

## REAL ESTATE

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## AFTER HOURS

The twilight open house. The post-school showing. The invite to drop in — to the pool — any time. For real estate agents, a slow market calls for innovative thinking.

By GAYLE POLLARD-TERRY  
Times Staff Writer

**F**LICKERING candlelight reflected in the sheen of the glossy ebony grand piano. Tiny flames danced from scented candles perched in a cubbyhole above the mantel and on an end table in the living room.

As Tricia Bautista lighted dozens of ivory-colored tea candles along the railing of a split-level redwood deck that wrapped around the back of the home, a bottle of Cabernet breathed on the kitchen counter. Next to more candles, a trio of trays offered cheeses, fancy crackers, slices of imported sausage, big red, green and dark purple grapes and black olive tapenade in a delicate dish.

Near a cranberry-scented candle, she fluffed red accent pillows on the sofa and then arranged stargazer lilies in a vase on a nearby table. In the background, a songstress softly crooned mellow jazz. Clearly, Bautista wanted someone to fall in love. Not with her. With the house.

Welcome to a twilight open house, an end-of-the-workday sunset showing — one more way to make a listing stand out in a market glutted with them. These leisurely evening showings, complete with wine or Champagne and hors d'oeuvres, are targeted to young professionals and empty nesters, the type of buyers who don't have to rush home to make dinner for the children or check homework.

Twilight open houses are a relatively new tool being used by agents, who are trying to come up with different approaches in this slower market to attract buyers and allow them to experience a home — even if just for a few minutes.

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Photographs by BÉATRICE DE GÉA Los Angeles Times

**MOOD LIGHTING:** Realty agent Tricia Bautista lights candles on the deck of a Silver Lake home before a twilight open house meant to show the house to its best advantage. Glenn Griffith, at top, was among visitors.

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REAL ESTATE

## Showings by twilight or when the school bell rings

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"With the market the way it is right now, you have to be a little more creative," said Priscilla Gonzales, who shares the Silver Lake listing with her daughter, Bautista. Both are agents for Las Casas Realty Inc. in Los Angeles.

"It's just about setting a mood," she added, as she set out bottles of wine in anticipation of arriving visitors. "When they walk in, we want them to say, 'Wow! I want to live here.'"

The agents represent Joseph Lopez, who owns the two-bedroom, one-bathroom Spanish bungalow, listed at \$660,000 for two months now. This is their second attempt at selling his 861-square-foot house. He asked \$749,000 in January. After receiving no nibbles in eight months, he took it off the market, then listed it at the reduced asking price.

Lopez, a retired psychologist, went along with the idea of a twilight open house to call attention to the 500-square-foot deck that he added to the home.

"It really enhances the property," he said, "and provides access to the view."

"We really wanted to showcase the deck," Bautista said.

And that's where the action was during the open house as couples, neighbors, singles and parents with babies savored the view of pastel houses dotting the hills above a craps myrtle tree bursting with pink blooms and, to the east, the sight of downtown L.A. skyscrapers.

Jim Rosenthal, a film and video editor who also lives in the neighborhood, was among those

who showed up. This was not his first twilight showing. He enjoys them, he said, because "it feels more special. It's more intimate. It's quieter."

As he toured the home, Kim Colwell, a feng shui interior designer, and Chris Rezanson, a composer for video games, stood on the top level of the large deck, which covers most of the backyard.

"Psychologically, you are in a more restful environment because it's the end of the day," Colwell said. "The colors are all popping better as the sun is going down."

One potential buyer thoroughly explored the deck, pointing out where he could put his hot tub, looking at the barbecue grill, touching the white patio furniture and checking out each entrance — from the living room, the master bedroom and the kitchen, which smelled like mulled cider.

"The deck is beautiful. It's a huge living space, almost as big as the house," said Glenn Griffith, who is in financial sales.

"I'm fantasizing," he added, "as if this is my house." Which, of course, is the whole point.

Innovative open houses are not limited to twilight.

Christine Lloyd, an agent with Rodeo Realty Inc., Paramount Properties Division, also holds them, but her opportunity time to show one particular listing is after the neighborhood school lets out.

Why? Because the outstanding test scores are a draw for families.

On a recent afternoon, she plopped down a sign right in

front of Woodland Hills Elementary School, a campus in the San Fernando Valley community that scored 951 out of 1,000 on the 2006 California Academic Performance Index Growth Report and outperforms schools with similar demographic characteristics. Among elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, its test scores rank third.

Lloyd is betting that moms picking up their kids will notice her sign and notify friends who covet that school for their own children.

"The parents who go there," she explained, "know friends who say, 'Gee, you're lucky to be living in that area. I wish my kids could go there.'"

For good measure, she put up another sign near the school playground and additional signs along the streets that most parents take to get to the school.

"You have a captive audience," she said. "Parents are sitting in cars, waiting."

—CHRISTINE LLOYD  
Real estate agent

She hopes someone who sees her signs is looking for a three-bedroom, two-bathroom, traditional-style house, such as the one she has listed about two blocks from the school. On the market for a month, the renovated home, which she also shows on weekends, is listed at \$730,000.

While Lloyd gears her sale tactics toward a school, a pool has helped agent Ian L. Brooks, who works for the Beverly Hills office of Rodeo Realty.

When he showed a contemporary home in Santa Monica to a young family on a hot summer day, the mother paused to mar-



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

**A CHOICE SPOT:** In Woodland Hills, Christine Lloyd sets up signs near the local elementary school. Her listing is just two blocks away. In a cooling market, selling a home requires new creativity.

*You have a captive audience. Parents are sitting in cars, waiting.*

—CHRISTINE LLOYD  
Real estate agent

vel at the new swimming pool. Water shot from four fountains, one from each corner, into the center of the pool while a waterfall from the spa splashed into the end.

"The pool looks very inviting," he recalled her saying.

"Go jump in," he replied, noting that they were wearing shorts anyway.

"The mom jumped in and said, 'Come in, it's wonderful,' to her little daughter," he said.

"They wrote an offer literally

the next day. It was in escrow three days later," he said of the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, which sold for \$1.55 million.

Brooks said he looks for ways to let buyers "experience the property."

At a Spanish-style house he was selling in Westwood, some clients admired the oranges and grapefruits on the trees in the backyard.

"Take as much as you like," he said he told them.

The next time he showed the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, he offered wedges of the fruit.

"The people who bought the house were amazed at how the fruit was so fresh and organic," he said, adding that they paid \$1.6 million.

He believes in "having the prospective buyers experience the property as if they already live there."

"You taste the fruit. You feel the water."

Even with a great view, an above-par neighborhood school, a swimming pool, fruit-bearing trees or other attributes, selling a home requires greater effort and creativity these days as the market cools.

So Gonzales quickly agreed when her daughter suggested a twilight open house at the Silver Lake home.

As the sky darkened, Bautista turned on tiny lights threaded through the leaves of potted trees.

Although the dusk by candlelight created a romantic ambience, the sunset was not visible from the deck.

"You can see the sunrise," she said, pausing as her mind worked. "We should have a breakfast open house."

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