



FROM LEFT: WILL SMITH TACKLES A DESIGN CHALLENGE ON HGTV DESIGN STAR; A LIVING ROOM AND BEDROOM SMITH STAGED IN DOWNTOWN CHARLOTTE

Staged to Sell

Putting on airs is never a good idea. But pretending you're a neat freak who lives clutter-free in a well-designed and decorated abode may help you sell your home.

By Carla E. Wills

Imagine this scenario: Your home has been on the market for more than six months. Your broker has lowered the asking price, twice. You've endured more open houses than you care to remember, and you're beginning to despise having to rearrange your schedule so that a bunch of strangers can traipse through your home and gawk at your shoe closet.

It may be time to call in a stager—a professional interior designer who can de-clutter, update, and decorate your home to help it stand out in a crowded market and perhaps help change that For Sale sign in your front yard to Sold. In a 2008 study conducted by the Real Estate Staging Association, occupied unstaged homes spent an average of 57 days on the market. But when those same homes were staged and then relisted, they spent 89 percent less time, or about six days, on the market.

“The purpose is to show off the home, as well as show people how to use certain spaces in the home, so they can see themselves living there,” says Charlotte-based designer Will Smith, a fan favorite on the second season of *HGTV Design Star*. “I staged a home that had been on the market for quite some time, and it sold after just two showings. The most powerful examples of staging are model homes—that’s how builders sell entire communities. It works.”

For the average seller, staging focuses on small, inexpensive changes, such as painting and removing and rearranging furniture to better show off a room’s size and amenities; depersonalizing the space (buyers may not appreciate the work of that cutting-edge artist who you love so much); and making minor repairs like patching holes or changing lightbulbs. It’s a process very different from simply hiring a decorator.

“When you live in a house, you want it to function for you and your family,” Smith says. “With a staged home, [the aim] is not so much [about making the interior] functional as it is [making the living space] aesthetically pleasing. For example, you’d see nothing on the kitchen countertops. The home office would be extremely well organized. And there wouldn’t be a kid’s playroom—in a lived-in home that’s a very real thing.”



Costs for staging can vary, from a \$300 consultation in which a designer draws up a plan for you to do the work yourself to several thousand dollars to have a designer take care of everything from buying new furniture to hiring painters. Stagers generally try to keep costs down, however, understanding that the goal is to cover only the most important changes, especially considering today’s slow housing market.

“It’s tough to tell someone that on top of losing money on their house, they’ve got to spend more to sell it,” says Atlanta designer Corinne Matthews, who has been staging houses for the past two years. “I try to use what people already have. If that’s not the best option, you can look at purchasing used furniture at consignment shops. Renting is an option too.”

As much as staging can help, it’s not a magic bullet. It generally doesn’t help a house that’s priced too far above market value, and may not do much to overcome a bad location. Still, Matthews explains, “When you have those things working against you, you have to do as much as you can to move things in your favor.” She also suggests that you complete the staging process prior to putting your home on the market—before potential buyers have seen and ruled it out—rather than after it has languished there for months.

Even if your revamped home doesn’t sell immediately, the investment to spruce it up can still prove worthwhile. “We’ve had people stage their homes and like it so much that they want to stay,” Smith adds. “It makes them fall in love again with their home—you win both ways.” □

Additional reporting by Tomika Anderson