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Furniture Too Big? Dr. Sofa to the Rescue

By Rachel Templeton

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” – real name Shlomi Gal-on – tends to the famously torturous ordeal of moving furniture into tiny New York apartments. With little more than a staple gun and hand saw, he eases the pain of space-challenged New Yorkers longing for a normal life with normal-sized furniture.

“Most furniture is not made for New York ,” Gal-on, 31, explained in a thick Israeli accent, his crisp blue shirt incongruous 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 sofas 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 . At least five competitors exist.

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.”

What’s more, New York apartment dwellers must grapple with a desire for standard furniture and the realities of small space, Gillingham-Ryan said. “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.”

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

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Photo: Rachel Templeton

Dr. Sofa. Shlomi Gal-on -- (in blue shirt) a

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.”

The problem for urbanites, Gal-on explained, is that most furniture is manufactured by designers with no concept of cramped city living. Most U.S.-made couches are built with easy-access driveways, wide garage doors, and spacious living rooms in mind.

Poorly-planned New York City moves account for most of Gal-on’s business because people often neglect to measure their furnishings, he explained. Other customers buy aptly-sized furniture from local dealers, but overlook measuring small hall space, short elevators and narrow doorways.

For \$250 to \$350 per 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 ringing 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.” Gal-on said he commonly meets customers on street corners where they sit guarding a beloved sofa left for the landfill.

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.

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.

Gillingham-Ryan agrees the need for Dr. Sofa is real. “People here live with special spatial concerns the rest of the country does not have,” he said, adding: “Living in New York City is completely abnormal.”

Money-strapped city singles unable to replace over-sized 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 “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 explained. “They really freak out with the sofa is cut and the guts are hanging out.” Gal-on said calming and reassuring customers is a big part of his job.

Gal-on considers his technique so proprietary that he is hesitant to identify the most useful tools to his work. “Here,” he said, holding up what looked like an oversized cuticle cutter. He described it as a staple remover, but declined to disclose a name. Gal-on is often asked – sometimes begged - 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 had things nearly under control. A quiet, tattooed Israeli and a portly Puerto Rican – both in bright red “Dr. Sofa” T-shirts – had removed upholstery from the sofa back. But after contorting the couch into several creative angles it was clear it would not fit. 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 towards apartment 6N for reassembly.

The bright apartment with bay windows overlooking Gramercy Park was nearly empty, with only a few small pieces of furniture inside.

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

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