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Waves of change are now evident

Many of the waves of change about to surface in the new millennium, now barely a decade away, already are in evidence.

Just as manufacturers and retailers of furniture for the home are lining up their modus operandi to meet the challenges of the 1990's so today's more knowledgeable, more sophisticated and more confident consumers are becoming more discriminating about how they spend their money.

In response to the consumer's intensifying search for information about the products she buys for the home, the Ontario furniture manufacturing industry is offering advice on how to differentiate one upholstered furniture design from another.

Upholstered furniture is a mysterious product, they admit, because the inner construction - the frame, springs, padding and filling - are hidden from view. It isn't easy for the consumer shopping for upholstered furniture to determine what she is getting for her money when just about all she can see is the fabric cover.

It may be important to know a high-end sofa or chair has a hardwood frame and hand-tied springs but it is equally important to know how these features affect the performance and appearance of the design.

Most mid-priced upholstered furniture - that is a sofa priced from about \$800 to \$1,200 or a chair from about \$350 to \$700 - essentially consists of the same basic structural components. But the quality of the components and how they are put together can make a big difference in the appearance, comfort and performance of the furniture.

There is a good possibility that a top-of-the-line upholstered furniture design will have an all-hardwood frame. But the consumer should know for long-term performance the hardwood, whether used exclusively for the frame or as a component, should be at least three-quarters of an inch thick. The general rule is the more expensive the furniture the thicker the wood is likely to be, up to 5/4" frames for better product.

But not all high-end upholstered furniture has its frame made completely of hardwood. The frame may have components made of other types of wood or composite materials. For example, some furniture frames are made of a combination of hardwood and plywood shaped and joined together to

establish the form of the finished piece.

Plywood used in the right way and in the right places can give a good performance. However it should be used in less critical areas which receive less stress.

Pointing out that density ranges from 1.2 pounds per cubic foot to 4 pounds per cubic foot, industry experts maintain the minimum acceptable density for a seat cushion is 1.8 pounds per cubic foot while 1.2 pounds per cubic foot is adequate for back cushions since backs don't have to bear much weight. A lower density foam in a seat cushion could soften through use while medium density, high resilient foams have a longer life span.

Shredded polyurethane foam rather than a solid block for back cushions can help reduce manufacturing costs on the furniture but, over time, it could compact and settle causing the cushion to appear empty at the top and hard and lumpy at the bottom.

The foam is wrapped in polyester batting to give the cushions softly rounded edges, well-filled corners and a gently curving crown. The batting serves the important purpose of preventing the foam and upholstery fabric from abrading one another and preventing the foam from breaking down which could cause the fabric to wear out prematurely.

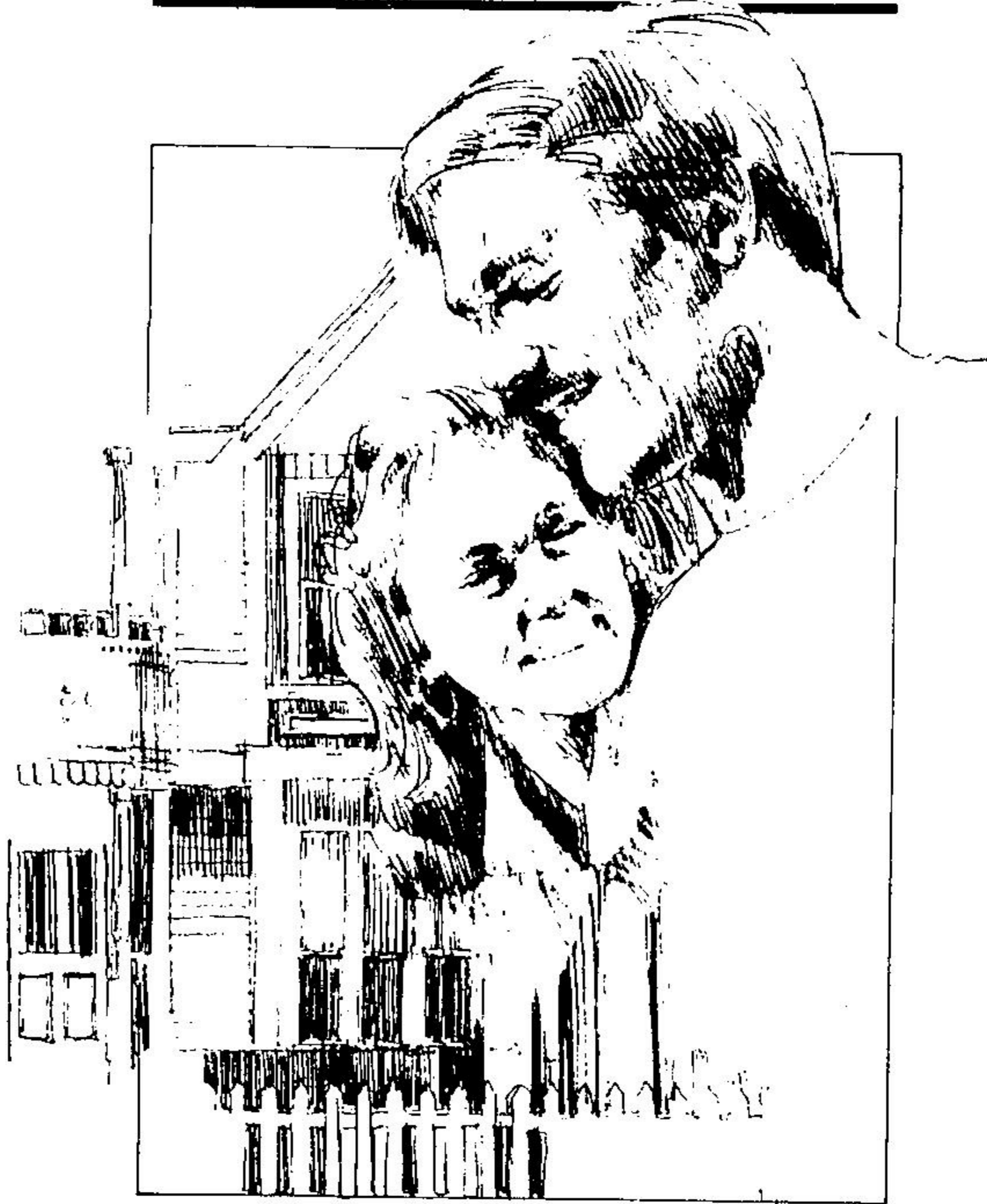
In some high-end furniture designs down is used to wrap the foam to strengthen the luxury and quality image.

If it is possible to see the sharp edges of the foam through the upholstery fabric, if the cushion edges feel hard when you sit down or if the fabric seems to pucker at the corners there is a possibility the foam was not wrapped in polyester batting as a cost-cutting measure.

In purchasing new furniture the consumer should inspect for interior casings in the cushion; if the polyester batting is sewn in; as well as the quality and quantity of the batting. All of these enhance the resilient feel and have a positive affect on the long term use.

Finally, if there are soft, casual back-pillows or throw pillows on the piece of upholstered furniture you are thinking of buying, you might want to check the amount of polyester that went into them. Try flattening a pillow, then fluffing it up with your hands. If the cushion readily regains its original shape, it can be assumed the pillow contains adequate filling.

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