

## Before Move-In Day, Evicting the Old Auras



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Judith Wendell, left, a feng shui expert, was hired by Zipporah Reich to improve the energy in her apartment. Since worries about the future or negative vibes from the past are two things New Yorkers cannot complain to management about, a very tiny industry has evolved to fill these needs.

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Zipporah Reich sat cross-legged on her living room floor. As Judith Wendell chanted and burned incense that seeped into every crevice of the apartment, Ms. Reich meditated over an altar that included bowls of water with candles and wildflowers and a stack of brightly colored papers on which she wrote her wishes: finding her soul mate, starting a family and having more success in her career.

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Ms. Wendell says her fees are driven less by apartment size than by “what’s in the space energetically.”

“I want to bring a positive energy that’s not tied to anything specific and also get rid of the energy of the previous owner,” Ms. Reich said.

Ms. Reich is a well-traveled 38-year-old lawyer. Ms. Wendell is a well-traveled 59-year-old feng shui expert, whose talents include the process of smudging.

The New York real estate industry has been a job machine for thousands of brokers, lawyers, managers, architects, engineers and tradesmen. But since worries about the future or negative vibes from the past are two things New Yorkers cannot complain to management about, a very tiny industry of smudgers — or “space clearers,” the term Ms. Wendell prefers — has evolved to fill these needs.

Smudging, predictably, is a vastly unregulated world with little organization. It can include a real estate broker adopting the Native American tradition of burning sage in an apartment in preparation for the first open house. It can also extend to include the afternoon-long space clearings that Ms. Wendell does with clients, for which she charges \$900 to \$1,800. Ms. Wendell said that her fees were driven less by apartment size than by “what’s in the space energetically.”

Ms. Reich said she had always been interested in [good-luck rituals](#). While growing up in Brooklyn, she watched how neighbors and friends brought bread and salt as housewarming gifts, a tradition among Jews, Russians and others. While living in Japan, she noticed that car dealers blessed cars before buyers started driving them.

She also wanted to wipe out memories of the delays and construction problems she had experienced while renovating her compact one-bedroom apartment on West 105th Street. Even though she closed more than a year ago, she moved in only recently and still has most of the furniture in storage.

“I definitely think things could have gone smoother,” she said. “I feel like I could have better luck.”

That is why she hired Ms. Wendell. The self-described “child of the ’70s” grew up in a Jewish family in Bayside and discovered spirituality, she said, while living in San Francisco. She calls her influences as varied as the Maharishi’s visit to the United States and a 1995 trip to Bali and Borneo. She also has professional training in feng shui and design.

Ms. Wendell said that although she expected her business to drop in the recession, it actually rose because people wanted to improve the feelings in their current homes, or the homes they were moving into that perhaps people had given up.

“I thought my business would go down because it’s not a necessity what I do,” Ms. Wendell said. “But when people are trying to create some security for themselves, this is one way to do it. This is part of their lives they have control over.”

In 2008, Barbara Wagner, a real estate publicist, and her husband, Steve, a lawyer, hired Ms. Wendell when they took possession of an apartment they had been renting to an aunt who died there. They wanted to remove any lingering aura from her death.

They were renovating, but they were on a budget and economized by using [Ikea](#) cabinets in the kitchen so they would have enough left over for the smudging.

But Ms. Wagner said it was worth it to spend the money on her hopes for the future.

“A lot of it really may be in my head,” Ms. Wagner said. “But it was a good start to an apartment we had known for years.”

Carolyn Zweben, a Prudential Douglas Elliman broker, has been a do-it-yourself smudger since 2004, casting out negative vibes from apartments she was trying to sell.

In particular, she said, buyers could sense the tension when there had been a divorce in the apartment.

While science has yet to get around to evaluating the effectiveness of smudging, Ms. Zweben, who says she knows other brokers who smudge, can offer anecdotes like this one: One woman hired her to sell her apartment because she was disappointed she had not found love there.

Ms. Zweben smudged the apartment and found a buyer. The buyer moved in, quickly fell in love with her neighbor and eventually got married.

And to those who would prefer to ridicule, she and other smudging converts have this to say: It can’t hurt.

She even smudged an apartment that she and her husband, Paul Zweben, also a broker, bought and combined with the one they owned directly above.

She said that before they bought it, a curmudgeonly older couple lived there who complained that they made noise. She wanted to smudge out the bad memories of those neighbors.

“Now I don’t feel anything negative from them,” Ms. Zweben said.

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