

S I L O P O I N T

Model for living

Some who look at model homes are buying the ideas, not the house

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When Joan Rogers tours a model home, it's not because she's house-hunting, but because she's taking in the interior design.

Rogers has been window-shopping this way for a decade, curious to see what's hot and what's not in home fashions.

"I like to see what kind of art they use. I like to see the window treatments and the colors. It's neat, clean - everything is perfect," the Timonium resident said.

Some people devour home-decor magazines; others are home-TV-show junkies. But Rogers prefers to be in the midst of it.

"This is better because you are three-dimensional. It gives you that added perception that helps you with visualizing a room," she said.

Rogers is a sightseer; builders are looking for buyers. The art of designing and furnishing a model home is what makes it appealing to both groups.

There's a reason why some visitors say they could move right into the model: Interior design is a crucial psychological element for models because part of selling a residence is selling the buyer on aspiring to live there. Builders identify the demographics and desires of would-be buyers and then market to them partly through staging the home.

It's no coincidence that the most popular floor plans are of the models, and that sales reps field inquiries on the furnishings. Few people can envision living in a house without seeing it furnished - even though part of the allure of a model is that it depicts idyllic dreams, not the reality of living, decorators said. Nobody has stacked breakfast dishes in the sink or turned the family room upside-down hunting for the TV remote.

Inviting spaces are ready for a person to step in: A table set for two creates atmosphere. His and hers sides of a bed and bathroom are identified by the items on nightstands and vanities, down to the books.

"Early on, we'd decorate one model and we'd leave another plain. We'd never sell model B, even if it was a better floor plan," said Michael DeStefano, president of Sturbridge Homes in Gambrills. "We never made that mistake again."

S I L O P O I N T

Interior designer Kathi Nickerson of Annapolis decorated model homes for 18 years before starting her own design firm.

"There is a plan from top to bottom, so that all of the rooms coordinate and the colors flow from one room to another," she said. "All the furniture is new and the scale is perfect for the rooms."

In contrast, Nickerson said, "That doesn't happen in our homes."

To reach potential buyers, Silo Point, the former grain elevator in Locust Point, soon will show eight model condos decorated by seven artists and designers, each themed to a different demographic group.

"This is like my little mini-movie set," said Tiffany Zappulla, a Baltimore set designer and interior designer, who decorated a one-bedroom unit for a young single man - "someone who's beyond leftover college bookcases."

Capitalizing on the reuse of an old industrial structure with exposed concrete and ductwork, she created a highly stylized but no-fuss masculine look of clean lines, metals and rich tones, carrying a few themes throughout. Personalization comes from textured fabrics and hides, Zappulla said. She used lamps with cast concrete bases, leaned art on small easels made of old nails and set the cafe table with dishes featuring a hammered-look silver border.

The tabletop is made of sunflower hulls, the bar stools are metal and a fixture with a pulley illuminates the area. Zappulla lined the wall behind shelves over a built-in bar with diamond plate, the truck-bed aluminum; it's bright enough to suggest a mirror, but not feminine.

Each of the colors - sage green, gunmetal gray and rich blue - appears in nearly every room. So do hides, which turn up in a cowhide living room rug, suede wing chairs, a suede platform bed and a leather-shag rug. Reused goods are everywhere: a distressed coffee table made from a pallet, an industrial window re-born as wall decor and an old bedroom bureau repainted in greens and grays.

Vicci Barrett, design director of Beazer Interior Design, which does most of the company's homes nationwide, said her designers work methodically to blend demographics, colors and trends.

If statistics point to potential buyers with children, one bedroom will be decorated as a child's room. It's likely to have a theme, reflected even in the closet.

"If we are doing butterflies for a girl, we put a dress in it with butterflies on it," Barrett said.

It may be a nursery. "A person might say, 'Oh, my little baby would look so good in this room.' Then they get excited about it and they think, 'Honey, maybe we could really afford this,'" Barrett said.

Still, builders estimate that up to half of model home visitors are sightseers who are fascinated by model

SILO POINT

home decor.

"It is a phenomenon that has been going on since model homes [were] created," said Scott Lederer, president of Strata New Home Sales, a Baltimore company that handles marketing and sales for developers and builders.

The curious seek decorating tips and renovating ideas, he said. They come to see trends up close.

Rogers, for example, has taken design ideas from her visits. "They will use two pieces or three of related artwork over a bed or sofa or something like that. And pillow placements on beds," she said.

Sightseers can visit any time, but grand opening advertisements really draw them. If they like what they see, sightseers may talk up the model with friends or revisit the same builder years later.

Rogers, who this year began working part time as a declutterer for Aim 4 Order, said she has studied so many model homes that she hopes to use what she has learned in creating a Web-based business of resources for people planning to sell their homes.

And today's sightseer may be tomorrow's buyer. Four years ago, Tom and Kristin Fleckenstein looked at a model house near their Pasadena neighborhood for ideas on finishing their basement.

Impressed with the basement, they went several times to see one house.

"We wound up buying the house - that model on a different lot," Kristin Fleckenstein said.

But they still haven't finished the basement.

5 things to know

Here are five tips for model-home sightseeing:

DO tell an approaching sales agent that you are just there to check out the decor. You're more likely to be left to wander, and the agent can focus on potential buyers.

DO note the decorator (take a business card) or ask the staff for more information on furnishings that you like.

DON'T expect the model home to be realistic. Nobody lives in it. Nobody's table is always set for guests.

DO remember that the model's furnishings are geared toward a lifestyle, are highly organized in presentation, and may feature custom bedding and window treatments.

DO look at advertisements to find model homes; go to builders' Web sites to view photos of their models' interiors.

S I L O P O I N T

Model taste

Interior designers Kathi Nickerson, of Changing Spaces, and Carol Grillo, of Carol Grillo Designs, suggest these ways to give your house model-home flair:

Declutter, and keep the house neat and clean.

Select two or three coordinated colors to carry through the house.

Use furniture that is in scale with your rooms.

Choose window treatments to complement your window size, shape and location.

Place attractive items, such as colorful glasses, in glass-front kitchen cabinets..