

Decorating

Does anyone really *live* in those magazine layouts? Yes and no

By Elaine Markoutsas

NOT A HAIR is out of place. In the living room, all colors coordinate, the fire blazes, the ficus and palms are lush (no dropped or withered leaves) and the flowers are perfect. They even cast perfect shadows. Books and magazines are stacked neatly on the coffee table. The dog poses as though he just won top honors at obedience school.

Does someone really live here?

Let's go to the kitchen. Copper pots and pans hang fashionably from a pot rack. Baskets of more perfect flowers decorate the spic-and-span counters. Incredibly fresh-looking fruits and vegetables are arranged artfully on a butcher-block cutting board. Just-baked golden brown croissants rest on trays in an open oven. And chocolate-chip cookies peek through a glistening glass jar.

Each month, interiors such as these grace the pages of Architectural Digest, Better Homes & Gardens, House Beautiful, House & Garden, Home and Metropolitan Home magazines. They are fabulous rooms that take one's breath away, in homes that seem unreal.

Sometimes they are unreal.

Rarely is a homeowner's room photographed exactly as is. A pillow might be rearranged, a chair moved for a better angle.

Or the decor might be entirely imported, just for the photograph.

"You have to see what's happening through the camera's eye," said Chicago designer Joan Butler, whose work has been featured in magazines. "The scene has to be far more dramatic in its contained area. That's why we often add what we call props."

THESE PROPS can range from an African violet to an entire truckload of furnishings, everything from the rugs on the floor to the pictures on the wall. Sometimes rooms even are created in previously empty spaces, model apartments or warehouses, as was done for the cover story featuring Thomasville pine furniture in May's House Beautiful, much like film and TV producers do sets for movies.

Each magazine has a different *modus operandi*. Regional scouts or teams of editors may hunt for photogenic interiors, often relying on word-of-mouth tips. Sometimes the homeowners themselves, their decorators or architects may send snapshots, color transparencies or glossies of residences for a magazine's consideration.

Weeding out and selection is a collaborative effort of editors, contingent on the magazine's philosophy (service, design, how-to, energy efficiency) and influenced by focus and mix (of other stories) in a particular issue. (Lead time averages several months, and some features are planned as far as a year in advance.)

"It isn't always a question of 'is something good or not good?'" said Denise Otis, an editor for House & Garden. Sometimes five people may bring in examples for a theme the magazine is trying to illustrate, she said. "We have to choose one that we think is best [of that type]."

Paige Rense, editor-in-chief of Architectural Digest, has estimated she reviews some 4,000 photos annually. Interiors accepted are chosen, she says, "for a certain magical quality." In the magazine's April issue, she wrote, "We are not concerned with name or fame, only with style."

WHATEVER STYLE the homeowners may have mastered, with or without the orchestration of a decorator, ultimately is reviewed by an editor who accompanies the photographer on a shoot, as photographic sessions are called. Shoots may be as short as a day (usually from early morning to early evening) to as long as a week.

The editor and photographer decide the order of shooting. There often are trial runs with instant-print cameras to establish correct angles and propping. A single interior shot may take several hours. There is a lot more involved than framing and clicking.

In a shoot with a promotional tie-in (furnishings manufacturers and some magazines collaborate to feature fabrics, wall and floor coverings, etc.), the home serves only as backdrop. So workers are hired to *schlepp* the homeowner's possessions into rooms not being photographed and haul in furniture and accessories that are.

This propping process can be costly. "I've heard wonderful stories of \$3,000 for one living room and

60 cents for a kitchen," said Andrea Thorson, features editor for Home magazine. "Ours don't have that range."

Outfitting a home in Bucks County, Pa., for a five-page spread in the October-November, 1981, issue of Country Living cost about \$10,000, according to sources who worked on the promotion. A large percentage of the expenses was paid for by the promoters, such as Waverly Fabrics.

The transformations can be stunning.

"We once turned two boys' room into the sweetest little girl's room," said Drucilla Handy, whose public relations firm in Chicago coordinates promotional campaigns with the magazines. "Those big strapping teenagers probably died when they saw it."

EMILY KAMATOS, a scout for Better Homes & Gardens, recently offered her Lincolnshire home to the magazine for a Sears promotion.

"I have white walls, sofas covered in white canvas, a glass-topped coffee table, an antique walnut armoire with beveled mirror, bookshelves on which I have boxes, baskets and candlesticks, and a chest from Kuwait."

When the magazine photographed the room, "The look changed from sophisticated to very cozy," she said. "They replaced my sofas with counterparts in soft blue prints, my armoire with one of light pine, put books on the shelves. The room looked totally different."

Yet in another shoot for Better Homes & Gardens that same week, the Evanston home of architects Thomas and Fredericka Rosengren was photographed practically intact because it demonstrated the point the magazine was trying to get across.

"What we're saying is, the architectural style [an older brick home] doesn't have to dictate the way a young family lives," said Bob Dittmer, who

Continued on page 2



When magazine crews prepare a room for photography, existing accessories often are the first to go. In this living room and bedroom in Bucks County, Pa., almost all the furnishings were brought in for the photo. In the smaller "before" living room picture, note the difference in objects on the mantel; and, in the "after," the wallhanging that

conceals one of the transoms [top right] and happens to hang over the door opening. Although the "after" bedroom has been shot from a different angle than the "before," note the different bed frames, window treatments, and quilts [the owner's appears in the "after" shot, draped on a chaise].

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

People do live in those rooms in magazines

Continued from page 1
was on location. "It's very comfortable without too much fuss, kind of a pleasant happening."

The reason most magazine editors prefer using a home to a studio, even if it has to be totally redone for their purpose, is for its elements of realism. "Homes look better," said Dittmer. "They have real registers, real plugs, real cracks and windows that do not fit properly."

WHETHER THE magazine article has a promotional, lifestyle or design focus, an editor and/or photographer decide what in the room works and what doesn't. It can be where to place a begonia petal on the floor, or whether the family dog, which has plopped on the bed after pillows and spreads have been fluffed meticulously for hours, should remain in the photo.

House Beautiful editorial assistant Susan Williams spotted a pen she knew belonged to an editor resting on a table next to a bed in a feature in the September issue. "You always have to be thinking of little details like that," Williams said of the effect of the pen in the picture.

"You look for a way to give more pizzazz, more impact," explained Jim Hedrich, whose Chicago firm, Hedrich-Blessing, is one of the foremost in the field of room photography.

That admittedly is a subjective process, one that may offend the homeowner.

"People sometimes don't understand why you want to move something from the place they have it in," said Hedrich. "Frequently you're trying to interpret the room in a single photograph. You must consolidate things."

"Sometimes we take-out things that only clutter the view in the camera," said Thorsen. "We'll replace items on a shelf with ones that are more graphic, simple, otherwise things don't 'read' as anything. We like to show a homeowner's mark, but also produce photography that is well composed. So we do 'depropping.'"

Even though real homes may lend realism, the magazines go to great lengths to hide the warts. That translates as the taking of certain liberties.

HOME MAGAZINE editor Olivia Buehl reported in a recent issue that one obliging homeowner allowed the crew to snip the blooms of her many geraniums and graft them onto two plants to lend the illusion of lushness. "We then worked fast before the taped-on flowers wilted in



Boys' room turned into girl's room: "Those big strapping teenagers probably died when they saw it."

the glare of the lights," she wrote.

To dress up an unlandscaped solar home for an exterior shot in one magazine, an editor borrowed some pines from a nearby forest and lined them up in the dirt along the front walk.

A recent bit of camouflage saved a kitchen photo. A tree branch was tied to conceal a clothesline in the picture window that had escaped notice despite hours of propping.

Working with pets can be challenging. When Architectural Digest photographed the home of Kentucky Gov. John Brown and Phyllis George Brown, the First Lady requested that her cat be photographed in her favorite chair. "We'd throw on the cat," said photographer Tony Soluri. "It would run off. We'd throw it back on. It would run off. It took about three hours before it finally worked."

And weather can be an unpredictable beast. But it often can be dealt with.

"We were shooting a sunporch in Columbus, Ohio," said Soluri. "We had two days of rain and storms. So we ran a bank of lights outside, all covered with

umbrellas, and faked the sunny look we needed."

THEN THERE ARE some universal tricks of the trade. Toothpaste to disguise nail holes on a wall, a ball of newspaper or lighting fluid to kindle a fire.

One of those roaring fires became so intense the fire department showed up. "We were shooting recently in a 200-year-old log cabin in Berea, Ky.," said Hedrich. "It was late June, very humid. We lit the fire because it was a Christmas feature. We created so much heat in the flue, the creosote lining had burned off."

Minor inconveniences sometimes are suffered by the crews: Editors being snapped at by dogs, a photographer's allergy to flowers, or mechanical breakdowns such as blown fuses, and heat failure on a chilly day. But calamities are so infrequent the stories are never forgotten.

Several years ago a flashbulb exploded, burning a hole in an expensive suede sofa; the sofa and its twin were reuphol-

stered [so that the colors would match; the photographer's insurance company paid for damages].

In the '40s, before light shields were used, the casualty was a rug at the home of architect Eero Saarinen. A new assistant put a light on the rug, which had been woven over the course of several years by the architect's mother. She graciously volunteered to repair it herself. The assistant was fired.

"We're extremely careful about what we do," said Hedrich. "After all, we are invited guests. I tell my assistant from the first day to assume when you pick up a lamp the bottom is broken and it will fall into a thousand pieces. That can happen. People sometimes don't think to tell you their son threw a baseball through a piece of sculpture and it is about to fall apart."

WHY DO PEOPLE want their homes photographed?

Some do-it-yourselfers want to brag about work they've done. Others want to laud their architects and designers. For

some it's an ego trip, the prestige of having their residences appear in national magazines.

"It's very flattering to have your taste recognized," said Hedrich. There's a show biz element to it. Some even think of the resale value the experience could add to a home.

There are certain perks. The homeowner may end up getting his walls painted, wood floors finished or tiled. New drapes brought in by the photo crew may be left behind, furniture reupholstered, all free to the homeowner. And when the articles aren't left behind for free, there may be discounts [sometimes 50 percent or more] on furnishings and accessories. The ubiquitous flowers that seem to fill the rooms in the photos may be donated to the homeowners.

Still, the shoot may be an unforeseen inconvenience to the homeowner.

"I don't know if I would want a herd of strangers trampling through my house for two or three days," admits Hedrich. "Yet some people just give you a key and leave. [There are others who follow you around with a safety net.]"

"We try to warn people there will be a full day of chaos: lighting, cords, massive boxes of photo equipment," said Thorsen.

SOME CHEERFUL sorts actually make a party of it. One family invited friends to a party and treated them and crew to a case of Dom Perignon. Another homeowner assembled all his aunts, uncles and cousins to pose for a picture featuring food.

"Then he insisted on looking through the camera to make sure no one was cropped out," said Hedrich. "We were really photographing the food in the foreground. The people were out of focus. I don't know if he realized that."

Not everyone is enthusiastic about using his home as a studio. "Some feel it's an intrusion into their privacy and they won't allow it," said designer Joan Blutter.

Designer Larry Deutsch imposed on close friends to have their gorgeous living room torn apart and have Masonite

applied to glazed walls for a promotion. "I essentially was asking them to let us disrupt their lives for one month. We'd pull off the Masonite and restore the room. In exchange, we offered a new paint job, their choice of color and painter and the opportunity to buy items we featured below cost. They finally agreed." And the room looked so super the homeowner's wife nearly decided to live with the Masonite, much to her husband's utter disbelief.

"A lot of times the homeowners stand in awe of what we do," said Thorsen. "At first they say, 'Oh, you're taking out the pictures of the family and relacing my couch,' but at the end they're quite pleased."

DESPITE ALL pains to achieve flawless photography there are certain traces of errors that professionals label "gotchas" that they can spot in an instant in a photo.

"An extreme is a tripod leg evident in the foreground," said Deutsch. "A lot of furniture pieces reflect light too strongly, so masking tape is put on the edge. Sometimes it pops up in the photo. When artwork has been moved, it may create a shadow where it has been. In rugs that have been rearranged, you sometimes can spot the indentation that shows where furniture has been."

Some gaffes are fixed before the photo is used. "[The reflection of] a photographer's light bulb and light meter in the center of a picture can be retouched," said Denise Otis of House & Garden.

"Photographers may be airbrushed out of mirrors, which are difficult to shoot. And sometimes you have to strengthen the color of a sky."

"The photographs come out looking so grand," said Druilla Handy.

But as someone who works behind the scenes, she sometimes chuckles to herself when she looks at the gleaming finished product.

"You may remember that off to the left was this crummy little area that didn't look like much."

Isn't it a relief to know that nobody's perfect?