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How the HGTV effect is affecting home sales

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When realtor Desmond Brown walks into a house that's just too stunning to be someone's home, he heads to the fridge.

An empty fridge is his second clue that the home has been super staged to appeal to a new generation of buyers who are looking for more of a showcase than a sound house to call their home.

"Gone are the days that you walk into a house and think, 'Wow, they really *lived* in this place,'" says Brown.

Brown has seen first-time buyers walk out of well-priced condos because the appliances aren't stainless steel. Even classic old homes graced with original wood trim and hardwood floors are taking longer to sell, he finds, than those that have "the look."

Call it the HGTV effect.

"This generation's expectations of what's reasonable and livable in a house is significantly different than previous generations," says John Pasalis, a Leslieville realtor whose office deals with a lot of first-time buyers.

"People have this vision based on what they see on TV. Generally, if a house doesn't have stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, new bathrooms and pot lights, there's a sense that you're slumming it."

Snazz sells, says realtor Irene Kaushansky who has seen young buyers so blinded by the glint of a Wolf gas stove and Sub-Zero fridge, they'll drive themselves into heavy debt in bidding wars that skew the market by driving prices wildly out of whack.

"I watch some of those shows and I know that's not reality," says Kaushansky. "I warn buyers that after they've bought the house and all that stuff is gone, it's not going to look like the same place."

Staging used to be largely about refreshing a tired-looking home by removing clutter, painting walls and replacing worn carpeting, says Diane Black, who stages more than 200 homes a year in Peel and Halton regions, as well as Toronto's west-end.

Now it's all about evoking a lifestyle and making the home appear move-in ready with the "right" modern furniture, art and accessories.

She's finding a new generation of buyers — on average 15 years younger than sellers — don't want to do the work, or don't have the imagination or the money after scrapping together down payments on pricey homes.

"They want that status," says Black. "They want labels and instant gratification and they want it all yesterday."

The stakes have been raised since MLS house listings went online and buyers have been able to do more looking on their own, says Black.

"If I can only do one thing for a seller, I want to give that wow HGTV factor online," which is why art, accessories, materials have become more critical to setting homes apart.

It's routine now for agents — even in newer suburban neighbourhoods — to recommend that owners spend at least a few thousand dollars on new counters, flooring and fixtures before staking a for sale sign on the front lawn.

But not everything can be "refreshed."

"The 1980s (suburban) homes are dying because nobody wants eight-foot ceilings anymore," says veteran Oakville agent Dan Cooper. "If a house doesn't have at least nine-foot ceilings, it's very tough to sell."

Super staging is so critical in real estate now, Cooper has hired stager Kathy Wood of Divine Design and is now looking to rent space, buy furniture and hire movers to help sellers turn around their homes quickly for what he calls "the want-now generation."

"The low interest rates don't help," because younger buyers tend to take the view they'll buy the best now and pay for it later, says Cooper. "That's a recipe for disaster if rates go up."

Of course, there is obviously payback for putting in a little work before pricing a home for sale, as Janice Hornick discovered when her parents went into long-term care and needed to get rid of the Burlington home where they'd lived for 25 years.

"I thought let's just get rid of it as is," says Hornick. "I didn't want the bother."

One agent suggested a list price of \$360,000. A second agent suggested Hornick call in Diane Black.

Within a month, Black had pink and blue walls repainted in neutral taupes, old carpeting upstairs was replaced with lush berber and the kitchen got a dramatic stainless and granite makeover. Black even removed window mullions to open up the view into the backyard ravine.

Hornick's jaw dropped when she saw the \$35,000 transformation.

The place sold quickly — for \$479,000.

What stagers say is in or out, at least as of today

In

“Depersonalized” décor (get rid of all those family photos)

Neutral taupe colours

Natural stone—granite, travertine, slate

Wide-plank flooring

Stainless steel appliances (a must)

Crown moulding

High ceilings

Spa-like bathrooms

Apothecary jars and Pottery Barn-type accessories

Bedrooms retreats with a chaise lounge or comfy seating area

Berber carpeting

Brushed nickel fixtures

OUT

Black or white appliances

Laminate countertops—even in the bathroom

Ceramic tile

Wallpaper

Pinky-beige, yellow and bold wall colours

Panelling/wainscotting

Plastic venetian blinds

Carpeting (except berber)

Brass fixtures

Original thin-strip hardwood/parquet