

SELL

Attention to detail can mean the difference between a **house that's sold and one that lingers on the market.** Here are some staging tips. ■ Remove unnecessary furniture. Allow at least a metre of space so potential buyers can walk freely. ■ Leave no more than two kitchen appliances on your counters. ■ Remove area rugs on top of carpets. Buyers assume they are hiding stains. ■ Take all papers and photos off the refrigerator. ■ Turn on all the lights during a showing, even if it's during the day, and

open all shades or blinds. ■ Avoid cooking a few hours before a showing, and don't smoke indoors while your house is on the market. ■ Pack seasonal clothing and organize what's left in your closets so they look spacious. ■ Put out fresh flowers to make your home feel inviting. ■ Hide bills rather than leaving them out in a tray or organizer, and stash cleaning supplies. Avoid giving the impression that your home is expensive or difficult to maintain. ■ Replace dated light fixtures. *Canwest News Service*

STYLE

THE LOOK • ALISON SILCOFF



GRAHAM HUGHES FOR NATIONAL POST

"I dress up each day ... even if no one is going to see it," party planner Alison Silcoff says.

BY LINDA FRUM

Who Alison Silcoff. Director and owner of Alison Silcoff Events, a corporate and party planning firm, Montreal.

What she's wearing Eavis & Brown dress. "It's a British designer. They don't sell in Canada. Just in New York, at Saks, and in Hong Kong, Paris and London. They specialize in hand embroidery."

You are British, and studied math and law at Cambridge. How did you become an event planner in Montreal? After university I worked for J. Walter Thompson in London as an account executive. Then I moved to Canada and started working for the Bank of Montreal. After the bank moved its public affairs office to Toronto, I took the plunge and went into business on my own.

Event planning takes a very particular kind of person. It takes a detail fanatic.

And you qualify? My husband would tell you, sadly, yes.

How does a detail fanatic approach fashioning? I adore fashion and I adore organizing my day and what I'm going to wear. I live in dread of living in a house where I wouldn't have the space to have such a closet because I've gotten so spoiled and so used to it. Sometimes, I just reorganize my sweaters. I refold them and get them all perfect, and in colour order. I guess that's because I'm obsessive.

Does your husband receive the benefit of your organizational skills as well? No. I'm not allowed to get near his closet. He has a completely undesigned closet with a rail and shelves. And he's completely happy that way.

How would you describe your daytime look? I work from my home. I have two

assistants, so it's a very small office. But I dress up each day. I don't schlump around, even if I'm not going to any meetings. I enjoy putting on something nice each day even if no one is going to see it. I put on high heels, too.

Even if no one is going to see you? I just feel good that way. That's not to say that on a Sunday I won't get up late, wear track pants and put on no makeup.

So many people claim to dress for themselves, but if you're doing it when none of your clients can even see you, then you are the real thing. I think even if I didn't have an assistant, and I was totally alone, I would still do it. It elevates you to another plane. A lot of what I do has to do with style and image, so it puts you in this right frame of mind. People have been surprised when they come over unexpectedly to the office and see what I'm wearing. But I love clothes. I just love them.

So you wear jackets, suits, the whole bit? Isn't dressing for comfort one of the chief advantages of a home office? If the jacket is very structured, and it's warm, I'll take it off. I'll put it on in my bedroom on the second floor, and then take it off when I get to my office on the third floor.

I'm sorry but that's very funny. But I guess you're trying to invoke the same atmosphere at home that would exist if you worked outside the home? I run my office here as if I were in a huge organization. Our standards are every bit as high, or higher, than the public affairs office at the Bank of Montreal because we are dealing with presidents of huge organizations whose standards are high. We have to show them that we are every bit as professional as they are.

Do you think you perform better on the telephone or on e-mail if you are well dressed? I don't think of it that way. It's just part of my persona. I just enjoy looking and feeling good even if I'm the only one seeing it.

Weekend Post

NET GAIN

Experiments in cybershopping by Sarah Bancroft

What Black patent Proenza Schouler-influenced "Felornda" heels at aldoshoes.com. They have all but vanished from the stores, but a savvy shop assistant directed us online.

Price \$90

Log-in to cash out Under five minutes. Fingers crossed they'll be in style for longer.

Arrived in An Aldo shoebox with each sandal in its own shoe bag. Nice touch.

Shipping time and cost Canadian shipping anywhere is free but with a gala less than a week away, I sprang for the \$10 three-business-days guarantee.

Satisfaction guaranteed? To die for. What Aldo calls the "wood-like" sole passes for the real thing. But most important, they passed the night on the gala dance floor.

Weekend Post



It's the avatar economy, stupid

Virtual universe may opt for gated communities

BY WAGNER JAMES AU

In February, subscribers to the virtual world of Second Life awoke to a surprise: The garish, skyscraper-sized billboards they had learned to tolerate as part of their three-dimensional landscape were about to be vaporized, the site's creators announced.

Billed as "Your world, your imagination," the five-year-old Second Life has been offering subscribers a sprawling realm of user-generated simulated mountains, oceans and sky where participants can build and interact as "avatars," alter egos they control and customize. Thanks to the world's virtual currency system of Linden dollars (which can be exchanged for real U.S. dollars at fluctuating rates) and the ability to buy and sell parcels of land on Second Life's two main continents, a thriving free-market economy has taken root.

That economy has included a lot of advertising, much of it ostentatious. So Linden Lab, the company that developed and owns Second Life, announced on its blog in February a new rule prohibiting advertising on Second Life's mainland continents if it impairs a neighbour's view. The rule was especially directed at advertisements erected "to deliberately and negatively affect another resident's view so as to sell a parcel for an unreasonable price" — i.e., to pressure that neighbour to sell his virtual land. It was a vague prohibition that would require a high degree of hands-on regulation by the Lindens (as company employees are known to Second Life users, who are in turn called residents). As such, it was the latest in a long series of intrusions on what once was arguably the purest libertarian economy in existence.

Linden Lab's experiment with laissez-faire began at the end of 2003, when the company first started selling virtual property to its users, encouraging them to buy and sell to each other with Linden dollars. Before then, the com-

pany had carefully nurtured its small early user base with frequent cash and land handouts, planning activities with the cloying enthusiasm of a metaverse Hillary Clinton.

After the creation of private property rights, Second Life quickly became a place where free minds and free markets predominated. Users could make millions of Linden dollars as real estate barons or fashion designer magnates, or spend time in kinky virtual sex clubs or art communities.

For the most part, staffers adhered to a principled hands-off policy that would have done Milton Friedman proud.

In 2005, when one landowner first began peppering the world with ugly billboard towers, residents protested. The Lindens generally refused to intervene. "It's not for us to decide the relative merit of construction in Second Life," Linden's community manager, Daniel Huebner, said back then. In 2006, company founder and CEO Philip Rosedale refused to intercede against Ginko, a virtual "bank" with a high rate of return that many residents accused of being a Ponzi scheme. That same year, some residents protested "age play": simulated pedophilia with avatars who look like they're underage, though the actual people behind them are over 18. Company vice-president Robin Harper replied that it would be forbidden only "if this activity were in public areas," implying that it was still permissible in private.

The reversals started last year. Age play and other vaguely defined "broadly offensive" behaviours were universally forbidden in May, 2007. This policy was announced shortly after a German television crew presented evidence to Harper that avatar-based age players were also using Second Life as a conduit to exchange real child porn photos. Age play was creepy but arguably harmless; when real-world molestation entered the picture, the moral equation changed.

But the changes didn't stop there. Gambling was prohibited in July, 2007. Unregulated banks were banned in January, 2008. The February prohibition of exploitative billboards was preceded by the debut of a "Linden Department of

Public Works" dedicated to "improving the experience for residents living on or visiting the Linden mainland." The Lindens were restructuring their universe into the communitarian society it had been in early 2003, when residents regularly received welfare payments and took part in public works projects to make themselves useful.

Did the Lindens reject laissez-faire as a failed experiment? Maybe. From the summer of 2007 to early 2008, the number of active users gradually plateaued at a population of about 550,000, but nowhere near as large as tightly regulated virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft or Habbo Hotel, which boast millions of users. Complaining about the ugly casinos and sex perverts they had to share Second Life with, many residents voted with their feet and left. The number of participants willing to buy virtual land from Linden Labs also dwindled. Offered a fully free society, the market plainly rejected it. So the Lindens went with a mixed economy.

But there is an alternative explanation. While all this was going on, the company kept dropping hints that it was about to let enterprising programmers and companies link their own virtual-world servers to the "official" world. If and when that happens, users would be able to host virtual Second Life islands on their own servers but still remain connected to Linden's mainland. It's possible, then, that Linden Lab's new regulations are part of the preparation for an open source era, when Second Life's most controversial residents will be able to run unregulated banks and have public sex in adjoining nations.

The Lindens might not be ending Second Life's libertarian era so much as creating a gated community in a far larger metaverse that remains fundamentally free. Then again, gated communities may be libertarian on paper, but considering all the conformist regulations required to get and stay in one, few would say they are libertarian in spirit.

■ Wagner James Au is the author of *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (HarperCollins).

Featurewell



Will Second Life libertarians soon be able to have public sex in adjoining nations?