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A COLLABORATIVE SOFA DESIGN



A Sofa for Somebody Else

Collaboration can be one of the furniture maker's most vital skills

BY ROSS DAY

Good custom-made furniture is a double portrait. It reflects the image of its maker, but it just as clearly reflects the person it was made for. To some furniture makers, it might seem compromising to design and build something with someone else's needs in mind. But I think that is the wrong way to look at it. To me, commission work is simply doing what someone

else wants in my own way. In the 12 years I've been making custom furniture I've discovered that the relationship with the person for whom a piece is made—whether that person is your spouse or a stranger—is where much of the fun is. I find pleasure in the personal interaction, and a challenge in stretching to design something that I wouldn't otherwise have

made. When the combination is right, I've found, the process sometimes produces work better than I would have done on my own.

But it takes effort and experience to develop the skills that enable you to work with someone well enough to make the act of collaboration a boon to you both. I recently completed a commission (for the sofa in the photos



on these pages) that was a real pleasure. I thought looking at the way that commission unfolded might provide some insight into the process of building something for somebody else.

TWO SIDES OF A FIRST MEETING

I drove an hour and a half to see Norma Shainin and her husband, Peter, at their house north of Seattle for our first meeting. I would have driven farther. To me, seeing someone in their own environment is invaluable. A person's house often tells me more than they do, offering a wealth of information about their taste and the way they use their furniture. I take in the furniture but also the architecture, the art work, the other things they may collect.

Norma's house, with its clean, simple lines and understated accessories, helped to determine the simple, sleek look of the sofa. The fine craftsmanship and detailing of the many baskets and carvings she collects convinced me that a sofa with similarly fine detailing would be appropriate.

I am also alert to the way someone uses their furniture. At Norma's house, it was obvious that everything was well-cared for and kept in its place. I would have designed something quite different for a family that was more informal and obviously used their furniture hard. To record my impressions, I always pack a note pad for making quick sketches and jotting down information, and I always take a tape measure. An easy-to-use camera for some snapshots can also be helpful.

Getting a sense of the setting and the people you are working with is half

the equation. The other half is presenting your work in the best possible light. This means bringing along a well-organized, professional-looking portfolio with good photography. Good photos can be expensive, but I don't think they are optional; your portfolio is really all you have as a record of your work. I bring a resume, a short biography and a business card to help give a picture of my approach to furniture making. Wood samples and sketches or drawings from a previous job would also be helpful to illustrate how your design process works. You might even consider bringing along an easily portable sample of your work—a side chair, say, or a small box—so your customer can see and feel the quality of your work first hand.

ESTABLISHING A RAPPORT

Furniture design is a social skill as much as an aesthetic one. One customer will be very clear about what they want and don't want and full of pertinent information and useful suggestions—Norma was like this—while another will have to have things

My Side of the Sofa

BY NORMA SHAININ

Commissioning a sofa is a fair investment, and not one we made lightly. But we had already commissioned several smaller pieces from Ross and I was totally confident that he could do what I wanted. He always listened to me carefully—which was important, because I'm not always so clear. And he made the commission an open process that offered more than I thought possible. Instead of "No, we can't do that," he would say "Sure, we'll make it work." And he did. I'm very pleased with the way the sofa came out, and I feel that there's a part of me in it, somehow. The ultimate stamp of approval, though, comes from my kids, who are already eyeing it. It's obvious that Ross's pieces will be in the family for a long time.



Temporary partnership. Ross Day views each commission as a design collaboration and a chance "to make what someone else wants in my own way." The photo above left shows Day with Norma Shainin and the pear sofa he recently built for her. At right, they confer at his shop in mid-construction.

dragged out of them. One key part of my role is to get a good exchange of ideas going.

If a customer is having trouble conveying what they want, I start probing: Do they like light- or dark-colored woods? How many people should this sofa seat? Would they like something on the smaller or larger end of the scale? Heavy or light? Do they like clean lines or something more embellished and ornamental?

It didn't take much to establish a rap-

port with Norma, who has a design background herself. But I still learned something valuable from the process. After the initial meeting she began sending me photos clipped from design magazines to illustrate her likes and dislikes, to make suggestions about what sort of feeling, form and detailing she might like on her sofa. She would clip a photo, tape it to a sheet of paper and write a few comments below: "Too ornate and complicated, but I like the flare of the arm." "Like side detail, although too open." This helped me enormously and seems to me a technique that could be very useful for drawing out someone who is not sure of their ideas or has trouble conceptualizing.

JUGGLING ALL THE INPUT

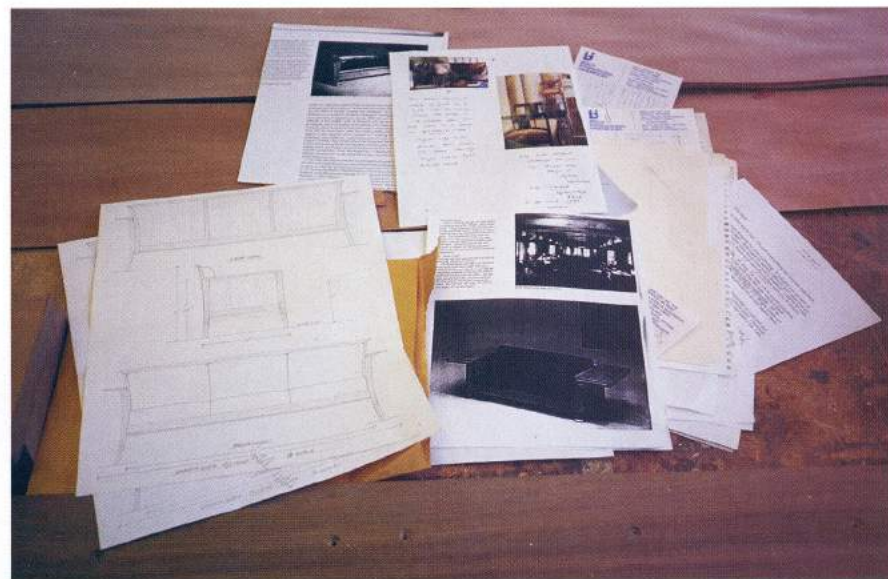
Once I've done my field work for a commission, I spread all the input and influences out in my mind's eye. For Norma's job, I started with the requirements we had discussed: a sofa to seat three, built with Norma's favorite wood (and one of mine) European pear, and upholstered with loose



Reality check. Shainin and Day confer on the full-scale drawing of the front of the couch, done on ¼-inch medium-density fiberboard.



Robbing the memory bank. Day's lounge chair below, designed several years ago, has shaping in its arms and at the ends of its crest rail that influenced the detailing in the new sofa, above.



The ideas are in the envelope. Day and his customer traded ideas by mail as the design developed. Shainin mailed Day magazine clippings which she annotated.



Settling on a format. With their paneled sides, loose cushions and wide, wing-like arms, Leopold Stickley's Prairie Settle (above) and Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House sofa (at right) influenced Day's thinking about the overall format of his sofa.



cushions in an off-white sail cloth. Then there were the clippings Norma had sent. They made it clear she wanted a sofa with arms that curved outward slightly as they rose. I thought back on her living room and remembered a couple of things particularly: the Frank Lloyd Wright barrel chairs with their beautifully rolled backs, and the planked ceiling, which was covered at the perimeter to meet the walls. Two sofas I had always admired were also blended into the mix. One was Leopold Stickley's Prairie Settle and the other was Frank Lloyd Wright's extremely wide-armed sofa for the Robie House. Both these sofas had upholstered cushions in a framework of wood panels and both had wide arms. I found the format interesting visually and also appealing for the comfort and enclosure it seemed to offer. I decided to adapt that format for Norma's sofa.

The Stickley and Wright sofas are both entirely rectilinear, however, as well as heavy and blunt. I wanted some curves to play off the barrel

chairs and the ceiling and I wanted more delicate detailing. Overall, I wanted the new sofa to look contemporary and fairly sleek, but not flashy. I decided to blend into the new sofa some of the curved elements and refined details from a lounge chair I had built previously. I decided on frame-and-panel construction for the tactile quality it would bring and because it seemed the most manageable way to build.

For Norma's sofa, as with most all my designs, I came up with quite a few options as I worked my way toward the new piece. It would have been tempting to present her with a dozen alternatives to choose from. I resisted the temptation. Presenting too many options can make it harder for your customer to choose. Either that, or they'll immediately pick the one design you really didn't want to build. I usually show just two concepts for a given project. It forces me to edit myself and decide which designs are the strongest. Of course, if neither of the

Arms talks. Day invites his customers to his shop to see their furniture in progress. Above, he and Norma confer about the width and the curve of the arms on her sofa. He cuts down these dummy arms until they are both satisfied; later, he duplicates the agreed-upon shape in pear (below).





options meets with approval, I will go back to the drawing board. I sent Norma one sketch of a frame-and-panel sofa with legs and another, quite similar, but with side and back panels that supported the sofa, sweeping right down to the floor. Norma picked the one with legs.

GETTING THE GO-AHEAD

Even someone like Norma, with an eye for art, is taking a lot on faith when she OKs a small sketch. It's important not to abuse that faith. I've heard more than one story about people watching agape as a custom piece arrives that bears little relation to the image they had in their mind. I try to be certain all the way through the commissioning process that my customer and I are on the same page. To provide a close look at the details of the piece I'm designing as well as some sense of its size and the way it will fit in to their house, I generally present full-scale front, back and side view drawings. Instead of wrestling with wrinkly rolled drawings, I do the drawings on sheets of ¼-inch MDF, which are easy to set up and view. Then I take them out to the customer's house and place them right where the furniture will stand. I accompany them with samples of the solid wood and veneer for the job.

I sometimes also rely on full-scale mock-ups to help me work through the design of a piece. In the case of Norma's sofa I did not make one, as I was convinced by the full-scale drawings that the joinery (a lot like a frame-and-panel cabinet, really) and the proportions would work fine. But when I do make mock-ups, I find them to be as helpful to the customer as the maker.

Norma and I reviewed the full-scale

layout, compared it against the concept drawing, and looked at the wood samples. I also explained how I intended to orient the grain on the pear-veneered panels. She agreed we were going in the right direction, and gave me the go-ahead to begin building.

WE MEET HALFWAY

Several months later, Norma came by my shop when the sofa was half-finished. Her sofa's frame (minus its panels, which were veneered but not yet trimmed) stood there dry-assembled, held together with a half-dozen quick-release clamps. It might seem risky to have a customer see their piece while it is still in raw form, but I think bringing the customer into the shop is just as important to the commission process as going out to visit them in their house. In addition to being helpful in the development of the design, these visits provide the customer with a unique view into the craft. Curiosity about the way things are made and the work lives of the people who make them is an important part of what makes people commission furniture rather than buying it in a department store or off the gallery floor.

Norma and I had deliberately deferred decisions on several issues until we could see the sofa taking shape. The main one was the width and shape of the arms. This was a real concern for Norma—she was worried that they would end up too wide. I thought that a fairly wide arm was important to the success of the design. So that we could work out the arm in 3-D, I had made some dummy arms of alder and fitted them onto the otherwise real sofa frame. As we talked, I could slip an arm off and shave it down a bit on the jointer, then put it back on the sofa. Over the course of 20 minutes or so we reached a width and shape that we both liked. To me, interactions like that go to the core of working with someone: give-and-take that rewards you both; in addition to solving design problems and fulfill-



Wright angles. Day had the rolled back of the Frank Lloyd Wright barrel chairs in mind when he gave his sofa its curves.

ing desires, they bring the customer into collaboration with the furniture maker in an intimate way that really makes them an integral part of the project.

THE SOFA AT HOME

Some weeks later, I delivered the finished sofa. I had it photographed in a studio first, and during the shoot I looked at it critically from all angles and thought it worked pretty well. But when we put it in place in Norma's living room, with its rugged stone fireplace and warm plank ceiling, its beautiful rugs and its Wright barrel chairs, its antique tansu and finely woven baskets, the new sofa suddenly looked much richer than it had before. Later, as we sat eating dinner, I looked across the room at the sofa and it seemed perfectly at home. It occurred to me that it probably wouldn't look as good anywhere else. And that, I thought, must mean the collaboration had worked. ■

The sofa is 78 in. long, 31 in. high and 25 in. deep.

Comfort in conformity. Day's sofa reflects the living room it was designed for, from the curves of the coved ceiling to the fine handwork of the carpets and baskets.