

Meet Dr. Sofa, the superhero of those with furniture fits

By Rachel Templeton
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NEW YORK -- A potential crisis was looming around the corner in Gramercy Park. "Dr. Sofa" was on call, his two-way radio continuously crackling with updates. In the service elevator of a white-glove apartment building, a 7-foot-long leather sofa bed was stuck.

"Did you get the back off? Take off an arm!" he yelled to his team, already on the case.

"Dr. Sofa," whose real name is Shlomi Gal-on, tends to the torturous ordeal of moving furniture into tiny New York apartments. With little more than a staple gun and handsaw, he eases the pain of space-challenged New Yorkers' longing for a normal life with normal-size furniture.

"Most furniture is not made for New York," Gal-on, 31, explained, his crisp blue shirt contrasting with his unshaven facial scruff. "But people want nice furniture. They don't want a skinny bench just because they live in the city."

Dr. Sofa's cure: Cut the sofa and other furniture into pieces, move in the parts and reassemble them as if nothing happened. His business is not unusual in New York City, where he has at least five competitors.

Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan, founder of apartmenttherapy.com, a site dedicated to space-challenged urbanites, understands the need for Dr. Sofa's business. "The city is made up of old buildings that over time have been chopped into smaller spaces," he said. "People are dealing with very awkward spaces.

"People are caught between wanting to live here because they love the city, and wanting to have a big, comfy sofa," he said. "It's hard to have both."

Any furniture, any space

All this spells good business for Dr. Sofa. Gal-on is a fourth-generation furniture professional who started his business after seeing heartbroken owners abandon furniture mid-move for lack of space. He left his job as a mover to experiment with dismantling and reassembling sofas.

"They started calling me Dr. Sofa, the furniture surgeon," Gal-on recalled. "The name just stuck."

Poorly planned moves account for most of Gal-on's business because people often neglect to measure their furnishings, he said. Other customers overlook measuring small hall space, short elevators and narrow doorways.

For \$250 to \$350 a job, Dr. Sofa promises to move any piece of furniture into any space, reconstructing it to the original condition. There is a 30-day guarantee on all jobs.

Seventy-five percent of Dr. Sofa's business comes from furniture "emergencies" -- a couch wedged in a stairwell or unable to get past a door jam. Many calls come in the middle of the night, when movers have long given up and occupants are left wringing their hands.

"A lot of times a guy calls and is totally hysterical," Gal-on said. "They are praying for the Messiah and here comes Dr. Sofa."

Most of the furniture emergency calls come via a 24-hour pager routed to Gal-on's home phone. Not unlike a team of physicians, Gal-on or a team manager will arrive to perform "surgery," usually within four hours.

'I almost cried'

The concept might have seemed crazy to Tabitha Anthony, a human-rights specialist from Queens, until she realized her cherished sectional was bigger than the elevator of her new co-op. The doorman told Anthony about Dr. Sofa, and she called the team to tackle the task.

"I wasn't so sure at first," Anthony said. "When they ripped off the upholstery I almost cried."

The operation was a success, however, and when the sectional was reassembled in her apartment, Anthony was pleased with the outcome.

"When people come into my apartment, they say, 'Oh, what a big sofa you have,'" she said. Anthony keeps Dr. Sofa's business card on hand: She will need him again when she moves out.

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Money-strapped city singles unable to replace oversized furniture are common Dr. Sofa customers, but other requests come from those just wanting extravagant pieces.

Last year, Gal-on "operated" on a \$30,000, 15-foot sofa belonging to the rap artist called Nas. The European, custom-made couch took a three-man team to cut, move and reconstruct. The entire process took four hours, double the usual time.

Watching the cutting is tough for some customers. "Women are especially emotional," Gal-on said. "They really freak out when the sofa is cut and the guts are hanging out."

Calming and reassuring customers is a big part of his job, he said.

Trade secrets

Gal-on considers his technique so proprietary that he is hesitant to identify the most useful tools for his trade. "Here," he said, holding up what looked like an oversized cuticle cutter. He described it as a staple remover, but declined to disclose its actual name. Gal-on is often asked to teach professional moving companies his trade, an offer he always turns down.

"I don't want to share too much information about how we dismantle stuff," he said. "If they ask what tools I use, I just say `hammer.'"

By the time Gal-on arrived in Gramercy Park, his two-person team, both in bright red "Dr. Sofa" T-shirts, had things nearly under control. They had removed upholstery from the sofa back. But after turning the couch into several creative angles it was clear further surgery was required.

Staples attaching the leather to the frame were wedged off with the mysterious tool. A few minutes of rapid hand sawing freed the problematic left arm. That accomplished, the sofa skeleton slid smoothly through the elevator, headed toward apartment 6N for reassembly.

The bright apartment with bay windows overlooking Gramercy Park was nearly empty.

"I've been to this building 15 or 20 times," Gal-on said, examining the apartment's 3-foot-wide doorway. "Prewar buildings are great for business."

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