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RESTORING RESHAPING A SOFA

BUYING A BRAND-NEW SOFA CAN SEEM LIKE THE only option when your living room begins to look dull, or your body gets tired of bony armrests and lumpy cushions. But sometimes the best furniture is right under your nose, suffering more from unrealized potential than from an inherent lack of style. Reshaping an old sofa for better design and comfort isn't necessarily a difficult—or wildly expensive—proposition.

Martha believes strongly in reworking good older furniture, even if it only dates back a few decades. Redoing a sturdy piece shows respect for the original craftsman's workmanship.

It is also less wasteful, and often less expensive than buying new. You can reshape a straightforward sofa for perhaps \$1,500, which is less than you'd pay for a high-quality new model. Gael Towey, creative director of *MARTHA STEWART LIVING*, took these ideas to heart when reworking a seventies-modern sleeper sofa. Her husband, Stephen Doyle, bought the sofa twenty years ago, and it wore its age like a banner. Yet a new, well-designed sleeper sofa can be difficult to find, so Towey decided to exploit the old one's latent gifts. She wanted to raise the back and arms about two inches, and also widen the arms to

the thickness of the cushions. The two seat cushions would be combined into one, and the boxy legs replaced with tapered legs.

The sofa was given to Carl Dellatore, whose D & F Workroom in New York City specializes in upholstery and drapery work. Dellatore says that the first step anyone should take when thinking about redoing a sofa is to determine whether or not it is worth saving. Here are some guidelines:

Turn the sofa over. There should be a layer of thin fabric stretched across the bottom. If this fabric, called the Cambric, is made of pressed fibers as opposed to woven, the sofa is most likely made of cheap materials. Cut the Cambric to uncover the innards. If you see coiled springs, there is a good chance you have a high-quality sofa. Zipper springs, which look like a series of connected Us, aren't as long-lasting.

If the sofa has carved wooden legs, arms, or other handmade flourishes, chances are it is well made and strong. If not, try to determine if the frame is built of hardwood, such as poplar,

BEFORE



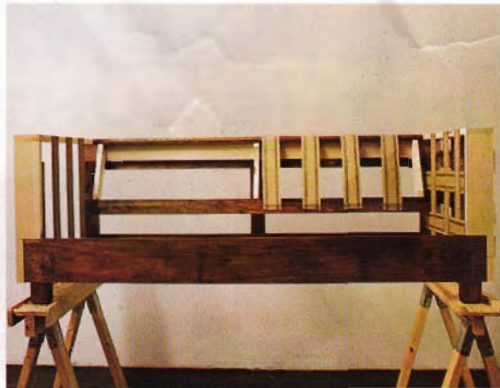
AFTER



BEFORE: Gael Towey's twenty-year-old sleeper sofa is marked with tape indicating where the reshaping work will be done. The long sofa has an awkwardly low back and arms; they will be raised about two inches.

AFTER: With a heightened wooden frame, new upholstery, and newly shaped legs, the sofa has a fresh, modern feeling that enhances its original lines. The new cushion, which replaced two old ones, has a layer of horsehair on top of the foam padding, for a luxurious feel and a good "return."

RESHAPING



REUPHOLSTERING



maple, or even mahogany. Hardwood indicates high quality; composite boards, like plywood, suggest the opposite. To find out which you have, don't just examine the exposed wood parts, like the feet or armrests. Often, hardwoods appear only on these visible appendages while less-expensive woods are used for the frame. And look at the joints: If they are doweled, you have a good, strong frame. Screws may indicate less-careful construction—most contemporary furniture is screwed together.

Jiggle the arms. If the sofa shakes a lot, it will probably have to be re-joined, with dowels or screws, and glued, at an additional cost. Also, the sofa's weight may indicate its quality; if it's quite heavy, it was most likely constructed with good materials, such as hardwood and coil springs.

Finally, if you just love the sofa,

no matter how poorly made it is, then splurge. You will probably never find another one like it.

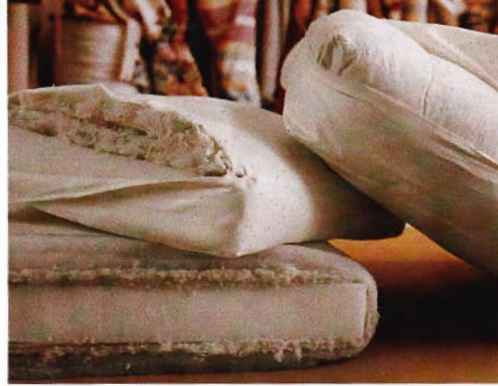
Don't worry if the sofa looks as though generations of preschoolers have used it as a trampoline. A good upholsterer can easily repair broken springs and flat cushions. To understand how, it helps to know the components of your sofa. Before reshaping your piece, the upholsterer will strip away all the tacks, staples, and layers of padding until you're left with a bare frame. Strips of poplar are then screwed in place onto the frame to bulk up its proportions. After that, the process of rebuilding begins. Loose springs are attached to the frame using twine, knots, and staples. Jute webbing is stretched tightly from one edge of the frame to the other and stapled in place, to keep the sofa taut and sturdy. Next, these structural el-

RESHAPING White poplar is screwed onto the old hardwood frame (left) to create the new dimensions of the arms and seat back; newly shaped legs were added at the end of the job. The jute straps (middle) strengthen the frame. The almost-complete sofa (right) is covered in Dacron, a protective fabric.

REUPHOLSTERING Solid-color fabric (left) is usually used horizontally; it results in fewer seams. Here it's used vertically (middle), to create seams that accentuate the sofa's strong, modern lines. A baseball stitch (right) joins the fabric sections. Carl Dellatore (below) worked as an interior designer before opening his workroom.



CUSHIONS



ements are enveloped in cloth. Dellatore uses leftover drapery fabric for this, but almost any heavyweight material works. (He once opened a sofa for Martha and came face-to-face with an old potato sack.) A layer of foam is glued over this, followed by cotton padding. Martha often prefers sofas padded with horsehair, which imparts a firm yet supple “give.” The piece is then armored with bonded Dacron fabric, to protect the padding.

With the guts in place, a muslin pattern, much like you would use for a dress, is cut for the final layer of fabric. The best upholstery fabrics are tightly woven and durable. Single-color fabrics are easiest to use. “Matching printed patterns can be a nightmare,” says Dellatore. For instance, five separate panels of fabric had to mesh together perfectly to

make the dahlias on Martha’s sofa line up. The fabric is stapled in place where possible, but otherwise is sewn by hand. A variety of seams can be used, ranging from prominent baseball stitching to subtle French stitches. Piping, ruffles, and other decorations can be used to hide seams or simply highlight certain areas of the sofa.

Finally, the cushions are put in place. Your input on how these are made is vital. Comfort isn’t everything. Also consider the cushions’ “return”—how fast they assume their original shape after you get up. Many people like the luxurious squishiness of down and feather-filled cushions, but their return is slow. Horsehair is another option, favored by Martha because it is very comfortable. For a more rigid, square look that springs right back after you

CUSHIONS Three hands apply equal pressure to three different types of foam (left): soft, medium, and firm. Although they look similar, these cushions (middle) vary in quality: The top one is composed of expensive down and feathers; the second is made of foam padded with cotton; the third contains inexpensive foam and cotton covered with Dacron. One of Martha’s sofa cushions (right) is padded with horsehair.

get up, use foam and plastic. And if you want to go all out, install expensive Marshall bundle springs in each cushion, for comfortable cushions that quickly regain their original shape. Whichever look and feel you choose, your sofa will probably have more individuality than any affordable new sofa on the market. Although our culture repeatedly encourages us to buy, buy, buy, this is one place where it may be best to preserve and restore. And then sit, and enjoy.

RESHAPING MARTHA'S SOFA

An example of a good candidate for reshaping is this love seat that for half a century graced the guest cottage of Skylands, Martha’s island home in Maine. Its intimate scale meant that the makeover had to be subtle. To accomplish this, Martha decided to change the silhouette so that it would appear more inviting, less fussy; she chose to deepen the seat back’s angle of repose, pad the arms, and bulk up the horsehair cushions. And since the original dust ruffle gave the sofa an unnatural sense of height, she wanted to mask that by raising the starting point of the new ruffle, giving it length and adding grace. She covered the redesigned sofa with a dramatic English chintz print of brown dahlias set against a blue-and-white-striped background. The fabric is tufted in the seat area, and a grosgrain ribbon runs horizontally along the length of the seat, accentuating the sofa’s beautiful lines.

