

Decor flexibility: Dump your giant coffee table-and cluster small ones
By Jen Renzi , December 6, 2013

SO OFTEN when people are putting together a living room, they agonize over seating. How long should the sofa be? Should the armchairs face it at a 45-degree angle—why not 60? In the sturm und drang created by the sitting-down debate, a critical factor can get overlooked: the coffee table. More than just a place to prop your feet and showcase your remote, it's the glue that unifies a seating vignette. A too-small table not only looks rinky dink beside your L-shape sectional, it's impractical: You need a surface within arm's reach of every perch. But a steroidal coffee table has other flaws: It can seem clunky, invite clutter and impede circulation.

A friendlier, more practical alternative? Deploying a cluster of smaller-scale tables in place of a single monolith. "A lot of clients want a superlong sofa, sometimes 9 or 10 feet," said Manhattan interior designer Damon Liss. "Placing a long coffee table in front looks too linear, so I prefer using side-by-side square tables or multiple round ottomans to break up the bulk."

On the functional front, you can easily move daintier pieces—like Los Angeles designer Azadeh Shladovsky's Torre stools—around as needed. Stash one away if you want more floor space for party guests, pull one closer to the sofa when reclining lengthwise with a coffee and Elizabeth Strout's latest novel—or drag a pair elsewhere to create an auxiliary hangout zone. Product designer Derek Chen embraces such mobility in his San Francisco home. "I am almost criminally modular with my furniture, which comes from being noncommittal about my interior design."

As reconfigurable living spaces have become de rigueur, brands from West Elm to Hermès have expanded their offerings to include coffee tables that can migrate or cluster. Donghia creative director Chuck Chewning designed an origami-inspired cantilevered version for the label's latest collection. "I'll scatter them around a room next to chairs and tuck them under consoles, or group them to make a statement," he said, "especially when serving guests hors d'oeuvres."

Of course, you needn't limit yourself to designs that are sold or marketed as sets. Almost any stool or side table can be part of a medley as long as it's of appropriate stature, ideally 16 to 18 inches tall. A table topography can be nice, too: "A cluster of tables at different heights and scales creates an interesting dynamic with a sofa," said New York-based interior designer Sara Story. "The composition creates an open flow and makes for a less stagnant and rigid furniture plan."

The cluster concept itself is scalable, working equally well in big and tiny living areas. Meaghan Kimball, a Manhattan film producer who moonlights as a small-space decorating specialist, likes to group garden stools. Most recently, she specified some for a San Francisco den that's connected to a garden via French doors. "I set a trio of blue-and-white chinoiserie ceramic stools against a white sofa to bring an indoor/outdoor feeling to the room," she said. The move let her give the den decorative verve without piling on knickknacks and books, "which can look messy in confined quarters." Stools-cum-tables offer an extra level of practicality, too. "Lined up, they create a functional surface," said Ms. Kimball, "but they can also be put to work as their true purpose: seats."