

Reupholstering can breathe new life into worn furniture

By Laura Reiley

Shoes get “broken in.” Jeans get “comfortable.” Furniture, unfortunately, just gets shabby. If your upholstery is showing signs of too many years of love from your family, it just may be time to reupholster. Reupholstering can be a smart way to spruce up a room, add new color and reinvigorate a tired piece of furniture.

When people come to Janice Hardy with a piece of furniture to reupholster, she first asks, “How attached are you to this piece of furniture?” Hardy, owner of Jan’s Recovery Room in Redwood City, Calif., cautions, “Reupholstery is not necessarily the cheap way out. But new furniture you can buy—for the same amount of money you would spend on reupholstering an old piece—is often garbage.”

Greg Johnson, of Johnson Upholstery in Beavercreek, Ohio, has been in the business 47 years. “The first thing I ask people is ‘How old is the piece?’” he says. The older it is, the better it is. New things don’t have nice spring units; they’re not even wood.”

The value is in the frame, he adds. Furniture frames should be made of hardwood such as oak or maple. “The clue is the weight.”



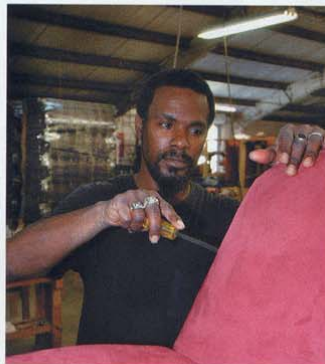
Photo by Robin Victor Goetz/RVGP, Inc.

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Upholstering process photos by Johan Roetz/Vision Photography



Heavier pieces make better candidates for reupholstery than newer, lighter-weight furniture. Longtime upholsterers sometimes speak of older, heavier pieces of furniture as “investment pieces,” furniture that may in fact get a facelift every 10 years or so for generations to come. Inexpensive or poorly constructed pieces may simply not be worth the cost of reupholstery.



Taking the plunge

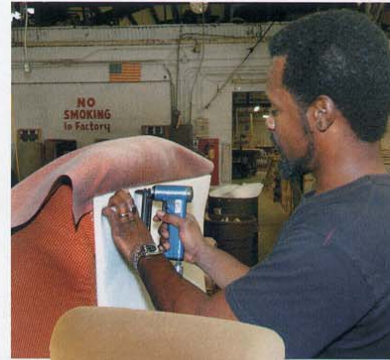
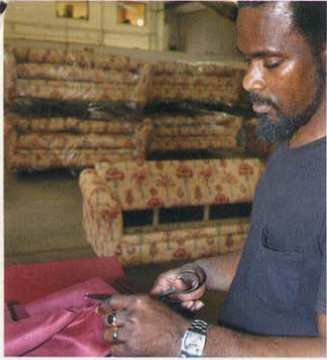
Once you’ve made the decision to reupholster a piece, Warren Edwards of Rose Upholstery, a leading workshop in Tampa for the past 52 years, gives tips on what to look for in a fabric. “Look for strength. Avoid open-weave fabrics. Some fabrics are multi-use, lighter-weight for curtains and so forth. Look for upholstery-weight or tight-weave fabrics with rubber backing and reinforced with Teflon,” he says.

Sturdiness is less of a concern if a piece is not going to endure heavy use. “For lighter wear you may pick out a chintz, but it won’t be as sturdy,” Edwards warns. Chintzes can be sophisticated and cheery in a room, but they will last you less time and the shine wears out.

“But if you want a fabric children can jump on, try a polypropylene fiber, versus cottons and natural fibers that must be treated with more respect,” Hardy adds. She notes that the amount of sunlight a piece gets should help determine the fabric—a colorful cotton print may become

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faded within a year. "Manmade fibers tend to be more colorfast than natural fibers, and you definitely don't want nubby, open weaves if you have a cat," she counsels.

Inappropriate fabric selection is one of the pitfalls many people encounter in reupholstering: People fall in love with a dramatic look or pattern, not realizing that on a lightweight fabric a spill may stain for life and with a lush-looking velvet the nap might get crushed over time. As a way to avoid fabric mistakes, companies like Calico Corners suggest doing more than just taking a small sample home to envision the final look. A "fabric approval plan" at Calico Corners allows customers to check out a whole bolt of fabric for three days.

Before buying fabric, all upholsterers urge people to inspect the entire bolt. "I have seen very expensive fabrics with flaws," Hardy advises.

Choosing a color

According to Edwards, after fabric weight, the next consideration is color. Think about what else is going on in the room—paintings, wall color, other fabrics. He notes, "More people are going toward solids in large sofa pieces. You don't get tired of it, and it can be changed with little cushions. Then they go crazy on a little 3-yard (of fabric) chair."

The denim trend is finally fading, while softer colors are coming back in. Comfort is at a premium: Soft textures like chenille are extremely big right now, and the worn-looking "shabby chic" fabrics popularized a while back by Ralph Lauren have persevered.

Hardy adds, "Every year there's a new trend, but make sure the color is complementary to you. You want to look like a million dollars on it. Pick out three colors in a room—they should all be complementary to you."

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Fabric prices can range from \$30 per yard all the way up to \$230 per yard, so price per yard is a major consideration if the piece is large. An empire chair may require only 3 yards—for the arm-cap cushions, oval back and tight seat cover—but a sofa may require many times that amount.

The nuts and bolts

In determining the quantity of fabric needed, first take the back measurement of the sofa or piece of furniture and the measurement of loose cushions, taking into account channeling or button-tufting. ("Channeling" is gathered cloth on a piece that looks something like a scallop shell.) Estimating is hard to do for a rookie, so come up with your best guess and then have two upholstery estimates to gauge your guesswork against.

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Fabric is not the only cost in reupholstery. Three specific costs make up the bulk of the expenditure: beyond fabric, there is the cost of labor and that of fillers used inside cushions. For most old furniture, it's not enough to simply replace fabric. Upholsterers often retie springs, replace foam, and even make structural changes before beginning

their sewing. Gifted upholsterers have been known to chop the legs off sofas that have always been too high, straighten out curved arms or create higher backs on low-slung pieces.

Make sure your furniture has been outfitted with an eight-way tie spring unit. While original springs are usually all there in an old piece of furniture, the webbing (jute that stretches across the bottom of the furniture, keeping the springs inside) has often come off, and the spring tying is all helter-skelter. Finish up this work with all-new decking and padding.

For cushions, you may want to use high-quality foam, made of oil, wrapped with Dacron. The Dacron adds a nice curve to foam that makes it look like feathers. For feather-stuffed envelope cushions, specify the percentage of feathers and goose down you'd like. Hardy suggests a 50-50 split. "It's just beautiful," she says.

For people who don't like down because it mats flat, Edwards suggests a down substitute made of finely spun polyester fiber. "This fiber has memory

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and will return to its original shape," he notes. Although it maintains a lush look, it's nonallergenic, and feathers will never fly all over your living room.

Once finished, reupholstered older pieces have a value unmatched by today's new furniture. But reupholstery is often undertaken out of more than just economic good sense—very often it's for nostalgia's sake. Grandma gives her beloved armchair to Mom, who in turn passes the comfy, albeit tatty, chair along to her daughter—reupholstery is a way to personalize and update a family treasure. Who says you can't teach an old chair new tricks? 🐾

Editor's Note: A special thanks to Special Comfort Furniture in Clearwater, Fla., for generously allowing Housetrends access to photograph the upholstering process detailed in this article.



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