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By JEFF OPDYKE

**Sofa vs. Sofa: Who Gets to Decorate?***January 16, 2005*

I'm sitting in my home office as I write this column, and around me I see chaos. Unopened boxes; piles of notes; a small TV on a footstool; too much paper on a too-small, cherry-wood writing table that actually belongs in the bedroom.

It has been like this since my wife, Amy, and I moved to Louisiana in September. We both agree something has to be done in this room. But we disagree on what.

Amy wants a big, solid, wooden executive desk with two fat pedestals with filing cabinets and drawers to stick stuff in. I think such a meaty desk would swallow this small room. I also think the desk she wants to buy is hideous. I'd rather have a very simple, unassuming mission-style writing desk with four slender legs.

There are financial issues that erupt in a marriage that are weighty and significant and that can shape the course of your life. This isn't one of them. This is decorating.

Still, how your home looks is important. It defines you to the outside world. It's where you retreat every day. It can consume a not-so-insignificant sum of money.

And conflicts about it aren't easy to solve. When it comes to most financial matters, a middle ground is obvious. One person wants to spend \$2,000 on a vacation, and the other person wants to spend \$4,000. You spend \$3,000. But where's the middle ground when your tastes are as mismatched as a velvet Elvis painting in a room of French antiques?

\* \* \*

OK, let me dispense with the sexist stuff first. A friend of mine -- a woman -- says "women don't want a man with strong opinions about home decorating. It makes us feel uncomfortable about your manhood and, more important, we feel you're encroaching on our turf."

I know that's a common perception. But I don't buy it -- any more than I buy that a woman isn't allowed to have strong opinions about cars or money or landscaping because that's our turf.

It may be true, though, that many men have different criteria when it

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comes to picking furniture. Judging from the people I talk to, women are more likely to look at furniture and see something that's "beautiful" or "goes perfectly with the antique pine ballfoot chest in the living room." Men, on the other hand, seem to look at furniture and see pain, as in, "That is the most uncomfortable couch I've ever sat on. I don't care how pretty it is."

A friend of mine admits that the only thing he has ever cared about when it comes to furniture is comfort. "I didn't care what it looks like," he says, "I only care about sinking into it. If I could imagine falling asleep in it, then it passed the test." His wife, meanwhile, "wants it so that someone who visits will see it as beautiful. We have two completely different tests."

Christie, a friend in California, faces a similar clash with her longtime boyfriend. They share similar tastes, she says, "but where we diverge is quality." She wants to find the right piece that will last a long time -- whatever the price. She comes from a family where her parents bought high-quality furniture that they still have, 40 years later. That's her ideal.

But her boyfriend isn't so concerned about getting something that will last. He wants to buy less-expensive stuff that's fine for now.

\* \* \*

There are solutions to such furniture flare-ups.

A colleague of mine believes that decisions should be partly based on who feels more passionately about the issue.

"In our marriage -- and I think in every marriage -- there are things that both of you care about, but one person cares more about," she says.

She says her husband has always made the final decisions on vacations, restaurants, movies and wine, because "these were things that were just more important to him than to me. But I am far more passionate about things like car safety, family issues, money issues -- and home furnishings. I feel like I should get final say on all these things, since he has his areas where he always gets final say."

She usually does get her way with decorating, she says, although, she adds, sometimes not completely. "You can compromise if you both express the one specific thing that matters to you the most," she says. "Neither of you may get your first choice, so start looking for a second choice you each can live with."

Another colleague says the furniture fight "was a constant source of irritation early on" in her marriage. At one point, she says, they ended up "with a marriage counselor refereeing our next furniture purchase."

Ultimately, the counselor suggested that each person have individual say over the decoration in one room in their home. He got the TV room, she says, "and crammed it with books, pictures, electronics stuff and ever-migrating piles of papers -- and he is very happy. I have the dining room with a Pennsylvania Dutch dry sink, a huge mirror made from an old barn window, one real hoop-back Windsor chair and a lot of empty space. It's my retreat."

This follows a theme my California friend, Christie, has begun to employ. In their new house, she says, she and her boyfriend are "assigning rooms where one person has more sway than the other, based on how the rooms are used." For instance, her boyfriend gets the kitchen, because he's the family cook. She's taking the office, since she spends more time there.

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Moreover, she's trying to bridge the gap in male-female speak. When shopping for furniture she asks, "Is this something like what you want?" That way, she says, "I'm getting a read on the attributes that are important to him, so that I can find something I like that meets both our needs."

And when it comes to those mutually shared rooms where no solution seems possible, here's some advice: stall. My colleague who went to the marriage counselor says that in jointly decorated rooms, "many times one or the other of us would grow enamored of something in a store and the other would hate it. We'd argue and argue. In such cases, we didn't buy the item, but waited to see what else we could find. And no one was allowed to buy furniture for a common room without the other's consent."

Surprisingly, she says, "this turned out to be fun, because we could take time and really do things right."

Says her husband: "It takes longer to furnish a place that way, but the house winds up looking better. It's like Lennon and McCartney -- neither was as good alone as they were together."

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