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Don't overdo pre-sale upgrades

UNIVERSAL UCLICK

In most areas, a real estate recovery is underway, puncturing the fierce buyers' market that let purchasers dictate the terms and conditions of transactions. But, surprisingly, some sellers have yet to get the message. That's according to Dorcas Helfant, a seasoned real estate broker who co-owns seven realty offices. She says some sellers, admittedly a minority, are still so nervous about their prospects that they overspend on pre-sale upgrades.

Smart Moves



Ellen James Martin

To illustrate, she tells the story of a client who fretted so much about selling his upscale property that he planned to spend \$80,000 on a kitchen overhaul. "Not only was he spending way too much, but he was planning changes that would make it harder, not easier, to market his home," Helfant says. What the executive had in mind was to give his ordinary kitchen an Italian villa look with ornate cabinets of exotic wood and fanciful fixtures. "It was a totally personalized vision. But buyers don't want your personal taste. They want a blank canvas where they can fill in their own vision," she says. It took a while, but Helfant eventually dissuaded her client from his plan. Instead, he did a minor kitchen redo involving classic white cabinets with sleek, clean lines – the sort of interior most purchasers prefer. And after his modest investment, his house sold promptly for the full asking price.

Before doing any pre-sale upgrades, Helfant urges sellers to review their plans to make sure they're both appropriate and worthy of the cost. For advice on pre-sale upgrades, she recommends that sellers visit the Houselogic website: www.houselogic.com.

Here are a few pointers for sellers:
■ Look to real estate specialists for guidance.

To find a happy medium for spending on pre-sale improvements, Helfant suggests that sellers ask one or more local real estate agents to drop by their place and provide a checklist of changes that would be cost-effective.

"Don't be timid about seeking advice from professionals – even before you choose the person you want to take your listing," she says.

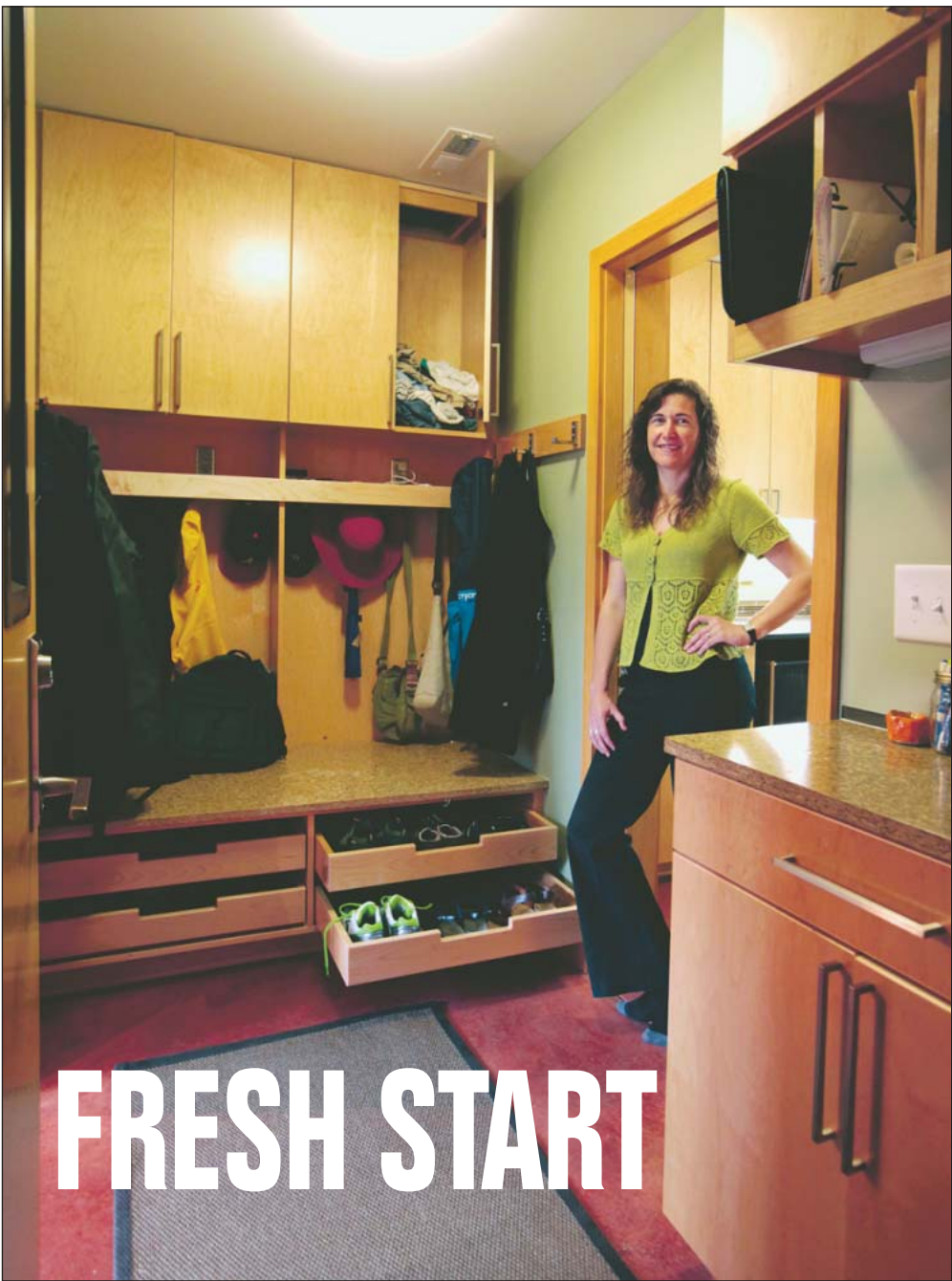
An increasing number of agents now recommend that sellers seek the help of a "home stager," someone skilled in the art of making a property look appealing to potential buyers. They review the home's current furnishings, remove excess pieces and rearrange the remaining ones. They may also lend the sellers additional furnishings to improve the look of the home while it's on the market.

Christian Salinas, a home stager in Washington, D.C. (www.staging-designdc.com), says it needn't cost a fortune to dramatically improve the appearance of a home through staging. And although the full services of a stager – including the use of inventory items – can exceed \$1,000, he says a less expensive alternative is to hire a stager for a brief consultation and then carry out the stager's suggestions.

■ Seriously question if a pre-sale addition is warranted.

If you have a small house to sell, would it be a good idea to add another bedroom or two to make it more inviting to buyers with children?

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CATHERINE WRIGHT
CORRESPONDENT

Carrboro architect Sophie Piesse likes to talk laundry.

Specifically, she likes to talk about making laundry rooms function better and have a nicer feel.

"I'm a mother of two boys, so laundry is a large part of my life unfortunately," Piesse said, explaining her interest in designing laundry rooms. "I have two very active boys who are very messy and dirty – and my husband is not far behind. I can tell you. So if you're going to spend a lot of time doing something, you should enjoy the space that you're in."

The Laundry Closet

Once relegated to the basement, the laundry room has evolved mostly to a closet. Many of the transitional houses that cropped up in the 1980s and '90s feature these laundry closets that typically are centrally located and make a lot of noise. Because the closets often aren't reinforced, washers and dryers can shake the floors and sometimes the house, Piesse noted. The closets also don't have appropriate storage or enough room to handle all laundry tasks. Often, people find they don't have room to fold clothes or to hang clothes that need to dry or they don't have a place to soak something that's stained.

"The closet just doesn't function for a family," Piesse said. "There isn't enough space in there for the stuff that we do. And especially if you have lots of kids and lots of laundry, where do you store your dirty laundry?"

What to Do

Depending on the size and location of your laundry closet, you may be limited in making it more functional.

• Stacking Washers and Dryers — Piesse often recommends installing a stacking washer and dryer to free space. With the extra space, you might install a countertop for folding; a sink for handwashing and soaking; drying racks; a fold-out ironing board; or cabinets.

• Paint — Choose a color that makes your laundry area more enjoyable. "Even having a joyful, fun color is a nice way to brighten

the space," Piesse noted, adding that colors play a large role in a room's mood. "Colors affect us a lot. They affect our mood," she said. "Green is very peaceful and soothing. Red or yellow is very vibrant."

• Expansion — Check to see whether your laundry closet could be expanded in one direction. Or if you're planning a renovation elsewhere in the house, consider



Sophie Piesse extended a client's small laundry room a few feet into the garage to create a larger laundry/mud room. She added color, brighter maple cabinetry, a butcher block folding area above the washer/dryer and a pull-out drying racks as well.

exploring whether a laundry room could be added. A small laundry room can be very functional, Piesse noted. "The idea is not that they're going to overtake the house," she said.

SEE REMAKE, PAGE 2B

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REMAKE

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Laundry/Mudroom

Piesse helped a Carrboro family turn their long, narrow laundry room into a vibrant space that also functions as a mudroom. The room was 5 feet wide by 8 feet 8 inches long, with laundry equipment and storage lined up on one side. Piesse noted it felt closed and wasted much space. To make the room more functional and enjoyable, she expanded the space into the garage by 4.6 feet, creating a more square room.

- **Laundry Area** — The room features a utility sink; counter over the washer and dryer for folding clothes; and pullout drying racks that can be tucked away over the machines when not in use. Above the countertop are cabinets to store items like detergent and a hanging bar to hang clothes out of the dryer. One wall features floor-to-ceiling storage with shelving 12 to 14 inches deep and spaces of different heights for multiple purposes, such as a place for dog food bowls and storage for large dog food bags.
- **Mudroom Area** — The mudroom portion features a bench and drawers underneath to store shoes; hooks for hanging jackets; storage space for hats, gloves, keys and phones; and outlets to charge phones.
- **Welcoming Entry** — To make the room welcoming, the family installed maple cabinetry; a butcher-block countertop dyed with a cherry stain; an ecru tile backsplash; and a ceramic tile floor. “It’s the space that families enter a house,” Piesse noted. “They don’t enter through the front door, so it’s nice to make it a nice entry into the house.”

For a bit of whimsy, the room was painted an apple green and the fire door between the room and garage was painted a midnight blue. Art work created by the husband when he was a child was added to a wall. “The Masons wanted it to be vibrant and fun,” Piesse noted, “so it’s very bright and playful.”

Laundry/Kitchenette

For her own laundry room, Piesse chose to design a room that could double as a butlers pantry or kitchenette. Just outside the space between her back door and mudroom is a patio and fire pit, where her family sometimes entertains guests. The architect installed a countertop and sink and created space for a small refrigerator in case her family ever chooses to make the room do double duty.

She also outfitted the room with a

goal of making it welcoming to guests, choosing a soothing, low-key effect. The 5½-foot-by-9-foot room features natural light; sage walls; a paper composite countertop in black; smoky gray recycled glass tiles for the backsplash; maple cabinets; and a terracotta-stained concrete floor with radiant heat.

Considerations

- If you’re frustrated by your laundry room or are thinking about making changes, Piesse suggests creating a list of what you like and don’t like about your laundry situation and what you want out of it to create a room that functions well. “How you want to function is very important to what you want the laundry to include,” she said.
- Consider:
- Who does the laundry and how often?
 - When do you do laundry, and what spaces do you want it near? Folks who wash and dry their clothes at night might not want the laundry room near bedrooms.
 - Do you want counter space, and where do you fold your clothes? Some people fold in the family room while watching a movie.
 - Do you want a sink, drying racks or hanging space, and how much hanging space?



Above left: A hanging/drying rack with storage above was created by stacking the washer and dryer. The space was also plumbed for a possible upright freezer in the future. Above right: The opposite side of Piesse’s laundry from the washer/dryer is maple cabinetry with a recycled hardened paper surface countertop with sink and roll out fabric laundry bins.



- Do you want to iron in the laundry room?
- Do you want to store dirty clothes in the laundry room or elsewhere? In Piesse’s home, a laundry chute sends clothes to a hamper in the laundry room on her bottom floor.
- Do you like your washer and dryer to be side by side or stacked? Do you want your washer and dryer on the floor or higher? Some people like raised machines for less back bending.
- Do you want a drain in the floor?
- How much storage do you want and for what items?
- Do you want the room to serve other purposes? Consider its location. If the room is near a garden, folks might want it to serve as a mudroom also. If it’s by a patio, they might want an extra refrigerator. Others might want to install a small bath for dogs or even kids.
- What uses share the laundry space, and how can they be separated? One use Piesse cautions against is using the laundry room as a place to put cats or their litter boxes. Cat food and litter on the floor can make for a dirty laundry floor. “Don’t just shove every utility into a space that you’re trying to create clean laundry in,” Piesse advised. “It can make the function of a laundry room a little less efficient.”

SMART

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

“The answer is an unequivocal ‘no,’ unless you’re willing to throw money away that you’ll never get back,” says Sid Davis, a real estate broker and author of “A Survival Guide to Selling a Home.”

With rare exceptions, Davis says homeowners who attempt a pre-sale addition typically recoup no more than 50 percent of their expenses, due to the high cost of expanding an existing home.

Perhaps you believe you could save on an addition by avoiding the architect’s fees. But Davis says this, too, would be a mistake.

“Without an architect for your design work, your new room could look funny and fail to blend with the rest of the place. That could torpedo your whole project and prove a costly error. It would be better to dump the addition plan altogether,” Davis says.

■ **Don’t top neighborhood standards with your upgrades.**

Real estate specialists agree that when it comes to pre-sale improvements, your kitchen should be a high priority. That’s because a kitchen that looks uninviting is a major turnoff to buyers, who could reject your place on that basis alone.

But Helfant says that concentrating on the kitchen doesn’t mean you must spend a sizeable sum there. And she stresses that no one needs to exceed neighborhood standards on kitchen improvements.

“For instance, if your countertops look worn and need replacing, you don’t need granite — assuming all your neighbors still have linoleum,” she says.

How can you size up neighborhood standards? One way is to seek the counsel of a listing agent who’s thoroughly familiar with your neighborhood and has toured many homes there.

“You can also stop by open houses to get a feel for the features of your neighbors’ homes,” Helfant says.

■ **Never forget the street view of your property.**

There are more reasons than ever for sellers to focus on the external appearance of their property. The major one is that virtually all buyers now screen properties online or through print publications before deciding which ones to visit. And the front view of your property is the most important image they’ll see.

“The landscaping in your front yard must look absolutely amazing,” Helfant says.

The good news is that you don’t need an expensive landscaping company to make your yard look much better, assuming you’re handy with yard gear or know someone who is.

“You can do wonders with ordinary trimming, edging, cutting and mulching, along with the addition of some blooming flowers. The key is to just get the work done, always remembering that your yard is the frame around your home,” Helfant says.

To contact Ellen James Martin, email her at ellenjamesmartin@gmail.com.



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Pickards Meadow Road
\$1,040,000

Proposed home for Pickards Meadow. We have selected this Prairie style floor plan for the 10 acre lot overlooking the pond, or you can choose your own plan and builder. With three bedrooms and a den or office, this home also features four full baths, a walk-out lower level and a 3-car garage. Architectural features include stone accents and screened porch, with quality details such as a 30-year roof, composite deck and sealed crawlspace. Final price is dependent on selections.



250 S Estes Drive #33
\$116,500

Amazing opportunity to purchase an affordable condo in Brookwood. Two spacious bedrooms and 2-1/2 full baths are perfect for roommates. Priced to sell, add your own decorating touches. Close to Battle Park trails, Community Center and park, University Mall, public library – community pool is right off the back deck!



603 Pepper Place
\$698,900

Craftsman details and artisan construction on nearly six acres with pond! Just north of Chapel Hill, this home offers 4500 square feet of living space including walk-out basement. Four bedrooms including main floor master and guest suite, separate office, workshop. Octagonal rooms, sitting nooks, pyramid wood ceilings, updated kitchen and master bath – features too numerous to list!

www.603PepperPlace.com



20058 Long
\$409,900

Walk to shops, restaurants and park in Governors Village. Beautiful home, filled with sunlight and impeccably maintained on quiet cul-de-sac. Three main floor BRs including master suite with deep soaking tub and separate shower, fourth BR plus bonus on second floor. Abundant storage plus screened porch.

20058Long.com



401 Lorraine Street
\$238,000

Charming brick ranch, close to everything Carrboro has to offer! Blocks from Johnny's, this 3 bedroom 2 full bath home has been tastefully renovated with gleaming new hardwoods, new kitchen counters, cabinets & stainless steel appliances. The sunlight pours in from new windows, skylight and solar tubes. Even a finished outbuilding that can be a studio. Large lot and great neighborhood!



306 Pleasant Drive
\$150,000

Join the Tiny House movement! Charming cottage on a peaceful street in the heart of Carrboro has all of what you need for a comfortable downtown life: one bedroom, full bath, living room and kitchenette. Beautiful yard with mature oak trees, plenty of room for a garden. Completely renovated in 2004.



117 Channing Lane, Chapel Hill
\$259,000

Beautifully updated and maintained townhome with the kind of quality usually reserved for detached homes. Though small from the outside, the floor plan opens up with vaulted and cathedral ceilings and an open floor plan. Hardwood floors throughout main level other than bedroom. Spacious kitchen with large pantry, potential master upstairs or down. Oversized deck sheltered with a landscaped privacy screen.

117Channing.com



105 Old Stonehouse Rd., Chapel Hill
\$512,000

More than just a beautiful home, this small farm is a modern paradise on 11 acres and less than 10 minutes from downtown Carrboro. Fantastically updated kitchen and baths, including granite counters, oiled bronze finishes, separate steam shower and exquisite tile work. Established property with over 400 blueberry bushes, barn, fenced pastures and phenomenal setting.

105OldStonehouse.com



6021 New Jericho Road
\$416,900

Bring your horses! Gracious farmhouse on 5 gently rolling acres with fantastic apartment over garage, just north of town. Warm and welcoming with two masonry fireplaces, five bedrooms including main floor master and 3 1/2 baths. Updated kitchen with new stainless appliances, sink and tiled backsplash. Passive solar sunroom and amazing gardens, large detached wired workshop.

6021NewJericho.com



33 Benchmark, Ferrington
\$248,000

Completely renovated home full of light on a lovely half-acre culdesac lot near one of the Ferringtion neighborhood parks. Contemporary style with vaulted ceilings, Separate living room and family room - sweet screened porch overlooking private fenced backyard (and creek!). Two bedrooms including master with sliding doors to deck plus loft room with large walk-in closet and potential for guest room or office!

33Benchmark.com



PICKARDS MEADOW
\$235,000

Gorgeous building lot with 10 total acres. Approx. seven acres in open field with three wooded acres and meandering creek. Home site overlooks neighboring pond with lovely pastoral views. Perfect for your mini farm and in wonderful neighborhood near the Pickard Mountain Eco-Institute and just ten minutes from Chapel Hill.



1349 Langdon Place
\$328,000

Serene and stylish one level townhome lives like a detached home. In a park like setting in Langdon Place of Ferringtion. Enjoy the simple life as the HOA takes care of all maintenance. Updated and open floor plan, tons of natural light, hardwoods, big windows, plantation shutters and new paint & light fixtures. The large master suite and bath has two walk in closets and two vanities. 3 bedrooms total, 2 car garage, double sided fireplace and lush courtyard and gardens, don't miss this one!



304 Pleasant Drive
\$125,000

Unique Carrboro opportunity! Historic 1930s mill house needs total renovation or teardown and build your dream home on a quiet street in the heart of town. R75 zoning on .3 acre lot also accommodates a duplex or single family home with attached apartment. Beautiful yard with mature trees and garden space.



1132 NC 902
\$268,000

Amazing contemporary with all the updates you have dreamed of! Open living w/ high ceilings, tons of windows & revamped kitchen & baths, floors & more, all in beautiful style. Huge deck and 2.5 acres of gorgeous extensive landscaping & outdoor space. Private & serene setting, yet only minutes to town. Separate studio/workshop/storage, chicken coop extraordinaire and more!



801 Kings Mill Road
\$549,500

Beautifully updated home with classic Chapel Hill charm, nearly an acre and an easy walk to the Botanical Gardens. Fantastic kitchen with gas fireplace, Subzero refrigerator, professional Thermador gas range. Separate living and family rooms, main floor master, with lower level guest suite and wonderful screened porch.

801KingsMill.com