

Stagers aim to depersonalize, neutralize and capitalize

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You could almost call Matthew Finlason an anti-decorator.

With conventional interior design, the idea is to express the client's personality, to create spaces in which the homeowner feels at home.

And then there's home staging, in which the object is a sort of tasteful, comfortable sterility.

Just ask Finlason, one of the stars of "The Stagers," premiering Tuesday, July 1, on HGTV Canada.

Finlason is a home stager, someone who is called in -- usually by an exasperated real estate agent -- to turn a house into something with which almost any prospective buyer can fall in love.

"Staging is about applying certain techniques that will give your home the greatest advantage to sell, to appeal to the most buyers," he says.

"That's what it's about. It's not about interior design of a space to make a client happy. It's about enhancing the beautiful features of the home and really finding the love factor.

"We neutralize the space."

Finlason works for the Vancouver home-staging company Dekora, which is the focal point of the show.

The producers selected it because it houses a colorful group of characters.

"When we met them, we kind of saw it as a sitcom in the office, with the staging almost a side issue -- one of these classic, 'WKRP' situations, where you have the various characters all working for the same company," series producer Cal Schumiacter says.

Each episode of the show revolves around different Dekora staff.

Some weeks, the stars of the show are mother-daughter team Maureen Powers and Bridget Savereux.

"They're both very experienced, and they have a lot of mutual respect," Schumiacter says. "But they fight like mother and daughter. All the time. They disagree on everything."

The drama of the series is helped by the fact that home staging is to decorating what rugby is to touch football.

To listen to Finlason talk, a stager needs iron nerves and a steel constitution, along with impeccable taste. He came by his tolerance for adrenaline by working as a set designer in movies and TV.

"A lot of people don't like it because it's high stress," he says. "It's a lot of adrenaline. Most interior designers can't cut it in this world. We have 3 1/2 days. We have clients and real estate agents to deal with. Staging requires more creativity than any of the other decorating and design crafts, because of the time we have to do it in and the pressure we're under."

Though home stagers work in most Canadian cities, Vancouver was a natural setting because of its overheated housing market.

In the first episode, Finlason takes charge of a bungalow that hasn't been redecorated since some time in the 1970s.

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He paints it in tasteful but bland colors. Then he thins out the owner's furniture and redecorates.

This is done mostly by pulling supplies out of Dekora's "lockup" -- a warehouse stuffed with lamps, tables, rugs, artwork and knickknacks.

In just a few days, Finlason and his assistant -- actress Rukiya Bernard, who moonlights as a stager -- transform the house from a home to something out of a furniture store catalog.

The house ends up selling for \$100,000 over its asking price of \$2.1 million.

Finlason says he has 10 rules for home staging:

1. Think of your home as a product and merchandise it.
2. Pay attention to first impressions. As someone walks up to and through your front the door, she is going to form an opinion that will affect how she sees the house.
3. Declutter. "Eighty percent of staging is editing," Finlason says.

4. Depersonalize. "Take down your family reunion and wedding photos." People want to picture themselves in the house.

5. "Clean, clean, clean! Hotel clean."

6. Repair those little things, from squeaky door handles to cracked windows. "A \$500 repair to you means a \$5,000 reduction in the price."

7. Paint. "Neutralize it. Use off-whites with warm undertones."

8. Cut down on the furnishings. "Most people's furniture is offensive. It probably doesn't speak to the actual market."

9. Lights. Bright and sunny interiors are more appealing.

10. Arrange furniture to best advantage. "Place your sofas so you can see the view."

"At the end of the day," Finlason says, "all you need are two buyers to fall in love with the space for you to at least get your asking price -- and perhaps bid over."