

Furniture

Unit

11

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Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this unit the candidate will be able to:

- ✓ explore different types of materials, joinery and detailing of furniture
- ✓ explore furniture elements found in an interior design,

The choice of furniture plays a vital role in the success of a room. No other element plays such an important role in determining how well a scheme works, both practically and aesthetically.

The style, shape, and proportion of a major piece of furniture all have a strong influence on the look of a room. Consider, for example, the effect of a four poster bed in a bedroom compared with that of two single beds. Style also relates to the materials and finish: a polished mahogany table will give a much more formal appearance than a white painted one. Furniture also provides a marvellous opportunity to unite the old with the new; for example, a traditional arm chair might be combined with a modern coffee table.

The layout of furniture in a room will determine whether it feels formal or relaxed, cosy or spacious. Sometimes a single item can be used as a focal point to draw the eye in and to alter the perception of space. For example, a tall narrow book case will draw attention upwards, creating an impression of height, while a low and wide book case will emphasize horizontal space.

No matter what style is chosen, furniture must always satisfy the functional needs of a room and those who use it. There is a wide range of options for seating, surfaces and storage.

Furniture Needs

The best way is to make a list detailing the seating requirements, after a complete assessment of how many seats will be required. Assess the existing furniture in relation to the floor plan and the style and mood that is required. The floor plan will also give an opportunity to rethink the arrangement of furniture. For example, a sofa and two chairs with a table in the middle is a classic combination, but you may prefer to place two sofas opposite to each other or even to replace the sofa with arm chairs to give you space for a bookcase. It is important to buy a mixture of furniture types, shapes and sizes to cater for the different people who will use the space and also for the various activities that will take place there.

With sofas and armchairs consider the amount of maintenance they require. Feather and down cushions on seating are soft and inviting, but they will need plumping up regularly. Quilted foam, on the other hand, bounces back into shape. Similarly a sofa with a tightly upholstered back needs much less maintenance than one with loose cushions.

Everyone needs a place to put things down. A coffee table is essential to tie a seating arrangement together. The coffee table should be at a proper distance from the sofa: make sure that no one has to lean forward to reach drinks, and there should be a distance of two to three feet between the table and sofa to leave room for people's feet and legs.

There is no ideal height for a coffee table. It is purely down to personal preference, although one that is about 21 inches high will be easier to dine on. Remember a coffee table that is much higher than the seat of the couch will look out of place. Keep end tables around the same height (about 24 inches) and depth (usually 15 inches) as the arms of the sofa or chair next to it. A couple of inches above or below is fine but end tables that are, say, 5 inches higher or lower will be awkward for guests to use while seated.

Material is important to keep in mind. Transparent tables, or those made of glass, can make a tight space feel bigger. Heavy material can make a space look packed.

Furniture Arrangements

Apart from the style of the furniture, the way that it arranged is of paramount importance. So your starting point should be to think about how the pieces will work together. If you have to redecorate a room you should have a clear idea of what to include in your scheme, what to discard and what extra pieces, if any, you will have to acquire. If the room has to be redesigned you must have a clear idea of exactly what furniture you will need, how you want to use it, what sizes will work best and where you want to place it.

Establishing Priorities

However good a room is, if it does not function well, it is a failure. In order to function well a room has to be arranged properly. It is as simple as that.

- If the furnishings are not appropriate...
- If there is no real focal point in the room...
- If people do not feel comfortable in the room...
- If there is no place to read...
- If there is nowhere near at hand to place a glass or coffee cup...

In all the cases mentioned above the room is definitely not functioning well, regardless of how brilliantly it has been decorated. The ideal arrangement for any room is for each piece to be placed where it works and looks best. But there is often a conflict between the aesthetic and the practical. An arm chair, for example, might look good in a corner to help balance the furnishings in the room, but it might never actually get used there. So when you have to choose between aesthetic and practical considerations, the practical must take priority. Armchairs are meant to be sat on comfortably. Find something else of comparable visual bulk, like a large plant, or a side table to create balance. Although people's needs vary a good deal, there are some general criteria to follow with regard to furniture arrangement.

Seating Groups

Any piece of seating cannot be considered alone, unless it is an occasional chair, or a desk with a chair. Seating should be considered as part of a group. A chair on which you can sit comfortably while reading should be accompanied by a side table and a light source, preferably a lamp, at the right level for reading. For more comfort you might include a footstool. This arrangement, in turn, should be considered as part of a larger seating group. Usually this larger group is a conversation group and includes a sofa and at least one other arm chair and possibly a love seat as well, depending on the availability of space. This seating group should be provided with a good lighting facility and with some sort of nearby table surface. You could, for example, combine an end table with a large upholstered stool or a good sized coffee table in the centre of the grouping. In addition there should be some focal point around which the seating is arranged.

Manipulating Space

Space is as important an element in a room as the objects in it. There has to be a balance amongst the solid objects present in the room and empty space. In general, rooms having lot of space around the furnishings look better than fully packed rooms because they seem lighter and airier. Along with improving the aesthetics of a room, the manipulation of space plays an important role in its traffic patterns. Traffic patterns should be established when planning the positions of furniture, so that there can be easy movement throughout the room. There are a few guide lines to remember:

- The major passageway through a room should be at least 4 feet wide, and preferably 5 feet, to allow enough room for two people to walk side by side.
- Allow about 18 inches between dining chairs and at least 2 feet to pull a dining chair back from the table. There should be at least 4 feet between the dining table and the wall, so that people can walk behind the diners when diner is in progress.
- There should be 12 to 18 inches between a sofa and an arm chair or a coffee table, so that people can get up gracefully from a sitting position. And at the same time the table should not be too far from the people to reach for putting a book or glass on the table.
- In front of the dresser or bureau, 3 feet is necessary to allow the drawers to be pulled out.

A Sense of Balance

Before selecting any furniture for a room, the first thing to consider is the scale and balance. This involves the ratio of vertical lines (tall pieces) to horizontal lines (low pieces) and the proportion of light items to solid ones.

- If a room mostly consists of tall pieces i.e. a wall unit, large pictures, mirrors, tall plants, high backed chairs and sofas, it will look too stiff, formal and uncomfortable.

- If there are all low lines i.e. low backed seating, small plants, low storage, low hung mirror, and paintings hung low on the wall, the room overall will look incomplete, somehow disturbing and again, uncomfortable.
- If most of the objects in the room are solid and heavy the room will look overstuffed and dark.
- If all the furnishings are very light, say several occasional chairs and a cane or wicker sofa, the room can look insubstantial.

There has to be a happy medium in a well arranged room. This, however, does not mean having half vertical and half horizontal lines, or half solid and half light weight items. Generally most rooms look best with a predominant number of low pieces, set off here and there by taller pieces of varying heights. They could progress, perhaps from a low, upholstered stool or sofa to a wing chair, and then to a side table or lamp and finally to the really tall lines of an armoire, a bureau-bookcase, a painting, a mirror over a side table, a fire place or tall plants.

Similarly sofas and armchairs which are solid should be balanced by the openness of occasional chairs, the lightness, perhaps, of a glass table or the height of a storage unit. A dresser or bookcase can be balanced by a tall leafy plant in the room. Planning a room will be much easier if you start with larger and heavy pieces and then balance them carefully with permanent features, such as fireplaces, doorways or windows and shelves. When all that is clear in your mind, you can decide where to fill in the smaller pieces.

Other features like floor, walls and window treatments all contribute strongly towards the balance of the room. A patterned fitted carpet or an oriental rug will be visually heavier and will have more importance in the room than an ordinary wooden or tiled floor. Dark coloured walls will look heavier than pale colours. All these factors have to be considered when working with the furniture arrangement.



Suitability of Position

How well the arrangement of the furniture has been done is affected by the environmental factors.

Environment

Extreme climatic conditions like hot and cold, dryness and humidity all need to be considered when positioning the furniture. Strong sunlight will make both wood and fabrics fade, so fabrics used for upholstered pieces placed near a window should be as fade resistant as possible. If furniture is covered in a fabric likely to fade do not place it near the window. In areas with a hot climate, consider the position of the ceiling fan before deciding on the seating arrangement. Pianos and other musical instruments, if possible, should be placed near an inside wall, rather than near windows and radiators.

Listening and Viewing

Stereo equipment should be placed near or against a hard wall, facing soft surfaces like curtains and upholstery. A television screen should be placed in a position so that it can be viewed by at least four people easily.

Creating a Focal Point

If there is no natural focal point in the living room like a fireplace or a window you will need to create one – a central interest around which you can place various furniture groupings. It can be either a large painting or a group of small ones, a tapestry or a rug mounted on a wall. Other possibilities include an interesting book case or a media wall, even a low table holding some interesting items might be a focal point.

Creating Arrangements on Plan

The next stage is to check whether your proposed arrangements will work, by drawing them to scale on the floor plan. Draw them on graph paper. Most pieces of furniture have fairly standard measurements, so you can use the templates of the most common furniture pieces. Making a floor arrangement plan helps you to see if anything has been left out, what should be left in and what should be purchased new.

Furniture Arrangement Checklists

Use a check list to remind yourself of the factors you need to take into account for the furniture placement in the room.

- **Practicality** - will it work well?
- **Aesthetics** - will it look good?
- **Organization of space** - is there going to be enough space around the individual furniture items?
- **Traffic planning** - can people move around easily?
- **Scale and balance** - will the furniture look well balance, without any individual item dominating?

- **Environmental aspects** - will furniture get too much sun, humidity, heat, cold, or dryness?
- **Ease of use** - will people be able to listen to music and watch television easily and is there a good focal point?

Upholstered Furniture

The most important thing about upholstered furniture is that what you see is not necessarily what you get. An upholstered piece should feel as good as it seems, because the inner construction is what counts. Therefore always look at the label detailing the construction of an upholstered piece.

Construction Methods

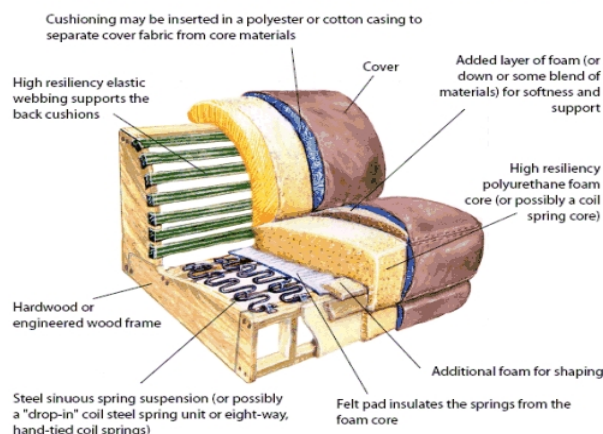
In order to know what to look for when buying upholstered furniture it is very important to have some idea about how it is constructed.

There are two types of upholstery:

1. Fully upholstered pieces, such as sofas, love seats, arm chairs, slipper chairs and upholstered stools are completely covered with upholstery with no frame showing, except possibly the lower part of the legs.
2. Exposed frame pieces, like occasional chairs, chaises and stools that have parts of the frame showing.

THE INSIDE STORY: UPHOLSTERY

Construction features vary depending on furniture design and price



Source: American Furniture Manufacturers Association

The frame is constructed first. Good quality furniture should be made from oak, walnut, teak or pine. The joints should be glued and double or triple dowelled, corner-blocked and screwed. Next comes the webbing, which is the bottommost material used on an upholstered piece, to hold the other layers. Good strong webbing should be made from jute,

flax or a synthetic material and woven into a basket weave design, which is tacked to the bottom of the frame.

In top quality furniture, after webbing comes the springs. Such furniture incorporates the coil springs which are set close enough together to provide good support without actually touching each other and these are hand tied in place. About eight springs are used for one chair. Cheaper furniture makes use of more rigid springs. On top of the springs goes a tough layer of canvas or hessian, which is sewn firmly to keep the padding intact. According to the quality of the furniture this padding consists of polyurethane foam, polyester, rubberized hair, foam rubber or feathers. The best quality furniture has a final layer of fibre fill or cotton felt, which is eased just over the upholstery fabric. Sometimes this layer has a protective covering of muslin to reduce the tension on the covering and thus maintains the shape. When upholstery fabric is stretched over the furniture it is often trimmed with self or contrasting piping to give it more fit and definition.

Commonly used Fabrics

The upholstery fabric has to be durable because it has to withstand a great deal of wear and tear. The toughest wearing fabrics are densely woven cotton, denim, cotton rep, twill and brocade, and these are all cotton based. Linen mixed with cotton is often used for loose coverings; velvet which is either cotton based or linen based is also used for this purpose. Wool is soft but an excellent upholstery fabric. Loosely woven wool or loosely woven texture of any type is not suitable for upholstery. Leather and suede, though expensive, always look luxurious and are extremely long-lasting.

Checking For Quality

If the furniture is covered with patterned, striped or checked fabric make sure that the designs are centred and that lines and checks are straight. If there are any buttons make sure that they are sewn well through the filling, not just attached to the fabric. Run your hands over the piece to make sure that there are no lumps or bumps.

Non-Upholstered Furniture

Wood furniture, whether it is new or old, is made of either hard woods such as mahogany, rosewood, oak, maple, walnut, teak, yew or cherry or of soft wood like pine. All wood furniture, whether antique or modern, should be checked for stability and quality of construction and finish.



Chairs

It is very important to check the joints of the chairs, whether they are new or antique. The joints should be constructed with corner blocks, preferably with ribs; these are meant to strengthen the joints which come under considerable pressure. There should be no gaps between the joints, and the joints should be smooth. Bear in mind that straight legs have the greatest strength. In order to test the stability of a chair, lean on the piece to see if it tips easily. Then push it a little to see if it wobbles. Finally inspect it for the finish and make sure that there are no bubbles or streaks.

Tables

Make sure that the joints have been constructed with corner blocks for strength. If there are extending leaves make sure that these match the main part of the table. Also check that the extending leaves are easy to fit and remove.

Case Goods

These are storage pieces like wardrobes, dressers, desks, bureau-book cases, sideboards and chest of drawers. When inspecting this sort of furniture make sure that the doors swing well and fit well. Drawers should slide easily and smoothly. The bottoms of the drawers should be strong. The inside should be smoothly finished. Fine quality furniture has thin layers of wood.

Hardware

Another important item to examine carefully is the hardware (the knobs, handles and hinges). These should be of appropriate shape, scale and material.

Glass, Plastic or Metal Furniture

Glass

Glass is mainly used for table tops and shelves. Make sure that the glass has a thickness of 5mm preferably 1.2 – 2cm for practical use. It should have smooth edges and nice finishing.



Plastic

These include fibreglass, laminated plastic, polystyrene, polyvinyl and acrylic. Plastic collects scratches very easily. Check that the pieces are thick enough to stand up to heavy use. The joints should be strong and overall finish should be neat.



Metal

Angle iron, wrought iron, brass, copper, stainless steel, chrome plated tubing can all be used for furniture. These should be checked to make sure that there are no bubbles and that it is smooth and free of weak spots.



Cane, Wicker, Rattan and Bamboo

This type of furniture is usually used in conservatories, gardens and porches. Check that it is sturdily constructed and joints are bound well.



Wicker furniture



Bamboo



Cane



Rattan

Beds

Mattress Types

There are several different types of mattresses, all of them quite different from each other.

Inner Spring Mattresses

These consist of about 800 or so coiled springs approximately 7 inches thick.

Foam Mattresses

This is a light weight mattress and is made of urethane or latex foam. It should be between 10 to 15 cm thick, and firm.

Stuffed Mattresses

These are not large enough to hold inner springs. They are much thinner and consist of polyester or cotton topped by foam.

Water Beds

As the name suggests, these are filled with water. These are especially good for circulation, discourage bed sores and are good for restful sleep.

Guest Beds

There are a few types of beds particularly useful for the occasional guests:

- A sofa bed can be used as a sofa and when required it can be pulled out to become a spare bed.
- A daybed can be made into a full size bed by sliding out a frame from underneath.
- A rise and fall single bed contains a second bed underneath.
- A Murphy bed folds up against a wall behind a panel and so is excellent for use in a studio or one roomed apartment.

Headboards

There is an enormous choice in headboards, including padded fabric, wood, brass, perspex, chrome, cane and white or black painted iron. Almost all headboards are sold separately.

Arranging Bedroom Furniture

Beds should be placed leaving a margin of about 2 to 3 feet on either side to allow safety of movement around them. Modern low beds are great in spaces with lower ceilings. If you choose an extra-tall bed frame then make sure that the ceiling height is at least 10 feet. Headboards should be tall enough to lean on comfortably while reading (about 2 feet tall). The style of the bed frame, whether a sleek wooden platform, dark sleigh bed, or wrought iron canopy, will set the tone for the other furniture items in the room. The role of the bedside table is to provide space to rest the essentials. It's nice to have two that match but it's by no means essential. The surface should be stable to hold something like a glass of water. When it comes to the size of the dressers, space will often dictate whether you go for a wide and long one (ideal for a narrow room) or a square and medium height one (for a square room with little wall space). The top of the dresser is prime real estate and can quickly become cluttered with keys, sunglasses or lip-gloss. Use a combination of trays, or even bowls and boxes, to create space for everything.

If the space allows it, a comfortable seating area in the bedroom makes a large room feel more intimate. The options range from mod rocking chair to a lounge chair. Each sends a very different message; the key is the style of the room.

Storage

To work out the storage requirements think about the different activities for which the room is used. Built-in storage such as alcove cupboards, look elegant, but free standing storage furniture can be moved if necessary so it offers greater flexibility. A mixture of the two can also be used. Furniture that combines storage with another function is extremely useful, especially in a small space; for example a coffee table with shelves or drawers for magazines, or beds with drawers for storing bed linen. Remember that furniture for storage should not just be functional. Consider its visual impact too.

Furniture Style

When choosing any piece of furniture, be it a sofa, a bookcase, an armoire, a bureau or a chest of drawers, it must not only work well in terms of comfort or practicality, but should also suit the style of the room and create a pleasing effect with other items in the scheme. Think about the key issues of shape, scale, colour and texture.

The larger and more permanent items of furniture, such as sofas, dressers and armchairs, naturally have a great impact on the style of an interior. Particularly large or decorative pieces often become the focal points. The key pieces should always be chosen to suit the style and proportions of the internal architecture. If the bedroom has a low ceiling, a boxy or overly tall bed should not be placed there. Using furniture that is very solid looking, such as dark wooden pieces, can make a small room feel very crowded. Furniture made of glass, laminates, shiny metals, cane and light-coloured wood will lessen the effect of solidity and give an airier feel to a room. Seating need not always mean fully upholstered furniture. A rattan sofa with seat cushions will appear much less dense.

Finally, remember that less is often more: a few well-chosen and carefully placed items will maximize the light and space in a room, which is essential for a feeling of relaxation and comfort.

Smaller items of furniture offer great scope in terms of both style and practicality. They are also the most portable items of furniture and can be moved around a room or home to revitalize different areas. The list of smaller pieces is a long one and includes occasional tables, coffee tables, sofas, end tables and side tables that can all be used for decorative displays or to extend surface areas when entertaining.

Decorative screens are useful for dividing space, concealing awkward areas, or creating a more intimate atmosphere in a large room. Whether painted, made of textured wood or fabric-covered, they also add interest to an interior. Large baskets are very versatile: these can be placed at the end of a bed to store seasonal bed linen and blankets, kept in the hall

for gloves, hats and scarves or used in a family room for games and videos. They also bring pleasing natural colours to the room.

Tips on Arranging Furniture

1. If you choose furnishings with colours that closely match their intended background the items will effectively disappear, leaving the room with a much less cluttered appearance: for instance, a beige sofa against a beige carpet and beige walls. If you want furniture to stand out, this can be achieved by choosing furnishing in contrasting colours.
2. A three-seater sofa hardly accommodates three people happily. Use a three-seater sofa but with two cushions on it.
3. In a dining room don't forget to allow enough space around the table to move freely, taking into account the need to pass behind a chair that is in use. A minimum space of approximately 90cm (3 feet) between a table and a wall will be required for comfort.
4. Stools and pouffes are useful for occasional sitting in the living room. They take up little space and can sometimes incorporate storage space in their base.
5. When designing wardrobes be careful to allow sufficient depth for coat hangers.
6. Try to arrange furnishings so that people entering the room are greeted by a pleasant view.
7. Kitchen units and vanity units should have a recessed plinth to make it possible to stand close to the work surface or basin.
8. In a kitchen, wall units that extend all the way up to the ceiling will eliminate an obvious dust trap, an arrangement that will also provide extra long term storage.
9. When ordering furniture, consider access to the house.

Suggested Further Reading:

- ✓ *Conservation of Furniture, (2003), By Shayne Rivers, Nick Umney*
- ✓ *Furniture, (2006), By Fine Woodworking*
- ✓ *Vintage Furniture Painting, (2003), By Karen Petrus Williams*