

## UNDERSTANDING ALTERED & ARTIFICIAL IMAGERY

### *A Consumer Guide to Evaluating Photos on MLS, Zillow, CoStar, and Other Online Sources*

When you browse properties on MLS-connected sites, Zillow, CoStar, Realtor.com, Redfin, LoopNet, and similar platforms, the images you see may have been digitally enhanced or altered. Some changes are routine and harmless; others can meaningfully affect how a property appears. Knowing what to look for helps you evaluate listings accurately and ask the right questions.

### IMPORTANT CAVEATS

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- **Rules vary by MLS.** There is no single national rulebook. Each MLS adopts its own policy on altered imagery, so the disclosure requirements that apply on one MLS may differ from those on another. In Utah, most listings originate on UtahRealEstate.com (operated by the Wasatch Front Regional MLS), which sets its own standards. The common thread across MLSs is the National Association of REALTORS® Code of Ethics, which requires members to present a truthful, non-misleading picture in advertising - but the specific watermark or labeling mechanics are left to each board.
- **Some places have actual law; most do not.** A handful of states have begun regulating altered real estate imagery directly. California's AB 723, effective January 2026, makes non-disclosure of digitally altered real estate photos a misdemeanor - the strictest such law in the United States. Most states have no equivalent statute, so outside those jurisdictions your protection comes only from MLS rules and broker ethics obligations.
- **Not every platform has rules or enforces them.** Many sites that display listings have no policy governing altered imagery, and among those that do, enforcement varies widely. Protections that exist on a given MLS may not follow the image once it is syndicated elsewhere.
- **This applies to commercial property too.** Enhancement, staging, and misleading edits occur in commercial listings (LoopNet, CoStar, Crexi) just as in residential ones - often with fewer disclosure norms in practice.

### WHAT IS NORMAL AND EXPECTED

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Most listing photos receive standard technical adjustments that do not change the property itself: lighting and exposure correction, color balancing, sharpening, lens straightening, and routine sky replacement. These basic enhancements generally do not require disclosure. A bright, crisp photo is not necessarily a manipulated one.

That said, even fully permitted, legal enhancements can shape your impression in ways that do not match reality. Be aware that:

- Color and saturation adjustments can make landscaping look greener, lusher, and healthier than it actually is.

- Exposure and lighting correction can create the illusion of abundant natural light in spaces that are actually dim.
- Oblique and aerial photography can warp scale and proportion, distorting how large a lot, building, or room truly is and how features relate to one another.
- High-contrast processing can set up expectations for colors, tones, and shades that the property does not actually have.
- Common legal filters and retouching can smooth away imperfections and surface conditions - minor wear, staining, unevenness - that you would notice in person.

None of these require disclosure, which is exactly why an in-person comparison matters even for listings that play entirely by the rules.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DISCLOSED (LOOK FOR A WATERMARK OR LABEL)

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On MLSs that follow the common pattern, certain enhancements must carry a disclosure watermark or notation. Watch for these and treat them as cues to verify in person:

- **Virtual staging** - furniture, décor, or styling added digitally to an empty or sparsely furnished room. The space may look very different unfurnished. Many MLSs also require that an original, unaltered photo be available alongside the staged version.
- **Virtual twilight, added fireplace flames, illuminated screens or lights** - cosmetic touches that shape mood and perception.
- **Renderings** - computer-generated or AI-created images showing proposed construction, renovations, or amenities that do not currently exist. These should be labeled “Rendering” and never presented as photos of the actual property.

Keep in mind that disclosure rules differ by system, and watermarks or labels may not survive when images are syndicated from the MLS to third-party portals like Zillow, CoStar, or LoopNet - so a disclosure present on the original listing can be stripped or obscured downstream.

## WHAT IS NEVER ALLOWED - BUT MAY STILL APPEAR

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Some alterations are prohibited regardless of disclosure because they misrepresent the property. Across MLSs that address this, prohibited edits typically include hiding material defects, removing or fabricating permanent features, and altering elements outside the owner’s control - for example, removing power lines, water towers, or nearby highways; editing out flaws or visible damage; or altering virtual tours to skip, blur, or conceal negative attributes.

Be aware, however, that an alteration falling in this “prohibited” category does not guarantee you will never encounter it. Sites without rules, or without active enforcement, may host such images anyway. If you suspect a prohibited alteration on an MLS listing, it may violate that MLS’s rules (and, in states like California, the law) - but on platforms without such rules you may have little recourse beyond your own due diligence.

## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EVALUATING IMAGES ONLINE

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- Cross-reference the same listing across multiple platforms; staging and edits sometimes appear on one site but not another.
- Look for an original, unaltered version of staged rooms - many MLSs now require one, and its absence itself is worth noting.
- Compare listing photos against satellite and street-level map views to check surroundings, neighboring structures, and what may have been cropped or removed.
- Treat unusually perfect skies, lawns, lighting, or surfaces as enhancement, not necessarily the property's true appearance.
- Remember that scale can be distorted - verify dimensions and proportions independently rather than trusting how large something looks in a photo.
- Check which MLS or jurisdiction a listing falls under; your protections depend on it.
- **Always confirm condition, layout, views, light, and surroundings with an in-person visit or an inspection before relying on photos.** This is the single most reliable safeguard, and it applies regardless of how trustworthy the imagery appears.