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Turning shabby into chic with the click of a mouse

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By Liana Grey

Not long after Vince Collura, president of Gotham Photo Company, launched a virtual staging service, a broker asked him to touch up a listing that was too cluttered to attract buyers.

No less than 85 picture frames adorned the living room walls. Another agent called when a seller refused to stow away half-packed boxes during photo shoots and open houses.

"Depersonalization is very important," said Collura. "Sometimes sellers aren't willing to clean, remove diplomas from the den or children's artwork from the fridge."

So Gotham does it using Photoshop, and posts the finished product online. The service, Gotham Renew, launched last month after repeated demand from brokers. But it's not quite as popular

as a program that designs model units from scratch. "Our first experience with this came from new development," Collura said.

Some clients are so hands-off that they do little more than select a color scheme or style, like elegant or modern, and let the staff at Gotham do the work. "We've built a fairly extensive catalogue of furniture," Collura said. "We pre-stage a lot, and create furniture groupings."

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Faced with an outdated kitchen at a brownstone on President Street in Carroll Gardens (pictured above), Immacolata Giocoli, a broker at Prudential Douglas Elliman, asked Gotham to remove a small window along the wall and swap the current door for a wooden French one.

With a couple clicks of a mouse, aging wall panels transformed into sheetrock, and mustard-colored hexagonal tiles became elegant beige squares.

Terry Robinson, another Prudential Douglas Elliman broker, approached Collura with an Upper West Side apartment decorated with such bright and eclectic pieces that both staging and decluttering were required.

"Terry wanted to be able to present the space to potential buyers as a blank canvas to build up from and also show the possibility of a more classic style of furnishings," Collura said.



Anything goes, at least within the bounds of copyright law. Which means that artwork can't be photoshopped into picture frames without permission.

"Somebody had us hanging other photos we shot for them," said Collura, who initially launched Gotham to photograph listings and snap broker headshots, and also runs a software firm that designed a website for Prudential Douglas Elliman. "I'm not going to sue myself," he joked.

When units are finally rented or sold, then it's the buyer's turn to grapple with how to fill empty floors and walls.

Like many first-time apartment dwellers, I didn't know where to begin when it came to decorating the small studio I rented during college. I went with a rug I'd spotted in the basement of ABC Carpet. To make sure it matched a sofa I'd been eyeing, I rolled up the red and black rug and schlepped it ten blocks to a furniture store in Union Square.

The interior design firm id 810 Design Group offers a service, Blueprint 810, that makes life easier for obsessive do-it-yourself decorators like myself. For a cost that ranges from \$800 to \$1,200, clients can submit a floor plan sketch, photos of furniture, and design inspirations culled from blogs and magazines, and receive a suggested design plan, with instructions for purchasing items.

"This is an especially great tool for renters as they won't need to invest as much as if they hired an interior designer," said Virginia Toledo, president of the design group. But it's equally fitting for brokers hoping to stage a model unit without hiring a design consultant.

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Of course, some in the industry are willing to shell out nearly as much cash for accessories that serve a purpose beyond beautification.

Thomas Morrow, president of Prestyl USA, a manufacturer of infrared heating panels, has received a flurry of calls from homeowners interested in a product launched for residential use: picture frames that heat up chilly rooms when winter sets in.

Fifteen years ago, Prestyl fashioned a device that could heat commuter trains without blasting in warm air, which is prone to slipping out when doors open and close. Infrared light was used to heat a panel, which then transferred warmth to its surroundings.

"That's where energy savings come in," Morrow said.

Intrigued by the prospect of cutting back heating costs, airlines began installing the panels on jetliners. When a European research team designed razor-thin strips that could be mounted on just about any object, Prestyl marketed it to commercial and industrial landlords.

"In an office building, a white panel in the middle of a tile ceiling looks great," Morrow said, "but if I was going to put it in your home, it doesn't look good." Hence, the picture frame disguise, which can be fitted with floral, animal, and abstract images from a company database.

Some homeowners have come to Prestyl with complaints about a drafty den. Others wish to keep a baby's nursery two or three degrees warmer than the rest of the house.

Many of the company's customers own homes in the suburbs, and are willing to pay extra to insert a custom photograph — say, a family portrait or vacation snapshot — into the radiant frames, which cost anywhere from \$500 to \$800.

But Morrow can see generic images being used to spruce up apartments for sale, particularly in pre-war buildings prone to drafts. "It makes for nice staging," he said.

Because they're portable and blend easily with other decorations, and can be plugged into outlets or connected to light switches, prospective buyers or tenants might find themselves eager to purchase one of their own.

"If I rent an apartment that's cold, I can go buy an incredibly unsafe and inefficient space heater," Morrow said. "Or I bring in a panel that looks good. When I move in a year or two I can bring it with me."