

Lessons in Seduction

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Nothing is done by accident in a builder's model home.

From the color of the paint to the books stacked casually on the bedside table, it's all calculated to appeal to those people the builder's marketing department has deemed most likely to buy that house.

They don't even call it decorating. It's "merchandising," the same technique that Bloomingdale's and Wal-Mart use to highlight their goods in the most compelling light.

Ever wonder why the only appliance you see on display on the kitchen counter is a chrome Waring blender? They're aiming for mid-life adults who like to entertain. (Look for the plastic cocktails on display nearby.) Is there a \$300 KitchenAid stand mixer instead? Now they're aiming at a woman (most likely) who enjoys cooking for her family. (Don't be surprised to see a plate of luscious-looking plastic cupcakes, too.) Is there an open cookbook and an array of rustic pastas and olive oil bottles? They're targeting young folks looking for their first home.

Bonnie Hale, director of design services for Beazer Homes, said that even within the region, Beazer will furnish models differently to appeal to different buyers. In parts of Maryland that are closer to the water, they will pare back on window coverings to show off the outdoors. "Maryland homes are more coastal, lighter and airier," she said. "Virginia tends to be a little more traditional market, with darker colors."

While furnishing an entire home from the drywall up is a luxury that's unavailable to people trying to resell their existing houses, there are some practical tips sellers can pick up from the pros. And buyers can learn to see through some of the seduction so they can better judge whether a particular house will work for them.

For the Buyer: It's an Appeal to Your Heart

For would-be home buyers, the thing to understand is that you are being seduced. Tens of thousands of dollars have gone into creating a lifestyle that the builder hopes will resonate with you so strongly that you must have that home.

After all, it's tough to size up white-walled rooms full of nothing but the echo of your footsteps and the lingering aroma of drywall mud. Can the bedroom accommodate a king-size mattress? Will the rec room hold a pool table? Who knows, unless you see a furnished model that demonstrates how the space can be put to work.

Touring a decorated model townhouse in Ballston with Phyllis Ryan, president of the model-home division of Interior Concepts, the Annapolis design firm that dressed it up for buyers, revealed a few lessons that buyers should remember when they tour any new model:

- *Look for what you don't see.* Often in a small bedroom, you may see a double or queen bed with room for only one side table. It looks attractive, but if two people will share the bed, odds are they each would want their own table and lamp.

In the Ballston townhouse, the formal living room was long and narrow -- a challenging shape for laying out furniture. Ryan's firm solved the problem by installing deep bookshelves at the far end, which helped shorten the space. And they placed a full-size sofa across the narrow dimension to prove the room could handle it.

What didn't you see? "There's no room for end tables," Ryan said. Instead, they installed two wall sconces above the

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sofa to show how the space could provide seating and comfortable light for reading.

- *Kitchens aren't just for show. If the upgraded cabinets and granite countertops in the model don't wow you, the appliances probably will. (Ryan said builders usually choose granite over other counter materials, probably because it conveys quality to the greatest number of buyers.) On top of that, the designers will carefully choose a few accents to try to hook you emotionally.*

There could be a stylish espresso machine, a retro toaster, or a display of luscious (fake) fruit and cheese. Those items aren't there to fill the space or to add color; they're to get you to imagine breakfast in your new home. You will be better off imagining whether the layout works for cooking that breakfast and for storing your pans after it's done. Is there space for all the things you regularly use, whether crock pot, laptop computer or cookbook collection?

- *The lights always shine brightest in the model. Not only do decorators often install extra lighting in a model, but there also may be extra windows, especially in a townhouse. Builders often create their model in an end unit. Force yourself to remember that a less-expensive interior unit will not have the same amount of natural light. And extra lighting, whether from nature or light bulbs, makes spaces feel larger.*
- *They're managing your mood. In the Ballston townhouse, soft jazz played faintly through the intercom. A queen-size bed was piled high with a comforter and pillows. A soft terry robe hung on the bathroom door. Plush towels were stacked on the granite counter. They're all touches designed to appeal to your senses, almost subliminally, and to convey a sense of calm. You will find an abundance of these seductions in the bedroom. "In the master bedroom, it's always the cocoon, stress-free and relaxed. A little sensual. You want to feel it, touch it," Ryan said.*

Not a bit of that, of course, comes standard with the house. You know that. But does your gut believe it?

- *Where's the giant mirror? Ryan said she props an oversize mirror against a wall whenever she has the opportunity. It adds a little drama, and it can visually open a space that appears to be a bottleneck or dead end. It's a favorite decorator technique, used so frequently to correct layout problems that buyers should consider it a red flag and evaluate that spot more closely.*
- *Keep track of the upgrades. Decorators can add a lot of flair with upgraded trim and extras, such as extensive crown molding and built-in bookcases. They're all things you can add to your home easily if they're offered as builder upgrades, or you can add them yourself after the sale. But, especially in conjunction with extra lighting, these touches can make the model appear to be brighter and bigger than it really is.*

For the Seller: Capture a Buyer's Imagination

The big lesson a model home can teach sellers: Nothing in a for-sale house should be about your decorating flair or your personality. It's all about touching the heart of the buyer.

Phyllis Ryan, president of the model-home division of Interior Concepts, an interior-design firm in Annapolis, led a tour of a new townhouse her firm decorated at the Buckingham Commons development in Ballston. The brick end-unit townhouse with a two-car garage, built by Paradigm Builders of Arlington, has a base price of \$798,000. It cost an additional \$80,000 to \$90,000 to design, paint and furnish the four-level model, including the cost of design services, Ryan said. Here are some tips gleaned from that visit:

- *Show a little personality. Although real estate agents and home stagers hammer at the message that sellers need to de-personalize their homes by removing family photographs and hobby collections, home merchandisers often add those very touches. "Sometimes minimizing takes away the personality," Ryan said. "It's a very fine balance."*

To create "emotional pull," the Buckingham Commons townhouse has framed photographs of professional models posing as happy couples. (There were photos of many races and ethnicities to appeal to a broad market and to comply with fair-housing laws.) What you won't see are dozens of family photos in mismatched frames. They reflect your life, not the buyer's.

- *Know your buyer. Your target market could be you -- but the you from 20 years ago, the one who's wondering where the kids can do their homework.*

You can show that there's room for a small desk in the bedroom. If young professionals are most likely to move into your condo, you might want to play up the urban-chic angle with art books and martini glasses.

- *Turn up the lights. You'll find every recessed ceiling light turned on in a model home. The decorator's wall sconces and table lamps are blazing, too.*

That's partly because builders need their sales space to be bright even when it's cloudy or during the months when evening arrives in late afternoon. But it's also to set a mood.

"You want it to be happy; you want it to be open," Ryan said. And, she noted, when buyers hit middle age, their eyes begin to let in less light, and they feel more at home in a brighter room. "If it feels dark, it reads small," Ryan said.

- *Create "memory points." The marketing staff wants buyers to be able to distinguish the home from all the others they have visited. Often, this quirkier decor is found in a children's bedroom or a hobby room.*

In the Ballston model, one bedroom is decorated all in pink, with a princess-style tiara stenciled on the wall and Barbies on display. "This is the memory point; this is the whimsy of the house," Ryan said.

And if a buyer's son is put off by the pink explosion, she noted, the mother might still be charmed.

- *Paint is powerful. Designers try to create a flow to the house so buyers feel that they're discovering something new as they make their way through all the rooms.*

One of the ways they do that is by using different paint colors in different rooms.

"If it's all the same color, by the time you get to the end of the house, you've lost your sense of anticipation," Ryan said.

The colors must coordinate with each other, of course. "The trend is toward colors in a grayed-down version to emulate the colors in nature," Ryan said.

- *Don't break the spell. Get rid of things that connote work. Merchandisers will lavishly outfit a laundry room with wicker baskets, plush towels and lavender-scented laundry spritzers in old-fashioned glass bottles. But you're less likely to find an iron or a clothes hamper.*

You won't find utilitarian alarm clocks on the bedside table or a rack for drying dishes on the kitchen counter.

"We try not to allude to anything that means you have to get up in the morning or you have to cook or you have to do your homework," Ryan said.

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