

Open House: If it isn't nailed down, thieves may get it

Heather Boerner, Special to The Chronicle

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Selling your house? Consider this checklist: Alarm clock. Cuisinart. Glassware. Wine collection. Furniture. That Hummel collection. Area rugs. Leather jackets. Laptop. Jewelry. Toiletries and towels.

A laundry list of items to pack up before you sell? Nope.

For Bay Area thieves, these are some of the items they've nicked from open houses. Stealing during the open house itself, breaking back in to grab a few things later and even backing a moving van up to a vacant, staged home, open house thieves take literally the hospitality axiom "My home is your home."

Sure, open houses have always been necessary. After all, how can someone imagine his couch in your living room if you won't let him in? But the fact remains that, to sell your house, you're opening everything in it to strangers whose motivations aren't always the best. Police, real estate agents, stagers and sellers report that people will steal anything from pocket-size souvenirs to rugs and even architectural details. And these cases are rarely reported and hard to follow up on.

"Literally, sometimes I feel like, 'If it's not nailed down, be careful; it might just walk away,' " said San Francisco stager Helen Liu. "You have to be prepared for anything."

The price of doing business

Over the past few years, news reports list at least eight open house thefts around the Bay Area, ranging from the conviction in Marin County last year of Trudy Baughman for stealing jewelry from Novato open houses to the theft of \$200,000 worth of Hummel figurines in San Jose to the alleged thefts and fraud in seven Bay Area cities earlier this year for which a mother-son team are now awaiting trial. The two are alleged to have stolen a police officer's badge from one open house and to have racked up at least \$30,000 worth of charges on credit cards stolen from Realtors' offices and open houses, said Berkeley police Sgt. Mary Kusmiss.

But don't bar the doors just yet. Despite these high-profile cases, open house thefts are still rare enough that they don't register as a trend in Bay Area police departments. "It's not pervasive by any means," said Kusmiss. "The culture of open houses is that people are encouraged to wander at will around a house. If someone is of that mind-set (to steal something) they're going to do it."

But police admit that open house theft victims probably aren't reporting all the cases, so it's hard to know how many open house thefts happen a year. "The burglary detail gets very, very,very few reports of these," said San Francisco police Sgt. Steve Mannina. "They think (open house thefts) may occur but for whatever reason people don't report them. We're not seeing an increase or a decrease because it's so infrequent we get a report."

Local real estate agents also say they don't notice an uptick in thefts as the market has changed. Rather, most say it's just a steady stream of usually small, but sometimes bizarre, items going missing from homes on the market. This can be most common when a home is vacant and staged, said Berkeley's Kusmiss. Vacant homes are always targets for burglaries, she said, and staged homes are no different.

"Last year, in the late summer, we had a couple notices of burglaries of homes that are staged," she said. "The burglaries occurred the night of the open house so it's quite likely the potential suspects looked at the house during the open house and saw things they wanted to come back for. Sometimes they'll come to the open house to case it to see if it has an alarm or the best access into the house."

Indeed, home stagers like Liu and home sellers say that they don't report everything. For Liu, for instance, it's just a "cost of doing business" and is covered by insurance.

Stealing big and small

The most common items reported stolen from open houses are small, expensive and easily concealed, such as laptops and jewelry, Kusmiss said.

People also steal pharmaceuticals from the medicine cabinet, key chains holding what appear to be house keys and things that can wreck financial havoc later.

Realtor Britton Jackson of Zephyr Real Estate in San Francisco recalls one client who slid his business checkbook under a dresser in the bedroom before an open house only to realize after he'd moved that someone had stolen some checks. Britton doesn't know if the checks disappeared during the open house or during the move, but it took several months to fix the mess this created, she said.

"So many people come to open houses with bags - they're just walking down the street and they have their grocery bags and decide to stop in," she said. "Who's to say they're not dropping the jewelry under the eggs?"

Liu said people often steal soap and towels from open houses - as if the house is actually a hotel. She also remembers placing a brushed-nickel clock in a bedroom, assuming that it was too large to fit comfortably into someone's bag. "Nope," she said, laughing. "The next day it was gone. Now it's just kind of amusing, like, 'I can't believe they took that!' You almost wish you had a Webcam to see how they did it and when they did it."

Big-ticket items

A Webcam might be useful to decipher how people steal some more bizarre items. When Liu started staging three years ago, someone made off with a large, white, wool shag rug she had rolled up and stored in a staged house's garage. Homeowner Lucia Hwang of Oakland discovered when she took possession of her house a few years ago that people don't steal just simple things. In rare cases, burglars will even go after parts of the house that are nailed down.

While Hwang and her husband were in escrow to buy their house a few years ago, someone stopped by the house and pried off the one-of-a-kind wrought iron door handle with the head of a lion and the body of a snake. "We didn't think much about it at the time, but now we think it was worth about \$10,000," she said. "We think someone saw it at the open house and came back to take it. I've talked to some of my neighbors and we've seen permanent stuff, especially in old houses with a lot of period details, get stolen."

When Kraig Kast, chief executive officer of the Peninsula's Atherton Trust, stopped by an investment property he was selling in the North Bay, he was shocked to discover that someone was entering through an unlocked window to do laundry.

"To me, it's astonishing what people do," said Kast, who advises his clients to remove anything of value - financial or sentimental - from their homes before an open house. "I've had clients come back to me and say, 'Someone walked out with our Cuisinart.' When they're getting ready to sell, I tell them to get all their stuff out of there. If you have any expensive leather jackets or furs, put them in a friend's house. A lot of people, for some reason, feel entitled to take things."

Protecting yourself

If you're concerned about open house theft, what can you do?

Aside from clearing the house of anything of value, not much, say real estate agents. Many ask home sellers to sign forms freeing them of any liability.

"It really is a matter of being prepared, of 'seller beware,' " Britton said. "I tell people up front that I'm here to sell your house and will keep close tabs on the people who come into your house, but if there are 150 people coming through, something might walk off if you don't put it away."

Others feel real estate agents ought to take more responsibility for protecting a seller's valuables.

"I think it really behooves Realtors to qualify their prospective clients," said Kast. "I hate to put it all on Realtors but it really behooves them to lock up houses and have more than one (person) on a property to protect it."

Although he doesn't believe agents can or should be held responsible for open house thefts, Realtor Mark Shaw of ReMax Accord in Lafayette does agree that sellers have the right to ask their agents exactly how they plan to protect their valuables.

He recommends more than one agent be in the house during an open house, especially if it's more than one story.

"I would advise home sellers to ask, 'Have there been issues (with open house thefts) in this area?' " he said.

"The second question would be, 'Will there be one (real estate agent) in the house or two during the open house?' Third would be, 'Without breathing down the prospect's neck, are you going to make yourself available and circulate through the house?'

"Open houses are all different," he added. "Sometimes there's one person or nobody (touring the house), sometimes there are 10 or 20 people at one time. You can walk around the house and have a different purpose than bothering the prospective buyer. Go to the bathroom, put something away and then take it back out again - anything so you have motivation to walk around the house.

"I always walk around and make sure the lights are on. That would add security because you become less predictable as an agent than if you're just parked in the kitchen."

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