

# The New York Times

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## If a Sofa Doesn't Fit, They'll Make It Fit



Not for the Squeamish Workers from Dr. Sofa reassemble a couch in a Manhattan apartment.  
Robert Caplin for The New York Times

**By J. Courtney Sullivan**

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I GET calls at all hours of the night,” Shlomi Gal-On said recently, describing the vagaries of his work. “Usually there are tears involved.”

Mr. Gal-On, who is otherwise known as Dr. Sofa, has been in the couch disassembly business in New York for six years. In that time, the demand for his services and those of other disassemblers has increased sharply. But he still remembers each case, each a drama.

“One woman called me crying because her couch didn’t fit through the front door of her building,” he said. “When I got to her place it was dark out and she was sitting on the sofa in the middle of the sidewalk, weeping hysterically. She jumped up and threw her

arms around me and started shouting, 'The messiah has come!' We definitely got some interesting looks from people passing by."

Sofa disassembly has existed as a New York trade since the late 1970s. But in the last few years, major furniture sellers like Pottery Barn, Restoration Hardware, Bloomingdale's and Macy's have begun offering sofas that are 94 inches or more in length and 43 inches or more in depth, compared with maximums of about 86 and 36 a decade ago. The number of desperate calls for help moving such large pieces has also grown, as has the number of businesses offering such help.

"Long, overstuffed sofas are so popular right now, and they're ideal if you have a McMansion," said Michelle McKoy, a saleswoman at the Domain Home furnishings store on East 22nd Street in Manhattan. "But here in the city we are constantly running into the problem of people who buy them and then can't get them into the elevator or through the door."

Ms. McKoy said the store's sofas are 86 to 97 inches long and 36 to 41 inches deep, an increase of about five inches in length and depth from a decade ago. "Like most major furniture stores, we are nationwide, and our furniture really caters to large suburban homes," she said.

Suburban customers have driven the large couch invasion across the board, said Barton Bienenstock, the publisher of Furniture World, a trade magazine. "The furniture industry follows housing trends," he said. As the size of American houses expanded in this decade, "furniture followed suit, and enormous sofas and high-back chairs have now become the norm."

Five or 10 years ago, he added, such large furniture was limited to the high end of the market, "but now even the moderately priced pieces are huge."

As a result, many one-man disassembly services have sprung up in the New York metropolitan area. The four most established furniture service companies — Dr. Sofa, based in the Bronx; Garry Furniture Service, in Queens; M.J.S. Furniture Service, in Massapequa, N.Y.; and Z Brothers, in Thornwood, N.Y. — all report a boom in business, even though none of them advertise. They charge \$200 to \$400 to get any couch into any space.

"Customers love us because we make it possible for them to get the big couches they want," said Michael Snow, the founder of M.J.S. He added that his company receives twice as many calls as it did 10 years ago and takes apart an average of six couches a day, six days a week.

His competitors are busy, too. Garry Furniture takes apart up to six couches a day, a third more jobs than it was doing three years ago; Z Brothers has had a spike in calls in recent years and does 60 jobs a week on average; and Dr. Sofa gets nearly twice the number of calls it did three years ago and dismantles over 2,000 sofas a year.

The disassembly process varies from one job to another, but typically a couch is flipped upside down and the fabric is gently peeled back. One arm is removed, then another. Sometimes the back must be taken off or more creative solutions found.

Z Brothers recently removed the back and arms of a new 120-inch couch and it still didn't fit in the elevator; workers carried the sofa up 10 flights of stairs in an adjoining building, then laid planks across the roof to move it in from above.



Michael Snow makes a suburban house call. Credit...Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

The services have opened up decorating possibilities for those who would otherwise be forced to buy pieces based only on what could fit through the door: a tiny love seat, say, or a pair of armchairs.

“Decorators come to me wanting these oversized pieces for their clients,” said Victor DiBlase, who owns Victor’s Sample Room, a furniture outlet at the New York Design Center, and has referred clients to M.J.S. for 15 years. The service has “saved me a lot of sales lately,” he said. “I tell them: ‘Don’t worry about size. If you want it, I know a guy who can get it in.’ ”

Beverly Balk, a decorator in Manhattan who runs Beverly Balk Interiors, learned the value of the service when she bought a 102-inch off-white linen Oscar de la Renta couch

with rounded arms two years ago for her own apartment. Her Upper West Side building has a small elevator and narrow hallways, so she knew that moving the piece into her one-bedroom might prove difficult.

“I had seen that Oscar de la Renta couch in a show house,” Ms. Balk said. “I adored it. I was so gung-ho about having it that I decided I would do anything to make it mine. I would find a way to shrink it if I had to.”

Ms. Balk called M.J.S., having heard about it from Mr. DiBlase, and said couch disassembly came as a revelation to her and liberated her professionally. “Some of the most exciting pieces available are simply enormous,” she said. “I have a very minimalist approach to design and I would rather use one or two fantastic oversized pieces in a room than clutter it up with a lot of little things. I now call M.J.S. to service my clients all the time.”

Furniture retailers are increasingly referring customers to the disassembly services, and all four major disassemblers say that the majority of their work has switched from old sofas being moved to new ones being delivered. Garry Furniture works with Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s, M.J.S. with Crate & Barrel, Z Brothers and Dr. Sofa with Domain Home.

Ms. McKoy estimated that her Domain store solicited the help of Dr. Sofa “at least twice a week,” about three times as often as when she started working there three and a half years ago. “You don’t think about it not fitting in until the delivery guy is standing in your hallway with the couch,” Ms. McKoy said. “It can be very stressful.”

It can also be traumatic to watch someone take apart a beloved antique sofa or a new couch that cost several thousand dollars. Indeed, couch disassemblers describe themselves as equal parts handymen and crises managers. “I always tell women not to look,” said Joe Torres, the owner of Garry Furniture. “I know from experience that many of them will break down if they do.”

Julia Kashner, who hired Garry Furniture to disassemble a new couch, recalled the process: “I could hardly breathe when I watched them bring the sofa up my stairs in pieces. In the end, it looked perfect, as good as new, but it was very emotional.”

And the anxiety is not always unwarranted. Although the disassemblers make it look easy, “the technique is very precise,” said Joe Zeolla, co-owner of Z Brothers. The process, by the way, voids most store and manufacturer warranties. (The four major companies guarantee a refund or a new couch if the sofa does not look the same once it is back together.)

When Catherine Finch moved an oversize couch from her parents’ house in Michigan into her Brooklyn apartment, she used one of the smaller disassembly services that have sprung up in recent years, with near disastrous results. “They charged me \$450, and when they were done the upholstery was a mess and part of the couch had sort of buckled,” she said. “If it had been a new couch, I probably would have lost my mind.”

Occasionally, accidents have been known to happen even among the more established firms. Years ago, Mr. Zeolla had to take apart an off-white silk sofa. "Silk is so difficult, you can't get a single drop of moisture on it," he said. Just as he was finishing he caught his finger on a staple and bled on the fabric. "I had to replace a 19-by-26-inch panel," Mr. Zeolla said. "It cost me \$600 just for the fabric to cover that one piece."

Still, judging from the uptick in disassembly jobs, New York's apartment dwellers have clearly been willing to brave such risks to fit supersize couches into their small spaces. And some of their bigger ones, too. "Even some of the city's most luxurious apartments have tiny elevators and door frames," Mr. Gal-On of Dr. Sofa said.

He cited Jeff Gordon, the racecar driver, who has called on his company twice in the past year to fit two different couches through his oddly shaped entryway. "I told him not to worry because tight turns are how I earn my money," Mr. Gal-On said. "He just laughed and said, 'That's the same way I earn mine.' "