medium of communication. Drawing on theories of status and symbolism embodied in objects of everyday life, this paper looks to specific examples of presentation in order to illuminate the coercive elements in the design and presentation of middle-class, single family, resale housing in America. It is a consideration of the rhetoric of professionally staged displays of the everyday and how they assist in establishing culturally perceived norms while denying social, cultural, and economic realities. Analysis of professionally staged homes and their constructed narratives clarifies the process by which the symbolic nature of material goods is enlisted to market a particular style of family life and social interaction. Further, this paper explores how these spaces are used as symbols that maintain social identity and the ways in which artifacts shape, and are shaped by, communally driven perceptions of middle-class values. The goal is an increased understanding of the staged homes as fictions that offer insight into cultural ideals and anxieties revolving around issues of family, self and identity.*

***Keywords:** Home staging—house merchandising—domesticity—single-family housing—simulacra—story-telling accessories*

As the United States economy struggled in the first decade of the twenty-first century and home sales dropped,¹ the resale housing market increas-

1 According to the National Association of Realtors the Pending House Sales Index (PHSI) dropped from 111.9 in 2006 to 87.1 in 2008. In January of 2009 the PHSI was 80.4. An index of 100 is the average level of contracts for existing homes in 2001, the first year the NAR recorded Pending House Sales. www.realtor.org/research/research/ehspage.

ingly relied on a form of house merchandising provided by a category of Interior Designers, referred to as Home Stagers, whose job it is to prepare a resale house for market.² Through furnishings and decorative objects, the Home Stager creates constellations of culturally specific narratives that situate identity: communal, familial, and individual. Staged spaces present objectified vignettes of perceived cultural ideals and, as such, become determinant of viewers' perception of potential realities. Viewing the staged home is an interactive performance of house and visitor; as the prospective buyer tries on the particular identity of the house, one meticulously shaped to appeal to an image of the desired self and create a sense of longing and attainability. Analysis of the creation and communication of specific family mythologies embedded in home staging literature and in the staged home illuminates the methods and meanings of this form of house merchandising and articulates how these spaces shape, and are shaped by, communally driven perceptions of cultural values. In search for everyday fantasies about the ideal American space, this article revisits Baudrillardian theory of 'simulations' and 'simulacra' to show its continued relevance for understanding American consumer culture and in particular the staged home of twenty-first century America. It begins with a historical background of the contemporary home staging literature and then moves through home staging narratives, seeking out the cultural values concerning family, self and identity inscribed within them.

The prototype of home staging literature is the work of Alexander Jackson Downing, whose method of presentation became the standard and, with slight alteration, is still in use today. Downing believed, as did many of his contemporaries, that the success of the nation lay in home ownership. In the preface of his *Architecture of Country Houses*, published in 1850, he extolled the agency of a good house as a means of civilization through its moral influence; the single-family home surrounded by nature would "give rise to the highest genius and finest character," preserve the nation's purity, and increase its intellectual powers.³ It was in the work of Downing and the proliferation of prescriptive literature that followed in the second half of the

2 Barb Shwarz, a California based Home Stager, is credited with inventing Home Staging in 1972. The United States government has conferred upon her the title Creator of Home Staging®.

3 Alexander Jackson Downing, *Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), preface. The sentiments are repeated often by authors of the period. In the early twentieth century it was resurrected in the rhetoric of the Better Homes campaigns of the 1920s.

nineteenth century that the symbolic nature of material goods was enlisted to market commodities in which were embedded specific domestic values. Access to Downing's philosophy and advice was made available to a wide audience by technological advances in printing technique, which allowed his architectural books to be inexpensively produced.⁴

Downing's purpose was to sell his services, and to that end he marketed his expertise as one knowledgeable in taste, appropriate interior furnishings, and the correct design of houses. In his hands, architectural pattern books became a primary vehicle of salesmanship. Their chatty but authoritative tone, a technique continued in today's home staging literature, and the author's belief in the inclusiveness of the dream of home ownership contributed to making Downing's writings the most widely distributed of the nineteenth-century pattern books. Their popularity, and that of similar books by other authors, suggest a growing service industry predicated upon anxieties related to the rapidly increasing number of consumer goods in the mid-nineteenth century. It is an industry that rapidly expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century as evidenced by the rise in publication of advice literature focusing on issues of domesticity and extolling the moral imperative of the family home. Their rhetoric and format begin to coalesce into a form that ultimately led to the development of shelter magazines that line the shelves of today's book stores and to the on-site, full-scale model home common in new housing developments since the end of the second world war. Walk-through model homes, and the more recent phenomenon of the staged home, are both contemporary forms of prescriptive literature that represent a continuation and sophisticated utilization of the rhetoric first introduced to the broader public through Downing's pattern books.

Home staging literature aimed at the general public has been accompanied by a burgeoning media presence. At any hour one can tune into a television show devoted to education of American audiences on any number of issues revolving around furnishing, decorating and preparing a home for resale.

4 See Neville Thompson, "Tools of Persuasion: The American Architectural Book of the Nineteenth Century," *The American Illustrated Book in the Nineteenth Century*, ed., Gerald W. R. Ward (Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1987), 137-69; Charles B. Wood III, "The New 'Pattern Books' and the Role of the Agricultural Press," *Prophet With Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852*, ed., George B. Tatum and Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, *Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture* 11 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 165-89.

The vast majority of these venues is produced at a low cost and offer fairly repetitive, unremarkable advice. However, their rapid growth indicates their popularity and suggests a continued anxiety on the part of many consumers when faced with issues revolving around domesticity. Prescriptive literature is a dominant means both of promoting ideas of home and of selling houses, two different, though interrelated goals. The process of marketing lifestyle and values remains the dominant method of house merchandising.

The staged home is a presentation of an archetype of American domesticity in which the public is confronted with images, what Jean Baudrillard refers to as simulations, and signs, that is simulacra, which have no referent but are dictated by ideals introduced through popular magazines, television, and film, ideals of a dominant cultural norm often in conflict with the realities of life. Erosion of boundaries between media representation, reality, and the spectacle of presentation of the staged space results in concepts of home that reflect social conformity.⁵ What is remarkable about both staging literature and the staged home is the consistency in lifestyles presented within a broad price range and across a broad geographic area. Home staging seeks to produce a neutral environment, one that offers a sense of authenticity while denying actuality. The simulacra become the real, the expected, and concepts of home become grounded in a mythological structure of a perceived cultural ideal. Selling a house has less to do with the house than with creating visions of what an American home and American family should be. To this end, homeowners in the United States routinely spend an average of between \$1,500.00 and \$6,000.00 staging their homes for resale.⁶

The home stager begins work with a new client by assessing the general aesthetics of a home. The house may be vacant, but more often a house on the market for resale is lived-in. Often, the home owner is instructed to rent a storage unit so the furniture and objects deemed unappealing can be removed and replaced with alternate, rented furniture and decorative accessories in which reside a more enviable narrative. An identity and a lifestyle are created; a story is told that resonates within the target market as the

5 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London, New York: Verso, 1996). First published as *Les Systèmes des objets* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968).

6 In 2008 Home Stagers charged, on average, \$150.00 for an initial consultation and \$30.00 an hour thereafter. Reva Oliver, interview with the author, June 18, 2008; David Kopec, "Home Staging: A Modern Tool for Sales," *Realty Times*, March 3, 2003; Barb Schwarz, www.StagedHomes.com.

prospective buyers are immersed in a world of physical evidence of the perceived true self. According to home stager Elizabeth Weintraub it is “about illusions . . . It’s about the art of creating moods. Staging makes your house look bigger, brighter, cleaner, warmer, more loving.”⁷ These staged lives are fantasies, supplied by popular media forms that shape ideas of “correct” living. Staged spaces are nostalgia-driven environments that maintain the assumption of a ‘traditional’ nuclear family and a more perfect past that offers the potential of a more perfect future. Success of house merchandising lies in the house’s promise of wish fulfillment that the staged house offers.

Formality: Narratives of Community and Relationships to Others

The geography of the house controls the nature of contact among family members as well as between residents and outsiders. It serves to establish, teach, and strengthen over-riding cultural conventions of segregation and social hierarchical systems and exemplifies what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the “structuring structure” of the house by which such divisions and hierarchies establish and support their manifestation in relationships of people and things, others, and practices.⁸ The narratives of the staged home reproduce and reinforce divisions inherent in the broader social world and situate identity of the home owner and relationships to community, family, friends, and self. It is the strength of these narratives that elevates the expectations of the consumer by giving the house agency in the definition of lifestyle and family dynamics, marketing a complex, and at times conflicting, image of home. Relationships with others are most clearly articulated in the formal zone of the house, the most ceremonial spaces, in which the value of self-presentation and dialectics of self/other are reinforced. It offers a clear message of social place.

The Exterior: Curb Appeal

Staged narratives begin with the view of the house from the street, which speaks to one’s level of conformity to community expectations. The front yard

7 Elizabeth Weintraub, *Home Staging and Staging a House—What is Home Staging*. About.com. <http://home-buying.about.com/od/sellinghouse/ht/homerep.htm?p=1>.

8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, London, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 89. Bourdieu’s work is based upon his analysis of a typical Kabylean (Algerian) house. However, the basic concept of house as classifying structure is applicable.

also serves as a barrier between home owner and others, privatizing the house and creating a sense of security. Exterior staging creates a picturesque setting that frames the house, providing a pleasing vista and offering the assurance of a homogeneous community. The lawn presents idealized, non-threatening nature, the picturesque superseding the sublime. (Figures 1 and 2)⁹

Social scientists have demonstrated that attention to the exterior landscape of the home increases with socio-economic status and the staged lawn reinforces the status, or desired status, of the home buyer. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, few Americans cultivated grass around their homes. Lawns were introduced to the American public through the pattern books of Downing, who provided illustrations of homes surrounded by lush broad lawns, shrubs, and flower beds and they became the goal for middle-class home buyers as they used pattern books as models of an appropriate house and its surroundings.¹⁰ However, lawns were not fully integrated into the American landscape until the mid-twentieth century, when, with the development of lawn care equipment, improved grasses, and lawn maintenance devices, the manicured lawn became a characteristic feature of middle-class, single-family housing in America.¹¹ Prior to these developments, manicured lawns were reserved primarily for the elite. Most houses had dirt or clay paths with scattered plantings or no planted yard.

The staged front yard's purpose is not functional. It is meant to be viewed, not entered. One of the most successful Home Stagers, Barb Schwarz, has been known to spray-paint grass green to cover dead spots.¹² Another Home Stager instructs, "All grass areas must be green and free of bare spots," and remember "sometimes weeds can be watered and mowed to look like grass."¹³ Plantings of bushes and flowers are selected and placed for temporary, immediate impact. Whether the plants will thrive in their location is not of concern. Statements by home stagers, such as, "A window box is like

9 Photographs are courtesy of Barb Schwarz of StagedHomes.com©. They are used in this article by permission.

10 Virginia Scott Jenkins, *Lawns: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 10, 27.

11 *Ibid.*, 10, 30-33.

12 Barb Schwarz with Mary Seehafer Sears, *Home Staging: The Winning Way To Sell Your House For More Money* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2006), 70. Schwarz's second book on Home Staging, *Staging to Sell: The Secret to Selling Homes in a Down Market*, was published in May of 2009. It was not yet available when this article was written.

13 Gayla Moghannam, *Peggy's Corner: Stage Your Home For Profit*. (Danville, California: Eaton-Moghannam Publishing, 2004, 2006), 17.



Figure 1. Front yard before staging



Figure 2. Front yard after staging

a smile beneath a window,” and “Two or three 12’ to 16’ [sic] containers of instant color flowerpots by the front door will really turn on the charm,”¹⁴ offer insight into one primary goal of home staging: to evoke a sense of homeliness, a vague, but much sought after element in housing.¹⁵ Such story-telling objects serve to make public statements regarding lifestyle, status and skill of the home owner. They are strategically placed, symbolically charged objects, such as flowerpots and window boxes, that help viewers project themselves into the narrative and establish associations with particular styles of living. Story-telling accessories are objects of daily living, which offer a narrative description of the owner of the home and create a sense of belonging on the part of the potential buyer that is central to the success of home staging. They serve as signifiers that communicate identity to the potential home owner.

The Foyer: Control

In most homes built in the United States since the 1980s, guests enter the house through an entry foyer. The foyer is where control is implemented, acting as connector and separator between the public and private spaces of the home. Staging utilizes this space to manipulate the initial emotional impact of entering the house. It is the location of first, and perhaps last, impressions and objects placed in the foyer which immediately informs the visitor of the values, status, and lifestyle of the homeowner. Since objects can be symbols of exclusion as clearly as they can define inclusion, Home Stagers remove family photos and any modern, ethnic, or religious art from the foyer as such artifacts define closed associations. Coat racks emptied and shoes, books, umbrellas, briefcases and book bags removed from the area.¹⁶ The owner must disassociate from their home as the house becomes commodity. The staged foyer is not a utilitarian space.¹⁷

The entry is cleared of all but a hall table, which too must remain clear, and perhaps a mirror, a signifier of the value of self-presentation. A remain-

14 Moghannam, 15.

15 Schwarz, 64.

16 Sheila Dielman, *The Do it Yourself Guide To Home Staging: A Step By Step Guide To Make Your Home Stand Out In Any Real Estate Market* (Falls Church, VA: The Life Uncluttered, 2008), 43; Moghannam, 32-33.

17 Elizabeth Weintraub, *How To Prepare Your House For Sale*. About.com. <http://homebuying.about.com/od/sellingahouse/ht/homeprep.htm?p=1>. All home staging literature speaks to the issue of disassociation.

ing vestige of the Victorian hallstand, the hall table, provides connectedness to a particular past. Hallstands were popular in middle- and upper-middle-class homes of the second half of the nineteenth century but no longer in use by 1920. Their reappearance and popularity since the late twentieth century reveal associations with Victorian culture and the merchandising industry's use of nostalgic references through objects to establish and reinforce particular values. The hallstand of a staged home no longer functions in a utilitarian capacity but as a symbolic retainer of the past.

The Formal Living Room: Taste Exchange

The formal living room is considered by home stagers to be one of the most important rooms in convincing a buyer to purchase a home. It is used for the presentation of a fictitious self to the outsider; very little living is done in a formal living room. Its primary function is ceremonial, an emblem of public identity where status is conferred not only by social display of artifacts placed in the room but by the deportment required to live in such a space. Home stagers typically remove a significant amount of furniture from the formal living space to create a sense of spaciousness but also to eliminate objects that communicate less than ideal lifestyles. The constellations of objects placed in the formal spaces are those considered fragile or costly. The fact that one possesses fine objects and materials to fill such a room communicates messages of status that encompasses concepts of respect and envy. The artifacts in the formal living room function as elements of categorization and serve to create distinction.¹⁸ They are symbols of the public vision of self, and they serve to establish a particular social identity to which it is determined that the target market aspires. Such objects must be understood as signs in a code of consumer values signifying class distinction.¹⁹ It is this symbolic value, rather than use value, that cultivates desire in the consumer.

Style, as evidenced by object consumption, plays a key role in the process of self-definition, reflecting values, aspirations, and assumptions re-

18 For a discussion of objects as elements of categorization see Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

19 See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981); Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*; Jean Baudrillard, *Le Soic  t   Consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

garding one's position on the social scale. An element of categorization, it creates distinction between particular groups.²⁰ Style and object selection form a visual vocabulary that assists viewers in deciphering identification with and alienation from particular groups and establishes certain spaces as appropriate for particular activities. The formal living room is the location of "taste exchanging," where residents and guests determine, through style and objects, if they are socially and intellectually compatible.²¹ Home staging literature is very explicit regarding the presentations within these spaces: "The coffee table should be set with two wine or champagne glasses, a decanter, two cloth napkins, a vase of fresh flowers and a candle."²² Barb Schwarz recommends placing one or three magazines on the coffee table or one high end vase or sculpture on a side table. These serve as signifiers of leisure and refinement. All other decorative objects are removed from the room. Signifiers of the actual self must be superseded by artifacts that codify the perceived true self.

Formal Dining Space: Potential

Eating rituals are a means to establish and maintain social relationships, and popular media present an image of the American family as entertaining at home a great deal, though there is no correlation of this statement to the realities of life in the United States. Evidence indicates, rather, that entertaining in the home has declined since the mid-twentieth century. Yet narratives of such events remain within the formal dining room of the staged home as nostalgic references to an imagined, genteel lifestyle. It is a space of rituals that are not often enacted; yet it is lavishly furnished and decorated for staging because of its symbolic and performative value. Formal dining tables in staged homes are almost always set for a meal, serving as display for fine china and crystal and creating a story of leisure and refinement. The set table presents the owner of the home as competent formal host, suggesting the possibilities of entertaining. Peggy Selinger-Eaton explains, "Dining room place settings should include water, wine and champagne glasses . . .

20 Upton.

21 Joan Kron, *Home-Psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration*. (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1983), 93.

22 Moghannam, 39.

you want it to look like a fun and festive dinner party is in progress.”²³ The goal is to create a scene of possibility; the potential buyer doesn’t merely see a set table, they envision friends and family gathered around, enjoying good company, laughing and admiring the host’s ability to entertain, something that many long for but that rarely takes place in the house in which they currently live.

The staged home offers the potential buyer possibility and establishes the home owner’s understanding of and ties to a nostalgic idea of culture. The fact that the staged home is not concerned with societal realities is made clear in the process itself. The staged home is a visible manifestation of the concept of displaced meaning, a strategy utilized to navigate the disparity between the real and the ideal, a result of recognition that reality embodies more than cultural ideals.²⁴ As one home stager writes, “In the dining room, I prefer to have six place settings with only four chairs. This lends a less crowded yet elegant and festive look.”²⁵ An illusion of livability immerses the potential home owner in an interactive space that denotes tradition, status, and glamour. This objectification of desire exemplifies Walter Benjamin’s theory of consumption, which focuses on the mass marketing of dreams within a class system. The process surrounds the consumer with a profusion of items that objectify dream fulfillment, available for purchase.²⁶

Home Office Space: Intellectual Havens

In the nineteenth century, the home was to be the antithesis of the public work environment. It was presented as a place of refuge and the underlying strategy of the middle-class home was to eliminate association with the public world of paid work.²⁷ Today, work is often brought into the home. It is, in fact, a significant portion of one’s definition of self and it is a prevalent

23 Moghaanam, 116.

24 For a detailed consideration of the idea of displaced meaning, see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 104-17.

25 *Ibid.*, 115.

26 Benjamin focuses on Parisian arcades and department stores, but the process is the same as that seen in house merchandising at the turn of the twenty-first century. For a discussion of Benjamin’s theory of consumption see George Ritzer, *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards and Casinos* (London: Sage, 2001), 118-121.

27 The exception to this was the merchant, who at times would have an office at home.

cultural belief that an area designated as office space within the middle-class American home is a necessity. A staged home office, whether or not, in reality, the current home owner needs a home office, is a must. If the current owner does have an office, the staging process requires all items be removed from the desk top. All papers must also be put away.²⁸ According to *The Do It Yourself Guide To Home Staging* "all you need on the top of the desk is the computer and a nice pencil cup with some matching pens or pencils."²⁹ All chairs except for the desk chair are removed.³⁰ Staged offices are arranged for display rather than for actual work. Theirs is a symbolic value as havens for pursuit of intellectual curiosities.

In a lived-in home, a home office is a functional workspace and is part of the informal or private zone of the house. In a staged home it is transferred through change of purpose to the formal zone where it is no longer a place of work but, rather, a symbol of prestige, intellect, and refinement. The message must be one of wisdom, stability, order, and status. Such meaning is signified in the home office by the presence of books, signs of achievement and intellectual pursuit. For staging, bookshelves should be half empty with only hardback books present and, as in all areas of the house, books arranged according to color.³¹ They are stage props and meant to be seen, not read. Their symbolic value lies in their existence within the home office, not in the messages of their text.

Informality: Narratives of family and friends

The spaces that make up the informal zone of the house speak to the emphasis in early twenty-first century America on the value of family cohesiveness. These spaces are presented as the heart of the home where families spend time together. While artifacts placed in the formal areas of the house signify the ideal, public self, objects presented in the family room tend to be more personal, speaking more to one's perception of the actual self.

28 Dielman, 109; Moghannam, 74.

29 Dielman, 109.

30 Dielman, 110; Moghannam, 74.

31 Moghannam, 75.

The Family Room: Ceremony and Domesticity

The hierarchy of space established in the more formal areas continues in the family room as a transitional space, part domestic and part ceremonial. It is a presentation of a more personal self, designed for a second, more intimate circle of friends. The informal living spaces of the staged home seek to express the concept of cozy sophistication through the use of artifacts such as pillows, candles, fresh cut flowers, games, and iced drinks. Furniture in this space is casual, but must be fresh. One home stager suggests that if there is no large screen television, the owner rent one as they are a must for many buyers.³² However, one must pack up all DVDs and videos.³³ Such items are too personal and so potentially exclusive. The television is an artifact whose signification is in transition. As recently as the late twentieth century, home merchandisers always removed or hid televisions, which were considered a symbol of lower class status. This began to change at the turn of the century as new technology introduced the American consumer to large-screen televisions and high-definition sound systems. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a large, flat screen television has become a symbol of wealth and leisure. This transitional nature of the television is reflected in the contradictory instructions of staging literature. Barb Shwarz recommends moving the television and stereo equipment to the basement.³⁴ Peggy Selinger-Eaton suggests creating a focal point other than the television, minimizing entertainment equipment and hiding remotes under the couch.³⁵

Home stagers warn against too many books on the shelves of the family room. One large book on the coffee table is okay if the book's cover is the correct color.³⁶ Items on the bookshelves are arranged in a decorative manner. Their symbolic value lies in their aesthetic, not their contents. As strong symbols of self, numerous books are not deemed appropriate for this space. Storytelling accessories placed in the informal spaces of the home articulate relationships to family and friends. The idea that people are choosing to frequently entertain close friends is not supported by evidence, but narratives in these spaces certainly speak to the desire for such activities signified by artifacts such as a teapots, cups and napkins placed on the coffee table and

32 Dielman, 103.

33 Ibid.

34 Shwarz, 45.

35 Moghannam, 47.

36 Moghanna, 49, 51, 75.

pastries arranged artistically on a plate. Games, symbols of fun and leisure, and strong signifiers of familial and community cohesiveness, are also a favorite story-telling accessory placed in the staged family room. In them reside stories of conviviality and family cohesiveness, concepts highly valued though rarely realized.

The Kitchen: Heart of the Home

Kitchens in the staged home are, of course, neat and clean. They are also sparse, to the degree that they become ineffective as utilitarian spaces. Their purpose is to offer a sense of effortlessness of life in the home's primary workspace. It is in the kitchen the staged life reaches its highest level of dysfunction. The change from functionality to illusion can clearly be seen in the contrast between an unstaged and a staged kitchen (figures 3 and 4). In the staged home there are no dishes in the sink, no shelves packed with cookbooks, no small appliances or collectibles, which are too personal, on the countertops.³⁷ Canisters, utensils and oils are stored out of site. Weintraub instructs, "No microwave, toaster, blender, coffee pot, napkin holder, salt/pepper, rice cooker, bread maker, or dish rack. This creates the impression of more counter space and a sparkling clean kitchen."³⁸ Items on kitchen counters make the space seem cluttered and small and the kitchen needs to appear larger and more open than it actually is: the illusion of space is a primary goal of home staging. Nothing is displayed on the refrigerator and the inside of the refrigerator must be clean and sparse in order to look well, maintained and spacious.³⁹ Shwarz states, "I know a family who bought a house because the only thing inside the spotless refrigerator was a jug of chilled white wine, a wedge of Brie, and a plate of fresh strawberries. It suited their fantasy of how they were going to live in the new house."⁴⁰ The staged kitchen remains neat, clean, and sparse, but only because its functionality has been obliterated. As real estate agent Gary McAdams states on his website, "it might not be as easy to cook while your home is on the

37 Shwarz, 38-40; Weintraub, *Staging the Kitchen*.

38 Moghannam, 53; Weintraub, *Staging the Kitchen*.

39 *Ibid.*, 39; Moghannam, 56; Weintraub, *Staging the Kitchen*. Sheila Dielman states things should be removed from the refrigerator door because "you never see those in a magazine photo" (Dielman, 71). Statements such as this reveal the source of contemporary ideas of ideal living.

40 Shwarz, 39-40.



Figure 3. Kitchen before staging



Figure 4. Kitchen after staging

market, but your tidy and ideal kitchen will appeal to the masses.”⁴¹ According to McAdams, real life doesn’t sell. The kitchen should look like it is straight out of a magazine.⁴²

Focus on convenience, efficiency, cleanliness, beauty, and the gendered identity of the kitchen remains dominant in merchandising rhetoric that has changed little since the early twentieth century. The most prominent change has been in the spatial configuration of the kitchen. While the early twentieth-century kitchen remained a separate, isolated work space, the kitchen of today is a space of socialization, and its location signifies a collapse between domestic work and a performative mode of sociability. The public nature of this area has transformed cooking into performance. No longer are meals prepared in an isolated work area designed solely for food production and then presented in the dining room. Meal preparation is now on display and story-telling accessories speak to the status of the home owner. The staged kitchen is as much a status symbol as it is a workspace. It must appear large, open and inviting, rather than the work space it actually is. The rhetoric and the promise of the kitchen are of happiness, ease and fun. In the first half of the twentieth century the message was overt: “Haven’t you dreamed about a kitchen that was so convenient, so colorful, and so easy to keep clean that your housework would be a joy instead of a monotonous chore? A kitchen which will make you feel gay and happy all day long. A kitchen you’ll be proud to show off to your friends.”⁴³ Today’s merchandising is more subtle. The image generated and reinforced by shelter magazines, furniture catalogues, television, and film, often present family members or small, intimate groups of friends sharing moments of laughter around the kitchen island or breakfast table. The kitchen has become the symbolic center of the home and the staged kitchen is the locus of values of sociability and family cohesiveness.

Staged pantries are clean, neat, and sparsely stocked to support an illusion of space. If there is too little space, it is suggested the home owner eat the excess.⁴⁴ Elizabeth Weintraub recommends alphabetizing spices and turning all coffee cup handles to face the same direction in order to present an im-

41 Gary McAdams, *Home Staging to Sell Your Home*.

42 Ibid.

43 Hazel Del Brown, *Dream Kitchens of 1939* (Lancaster, PA: Armstrong Cork, 1938), 1.

44 Ibid., 74.

age of meticulous adherence to order.⁴⁵ She also suggests a stand with an open cookbook and a bowl of polished fruit to be set next to gourmet olive oil or a bottle of red wine. Within these displays lie clear narratives of ease of life and cooking as a leisurely activity. Story-telling accessories placed in the kitchen are often presentations of culinary abilities in the form of plastic replicas of baked goods, creating associations with nostalgic ideas of life at home. Such presentations are meant to create longing and dissatisfaction with one's own kitchen, which is an often cluttered workspace in need of cleaning.

The concept of companionate marriage is also reflected in the kitchen. Popular literature suggests kitchens are for both men and women now that cooking has been transformed into recreation. Cooking may be considered an activity undertaken by both men and women today, but it is still a gendered activity, viewed as a hobby for men but a responsibility for women. The kitchen as a workplace is still considered a woman's domain; men and children remain helpers and guests, as cooking is presented as an interactive, family endeavor. In reality, most of today's homes are vacant during the day with husband and wife at work and children at school, and kitchens are used very little at any time by today's busy families. But they offer a narrative of family togetherness and a promise of future shared conviviality.

Privacy: Narratives of Self

The private zone of the house contains messages of family cohesiveness and contentment established in the more public zones and more personal narratives revolving around ideas of retreat, self-fulfillment and companionate marriage. The emphasis on privacy and personalization of space expresses the value of self-definition and is indicative of the cultural focus of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century on cultivation of the self, a value strongly articulated through the selective use of storytelling accessories as signifiers of self.

Children's Bedrooms: Conformity

The staged house references a traditional narrative of family, one consisting of a married man and woman and two children, and staging rooms for

45 Weintraub, *Staging the Kitchen: How to Make Home Buyers Fall in Love With Your Kitchen*. http://home-buying.about.com/od/sellingahouse/qt/040108_StageKit.htm?p=1.

nonexistent residents is not uncommon. Home stager Peggy Selinger-Eaton recounts turning a spare room in an older client's home into a nursery, even though there were no small children living in the home.⁴⁶ In nurseries that are in use, stagers mandate that supplies, clothes, and toys be removed from the changing tables, rendering the space completely ineffectual as a functional nursery but successful as a symbol of cultural ideals of family and home.⁴⁷

The cultural nature and needs of children are social inventions that change over time. The difficult, complex, and at times contradictory nature of this process is evidence of the ambiguous status of childhood in America today. This ambiguity is embedded in the staged children's bedroom. They are bright, clean, and orderly spaces that articulate a value of connectedness to the family and to sanctioned extracurricular activities rather than an unsupervised relationship to the outside world. Whimsical room decorations create narratives of innocent, carefree childhood. Posters, with their potential to reference persons of questionable repute to parents are removed as are telephones and televisions, items highly valued by children.⁴⁸ Such items indicate a lack of family companionship and suggest isolation. The staged presentation is one of children who are not spoiled or self-absorbed, but rather adhere to culturally driven ideals regarding children's behavior, interests and temperament. There is no family strife here. These children are not troublesome. Such spaces are perceived to shape and express desired character, and artifacts such as trophies, ribbons and books are placed in children's rooms to signify successful participation in extracurricular sports and intellectual pursuits. Yet, in the complex crafting of the children's room lies an inherent contradiction: these are spaces that provide isolation; yet they are embedded with narratives of family and community involvement.

Master bedrooms: Romance and Retreat

The narratives embedded in the artifacts of the staged master bedroom refer to the most personal needs, and the at-times contradictory values of self-cultivation and companionate marriage. The presentation of a self-sufficient, private retreat also creates a strong conflict with the value of family

46 Moghannam, 67.

47 *Ibid.*, 65.

48 Schwarz, 49.

cohesiveness articulated in the informal zone of the house. The home buyer desires time to relax, away from the kids and other anxieties of life; the image of the master suite must be one of retreat. Here images derive from shelter magazines and furniture merchandising; master bedrooms are staged as formal spaces with comforters turned back, bed skirts, and multiple layers of pillows. The lush, overstuffed, sumptuous bedding tells a story of wealth and of leisure. It also serves as homage to the construct of marriage, and the constellation of artifacts placed in these spaces signify marital contentment and fulfillment of the most personal needs and desires. The image of the master bedroom as a romantic refuge for husband and wife is furthered by the presence of story-telling accessories such as plates of fruit and drinks on bed trays. Champagne flutes and roses are also common. Such romantic allusions symbolize a happy marriage and by extension a happy home. More practical objects necessary for actual day-to-day life within the master bedroom, such as alarm clocks, tissue boxes and telephones, are conspicuously absent. They too strongly reference less personally satisfying aspects of life of which the potential home owner should not be reminded.

Closets: An Orderly Life

One of the most common complaints by home owners is an inadequacy of storage space. The staged closet belies this reality, offering the promise of an organized, uncluttered life. Approximately one half of the items in the closet of a lived-in home are removed during the staging process. The home stager instructs the home owner: "Your closet should look like a rack at Nordstroms. Organize the closet by pants, shirts, skirts, and dresses. Go back and color coordinate."⁴⁹ "Use pretty hangers."⁵⁰ Wooden hangers replace wire as they suggest social status and wealth based on images provided by popular media. Persons of refinement and high cultural status are perceived as having such closets. The staged closet supports the traditional concept of the American family to the extent that if a single woman lives in the home, she is encouraged to bring in men's clothing to be placed in the closet of the master bedroom.⁵¹

49 Ibid.

50 Shwarz, 52.

51 Moghannam, 69.

Bathrooms: Self-indulgence

Bathrooms are primarily utilitarian, yet the artifacts placed in the staged bathroom symbolize personal needs, desires and concerns. Master baths in new construction homes in the United States have become shrines to romance and to the body. It is a trend that began slowly in the first half of the twentieth century when a sag in housing starts stimulated a new approach to advertising in order to stimulate demand. It was the mimetic appeal of a luxury bathroom that began the transformation of a functional, utilitarian space into one of luxury, leisure, and romance, as consumers of the late 1920s were introduced to images of movie stars such as Gloria Swanson and Myrna Loy enveloped in risqué, "soapy splendor."⁵² As films of the era began to include sensuous bath scenes, sleek and stylish bath fixtures became representative of glamour and status. The opulence and spatial allotment of the master bathroom in new-construction homes of the early twenty-first century often reach 400 square feet and at times are larger than the footprint of the master bedroom. Homes staged for resale must create a sense of space and luxury.

Staged bathrooms are, of course, pristine; the few items placed on the countertop are neatly arranged and brightly colored towels are neatly folded and displayed in the linen closet. Story-telling accessories, such as bath oil, loofahs and wine, reference relaxation and self-indulgence. Fresh flowers and candles placed on the countertop and next to the bathtub create a sense of romance. New towels are also required. Barb Shwarz has clients tie their new towels with ribbon, sisal, or rope, into which a silk flower or piece of greenery can be placed.⁵³ This renders them nonfunctional and requires the home owner to keep towels they actually use in another room, hidden from view. However, it assures the towels remain clean, aesthetically arranged decorative elements with their symbolic value intact.

Conclusion: A Happy Place to Live?

In *Peggy's Corner: Stage Your Home For Profit*, Peggy Selinger-Eaton presents a telling image of the staged home, properly prepared and irresistible to buyers:

52 Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovations From Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2000), 195-200.

53 Shwarz, 44.

Picture this: John and Joanne Pre-qualified pull up to your house that has just gone on the market. A freshly painted mailbox in the front and some blooming annuals make a warm and welcoming entrance . . . Windows sparkle . . . The hopeful couple walks inside. Something smells delicious, maybe homemade cookies or freshly made cinnamon rolls. The table in the dining room shines with crystal and china set for an intimate and elegant dinner party. The kitchen table is brightly set for a picture perfect meal. The living room ottoman is ready for tea for two with an interesting book and a basket of fresh fruit. The beds are stacked with pillows, comforters fluffed, and sheets folded back like the beds in Macy's linen department. Fresh cut flowers in vases are placed throughout the house . . . The hallways are cleared of family pictures and the walls are uncluttered. Everywhere they look says bright, comfy and spacious.⁵⁴

The overwhelming consistency in the geography, furnishing, and decoration of the staged home supports Baudrillard's argument that people are no longer self-determined or authentic, but, through influence of mass media, reflect a social conformity and function as an anonymous mass society rather than as individuals.⁵⁵ The simulacra have become the model upon which new forms are based. In the early twenty-first century interior designers are increasingly being commissioned to transform lived-in spaces with the goal of creating the ambiance of a staged home. They are being called upon to create environments based on virtual models that connote acceptance of a perceived ideal based on ideal signs.

Homes are expressions of identity and social relationships that people adapt to accommodate their lives and to function in accordance with their lifestyle. In so doing, their home is a physical manifestation of family and social structures, interests, priorities, and affiliations. Staged homes invalidate these expressions. Staged fantasies of life in the home, based on images supplied by television, film, and the plethora of popular literature devoted to housing and lifestyle play a central role in the creation of desires and expectations of comfort, privacy, safety, and, above all, happiness. The staged home objectifies these ideas, selling a dream of a way of life, dependent not upon actuality but a false perception of authenticity. It is a subtle, seductive form of advertising that shapes desire.

The most prevalent themes of house merchandising—nostalgia, sociability, family cohesiveness, and self-fulfillment—are constructed for presentation in the staged home. They are shaped and reinforced by narratives of relationships to community, to those outside the family, to family members

54 Mohannam, 9.

55 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 29-62.

and to self objectified in the artifacts of staging. But they are narratives that eliminate the inherent anxiety and complexity between a house and its varied inhabitants, or dissonance between inhabitants. In these simulacra the distinction between the real and the imaginary is blurred as the sign, a way of living, becomes more pertinent than the object, the house. It is because staged homes are fictions that the stories they tell offer insight into cultural ideals and anxieties. For while these staged houses create desire and a sense of belonging, they are, ultimately, places of denial.

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