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Designing For Dollars

With the real estate market sinking around them, North Shore homeowners are getting creative about making the sale, including a Glencoe couple that called in reinforcements — from HGTV.

By Sherry Thomas

When Eric and Ylva Jacobs decided to put their house on the market this spring, they knew it would be an uphill battle. While the 1927 gem has what realtors like to call “good bones” and the Glencoe location is superb, there were issues this family knew would need to be addressed before the property could fetch what they needed to get out of it.

“We’re very utilitarian,” Eric confesses. “With four kids, our house has become a container for people.”

“And toys,” Ylva chimes in. “That’s the way we live.”

“But,” Eric interjects, “it’s not necessarily the way you want it when you’re selling a house in a down market.”

So the Jacobses took a gamble. At the suggestion of a friend, they proposed their property as a candidate for HGTV’s wildly popular *Designed to Sell* reality show. A few days later, they got the call they’d been hoping for.

“They had a scout out here right away,” explains Eric, talking with us one weekday afternoon as cameras “rolled” in the next room.

“I think they were really excited to do a house up here. We’ve got the good bones, and they’re putting the bling in.”

Welcome to today’s real estate market, where the price not only needs to be right but every nook and cranny needs to be “marketed” to its maximum potential as well. Often that means bringing in a professional “home stager” to help prospective buyers visualize the possibilities, a service



Before HGTV’s *Designed to Sell* crew came in, this sunroom was used as a home-office space for the busy couple. As part of the show’s \$2,000 makeover, carpenters built in benches to add interest and seating below the windows, and a fresh coat of paint was used to freshen the room.

routinely suggested by local realtors. But the *Designed to Sell* franchise takes it one step further, taking a \$2,000 materials budget and a full crew of contractors to give each of its properties a market-ready makeover and an open house — all on national TV.





Before, the Jacobs' living room [pictured right] was plain and utilitarian, which perfectly suited the needs of the couple and their four children. Now, the space is cleaner and more inviting, with sophisticated new furniture, a fresh coat of paint and artwork that ties the room together and injects a sense of style. The makeover allows potential buyers to see the potential for their own décor.



"We look for people who are selling and need some help," explains Lisa Holden, a member of the Pietown Productions crew in Chicago. "These are people who just need that extra boost to take (their property) to market."

Jennifer Bernardi, the shoot producer, says the Jacobses were making one of the biggest mistakes homeowners often make when showing a house. "They had a lot of furniture in here," she says. "It was not really defined well."

However, perhaps the most unexpected transformation for the Glencoe home was in the sunroom, a relatively small space that — when viewers see it on HGTV later this year — could be one of the most memorable.

Eric and Ylva added the room to replace a sagging three-season porch shortly after purchasing the property five years ago. They vaulted the ceilings with wood and put in new windows, but since the couple works from home (Ylva as a graphic designer; Eric

as a consultant), what they ended up needing the space for was a home office.

"We typically pick three rooms to do because we want to make sure we put our money where it will do the most," Holden explains. "So we converted that room from what was considered a home office back to a sunroom."

As the construction crew (which, by the way, consists of more than the hunky carpenters you see on TV) rolls primer up and down a brick wall in that very sunroom, Eric and Ylva reflect on the experience they've gleaned from this experience, a literal rush to market with cameras rolling.

"You have to fall in love with your family and not your stuff," Ylva says. "Your stuff is coming with you."



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The dining space was one of the three rooms targeted by the *Designed to Sell* TV crew. In addition to painting the walls and changing the window treatments, the designer made the decision to replace a dated lighting fixture, which brings focus to the dining room table. The couple's blue-and-white porcelain dishes inspired the transformation.



And even though they both consider themselves seasoned "renovators," Eric says having a professional designer on hand to guide them was invaluable. "We look at it subjectively ... they are looking at it very objectively, and that makes a difference."

One of the oft-repeated *Designed to Sell* buzzwords has been the homeowner's strategy to make "top dollar." But all the staging in the world won't make a difference if the house on the property you're selling is beyond repair or requires such a major overhaul that not even the reality-TV gods can pull it off.

Last year, Todd Wilkins, executive vice president at Lincolnshire-based Orren Pickell Designers and Builders, launched a unique program to help buyers in just that situation.

"This is beyond staging," Wilkins says. "It's more forward-thinking in terms of the due diligence side in that we're completing some of the due diligence for the buyer."

Wilkins says the new Consign & Design program targets "very exclusive properties," which he describes as being "near water," difficult to duplicate, or "of beautiful nature."

In other words, the service is most suited for land parcels that scream "location, location, location," which was exactly the case for a North Shore homeowner last year who came to Orren Pickell with a piece of real estate that just wasn't selling.

"It had a ravine and limited access to the beach. But the home on it was definitely a teardown and had been on the market a year," Wilkins says. "We go beyond the possibilities of what's standing to what could be standing. We created a coastal design and marketed that design with that particular location, and it sold."

As he speaks Wilkins is on the site of the latest Consign & Design project on Chicago's Gold Coast, a grand old mansion that had been turned into a four flat and is being converted by Orren Pickell back into a single-family home.

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erty, but the house that's on it is either a tear-down or a complete remodel, it's difficult for someone to see it for what it could be. Walking into this Astor Street property, it's very difficult to see how this could be my life," he explains.

"By using design and thinking forward, the seller is doing due diligence for the buyers. Besides doing the design, we put budgets in. With great design and a good budget, we'll sell this property."

Now comes the burning question: How much does all this cost, and who pays for it?

While the execution is different, the Consign & Design program works much like a home-staging service — the investment is on the part of the seller, in the hopes of turning the property for "top dollar." In the case of a professional decorator or "stager," costs can range from consultation only to cosmetic facelifts and furniture placement. For the Orren Pickell program, the cost is in the blueprints and design concept.

Wilkins says the buyer has no obligations to Orren Pickell, though so far most have opted to continue with some variation of the designs they "bought" into.

Take, for example, the Lake Michigan property that inspired the Consign & Design program. The people who ended up purchasing the lakefront home ultimately did not use Orren Pickell's original design.

"They had more contemporary taste, but this (design) gave them the visual ability to understand what the floor plan and room count could be," Wilkins says. "The seller paid us a fee for our (original) design, and now the buyers are working on plans customized specifically for their family for this location."

Back in Glencoe, Eric Jacobs admits it was hard for him at first to relate to buyers without vision, those would-be naysayers who walk into a home and see exactly what's in front of them.

"When I go out and look for things to buy, I look for potential," he says. However, having gone through the *Designed to Sell* experience (which, less than one week later, had multiple showings and rave reviews), he's beginning to see the value of the strategy.

"If I were to put myself in the buyer's shoes and walk into this house today compared to what it looked like before, it looks amazing," Eric adds. "It does make a difference." ■

For more information about *Designed to Sell* and requirements to be on one of the upcoming shows, go to www.pietown.tv. For more information about Orren Pickell's Consign & Design program, go to www.pickellbuilders.com.