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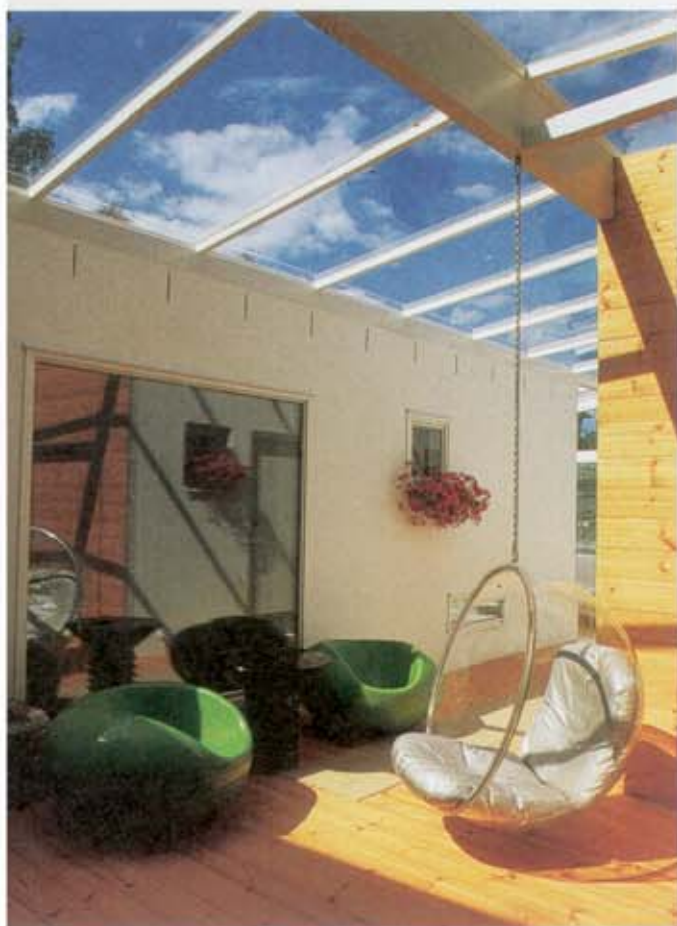
Eero s. 88

By Kristi Cameron



Famous for vivid sculptural chairs from the 1960s, Finnish industrial designer Eero Aarnio also created a surprisingly understated Modern lake-house.

Photographed for *Metropolis*
by Harri Kosonen/Studio Sempre



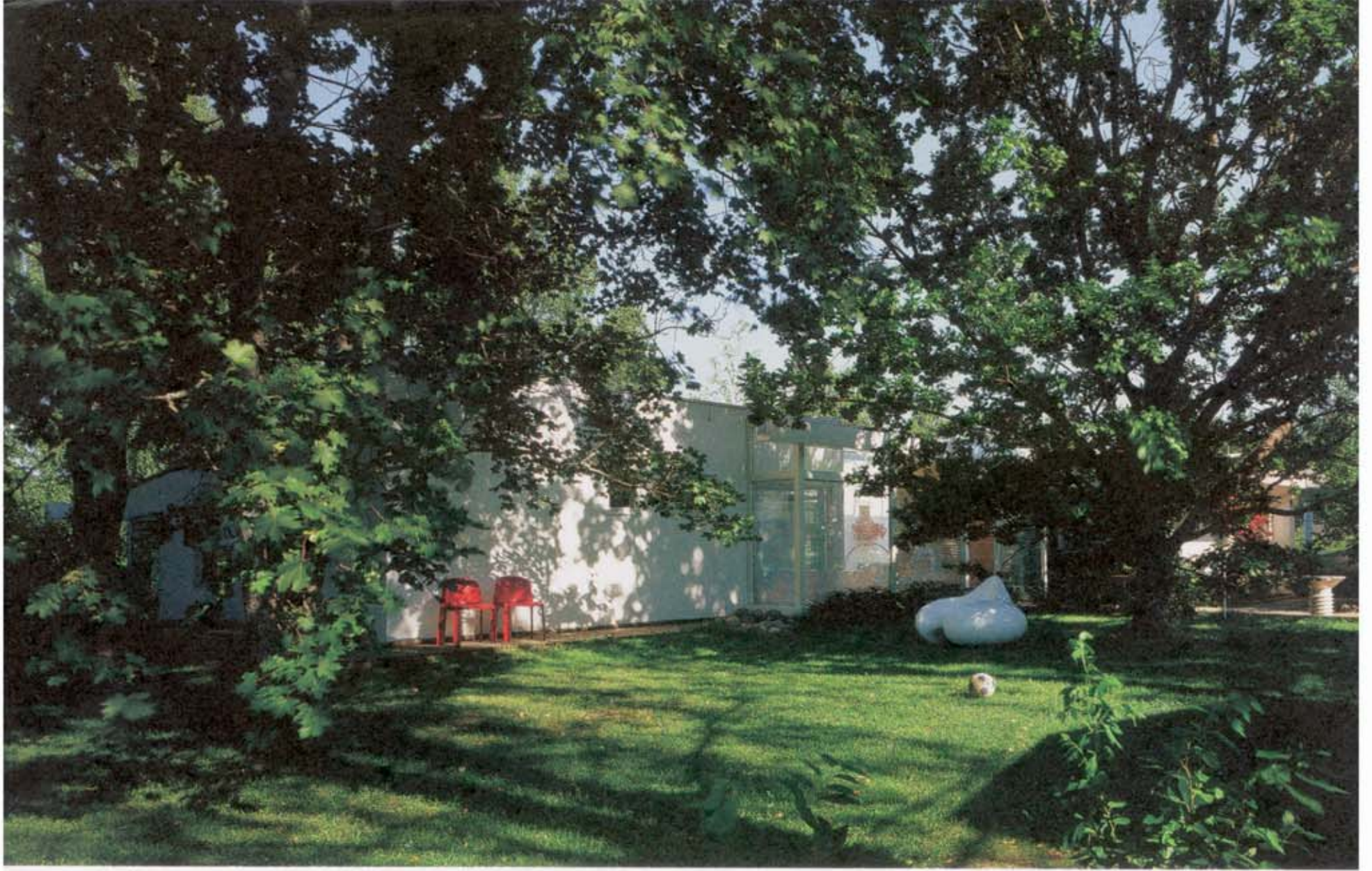
SPACE

The Ball Chair (1962; opposite) wasn't put into production until 1966, when it became an instant international success. After discovering that the fiberglass rocking chair Pastil (1967; pictured in green, below) floats in water, Aarnio designed the Tomato (1971; top) with a back and armrests to float with more stability. Last year, he enclosed the space between the main house and his workshop (above) in glass.

Drive 30 minutes west of Helsinki to Veikkola, and you may find yourself on a suburban street where a white Formula Chair sits on the lawn behind a low white fence. If you recognize the chair, it's probably because you're familiar with the plastic oeuvre of Finnish designer Eero Aarnio. The modest one-story structure behind the chair is his house. Aarnio—who had intended to study mathematics at university in preparation for becoming an architect before pursuing his true calling—designed it himself, but he explains that it was only a partial fulfillment of an old goal. "My imagination," he says, "is always bigger than my wallet."

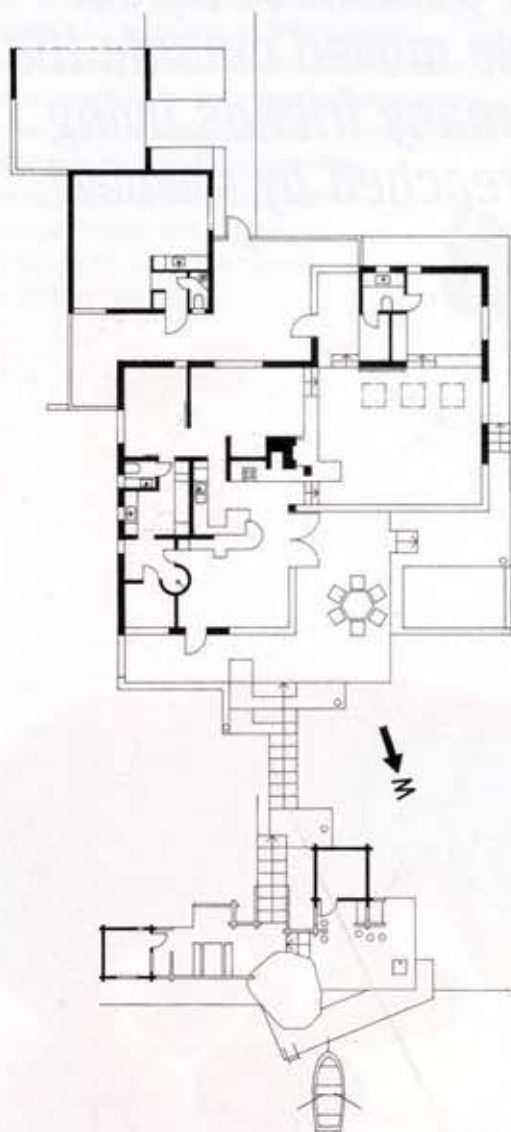
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Aarnio designed nearly every piece of furniture in the house. Beyond the gallerylike front rooms the furnishings, like the house, are modest and utilitarian.

From the front yard (opposite, top) Aarnio's house looks like a simple box, but it's actually two buildings with three levels (below). The public rooms at the front of the house—the living room (opposite, bottom) and library (far right)—showcase plastic pieces from the sixties and seventies like the Pony Chair and the Mushroom Stool. Aarnio also designed these traditional stools for the kitchen (near right).



Those aware of Aarnio's brand of sixties pop Modernism (truly a testament to his imagination) will be surprised by the Scandinavian classicism of his house. "He was the foremost Finnish designer from '64 to '70, the hippie time, because he used new and innovative plastics combined with pure, clear colors and geometric shapes," says Pekka Korvenmaa, a professor of design and culture at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. "Aarnio's designs are icons of that period."

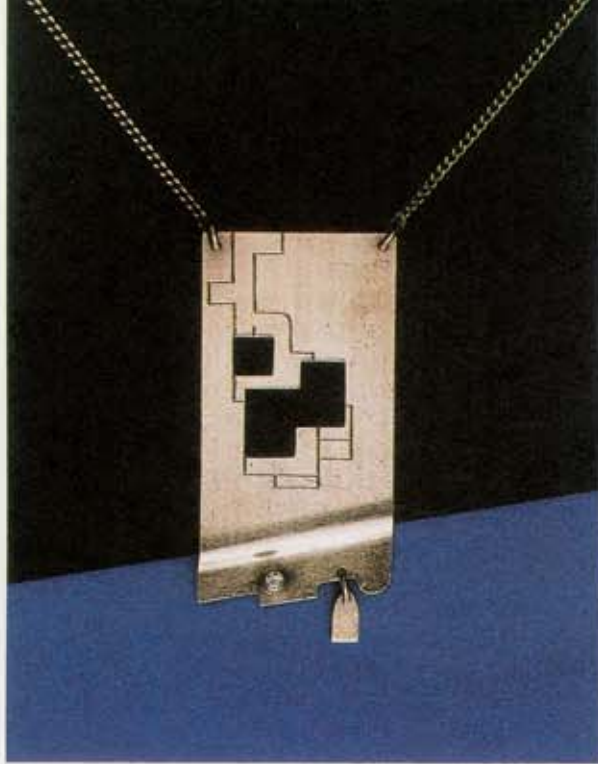
His 2,700-square-foot house, which sits on a gentle slope at the edge of Lake Lamminjärvi, appears from the driveway to be a simple white box. It's actually two buildings: the right corner workshop was converted from a two-car garage and is now connected by a glass terrace to the main building. Together they serve as an exhibition space for his prototypes, produced designs, and custom-made pieces. Just inside the front door hang two translucent Bubble Chairs (1968) backed by a grassy Pastil Chair (1967). The original handmade prototype of the piece that launched his career, the Ball Chair (1962), commands the entrance hall. All this design history before you're barely inside.

This year M2L Inc. is reintroducing these classics in the United States, beginning with an exhibition at their gallery in Manhattan that runs this month through mid-November. "Eero's pioneering use of plastics still has a freshness after nearly forty years," says Michael Manes, president of M2L. The company will also distribute Aarnio's Pony Chair (1973), Screw Table (1992), and Mushroom Stool (1961).

Though he'll always be best known for his sculptural plastic pieces, he's also done different types of commissions: office-chair designs for Martela and EFG, handles and knobs for Valli & Valli, for example. And after 17 years, he has realized the production of a steel-tube rocking chair with a fiberglass seat, which was chosen as the symbol for Habitare 2001, Finland's furniture and interior-design fair.

Aarnio designed nearly every piece of furniture in the house. Beyond the gallerylike front rooms the furnishings, like the house, are modest and utilitarian. The split-level main building—three descending floors, each separated by three steps—is essentially a large open space. The rooms are divided by elevation changes, and many of the exterior walls—especially those at the rear of the house facing the lake—are floor-to-ceiling windows.

The hub is the combined studio and living room, which has a panoramic view of the lake. Aarnio works on the highest floor at the front of the house, in the corner above the living room. His drawings hang on a sliding wall between the two.



Lake Lamminjärvi is the governing feature of the house. Aarnio depicted the glacial rock (bottom) and rowboat (far left) on its shoreline as a diamond and a charm in a necklace (near left) he made for his wife's birthday.



All the public rooms branch off from the living room, including the library and kitchen. On the common wall between the three is a fireplace that serves two purposes: central heating and a fire oven. The raked-pine stools, counter, and kitchen dining table look too traditional to be Aarnio designs, but they are. In the 1960s he created a series in this style, called Pirtti (log cabin). It included a dining table, chairs, and shelves and was in production for 20 years. "I find it rewarding to work in different styles," says the 69-year-old designer. "They support each other and often provide new methods of problem solving."

In the log-cabin style Aarnio also designed furniture and accessories for a prefab sauna used in residences, hotels, and salons. The sauna package included his design for an electric model, which was in production 1965–75. The sauna dates back 2,000 years in Finland—popular no doubt because of the long, cold winters. Approximately one in every five Finns has one. Today the fast-heating indoor electric versions are most common, but the traditional smoke sauna is more desirable. Aarnio has both: the electric one is located in the back corner of the house; his smoke sauna sits on the lake—it's heated for two hours to 212 degrees Fahrenheit using alder wood. Customarily, the experience is completed with a cooling swim in the lake (even in winter).

The site was selected for the lake, and the house is oriented around it. Lakes are an integral part of the culture and geography of Finland ("Land of a Thousand Lakes"), which has nearly 200,000 of them, covering roughly ten percent of its surface area. "The lake is why we moved outside the city," Aarnio says. "It's a good location for my work. We have enough room, we're surrounded by nature, there's clean water for us and for our grandchildren to swim in, and by highway it's only 30 minutes from Helsinki. We have many friends living around the lake who can be reached by rowboat."

Because the Aarnio family has moved so many times, their houses have become part of family legend (he and his wife, Pirkko, have two daughters, Rea and Marja-Leena). Aarnio can recall the house in which he created each of his designs. Last year Marja-Leena painted a silk scarf for her mother's birthday mapping the 31 houses she has lived in. Aarnio and his wife have lived together since number 12, an apartment in downtown Helsinki.

Aarnio created an artistic totem of the current house as well, also for Pirkko's birthday. In 1989, just after they moved in, he made her a necklace based on the house plan. He used a diamond purchased 30 years ago in the Amsterdam airport to represent the 10,000-year-old glacial rock that sits in the backyard. (The scale of the plan, set by the diamond, is 1:1,500.) "The diamond was the cheapest one they had—11 dollars—but I asked them to put it in their nicest box," Aarnio says. "They told me the box was worth more than the diamond, but I managed to get it for free." www.metropolismag.com

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