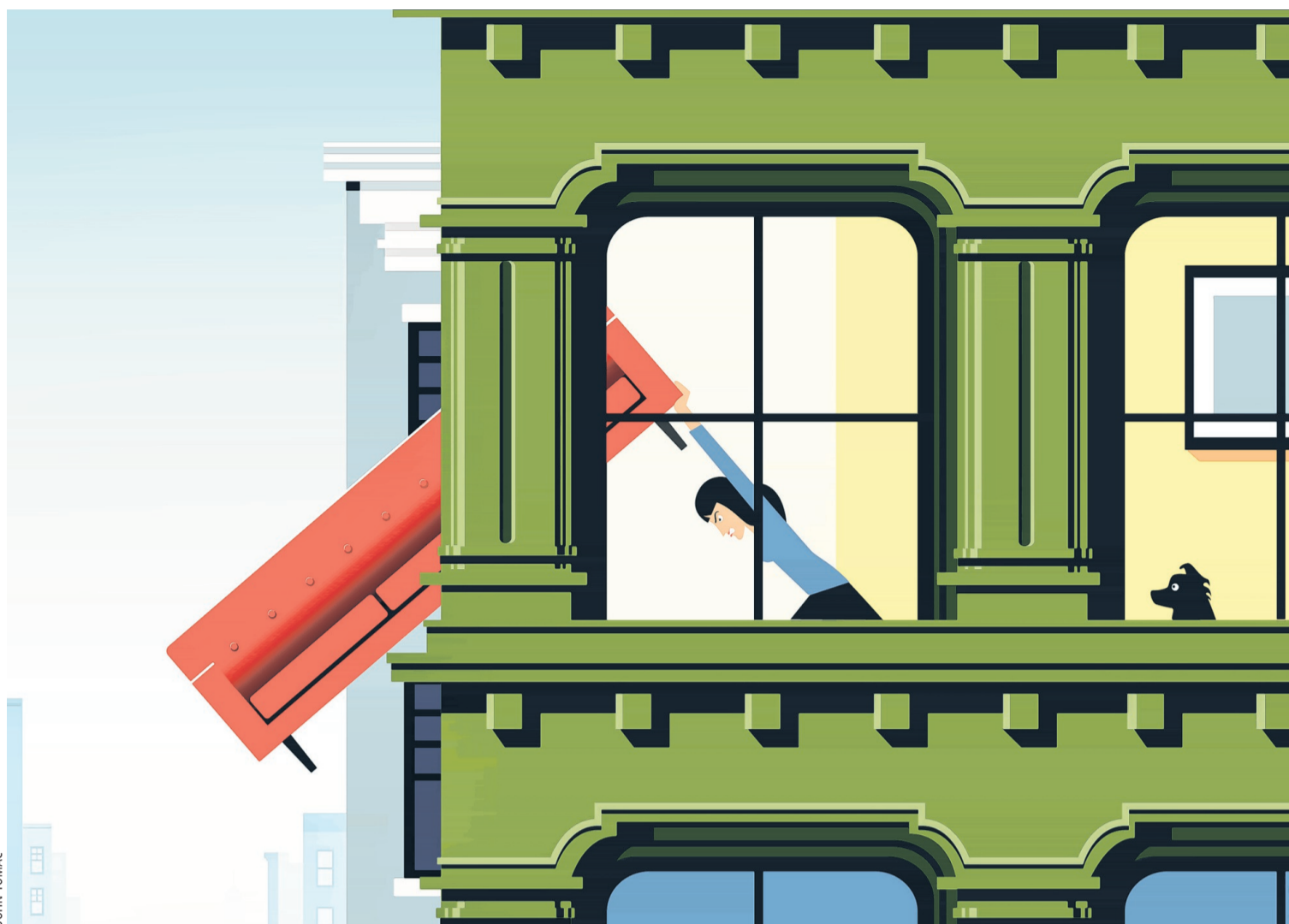


DESIGN & DECORATING



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A MATTER OF LIFE AND DÉCOR / MICHELLE SLATALLA



Why We React Badly When That New Sofa Arrives

TIME WINDOW FOR delivery” was the subject line on an email I received the other day. “Your new sofa will be delivered between 1:00 and 3:00,” it informed me.

Protocol in these situations requires me to phone my friend Stephanie immediately. “The new furniture will be here on Monday afternoon,” I told her.

“I’ll clear my schedule,” said Stephanie, who happens to be an interior designer. “If the sofa gets there before I do, try not to look at it.”

Stephanie, who lives two blocks away, comes over to consult whenever I buy something new for my house. This is necessary because I suffer from a chronic condition known as “New Furniture Freak-out.” For the first three weeks after I buy any piece of furniture, I absolutely hate it.

I don’t experience buyer’s remorse from other big purchases like cars, televisions or houses. Just furniture, and after I get used to my acquisitions, I am at peace with

them. Sometimes it takes Stephanie to convince me, with her tape measure, that the furniture in question is not too big or too small or too-something-else for the room. A velvet sofa I initially hated because it was “too brown” (“It’s just brown enough,” Stephanie said) became

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such a favorite that, some years later, I moved it into my bedroom—where I am lying on it now as I type.

For a long time, I had no idea other people also suffered from the same ailment. But recently another pal, Julie, confided she was having a hard time getting used to a new coffee table (“It’s just there, looking at me every time I walk into the room,” she said). Then I found the reader forums on remodeling website Houzz, where panicked people

post photos of furniture (“I bought a new sofa and side chair...I’ve stayed in my bedroom all day so I don’t have to face my awful decision”). Other readers chime in to soothe, in a very Stephanie-like way (“I like your sofa...come out of hiding”).

In fact, the worse your old sofa looks, the more likely you are to hate a new one, said Becky Dietrich, an interior designer based in Charlotte, N.C. This is a theory she developed after 40 years in the business, working with private clients and as an in-store designer at Ethan Allen and other furniture stores.

“People are uncomfortable with change. The more of a change the new furniture is, the worse the reaction,” said Ms. Dietrich, whose experiences prompted her to post an article on Houzz, titled “Why It’s OK to Hate Your New Custom Sofa.”

Buyers are most likely to freak out, she said, if the new furniture is upholstered in a bold color or pattern. Other triggers include furniture that’s a different size than the

piece it replaces and fabric that creates clashing patterns in a room. Interestingly, colors especially susceptible to changes in daylight—such as taupe or brown—are difficult to get used to.

“If you have a freak-out, you are like 99% of Americans,” Ms. Dietrich told me. “I tell my clients all the time, you are going to hate this when it gets in the door. Don’t worry about it.”

“My new sofa is dark leather,” I confided. “It’s coming on Monday.”

“Leather?” Ms. Dietrich repeated. “The freak-out is going to happen.” I would prefer to skip the freak-out and embark immediately on the love-affair phase of my relationship with my leather sofa. After all, there are plenty of lucky people who don’t panic. Designers say this is because these folks are better able to imagine how a new sofa will look in a space, or they prepared better. (“With patterned fabrics, some customers order a whole yard so they can see what the repeat will look like before they make a deci-

sion,” said Ms. Dietrich.)

But factors other than appearance can trigger a panic. As much as 10% of furniture gets returned when there is nothing wrong with it, said Ohio management consultant Daniel Bolger, whose clients include Bassett Furniture and La-Z-Boy. (“It’s an emotional process, buying furniture, and people don’t always react logically,” Mr. Bolger said when I phoned him from my bedroom sofa.)

What panic-prone home-furnishers don’t realize, he said, is that the delivery process itself can play a key role in determining a purchaser’s reaction to new furniture.

After analyzing the outcome of 250,000 furniture deliveries in New York, Florida, California and Denver, Mr. Bolger came to a startling conclusion: Any problem during delivery can make a buyer feel as if he or she made a mistake, he said.

For instance, if the delivery team arrives late, dings up a wall while trying to maneuver my leather sofa through the front door, tracks in dirt on their shoes, or makes a comment along the lines of “What idiot sold you this?” I will be more likely to have a freak-out, he said.

By the time I said goodbye to Mr. Bolger, I’d spent so much time talking about the sofa I felt like I’d been in therapy. This was the first time I’d confronted my deepest furniture fears before the sofa even arrived.

Monday rolled around, and I felt strangely calm when Stephanie phoned to reassure me she would come over by 1 p.m. to be on hand for the entire delivery-time window.

Then at noon, potential disaster struck. The doorbell rang—the delivery truck had arrived an hour early!

“Where should we put the sofa?” one furniture mover asked. I pointed weakly to an empty spot in the living room.

“It’ll look great there,” he claimed.

What happened next was a blur—within seconds, it seemed, three movers donned blue surgical shoe covers and carefully maneuvered the sofa through my narrow front hall and set it down in the living room. Before I knew it, they were removing its protective, quilted cover.

“Do you want to try it out?” I think one of them asked.

“You first,” I remember saying.

He sat on it.

“Comfortable,” he said.

“Looks great,” another mover said. “Sign here.”

Then they were gone. It was a good delivery. I sneaked a peek. It looked...just the way I had envisioned it: a low-slung, 84-inch, un-tufted, dark-leather Scandinavian-style sofa.

An hour later, when Stephanie arrived, I was lying on the new sofa, typing.

“I love it,” I said.

Ms. Slatalla is an editor for remodelista.com which, like The Wall Street Journal, is owned by News Corp.

FLOWER SCHOOL

Post-Party Impressionism

Floral designer **Lindsey Taylor** riffs on a pooped-out reveler for an after-the-holidays arrangement



THE ARRANGEMENT



THE INSPIRATION

Green geranium foliage grounds the blues, yellows and oranges of the bouquet (far left) evoking the sofa in Ramon Casas’s 1899 ‘Decadent Young Woman. After the Dance.’

Vessel: *stylist’s own*

ON MY INSTAGRAM feed, up popped a painting by an artist unfamiliar to me: “Decadent Young Woman. After the Dance” (1899) is the work of Ramon Casas (1866-1932), a Spaniard known for portraits of the intellectual elite of Barcelona, Paris and Madrid. His portrayal of a woman succumbing to the exhaustion too much revelry brings felt appropriate as inspiration for my January, post-holiday-frenzy arrangement.

I selected a footed vessel with a wide opening that would let a large, horizontal bouquet cascade heavily over its rim, mimicking the woman’s splayed posture. To support that many stems, I fashioned a reusable “floral frog” by bunching up a piece of floral chicken wire and securing it in the urn with waterproof tape.

I created an overall structure with the foliage of scented geranium plants that I winter indoors. The leaves had all the shifts in green I wanted, and their soft texture and frilly edges nod to the luxuriant sofa. They also smell refreshingly pungent and herbal.

In the garden, I found a few early blooms of white hellebore to insert in front, encouraging them to droop like our hedonist’s hand. For her hair’s autumn tones: raspberries on stems. For the blues of her dress: viburnum berries and the thistle-like Eryngium. Yellow poppies stood in for her book, and rich orange ranunculus echoed the corner of the carpet. Making these arrangements, I focus on crucial textures and colors in the art and don’t try to find an equivalent for everything. That would get too strained.