5 essential pieces for stylish homes

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Maybe you've just bought a new house.

Maybe you want to update the home you already own.

Either way, new furniture, which will amount to a considerable investment, is in your future.

But where to start? Sofa, chair, new bedroom set, coffee table, ottoman?

Just like everything else, there's a pecking order when it comes to buying furniture. Some pieces are simply more important than others.

After ogling furniture and talking to several interior designers, I've come up with a list of the five most important pieces of furniture for your house.

1. Sofa

The sofa is the center of your house, and it should fit your lifestyle.

"It's where you sit and watch TV. It's where you have conversations as a family. Dare I say it's probably where a good portion of us Americans actually eat dinner," says Charles Oglesby, chief of design for Scott Huntington Interiors in Royal Oak, Mich.

"You have to make sure that workhorse No. 1, comfortable and No. 2, durable," he says.

» **Buying tip:** Go for something simple with clean lines, and if they want to add wild throw pillows, interesting out-of-the-box end table or coffee table, they can," says Stephen Knollenberg, who has made the 2010 "Architectural Digest" list of the top 100 designers and owns Stephen Knollenberg Inc. in Birmingham. "But I would let the upholstery be more quiet. Do an oatmeal color, do a white, do a chocolate brown or a gray. Obviously, if you have little kids and spaghetti sauce, you're going to want to choose a chocolate brown."

Another buying tip: If you have a dog, Oglesby recommends considering leather because it doesn't retain odors.

2. Bed

In addition to a good mattress, every bed outside of a college dorm room or an undergraduate apartment needs a frame that includes a headboard.

"A lot of us, we sit up in bed and read. You need something that is going to support you," says Oglesby.

Whether you choose a wood headboard or upholstered headboard, a really great bed frame "lends itself to the aesthetic" of the room, says Oglesby: "You want your bedroom to be very, very inviting. You want it to be someplace you want to go. You want to escape and rest and relax."

» **Buying tip:** Don't skimp on your mattress. "It's important for your health," says Mary Olk, owner of Designer Interiors in Royal Oak. "You spend a third of your life in bed."

3. Dining set

Dining tables made from reclaimed wood are especially popular and can work in traditional settings as well as more casual, modern settings.

As for the chairs, just make sure they're comfortable.

"You don't want people to kind of dine and go," says Oglesby. "You want people to sit down and kind of relax and enjoy one another's company. It reminds me of being a kid, and we'd sit around the kitchen table, and we'd eat dinner. It was kind of the one time the entire family was there. We got to catch up and see what was happening."

» **Buying tip:** "If people ask what my opinion is, I always say, 'Do a round table,' " says Oglesby. "It creates more of an intimate setting. It's a little cozier, a little more inviting." Everyone can see everyone else. And no one has to take the sometimes awkward position of sitting at the head of the table.

4. Armchair

People tend to feel very personal about armchairs.

Durable and forgiving fabrics: corduroy, hefty linen, velvet, linen, wool.

» **Tip:** Pay attention to size and scale. Once you see something you like, "come back to the house and measure those things out in their space," says Knollenberg. "It's not uncommon (for someone) to go shopping for furniture today and come back and realize that the sofa they love is a Buick. It's great on the floor, it looks great in the mall, but it's not going to fit in my house. ... Nothing looks worse than furniture that's too big in your room."

5. Conversation piece

"You need something that's different, something that's fun," Olk says.

Whether it's a colorful chest in the living room or a piece of artwork you find personally important, you need something to give your house some soul.

"It's nice to not see page 42 of the West Elm catalog in everyone's house. It's nice to make it your own. Bring in something personal," says Knollenberg. "Maybe it was a chair your grandfather had or a table your mom liked. Don't be afraid to pepper that in. Whether it's Neiman Marcus or the Royal Oak flea market, it doesn't matter."

» **Tip:** "You're going to expect to spend some money on your primary upholstered pieces," says Knollenberg. "But if you're up for the search to fill in around those pieces with things that are new, old, found, collected, whatever they might be, your dollar signs don't keep accruing."