

HOUSE RULES

Episode 21: How to Buy a Sofa You Won't Hate Tomorrow

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.
Welcome to Episode 21.

Thirty years ago, I agonized over what sofa to purchase. I finally made a decision, and then waited for it to be delivered.

The very moment the delivery men left the house, I knew I had made a huge mistake. I spent the next five years giving a dirty look to a sofa that I picked out. But it was worth it.

By the end of today's episode you'll know one way to pick out a sofa you won't hate tomorrow.

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I really tried to avoid this truth for a while, but the truth is, if you hate the sofa you're gonna hate the space. Over the twenty-nine years and fifteen different houses that I've been creating a home, I've found the one thing that makes or breaks how I feel about a family or living room, and that's my relationship with the sofa.

When I detest looking at and sitting on my sofa, there's really no amount of cute tchotchkes or wall art, pretty rugs or lighting can make up for the hate my heart holds for a sofa that isn't serving our family in both form and function. I really wish this was something we could get past and I had a trick to make you love any sofa. I promise I've tried. But I don't have that. Committing to use a sofa you hate for the long haul is like forcing yourself to wear the worst pair of jeans you've ever tried on. Indefinitely. You will feel lousy every day, and everything you pair with it will be tainted.

This goes for the most prominent piece in every room. Hate your bed and you won't love your bedroom. Hate your dining table and.. Well, you get the idea.

If you don't love your sofa and are ready to make changes in the room where your sofa lives, I want to encourage you that if you do nothing else than find a way to get a sofa you love, your entire room will feel better. It's the single most impactful decision you can make. When you hate your sofa, you'll hate your space. When you hate your space, you won't fully use it, and that's a waste.

Maybe you feel that if your family says the sofa is comfortable, then you aren't allowed to change it. But comfort is only half of what a sofa provides, because even when you aren't sitting on it, you see it. If you didn't care how your sofa looked, you wouldn't be listening to this podcast. If you've trained your family to think a sofa should be as comfortable and nappable as a bed and should include cupholders and remote controlled recliners, you'll have some work to do to reintroduce a sofa that does the main job well: allow people to simply sit comfortably. It's possible to find a comfy sofa that looks great. I know you're up for the challenge.

Thirty years ago I was freshly married and we had saved a budget for one piece of furniture: a sofa.

I was equal parts thrilled and terrified.

I knew enough to know that I didn't know how to shop for a sofa. I was very aware of that while also being aware that we needed a place to sit.

This is gonna sound like a lie, but I VIVIDLY, CLEARLY remember thinking and wishing there was someone I could hire to just help me pick out a sofa. Like a sofa counselor. I knew I wanted to learn how to make great decorating decisions myself, and even if I had the budget I probably wouldn't want to hire a designer, but I also knew there was a lot riding on my sofa decision. If only I had an article or book to read, or a coach, someone to give me some rules of thumb on how to buy a sofa I wouldn't end up hating.

The truth is, I had become that person. And the tuition for me to graduate from sofa buying coaching school was purchasing a sofa I instantly hated. It was worth it.

Now I understand how to buy a sofa that I'll love for years. Now I am talking about the look of a sofa today. We can talk about the feel of a sofa another time, but today I am talking about how the sofa looks. I understand how to do that and I can tell you how to do that too.

Almost every town we've lived in has a neighborhood that was built between the late 1800's and 1940's and it's full of charming homes that are well cared for. Every home has character, personality and endearing qualities. A lot of times, every home sells fast when it goes on the market. Every woman wants to drive down the street slowly in the evenings to see if we can see through the windows as the lights are coming on.

There are Tudor style homes with arched doors, cat slides.

Craftsman with their low pitched gabled roof, exposed roof rafters, tapered square columns opening up to welcoming porches.

You'll see sensible and stately colonial revivals with their beautiful symmetry, a center door often with sidelights, flanked by double hung windows.

There's probably some French eclectic homes with steeply pitched hip roofs, some even with round towers, or half timbering where you see exposed wood and the home is often a mix of brick, stucco and stone.

If you're lucky, maybe there are some older homes like fussy asymmetrical Victorians with gingerbread details, turrets, and wrap-around porches.

Then from time to time as you drive through the neighborhood, you can tell a lot has been sold and a recent new build has been put in. We can tell because that house often doesn't have the charm that the older homes have around it. Why? It lacks history, the new house often isn't built with a nod to the past in the same way the older homes were. So, although the new home was built with the trends that were popular at the time, it most likely won't have the same appeal over time because it lacks that rootedness into the past. It's missing those classic, recognizable details that links it directly to a historical past.

What in the world does this have to do with buying a sofa?

Well, I think it has everything to do with it.

If you want to purchase a sofa you won't hate tomorrow, one way is to look for a silhouette or shape. A lot of times it's referred to as the sofa style that's been around awhile. A classic style is ideal because it's proven itself over time.

How do you know what a classic style is? Well I can tell you, and I will, but also here's a way to see for yourself.

Go to a thrift store or your grandma's house and get your hands on some old decorating books or magazines from at least 30 years ago. Or you can google "living rooms from the 1980's or 1970's." At first the patterns and colors and datedness of it all will be in your face so you have to get used to that first. Once your eyes have adjusted, I want you to go silhouette hunting.

We're talking about sofa's today, so that's what I want you to notice. Notice the shapes, the outlines, the silhouettes of the sofas. Try not to notice the fabric color, styles or patterns. You will find that you recognize some of the classic shapes of sofas and you see these in homes today. Because they have proven themselves to be ideal and these sofas styles have a name.

Some classic sofa shapes that have stood the test of time are:

Chesterfields

English Roll arms

Camelback

Lawson

Tuxedo

Cabriole

So if you want to buy a sofa you won't hate tomorrow, try looking for a sofa with a name, with history, because one way to predict the future is to look back at the past.

I've purchased at least ten sofas in my life. I've had custom made sofas and thrift store sofas. The sofas I liked best that we used for the longest time were the ones with a timeless, classic shape – a few of those were hundred dollar purchases from thrift stores, a few were nicer, brand new sofas. Slipcovering a sofa also is a great way to get more life out of a sofa or to update an outdated fabric. But if a sofa is the wrong scale, if it's uncomfortable or if the silhouette or shape is something you don't love, slipcovering is not going to help that much.

It's not the price of the sofa, believe it or not, that makes a difference in whether I like it for the long haul, or if I think you're going to like it for the long haul. It's going to be the silhouette. Yes, a nicer sofa usually costs more, and to me it's worth buying the best you can afford. But where most of us go wrong is buying a sofa with an unrecognizable, uncategorizable shape and then we wonder why it adds no style to our space. I'm the queen of this, so that's why I know it so well.

Am I saying that if your sofa doesn't have a name it's ugly, wrong or you'll get tired of it? Not at all! Some of my favorite sofas I see online are unique and amazing! But, if you are like me and kind of worried, or had an experience like me where you bought a sofa and ended up not liking it, I want you to look for something more timeless. If you are unsure what direction to go, if you want something you're more likely to love for years, choose a timeless silhouette in a neutral color with a fabric that's soft and easy to clean.

For me, I'll add color and pattern with pillows. I'm going to change those up every season because I'm fickle when it comes to color. But that sofa is going to last a long time.

Timelessness is truly here to stay.

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Today's episode features House Rule number 34: Timelessness is here to stay, and House Rule number 40: Hate the sofa, hate the space. Those are just two of the 100 House Rules included in the brand new book called, you guessed it, House Rules: How to Decorate for Every Home Style and Budget.

House Rules is available everywhere books are sold April 23, 2024. If you are listening before that date, you're extra lucky, you can preorder and reserve your copy now and as a thank you we've created a masterclass called House Rules in Action. I invited a video crew to my home and we walked through the rooms of my house and I shared which rules helped me make decisions in every room. You'll also receive the audiobook for FREE when the book releases. There's a link in the show notes, the same link is the one to use to order your copy and claim your gifts.