

The Transforming Touch

Meridith Baer's knack for turning undecorated, unloved houses into dream homes has led her company to be named the No. 1 home-staging business in Los Angeles.

By Christine Aebischer

When Meridith Baer walks into an empty house, she doesn't just look — she listens. She believes the bones of a house have a lot to say about how it wants to look, and her keen ear is tuned in from the moment she steps on the property, eager to reveal its true personality.

"When you go into an empty house, usually it will speak to you," says Baer. "The same way you get to know a person, you get to know a home.

"It lets you know if it wants to be masculine or feminine. If it's an older home, it may say, 'Freshen me up,' and if it's contemporary, it may say, 'I know I'm really modern, but I'd also like some Persian rugs.'"

The former screenwriter lets her imagination run wild as she envisions who will buy the house and how they will live in the space. Once the story is written in her mind, next comes the execution.

Baer achieves a comfortable style in each home by using white or beige furniture as a base to which she adds pops of color in the form of throws, decorative pillows, rugs and artwork. She finds one of the biggest decorating mistakes people make is having too much color in a room, which creates a demanding environment instead of a relaxing one.

With all of the spaces she stages, both indoor and outdoor, Baer thinks in terms of how each one will be used, so that when potential buyers view the home they don't have to ask, they just automatically see themselves living there.

"We want the home to feel like someone does really live there, or could live there, and that it feels real, not like a furniture store or a decorator's showroom," says Baer.

For someone who has perfected the craft of home staging, it's



INSET PHOTOS BY CAL BINGHAM

Santa Monica, California



Watermill, NY The Hamptons

hard to believe that Baer fell into the profession accidentally. While leasing a home in Brentwood, N.Y., she made some improvements that impressed the homeowner so much that he kicked her out in order to sell it. Left with about 250 potted plants and nowhere to live, Baer found refuge in a friend's house — a house that was on the market. She arranged her plants in the courtyard and brought in her own furniture to spruce up the interior, and within a couple of days the house sold for \$500,000 over the asking price.

Real estate agents from both sides asked if she would do the same for them, and soon Baer was in the staging profession, even if she didn't know it yet.

"I had never even heard of staging," says Baer. "It was a year or two doing it before I even realized it was a business."

When Baer first started out she was using her own furniture and living in the houses as she worked on them, for lack of her own place to live.

"I started asking anyone I bumped into if they would work for me," she recalls.

Now, Meridith Baer Home stages properties throughout the country, has worked with celebrities such as Madonna, Amy Adams and Gwyneth Paltrow, and has over 100,000 square feet of warehouse space to store furnishings. In 2013 alone, the company staged 830 homes and in 2014 was named the No. 1 home-staging business in Los Angeles by *Angeleno* magazine.

"I felt so proud," says Baer of the recognition. "This is my hometown, I was born here and I felt really honored by that."

She attributes her success to always saying "yes" and to hiring some fantastic people, including two of her top designers, Heide Ziecker and Linda Kennedy, as well as her nephew Brett Baer, who is now the company's co-president.

"[Brett] has really single-handedly made the business soar, kind of with me kicking and screaming," jokes Baer.

Even though her company has rapidly expanded in the past 15 years, Baer is still able to keep every home in her own vision by doing 90 percent of the buying herself. Each of her 18 designers has his or her unique style, but must work with what Baer has chosen.

"They each have their own flair, but there is a basic continuity in all of the houses staged," says Baer.

Looking to the future, Baer sees the company branching out to most of the other metropolitan areas. While she couldn't elaborate, she did note that "key alliances" are being formed with some of the big real estate companies, something she is finding very enjoyable. Baer would also love to break into the world of boutique hotels, where she believes the possibilities are infinite to create more home-like, welcoming spaces.

"I always love whatever job is on our plate," says Baer. "As a writer, I could work on a project and who knows what would happen ... but in the matter of a few days I can give [a house] a personality, life. It's very, very satisfying." **UH**



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