



They are statement pieces – but sofas must offer style AND comfort, says **Kate Watson-Smyth**

Be sure to sit in first class

BUYING a new sofa is one of the heftier purchases you will make for your home, so it pays to give it careful consideration.

You might think that choosing a colour that goes with the walls and carpet is all there is to it, but there are all sorts of other factors to take into account.

And with sofas on the market from £800 to £8,000 in a variety of shapes and sizes, where do you start?

Richard Baker, who set up his traditional furniture-making business Rume, ten years ago, says: 'The sofa is the most important element of the room and you should always spend a little more money than you intended getting it right and then build the room around it.'

'The colour is the last thing to consider because it is the one element that you can easily change.'

First of all size. Some people just want a sofa, settee, couch — call it what you will — that's long enough to take a nap on. Others would prefer two smaller pieces facing each other to create a cosy atmosphere.

Or, perhaps, you want an L-shaped or modular one to get the whole family onboard. And it's not just about how it fits in the room. It needs to get through your front door. Many companies offer sofas with bolt-on arms or legs that can be removed.

Campbell Thompson, senior buyer at furniture store Heals, suggests laying a newspaper template on the floor to help you choose the right size.

'If you don't have a space for a corner model, then consider a



Settle in: The traditional three-seater Pelham sofa is priced at £3,881, plus the cost of 17 metres of fabric, at Rume.co.uk

large sofa and footstool which will achieve the same result, but allow for more flexible living,' he says.

Don't forget that wide arms will make for less seating space and, if you are buying a leather sofa, it will need to be at least 30cm away from a radiator to prevent cracking.

A sofa with a high back may be more comfortable, as it provides a head rest, but this style will dominate in a room with lower

ceilings, while low backs will give a sense of space and also emphasise the size of an open-plan room.

Thompson advises that you think carefully about who will use your sofa: is it for guests or the family?

'If you want to lounge or watch TV, then don't choose one where your knees will be lower than your hips for long periods of time.'

'If you need more support, then pick firmer foam or sprung back seats with high arms and legs. And if you want a deep sofa, then make sure there are enough cushions to support your back.'

exactly what you are buying. He also suggests the following test: lift one front corner of the sofa and when you have reached about six inches, the other front leg should have risen, too. If it hasn't, then the frame is not rigid enough.

The legs should be bolted in place, not just screwed, and the fixings should be attached with screws, glue and dowel pegs.

When it comes to the filling, it's a matter of personal preference. Feathers will need plumping more often than foam, but they can clump together over time.

Charlie Marshall, the founder of Loaf, says feather wrapped foam is the most comfortable and practical combination. This is because while foam is firmer and lower maintenance, feathers are softer.

Once you're happy with all the above elements, you can think about the colour. Many companies, including Loaf and Rume, make their sofas in Britain, partly because we have a tradition of crafting some

of the best upholstery in the world, but also because it's easier to offer a large choice of fabric from a relatively local base.

Leigh Harmer, whose company *love-your-home.co.uk* makes hardwood framed sofas at affordable prices, says that contrary to popular belief, leather and velvet are two of the hardest-wearing fabrics.

'Velvet is our best seller — we have one that's man-made with inbuilt stainguard that doesn't bruise. Leather can also be wiped clean. Cotton and linen, which many think are the most practical, can stretch or snag and are the least tough.'

Finally, a word on sofa beds. While many of the same rules apply to sofa beds, you need to be realistic about whether your sofa is for occasional sleeping, in which case a foam mattress will be fine, or if the quality of the bed is paramount.

A pocket-sprung mattress is more expensive, but can be used more frequently and provides better support for your back.

And, when you've gone to all that trouble to find the perfect sofa for your interior, what about outside?

Coco Wolf make outdoor furniture that is designed to complement your carefully chosen interior. Their sofas look equally at home in the living room as in the garden, but their breathable and hard-wearing covers are designed to withstand wind, rain and sun while the frames are guaranteed for five years.

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UNNA Patel, upholstery buyer at John Lewis, says: 'When sitting on a sofa, you should not be able to easily slide your arm behind the base of your spine. If there is a large gap, the sofa is not offering enough support.'

Once you have decided on the style, you need to consider the frame. Ideally, you want hardwood, such as beech, which makes a solid frame. Softwoods, such as pine, may warp and bend.

However, many sofa frames are now made from chipboard, which may include an element of hardwood, and this allows the manufacturer to claim it is a hardwood frame.

Richard Baker says you should question the manufacturer or vendor to make sure you understand



Lounge lover: The Chofa two-seat sofa costs £2,197, plus ten metres of fabric, at Rume.co.uk