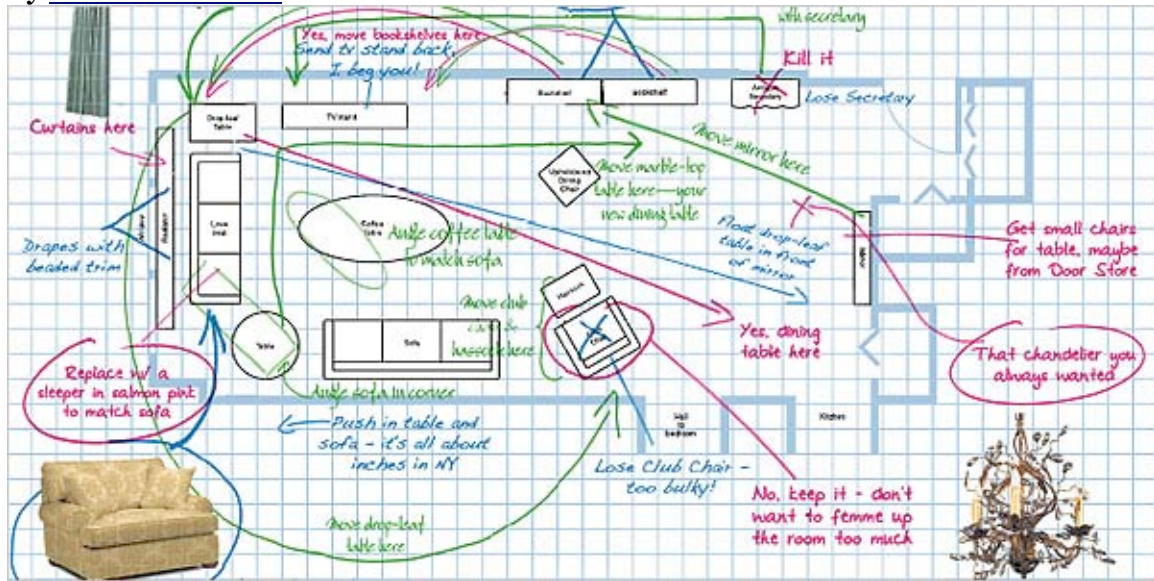


PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

December 28, 2006

Can This Living Room Be Saved?

By **JOYCE WADLER**



THIS is my ideal way to shop for home stuff: Go to a Housing Works or a [Salvation Army](#) thrift shop, pick up a side table for \$45, and when I tire of it, bring it back as a contribution: birth, death, rebirth — a home furnishings circle of life. I also spend time at flea markets, picking up old French china and crystal. It may be a misguided pastime since I don't have a dining room. For big stuff like sofas and upholstered chairs I go to retail shops, though it makes me nervous. Big-ticket items can mean big mistakes, and since I'm living with some of those now, when I walk into a furniture store I freeze.

As a result, nothing in my apartment matches or seems to know where, or even if, it belongs.

A chintz love seat that clashes with the huge tapestry-pattern sofa was going to be tossed, but when I started thinking the sofa might be the culprit I decided that maybe the sofa should go instead. (Or maybe not.) A large gilt-edged mirror that used to hang over the sofa is now propped

vertically at the end of the room, creating a mirrored wall as I figure out what to do with it. Since my preferred look lately seems to be Violetta's Paris apartment in "Traviata" before she got sick and had to sell the drapes, I'm starting to like the mirror there, but it creates problems.

The mirror has pushed out the drop-leaf dining table, which is now in a corner by the love seat, pretending to be a side table. I really could use that drop-leaf — say, to eat on — and it might have worked against another wall, near the entrance, but that's where my antique secretary is. The secretary, a curvaceous, baroque piece with ornately carved rosettes, has legs too short for anyone to sit at it. But I can't get rid of it. It is a part of a bedroom suite my parents bought at an estate sale, probably of the consort of the King of Bavaria. Also, I kind of like that secretary. It's like an over-the-hill soprano who can still throw her weight around.

I have been trying to figure out a solution for years, but I've never been the sort of person to hire a decorator. The furniture salespeople I consulted just wanted to know what I was looking for, and I had no idea what I was looking for. Finally, three weeks ago, I stumbled into an Ethan Allen on the Upper East Side and the first of a series of topsy-turvy adventures in no-cost or low-cost design.

"I have a living room I don't know what to do with; I'm thinking maybe a sectional," I said when a salesman came over.

He turned out to be very flexible. When Domain's customer service people told me that my sofa was under a five-year warranty and that they would replace my molting cushions for no charge, he had me come in with a pillow to make sure his color scheme worked. When my first choice of fabric for the love seat priced out at \$3,421, he quickly found a substitute, bringing the price to what I considered to be a reasonable \$1,699. I was delighted.

BUT after love, inevitably, came doubt. Maybe I was committing too totally to a single store. I decided I should have a consultation with a designer who was a free agent, as long as the price was right. The Interior Redesign Directory site listed designers from around the country.

I canceled one designer and hired Jennifer Ellen Frank (www.redesignNY.com) (www.jenniferfrank.com), a former textile

designer who does one-day decorating consult for \$375 for two hours. When Ms. Frank came bounding down my hall I made her immediately for a West Village artist, from the time when artists could afford the West Village. Long, wild hair, black jeans, down-to-earth style, my kind of girl — I wouldn't be surprised if we dated the same guys in the '70s. The minute she was through the door she was eyeing my living room like a drill sergeant who has spotted a recruit with his pants on backward.

“This room is unbalanced!” she said. “Those shelves, they should go on either side of the television.” Then she saw Drop Leaf, cowering beside the love seat. “What's that doing there?” she said.

Ms. Frank kicked off her shoes (she needed to feel the room with her feet) and suggested putting the dining room table a few feet down the wall from the entrance door. When I said I thought that would be a barrier, she made the same dining room suggestion that Mr. Springer had: put the table in front of the mirror. “It's weird to walk into a big empty space.”

A minute later Ms. Frank was pushing Drop Leaf across the room, to about two feet in front of the mirror. Then she was deep in a closet, pulling out two Limoges plates and two wine glasses from the 26th Street flea market and putting them on the table. She added brass candlesticks. Now the mirror reflected old glass and china and a suddenly more handsome drop-leaf dining table.

“And maybe one day you'll talk yourself into getting that chandelier,” she said.

Spooky! I had never told her that — although, I realized later, when you look into a closet and see enough Limoges to stock the court of Louie XIV, it's probably not an enormous mental leap. We admired, together, the imaginary chandelier reflected in the mirror.

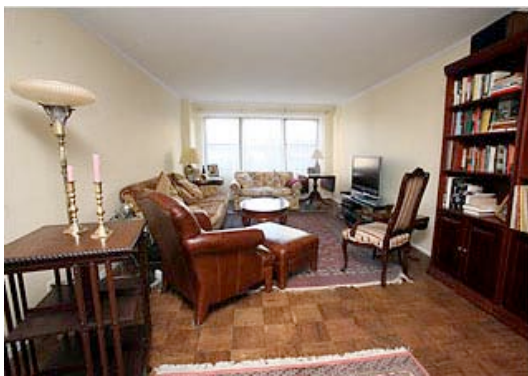
Then reality set in: the table has room for six people, but where will I put all those chairs? And what about the big brown leather chair and the hassock, now planted between the dining and living areas — don't they make the room feel heavy and congested, as the other salesman seemed to think?

Ms. Frank was unconcerned: get four skinny little chairs, put two of them in the closet, scooch two of them under the table; that's where chairs are supposed to live anyway. Crowded? The leather chair is big, she said, sitting down in it, but that's good.

"You have a boyfriend, right?" she said. "You can't let this room get too femme." She stretched out her legs. "This is comfortable," she said. "I'm staying here."

She rattled off her recommendations, all of which were very price-conscious: replace the love seat with one that picks up the peachy salmon color in the sofa's pillows. She recommended the AU Olivia love seat-sleeper, which can be bought at Stickleby Audi, at 160 Fifth Avenue — "the best bang for the buck in town," she said of the store. If you ask for Joy Florentz and say Jennifer sent you, it will cost \$1,700 to \$2,200. Skinny little chairs can be found any number of places, she said; Ikea, the Door Store, even Bed Bath & Beyond. Ballard's Backroom in Atlanta (ballarddesigns.com) has cute chandeliers and you can get them fast, in about a week. She suggested the Petite Claire, which is 18 inches high and costs \$149.

I asked her about the pieces that had driven her predecessor nuts. My compressed sawdust bookshelves? Maybe one day when I'm super-rich I'll want to replace them, Ms. Frank said, but flanking the TV, they'll look like an entertainment center. The old lace curtains? Ms. Frank wouldn't rush to change them, but if I must, she suggested Crate & Barrel or Restoration Hardware, which has Thai silk at about \$380 a panel — cheap compared with custom-made. Redecorating had just become a lot simpler and a lot cheaper. Ms. Frank is sensational.



Before



After

I now felt I had all the decorating advice I needed, but since my project had turned into a feature article, and I would be reimbursed, I rebooked another redesigner for the sake of research. She is tall and high-energy, and the minute I heard her recommendation I knew it was nuts: the living room lacked drama, she said; the sofa should be pushed into the corner and rotated to face the room at an angle. When we moved it, the room seemed to tilt. “I feel like I’m on the Titanic,” I told her.

Like Ms. Frank, Ms. Greenberg wanted the two tall bookcases to flank the television. We shoved them across the room, which immediately seemed more balanced. Then she made her craziest suggestion of the day.

“How much of an heirloom is that?” she said, pointing to Marble Top, which has always functioned as a corner table. “Could you eat on it?”

Impossible, I told her. For one thing, it is encircled by brass trim an inch high, which would prevent comfortably resting your hands on the table. She disagreed. A glass top could be made. Or a tabletop that could open to 48 or 60 inches in diameter, for guests.

We moved the round table to the wall, to where the bookshelves once stood, then put the mirror behind it. The round French table, reflected in the mirror, was far prettier than the drop-leaf.

The love seat was moved to where the mirror had stood before. With the love seat and the sofa at opposite ends of the room, the patterns did not conflict, and I no longer needed to replace the love seat.

The drop-leaf table, positioned against the wall opposite the marble table, became a sideboard.

Did Violetta play around? I brought out the thrift shop linens, and she styled the room: decanters of cognac and port on the sideboard, clustered together with old brass and silver candlesticks; dried roses in a cracked Art Nouveau vase; Marble Top set with mismatched crystal that hadn’t been out of the closet in years. The meter was running as she did this. With tax, her fee came to \$830. But the room was gorgeous. No need for a chandelier now. With the mirror reflecting the glass and the silver, the room had become its own chandelier. My living room had been redesigned without buying a thing.

Feeling guilty, I told salesman I would not be needing the love seat or the window treatment after all. Not a problem, he said: "I hoped I sparked your fire." But of course I had been at the shop so often that I had by now fallen very hard for some magnificent chintz drapes, which are bright enough to tame my operatic, heavily carved bedroom set. They will run about \$2,200; by shopping around I might do better, but I felt a loyalty and an attachment to Mr. Springer and his company. As for the narrow, antique chairs I would need for additional dining room seating, I'll be going to Housing Works. It's the end of the year, when people donate their stuff for tax purposes. The pickings will be sweet.