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# LUXXX

The joy of fashion

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# Curtains up!

KATRINA BURROUGHS meets the stylists whose theatrical refashioning of a home can make or break a sale

**AT THE VERY** pinnacle of the property market, little extras like a helipad, a padel court, a meditation room and a dog spa can be helpful in luring a prospective buyer. But often they're not quite enough to close the deal. Sometimes people want to know what it might be like to live in a house: what it smells like, what it feels like. They want to be seduced – as if they're walking into a glamorous stage set in which they could see themselves living.

Which is where a home stager comes in: someone employed to create that magical setting filled with props to make them feel at home.

Since they founded their home-staging company Burbeck in 2013, the brothers Jack and Alex Willcocks have worked on more than £2.7 billion worth of property – with 85 per cent of it going under offer within four weeks. One of their Chelsea projects sold on first viewing for over the asking price, fetching £3.3 million; a Queen's Gate Terrace development marketed at £10 million achieved its asking price and got offers within the first week. They know they have succeeded, Alex says, when they "create an interior where somebody feels as if they could just turn up with their suitcases. Then the job's done."

Their success, they surmise, is going for a look that is timeless rather than trendy: quality upholstery, sculptural occasional tables, tactile surfaces and muted colours, costing from £5,000 to £100,000, depending on the location and size of the project. While most projects have been for developers and agents, last year they launched a furniture collection, including their bestselling £1,195 Thornhill dressing table, so homeowners can mimic their makeovers.

Becky Fatemi, an executive partner at Sotheby's International Realty, says staged homes in London sell up to 60 per cent faster, with prices up to 10 to 12 per cent higher. In prime areas such as Mayfair, Belgravia and Kensington, staging often brings offers much closer to or even above asking price. The interior design studio Angel O'Donnell is often called in to help dress projects; one of its most recent was at the OWO development in Whitehall, whose first show residence sold fully furnished for £14 million two days after launch. So far its designs have helped to sell more than £100 million of high-end property in prime central London.

However, what wows in Whitehall will not impress the English country house buyer – in fact, too much metropolitan gloss can be a turn-off, says Lindsay Cuthill, the former head of country houses at Savills and the co-founder of Blue Book Agency. He calls in Kelling Designs when he needs staging services; the studio



An apartment styled by Angel O'Donnell at the OWO development in London

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styles interiors using rented furnishings (costing about £4,000 a month for a four-bedroom house).

Cuthill says: "Five or ten years ago, hardly anyone staged a Georgian rectory or a thatched farmhouse. Now it's becoming increasingly thought about – especially with a wave of buyers coming to the countryside from the city or other countries." However, he warns: "You don't parachute in sleek designer furniture to make a Cotswold manor look like a Knightsbridge penthouse; it jars with the setting. People buy country houses for their charm, their atmosphere and their history. They want to sense the generations who've lived there, the rhythm of rural life and character that can't be faked."

His tips for selling a grand old pile? "We call it 'posh clutter' – the details that give it soul. A stack of old Country Life magazines, wellies by the back door, a Barbour hanging on a peg can all add authenticity."

But there's a fine line between character and chaos, he adds – dusty souvenirs or a bare bulb awaiting a lampshade. "Sometimes that means being quite firm with clients. We'll say, 'That dog bed has to go!'"

As well as making houses appealing to the eye, stagers often go a step further by appealing to multiple senses. "Think the soft touch of a cashmere throw, the scent of fresh flowers or a Diptyque candle, and the sound of classical background music," the London-based designer Philippa Thorp says. Unpleasant sounds can be a deal-breaker. "Recently, one of my clients was put off buying a property simply because she could faintly hear the road noise. In this case, the estate agent should have turned on the garden fountain for a bit of pleasant background white noise."

[burbeckinteriors.com](http://burbeckinteriors.com); [angelodonnell.com](http://angelodonnell.com); [kellingdesigns.com](http://kellingdesigns.com); [thorp.co.uk](http://thorp.co.uk)