



Real Estate Matters

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Simple Upgrades, De-cluttering Boost Home Livability, Marketability



When Kathy and Marc Garneau bought their Highland Park, Ill., house in December, the property had received few bites. It's no wonder why. The seller had lived in the property for four decades and had done nothing to freshen the décor.

The property featured floor-to-ceiling shelves of clutter. The kitchen, bathrooms, and light fixtures were dated, and nearly every surface was covered in 1970s-style wallpaper. The thirtysomething move-up buyers snapped up the house for \$50,000 below what comparable properties were going for.

Such scenarios are common when Seniors have resided in a house for decades, according to Kelly McFrederick of Kelly's Staging® Kreations, a Largo, Fla.-based home stager. The properties are a hard sell, particularly when a neighborhood is attracting a younger demographic, she says.

Upgrades and de-cluttering are key to getting top dollar when selling a house. Why not perform some of the jobs before selling so you can enjoy the changes?

Tracy DeCarlo of Detailed Solutions, Inc., Altamonte Springs, Fla., and author of *Don't Forget the Linen Closets*, recommends making simple changes that will allow you to better age in place, as well as boost the property's appeal to prospective buyers later. Her specialty is increasing homes' functionality during construction and remodeling projects.

She recommends starting with the garage. "A disheveled garage leaves a bad impression. It's often the first thing you're greeted by and the last place you see when leaving," she observes. Small changes can improve aesthetics and functionality. Built-in storage with doors keeps possessions clean, hides pack-rat habits, and provides clean visual lines. Installing a utility sink with a pullout

faucet eases large clean-up jobs, and the addition of workbenches or countertops offers a convenient spot for hobbies and home repair projects.

Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers, author of *Organize Your Garage in No Time*, and founder of Arranging it All, Austin, Texas, expresses similar views. "The average two-car garage has become a no-car garage," he jokes.

De-cluttering and organizing are the first steps. You could do it yourself or hire a professional organizer to create a strategy and assist you.

Izsak acknowledges the emotional attachment to clothes and objects. "Certain things represent a person's life experiences and that adds another dimension to de-cluttering and organizing because it feels like you're giving away a piece of your life," he says. Another reason people often keep things: they say they paid good money for it. "But if you're not using it, why keep it? Sell it and turn it back into money," suggests Izsak.

Here are strategies to purge the most problematic areas.

Garage—Dispose of the easiest things first, such as broken VCRs and old paint. Then move methodically from section to section, deciding what to keep.

Closets—Set goals. Commit to reducing your wardrobe by half or eliminating everything you haven't worn in three years.

Kitchen—and the bathrooms are critical areas to buyers. Start in the kitchen by purging gadget drawers of duplicates and items you never use. Then move to each cabinet and dispose of all unnecessary pots, pans, and appliances. Consider whether you really need 100 Cool Whip containers. If you have two sets of dishes, Izsak suggests giving away the everyday dishes and using the best ones for daily meals. "Enjoy them," he says. "What are you waiting for?"

Collections—Edit collections and keep only your favorite items. Donate or sell the remainder. If

you're willing to let go of the entire lot, consider photographing the collection so you have the memory of those items.

Paper—Ask why you're saving papers. If they have no legal or tax implications, toss or shred them. Create filing systems for items—bills, taxes, and insurance, for instance—that need to be kept.

Once you finish purging, decide on upgrades. DeCarlo suggests simple changes that will help you improve your home.

Flooring—Replace carpeting with a low, tight pile in a neutral color. Such floor covering is less likely to cause trips and falls than others, and the upgrade can make the home more appealing during a sale.

Lighting—Brighten the entire house with recessed lighting, track lighting, and lights above sinks and in showers.

Hardware—Handles, not knobs, on sinks and doors are easier for everyone to operate. Those with arthritis don't have to make painful twisting movements and everyone benefits if they can open a door by pushing a handle with an elbow.

Paint—Fresh paint can transform a space.



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Anthony Massimino & Company

Massimino Real Estate Consultant

Anthony "Tony" Massimino, SRES

102 River Road

Hanover, Massachusetts, 02339

781-826-2211 or cell: 617-763-2211

Repainting is essential if rooms feature garish or dated hues.

Exterior--Freshly painted doors, abundant colorful flowers, powerwashed surfaces, trimmed bushes and trees, well-tended lawns, and gleaming windows all help to make a good first impression.

As you're working, consider what buyers might want you to leave. When you sell, remain flexible if they want items such as your patio furniture, chandeliers, or storage units.

Though certain projects can be accomplished in a few hours, freshening an entire house will require significant time. Izsak recommends starting the organizing process at least six months to one year before moving. Then you can enjoy the improvements and not feel stressed.

Additional Resources:

-www.flylady.com—The site offers a wealth of tips and methods for creating order out of chaos.

-www.nahb.org/caps—The National Association of Homebuilders certifies specialists with expertise in helping Seniors with home renovations.

-www.napo.org—The National Association of Professional Organizers offers organizing tips and referrals to professional organizers.