"Ready-to-wear" is often a misnomer when the clothing sizes can't accommodate the many shapes bodies can take. Christina Binkley discusses how investing in good tailors can breathe new life into clothes. Photo: Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal.

Ready-to-wear often isn't ready to wear.

Even luxe clothes can be spoiled by ill-fitting shoulders, loose straps, gaping blouses and bulging waistbands. The difficulties multiply with age; after 40, it can seem that nothing fits well.

Fortunately, there are mechanics for clothes: tailors. While they're sometimes overlooked in America, they're a secret weapon for those who know how to wield them.

Jeanine Goss, a 30-year-old makeup artist in Los Angeles, picked up a sequined gown last week at a local tailoring shop called the Perfect Fit. When she bought the gown, the back puckered. Then the shop shortened and reset the straps. Instant fit. "When you find a good [tailor] you keep coming back," Ms. Goss said.

F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas

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The shop's owner, Jill Aghassi, and her staff work six days a week in this enclave of old-money mansions near Pasadena, taking in darts, letting out waists, tightening seams so a blouse doesn't gape, and adding gussets, or pieces of fabric, to pants that are too tight. "If I find something and it's a little big, I'll buy it because I know she can fix it," says Liz Giordano, a client of 25 years.

One of the reasons why celebrities and socialites look so good is that their clothes fit well. Alterations are a given for stars working with stylists.

Yet in most of America, tailors and seamstresses have been disappearing. (Ms. Aghassi was raised in Iran and studied fashion and pattern-making in Germany.) One reason is that clothing is so inexpensive, now that much of it is imported from cheap-labor countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, apparel prices flattened and then fell, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Spending $40 to tailor $79 pants feels oddly wasteful. The result: American closets are brimming with ill-fitting clothes.

**Behind the Scenes at a Tailor Shop**

Tailors are a secret weapon for those who know how to wield them. *Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal*

Historically, tailoring was common for men, while many women sewed at home. That
has shifted as more men's clothing is sold finished and as women in the workplace have required more tailored clothing (and given up sewing).

Spending a day with Ms. Aghassi reveals the variety of puzzles that tailors solve. A client named Dee Maechling toted in a white Alexander McQueen sheath dress and a black velvet T-shirt. She tried on the dress and presented herself to Ms. Aghassi's senior tailor, Youn Choi. She pointed at two protrusions of fabric where darts ended in the chest. "How can we fix this?"

Mr. Choi affixed pins where he would recut the darts. He also added pins to narrow the wide neckline of the velvet tee and make it more flattering.

John Adamson, 23, arrived with his late grandfather's camel-hair jacket. He wanted it trimmed down to suit today's body-hugging trend. Vertical darts along the front panels were pinned in place. "I'm going to take my grandmother to dinner in this jacket next week," Mr. Adamson said.

There are tricks to a great fit that only a good tailor knows. Ms. Aghassi updates older styles by resetting shoulders and slimming down sleeves—even restyling knitwear such as St. John. "Most of the time, fashions come back, but they don't come back exactly the same," she says.

Ms. Aghassi's arsenal of solutions includes cinching necklines with elastic, removing annoying turtlenecks, and adding fabric to cover plunging necklines or exposed shoulders. To widen a waistline, she removes fabric from a hemline. She says she has large clients who buy two of the same garment so she can meld them into one larger garment.

When Fran Benuska, a San Marino real-estate agent, bought a long black organza skirt several sizes too small, Ms. Aghassi cut the A-line skirt down from the waist and found a wider place to put the waistband.

One of her most mysterious achievements is lengthening the crotch of a garment. "How can you lower a crotch? There's no fabric!" demands client Marilyn Goudzwaard. Ms. Aghassi recuts the fabric at the crotch, adding gussets if necessary to widen the thigh.
This only works if the pants are long, since the cutting shortens the leg.

"I can't tell you how much money she's saved me," says Ms. Goudzwaard. "Before, I never felt like I looked good, and I kept buying more clothes."

Not all tailors are cut from the same cloth, so it's worth searching thoroughly. Good department stores and independent boutiques offer tailoring free of charge, unless you're shopping on sale, in which case there may be a fee. Otherwise, ask friends and cleaning professionals for recommendations; then ask the tailor how he or she would handle your task.

Camille Canon, a 26-year-old bride, took her vintage wedding gown to five shops before settling on Ms. Aghassi's.

"She was the only one who called out the details of the dress," says Ms. Canon. "She noticed it didn't have a bustle. She noticed that the top is asymmetrical."

At the Perfect Fit's upstairs work area last week, Hengameh Tirgar wielded a razor blade to remove two small knit belt loops from the waist of a cashmere sweater, moving them higher to the client's actual waistline. Iren Kapkarin opened seams on a jacket, while Mr. Choi hunkered over a colorful man's jacket at a sewing machine. A floral Lela Rose sheath dress waited to have its darts let out. A box contained a fox stole and a magazine photo for its makeover.

I discovered the Perfect Fit after investing in a sequined Dries Van Noten skirt that drooped awkwardly in back. Having lost two dresses to poorly executed alterations at my dry cleaner, I recalled an haute couture collector recommending a Pasadena clothing restorer called the French Hand Laundry, which in turn recommended the Perfect Fit.

After Mr. Choi finished shaping my pencil skirt (reattaching tiny sequins by hand at the seam), it skimmed my body like a custom glove. He even added a kick pleat so I could walk and sit comfortably. I wore the skirt to a gala. I didn't furtively check a mirror all night.

That pleasure led me to return with more clothes, and then more. Often Ms. Aghassi and
Mr. Choi would collaborate to arrive at solutions. With one schlumpy-looking dress, Mr. Choi pinned darts vertically at the chest. He and Ms. Aghassi consulted each other, then redirected the darts, making them horizontal. Suddenly the shoulders stopped pulling and the garment fell into shape.

Mr. Choi recently altered my seven-year-old Ann Demeulemeester riding jacket, which turned out to have a variety of ailments that added up to make it rarely worn. The shop tightened a seam in the back, shortened side darts to make it flare at the hips, and narrowed and shortened the sleeves (preserving the four functional buttons in each).

The prices of the alterations ranged from free (removing shoulder pads from a Chanel blazer) to more than $200 for heavy tailoring. In each case, a wearable garment was salvaged from the dungeon of my closet.

Such transformations often leave clients wishing everything could be reshaped so deftly. "I wish," Ms. Goudzwaard told Ms. Aghassi last week, "that you could do something about my face."

Write to Christina Binkley at christina.binkley@wsj.com