



D10



D4

OFF DUTY



D5



D7

COOKING | EATING | STYLE | FASHION | DESIGN | DECORATING | ADVENTURE | TRAVEL | GEAR | GADGETS

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The Comfort Revolution

It's no longer necessary to suffer for style—from sleek sneakers to cars that soothe, our on-the-go lifestyles are transforming all quarters of design. A report from the front lines of the feel-good movement

BY KATE BOLICK

WHEN SOTHEBY'S PUT Brooke Astor's belongings on the auction block last month, assy voyeur was reminded that being rich hasn't always meant enjoying the cushy life. As I scrolled through the 901 lots pictured online—a shocking number of marble-topped Louis XVI console tables; herds of Chinese porcelain animal figurines with which to populate them—the word that kept coming to

mind was "hard." Save for the ecstatic curlicues on a few Rococo mirrors and the occasional seat cushion, there wasn't a yielding surface or curved edge in sight.

We've long accepted that high style presumes a certain level of suffering, as if feeling good were the antithesis of fashion, something to be indulged in private, when nobody was looking (e.g., sweatpants). That's changing. Over the last 10 or so years, comfort has become a leading motivator in fashion, décor, even industrial design, abolishing the old line between private and public. Feeling good remains as personal and idiosync-

cratic as ever—what works for you won't necessarily work for me—but because there are so many options to choose from, and so much information available to help you choose it, rather than being a relaxation of standards, comfort is an increasingly particular, even scientific art. Today, comfort is king, as well as our dominant form of self-expression.

Take the sneaker, historically the bane of the professional woman's existence, currently the comfort revolution's hammer and sickle. If you've walked down the

Please turn to the next page

Photo: Illustration by The Wall Street Journal

NIGHT BIKE AMONG SHANGHAI'S SECRETS

Twisting alleys and deserted complexes reveal hidden sides of one of China's most hectic towns

BY DAVID WESSEL AND BOB DAVIS

"HOLD YOUR BREATH! Public toilet!" Wu lieto shouted as we rode our bicycles through a narrow alley between tenements that house migrants from the countryside in the shadows of Shanghai's neon-draped skyscrapers.

It was nighttime, the alleys were dimly lit and the lights on

our bikes were intended to make us visible, not to light our way. Peering through the buildings' open windows, we could see some residents playing mah-jongg. Others stood in our path, talking to each other, their silhouettes barely moving at the sound of the bells on our handlebars and Ms. Wu's repeated cry: "Xiao xin!" ("Watch out!")

As we emerged onto a wide, busy boulevard, Ms. Wu told us

Please turn to page D9



AFTER DARK
Tour guide Wu lieto riding along East Nanjing Road.



[INSIDE]

HOT POTS
Container plants: jewelry for the front door **D3**



SLOW FOOD FAST
Eric Ripert dishes up skate with charterelles **D6**

DANCE, DANCE, DANCE

How an Xbox can hone your moves **D11**



STYLE & FASHION

FOR HIM
Men's wear has relaxed, without relaxing standards.



• Rick Owens' skirt for dudes-well, some dudes



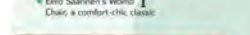
• Sudala & Wortman velvet slippers that pound the pavement



• Basico's cozy yet slim puffer jacket has a sublimation fabric shell



• Larven's sweatshirt-like wool sweater



• Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair, a comfort-chic classic



• No hard edges on the Blogger sofa by Roche Bobois



• BMW 5 Series' brown interior is considered reassuring to women



• Beeline Home's 20-inch-high side table offers sofa-sitters an easy-to-reach drink perch

AT HOME AND BEYOND
From ultra-cushioned sofas to cars in calming colors, comfort-chic is design's new mantra.



THE COMFORT ZONE

• Laser track pants from T by Alexander Wang

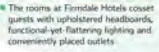


• Isabel Marant's fashion-forward wedge sneaker

• Plurima's pajama top for daytime



• Flush flokati rugs, like this one from Anthropologie, have become de rigueur décor



• The rooms at Firmdale Hotels coast guests with upholstered headboards, functional-yet-flattering lighting and conveniently placed outlets

Continued from Page 10e

Street lately, you may have noticed that the overstuffed marshmallows of yore have been replaced with snive styles in every conceivable shade of bright and neon. The 1980s career woman in her skirt suit and Bechdele slumped on her grown-up shoes when she got to the office, but the millennial liberator, liberated from her desk by the smartphone, is often anywhere but the office. When a typical workday includes a round trip flight to Chicago followed by dinner with clients, travel-friendly footwear is not only necessary, it lets people know you're successful enough to not have to wear shoes that give you blisters. The likes of Isabel Marant and Chloé are even tooting a high-topped sneaker with a hidden 3-inch wedge heel that confers an air of integrity lacking in previous offerings (picture the offspring of a Converse and a pump). Marant's new collaboration with Liberty of London has amplified the style with a delicate floral print.

In June, fashion site Refinery29 ran a tutorial on how to incorporate the new sneaker into one's wardrobe—which itself presents limitless opportunities for dignified sloth. Yastemak-

ers recommend we don pajamas as evening wear, because haven't budget since their millennial comeback and Barneys recently announced in an advertisement, "No longer relegated to lounge-wear, the once-fumble sneaker has been making appearances on street-style stars and runway alike."

Men are benefiting as well. If "Casual Fridays" were introduced in the 1990s to raise white-collar morale, not '90s tech-gave chic—jeans, T-shirts, hoodies, sneakers—ugged the same by enabling CEOs to transition seamlessly from boardroom to videophone console. The years since have seen something of a stabilizing effect, thanks in part to an uptick in high-quality, touchable cashmere, fine woods and chunky knits that cloak the wearer in a sensual cocoon and broadcast a quality of subtle refinement. Whether the men's skirts peddled by Marc Jacobs and Rick Owens will catch on remains to be seen.

There's something undeniably progressive about this demand for comfort, along the lines of the Dappers tossing their corsets or the women's libbers burning their bras. Many of today's leading designers came of age when third-wave feminists were trying to puzzle out how to look attractive without compromising their politics, and today's chic insouciance is a solution to that conundrum. In 2002, when she was in her late 20s, fashion designer Rachel Comey transformed the footwear landscape with the now-ubiquitous fashion clog; this season, she offers 12 different options. "I like to think there's something sexy about clogs," she said. "They conjure up images of the light-john-wearing, Firebird-driving baby sitters that Iired sedr to me in the 1970s. They were all liberated and opinionated and a touch naughty." It doesn't even matter if the women buying these fabulous view their purchases as political—they are undeniably part of a soft-still-shift that's seeing women make and spend more money than ever before, and they're influencing design with their dollars.

The comfort craze is even impacting the universe of cars. The last 10 years have seen a transformation in automotive design, said Gerry McGovern, head of design and chief creative officer for Land Rover. Now that women are driving more than ever, their preferences have more influence, and new studies show that women experience comfort much differently than men. He cited the "hellbelle," that horizontal zone on the side of a car separating the windows from the doors. A low hellbelle is generally considered elegant, but Land Rover's researchers found that women like the hellbelle to be higher than usual, because it makes them feel secure. This modification gave a more dramatic look to the car's exterior. As if to bring this bridging of worlds to life, in May Vogue Italia editor Franca Sozzani collaborated with BMW to custom-design a MINI Roadster for the Milan Fashion Shows. Her creation—a brilliant violet with gold racing stripes—reflects the latest research into gender and color preferences. According to Sandy McGill, chief designer at Designwomens, a creative consultancy owned by BMW, women love purple and men hate it. "It makes women feel secure, whereas it seems to actually scare men," she said.

Because color affects us not only visually but also emotionally, it's a key ingredient in auto design, as drivers need to feel secure in both body and mind. According to Ms. McGill, the biggest trend in auto interiors is shades of brown, considered a "comfort color." Brown is rich, warm, approachable, earthy. It gives you a feeling of history and refinement with age," she said. As Mr. McGovern put it: "The car has become the extension of the living room. We spend so much time in our cars—the recognition is that interiors have to be calming and inviting spaces that stimulate the desire to be in them."

As for living rooms themselves, they haven't been this cozy since the 1970s, when shag rugs and throw cushions tumbled us off our ottomans and down onto the floor—which is exactly why designers are incorporating them (and their cousins, the flokati and wall-to-wall carpeting) into contemporary decors. "Home can't be happy unless it's comfy," said home furnishings de-

signer and "smuggle chic" purveyor Jonathan Adler. "You should use every square inch of your house." His designs are the antithesis of those found at Brooks Astor's high-end tag sale. There's nary a straight line or sharp edge in his enthusiastic mishap of midcentury Palm Beach and global pop. Quick persals of West Elm and Crate & Barrel might lead one to wonder if all the rooms we're logging in bed with our laptops and iPads have inspired an upholstered headboard revival, sure enough. Mr. Adler sells nothing but.

Interior decorator Barry Williams has been refining her approach to comfort since the mid-'60s, when she joined the iconic decorating firm Parish-Hadley, and has watched the demise of the formal living room and rise of the multifunctional "great room" firsthand. "We want rooms that feel good, that reflect the way we live," she said. For her, comfort is synonymous with usability: a sofa that's good for napping, chairs that can be pulled over when friends drop in, small tables that ensure when a person sits down with a cup of coffee she has somewhere to put it.

Kiri Kemp, owner and design director of the supremely comfortable Firmdale Hotels, and author of the new Rizziotti coffee-table book "A Living Space," has noticed that her increasingly design-knowledgeable clientele no longer considers the trend for bespoke and tailor-made to be a luxury, but a requirement. She considers every aspect of her hotel rooms, down to the lining and trim on the curtains. "Details are comforting for the eye because they make you feel connected," she said. A high bed "has a certain stability, and make you want to throw yourself onto it" as

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upholstered headboard miasm "you can lean back and have breakfast"; there should always be a bedside light that's strong enough to read but not romantic enough that you look good without your makeup. And then there's the technology: "If I could get away with not having any electrical outlets I would, but I fear that is far in the future. For now, technology is the first thing I think of when designing a room. There should always be broadband and several telephone lines, and because we all use the alarms on our phones to wake up, I put a plug beside the bed."

The masses might not be experiencing comfort as luxuriously as the one percent, but the pursuit of it is nothing if not egalitarian. The wide availability of affordable comfort at mass retailers like J.Crew and Target has been a significant step in this direction. There's trickle-up, too: The fit set was originally exclusive to people who worked on their feet all day, such as nurses and chefs. Who knows—perhaps it will come to pass that comfort is the great equalizer.

WHERE TO FIND THEM IN 'THE COMFORT ZONE': Larven Contrast-Front Wool Sweater, \$120; mpcor.com; Stubb's & Wooten Velvet Slippers, \$400; mpcor.com; Basco Puffer Jacket, \$700; Basco New York, 800-222-8630; Plurima Annabelle Shirt in Cactus, \$275; net-a-porter.com; T by Alexander Wang, Teard-Print Jersey Track Pants, \$235; net-a-porter.com; Belet Leather and Suede Sneakers, \$685; Isabel Marant, 212-259-2280; Flokati Rug, from \$308; anthropologie.com; Beeline Home by Barry Williams Colonne Table, \$575; Tealight, 212-635-2280; Biague 3-Seal Sofa by Roberto Tapasini and Maurizio Manzoni, \$3,024; Roche Bobois, 212-889-0700; Womb Chair and Ottoman by Eero Saarinen for Knoll, \$5,000 (for chair) and \$1,009 (for ottoman); Deco Scandinavia

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Photos: Bobo for the Wall Street Journal; Photo by Steve Delaney for the Wall Street Journal; Photo by Steve Delaney for the Wall Street Journal; Photo by Steve Delaney for the Wall Street Journal; Photo by Steve Delaney for the Wall Street Journal