

IN THE REGION/*Westchester*

Where the Curious Meet the Serious

By ELSA BRENNER

THE thought of holding a public open house makes Paul A. Falla wince: strangers traipsing through his five-bedroom contemporary in White Plains, peering into his closets, opening the kitchen cabinets and checking out the equipment in his home theater.

What is more, some of those strangers won't be potential buyers, but rather the curious — among them, nosy neighbors — who like looking inside other people's homes, especially the expensive ones.

Even so, Mr. Falla, a retired New York City firefighter, and his partner, Lisa Rizzi, a court officer, have agreed that a public open house might increase the prospects for a sale.

The 28-year-old house, which Mr. Falla bought eight years ago and fully renovated, is listed for \$949,000. It came on the market five weeks ago, after an unsuccessful stint a year ago without a public open house.

"This may or may not work," Mr. Falla said of his open house, which is to take place Sunday. "I'm generally against having someone walk through my beautiful home unless they're really interested in buying. But we're going to try it anyway."

Not all brokers, however, believe that inviting the public is worth the time and trouble, preferring instead to restrict open houses to other agents.

"I am the antithesis of the public open house," said Mark Seiden, who owns a real estate office in Briarcliff Manor. "I've done that — invited all the neighbors, put up balloons and signs, and given people tours of the house. But in a year of more than 100 public open houses, all I got was a ton of what we call 'looky-loos' in the trade, and only one property sold."

As a result, these days Mr. Seiden sticks to brokers-only open houses, and doesn't offer lunch or a drawing for a bottle of wine as an enticement, as some agents do. If a house is priced right, he said, the other brokers will come.

Loretta Rapisardi of Julia B.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSAN STAVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SOCK HOP

Presiding at an open house in West Harrison, N.Y., Loretta Rapisardi, left, provides a guest, Robyn Chapman, with information about the neighborhood.



Fee Sotheby's International Realty in Rye, sees it differently. "The idea is to get as much exposure as you can," she said. "There have been a couple of cases just within the past few weeks when someone walked into a public open house and purchased it on the spot."

That is not to say that Ms. Rapisardi doesn't also ply her trade using broker-only open houses and advertising heavily. But she has become partial to the public open houses. "You can never have enough exposure," she insisted.

Bradley and Kathy Brammer, associate brokers for Keller Williams Realty in White Plains, specialize in open houses. They routinely send out postcards to announce events and knock on doors to remind neighbors that a house near them is for sale. Mr. Brammer's rationale is that neighbors often refer friends and relatives. Typically, their open

houses attract about 15 people, often in groups: couples with children and sometimes even grandparents.

Using the open house in a more limited fashion, Sona Davidian, a broker-owner at McClellan Sotheby's International Realty in Pelham, sees it as a way to gain exposure for languishing or less desirable properties, like homes on main roads or near highways. And in a community like Pelham, which does not allow "for sale" signs, the public event is a kind of public announcement.

As for the inherent security risks, brokers urge caution but say that incidents of riffled or stolen belongings are few and far between.

"Over the years, there have been allegations of things missing after a public open house," said P. Gilbert Mercurio, the chief executive officer of the Westchester Putnam Association of Real-

Open house? For agents, yes; the public, maybe not.

tors and the Westchester-Putnam Multiple Listing Service. "We've heard of that from time to time, but it's rare."

Leah Caro, a Bronxville broker who is president of the realtors' association, said that visitors at virtually all open houses are required to present photo identification and to sign in. Then, if something turns out to be missing, the police have the names of those who attended and the time of day they were in the house.

"We've never had a problem in Pelham," Ms. Davidian said. "But I still tell my clients it wouldn't be wise to leave their Rolex on the dining-room table."

Nancy and Steven Zang, who are selling a four-bedroom three-story colonial in West Harrison for \$1.325 million, opened their house to the public last week. The couple are moving closer to Manhattan, where Mr. Zang works in the finance industry.

"We need as much exposure as possible to sell in this market," Ms. Zang said, "so we agreed to do it, despite our concerns."

Their open house on May 8 drew about a dozen lookers, including a couple with children, a small group of people who arrived with a broker, and of course a curious neighbor, said Ms. Rapisardi, their broker. Although no one offered to buy the house on the spot, one couple asked for a tour of the neighborhood.

Ms. Zang, who left out a small bench in the kitchen where the children of prospective buyers could play, returned home to find everything in order. She is hosting another open house Sunday, part of a countywide event held by Sotheby's offices in Westchester.

Information on dates and locations of public open houses can be found at the Web site of Westchester-Putnam Multiple Listing Service: wpmls.rapmls.com