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What Home Staging Showed Me About Housing in America

Home staging is a privileged kind of precariousness.

I'm in a small bar across a set of train tracks from an artist residency in upstate New York between piles of mountains and tall trees. There is a pool table and cheap whiskey, pizza and Buck Hunter, and children run between games at dinnertime. The other residents are visual artists, and they drink more than I do because I do not drink as much as I once did—my stomach cramps and sometimes bleeds with more than one drink—and I awake at night often to doors slamming, laughs in the basement, karaoke nights bleeding from the studios to the houses where the walls rattle with cold and other people's bodies.

After over a year of mostly not drinking at all, eventually I nurse a rail rye while smoking cigarettes over a fire pit, eating potato chips for dinner. Tonight is one of the last nights before I return to my PhD program in Minneapolis, and we've gathered to say goodbye. Most of the residents are, like me, either from or live in the New York area. They know I grew up in Connecticut, where wealth clusters in thickets, nestles behind stone walls and long driveways.

One of the residents asks me where, exactly, I grew up, again. But where, they ask. *What town.*

The other residents look back at me, faces expectant, chins on palms. They want to know where in Connecticut, but what they mean is which Connecticut, which means—though nobody says this—*Are your parents rich?*

I explain that my parents were home stagers: From 1996 to 2001, my family moved every three to six months, from one difficult-to-sell house to another, where my parents paid a below-market rent to live in some of the richest towns in the country. This means we lived around rich people and took care of their homes.

Another resident asks if my parents used the money they saved from home staging to buy a house.

I pause and say no. I don't want to explain that my parents do not own a house anymore.

A woman I have only met once—Dutch, warm but direct in her demeanor—asks me if there is any place that I call home.

The place that I call home is a question I have not been asked. Where I grew up is a place that I pass through on Metro-North on my way from New York to New Haven: I sit backward on the train so that I can watch vinyl-sided row houses turn to the leafy nature preserves that cluster around houses which not even neighbors can see. The question of home feels big, and I don't know how to answer without sounding dramatic, and so I shrug, my mouth wincing my discomfort. *I suppose I don't.*

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I began my senior year of high school in a pale gray contemporary built into the shearing walls of a ridge in Weston, Connecticut. The house overlooked a small valley, carved into a cul-de-sac paved smooth and dark.

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This house was not my parents' first turn working as home managers with a home-staging (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/realestate/home-staging-new-york.html>) company that staffs houses on the market with “professionals” with “beautiful art and furnishings” but who need “temporary housing.” Home managers make sure a house is ready for sale: Repairs are made, shelves are dusted, topiaries trimmed, throw pillows positioned. Home managers are also invisible to potential buyers—when a realtor calls, everyone leaves the house as quickly and tidily as possible.

Home-staging franchises claim that staged homes (<https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-home-staging-1799076>) spend half the time on the market (<https://www.cnn.com/2016/04/14/setting-the-stage-to-sell-your-home.html>), and recent reporting suggests that home staging can increase the sale price of a home by 10 percent (<https://www.housingwire.com/articles/48938-how-much-can-home-staging-boost-your-sale-price/>). As some companies tell potential customers and franchisees, “Life sells homes.”

Life sells homes as long as there is no evidence of actual living, like a still life. In the morning, I curled my sweaters and teenage debris into the corners of my dresser drawers. I pressed at the piles with my hands—notebooks and magazines, a ribbed yellow silk-blend turtleneck, a royal purple cardigan—until the drawers shut, hiding the disarray within.

Outside of this house was always dark, a blue hour that lasted for an entire semester; it lingered at the French doors and hovered above the kitchen island and hung heavy with fog over the mawing garage door.

An African serval—a medium-sized wild cat, police and wildlife experts assumed escaped from some collector’s estate—was loose then, and when I remember the serval, I hope that it is still running in the quiet, moneyed dark between neighbors’ houses, silver and wild.

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During sophomore-year world history, the teacher explained housing in the Soviet Union to us using our town as a hypothetical case study: Weston has a lot of very nice houses, he said, really big houses. So big that they could house more than one family. (Years later, working at a leftist magazine, I learned the word for this: *expropriation*.)

There is sighing and headshaking at the unjust and hypothetical confiscation of media rooms and pool houses and au pair suites, in-law apartments and home offices and gyms. Poverty was talked about as though this was bad luck, or misfortune, as though poverty and wealth were not the result of the same process: exploitation.

My classmates didn’t see that their possessions were from what others did not have: that towns like Weston are rich because the people who live there are mostly white, because other towns near them are poor, because the people who live in other towns near them are not white.

Clinton was president and history was over and Mr. Kaufman was telling me something I already knew: That people in Weston are so rich when so many others have much less is wrong.

That year, the students in my class complained that gas was two dollars a gallon at the town center’s gas station and repeatedly claimed the average price of a house in the town where I lived in houses that were for sale: two million dollars.

The houses in Weston sold (and continue to sell) for a lot of money because the public schools are very good, my parents said. This was why they were home managers. But the houses in Weston sell for a lot of money because of what I hear called a *grandfather clause*, which I learn is really a tangle of zoning ordinances. One required that every house have a minimum of two acres

(<https://ecode360.com/13189351?highlight=acreage,minimum&searchId=3378265009555632#13189351>); others established historic districts (<https://ecode360.com/WE2073>) and prohibited any future commercial development in Weston, which already had a restaurant, a diner, a grocery store, two gas stations, a liquor store, a pharmacy, and a real estate broker's office.

The term *grandfather clause*

(<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/10/21/239081586/the-racial-history-of-the-grandfather-clause>) originated in the late nineteenth century to describe a set of laws that used largely race-neutral language to exclude Black people from voting. Calling Weston's zoning ordinances a *grandfather clause* wasn't entirely incorrect: the ostensibly nonracial language of these zoning ordinances kept Weston white.

Now I know that these ordinances are called *exclusionary zoning*, a way of making sure that the only people who lived in Weston were people who could afford to buy a house on two acres in Fairfield County, Connecticut. This means: people who are rich, and if not rich, the kind of "middle class" that can buy BMWs for teenagers. In 2010, 93 percent of the people who lived in Weston were, like my family, white

(<https://www.westonct.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=312>).

In 1989, the state legislature directed all towns to make 10 percent of new housing affordable.

Weston never did

(https://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/tax_the_suburbs_for_segregation/).

In 2006, Weston set a maximum size for new houses: eight thousand square feet.

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When one house sold, we moved to another. Though the exteriors of these homes varied, the insides always looked the same: a lot of greige (hailed as "the ultimate staging color"), washed spruces, and ecrus of 1990s J.Crew catalogues and *Martha Stewart Living*. The furniture was my parents'. The look was high American bougie, before *bougie* was a word, before I used *bougie* to explain *bourgeoisie* and capitalism to college freshman. My parents said they were broke—and I believed them; nearly every argument they had was inflected with money—but my mother had a good eye and nice things from years working as a hard-goods buyer for a department store.

Here is what my mother moved between each show home: a kitchen table that was carved from oak and oiled and probably described as "French peasant," slipper chairs covered in sunshine-yellow chinoiserie, not-quite-overstuffed couches shrewdly upholstered in dark Laura Ashley floral prints that hid stains, four children, Tiffany china, and a David Hockney print.

My mother hung *Still Life with Book* (1973) in hallways and foyers, in living areas, but the print looked best against yellow, in the sunlight. At the print's center was a vase shaped like the petals of thin flowers—cerulean slivers that bloom and peel like vellum and are a day from falling to the flat white of the table, their stems quick slashes of gouache across thick paper.

The book is *Bouvard & Pécuchet*, by Gustave Flaubert, about two men who move to the country and turn their house into a museum for their belongings. They are, like my parents were, frequently broke and forever preparing their home for view.

Home staging is a privileged kind of precariousness. Although the practice is widespread now, the housing is so temporary that it's only a solution for the homeowner. The narrow standards for home managers can exclude people too: high-end homes in fancy suburbs generally require a car; the houses are also very large and require time and work to keep shining and ready to show; nice furniture and art cost money.

What I learn is that there are many ways to be broke.

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The last show home was in 2008, nearly a decade after I'd graduated high school but before my parents divorced. The indoor pool was dirty and unusable. Outside, AstroTurf curdled and peeled from what once was a putting green on the back porch, grayed like driftwood. The house felt vacant and un-lived-in, which it was: after the owners were transferred to Zurich, the home-staging company assigned my parents and little brother to the house on the northernmost edge of Stamford, Connecticut, separated from the New York state line by a golf course.

What I learn is that there are many ways to be broke.

My parents were in the house in Stamford because they lost the house they moved into after I graduated from high school. "Lost the house" sounds easy, as though the five-bedroom colonial was left on top of a car roof, forgotten at a party where one has had too much to drink, an unfortunate accident that was half-chance, half-negligence, never to be found or had again but no blame or fault to be assigned. After seven years of extra mortgages and equity, of not picking up the phone or opening the mail, of lawsuits and mediation, my parents packed everything up into the sturdy boxes that are used to deliver cases of wine and liquor and moved my brother to the house in Stamford.

In the mornings, my mother drove my little brother three towns over to his old high school and the diner where he washed dishes. He began his junior year the way he began kindergarten, with a PO Box for an address.

When I remember this house, the massive rooms appear as part of a movie set—the hollow, angular walls slide apart without connecting, as though the house is unraveling, just like Lehman Brothers and AIG—and I see my parents, my siblings, and I all suspended, like dust in daylight.

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After I returned to Minneapolis from the residency in upstate New York, I became ill, the sickest I had been since 2008. When I emerged from the hospital, I went to the art-lending library of my university museum and flipped through a set of clanging metal racks and startled and reached for the blue watercolor before I knew why the print seemed familiar. I paid fifteen dollars and carried *Still Life with Book* (1973) home on the bus. I leaned the print against raw-pine utility shelving in my graduate-student apartment, daylight striking white and clean across the glass.

A year later, I cleaned the attic of the apartment where my mother now lives. I found tiny tubes of airline toothpaste she had saved since before the last show home. My mother, once ruthless in disposing of what was not needed, does not want to cull anything that she might use.

Now thirty-seven years old, I try to count the show homes where my parents lived, but there were too many. The houses collapse into a topography rather than an inventory, a typology of all the places from which we vanished whenever real estate agents told us they were on their way.

We lived in more than one house like the house in Stamford, where coyotes claimed the remaining family cat and the three-car garage was filled with everything that my family couldn't yet throw away or put in storage.

We lived in more than one house like the house in Wilton, which was old but rambling with new additions: a wing with a library with a mezzanine and an au pair apartment, large windows that rose from ceiling to floor for two stories, and a spiral staircase where my sister and I practiced dance moves we learned from Christopher Walken in the video for "Weapon of Choice."

When I think of all the houses, there is a part where I lose their geography: In one garage, I prepare and photograph materials for my college applications; in the family room, I apply for college; I sleep in a room that is the office or the guest room; I don't remember the upstairs in this house at all, though I know that there was an upstairs, that my parents and sisters and brother lived in these rooms. Sometimes, all of the show homes become one home, and the house with a mezzanine for dancing like Christopher Walken has a backyard that is a series of terraced gardens that does not end, the flowers and vegetables reach toward an orchard on the horizon and no neighbors can see us, and my sisters and brother and I pitch lacrosse balls at each other, and in this house, the sun is always falling like hay through the bay windows, dappling the wide-planked wood floors.



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Alexis Zanghi is a writer based in Minneapolis. Her work has been published by the Walker Art Center, Full Stop, the Collagist, the Los Angeles Review of Books, the Point, the Millions, Current Affairs, Jacobin, CityLab, and the Atlantic. She has been awarded residencies and grants by Fulbright, the Wassaic Project, the Minnesota State Arts Board, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, where she earned an MFA in fiction. She is currently doing a PhD in the department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at UMN.
