A Real-Estate App When You’re Buying or Just Nosy

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Let’s say you’re walking around your neighborhood, or a neighborhood you’d like to make yours, and you spy a house you find interesting. Even if it isn’t for sale, you can just whip out your iPhone, take a picture of the home and in less than a minute, you’ll have an estimate of its price, plus details on its square footage, number of rooms, similar homes for sale and other facts.

This feat of digital magic, which works all over the country, is performed by a new, free app called HomeSnap, from a Washington, D.C., online real-estate firm, Sawbuck Realty. Despite its parentage, the company says that using the app doesn’t send any data to a Realtor, or invite any calls or emails from one — unless you explicitly ask for such a connection. It’s just a cool way to investigate houses and if you like, to share your “Snaps” — photo profiles of houses — with HomeSnap users and friends via email, text or social networks.

Why would you want to use it? Maybe you’re interested in buying the house if it ever comes on the market, or helping a friend do so. Or, maybe you’re just curious, or nosy. Of course, you could be in real house-hunting mode, and HomeSnap gives you even more information if the house you took a picture of is for sale, including interior photos and bid history. There’s even the option of contacting a buyer’s agent, asking a question or requesting a tour—right from the phone.

You can use the app to flip through Snaps taken by others, either in nearby areas or around the nation. (HomeSnap allows you to keep your own Snaps out of this “stream,” if you’d rather your neighbors didn’t know you’ve been investigating their homes or you’d rather not tip off potential competing buyers.)

There are many real-estate apps and Web sites, such as Zillow, that allow you to get similar information. Some real-estate firms have their own. But these typically require you to type in an address, or troll through a list, or study a map and tap on a marker that represents a house of interest. All HomeSnap requires is that you snap the shutter on your iPhone. (Android and iPad versions are in the works.)

I’ve been testing HomeSnap for a few weeks in two states: Maryland and Rhode Island. In my 17 attempts, the app almost always correctly identified the house I was shooting. In two cases, both in townhouse complexes, it wasn’t sure and presented me with an aerial photo displaying a few guesses from which I could pick. In two other cases, it couldn’t identify the house at all for some reason.

The app doesn’t actually perform photo recognition on the house. Instead, it uses the iPhone’s GPS capability and its sensors to identify the house and then fetches the details from a server in the cloud.

HomeSnap includes a Stealth mode that lets you take a picture when you aren’t right in front of a house — even when you’re inside another nearby house — and get an aerial view of homes in the area from which you can choose a property as your Snap. This proved accurate for me. In one test, it worked perfectly when I was only able to shoot the rear of a house.

Sawbuck says it built the app partly because it hopes that if a user likes it, he or she will one day use one of its agents. But it says so far only about 10 percent of the 150,000 Snaps taken with the app have been of homes that are actually for sale.

If a home isn’t for sale, HomeSnap draws its information from public information like tax records, school boundaries and census data. If a home is for sale, it provides much more detailed information drawn from local listing databases.

I found HomeSnap fun and impressive. It’s a good tool for investigating possible purchases, learning the estimated value of a house and getting other important information. For example, each Snap includes scores from third-party data vendors that rate the quality of nearby schools and rate the relative appreciation and investment value of a home, over 10 years, compared with the average. Some Snaps reveal previous sale dates and prices.

But its information wasn’t always complete or accurate. For instance, in the case of my own home, which isn’t on the market, it got the number of bathrooms wrong, and didn’t know the number of bedrooms — an omission the company blames on a quirk in the public records available for my area. (My tests elsewhere did include the number of bedrooms.) The app has a feature that allows you to report such errors.

In addition, the app currently doesn’t have extra information drawn from listings of homes for rent and can’t pinpoint units inside large buildings. The company says it’s working on both capabilities.

It marks photos of certain homes with a color-coded banner — green if the home is for sale; orange if it’s under contract; and purple if there’s an upcoming open house for the property. If there’s a major change in the information on a Snap in your history, the app updates it.

The app keeps a history of your Snaps and the company retains them on its servers, whether or not you choose to make them public. In its licensing terms, the company reserves the right to reuse, or modify, the photos you take, though it promises not to “materially” change them, or to distribute or reproduce photos taken by those who opt to keep them private.

If you’re looking for a house or just curious about one and you own an iPhone, HomeSnap is a clever, useful and entertaining tool.

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