



This bulletin began in late July with rumination over the residential real estate staging industry. It ended this November with rue of another order. The author wishes to acknowledge several references, including Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen's *Picture Windows*; Pierre Bourdieu's *The Social Structures of the Economy*; Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck's *Suburban Nation*; Dolores Hayden's *Building Suburbia*; and Robert J. Shiller's *Irrational Exuberance*; but, moreover, the innumerable unmemorable TV episodes wavering between reality show and infomercial now freely available to watch on YouTube.

Cover: A still from *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, April 2016, including an over-shoulder inset clip from a 1994 episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, featuring Donald Trump and his then wife, Marla Maples, in which Trump speculated about the likely size of his infant daughter Tiffany's adult breasts.

*Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, “television’s authority on wealth, prestige and the good life,” ran from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s on nationwide cable networks in the U.S. With its signature gold cursive lettering and dramatic opening theme, it reveled in what was kitsch and rich. Cameras panned over mansions, yachts, cocktail attire, boob and nose jobs, but most importantly they browsed interior decorations while English host Robin Leach’s voice-over emphatically informed viewers about the global holdings, family power structure, and monetary value of the properties of sheiks, celebrities, and moguls *tout court*. Each episode ended with Leach wishing the viewers “champagne wishes and caviar dreams.” *Lifestyles* would have been the 20th-century equivalent of commoners-get-to-visit-the-royal-palace-day, if such a day ever existed, but with mere financial wealth standing in for the spectacle of inherited aristocratic status.

Some three decades later, while tabloids feed expensive Kardashian kitsch to us daily, the host of the UK version of *Lifestyles* ends up anchoring a news program on CNN (before getting kicked off the air), and one of the illustrious guests featured by Leach is now President-elect. Apparently, we’ve interiorized Leach’s imaginary and are busily reproducing it in contemporary terms. *Lifestyles* was momentous: not only was it produced for over a decade, it helped bring the term “lifestyle” into mainstream use. Google Ngram Viewer—an online analytics tool tracking word frequencies in printed books between 1500 and 2008—shows a steep, ongoing rise for “lifestyle” over the last 40 years, up from almost no usage before the early 1970s.

Producer Al Masini’s “lifestyle” differed from earlier instances of the term as it appeared in Viennese psychiatry circles, where Alfred Adler first spoke of “Lebensstil” in the 1920s. He used it to talk about personality—a person’s unity of thought, feeling, and action. For him, one’s lifestyle was rooted in a childhood prototype (ruling type, getting type, or avoiding type) and remained consistent throughout the rest of one’s life. Adlerian therapy aimed in part at reeducating these types and understanding them within the social system of which they were a part. “Lifestyle,” though, has gained more prominence in the fields of sociology and economy, where it still relates to an individual’s unity,

albeit one shaped by the relation between consumer behavior and social aspirations. Lifestyle is the placeholder for the way in which a person expresses and consolidates her social aspirations, an idea connected to 19th-century sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption." Conspicuousness factors in those choices consumers make in order to set themselves apart from inferior groups and to approximate the superior social stratum to which they aspire. Inferiority and superiority can be related to wealth but also to a number of other factors; the rich and famous aren't the only ones who have lifestyles, i.e., a "green" consumer distinguishes herself as significantly as do *nouveaux riches* and skaters.

The Don Drapers of our world fine-tune lifestyle branding, as in the final episode of the TV series *Mad Men*, when a hippie commune is taken by archetypal ad man Draper as the ideal backdrop for a sentimental Coke campaign. Of course the campaign featured in the episode was an actual Coke campaign, not only a foil in a dramatic fiction. Since Draper's mid-century era, the business of marrying lifestyle and homeownership, i.e., residential real estate, has grown



increasingly lucrative. One's own home is the textbook indication of bourgeois achievement: proof of one's "ascension" into the middle class. To blame or to credit for this marriage of associations are Senator Joe McCarthy's 1950s Communist-witch-hunt hearings, which helped put President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal-era housing policies to death. According to historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, authors of *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*, McCarthy's attacks catalyzed the rise of private development and the influence of private developers themselves as urban- (and hence, social-) shape-makers. At the same time, the American "sitcom suburb" was introduced by new television programs like *Leave It to Beaver*, as noted by urbanist Dolores Hayden, who coined the phrase. It's obvious that the American dream has, since the 1950s, melded with the dream of single-family suburban homeownership, and that the American private realm has since been honed into what some call a "superior product." Since then, developers have based sales pitches on sentiment, preferring comparative adjectives to comparative values, thus setting the stage for "a house" to transform into "my home." If the narrative of the 19th-century bourgeois interior décor affirmed the owner's imperial-industrial sophistication by incorporating other-worldly exotica, the decorated house of today's well-to-do expresses the contemporary analog: a modern lifestyle.

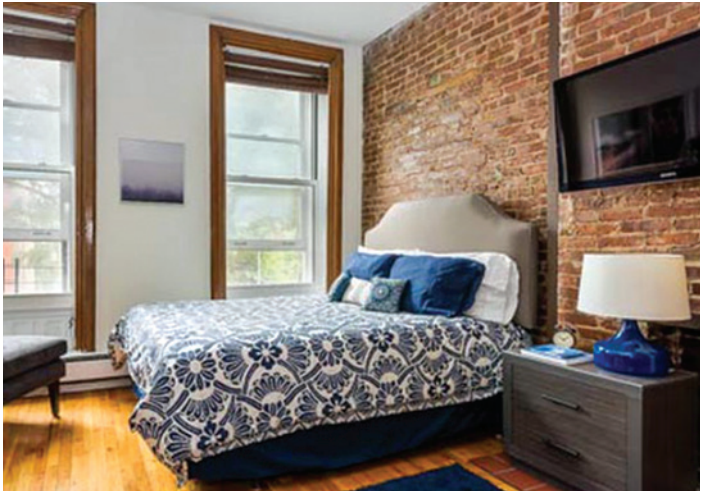
*Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* episodes spent a considerable amount of airtime on parties and travel, but the anchor of any given segment was the real estate presented from bird's eye perspective, followed by pans over the lavish interiors of the owners' multiple properties, ranging from cosmopolitan penthouses to Serengeti villas. The show still provides a useful inventory of ingredients necessary for a publicity-worthy lifestyle, with a house being key to accolades of sophistication. The camera's attention cued viewers to ponder the cost of golden egg-shaped faucet knobs, ivory coffee tables, or garish wall carpets, not-so-subtly suggesting an equivalence between the owner's social status and the sum monetary value of those "unique" details. It was not unusual to see an actual dollar sign and seven-plus digit numbers pop up on screen in big white lettering. *Lifestyles* set the stage for today's reality programming of the Home & Garden

Television (HGTV) variety by familiarizing commoners with strategies for conveying prestige through specific modes of home construction, improvements, and furnishings, significantly influencing the way real estate is presented for sale along the way.

Moving into homeownership, whether suburban or metropolitan, has long stood for moving into consumption. After a sales contract is signed, a house only becomes “my dream home” through custom décor. Over the last three decades, the strategic outfitting of a property as a screen for lifestyle has played an increasingly important role in the residential real estate sales process. Today, prospective buyers’ dream projections are best facilitated by an already-furnished, albeit temporarily furnished, house.

Draper and co. showed how a Hershey’s chocolate bar could shift allegiances from one particular lifestyle association to another via logo modification, wrapper redesign, and framing adjectives. Lacking such recourse to fully-contained and tangible “identity” maneuvers, the real estate industry leans on a new middle-person to better imbue their product with lifestyle: \*the stager.\* The job of stagers is to soak the dry facts about any given property—square footage, building materials, number of bedrooms—in a bath of social perceptual psychology.

Switch the channel to HGTV ... **The scene opens in chaos. A home seller is stressed about time and money. Enter the stager and her team. They assess the space and work their magic. Come the buyers. Leave the buyers. The seller returns in awe, soon to make the deal of her lifetime.** While clients despair over fears they’ll fall short of their financial goals, stagers—efficient, hands-on scorers—swoop in. The viewers of this TV show, myself included, take pleasure in sensing the initial anxiety then standing on the stager’s end of things; together with her we resolve the challenge of making this forlorn property shine while the owner is expelled from the picture. The episode makes use of the before-after advertisement magic seen in hair implant surgery ads on the subway, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* makeovers on Bravo, and even *Dog Whisperer* testimonials on National Geographic. The subtext is the prospect of finding and surfacing one’s true self—a self



the rudderless client is out of touch with and OMG they can't believe they ever even had. The stager brings out the "true" potential of the property: something, so the industry suggests, neither seller nor buyer can perceive sans staging. The idea is that sellers have lost access to the prospective buyer's first impression gaze, unable to evaluate their own home from the doorway after years of living in a place. A stager would compare the phenomenon to my inability to see the real shape of my partner's nose, which has become a second nature to me. A buyer, on the other hand, takes cues from fresh-cut flowers, puffy pillows, and strategically placed light points (at least three)—not from the architecture or the home stats—to form her first impression. Practicalities matter little for these impressions. That is why, in the panicky before, the wall-mounted TV simply has to face the bed (how else would the homeowners watch their late night programming?), but in the smooth after, it can just as well hang over the nightstand.

This reality-TV storyline applies to lived-in properties, where stagers spend the bulk of their time de-cluttering before they go to drape that color-matched throw over a tightly made king-size bed, or place

a white moth orchid on the bathroom cabinet. In vacant properties, stagers typically feature what they call “zero aesthetic” furniture (equivalent to supersized modernist design) in freshly painted white rooms. Purportedly this is to give a better sense of scale but moreover to create an atmosphere of luxury and comfort, effects which are, in real estate lingo, synonymous with home. Staging, especially the first generation kind championed by Barb Schwarz, whose mantra “clutter eats equity” never gets old, could be compared to a professional cleaning service meets furniture rental service. The stager exists because most affluent people accumulate far too much stuff, and all that stuff interferes with buyers’ needs to project their own desires. Stagers know that our closets and shelves should be only half full and that our homes will be far more attractive when half empty. The buyer is turned off by the feeling of a used house. From de-cluttering, the stager’s next objectives are to create a coherent sense of interior decoration and to unify the presumed aesthetic appeal of a given space. Hence, a staging business’s main startup costs entail building up furniture stock and renting, or acquiring, warehouse space since, in order to service multiple clients simultaneously, a stager must have immediate access to an inventory of home furnishings. (Like art galleries, successful startup staging businesses generally don’t make sizable profits until after their third year of existence.)

I initially saw stagers as a particular breed of storyteller, leaving prompts in a house that would lead potential buyers to construct a story, which the buyer would of course consider her own. But the more I watch HGTV, the more convinced I am that the optimal staging effect avoids narrative. Its primary purpose is to invite a projection of comfort. Where I once saw the dog bowl and leash placed in an uptown condo as a forensic fact in a particular script, I now read it as a tool to evoke leisure and cuddly, affective relations. No classical novelist would see the point in placing ostentatious orchids in every room of the house or in overpopulating the couches with karate-fold pillows. This sort of stuff would only prove the writer lacks imagination, doesn’t know how to use a couch, or is far too committed to experimental non-narrative formats. The only novel that could realistically feature such interior decorating is a novel about hotels or, of course, one about staged



properties. Perhaps this is why the few writers who have indeed gone there portray the stager in a doubtful light, almost as antithesis: in *A Hologram for the King* (2012), Dave Eggers describes how a stager makes a version of a house using props “signifying nothing,” while journalist Peter Haldeman describes his home stager’s interventions as “pimping.” It’s as if the authors feel cheated by these hoax story-builders. Could it be that the writer, supposed master in the craft of suggestion and evocation (the glove, the yellow wallpaper...), sees a mediocre version of herself in the stager?

I’d like to tell a real story of a stager to prove the writer wrong, but the publicized bios of the people who are now the recognized faces of the profession (predominantly white women) equally exude the impersonality found in their interior decorating. Two better known names in the business are Barb Schwarz and Meredith Baer. Incidentally, they both have a connection to the world of theater: Schwarz was an actress, Baer a scriptwriter who also acted occasionally. Baer, according to her self-told story, fell into staging almost by accident, initially using her own overflow furniture, and since 1988 runs a national company that



reportedly brings in \$1.7 million a month in revenue. For her, falling into staging was sheer luck and spur-of-the-moment intuition. Schwarz, though, claims to have single-handedly invented the profession—in Seattle, in 1972. She coined the word and then turned it into a trademarked activity. She now directs the Staging University and travels around the globe teaching her certification courses. The blurb on Barb's website leaves no doubt as to her legitimacy and imprint:

**Barb is the Inventor and True Visionary who came up with the Staging Concept. She has built the Staging Industry from day one before any others had thought of it. Barb has personally taught over one million people in her classes since 1985.**

Those who obtain the ASP® (Accredited Staging Professional) or ASPM® (ASP® Masters) certificate get access to, and eventually become, the network. It's a safe way to guarantee continuation of and dependency on Home Staging® as singular metonymy for the industry.

Schwarz rose to success in the context of deep economic recession: Boeing's restructuring at the time meant layoffs for almost half its workforce, which sent ripple effects through the Seattle economy. Barb was certainly not the last person leaving and turning off the lights, as a contemporary billboard implored departing motorists to do.



Instead, she focused on brightening up—but never with more than three colors on the exterior. Perhaps Seattle's then bear market

created a perceived need for a professional like Schwarz, who made people believe that her services could still get a property sold at good price despite a shrinking pool of buyers. Seems plausible, especially since one of the ways in which she and other stagers appeal to clients is to play on their fears of being forced to cave in and sell their property below its list price after idling on the market. The cost for staging, this argument goes, is far lower than the amount the non-staging sellers may have to cut from their asking price. Said differently: the final “top dollar” of the sale will offset the staging investment. In short, what you’ll pay for staging is peanuts compared to the “value” it adds.

Schwarz built a strong web of followers: not only the thousands of people who enroll in The Staging University® but also the people who decide to work with an ASP®. It’s certainly helpful that the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, which produces the industry’s evaluative statistics, is also founded and run by Schwarz. A prospective client who does her due diligence will quickly land on the data published by the same IAHSPP informing her that staged homes on average yield 17% higher final sale prices than non-staged homes.

But faith in staging isn’t based on trust in these numbers or much bothered by evident enhancement of the same. There’s no denying the housing market is driven by psychological manipulation, perhaps even more so than other markets. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examines to nearly nauseating detail in *The Social Structures of the Economy* (2005) the local, social practices that shape residential real estate. Buyers’ decisions embed desires about future family life, taste, and social status. Home purchasing decisions are affected by and stand to affect one’s financial capital (assets) as much as one’s cultural (education and access to information) and symbolic (social prestige) capital. A house is a “product loaded with meaning,” a “material object but also a social entity.” A house’s value can only be measured in part as the sum of its material parts and their construction costs; a house is also meant to function as a home, whose value is nebulous, and is always informed by past models of home-making as well as by future aspirations. Bourdieu culls data from France in the 1970s and



early 1980s, and while he focuses in great detail on the role of the state and on the development of prefab suburban housing, his most important insight is that buying a particular house depends on the home story one reads in the house and how that matches the buyer's cultural, social, and financial aspirations.

Stagers can create specific settings that activate these cultural or symbolic sensors. It's very likely indeed that their props have a bigger impact on buyer decisions than a concrete price analysis does. Economist and Nobel Prize winner Robert J. Shiller analyzed the U.S. real estate market and housing prices from the last century and found that, across the board, psychology is the prime mover of the housing market: people simply make bad or irrational decisions out of a belief that houses are good investments, and that they are a guarantee for future profit. Or, looked at from the opposite perspective, perhaps psychology has become so decisive (and staging so popular) because real estate pricing is often \*off.\* The market pendulum swings between opposite poles of bidding wars and price slashing, only briefly passing through the zone of what could be considered "rational" asking price.

However deluded home buyers and sellers may be in their financial reasoning, it is still remarkable that “staging”—a word undeniably related to fictional presentation—has become so widely accepted. The aforementioned Ngram search engine indicates that the word’s appearance in print has doubled since 1960. In theater, a stage features props meant to create an illusion of reality sufficient for an audience to suspend its disbelief and follow the story as silent witnesses. But in the real estate world, stagers provoke sentiment because they know emotions drive home buying decisions. The stager’s audience is seeking a story in which they themselves can become protagonist. Similar reasoning motivates marketers to put a picture of a happy family on a milk box; the object of purchase thus packaged appeals to our emotional needs to identify ourselves with the picture over, say, quality or price. But the difference between the happy family milk box and the staged apartment is that the apartment-buyer will indeed be living inside the milk box, not just imagining herself as part of a picture on her way to purchasing branded milk. With houses, there is less evident distance between product and buyer. The person who steps in through the doorway has to feel at first glance that she finds a future version of herself in the bright eat-in kitchen, that she would be happy and thriving in this home. Or, in the language of *Lifestyles*, the as-yet-unrecognized tycoon in you is looking for her future penthouse.

While preparing a Hollywood Hills villa on one of her *Staged to Perfection* HGTV shows (episode 8, 2013), Meredith Baer explains this dynamic: “You have to strike the balance between this being somebody’s home and tell[ing] the story of a sophisticated person living here.” Buyers need a little distance between what they see and their own “personal” décor (i.e., it should be clear that this is somebody else’s actual home), but they are most likely to respond to the staged version that comes closest to their own aspirational selves.

The psychological play stagers set in motion dallies with make-believe while aiming for the suspension of critical faculties. Whether in videos or press coverage, stagers compensate for this fact with efforts to craft a language of trust and authenticity. What they do is not phony, nor do they hide what’s wrong with the apartment. “Staging accentuates great

things and downplays not so good things,” according to one of Baer’s designers, which is not far off from Barbara Corcoran’s motto, “If you don’t have big breasts, put ribbons in your pigtails.” Those ribbons come in handy because, as Corcoran (the founder of a large residential and commercial real estate company) knows, “perception creates reality,” and perception in her world is synonymous with first impressions. Bring the gaze to the face rather than the chest, or, for a stager, to the bright bay window, rather than the dismal fireplace.

Whether showcasing studio apartments or McMansions, stagers direct a visitor’s eyes to wander through a space the way a camera pans, and their craft has certainly been adapted, like our own eyes, to the virtual perambulating of online slideshows. But stagers ultimately spur their audiences’ behaviors in deeper ways, corresponding to the categories 19th-century sociologist Georg Simmel designated in his analysis of the psychological and social forces informing lifestyle: IDENTIFICATION (I can see myself in this setting), INDIVIDUALIZATION (I can develop my unique version of home here), DIFFERENTIATION (this house is not like the other ones I have seen and will make me different from



the rest), and RECOGNITION (this house will be noticed by others, it will give me prestige).

As buyers become more accustomed to visiting staged properties, they don't necessarily expect to find a functional, livable space, so much as an atmosphere that alludes to their own lifestyle. Change the question from, "Is this kitchen island high enough for chopping vegetables?" to, "Is this kitchen island a place around which to entertain and consolidate my social status?" Similarly, it's become totally acceptable in recent years to stage properties virtually (i.e., to Photoshop the source material) for the listing's online showing. So the truth or reality sought for by buyers is not to be found in the material qualities of a room, its bed or its sofa, but in the ambience—of luxury, leisure, and comfort—that conveys the lifestyle particular to any given place. New York-based inFormed Space® and Dandy Pack® produce collapsible furniture exclusively for staging purposes. Picture beds made from corrugated plastic, pillows from packing peanuts, or sofas from cardboard boxes, all for use in quick, lightweight staging. These are then dressed up with real flower bouquets, a nice looking throw, or even a framed picture portrait to add a pinch of \*feeling.\* Turns out, that's all it takes to start us dreaming of caviar and champagne. Soon sellers may very well do their own DIY staging by mail ordering a set of props and instructions together with their moving boxes. Then it's goodbye to the de-cluttering suburban maniac. Much obliged, indeed.

While the stager may well be exiting stage left, her decades of work on the plane of psychological priming forebode of a parallel transformation in political theater. In the U.S., a creepy stylister has become the sinister incarnation of what was once a democratizing living room dream. Like the stager, he loves status signals and adjectives, albeit of a less delicate kind: "great," "stupid," "tough," "weak," "YUGE." He shuns narrative and rationality, preferring amplified emotional cues: "I'm a winner." "They are rapists." "What the hell do you have to lose?" The proverbial knitted throw has been stripped from its cardboard couch, or, in the words of veteran journalist Bill Moyers, "The truth has been pulled inside out." Many seem not to mind and even to welcome this coming, which has been years in the reality-TV making,

after all. So, it's really NOT the economy, stupid. It's the emotive packaging. A style of rhetoric indifferent to facts has entangled aspiration with hate and impunity, but cardboard beds and sofas won't support a good night's sleep or heal a case of buyer's remorse. And then what?

\*