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REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

Loose-Cushion Sofas: Comfy But Do They Look Too Sloppy?

Does your sectional couch always look like an unmade bed? Designers debate the merits of tidy—and newly trendy—solid-backed sectionals vs. more pillow designs.



TIDY RESULT In a Brooklyn home, designer Josh Greene chose a fixed-back model because its clean lines “fit the surroundings of the very modern townhouse.”

PHOTO: JOSHUA MCHUGH

By Tim Gavan

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YES

DOES ANYONE want a slovenly sofa? Have you ever struggled to prop up and fluff the saggy, detachable back cushions on a sectional sofa so they form a neat line before guests ring the doorbell? If so, you might feel such unkempt designs have had their run.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What's your preferred style of sectional, and why? Join the conversation below.

Sectionals weren't always the plague they are now. In midcentury America, when they began proliferating, plenty of examples with tightly upholstered backs existed: from Vladimir Kagan's sensuous Serpentine and blocky Omnibus to solid-backed versions from [Sears](#) and Kroehler. But as residential decorating

grew inexorably casual, the loose-cushioned model began to dominate. (See Restoration Hardware's and Pottery Barn's endless offerings.) And many design pros have finally had enough.

"Loose-back sectionals sag like a cheap pair of underwear," said New York designer Lee Melahn. By contrast, "tight-backs," as the more buttoned-up and aesthetically pert models are known, "retain their shape and present as a bit more elevated," said Brooklyn's Holly Waterfield. Bay Area designer Alison Pickart has come to see tight-backs as the "sophisticated main attraction" in truly modern interiors.

Retailers are responding. As part of the first full collection under new vice president of product design and development, Sebastian Brauer, Crate and Barrel has introduced a sleek, solid-backed sectional known as the Strom. According to Mr. Brauer, his customers increasingly want "more tailored and streamlined frames" when it comes to sectionals. "We felt this was a void in the market." Crate and Barrel's website has given the Strom "hero" placement, underlining the brand's tight-back boosterism.

Also noticing surging demand for less slouchy designs is Greg Coccaro, co-founder of Brooklyn furniture shop Beam, which is newer to the retail scene. His store now carries eight solid-back sectionals, almost as many as it does loose-cushioned models.

Architect Leyden Lewis, a fellow Brooklynite, prefers the feel of a tight-back sectional. "I love a firm mattress and personally don't enjoy sinking into the seating." But for those who want to cut down on cushion-fluffing anxiety and labor without forgoing coziness, Los Angeles designer Kevin Isbell suggests looking for tight-backs with seat and back cushions that are sprung and down-filled. Added New York's Anelle Gandelman: "Additional pillows are a must."

NO

STILL, THERE ARE some designers proudly willing to die—and quite comfortably, they’d add—on a hill made of loose sectional cushions.

TIPS ON ACHIEVING A MORE COMPOSED LOOK

Bolster: With a pillowy model like Restoration Hardware’s Cloud Sectional, Los Angeles designer Anne Carr inserts a foam core inside each down-filled cushion for “a cozy feel that doesn’t always look like an unmade bed.”

Elongate: Choosing a design with rectangular rather than square cushions “will keep things looking neater,” noted New York designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz.

Maximize: Well-placed throw pillows and a folded knit blanket can actually hide the imperfections of loose cushions and create a more intentional, put-together appearance. “We always add colorful, patterned pillows with fabrics that are soft enough to nap with,” said Brooklyn designer Erin Fearins.

Compromise: A sectional with semi-attached cushions—that is, ones that are affixed at the back to the frame of the sofa, explained Seattle designer Charlie Hellstern—has the fluffy look and feel without all the upkeep.

“Tight-back sectionals are a bit of an interior-design oxymoron,” said Dallas designer Jean Liu, in the same way “corduroy shorts or sleeveless turtlenecks” are fashion oxymorons. “In our projects, sectional sofas are reserved for the most casual part of the house,” rooms that are all about “lounging with friends, sinking in to watch TV and kicking back at the end of a long day. A tight-back sectional sends a contradictory message of wanting to be casual but only sort of.”

Amalia Graziani, a residential real-estate developer in New York and San Francisco, said she never wants a guest to feel anything less than at-home. She reasoned that “particularly in more polished spaces, a loose-cushion sectional keeps things relaxed.” Los Angeles-based designer Melissa Warner Rothblum also worries about a potentially chilly, uptight ambience. “I always want the sofa to feel inviting and a bit undone. You can certainly achieve comfort with a tight-back if it’s padded properly, but to the eye, it isn’t always as approachable,” she said.

No fewer than a dozen designers referred to the desirable “sinking in” one experiences with a loose-cushion sectional. “A cocoon-like sensibility is definitely key when it comes to sectional sofas,” said Gil Melott, founder and principal of Chicago’s Studio 6F. The consensus among this cohort seems to be that the most you can achieve on a tight-back is a sensation of perching, less satisfyingly, atop its upholstery.

“Clients with growing families want their sectionals to be softer and cozier because they imagine themselves spending a long time there, watching a movie, reading a book, even napping,” said Pennsylvania designer Shoshana Gosselin. “I was recently told by a client that, ‘We’re all living on our sofas during Covid, so I need a plusher model.’”

Where space allows, designers sometimes have it all. In the Brooklyn townhome pictured above, New York designer Josh Greene drafted both styles. “There is a separate TV room that features a sofa with a loose back,” he said. “Since the living room was truly more for entertaining, I felt comfortable proposing a tight-back.”