

Whether you're selling a hillside Neutra or a modest carpeted condo, home staging has become the norm in today's uber-competitive real estate market. And more sellers than ever are staging modern. Modern design befits a staged living environment because of its clean lines and purity of form. It delivers a sense of cool urbanity, blissfully free of that icky lived-in feeling. You may relish the nostalgia of country floral wallpaper or grandpappy's hand-whittled bar stools, but potential buyers do not. They don't care about your kickin' eight-track collection or your Lynyrd Skynyrd airbrushed pool table—even if it is ironic.

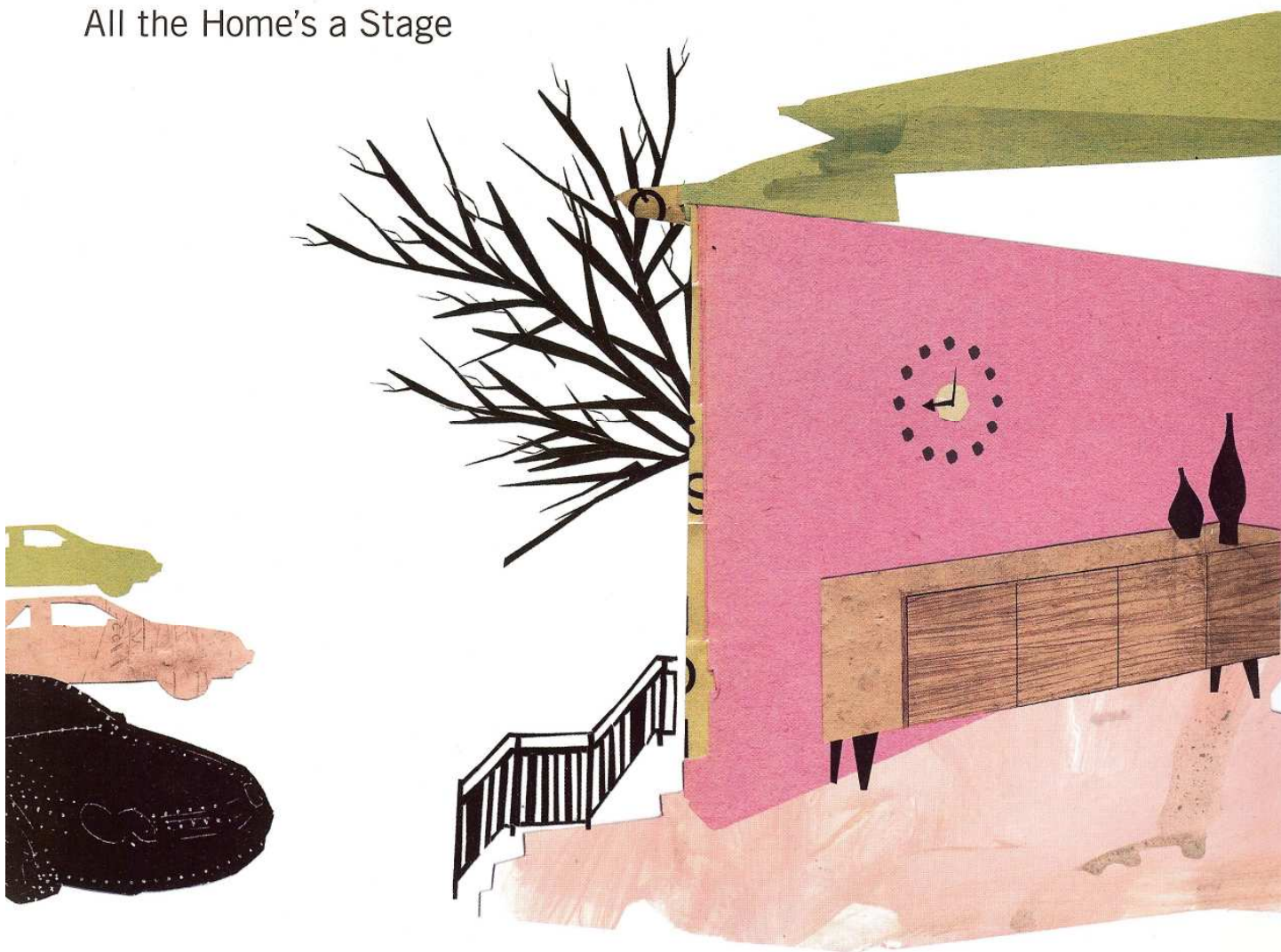
The homeowner's equivalent of hiring a celebrity stylist for Oscar night, the modern stager's goal is to accentuate all architectural assets, making spaces that could be perceived as austere or intimidating feel warm and inviting. Hands-on staging services can cost anywhere from \$1,000 for a small condo (utilizing existing furnishings) to \$10,000 or more for larger homes in desirable markets.

Beth Ann Shepherd, the president of Dressed to Close, a full-service staging company based in Los Angeles, explains the physics-defying effect that staging can have on a home. "It makes small rooms larger, outdoor areas more dramatic, and expands overall square footage," she explains. And it's not merely about looks. "In my experience, [staging] always increases the sale price," she continues. "It's a short-term, high-yield investment."

High-end staging companies such as Shepherd's can turn an empty house into a swingin' mod paradise in 48 hours. They source from vendors all over the world, scouring the Milan and High Point furniture fairs for the latest "it" item. Your home can be custom designed ("done-done" in the industry vernacular) with lighting, rugs, upholstery, bedding, chairs, sofas, and even custom artwork. Shepherd calls these homes "designer perfect."

As design is increasingly democratized, buyers are adopting new ideas of what constitutes desirable decor. "People want modern," Shepherd continues. "Modern has

All the Home's a Stage



become symbolic of success, of happiness." And modern home staging is particularly adept at communicating a lifestyle—that elusive symbiosis of good design and subtle luxury that says, "I've made it. Not that I care..."

The most popular staging pieces represent a cadre of design classics typically found in five-star boutique hotels or the pages of, well, this magazine. Italian and mid-century chairs. Low-rise sofas. Modular sectionals. Pony-skin rugs. And, of course, our friend the Barcelona chair. "Everyone loves a Barcelona chair," Shepherd says. "It's the epitome of modern staging."

But the clincher is, surprisingly, the humble ottoman. "Oversize movable ottomans are the hot item right now," Shepherd explains. "They allow people to improvise their living spaces." As the popularity of staging increases, so does the number of buyers who purchase homes completely furnished. "Homes are selling 'to go,'" Shepherd says. "Especially single men. They buy it all."

Good news for the swanky bachelor set. But does this

result in a sort of assembly-line design, the aesthetically principled version of the McMansion? Or perhaps the to-go home typifies the point of modernism, to simplify, embrace functionality, and celebrate essential objects. Either way, business is booming. Shepherd is even launching a new product line website, fabulouslybyfriday.com, built around pieces used for staging purposes.

Paul Kaplan, a Palm Springs, California-based real estate agent who specializes in modern homes, also notes that staging can educate owners about the assets of their own spaces. "Often I get listings from sellers that may not have an appreciation for the modern design of their home," he explains. "Staging shows people how a space can be used."

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for modern staging is in the numbers. In a 2004 survey of almost 2,800 properties in eight U.S. cities, staged homes, on average, ended up getting 6.3 percent over their asking price. For anxious would-be sellers, that's reason enough. ▶

