

THE HOME YOU OWN

How to sell a haunted house

Ghostly tales from real estate agents that are even scarier than this housing market



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October 23, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



(Evangeline Gallagher For The Washington Post)



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Real estate agent Arto Poladian knew that taking on the \$2 million listing in Los Angeles could be a challenge — even though it was 2021 and the market was extremely hot.

The problem wasn't the property itself, which he describes as “exquisite”: A spacious lot with views of the Rowena Reservoir, the downtown skyline, Griffith Park *and* the San Gabriel Mountains. Or its neighborhood of Los Feliz, which boasts hip shopping and historic estates. And although the home was dated and needed upgrades, its “trophy location” canceled out those concerns.

The issue was what happened in the house on Aug. 10, 1969.

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That night, several members of the Manson family, including Charles Manson himself, broke in and stabbed the grocery store executive Leno LaBianca and his wife, Rosemary, dozens of times. The seemingly random murders occurred one night after Manson's followers killed the actress Sharon Tate across town.

Poladian's client had owned the one-story Spanish revival for two years. He was a paranormal investigator and TV host who [told the Guardian that he had experienced](#) “a very, very strong energy” there.

Very few spaces have the notoriety of this particular home, but real estate agents say they often contend with properties that just feel a bit off. Restless spirits may not actually materialize in the halls, but potential buyers get a bad vibe and walk away spooked nonetheless. In these cases, the tried-and-true tricks of decluttering, staging the rooms and applying a fresh coat of paint often are not enough to close the deal.

Poladian, who works for Redfin, says he personally “never dealt with anything freaky or scary” in the LaBianca house. “If I didn’t know the history of the home, it never would have crossed my mind,” he says. Although he said he wasn’t concerned about ghosts popping out of corners or books flying off shelves, he was anxious about the property possibly attracting the wrong kind of attention. “In today’s day and age, when you have a listing like this, it attracts social media wannabes, who will break out their camera and take a video of themselves,” he says.

Still, he mentioned the “infamous” history directly in the listing because he also didn’t want to catch any potential buyers unawares. To keep lookie-loos to a minimum, he did not hold open houses; he prescreened people and required them to submit proof of funds before allowing them to tour the place.

He also looked into changing the home’s address as a way of further separating it from its grisly past, only to discover another owner had done that years earlier. It hadn’t been terribly effective, apparently. Gawkers, he says, would “drive by daily.” Ultimately, the home went under contract for \$1,875,000 after about three months on the market.

Kelly Moye, a Compass real estate agent in Boulder, Colo., keeps a list of go-to professionals who help make her listings as appealing as possible: furniture stagers, floor repair people, lighting designers — and two “home energy clearers.”

The “clearers,” she says, are “the exact same as a stager — the stager stages the furniture, the clearer stages the energy.” Moye calls on clearers when houses that otherwise seem prime for a sale just won’t move for mysterious reasons. Although she was at first skeptical, she says the clearers’ “actions have been so confirmed for me over the years, I kind of stopped thinking it was goofy.”

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Moye rattles off a half-dozen anecdotes about times when a property kept getting the same feedback from other agents — “It just doesn’t feel right” — and calling in a clearer was what finally made the difference.

In one such instance, she was hired to [sell a 19th-century Victorian](#) in Denver. Her clients were giving her a tour of their home when they arrived at the entrance to the basement. As Moye began to descend into the old cellar, the owners’ cats, which had followed her throughout the house, suddenly put on the brakes and refused to go past the top of the stairs.

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“I get to the bottom of the stairs and my hair on my arms is standing up on end and everything is just heightened,” Moye says. The basement was otherwise unremarkable, “but boy, you walked down there and you felt something really wrong.”

She asked the owners whether anyone had ever commented about it. Turns out, nobody wanted to go down there, humans or animals. “And I said, ‘Well, let me get my house clearer over here and see what’s up, because if you get this funky feeling that I got, that’s not going to work for a buyer,’” Moye recalls.

Both of the psychic-like professionals in Moye’s Rolodex offer roughly the same service. For \$300, they’ll take between four and five hours to do an elaborate ritual, going into a trance-like state to “communicate” with the space. In this case, the clearer uncovered that past owners of the home had illegally made alcohol during Prohibition, and the basement had been the site of a deadly police raid. After clearing the energy of those murders, Moye says, the cats would enter the space without fear — the owners even put their litter boxes down there during showings.

Moye also offered to send a clearer to another home in a Boulder suburb. She had sold the house to the client years before and called to check in. The update? It had a ghost, described by the client as a “white-shrouded, kind of wispy sort of being,” recalls Moye. Members of the family had all allegedly spotted it at one point or another.

“She said, ‘You know, I’ll be making dinner and I’ll just catch something out of the corner of my eye,’” Moye says. The client even sent her a photo of herself folding laundry in the bedroom, in which Moye says she could see an apparition in the reflection of a window.

But the client declined the help. It turned out the family liked the ghost and had named her Lucy. “Just ’cause there is a spirit presence nearby does not necessarily mean something’s wrong or it’s a bad thing,” Moye says.

States have different laws dictating what a seller must [disclose about a home’s history](#) to a buyer, although most don’t require sharing information about deaths or other “stigmatizing” events on the property. California, which has the strictest statute, calls for sellers to disclose all deaths going back three years. One famous property law case in New York from 1991, known as the Ghostbusters ruling, does require owners who have publicly stated their home is haunted (for instance, as part of a ghost-tour business) to disclose that haunted reputation to buyers.

Without such a mandate, though, it's relatively tough for a new owner to uncover information about deaths that may have occurred in a given home. This is what prompted Roy Condrey to launch the website DiedInHouse.com in 2013. Customers pay for a report with a slew of information about an address, including whether people have died there, although Condrey acknowledges that "we can't find everything."

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He says that how people use the information really varies. "They care because they may believe in ghosts," he says. "And then there are people who may not believe in ghosts but the house creeps them out. They got a bad vibe there and want to check it out." Others are hoping for a bargaining chip during the negotiating process or are trying to avoid moving into a home that might be a local tourist attraction.

Brian K. Lewis, an associate broker in New York City, has sold a number of "generational houses" — places that have been passed down through families, or where the owner lived for an especially long time. Those listings tend to attract more questions about who may have died there, and whenever he can, Lewis makes a point to tell interested buyers that the most recent occupants died off-site. Still, that's not always possible: "We're a dense, old city, and even in new buildings, things happen. People are born, people get married, people have babies, people die," he says.

On occasion, "I have had sellers who feel like different energy needs to be there, and they go to great effort and sometimes great expense to change the energy of a room," Lewis says. He has had clients bring in astrologists and feng shui specialists, and smudge their homes with sage to ward off otherworldly tenants.

And then there are the times when he’s surprised that buyers don’t care *more* about a building’s eerie past. A few years ago, he was selling \$2.5 million luxury apartments in a recently converted 1800s hospital. The history was well known, yet “zero-point-zero-zero buyers cared,” he says.

By now, some may wish they’d asked more questions. “This place, I am told by the people that work there, has had some very interesting things happen since it became a residence,” says Lewis, including strange noises at night and more than one unexpected death.

Coincidences? Maybe.

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