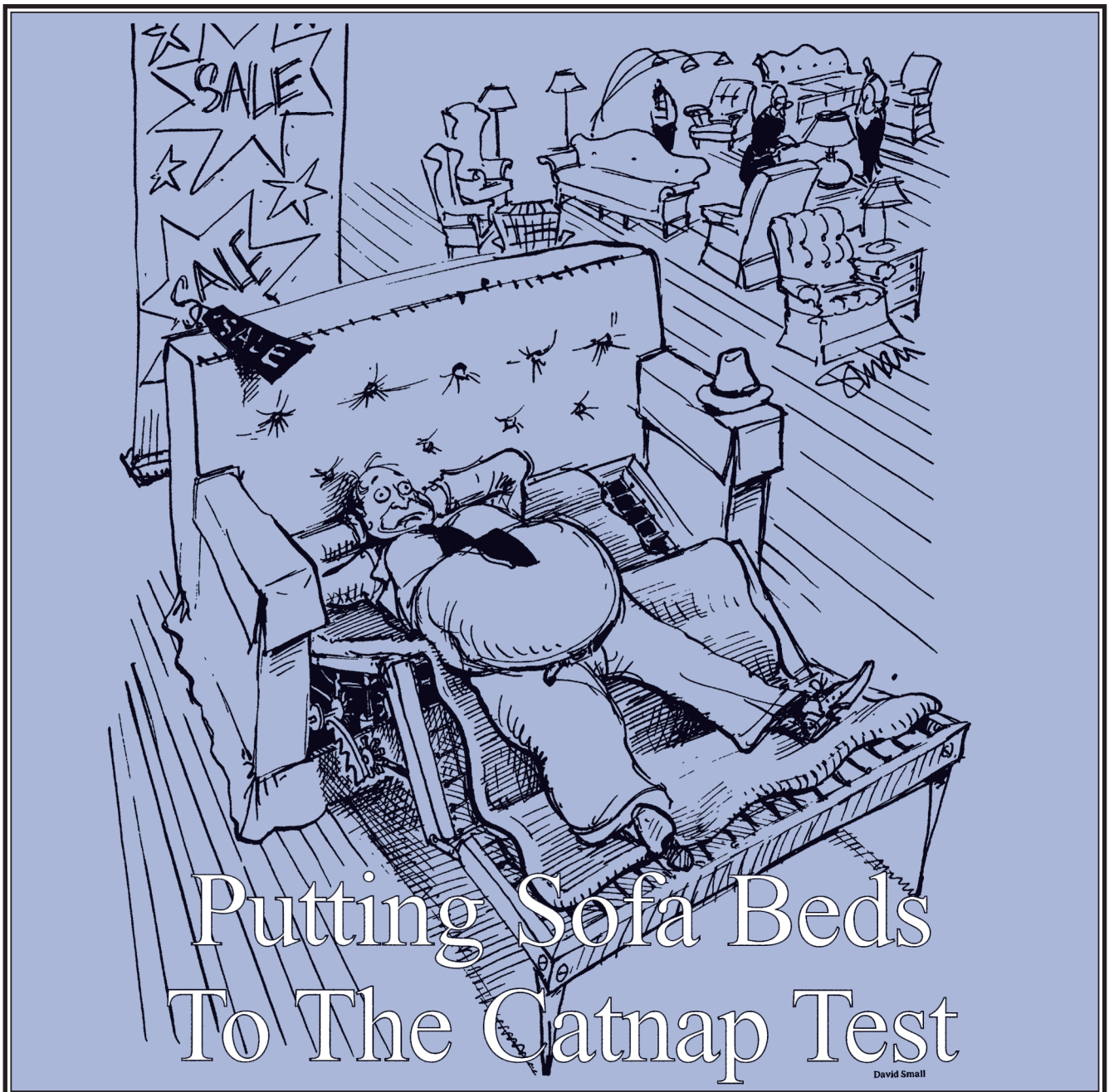


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## Putting Sofa Beds To The Catnap Test

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# Putting Sofa Beds To The Catnap Test

By JUSTIN SPRING

The sofa bed is to guest quarters what a casual wave is to a formal bow: it's an acknowledgement but hardly a red-carpet welcome. With its pain-in-the-back bar, stub-your-toe frame and thin, lumpy mattress, the sofa bed of memory is as much a menace to guests as it is a haven for them.

But for a pressed-for-space apartment dweller with persistent out-of-town guests, isn't the sofa bed better than the froufrou chaise, the forever-wrinkled daybed or no bed at all?

Fine tailoring. Great style. Firm mattress. People who have bought sleep sofas rarely use those words. I was prepared to compromise, but not on comfort.

Finding a comfortable sofa bed for the occasional guest on a budget of about \$1,500 is no easy task. "The nature of the sleep-sofa market makes specific brand and model recommendations impossible," an article in the November 1992 issue of Consumer Reports said. There are at least 100 brands of sleep sofas, each one with many models. Even within a single model line, manufacturers may vary bed mechanisms, mattresses and sofa cushions. So the only way to find a comfortable sofa bed is to visit local retailers and lounge for at least five minutes per bed.

Even in my waking hours, I like to spend so much time lying down that friends call me "The Horizontal Guest." Who better, then, to conduct an informal survey of sofa beds? Particularly since, at 6 foot 2 and 215 pounds, I pose a significant challenge to just about any mattress, convertible or otherwise.

The first stop on what was to be a two-day-long catnapping marathon in the New York City area was Foremost Furniture, an ambitious vertical mall at 8 West 30th



Culver Pictures

*Circa 1900 Thomas Edison napping.*

Street, where Gary Zuckerman, an owner, shared some trade secrets.

"People will pay a premium for a fancy living-room sofa," he said, "but a convertible is usually for some room that can be used as a flop. So if there are a lot of low-quality sofa beds out there, it's because that's what the buying public wants."

(Indeed, according to Consumer Reports, in 1992 the national average of the prices paid for sleep sofas was about \$600).

"Here's how the pricing is done on sleep sofas," Mr Zuckerman said in the elevator up to the showroom. "First, you're paying for the intricacy of design. Second, for the covering, whether it's fabric or leather. Only about 10 percent of the cost goes to the bedding and mechanism, and when a manufacturer cuts corners, he cuts corners here." Hence a \$5,000 leather sofa may contain a murderously uncomfortable bed mechanism.

Foremost carries convertible sofas by Bernhardt, Century and Sherrill, as well as some leather sofas by assorted makers that accommodate sleep-sofa mechanisms.

There's plenty of room to try them out. A contemporary leather sofa selling for \$1,460 was a bargain - for leather, not for the bed. Its mattress was terribly uncomfortable. In the Century showroom, I sampled the LTD Car model (\$1,500), featuring

a Kingsdown Century mattress. I could feel the crossbar at midback.

The most impressive bed at Foremost was the Precedent line by Sherrill, featuring Kingsdown's Posture mattress. This is an unfortunate conundrum for most sleep-sofa shoppers: the best bed in the showroom is often attached to a piece of nubby, circa-1978 furniture.

What about the Bernhardt sale sofa, with the alluring prices (\$1,000 to \$1,300)? "Unfortunately we sold them all at a sample sale last week," Mr. Zuckerman said. As I would soon learn, stock shortages are par for the course in most sleep-sofa showrooms.

While I had identified myself as a reporter at Foremost, I decided from this moment on to be simply an anonymous shopper looking for a comfortable sofa bed for guests. I quickly came to realize that price alone was no indication of quality. But even if you're buying a premium sleep sofa, you need to test it. Surprisingly, few shoppers do.

"I've moved more furniture for you than I moved all of last week," said Patrick Tooman, the obliging salesman at Jennifer Convertibles at 375 North Highway in Southhampton, L.I., as he hefted another coffee table. "Most people don't even fold out the bed on the unit they buy."

Not all sofas could be opened because they were too close together, but one of each of the four mattress models that this Jennifer Store offers was available to try out. "So lie here all day if you want," Mr. Tooman said, "I won't chase you out."

From four mattress models, I came up with two winners: Sealy's premium Monogram Platinum, on Jennifer's sofa bed No. 3131, an overstuffed fantasy in the Edwardian style (\$1,499), and KFI's Deep

# Castro's Revolution

**T**here seems to be a law of human nature: If people can sleep on it, they will want to fold it. Bernard Castro, a Manhattan furniture manufacturer, recognized that in 1945 when he invented the now familiar tri-fold sofabed mechanism.

But the idea of a bed in mufti (thanks to hinges and other mechanisms) has been around since at least the 17th century, when English designed a settee that with a flick of its arms unfolded to become a place of repose.

Through the years the mattress has been a master of disguise, from the 19th-century bed Masqué (is it a piano?) to the 1980's futon (you expect me to sit on this?). Here are a few examples from folding bed history.

ELAINE LOUISE



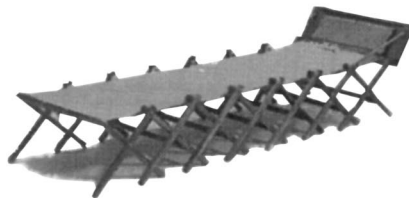
Brooklyn Museum

**1876** The bed Masqué manufactured by Smith & Company of Boston appeared to be an upright piano only when it was folded away.



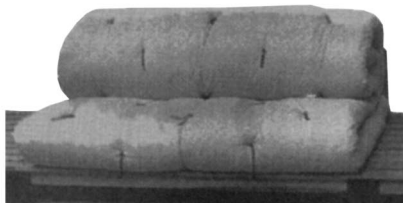
Culver Pictures

**Circa 1900**  
The Pittsburgh folding chair-bed had 30 positions.



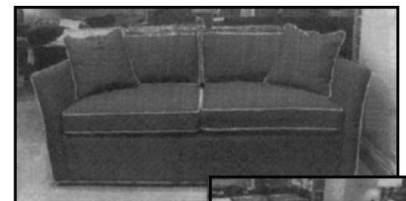
**1980**

The centipede-like Tote-Bed with its 28 legs was a cot that could be folded into an end table.



Gene Maggio / The New York Times

**1983** An ash platform and two end tables by day, a base and two Japanese-style futons by night.



**1994** Carlyle Convertibles' Sandy sofa bed.



John Sotomayer / The New York Times

Comfort in the Maria model, a marshmallowy confection upholstered in a pink-and-yellow cabbage rose print that gave support comparable to the Platinum at only \$799. And the Maria featured attached back cushions that wouldn't slip down into the yawning chasm between the mattress and frame.

Unfortunately, neither mattress was featured on the sofas advertised at fantastically low prices. These \$400 sofas contained a low-grade foam mattress utterly unsuitable for adults; they might suffice for young children. In these models, no mattress upgrades were available.

The average Jennifer sofabed comes with a standard-issue Sealy innerspring mattress that was little better, particularly at that crucial bar-in-the-back spot. But a number of models can be upgraded to Monogram Platinum mattresses for \$100.

"Also remember that you're a big fella," Mr. Tooman said. "Not everybody sinks into the mattress like you." I promised to keep that in mind and asked for a fabric swatch to

take home. But at Jennifer, swatches may not leave the showroom.

The Castro Convertibles Showroom at 51 East 34th Street feels a bit like a sofa-bed parking lot, with little room for trying them out. Ric Mientko, the assistant manager, said people who rarely use their beds should be happy with Castro's regular mattress, but I found it uncomfortably thin and lacking in support.

For \$200 extra it could be upgraded with Serta's Classic mattress with a 312-coil count. It was attached to a handsome, sturdy Montana sofa. The all-inclusive price – \$1,514 – was hardly a bargain but a 25-percent-off sale knocked that down to \$1,135. As a bed, I didn't find it much more comfortable than Jennifer's \$799 Marie.

## Closer to the cutting edge

By this point I had noticed that most sleep sofas looked the same: boxy, traditional, very little flair. John Mascheroni, a furniture designer in New York, explained; "Sofa beds

are not about design unless you go way up in price. They're about filling a need."

Had he heard of anything innovative? "Only two recent bed developments come to mind – one which folds the bed in half instead of in thirds, but that's really only in custom sofas that are far beyond your price range. And then there's a European mechanism that had wooden slats instead of springs and slides out like a drawer."

Just down the street from Castro, I located a store that sells this European mechanism: Maurice Villency, at Madison Avenue and 35th Street, where it can be bought in Roche-Bois furniture. Unfortunately, the mechanism was not available for demonstration. More distressing was the price: "Around \$5,000," said Elaine Williams, a designer at Villency, "and they go up."

But at Villency there were good sleep sofas in the \$1,000 range. The Prelude and the Dalton both cost about \$1,350 and unfolded to reveal the moderately comfortable Kingsdown mattress. Both were hand

some pieces of furniture, trimly tailored and discreetly covered, either in beige cotton or a subdued Regency stripe, with decent (not extraordinary) bed mechanisms. Considering the quality of service – no high-pressure sales tactics, an interior decorator for advice, free coffee – Villency was a good place to shop.

### The Department Stores

At Macy's Herald Square, the sofa bed area of the furniture department was heavily staffed with five salesmen who could not be bothered to assist me (though none were working with customers). Or the three sofas I tried to unfold, two were securely wired shut, and the third lacked a price tag. When I asked the salesman who was passing by, he said over his shoulder that he thought it was "somewhere around \$899." (The sofa retailed for \$699, I learned later.)

At Bloomingdale's in Manhattan the furniture department was a festival of muted beige, right down to the linen suit worn by Barbra Kendall, my saleswoman. She was quick to point me to the best sleep-sofa mattress.

"You'll love these – they're incredible because they're all cotton," she said, indicating the luxurious ticking. A beige sofa from Bloomingdale's Alexandria Classic Furniture line featured a Schifman mattress with a firm, well-padded consistency. The sofa bed was \$2,150, but a sale brought the price down to \$1,599, comparable to the better models at Jennifer and Castro.

### The Smaller Makers

My last stops were at two small sofa-bed makers. Classic Sofa at 56 West 22nd Street sells the same mechanism and mattress in all its sleep sofas. "We custom-design and build them right here in our workrooms," said Jay Rothman, who helped me in the showroom, "So anything you want, we can do. And our mattresses are custom made for us."

The mattress was covered in an ecru cotton that exuded quality, though I could

feel the bar through it. With starting prices at about \$1,500 (down cushions) or \$1,000 (polyurethane and Dacron cushions) before fabric, which can add an extra \$200 or so, this is more a source for beautifully crafted and designed sofas than for a comfortable night's rest.

At *Carlyle*, 1056 Third Avenue (62nd Street), I found a very impressive sofa bed that looked and sat like a regular sofa, not a folded-up bed. Carlyle and its budget relative, Carlyle Studio, at 1375 Third Avenue (78th Street), feature custom-built sofa beds that are made by Avery Boardman, the sofa maker popular among decorators in search of top-quality goods, said Brian Layland, a designer who assisted me. The difference between Boardman and Carlyle is simply one of marketing, he added. Boardman sells to the trade only, while Carlyle is a retailer.

"And you get the basic, no-frills model at Carlyle Studio," he explained, "but skirts and welting will cost you extra. Here those costs are built into the starting price."

While conservative in appearance, the sofas feature a high-quality mattress and a marvelous mechanism: "You know that pole that runs across your back?" Mr. Layland asked. "Well, look..." He lifted the mattress to show me a special double-bar innovation: a thin band on springs to take the pressure from the mattress, and a primary support bar beneath it. "Also, we've moved the whole bar up farther, toward where your shoulders should be, so that it doesn't catch you in that tender place on your back."

*Clearly these were the sofa beds I was looking for.* My only concern was price. Every Carlyle sofa exudes a Park Avenue solidity and Palm Beach plushness. Surprisingly, with a deluxe mattress, basic fabric and polyurethane and Dacron cushions, the Sandy sofa cost \$1,835.

"Any sales coming up?" I asked, resting comfortably for the first time all day. "Only on floor models," Mr. layland said. "And since they tend to have really expen-

sive fabric, they'd cost about the same as the quote I've given you.

"Well then," I said, lying back and feeling totally shameless, "how about knocking something off the price?"

"I can give you two deductions," he replied. "Do you think you can do without a skirt? On the bed, I mean. If so, you can take off another \$120. And if you can do without the welt, that's another \$75."

The new price was \$1,640, and with delivery in only four weeks, this seemed like a very good deal to me. And by this point, I'd bedded the best of them.

### As Always, of Course, Caveat Emptor

Carrie Getty, the vice president of the Better Business Bureau of Metropolitan New York, said that smaller furniture stores tend to be the most recalcitrant about accepting returns and giving refunds, whether it's a sofa bed or some other piece. Department Stores, she said, have the best record in making "full adjustments," that is, resolving an issue to the customer's complete satisfaction.

No matter what store you buy from, assess the quality of a potential purchase. Make sure that the fabric, patterns line up, that the seams are straight and that there is no unwanted puckering. Does the mattress lie flat or bulge?

Bring along the measurements of your living room, to calculate how much room you will have left when the bed is folded out. If possible, include the measurements of the room, stairways and doorways in your contract, so that if the sofa bed does not fit, the liability falls to the retailer.

Alfred C. Cerullo 3d, New York City's Commissioner of Consumer Affairs, said: "Read the sales contract carefully. Never sign under pressure. And always ask the refund policy of the store you're dealing with."

JUSTIN SPRING

#### Carlyle Studio Collection

1375 Third Avenue (Bet. 78th & 79th)  
New York, NY 10021  
Fax (212) 570-2431 • (212) 570-2236

#### Carlyle Custom Convertibles

1056 Third Avenue (Bet. 62nd & 63rd)  
New York, NY 10021  
Fax (212) 758-7562 • (212) 838-1525

#### Carlyle Chelsea Collection

122 W. 18th Street (Bet. 6th & 7th)  
New York, NY 10011  
Fax (212) 675-3293 • (212) 675-3212