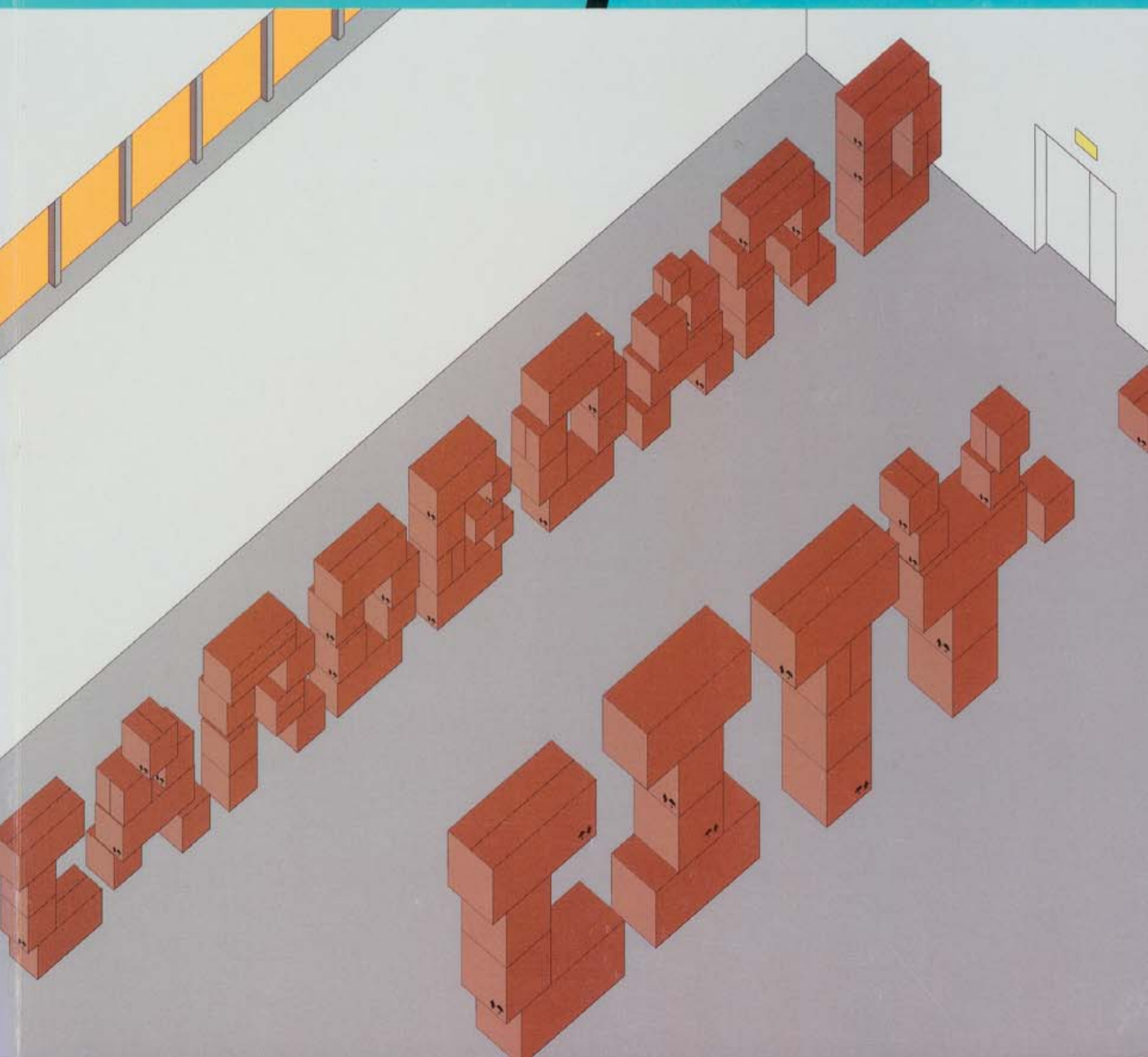


S. 31-39

ptah

architecture design art

2001:2



▼ After several versions of the rattan stool, Aarnio developed this chair known as **The Elephant Boot**. It developed very naturally from the rattan stool. All rattan seats were fully finished with cushions.

FANG HAI

EERO AARNIO AND HIS DESIGN

Fang Hai (b. 1963) is an architect. He is at the moment studying as a doctorate student at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki (UJAH) in the Department of Interior Architecture and Furniture Design. He is the author of a monograph on Yrjö Kukkapuro and is writing a monograph on Eero Aarnio.
fang.hai@avarte.fi

Photographs from Eero Aarnio archives.

English language consultant Desmond O'Rourke.

Eero Aarnio is one of the most famous designers of our time. During a broad career, he has produced a varied range of high quality works. With many world-famous designs, he is one of the architects and designers who have been credited since the 1960s with establishing Finland firmly in the international design market.

He is not only a master of furniture design but has specialised in interior design, exhibitions and industrial design. He has also worked in other areas, particularly graphic design and photography. Many of his creations figure in the collections of the world's leading museums, among them the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1. Based on an interview with Eero Aarnio, May 2001.
2. MD magazine 1966.10, Germany.

Origins Eero Aarnio drew on Finland's heritage in his early furniture designs by following traditional methods and focusing on native materials. He also drew on other traditions, such as that of Chinese cane furniture. His key furniture designs appeared early on. During the summer of 1954, Aarnio visited the hometown of his future wife, **PIRKKO**, and started to learn basketry. While very popular in Asian countries, in Finland it is mainly associated with handicraft made by the blind. Aarnio, after finishing a basket, stood it upside down and made it into a seat.¹ A series of these seats marketed under the name *Mushroom* spans the period 1950–1990. The first version was made of rattan and was a popular product in the early 1960s. For a time, various stools and chairs of woven cane manufactured in Hong Kong found buyers.² Then came the fibreglass version. "My first commercial design idea was a cane stool which I myself wove in 1954. The first series of rattan stools was made in Finland in 1961 by the Society for the Blind. In 1962, I expanded it into a product series and found a manufacturer in Hong Kong. The first fibreglass samples of these stools were made in 1967 in Hong Kong, but actual production did not start until the end of the 1990s. The fibreglass stool has been made in Finland since 1998 and sold throughout the world by Adelta, a Finnish-German company based in Germany. The cane stool is called *Mushroom* on the US market. Since





▲ The *Mushroom Seat* collection made of woven rattan. Designed in 1961 in four different versions. The rattan series was made entirely in Hong Kong by Fennkong Ltd.

► Designed in 1963–65, the *Ball Chair* (also called *Thunderball*, *Bomb* or *Globe*) was the talk of the 1966 International Furniture Fair in Cologne. The foam-padded fibreglass shell came in a choice of glossy white, yellow, orange or red. Loose dacron cushions allow for individual comfort. A steel swivel base matches the colour of the fibreglass shell. This chair immediately made news with its multiple uses ranging from ship's deck to hotel lobby.

PHOTO HARRI KOSONEN

3. Based on an interview with Eero Aarnio, July 2001.

the fibreglass version is the same product as far as shape, dimensions and function are concerned, it was given the same name.”³

Mushroom is a complement to famous fibreglass designs like *Pastille* and *Ball*. You can use it as a stool or small table, indoors or outdoors, combine it with your *Tomato Chair* or put it in your bathroom. The smaller stool fits inside the bigger one.

Pop Design Icons By the 1960s, Aarnio was experimenting with plastics, breaking away from traditional forms built with legs, backrests and joints. People were delighted by the vivid colour of synthetic materials in contrast to the natural grain of wood. Exciting plastic creations, especially chairs

such as the *Ball* (1966), *Pastille* and *Bubble* (1968) were, and still are, photographed and publicised and came to characterise the spirit of the time. Round as balloons, scooped out or slightly flattened, seat and base form a single unit and can even create an enclosure.

At the outset, Aarnio displayed an interest in combining new ideas with traditional materials and a penchant for outlandish round shapes. He designed the *Mushroom* series in woven rattan and won a street furniture design competition in Sweden with a mushroom-shaped concrete climbing frame for children. His armchair made of steel, plywood and leather won a prize in a major international furniture competition in Italy. The next requirement was practicality. Aarnio had an excellent grasp of the potential of plastics – extruding, sawing, grinding, polishing and

laminating. It taught him that spheres and ovoids were ideal forms for this material.

Fibreglass appeared as a new material at a time when space travel, only dreamed of in the 1950s, became a reality and a source of design inspiration in the 1960s. A whole subgenre of visionary furniture grew out of the fascination with space age exploration. Satellites such as *Sputnik* and *Echo* (a spherical satellite launched by the USA in 1960) turned the sphere into a perfect symbol of the decade. From the awareness of ourselves as a planet afloat in the cosmos arose the single most characteristic shape of the age. The sphere was to the 1960s what streamlining was to the 1930s and the boomerang to the 1950s. It stood for an orbiting globe. Finland did not send a man into space: instead, Eero Aarnio gave us the *Ball Chair*, a personal space capsule complete with stereo speakers that turned its occupant into a solo flier.⁴ The *Ball Chair* is a paradox, shocking and garish. Upon closer examination, it is simple, practical and comfortable and an example of great craftsmanship.

The huge success of the *Ball Chair* in 1966 issued in a whole series of plastic furniture by Aarnio. The *V.S.O.P.*, *Bubble* and *Pastille* chairs appeared in the following years.



▼ The *Bubble Chair*, also called *Bing Bong*, was created in 1968 as a result of Aarnio's desire to read while sitting inside the *Ball Chair*. It allows the occupant to remain apart and simultaneously observe the surroundings through clear, plastic panels.

4. Cara Greenberg, *Op to Pop: Furniture of the 1960s*. 1999.



▲ The *Pastille Chair*, also called *Gyro* in the United States, is a small version of the *Ball Chair*. It is one of the most innovative chairs in modern furniture design.

▲ The *V.S.O.P. Chair*, designed in 1967. It was first shown at the Furniture Fair held in Cologne. A fibreglass-reinforced polyester seat shell is set on a matching Fibreglass base.



▲ The *Tomato Chair* expresses how Aarnio plays with round shapes. Complicated at first glance, the chair is a clever combination of 3 circles of equal diameter, two of them being armrests, one stretching to a comfortable backrest. There is even a fourth half circle upside down forming an additional seat on the chair. PHOTO PIETINEN.

5. See the *Adelta Company's website* www.adelta.de

6. Based on an interview with Eero Aarnio, August 2001.

The *Pastille Chair*, also called *Gyro Chair* in the United States, is actually a smaller version of the *Ball Chair*. Aarnio affectionately called it 'Baby Ball' because it fits inside the generous proportions of the larger *Ball Chair*. "The pastille shape can be looked at from any angle. The initial idea may have been the same as in the *Screw Table* I designed later. The product shape derives from a small candy or pastille, but in this case the idea is that a lot of empty, cushioned space is sent to the other side of the world inside the *Ball Chair*. A new round chair would fit in this space, and the diameter is the same as the hollow in the *Ball Chair*. I made the first prototype out of polystyrene which helped me check dimensions, ergonomics and the rocking motion. Because fibreglass is always laminated by hand on a smooth mould, the visible surface is shiny but the

reverse side is somewhat rough. I have always wanted to screen or hide this surface in my fibreglass products. In *Pastille*, it is on the reverse side and totally invisible."⁵

In 1968, the year after Aarnio designed *Pastille*, it won him the American Industrial Award. Finland has over 60,000 lakes and Aarnio was happy to discover that the chair also floats. In summer, it is great fun to sit in it on the water. "At my summer cottage, it serves as outdoor furniture, a children's water toy or a floating seat for grown-ups. We use an oar to get them to nearby islands and catch fish."⁶ In winter too, sliding down hills in them at tremendous speed is a fantastic experience.

In its original form, Aarnio's *Pastille Chair* goes beyond the simplified seating shown in his *Ball Chair* or other works by fellow designers in Scandinavia. This legless chair is entirely made from fibreglass-

reinforced polyester, moulded in only two places. *Pastille* is Pop Art, humorously recalling candy or bubblegum shapes. It is manufactured in vivid confectionery colours which include lemon and lime, as seen in this article. *Pastille* is a novel interpretation of the rocking chair. YRJÖ KUKKAPURO, another leading Finnish furniture designer, calls this easy chair "a real innovation in furniture design. It is comfortable for you to sit in. You can bounce on it, you can change position without getting up."⁷ The *Pastille Chair* looks like a piece of candy with a huge thumbprint. It is one of Aarnio's conceptual masterpieces and the second example of a new type of furniture produced at an early stage in his career.

Aarnio's plastic designs from the 1960s have been closely associated with the space age. He claims that he was thinking of nothing more esoteric than an egg when he conceived his masterpiece, the *Ball Chair*, in 1963. Looking for a structural form that would work well with the newly available plastic technology, the designer realised that the egg is one of nature's strongest and most perfect designs. On the way to its final form, the ovoid became a sphere. And above all, the material itself yielded certain shapes while ideas were always inspired

by the cultural milieu. Aarnio has the following to say:

"In the sixties, fibreglass gave me an opportunity to break with traditional thinking about furniture design. At that time, new materials, forms and thinking were like so many explosions in fields of design and music that delighted my generation. For me the design must be inspiring and only inspired people can create any new ideas in each generation. To design is to solve the problem. For example, the wheel will help people always, no matter if the design is made in the sixties or later. It is not a question of the decade, good designs are timeless, it has nothing to do with the space age or pop culture."⁸

Eero Aarnio asserts that his objects are not just functional but also have an image of their own. As a construction, the ball shape derives from nature. It is the strongest shape made of the smallest possible amount of material. Nature is more original than humans and it resorts to a variety of ball or ball-like shapes, such as eggs, water drops, and soap bubbles.⁹

Aarnio thinks that material and technological innovations can open new avenues for design. "In the 1960s, I used fibreglass (manually applied), polypropylene (injection moulded) and acrylic sheet (heated)

7. Based on an interview with Yrjö Kukkapuro, December 2001.
8. Eva Cocco and William Martin, "Interview with Eero Aarnio", *JiGiaguaro magazine*, Autumn 2001, Italy.
9. Helen Quin, "Design Buys", *The New York Times* 1969.



▲ Designed and made in 1973, the *Pony Chair* is one of Aarnio's favourite designs and is especially favoured by children who are attracted by the bright colours and unconventional form of his designs.



▲ Aarnio designed the *Copacabana Table* especially to go with the *Pastille Chair*. The curved line of the table matches the round shape of the chair. The Copacabana bench turns out to be a perfect small bench as well. PHOTO HARRI KOSKINEN.

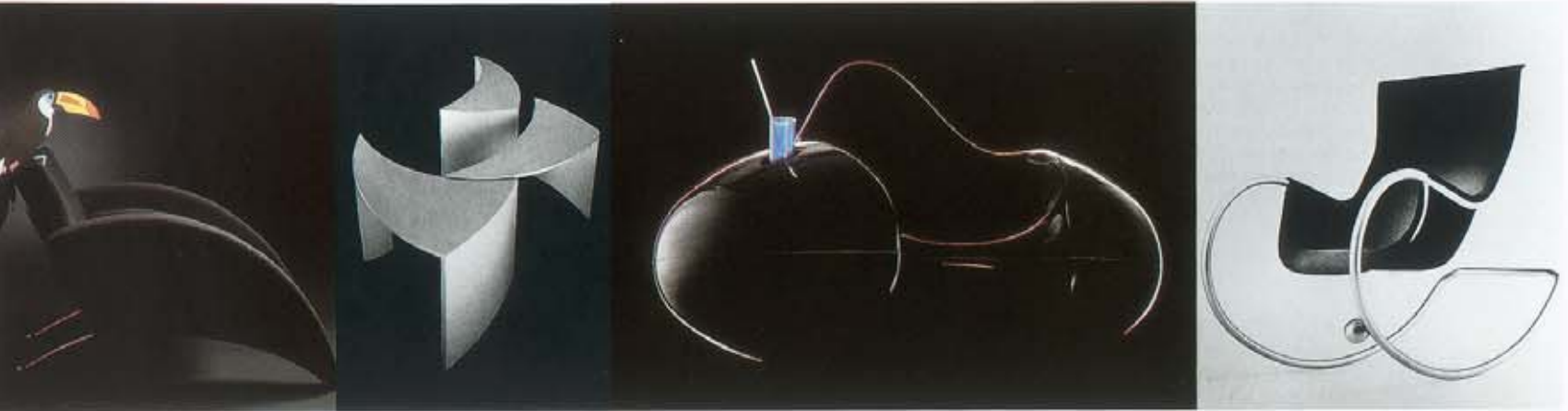


▲ The *Screw tables*, designed in 1991, can be placed as side tables in living room or veranda. The higher version suits cafeterias and bars. The fibreglass and metallic colours make them a glossy eye-catcher wherever they are.

▼ The **Dolphin** collection (designed in 1995 for Tetrimäki Ky) consists of chairs and tables. Both adopt the same shape as inspiration. They are made of laminated plywood, with their inside surfaces upholstered. The colour of the upholstery can be decided by customers.

▼ With the **Formula Chair** (designed in 1998), we re-encounter the rounded shape of *Pastille* merging together with sculptural elements from the *Tomato* chair to yield a new boldly curved design. Aarnio appreciates the way fibreglass enables the designer to give full vent to handling his material ever so playfully.

▼ Designing a rocking chair has been Aarnio's enduring dream. In 1983, he made the first drawing of a rocking with a rattan seat. It was eventually finished in 2001. The chair was featured on the poster for the Habitare Furniture Fair in Helsinki that year.



▲ In the **Cacadu** chair, designed in 1992, fibreglass material and plywood are used in a new way. The armrests are fibreglass upholstered on both sides, while the seat and back are made of bent plywood with upholstery. The rear legs are made of coned tubes, stretching from the main body and ending with a solid steel ball.

PHOTO HARRI KOSKINEN.

in a way that was, and still is, characteristic of the materials. In terms of form, there seem to be two general paradigms for space age objects of design, the first being an adherence to set geometrical forms such as the sphere, the cube, etc. On the other hand, we become fascinated when moving from the geometric to increasingly sinuous, volatile, organic forms. When I designed *Ball* in 1963, *Pastille* in 1967 and *Bubble* in 1968, I used the round shape because it was a very rational and easy form for industrial products and moulds. In *Bubble Chair*, the ball shape is the shape nature itself forms because the item is made by blowing without any mould. It was later that this kind of shape was called space age design. In my case, the design was based simply and solely on the spirit and language of the material. Relating round shapes to the space age was attributable to the journalists. It helped people understand and accept new forms and materials.”¹⁰

It is interesting to note that different designers have created masterpieces with the ‘new’ fibreglass material from different standpoints. Kukkapuro designed his Karuselli chair solely from an ergonomic standpoint. VERNER PANTON designed his *Panton Chair* in Denmark from the ideal

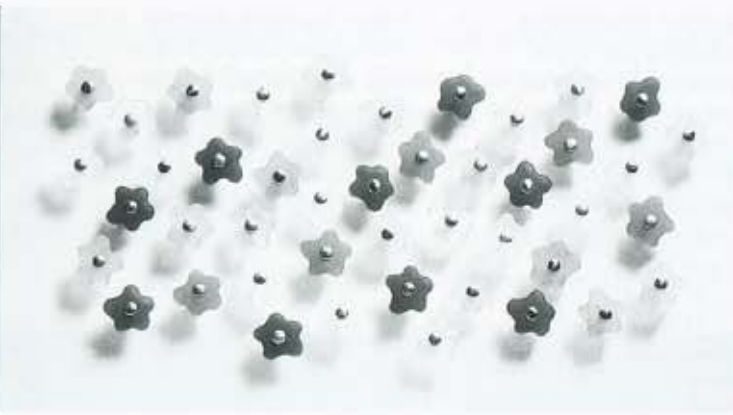
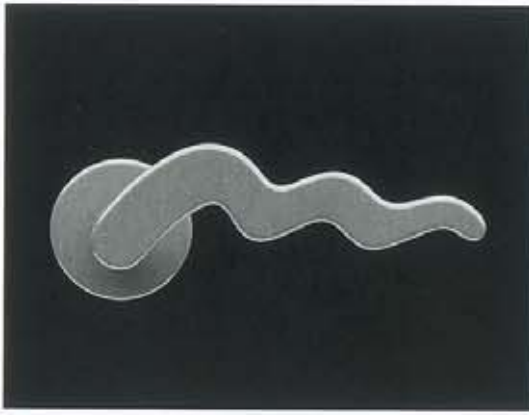
of creating a one-piece chair, while Eero Aarnio made his *Ball Chair* and *Pastille Chair* based on consideration of the material itself.

Innovative Seats Aarnio's fascination with plastic materials extended into the 1970s when he first created the *Tomato* seat. Again, full of round elements, *Tomato* is a combination of the *Ball* and *Pastille*. Then came *Upo 022* and *Upo 023*, made of plastic, and stackable.

After producing landmark plastic chairs with abstracted organic forms in the 1960s, Aarnio turned his attention to more figurative forms made of polyurethane foam in the 1970s. He wanted to create designs with a strong and identifiable character. He achieved this through the emphatic and humorous animal shape of the *Pony Chair*, probably the most innovative design of this period.

The *Pony Chair* is a fully-fledged chair made of flexible polyurethane cold cure foam over a frame of metal ‘bones’ with a ‘skin’ of plushy velour. The design represents a comfortable and zany likeness of the real thing – and far softer to sit on. “A chair is a chair, is a chair, is a chair – but a seat does not necessarily have to be a chair. It can be anything as long as

10. *Ibid.* Eva Cocco and William Martin, “Interview with Eero Aarnio”, *JiGiaguaro magazine*, Autumn 2001, Italy.



- ◀◀ In the early 1990s, Aarnio began designing door handles and furniture knobs for an Italian company Valli & Valli SPA.
PHOTO HARRI KOSKINEN
- ◀ This is a furniture knob designed by Aarnio for the Valli & Valli company.

it is ergonomically correct. A seat could even be a small, soft *Pony* on which you could 'ride' or sit sideways. The *Pony* has a moulded foam body, feet and ears connected by a tubular frame and all the parts are upholstered with stretch fabric. The colours are white, black, orange, green, brown and red."¹¹

The *Pony Chair* is another big surprise of Aarnio's. This chair was used by him to show that furniture design derives inspiration from a variety of sources, even animals. Frequently, the designer will find that new ideas about design can arise from the model-making process. You can actually ride this *Pony*; sit on it like a stool or chair. The ears can form a backrest, not to mention that children can play with it too.

According to Aarnio, there is no difference between design and nature, and designers can find inspiration in all kinds of things. The *Pony* is a good example of

his design philosophy. As he once said of a plastic chair he designed: "A seat is merely something to fit the human posterior which is much the same all over the world. Learning from life and surroundings is a joyous experience for a designer". His work bears this out.

Versatile Designer For some time, Eero Aarnio has been working in two different fields, designing office seats for major Scandinavian furniture factories (Martela, EFG) and creative fantasy designs for the Adelta company, which has the international rights for marketing of Aarnio's fibreglass objects. Although these two products look very different, for Aarnio they help in the creation of new designs by a cross-fertilisation of ideas.

The designer enjoys the fact that the 1990s witnessed a general revival of interest in his innovative designs that took

11. Eero Aarnio's website
www.eero.aarnio.com.

- ▼ Living room interior in Aarnio's home-studio in Veikkola, Helsinki.
- ◀ Entrance view of Aarnio's home studio in Veikkola, Helsinki.

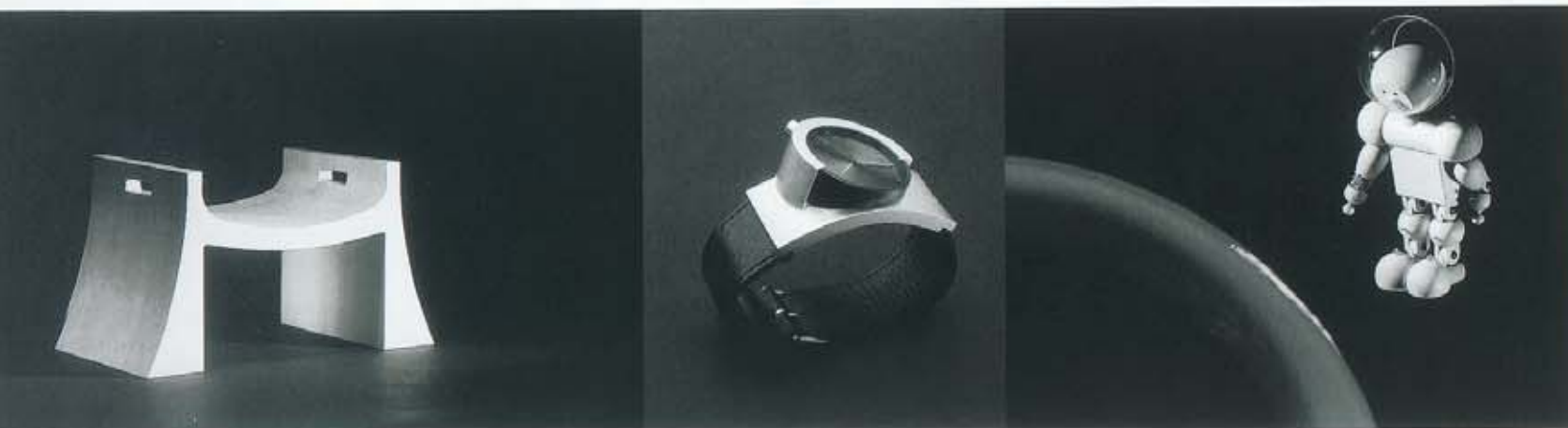


▼ The **Chinese Stool** was designed in 2001. The starting point here was to discover a more beautiful shape for a simple stool. Aarnio felt the result has a strong Chinese slant and so he called it Chinese. The stool is made of solid wood of a natural colour.

PHOTO HARRI KOSKINEN.

▼ Stepan Sapaneva, a Finnish watchmaker living in Switzerland, asked Aarnio to design a watch in 2001. Aarnio supplied this design and Stepan made the first prototype in the same year using a special alloy. He is going to put the watch into production.

▼ Early in 1985, Aarnio designed a big toy named **Space Man** but it was not until 2001 that it was produced with some small changes. The last helmet was blown just like the **Bubble Chair** from thin acrylic sheet. The blue globe in this picture is a **Bubble Chair**.



12. George Tate Blair, "Form, Function and Fantasy", *Bluewings*, Summer 2001.

13. Sinikka Salokorpi, "By Hand and Computer", *Look at Finland*, 1982, 4.

14. Based on an interview with Eero Aarnio, September 2001.

shape from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, particularly those associated with the so-called Space Age. He was interviewed by several magazines and newspapers and was encouraged to create more products along these lines, but he did not limit his creations to chairs. We find more interesting fibreglass models: a *Copacabana Table* series, *Screw Table* series, *Cacadu Chair*, *Dolphin Collection* and *Formula Chair*. Aarnio's *Rocking Chair*, under development for over a decade, first appeared last year in the *Habitare Furniture Fair* in Helsinki.

Aarnio is always spontaneous and somewhat restless but never random. While he designed his new fibreglass models for Adelta and office furniture for Martela and EFG, he also began co-operating with Italian firms because he was impressed by the way they worked with him. "Italians epitomise the free spirit, they encourage creativity, and more importantly, they give me the crucial freedom I need."¹² For years, Aarnio has been designing high-end metal door and furniture handles for the Valli & Valli company.

Eero Aarnio is a one-man design workshop: interior designer, industrial designer, graphic artist, photographer. He sees no difference between art and design because he thinks that art and design both mean constant renewal and re-alignment. "It is

doubt and certainty by turns. To begin with, you doubt whether it could be done better, then you feel certain that it could. The more designers and artists see and experience things, the better. To quote the proverb: a rolling stone gathers no moss"¹³. According to Aarnio, it is very important for the designer that every design should meet the demands of its user and be cleverly worked out from a production point of view with a minimum waste of material.

Aarnio has acted as the architect for his own houses. In 1974 he designed and built his first in Helsinki. This was a big but compact house. Like many Finnish buildings, it looks simple from the outside, but inside it is very elaborate. Aarnio designed and built his second house in 1988–1989.

It is a modern lakeside house, closely merged with its surroundings. Aarnio is satisfied with the house, "it is a good location for my work. We have enough room, we are in completely natural surroundings, there is clean water in which we and our grandchildren can swim and we have many friends living around the lake who can be reached by rowboat. This is really the best house we have ever lived in."¹⁴

Latest Designs Eero Aarnio loves innovation but he also values great traditions. He likens the designer to a huge vacuum cleaner that is always plugged in. "There

are so many great designers who have had an influence on me and I think also of our ancestors many generations ago whose amazing work can be seen in museums. They discovered what is essential in the design of new tools for everyday life, houses included.”¹⁵

Aarnio has always believed that the public's need for furniture is multi-faceted. He tried to tell people how to see furniture in a new way. His first step or primary requirement in the creative process and production is to find a solution to technical and ergonomic problems, even if he does not consider these aspects to be the most interesting part of the process or the finished product, quite the contrary. It is important for him to stress aesthetic alternatives and the whole potential range of his work at every moment. Aarnio has been interested in designing everything he could, and always contemplates his designs as an integral part of modern architecture. Full of fresh ideas, he is restless, continually searching and using new methods and materials in his works.

Just now, *Rocking chair* is going into production. Meanwhile, he is designing a number of fun things for the new century. “I

redesigned my *Pony* last year and found a good factory in Finland to make cold foam moulding. I can tell you that one of my designs will be the result of a date between a chair and chicken and that its name will be *Chick*. After that, *Mama* will be born. I recently finished the first prototype and will change it a lot. It is a chair that will hug the whole world. Also the *Doggie* drawing is done. Meanwhile, I am working on the prototypes for *Watch*, a *Chinese* stool and *Space Man*. My brain is teeming with design ideas.”¹⁶

Eero Aarnio is recognised as one of the great designers of the 20th century. What brings a designer to this level? Surely, the main reason is that his designs do not promptly disappear after a period of spectacular success, but survive the fickle taste of the public for more than a few years. It must be a design which exists despite changing forms, colours and materials. Only simple forms, clear colours and clean materials have a chance of fulfilling these needs. Working in many different areas of design – architecture, furniture, handles and tools, Aarnio discovers materials and forms and combines them in fresh ways.

FANG HAI

15. *Ibid.* Eva Cocco and William Martin, “Interview with Eero Aarnio”, *JiGiaguaro* magazine. Autumn 2001, Italy.

16. On the basis of an interview with Eero Aarnio by the author in January 2002.

► *Chick*, just like *Pony*, is made of flexible polyurethane cold cure foam supported on a metal tube frame but the legs are different in this case – they are of painted polyurethane supported on a steel frame. PHOTO: HARRI KOSKINEN.

