

# Analyzing the Couch



Misfits, by Ron Arad for Moroso, is an upholsterer's nightmare, but it makes a strong visual statement; \$31,500 for this group.



The Ploum sofa by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Ligne Roset, \$6,010.



My Beautiful Backside, above, by the British design studio Doshi Levien for Moroso, starts at \$17,820.



Limited-edition Maharam Polder sofa by Helen Jongerius for Vitra, \$16,640. (The floor cushion is \$1,015.)



Confluences three-seat sofa by Philippe Nigro for Ligne Roset, above right, from \$4,565.

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er hear children fighting over who gets the sectional.

And yet, now that I need a new couch to replace the latest one I characteristically bought cheaply and treated poorly, I find myself rethinking my approach. It might be worthwhile after all to find out what goes into the design and construction of a high-end sofa as opposed to a budget model, and whether it's worth investing the money.

Thinking of sofas as interchangeable is wrongheaded, apparently. Magnus Breiting, director of product management for the chair maker Emeco and formerly with Vitra, the Swiss furniture company, set me straight on the subject of luxury sofas.

"There's a lot of intelligence that goes into the product, not just in construction but in sourcing," Mr. Breiting said. "The effort and time is much higher than with a typical Macy's or Ikea couch."

But then again, so is the price. One reason manufacturers like Ligne Roset or Vitra charge significantly more is the involvement of a top designer, Mr. Breiting said. "You're investing time and money in playing Ping-Pong with the designer because they have a vision."

Do I really want to spend an extra \$5,000 to underwrite someone's creative process? I may fall victim to designer names with clothes, but not sofas.

For me, a more persuasive argument would be superior construction. Like many men, I am susceptible to the idea of things made by craftspeople using arcane tools and labor-intensive practices dating back to the Middle Ages. Kayel De Angelis of the New York upholsterer De Angelis, which was started more than 60 years ago by Mr. De Angelis's grandfather Guido, is one such craftsman. To prove it, he began by tossing around woodworking terms I didn't understand, like mortise and tenon.

In a budget couch, Mr. De Angelis said, "you could see plywood frames that are stapled together, with foam rubber inside. Frames made in that way — give it a year or a little longer, and the arm might be loose."

The frame of a custom or high-end sofa

by a manufacturer like Baker, he added, is usually a hardwood like ash or maple held together with glue and dowels or tongue-and-groove joints. "The joint is just as strong as, or stronger than, the wood itself," he said. "And, then, the multiple layers of the upholstery won't degrade the way foam rubber will."

Mr. Breiting pointed to the cushions and outer layer as another point of difference. "The life cycle of the fabric or leather is much longer with an expensive couch," he said. "Foam gets compressed and releases, and with time, the foam is wearing out."

But assuming I'm willing to invest in a really well-made sofa, how do I know if I am actually getting my \$10,000 worth — or if I am paying \$2,000 for materials and construction and \$8,000 for marketing and cool Euro design?

Annie Elliott, an interior designer in Washington with strong opinions on the

## The Sofa Test Drive

Tim Springer, the founder of Hero, Inc., which consults with companies on ergonomics and environmental design, said couch shoppers often make the mistake of simply plopping down, wiggling around for less than a minute and then making a snap decision.

"You wouldn't hop in a car in a showroom for 15, 20 seconds, hop out and say, 'I'll take it,'" Mr. Springer said. "But you see that all the time with furniture." He offered some tips for choosing a sofa that will not only hold up but be comfortable for years to come.

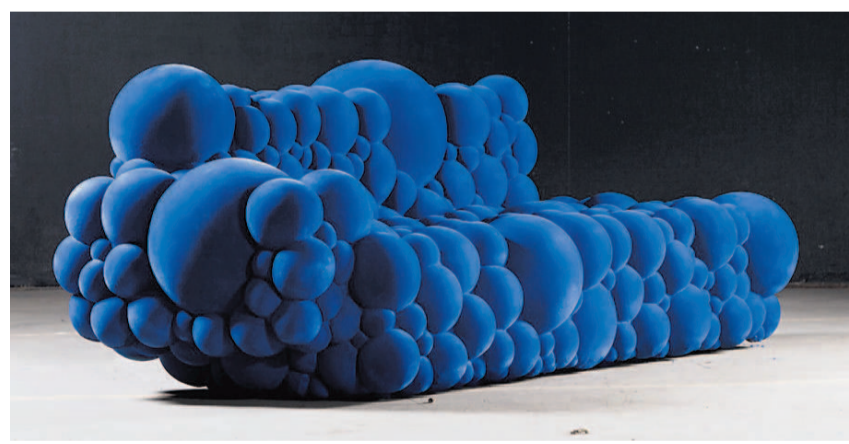
**TAKE IT SLOW** Watching a movie at home, you may log two hours on the couch. "So 10 minutes in a store is not much to ask," Mr. Springer said. "If you're comfortable the first minute, but three to five minutes in you go, 'You know . . . ' that's probably an indicator that it might not be the best fit."

**CHECK UNDER THE HOOD** Ask things like what the frame is made of, how it is held together and the type of cushion foam used. If you're not satisfied, don't be afraid to ask if you can lift up the couch. "If I'm going to spend top dollar," Mr. Springer said, "I'm going to turn it over and look."

**DO THE FLEX TEST** If you can torque the frame, it may be a sign of poor construction. "Some of it is physics," Mr. Springer said. "If you have a very long sofa, you could probably flex it. But if the back or the arms move easily, that's probably not a good sign."

**TREAT THE SHOWROOM LIKE YOUR LIVING ROOM** "Don't let the salesperson pressure you," Mr. Springer said. "It's your money after all. You have to get into your own head and say, 'I'm here because I want to evaluate this.' Be pretty critical, because that's your chance to make a decision."

STEVEN KURUTZ



The Mutation series sofa by Maarten De Ceulaer, left, was produced in an edition of eight and is sold through the Industry Gallery in Washington; prices start at \$30,000. Paper Cloud, right, by Tokujin Yoshioka for Moroso, starts at \$14,670 for a two-seat version.



## A Dream of a (Designed) Couch

The sofa of my dreams is low and blocky, with cushions covered in different fabrics. It has big, cheerful buttons tacked on the back and a casual asymmetry that invites sprawling. Designed by Hella Jongerius for Vitra, the sofa, called Polder, costs at least \$9,500. Which is why it furnishes only my fantasy life. But if a pile of extra cash were to drop in my lap, I would consider the indulgence.

In my mind's ear, I hear my husband chanting "Crate & Barrel, Crate & Barrel" in protest. But wait. A sofa is made to accommodate long hours of immobility, and that's a tough job. No other household piece does more work. In fact, much of what we call furniture serves as the sofa's lieutenants. Innumerable coffee tables, reading lamps and tray tables have sprung up to assist in the social and recreational activities a sofa supports. And now furniture companies are turning out laptop-proportioned desks for the growing number of people who perform their jobs on their sofas.

Doesn't such an important item deserve to be more than humdrum? To be superbly

made so that its frame won't sag and its cushions will retain their geometries, despite the best efforts of your athletic children? To be beautiful, so you can scribble on floor coverings and window treatments, which no one will notice anymore because they'll be so busy admiring your designer sofa?

The sofa of your dreams might also be Polder, which was named after the flat patchwork fields of the Netherlands. (Ms. Jongerius is Dutch.) It's a lovely idea: to stretch out like a giant on a piece of precious territory in a country with excellent coffee. Or you might dream of Confluences, a Ligne Roset sectional whose sections lean into one another like cozy family members. Or My Beautiful Backside, an exquisitely tailored seat from Moroso inspired by benches and pillows in the royal houses of India.

Next week, a limited edition of Polder will be released in the United States, in fabrics by Ms. Jongerius and Paul Smith for Maharam. The price has been ratcheted up to

\$16,640 (and that doesn't include the pouf). If my family were to use this rare sofa a conservative two hours a day for a conservative 20 years, that works out to a bit more than a dollar an hour. Less than we spend on cable!

And its value might even accrue. Amy Lau, an interior designer whose clients include Elvis Costello and David Zincenko, the former Men's Health editor, said some sofas "are going to be the collectibles for tomorrow, so they will have value to them later on if they're purchased correctly."

In the long run, Ms. Lau added, a big investment in superior quality can even be prudent, as lower-priced models often don't hold up over time. "I don't know how many times I've seen a sofa in the four-, five-, six-thousand range," she said, "and in three to four years it's gone."

Ms. Lau's own sofa is a vintage piece designed by Harvey Probber, who pioneered sectional seating in the 1940s and died at the age of 80 in 2003. "I'm on my second upholstery," she said. JULIE LASKY