

# Setting the Stage for a Sale

by Greg Hanlon

## Priming properties can be costly, but proponents say staging pays off in higher prices for sellers

“Selling is no different from going to a job interview. Just like you want to show up in your best attire so you look your best, you want the apartment to look its best, too”. So says Manhattan-based stager Ilaria Barion of her job, which combines the art of capturing the imaginations of potential homebuyers with the science of appealing to as broad an audience as possible by “dressing up” apartments on the market.



After

15 Broad Street

### Staging: A Case Study

The living room of this vacant two-bedroom apartment on 15 Broad Street- currently on the market for \$1,899,000- presented Ilaria Barion with a blank canvass. Her first order of business was to determine the target demographic for this space. “The property is in the Wall Street area, so the buyer will probably work down there, which means he will probably be a wealthy type of person”, she said. “Also, this neighborhood is just coming up. It’s kind of hip, so we’re trying to appeal to a younger buyer.” So Barion added furniture –the leather sofa, coffee table and chairs- that she describes as minimal, contemporary and hip. “Every item is a designed item. People know how much this stuff costs, so it conveys a sense of luxury,” she said. “You’re not only selling the house, you’re selling the lifestyle of luxury these items convey”.

To demarcate the sitting area, Barion laid down a 7x9 foot white rug. She always uses solid-colored rugs because she thinks that rugs with designs make the room look smaller. Depending on a host of factors, “the exact same

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space can look 25 to 30 percent bigger or smaller,” Barion said. And white is a neutral color, which doesn’t elicit strong reactions in people. The size of the rug is of critical importance as well. If a rug is too big, it detracts from the floor, which Barion said “is one of the most important pieces of the apartment.”. But if the rug is too small, it can have the effect of making the sitting space seem insignificant. To highlight the view of the old Wall Street office buildings, Barion did not put any treatments on the windows.” The view is great, and will obviously be a big selling point” she said. In the back corner of the room stands a tall, elegant plant. “I always use real plants,” she said. “Fake plants are cheaper, but to me, it’s just cheap to use cheap ones. I spent \$8,000 on plants last year. It’s a cost, but it’s worth it.”

The profession of apartment staging originated in California 30 years ago, but only recently has it taken hold in New York City, where shy-high demand for real estate had long sheltered sellers from the pressure of competition.

“As long as the apartment didn’t have rats, you could sell it” Barion says. But an increase in new developments has resulted in more apartments on the market, leading to an increased competition that has forced many sellers to look for new home-selling marketing techniques. And so apartment stagers –whose fees can range anywhere from a few hundreds dollars for a brief consultation to as much as \$25,000 for a comprehensive overhaul- came to take Manhattan.

Currently, only around 300 of the approximately 5,900 apartments on the market in New York City-around five percent- are staged. But this figure is rapidly rising, according to Lucien Lidji, a real estate broker at Prudential Douglas Elliman who says he is a huge proponent of the practice. “Many brokers haven’t caught on yet,” Lidji said. “It’s a competitive advantage that I have.”

### **While they pare down the stamp of the current owner, stagers also try to provide enough of a decorative framework to guide the buyer’s imagination**

The logic of staging is as simple as it is compelling: given the tremendous amount of money involved in selling an apartment- the average property in New York now goes for \$ 1.3 million- it makes sense to invest a comparatively small sum to ensure that a property looks as good as possible.

“It’s an extra marketing expense, but it’s one of the best ways to spend money on a property” Lidji says.

#### **Case Study**



**15 Broad Street**

The other vegetation in the room is the tropical orange flower on the coffee table. “Everything about this building is very grand, so if somebody is buying here, they’re probably into that style”, Barion said. “I wouldn’t use that flower in a Park Avenue apartment, but it works for this space.”

Rounding out the decorations are the brown pillows on the couch, the wood sculpture on the coffee table and the wood sculpture next to the couch, which, Barion said, “counterbalances all the white in the room.”

The cost of this job? Ten thousand dollars, a total that includes Barion’s fee (which she would not disclose) along with the furniture rental and moving costs.

**- Greg Hanlon**

Generally sellers can expect a five-to-ten-fold return on their staging investment, according to Lidji. If you put \$10,000 into staging, for instance, you can easily get \$50,000 back on the sale price. “It’s really a no-brainer,” he said. The twin tenets of staging are, in the parlance, “de-personalizing” and “de-cluttering”. The two are not unrelated. “Nobody wants to see an apartment full of everyone else’s stuff,” Barion says.

So personal touches, like photographs, religious items, or unconventional uses of space –making a playroom out of a living room, for instance- must go. “If there’s too much personal stuff around, it’s harder for the buyers to see their own stuff there,” Barion says. The cleanliness of bathrooms and kitchens, which if the slightest bit unsanitary can cause an immediate visceral repulsion, is also key. “Changing a shower head costs 30 bucks. It’s nothing,” Barion said. “Changing the curtain, changing the toilet seat. The bathrooms should look like spas. You don’t want to feel like someone used the bathroom that morning”.

While they pare down the stamp of current owners, stagers also try to provide enough of a decorative framework to guide the buyers' imagination.

"We definitively want to take out the current owners' imprint, but we also want to make an emotional connection," says Kitty Schwartz, who stages apartments throughout the tri-state area. "You do need drama. In order to feel that connection with a place, they need to walk in and imagine themselves living there. If they can see that emotionally, we're there". Schwartz describes creating "an invisible thread that runs through the house that's going to pull the buyer to the next room. "To do this, she sets up "accent colored" accessories like pastel-colored pillows to unify the rooms of the house. "We want to make sure that every room is connected to the next room," Schwartz says.

But just as important as putting stuff in is taking stuff out. For the purpose of "de-cluttering," stagers often find themselves removing pieces of existing furniture that make the apartment feel too cramped. "We want them to make a connection with the space, not the furniture," Schwartz said.

In place of the old furniture, stagers turn to neutral-tones pieces designed to highlight the existing features of the apartment.

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Barion has a stash of more than 600 pieces of furniture and accessories in storage for this purpose; other stagers either have pieces in storage or rent them at cut rates.

"I use a lot of white, a lot of beige," Barion says. "People don't have strong reactions to that. If the colors are too bold, some people will like it and some people will hate it. And in this business, you don't want anyone hating anything".

The goal is simple, according to Barion: making an apartment appealing to the largest possible audience.

"The more people who are interested in the property, the more offers the seller will have," she said.

"And the more offers the seller has, the more money the property will make".