Sustainability and Staging: an Introduction and Sustainable Staging Checklist

Why "Sustainable Staging"?

Staging has revolutionized the real estate industry by maximizing homes' appeal and potential, drawing attention to selling features, and helping buyers to imagine the home as their own, so that homes are shown at their absolute best. Similarly, a green revolution is now sweeping new home builders as public awareness of global environmental problems, indoor air quality issues, and the need for energy and water conservation has become the new norm. The importance of this movement is underscored by recent estimates that our buildings are currently responsible for 35% of North American carbon dioxide emissions, and improving them will be the quickest and cheapest way to reduce North America's impact on climate change. **Sustainable staging brings the green revolution to the real estate resale market.**

Sustainable staging has several important benefits. Realtors gain a significant marketing advantage for properties that may be otherwise unremarkable. In addition to gaining a more marketable home, sellers become educated on how to make their home and lifestyle more environmentally friendly, and carry that knowledge to their lives in their new home. Last but not least, buyers benefit from a detailed list of the environmental, health, and fiscal advantages of their new home and recommendations for further improvements they can make after the sale.

What makes it sustainable?

There are many definitions of sustainability. My favourite comes from architect William McDonough, who says that sustainable design asks the question, "**How do we love all of the children of all species for all time?**"

In the case of staging, **answering this question requires a holistic approach both to specifying individual products, and to the design of the whole home**. Environmental, client health, and social justice issues all must factor into the choice of materials and finishes, which in turn must work with the rest of the home to create a space that is liveable, resource-efficient, and appealing to the target demographic. These issues are of course in addition to the aesthetic, budgetary, functional, and practical considerations taken into account by any interior decorator.

For example, on the whole-home level, a building is not truly green if it is energy-efficient but full of finishes that offgas, which individually might not pose a problem but taken together may endanger occupant health. Similarly, a home which uses many beautiful products made of rapidly renewable resources that may crack and warp and need replacement in Edmonton's dry climate – or rapidly rot in the damp climates of Vancouver or Halifax – is not much more sustainable than one which was finished with semi-disposable conventional finishes with only the first point of sale in mind. Furthermore, a sustainable home has the ability to interact with its location, with the local climate dictating whether the home capitalizes on, or needs protection from, available sunlight and prevailing winds.

Examples of specific issues to be considered in choosing sustainable products and materials include:

- energy or water use in operation and/or manufacture
- use of recycled or rapidly renewable materials for manufacture
- whether the product is durable and/or designed for reuse or recycling
- distance and means of transport through the chain of production
- ease of cleaning and maintenance
- effects on indoor air quality
- conditions provided by manufacturers both in the facility and the surrounding community
- fair trade and child labour issues

Furthermore, a sustainable staging practice **requires a commitment to educating clients, realtors, and trades** – particularly in markets where 'eco-friendly' and 'energy-efficient' are widely viewed as interchangeable terms. Sustainable staging also requires solid research and critical thinking skills, since the green product marketplace is changing rapidly at present, and 'greenwashed' products are all too common.

ecoDomestica reDesign's "Sustainable Staging" Checklist

Here are some of the many strategies we use to ensure that we follow the principles of sustainable design in our staging practice.

Client Consultation:

After the initial consult and before work commences, an additional eco-coaching walk-through is conducted with the seller to highlight small changes in energy and water conservation practices, waste management practices, and cleaning products used that can make a big difference in the clients' health, wallet, and environmental footprint, and to determine whether a full energy audit to qualify for available government subsidies is worthwhile. Based on this discussion, a custom-tailored report is created for the seller that addresses their lifestyle and goals, including the recommended staging steps for this home, specific product recommendations, and the steps they can take in their next home.

During the Big Purge:

When packing clients' personal effects and decluttering, keep the 3 Rs in mind. Reduce the amount of stuff on display by a half to a third, and encourage sellers to consider reducing the amount of stuff to be displayed in their new home; reuse unwanted items by selling or donating them; and recycle any trash you can (for example, Edmonton's EcoStations will recycle many things you might think are destined for landfill, including construction scrap and e-waste; check with your local municipality). Responsibly dispose of household chemicals such as old paint, cleaners, pesticides and herbicides. Keep in mind that local charities are happy to take unwanted furniture, linens, clothing, books, toys, and even building supplies and appliances. Packed items the client is keeping can be stored in a friend or relative's garage, or in a rented storage facility or portable container.

Sprucing Up Or Renovating:

Before any work is done, whether by professionals or by homeowners, all heating and AC vents must be completely sealed. HVAC systems are notoriously difficult to clean once contaminated with particulates such as dust from lead paint removal or drywall installation, or fumes from paint, adhesives, or floor sealants.

Any mould problems must be dealt with by an expert to avoid contaminating the entire home with mould spores. Ditto for asbestos and lead in older homes.

Take care to specify sustainable materials, energy-efficient appliances, and water-saving plumbing fixtures to replace/upgrade flooring, cabinetry, countertops, appliances and fixtures. Look for third party certification of any product's environmental claims to avoid falling for greenwashing.

Use Zero Volatile Organic Compound (0-VOC) paint for all repainting. The best case scenario is to use a truly 0-VOC product, which does not contain volatile solvents that are exempt from VOC regulations because they're not responsible for creating smog. However, this is not always possible or practical; conventional 0-VOC paints are a good second choice for most situations.

Any wallpaper and paste should be removed, both to depersonalize the space and to expose – or prevent formation of – possible mould problems.

Whenever possible, avoid carpet installation, as it's a trap for allergens, offgassed chemicals, and pesticides, soot, and dust tracked in from outside. If wall-to-wall carpet is being used, specify low-VOC adhesives. It is preferable to use a modular, adhesive-free carpet tile system, which may also be used as area rugs over hard flooring. Some manufacturers have recycled, recyclable, or natural fibre options.

Sustainable hard flooring options include: refinishing existing hardwood or concrete using 0-VOC products; installing locally-sourced, reclaimed, and sustainably-harvested hardwood; installing rapidly-renewable materials such as cork, bamboo, and palm flooring; installing natural linoleum; and, installing durable terracotta or porcelain tiles (some of which now have recycled content).

High-flow plumbing fixtures such as toilets, showers, and faucets should be replaced with low-flow or dual-flush toilets and low-flow showerheads (both of which are much improved by redesigns of the past five years) or outfitted with aerators to reduce wasted water. Ideally, replacement showerheads should have a flow rate of less than 2 gallons per minute.

In kitchens and bathrooms, 0-VOC paint is usually the greenest, most cost effective way to refresh tired cabinets; cabinet doors can also be replaced. Cabinets with a variety of environmentally friendly attributes, including sustainably harvested wood, urea-formaldehyde free wood products, and agricultural waste products such as strawboard and sorghum board, are now available. A wide selection of sustainable materials for countertops and backsplashes are now available as well, from recycled glass tile to durable solid surfaces containing recycled paper or glass chips.

Measures such as the installation of daylighting ceiling fixtures, transom windows, and French doors are an inexpensive way to increase penetration of natural light into the interior of the home without structural renovations.

Manage construction waste during renovation very carefully to ensure that anything that is recyclable is disposed of appropriately, instead of taking everything to landfill.

Curb Appeal and Exterior Upgrades:

Where possible, choose organically grown plants for near the entry, avoiding flowering plants that are common allergens. Organic lawn-care and gardening techniques must be used. Where re-landscaping is desirable, xeriscaping using native and drought-tolerant perennial plants should be seriously considered. Add rain barrels and a composter to the garden.

If exterior windows need replacement, look for new energy-efficient technologies such as low-emissivity coatings and argon gas between the panes. In some climates, consider adding exterior shades to east- and west-facing windows to reduce solar heat gain (and decrease the need for air conditioning).

Cleaning:

Obviously, the whole home must be spotless for showings; but it shouldn't have an artificial "clean" smell from the phthalate-laden perfumes in conventional products. Use only environmentally friendly cleaning products or homemade cleaners (using vinegar, baking soda, and the like) to clean the house, for the sake of both the indoor air quality of the home and the ecosystems downstream of our wastewater systems.

If the situation requires it, consider renting a non-ozonating air cleaning system to use prior to showings. (Ground level ozone can cause lung damage.)

Furniture and Staging Props:

Use sellers' existing furniture wherever possible.

Source antique and vintage furniture from local antique stores, thrift shops, and online services (like Craigslist, Freecycle, and Kijiji) to fill any needs for providing purpose to rooms. Buying new 'green' furniture should be viewed as a last resort.

Reupholstery using natural or recycled fibres and non-petroleum, non-PBDE-containing foams and fillings should be considered as an option for worn, tired looking upholstered pieces.

If the sellers are buying new furniture which they plan to take with them, encourage them to invest in durable, high quality, flexible pieces made of sustainable, healthy materials.

Use green products as staging props, such as organic cotton or bamboo linens and towels, cruelty-free wool blankets, natural soaps, and unscented pure-beeswax or soy candles. Provide a recycling station in the kitchen and a paper recycling bin in the home office.

Avoid all air fresheners, scented paraffin-based candles, and fragrance diffusers. This category of product can be extremely detrimental to indoor air quality, due to the phthalates in artificial fragrances, and furthermore, allergies to both artificial fragrances and natural essential oils are very common.

We use exclusively real plants shown to improve indoor air quality, such as spider plant, philodendron, English ivy, bamboo palm, weeping fig, and gerbera daisy. Take care not to use plants which are toxic to pets if eaten, or plants which are problematic for individuals with allergies.

For lighting, replace incandescent lamps with high efficiency light bulbs wherever possible – with high quality 'warm white' Compact Fluorescent Lamps (CFL) and Light-Emitting Diodes (LED) you will not be sacrificing quality of light, and CFLs are now available in every shape and in non-flickering dimmable lamps. In rooms such as kitchens, dining rooms, and crafts rooms, where accurate colour rendition is important, choose energy-efficient halogen incandescent lamps instead of CFLs. Consider motion-sensor switches for lights that are frequently left on (such as in children's rooms).

Our recommendations for buyers may include:

- replacement of vinyl siding and asphalt shingles with durable fibre cement or metal products
- energy conservation measures such as upgraded HVAC, appliances, windows, and insulation
- water saving measures such as upgraded appliances, fixtures, and on-demand water heater
- sustainable products and materials to use in likely renovations
- alternative-energy solutions (i.e., solar, wind, geothermal) that would be appropriate to the site
- appropriate trees to plant for the site and climate

In Conclusion

Sustainable staging has the potential to not only transform the real estate marketplace, but to act as an engine for positive changes in clients' lives and environmental impact. I hope this discussion and checklist has inspired you to incorporate sustainable practices into your next staging project.

Deborah Merriam is proprietor of ecoDomestica reDesign, specializing in one-day redecorating and staging, healthy home makeovers, sustainable lifestyle coaching, and green product and material specification, for the greater Edmonton region in Alberta, Canada. Her broad scientific background from her previous career in medical research gives her a valuable interdisciplinary perspective, a talent for meticulous research, and the lateral problem-solving skills that are essential for success in the rapidly changing field of sustainable design. She holds membership in the Canadian Redesigners Association (CRDA), and a student membership in the Canadian Certified Interior Decorators Association (CCIDA). Deborah welcomes opportunities to consult with other stagers and decorators to help them green their projects.

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