

# Real Estate Reality Check

Insights from Trulia's Real Estate Realist to Make Your Real-Life Decisions Smarter



## 5 Hypnotic Home Staging Techniques – and How to See Through Them

We all know how important home staging is if you're trying to sell a home. It's equally important when you're buying real estate for exactly the same reasons. Just like a person you meet on a blind date, staging is all about highlighting assets and deflecting your attention from any flaws. As a buyer, you have to learn to look past the staging and see what lies underneath.

That's not as easy as it sounds because clever staging can be hypnotic. I once had a client who called this the "vortex of cute." If you hear yourself oohing and aahing over wall hangings or a fabulous sectional, watch out! Even if you're buying a furnished home, which is rarely the case, you're focusing on the wrong thing.

Understanding hypnotic staging techniques will help you break their spells. Here are five of the most common, along with corresponding tips that will help snap you back to reality so that you can really see what you're buying.

**Hypnotic Staging See-Through #1: Tiny Furniture.** I'm sure that you've gone through your closet at one time or another to put together an outfit that made you look smaller than you are (fine, then – I'll speak for myself!). Well, house staging aims to accomplish the exact opposite. By opting for very small furniture, rooms can be made to appear much larger than they really are.

That can be a problem if those rooms don't accommodate your lifestyle.

I'm not recommending you turn away from a potential home just because it won't fit your Nana's custom-made-for-her-13-kids-and-their-spouses dining room table. But if the 'kids bedroom' won't fit a standard-sized bed and dresser, or you'd have to be the size of a Barbie doll to fit on the chaise lounge that the living room is sized to fit, you've got a problem.

Should you fall in love with a place that's heavily staged with tiny furniture, bring measurements of your furniture and a tape measure on your second look to make sure they'll actually, comfortably fit.

**Hypnotic Staging See-Through #2: Camouflage and Cover-Ups.** Just like baked cookies can make a house smell homey, gauzy wall and window coverings and soft music can make it seem positively dreamy. Downside: they can also camouflage a whole lot of nastiness. Don't be fooled: investigate. You need to know what the natural light and sounds will be like after the gauze is gone, so ask for the music to be turned off and throw open the curtains. Then look outside the various windows to see what's out there – I've seen power poles, neighbors' patchwork roof repairs and even, once, a backyard dog fighting ring, obscured by gorgeous window coverings.

Speaking of looking, make sure you draw back any and all coverings, and open all closet and cupboard doors. I know a homeowner who only found out after she had purchased her home that the built-in microwave was powered by an extension cord. She hadn't wanted to snoop, so (much to her electrician's subsequent delight) she simply didn't check behind door #17.

**Hypnotic Staging See-Through #3: Activity Props You'll Never Use.** Don't you just feel all warm and fuzzy when you walk into a room with a lovely crib and a baby mobile? See a room with well-organized shelving and a craft table and you immediately imagine yourself scrapbooking or quilting. Yoga mats and meditation pillows almost make you want to find your mantra, but also make a room seem more serene than it will ever feel when you actually live there (considering you've never said a single 'om'.)

Come on, now - this is you we're talking about. Unless you have—or plan to have—a baby or already do crafts or meditate, you need a home that will fit your lifestyle, your needs and your wish list. So when you feel yourself being swayed, just make a list of the activities you actually do in your current home and want to do in your new one, and pay attention to whether a given prospective property actually has space for those items. (I've heard that stamp collecting can take up almost as much space as cultivating orchids – who knew?!)

**Hypnotic Staging See-Through #4: Any item that seems to be there strictly for appearances.** Décor can often hide or diminish the appearance of flaws that seem like small potatoes in light of the overall fabulousity of the place, but can actually prove expensive to change. So check for items that seem like they might have been put in just for looks—including curtains, rugs, paintings and doorways with no doors on them—and then don your sleuthing hat to figure out what flaws they might be concealing. Water stains and wall cracks can be covered up (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) by area rugs and wall hangings, and wonky floor plans can be staged as more open by taking the doors off their hinges.

**Hypnotic Staging See-Through #5:** Neighborhood staging. Before you get off investigative mode, you'll also want to check out the neighborhood. Not the staged neighborhood -- the real thing, warts and cars on the lawn and screaming schoolkids and all. I've actually seen neighbors move their cars and refrain from their normal (noisy) activities when there's an open house on the block. Even without that kind of intentional neighborhood staging, most open houses are held on a relatively calm days of the week and times of day, when traffic is light and noise is low.

To get the real scoop, make sure to visit the house at different times of day and on different days of the week in order to determine what the noise levels are like at evenings and weekend. You also want to make a point of showing up at the hours you'll normally be coming and going, so you can check to see how easy it is to get in and out of the driveway vis-a-vis traffic and what the noise levels are like at evenings and weekend.