

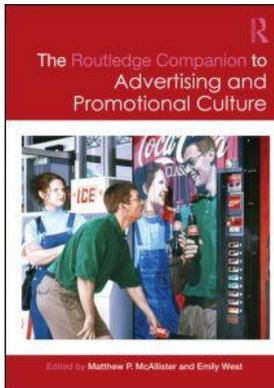
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PROPERTY PORN: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING

Jacqueline Botterill

The recent economic crisis has taught many lessons about the market economy but perhaps the most important was the simple recognition that interest in owning a home became the engine of economic growth in the consumer economy. In my book *Consumer Culture and Personal Finance* (2010), I note that this shift in home ownership was aided by the expansion of personal credit as financial organizations promoted innovative mortgages, bank loans, and credit cards to the mass market. So too did the neoliberal political agendas that began in the 1980s support home ownership. Governments enacted policies that provided tax breaks for renovations, and established savings and insurance schemes to make home ownership less risky and more accessible. Tax concessions on mortgage interest payments were offered in the United States and the United Kingdom. Calls to democratize home ownership coupled with the new more liberal financial instruments brought groups previously excluded from bank financing—the young, the economically disadvantaged, and those with poor credit ratings—into the fold of mortgages. Subprime lenders covered their risks with higher interest rates. With an eye to growth, urban planners encouraged construction forms which extended private ownership of houses and apartments, while public investment in social and cooperative housing diminished. Profound changes in home tenure patterns took place between 1900 and 2000 as home ownership rose from 10 percent to 70 percent in Britain, the United States, and Canada.

Coupled with mortgages, credit card debt helped to fund a spin-off wave of economic activity as hardware chains expanded to meet the demand for do-it-yourself home renovation and up-grading; home furnishings suppliers capitalized on the changing fashion cycles in home décor; and department stores extended their offerings of house and garden wares, appliances, lighting, and wall décor. Consumer debt rose to unprecedented levels as people bought, renovated, and decorated homes. Despite repayment schedules that harnessed incomes for more than a lifetime, the potential rewards of home ownership made shouldering debt appear a shrewd investment. Over 3 million foreclosures later, this credit-led boom became the subject of much economic hand-wringing. Yet

the promotional infrastructure that underwrote this expansion in private home ownership remains little understood.

The growing interest in owning, maintaining, and selling homes that emerged in the early twenty-first-century property boom was accompanied by a promotional phenomenon which journalistic commentators, covering the public's growing fascination with property media, called "property porn." By 2005, looking and talking about the property market had become so commonplace that the term "property porn" achieved an entry in the Collins dictionary (About Property 2005). Marjorie Garber (2001) explains the rise of property porn by highlighting how home ownership had become central to consumer lifestyle. New York dinner party conversations are more likely to be taken up with the outrageous sum required to purchase a derelict Brooklyn brownstone than sexual politics or personal gossip. While everyone can look at property images on the Internet, Garber notes that yuppies have a particular penchant for it. Instead of Sunday afternoons in the park, some find equal pleasure in the act of snooping around open houses or searching online realty sites, making the active fantasizing about home ownership a common practice:

Real estate today has become a form of yuppie pornography. . . . Upwardly mobile middle-aged professionals scan real estate ads with the same vague prurience with which they scan personal ads, not with the intention of pursuing anything, exactly, but for the pleasure of enjoying the fantasy such ads represent.

(Garber 2001: 3)

Douglas Holt (1998) also acknowledges the centrality of property in late modern society when he, replicating Bourdieu's (1984) study of processes of distinction in America, stresses that owning and decorating the home now constitute a field of bourgeois cultural capital comparable to the fine and performing arts in late 1960s France. Talking and fantasizing about home ownership have become widespread in the consumer culture.

In what follows I explore online realty advertising as a way of unpacking the promotional dynamics underwriting this fascination with home ownership. For, as the term "property porn" suggests, realty advertising is not just a stand-alone marketing discourse but both a revenue stream and a galvanizing force within the wider mediated marketplace (Leiss et al. 2005). Property advertising intensified in the 1990s, migrating from shop windows and print into new media. Realtors joined forces with photographers and stagers consolidating particular representations of the home. In keeping with Celia Lury (2010), I argue that these cultural intermediaries, while focusing on the task of circulating property, also provide a resource for the creative construction and maintenance of individual and social identities.

Advertisers' efforts dovetail with the wider system of property media, which since the 1980s has found means for addressing and cultivating an audience appetite for information about home decorating, gardening, and DIY (Rosenberg 2011). Parallel with the burgeoning fashion and foodie magazines, *Metropolitan Home* became a yuppie property bible, to be joined by *Romantic Homes*, *Traditional Home* and *Country Home*. The esteemed *Architectural Digest* went mainstream, while in the 1990s hybrid publications such as *Wallpaper* and *Elle Déco* blended fashion and home seamlessly. In 1994, Home and Garden Television, a specialty channel that offered a vast array of housing-related programs 24 hours a day, entered popular culture.

Home and Garden Television attracts an audience with a median household income of \$70,907, well above the average household income which in 2009 was \$50,000. Much of the programming is aspirational, skewed towards a middle-class habitus and above. *MTV Cribs* and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* allow audiences to peep into the homes of the celebrated and wealthy. On the Internet, Martha Stewart posts slide shows of her estates, while Dwelling Gawker offers a fresh batch of housing images drawn daily from the hundreds of independent blogs devoted to home representations. Media producers celebrate the ability of home and gardening programming to attract audiences for sale to advertisers. The sector offers a plethora of diverse programming because, often serving as a product placement vehicle, it is cheap to produce. Men and women find programming to satisfy their tastes. Together real estate advertising and the expanded property media underline the message that the good life is to be found in owning and decorating a home.

Realtors have enthusiastically welcomed property media. Interviewing London real estate agents, Young found universal praise for the home décor programming because it stressed the importance of maintaining the home to a high aesthetic standard (2004: 7–8). Narratives often stress the importance of creating a home that reflects the inhabitants' taste. The programs equate correct aesthetic design with higher property values. The programming frames the house as the perfect stage for showcasing personal goods and lifestyles. According to J. Collins (2002), "The good design chain store has made home-as-self possible financially, while the design advice industry has made it a foregone conclusion as a mentality" (184).

Approach

The analysis of online property advertising is offered as a key to interpreting some aspects of the promotional dynamics of property porn. The analysis is based upon 600 real estate website resale property profiles, drawn between May and December 2010, and divided into 200 profiles drawn from major urban centers: London, New York, and Toronto. The London sample was drawn from Foxtons, the New York from Truli, and the Toronto sample from Multi Listing Service (MLS). The sample is not representative, but purposive. These intensive property markets are at the forefront of innovating and popularizing promotional techniques. I was interested in exploring how advertisers capture the unique political structures, immigration patterns, historical and cultural traits, climate, and geography of the cities. I sought to explore the range of lifestyles represented in the images.

Property images became the object of study because their expansiveness and aesthetics mark a significant shift in the history of property advertising. To explore whether price alters depictions, I used regional demographics, including income, education, and property price, to divide the sample for each city into two high-income neighborhoods, two middle-income, and two lower-income. The approach blended content analysis, to ensure review of the widest range of images possible, with textual analysis, to interpret meanings lost in the tyranny of tallying. A basic image analysis also guided my interpretation procedures, leading to a systematic exploration of lighting, angles, focal points, iconography, and arrangement within the frame (Deacon et al. 2007). Seeking to provide interpretations with depth, I drew theoretical inspiration from Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic spaces, *The Poetics of Space* (1994).

Although Bachelard's concern is with homes in general, not property advertising, his

work made me appreciate domestic spaces in a rigorous way. What I found particularly useful was how through his analysis of literary representations Bachelard pulled together experiences such as intimacy, privacy, safety, and selfhood with home spaces—corners, upper and lower levels, nooks, stairs, entry ways. For example, he questions why Western culture feels general unease towards basements, crawl spaces, and the subterranean spaces, yet not other spaces of the home. His interest in the archetypes of space and human experience seems dated in the context of contemporary theory and reflects the historical moment, cultural tendencies, and biases of the author; still his careful attention to the role of home spaces and the imagination sensitized me to domestic space nuances which opened up my analysis of property advertising.

Real Estate Advertising

Property is not well represented in the advertising literature, and available research too often theorizes with minimal reference to actual property ads (Bourdieu 2000/2005; Ellis 1993; Garber 2001). Two recent studies of condominium advertising are exceptions. Costello (2005) documented a condominium development shaped and promoted in relation to consumer research. Before the ground was broken, the realtor undertook surveys and focus groups. The research was translated into a stable target consumer. Realtors believed that potential condo dwellers viewed the home as part of “a particular lifestyle and consumption pattern” (Costello 2005: 140). Potential dwellers were described as “quite fussy,” interested in good finishes and fixtures, storage space, and parking, and critical about kitchens (140). In response designers, realtors, and advertisers highlighted the amenities of the high-rise complex, the beauty of the kitchens, and the spaciousness of the parking. The study demonstrates how advertisers use a research cycle to mobilize existing audience desires.

In a New Zealand study, D. Collins and Kearns (2008) focus on the real estate images employed to sell coastal condo developments. The ads consistently represent a fable seaside devoid of people. Collins and Kearns (2008) argue that this promotes “a way of seeing the coastal landscape that is consistent with the ideology of enclosure” and invites people to purchase property as a means of cocooning and escaping from others (2914). They draw attention to the systemic distortion in property advertising, notably the exclusion of humanity. The photorealism of the ads invites viewers to “see the property for ourselves,” but Collins and Kearns unravel the construction and promotional intentions that structure the ads.

A Choir of Realtors

Realtors throughout their history have prided themselves on marshalling the public’s attention towards property ownership. The role of realtors (marketers of private property), or estate agents as they are known in Britain, grew in the twentieth century as they professionalized and accredited themselves to distinguish their exclusive rights to sell property. Realtor associations, such as the National Association of Realtors (NAR) in the United States and the National Association of Estate Agents in the United Kingdom, provided a collective voice. NAR started in 1908 with 1,646 members and by 2004 boasted over 1 million (McCormick 2011). Dedicated to helping members “become more profitable and successful,” NAR lobbies governments to ensure new policies favor its members’ commercial freedoms (NAR 2011). NAR might also be understood to

contribute to the standardization of selling practices, because the association circulates a common base of research, education, and advice to members. Innovations and tips spread through realtor networks that stretch across the English-speaking world.

Keen to find new ways to communicate with potential buyers, realtors favor new communication technology. In the early twentieth century realtors tested a variety of formats distributed through word of mouth, outdoor signs, and newspaper classified sections. They developed an evocative language—“charming,” “spacious,” “well proportioned,” “modernized”—to highlight property features and suggest uses. Over time they learned that prospective buyers frequently reject realtors’ sales pitches as over-the-top hyperbole, hence realtors’ early embrace of photography. Compared to agents’ flowery sales pitches, photographs, using Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1992) argot, are more iconic, reflecting a greater likeness or similarity to their object. Images thus ease consumer skepticism. Still, early-twentieth-century photography was costly, leading realtors to commission images only for a selective number of properties. The photos remained in real estate offices, revealed to potential buyers only. By the 1960s photographic techniques had advanced to a state that witnessed realtors post glossy images on their storefront windows, where they became available to the general public. The ability to window-shop brought property images into the arena of popular culture. By 1970, realtors were circulating shelter magazines containing glossy images of the inside and outside of the home, but print remained expensive and difficult to update, with a limited distribution range. Home marketing was still largely limited to property tours.

The arrival of Internet databases in the 1990s solved these problems, at the same time as it introduced new ones. Realtors accustomed to the intimacy of property touring did not see themselves as photographers or visual stylists, perplexed towards a medium that privileged aesthetic display (Young 2004). Photographers unable to make a living in art, or secure employment in fashion or other commercial sectors, thus found they could ply their trade in the property market. Stagers entered the promotional process, proclaiming a specialized talent for arranging homes for photography. Hired for up to \$50,000 to arrange a single home, sales figures suggested that artful attention to constructing *mise-en-scène* was worth the investment (Garber 2001: 22).

Prospective buyers flocked to the real estate sites attracted to the large number of easily accessible profiles, search facilities, and ability to view property away from the sales pitches of estate agents. In 2008, “Nearly 40 percent of Brits regularly surf[ed] the web looking for property and more than one in ten (14 percent) property website users admitted to spending more than an hour a week searching for homes online” (Wiggin 2008). Nearly nine in ten homebuyers used the Internet as an information source, and one in three found a property on the Internet. Viewers also reported that they visited the sites to consider their next home (NAR 2008). Most intriguing is the finding that up to a quarter of the website visits were people who wanted simply to fantasize about home ownership. The Internet has assembled a large audience who use property images in a variety of ways.

Looking at Property

Online databases contain extensive images of the home. In the research corpus, single images rarely appear, and do so primarily in relation to “fixer-uppers,” too downtrodden to represent visually. Typically six or nine images compose a property profile, with a maximum of 15 images. There is no difference in the number of images presented to sell

cheaper or more expensive homes. Yet different cities lead with different profile images: Toronto sellers typically open with exterior shots of the building, while London and New York real estate agents begin their visual tours in reception or living rooms. New York realtors experiment the most, posting the widest variety of opening images. Short of these differences, the property advertising of the three cities uses remarkably similar photographic conventions. Photographers strongly favor the realist, human scale of eye-level shots in 81 percent of their images. Privileging wide angles they strive to capture as much of the room as possible in one frame. The sense of space allows the eye to enter the center of the room, which Bachelard (1994) understood as “a major zone of protection” (31). Low-angle shots appear from time to time to highlight the grand stature of the exterior building. Looking up in awe is invited outside, never inside the home. A small number of London profiles employ a diagonal shot to give a few opulent abodes a sense of eccentricity.

Windows serve as frequent focal points, but their purpose is to frame the star attraction: light. Only two night shots, both in Toronto, appear in 600 profiles. Photographers’ preference for shooting on sunny days may relate not simply to an interest in natural lighting, but also to the positive connotations of sun. Many photos attempt to construct an aura: rays of light beam down exploding into radiating rainbow-colored stars that kiss strategically placed objects. Curtains, if they appear at all, are never drawn together. Flicked-on interior lights further emphasize luminosity. Dark corners simply do not appear. Besides privileging the visual, light’s aesthetic-moral connotation, according to Bachelard, suggests openness, purity, and reason; darkness signals the unaccountable and serves as an obstacle to the modern eye’s interest in seeing and believing. Chaos, dirt, clutter, and deception cleave to the meaning of shadows; hence, shadows are aestheticized into artful chiaroscuro effects that dramatically pattern floors, creating a sense of volume out of contrast. Realtors rarely post depictions of hallways and passages because they are narrow, shadowed, and confining. The lower regions of the house or apartment, including the basement, garage, or parking lot, also fail to make the profile cut.

Realtors have learned that women prefer to view hyper-hygienic properties, for cleanliness and order seem to negate daydreams of housekeeping. Unlike retail goods, property cannot be wrapped in plastic to signify its commodity status; thus it is wrapped in cleanliness and bathed in light to suggest newness. Studies support the point that people more warmly receive clean spaces. Realtors believe that viewers interpret home cleanliness as a sign that “someone good lives here” (Young 2004: 9). Light conveys honest cleanliness because it reveals every mark or scuff (Harris and Sachau 2005). In all images, the hardware shines as brilliantly as the hardwood floors. The surfaces shimmer with the radiance of a young woman’s face. Yet few actually live in this displayed level of cleanliness, for it is impossible to maintain in everyday life without full-time hired help or a stay-at-home spouse.

Light is also a powerful tool for deception. Light can homogenize and upscale material to a middle-class standing by transforming the cheap and ugly into the glowing and magnificent. Good lighting can modulate texture, making the laminate countertop appear granite, the parquet floor, hardwood. Light can create a sense of non-existent space, which as one realtor notes is an important selling feature: “We tell them [the vendor] to make it look more spacey [sic], airy . . . maybe laminate flooring and mirrors, keep the curtains drawn [back]. It all helps to make it look more spacey” (Young 2004: 8–9). Realtors attempt to extend space further through crude post-production

techniques. Roughly 40 percent of the images are stretched, with New York realtors most guilty of this practice.

Light is also employed to block out the outside world. The Toronto and particularly the London images frequently overexpose the windows, effectively barring the external view. The outside appears as a whiteout. Bachelard (1994) would suggest that this negation of the external world serves to boost the intensity, intimacy, and dreaminess of interior life. English ideals of privacy, which conceive of the home as “an isolated world” for family and individual privacy, may be reflected in these images (Rybczynski 1987: 108). New York profiles, by way of contrast, not only enable but encourage window views.

London property images also uniquely valorize nature by depicting open windows and terrace doors, allowing a view of lush greenery instead of urban concrete. Open windows also visually signify fresh air. This practice may find its roots in old Victorian moral codes, which insisted upon wholesome, outdoor physical activity as a balm against physical and moral decay. London’s many green spaces are part of this belief in the curative properties of nature. According to Rybczynski (1987), “They [Victorians] seem to have authentically enjoyed the bracing feeling of the outdoors, even inside their homes” (135). London profiles also contain many more indoor plants. Chevalier’s (1998) ethnographic study of London homes noted the porous boundary designed between London home interiors and gardens. London photographers make valiant efforts to frame their exterior shots, moving far from the house to capture a branch of green from a tree across the street. On the other hand, Toronto profiles, as with New York, depict windows and doors firmly shut.

The New York profiles seem more intent upon relaying a sense of security in their frequent reference to the buildings’ expansive front-desk check-in points. Bars on the windows stand as stark reminders of city living in ground-floor apartments. Instead of nature, New York realtors attempt to catch their readers’ imaginations with modern art and the Manhattan skyline. Realtors appear to believe that New Yorkers are refreshed by modern art, which they reference far more incessantly than greenery. The depictions of New York apartments celebrate the abstraction of space and proportion, not the bucolic. The Manhattan skyline and New York street signs appear more often than flower bouquets or potted plants. London estate agents rarely invoke the city as a whole, focusing instead on the singularity and intimacy of the property. Toronto profiles with their emphasis on home exteriors seem to privilege neighborhoods, which have been central to the historical development of this city.

White

The wall colors displayed in all three cities’ profiles are, almost without exception, white, off-white, or beige. Wood is by far the preferred flooring. Regardless of property price, white and wood are staples. There are many explanations and supporting evidence of a wide-scale white paint phenomenon. Economists use sales of titanium dioxide, the compound which makes white paint white, as a sign of economic health (Waldie 2009). Young (2004) suggests that neutrality is a “culturally constructed fashion” favored by realtors (7–8). Wigley (1995) explains neutrality as the triumph of modernism’s break from traditional architecture. According to Wigley (1995), for Le Corbusier, who popularized white in his modernist architecture of the 1920s, “the neutrality of white is understood as a neutrality from space itself” (217). In other words, white does not create space so much as it “obliterates a sense of space” (217).

Agents embrace neutrality for many pragmatic selling reasons. Color—lively, gendered, and distinguishable—is a gamble. The odds are higher that color will divide opinion and taste. White is least offensive. Color signifies another’s territory more than white, for it links to personal statement and thus threatens to stop viewers taking imaginative possession of the property. Viewers are thought to react negatively to references to styles they feel are tired. Color—more subject to the whims of fashion—dates quickly. Some realtors believe viewers interpret dated colors as an owner’s failure to “look after” the property. Neutral surfaces on the other hand suggest a lack of wear and thus achieve a state of timelessness. As with shadows, color and pattern also too easily align with the thought of potential refuges for dirt and stains, while white is associated with cleanliness. Finally, white is coveted for its ability to stimulate viewers’ imaginations. White serves as a canvas upon which viewers can imagine painting their lifestyles. As Young’s interviews with realtors suggest, white paint connotes a space that invites viewers to place their goods and accessories in it (2004: 13).

Adding Life to the Room

The importance of space in the property market is beyond question. Realtors show space and thus have come to view clutter as a sales obstacle. Exactly how many objects define clutter is a complex equation, subject to historical change and class, ethnic, gender, age, and personal preference. Given the number of objects in the images it appears that realtors conform to the middle-class mantra: less is more. Sparseness may also be the rule because objects have an erotic life carrying their current owner’s taste. By removing objects from the room, realtors reduce potential taste clashes and diminish the trace of other people’s ownership. Overly stark rooms initiate their own set of problems, however, because they provide the eye with no place to rest. Thus the images almost always include a few meaningful objects, noteworthy as a result of their frequent appearance in all profiles.

Realtors believe photographic iconography performs several important sales functions. Props in a room provide points of interest and cues for understanding the meaning and use of the room. Objects also connote a homey atmosphere; thus their presence helps audiences to avoid reading the space as a characterless hotel. Objects provide signs of habitation to initiate daydreams. Computers appear sporadically, but stagers always associate them with leisure instead of work. Home offices rarely appear, but attention is lavished on living rooms. Universally sparse, the few objects stagers allow to remain are aesthetically laid out to stress maximized living room flow-through. Like a neat résumé, plenty of white space surrounds each object. The furniture is neutral: the influence of IKEA-inspired modernism clear in all city profiles. Color gains entry via area rugs, pillows, art, and flowers—all easily removed should the viewer prefer something else. Red area rugs, reflecting some form of classical Persian patterning, endlessly appear. Art is also common: New York stagers hang modern art and position sculpture, while the Toronto and London profiles depict more traditional art and photography. Flowers repeatedly appear in Toronto and London but not New York living rooms. London and New York profiles showcase these cities’ publishing roots, depicting books more often. In general, however, books appear less than flat-screen televisions, DVDs, and recorded music. Musical instruments, particularly guitars and pianos, appear far more in London profiles than those of New York or Toronto.

“Agents believe that kitchens and bathrooms are particularly important for a sale” (Young 2004: 11). Open-format kitchens, found in 40 percent of the 600 profiles, appear

to be chasing out galley kitchens and dining rooms. New York leads the way in presenting the most open kitchens. Cooking remains a necessary and often cherished activity, but being sequestered in the kitchen as the scullery maid to family and guest is no longer welcome. Dining rooms, too, now seem overly formal and labor-intensive to suit current taste. Kitchens have become more open, allowing for the display of culinary skills and techniques in front of onlookers and guests. The removal of the walls that separate the kitchen and living area privileges exposure of light and space. Stagers appear to permit a greater number of objects to appear in kitchens and bathrooms. A fruit bowl—homage to freshness, health, and aesthetic heritage in still-life painting—is reproduced endlessly in all city profiles. The table is sometimes set, allowing viewers a launching pad to imagine a wonderful home-cooked meal. Coveted brand-name appliances are mentioned in property descriptions and visualized in pictures. New York and Toronto images, in particular, make frequent reference to notably middle-class foodstuffs: Maldon salt, cappuccino makers, wine bottles, ornate spice racks, bottles of olive oil, pasta, and cocktail shakers. Bathrooms, if they appear, are polished to an extraordinary glow. Toronto and London realtors often dress the bathroom with a shower curtain and a host of soaps, oils, creams, and fluffy towels. New York stagers make the most consistent and elaborate efforts to present the bathroom as a place for pampering and self-purification.

No Man's Land

Real estate professionals insist that photographs remove references to owners to facilitate the viewers' ability to read themselves into the space. The National Association of Estate Agents explicitly states that potential buyers can only imagine themselves inhabiting a home if it is stripped of references of the owner (Young 2004: 14). The chief editor of *Architectural Digest*, the gold standard of property photography, reiterates the point: "When readers look at an interior part of the enjoyment is actively projecting themselves into it" (17). The 600 profiles reviewed conform strictly to the anti-person rule. People appear only by accident: someone caught in the flash of the camera, or an arm of someone banished to the exterior of the house while the photo is taken, or caught in the reflection of a mirror. In the New York profiles people appear on sidewalks in front of the building, in the gym, garden, or lobby, but serve as generic crowds instead of unique individuals. Representations of people are associated with public, not private, spaces. Toronto and London profiles, perhaps owing to lingering concerns about privacy, sweep away all traces of human occupation.

None of the profiles privilege family. Children's indexes—toys, drawings, color—fail to enter the realtors' frame in a significant way. Stagers even dismiss or obscure family photos. Online property images dedicate themselves to the individuals, not kin. Photographers banish all living creatures. No dog bowls, cat flaps, birdcages, or fish tanks appear in the 600 profiles, despite American Animal Food Manufactures estimating that roughly 62 percent of people house a domestic pet (American Pet Products Association, 2011). For many, animals define domesticity. However, creatures can be a troubling category. A house dominated with animals can cease to signify home, tipping into the category of zoo or barn (Krasner 2010). Animals tread across the boundary between nature and civilization too readily; thus even the nature-loving London estate agents reject them. Animals cleave to connotations of fleas, potential disease, allergies, bedlam, and dirt. They would disrupt the smooth circulation of the home through the marketplace; hence the images make a clear separation between animal home and property.

Discussion

The promotional images employed to sell properties in London, Toronto, and New York reveal slightly different ideals of domesticity. London realtors, besides reflecting unique architectural patterns and materials, stress seclusion in nature. Their photographers take great care to mask the social world outside the home while interweaving it with nature. The London profiles include a greater proportion of indoor plants and flowers, views of greenery, open doorways, and windows to simulate access to fresh air. Realtors in Toronto on the other hand fixate upon the exterior of the property, inviting audiences to gaze upon the quality of the building and surrounding streetscape or neighborhood. New York property advertising places the glass, concrete, and shining lights of the Manhattan skyline at the forefront while making little attempt to mask the prying gaze of nearby neighbors.

Yet the similarities in these promotional images are more striking than the differences. There is negligible variation in the numbers of pictures displayed, the use of neutral colors, lighting, and camera angles, or the types of props employed. Realty photography produces a middle-class *mise-en-scène*: light is employed to improve cheap building materials to a middle-class standing. Small rooms are stretched to create the visual illusion of space. Neither the price nor the area in which the property resides alters the photographers' reliance on these standard promotional motifs. In all three cities, the emphasis is on white walls, with the accent on the visual harmony and proportion of the space filled with a uniform set of props—the Afghan rugs, hardwood floors, art, gourmet cooking utensils, and food. The flowers, fruit bowls, and guitars—the classic icons of the still life—speak to a bourgeois sensibility one finds in *Architectural Digest* and other home and garden magazines. These promotional images of the home as commodity reinforce a bourgeois habitus. Through a process of trial and error realtors, photographers, and stagers have boiled down a set of techniques of visualization that accelerate date of sale. Competition in the housing market appears to foster homogenization rather than innovation and diversity of lifestyle depictions, as realtors turn to tried and true, known, and easily applied methods.

Conclusion

When I first set out to study realtors' visualization of the home I anticipated documenting a variety of ways of living. After all, homes are social spaces, lodged in the dialogue of family, social standing, and class. Studies have documented that, even after a brief look inside a home, participants can predict, with considerable accuracy, the owner's social background and personality (Altman 1975; Becker and Coniglio 1975; Brown 1987; Sadalla, Burroughs, and Staplin 1980). And yet these promotional images of the home as commodity erase traces of humans actually living in them. Photographers employ lighting and framing that seek to cover the marks of others, their nicks and the wear and tear of time. As a commodity, the home appears as an empty shell waiting for life to take residence. It is as if selling is a divestment ritual—a social practice that empties an object of the claim and meanings imposed on it by a prior owner or user. The removal of dirt, clutter, and bold colors may be understood as techniques for minimizing idiosyncrasy to aid viewers' smooth imaginative passage into the property. Divestment rituals may be particularly important in this commodity sector precisely because domestic spaces resonate with profound human experiences including intimacy, aesthetics, and territoriality (McCracken 1988).

Realtors pour into the “depersonalized” spaces a visualized aesthetic of the bourgeois habitus. The promotional home is not simply filled with middle-class *objets d’art*, but framed for viewers’ lifestyle daydreaming. The invitation to imagine the home first and foremost as an arena for self-expression and display is in keeping with the idea of the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone 2007), which has been traced back to bohemian subcultures, but now recognized as firmly rooted in the mainstream of the consumer culture (Wilson 1999; Zukin 2004). The idea of the home as a blank slate for writing lifestyle narratives not only has improved the circulation of property but is in no way oppositional to the health of the expansive home goods and services market. Property has become a central hub within US, UK, and Canadian consumer economies and attendant promotional systems.

The property porn phenomenon acknowledges that people spend time not simply as consumers in the late modern market, but as audiences. The scenes of property promotion lack diversity, but the bourgeois habitus realtors repeatedly offer audiences is seemingly open to diverse musings owing to its depersonalized invitation to self-express and self-transform through the creative activity of making a home. Online property advertising offers audiences the chance to flirt with ideas of possession, imagine home accessorizing as an identity project, and inhabit a space culturally marked as desirous. In so doing, it contributes to the consumer economy and the aspirational processes of daydreaming and individual and social identity formation. The norms reflected in promotional images represent realtors’ attempts to accelerate and stabilize commodity circulation to aid the health of property speculation. The social byproduct of this sales mission, according to Garber (2001), is neglected. While critical discussion surrounds fixations on sex, food, or money, fascination with property, despite its bankrupt promises, continues to be openly supported and encouraged by this promotional discourse.

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