

Relax. There's Plenty of Room.



Mark Veltman for The New York Times

Today's chair is yesterday's love seat. Right, a Bernhardt chair-and-a-half at Raymour & Flanigan; the LC2, left, designed by Le Corbusier in the late '20s, is sold by Design Within Reach.

By STEVEN KURUTZ
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TEXANS aren't known for understatement, so when Mark Williamson starts describing his couch ("We call it 'Texas depth'"), it's a good bet he's not talking about a love seat.

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The Molly chair from Raymour & Flanigan is almost four feet wide.

And the couch in his suburban Dallas home, made by a local company called the Luxury of Leather and very similar to one he saw at Restoration Hardware, is indeed big: 100 inches long by 46 inches deep by 36 inches high. When relatives visited from South Carolina last year, everyone jumped onto the couch for a family photo. Seven people and a dog fit comfortably.

The first time he sat in the Restoration Hardware version, Mr. Williamson said, his feet didn't even touch the floor. "It seemed like a couch for a basketball player or something," he said. But Mr. Williamson, who is 5-foot-10 and owns a company that organizes career fairs, has since adjusted to LeBron James-size seating.

"This couch is a beast," he wrote on a house and garden message board, with obvious pride. "In fact it is so big it's almost like having a whole cow in your living room."

Furniture has been bulking up for several years now, partly to match the scale of all the cavernous "great rooms" that became must-haves in new homes (and perhaps also to match expanding waistlines). But big furniture seems to have reached a critical mass of comical massiveness. One tipoff that the scale of a couch might be a bit out of whack? When you start comparing it to a large farm animal.

Home stores these days, especially mass-market retailers, are filled with enormous furniture: coffee tables big enough to land an airplane on and "luxé depth" sofas with sink-in cushions that could easily double as guest beds. Even high-end European brands like Poltrona Frau and Ligne Roset are selling bulky Chesterfield sofas and sectionals that seem to stretch into infinity.

These pieces dwarf the furniture of an earlier era, or even the more modest designs elsewhere in furniture stores today. At Raymour & Flanigan, the East Coast furniture chain, a chair from the Briarwood collection by HM Richards is equal in width to Le Corbusier's LC2 love seat, designed in the late '20s and sold by Design Within Reach. (The "chair and a half" version is nearly as big as the LC2 couch.) With its stout profile and rolled arms, the Briarwood chair is a throne for the King of Sunday Afternoon.

"I was just shocked," said Thomas Hine, the culture and design writer, recalling his visits to furniture stores in suburban Philadelphia a few years ago as he searched for a chair. "I was appalled by how incredibly large furniture had gotten. I had no idea."

Richard Wright, who runs the Chicago-based auction house Wright, which specializes in slimmer midcentury furniture, is also puzzled by the scale of today's furniture. "It's very odd to me," he said. "Sofas are ponderously deep now, as are chairs. I find deep seating very uncomfortable. You feel like a little kid."

One of the most prominent retailers of supersize furnishings is Restoration Hardware, the California-based chain whose leather steamer trunks and machine-age desks suggest that the Indiana Jones estate is being liquidated. In its fall catalog, the company says its most recent line was partly inspired by the baronial spaces of 18th-century France.

Consider the Versailles chair, with its winged sides and cocoon-ish overhang that reaches a full five feet in height. The design is intended to "fend off drafts in the grand chateaux of France," the catalog explains. Unless you actually own a drafty chateau, though, you're just as likely to feel like that old Lily Tomlin character Edith Ann when you sit in it.

"The strange thing is, you would likely need to live out in the suburbs to have the space for that furniture, but it seems the aesthetic is fairly urban," said Claire Zulkey, who has thought a lot about Restoration's Old-World-Europe-meets-steampunk look.

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(Page 2 of 3)

Last summer, Ms. Zulkey, a writer who lives in Chicago, carried the Restoration catalog with her on a road trip and began musing on what the furniture might suggest about a mythical population living inside the store. On her blog, she theorized that “the people who live at Restoration Hardware are either very big, and thus enjoy furniture and accessories proportionate to their largeness, or they're petite, and enjoy feeling dwarfed by their home décor.”

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Mark Graham for The New York Times

From left, Zachary, Mark, Zeta and Julie Williamson on the big sofa in their Allen, Tex., living room. Mr. Williamson likens its size to that of “a whole cow.”

The company declined to comment for this article, other than to say that it offers furniture in various scales and sizes.

Annie Elliott, an interior designer in Washington, said she battles against giant furniture and generally advises clients not to buy it. “It doesn't look right, it's sloppy and probably too big for whatever room they're putting it in,” Ms. Elliott said.

She recalled one client who insisted on buying the Dr. Pitt sectional sofa by Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams. “It's U-shaped, but they sell ottomans that are the same seat height as the couch, so you can push it in and make a raft,”

Ms. Elliott said. The sectional was to go into a dining area that the client was converting to a family room.

“They pay me to save them from themselves,” Ms. Elliott said. “I suggested something more in scale so you could have a reading chair and maybe a place to put your drink.”

But the client insisted, and the sofa took up so much space that nothing else fit in the room. “There wasn't room for a floor lamp,” Ms. Elliott said. “We mounted lights on the walls.”

When Mr. Williamson put his bovine couch in his family room, it instantly dwarfed the other pieces. He set out on a quest to find a table scaled to match the couch, he said, and eventually bought “a behemoth of a coffee table that weighs 300 pounds.” The appeal of both the coffee table and the couch is that they are childproof and seemingly indestructible.

He added: “I can stand on top of the coffee table, and it won't even think about budging or breaking. And I stand on it quite often. Neighbors come over and I'm always showing them, ‘Look, I can stand on this coffee table.’”

In some cases — particularly in New York, where doorways and elevators are narrow — big pieces bump up against simple laws of physics. Max Bar-Nahum, the director of sales and marketing at Dr. Sofa, a Bronx-based company that specializes in the disassembly and reassembly of furniture, said he gets several calls a day from people who buy a couch or chair and discover it's too big to deliver. The steel-frame couches made by B&B Italia and other modern designers bring him a lot of business. “You have no idea how big these sofas are,” Mr. Bar-Nahum said.

Granted, it can be hard to gauge the size of furniture in a store, where the ceilings are often high and the showrooms loft-like.

But retailers show no sign of dropping the biggest pieces from their lines, even at a time when many Americans are downsizing in response to the housing crash and recession. The median size of a new home, as of the third quarter of 2011, was 2,244 square feet, down from 2,308 square feet in 2006, said David Crowe, chief economist for the National Association of Homebuilders. He added that the square footage should level off at about 2,200 — a trend line that hardly screams Texas depth.

“The underlying reason is that people like it and they buy it,” said Russell Bienenstock, editor in chief of Furniture World, a trade magazine, explaining the prevalence of oversize furniture. “You have to assume retailers are re-ordering what is selling well.”

Michelle Enders, a senior buyer for Raymour & Flanigan, said the company carries a range of styles and sizes, but sales of sectionals, in particular, have been booming in the last two years. “They make a lot of sense,” Ms. Enders said. “They maximize your seating area, and in the larger great rooms, they help to break the room up.”

Especially in McMansions, which still populate the suburbs like domestic mastodons.

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(Page 3 of 3)

“Look at the home inventory,” said Bill Quirk, the president of HM Richards, the company that makes the Briarwood chair and its supersize chair-and-a-half sibling. “People still need to furnish the big homes that were built. It’s not like all of a sudden furniture will change.”

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Mr. Quirk discovered firsthand how his company’s seating looks inside a smaller home. “I rented a place down in Naples, Fla., that had one of our chaises in it, and it took up the whole den,” he said. “I thought, ‘This thing is wildly out of proportion for this beach house.’”

Still, he observed, in a more-spacious home, a big chair takes the place of a formal love seat and fits better with the casual way that people live. And wall-mounted flat-screen TVs have eliminated media centers, creating more space for seating. For homeowners with what The New Yorker writer Tad Friend once called “relaxed fit” tastes, overlarge, cushiony seating is equated with comfort.


“People want the furniture to be more comfy,” Ms. Enders said. “The more contemporary furniture, which has lower seating with firmer backs — I don’t understand how the Europeans use that furniture.”


Ms. Elliott, the Washington interior designer, said she heard the same comfort-is-king refrain from the client who bought the Dr. Pitt sectional. “She really wanted to create a space where you could let it all hang out — where you could run from the kitchen and do a swan dive.”


To Mr. Hine, the culture and design writer, however, what appears to be a desire for comfort is really “ostentatious indulgence.” Referring to all those sprawling sofas and chairs, he said: “They look like they have to be the most comfortable thing ever. But then there’s an element of ‘I want to impress everyone with how comfortable I am.’”


Mr. Bienenstock, the Furniture World editor, offered another, more primal reason for the appeal of huge furniture — one drawn from the theory of supernormal stimuli. Brooding birds, presented with the choice between a smaller egg or a larger one, have been observed to choose the larger, even if it was artificial. In other words, even birds think bigger is better.

“Maybe the same thing is going on with upholstery,” Mr. Bienenstock said.


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