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## HOMES

# These Real-Life Ghostbusters Will Help Sell Your Haunted House

Who you gonna call? Some psychics and paranormal investigators charge hundreds of dollars to clear homes of unwanted spirits



ILLUSTRATION: MIKE LEMANSKI

By [Katy McLaughlin](#)

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**Lots of things** can thwart a home sale—ugly décor, a bad location or an unrealistic price. But some homeowners and real-estate agents cite another reason: ghosts.

For help, there's a cottage industry of people who advertise themselves as psychics, ghostbusters and paranormal investigators. Some charge hundreds of dollars to visit "haunted" properties—either in person, or via astral travel—and "clear" them of unwanted spirits. Others are volunteer ghostbusters who comb homes with high-tech gear to suss out paranormal activity.

Jane Phillips, a paranormal investigator and self-described clearer in Santa Fe, N.M., markets her services to real-estate agents because "it's easier to get them to pay for

something if it gets their houses sold.” Ms. Phillips, 65, was a mortgage banker for 30 years in Minneapolis, before moving to New Mexico in 2008, she said. Since then she has worked on hundreds of homes, mostly locally, charging about \$350 to \$400.

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Jobs require her to remove “energetic things,” that can include ghosts but can also be portals—energetic holes connected to planets—as well as what she calls dark energies, which are “energies from other dimensions,” she said. The work mostly occurs “in my imagination—but my imagination is real,” said Ms. Phillips.

Suzanne Taylor, the broker/owner of Taylor Properties in Santa Fe, hired Ms. Phillips for six of her home listings, paying between \$500 and \$750 for services. She recently brought her in on a house listed for about \$300,000 in Santa Fe. Ms. Phillips came into the house carrying “dowsing rods,” crooked rods that are traditionally used as divination tools for finding buried treasure or water.

“She holds them and walks around the house and the rods move on their own,” said Ms. Taylor. At the end of the process, Ms. Phillips said she created a “white blanket of light” in her mind to “lift out any stray energies.”

Shortly thereafter, “I got an offer and closed it,” Ms. Taylor said.

Nicole Sassaman, a designer and home-décor retailer in Los Angeles, has seen her share of weird things in 20 years of flipping houses. But nothing prepared her for the strange occurrences at the fixer-upper she was renovating years ago in the Hollywood Hills neighborhood.

“Doors would swing open. A box of plumbing supplies would move from one corner to the other when we weren’t looking. The floors warped for no reason. The house got broken into,” said Ms. Sassaman, 45.

About six months into the renovation, a neighbor dropped a bombshell: The former owner had died in the bathroom, Ms. Sassaman said. She paid a clearer \$500 to rid the home of “spirits and negative energy.” The process, involving crystals, bells and murmured prayers, was weird but effective, Ms. Sassaman said. The problems stopped and the property sold quickly for its asking price of \$995,000, nearly twice what she’d paid for it.

Not everyone in the ghostbusting business automatically assumes that low-pitched hum coming from the basement is a ghost.

“Eighty percent of the time, it isn’t something paranormal at all,” said Jason Hawes, the star of “Ghost Hunters,” a reality show on the Syfy channel that started in 2004 and is currently in its last season.

Plumbing, electrical, psychological or medication problems are the most common culprits, said Mr. Hawes, 44, a plumber in Warwick, R.I., who is the founder the Atlantic Paranormal Society, or TAPS.

The TAPS Family Network includes 76 groups of paranormal investigators in the U.S. (plus another 40 internationally) who work for free. These groups, usually comprised of 10 to 20 volunteers, visit homes armed with equipment such as thermal imaging cameras, wireless audio recording systems and electromagnetic field detectors.

Joe Nickell, senior research fellow at the Center for Inquiry, an Amherst, N.Y.-based think tank focused on science and secularism, has investigated hundreds of claims of paranormal activity over the past 40 years.

“I have never found evidence of an actual haunting,” said Mr. Nickell, 71. “Ghosts must be believed to be seen.”

Laws addressing seller disclosures of “psychologically impacting factors” in properties vary widely from state to state, said Val Werness of LegalResearch.com in Minneapolis, which issued a report on disclosures for the National Association of Realtors last year. Only two states, Minnesota and Massachusetts, have laws that even mention reports of paranormal activity, and only to say they need not be disclosed, said Ms. Werness.

Three other states, California, South Dakota and Alaska, have laws that require some form of disclosure of deaths on a property, even if the buyer doesn’t ask about it. (Ms.

Sassaman, who sold her house 15 years ago, said her agent told her disclosure wasn't required in the particular case of her house.)

Some people are content to live amid the spirits. In New Orleans, Keith Teachout, who owns an 1830s Greek Revival bed-and-breakfast in the French Quarter, said he spied a ghost in June.

Mr. Teachout said he was carrying a load of laundry up to his private suite of rooms when he saw a man with a slim build, in his late 50s or early 60s, perched on a settee in the living room. The man looked as real as anyone on the street, Mr. Teachout said, except that he was dressed in a 1940s-style overcoat and fedora. After a few moments, the man disappeared.

"I assumed he was a ghost," said Mr. Teachout, 55.

About a week later, by coincidence, a police officer stopped by the home and explained that his great-aunt had lived there in her youth. Mr. Teachout said he invited the aunt, now 99 years old, to lunch and learned that her husband had died of a heart attack, wearing his overcoat and fedora, in the very room where Mr. Teachout had spied the ghost.

Mr. Teachout had met Cari Roy, a well-known psychic medium in New Orleans, at a party, so he called her up and asked her to come and see if she perceived the ghost. Ms. Roy said she has worked on ghost issues in over a hundred houses, hotels, restaurants and bars. For site visits, she typically charges \$200 an hour, though she didn't charge Mr. Teachout, he said.

Ms. Roy said she sensed the ghost and his reason for hovering: He wanted to protect his widow, she said. Ms. Roy and Mr. Teachout decided not to try to interfere. Ms. Roy considers ghosts part of New Orleans history, she said.

"Who am I to throw out a ghost who has been here for hundreds of years?" she said.

For those reluctant to hire a professional ghostbuster, there is a do-it-yourself solution. Last year, Yvonne Arias, owner of Los Angeles brokerage Property Lab, accompanied a client to a walk-through a few days before closing on a \$600,000 house. The house was in poor condition—"there was a bad smell, all the windows were caulked shut," said Ms. Arias. But even that didn't account for the "creepy, bad energy" both she and the seller perceived, Ms. Arias said.

The buyer handed Ms. Arias a bundle of sage, which they lighted on fire and toted from room to room. Burning sage to dispel spirits is traditional in several cultures, including some American Indian tribes. A few days later, the property closed as planned, Ms. Arias said.

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