



MICHELLE BURTON

TWENTY YEARS AGO, SWITCHED-ON CAPITAL CITY VENDORS BEGAN EMBRACING PROFESSIONAL STYLING TO HELP SELL THEIR HOMES. NOW THE PRACTICE IS BECOMING POPULAR HERE. SUSIE CHATS WITH A LOCAL STYLING SPECIALIST.



The houses are for sale. You attend open-for-inspections and, suddenly questioning your own housekeeping standards, wonder how these families could possibly live in such a perfect, tidy manner; all have such remarkable good taste, and access to homewares you've never seen in the stores.

In fact, most don't. Chances are they've contracted a professional stylist to put the best face on their property (not to mention a team of cleaners whisking through the day before.) When the residents return home afterwards they probably won't be able to find their toothbrushes, concealed somewhere: the modern Open Home ethos mandates that all traces of everyday life, its chaos and detritus, be obliterated; no one owns muddy sports boots, fridge magnets and school schedules, an ironing board or rubbish bin. Beds are made to 5-star hotel standard in 1000-thread-count linen; kitchens gleam, stainless steel appliances apparently never attract a finger mark; every shower screen magically repels even a spot of soap scum. Occasional tables feature vases of fresh flowers, there's not a hint of clutter, never a stray cord trailing from an electronic device.

Welcome to house "styling", or "staging" as US TV shows describe it. In all its guises, the discipline aims to present an idealised scenario, to show a property at its absolute best. Caveat emptor, of course: buyers need to be wary being dazzled by an alluring display of draped beds and sofas or perfectly poised bowls of fruit may distract them from reality, and from noticing faults in essential elements of a property. Beyond the usual credo of making a home clean, tidy, fresh (baking bread, brewing

coffee!) and attending to small repairs, styling involves anything from layering cushions and throws and hanging temporary artwork to create an attractive appeal ... to repainting walls, removing pelmets, replacing curtains, storing worn or unflattering furniture and substituting rental pieces – as the stylist's eye dictates an overall coherent "look" that makes the house desirable, irresistible even. New display homes, too, always sell better staged with furnishings to lure the aspirational buyer (even if the buyer can't really afford sofas of equivalent quality).

Enter Michelle Burton, nationally-awarded kitchen and bathroom designer, interior designer, and consultant stylist making exceptional transformations to Port Macquarie and region properties. Burton's work includes collaborating with respected builders including Rob Tate Homes, Brandon Calder, J & E Miller and others, styling their new display projects for presentation; designing kitchens and bathrooms; sometimes, if called on by builders' clients, colour-consulting, choosing bricks, tiles, textiles, and spatial planning. But there's more:

"I've worked with [real estate] agents including Greg Trembath, LJ Hooker, Percival, and strongly with McGrath," Burton adds. "I suppose you could say [McGrath] have endorsed me as part of their package because in houses I've styled with them the results have been fantastic!" Indeed, anecdotally, the expected selling prices of some styled homes in Port Macquarie have been boosted exponentially. Or at least they sell faster. And her commissions don't always come through agents. "Some clients just contact me direct," she notes.

Fees for her services are as varied as the

individual job. "Some people have good ideas but don't know [how to go about it] or just want a bit of support or hand-holding. They may only need eight hours of my time, because they want me to point them in the right direction. Then, sometimes people phone me from out of town: they have investment properties here and need me to look after everything. Say it's a holiday rental for sale: I can add extra pieces. If the place is completely empty: among my private inventory I've a package that includes a three-seater lounge, floor rug, chair, queen-size bed, dining table ... small-scale pieces to suit an apartment or smaller house. This month I'm moving into a new warehouse near Acacia Street that's three times the size I've had. I'll be offering more packages, more scope, with room to expand my [furniture and furnishings] inventory. And I'm constantly purchasing new cushions, new homewares, things on-trend."

Her fee depends on what's required: "how much they want me to do. I can give them a direction to go in, or I can do everything for them from selecting the hire pieces, being there when they arrive, and styling. Basic assistance starts "at an hourly fee, for eight hours, around the \$900 mark. That's using my skills to work with what they already have, enhancing it with selections I suggest, whether [to be bought] over the internet, or pieces they can acquire locally. They could have a scratched dining table that looks old and tired and we need to find something new, or maybe the chairs just need to be replaced. The styling crosses over from time to time into interior design because the place might need a fresh coat of paint, so why not paint it a colour that's on trend or will suit a more neutral market? Sometimes I

need to select carpet, paint colours, window coverings ... " She maintains a list of trusted tradesmen and removalist contacts to call on.

Burton came to Australia from Louisiana via Los Angeles 25 years ago, "following my heart". Formally trained in interior design with past and current [2016] Australasian and national awards for her work, and then operating her own consultancy in Sydney, she was retained for a project in Dunbogan, discovered this area, and moved here in 2011. "I thought: Wow, this place is beautiful!" Now, she and her fiancé live in a half-century-old weatherboard home that's been renovated in what Burton describes as having moved from "shack" to "chic", with sea views at the front, in Lake Cathie. She exudes her own chic personal style, too: casual dress, understated and elegant; simple yet striking silver jewellery; smart Prada-framed glasses. Her face shines when she talks of visiting Italy, world's designer hub, for EuroCucina, the peak kitchen fair in Milan, one of many design shows she visits regularly. Sourcing products can be challenging in the bush but Burton assures me this is where keeping up to date at the expos pays off: "If I see something special and specify it, my suppliers will try to source it."

There are many transformations she's proud of, from grand to humble, like the home of an elderly person going into care: painting skirtings, changing door and cupboard handles and light fittings, adding new curtains, and styling: "It was all cosmetic but the house came alive and sold well over its reserve." Or, as her website puts it: taking it from drab to fab.

See her portfolio at www.designingdivas.com.au

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