

# FORM



DAVID CHIPPERFIELD  
THE STARCHITECT HAS LANDED

DANISH LESSONS  
KIDS' ARCHITECTURE IS IN VOGUE

GARDEN OF EERO  
AARNIO'S MAGIC WONDERLAND

HOW TO SAVE A MUSEUM  
ARKDES IN STOCKHOLM TAKES SHAPE

NORDIC MAGAZINE ON ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN | FOUNDED 1905 | 5 | 2014



## THE GODLINESS OF SMALL THINGS

SIX DESIGNERS TELL THEIR STORIES IN DETAIL

---

# GARDEN OF EERO

Text: SOFIA HALLSTRÖM Photo: PATRIK ENGSTRÖM

---

“Dreams, fantasies and illusions.” That’s how the Finnish legend Eero Aarnio describes his work as a designer. Sofia Hallström visited an 82-year-old boy in his magical home in Veikkola, amongst penguins, puppies and thunderballs.



Aarnio on his porch in the hanging chair *Bubble Chair* (1968) in acrylic and steel. It is now distributed by Adelta. In the background, the room divider *The Tree*, designed for Martela.

*"It is a human trait to want to curl up and hide. Just as it is human nature to like swinging and having fun."*

---

**E**ero Aarnio greets us like a white rabbit in Wonderland. His home is like taken out of an interior magazine with open plan, elegant stone floors and large windows facing the Finnish seascape. But the craziness doesn't wait. Already in the vestibule, an overgrown cockerel guards with his bum full of plants. Next to him, the dog *Puppy* stands on his hind legs and a flock of round-bellied penguins roll around with their wings in salute.

The Aarnio couple would fit right into a hipster neighbourhood. Him in black denim clothes and her with plastic framed specs and pinstriped jumpsuit. Pirkko toasts with prosecco and, further in are more animals from their silent zoo: a group of chubby ponies whose grey velvet muzzles just have to be touched.

We don't get far into the house before a wall appears.

– Look here.

The white rabbit laughs. I do see. Pasted up are dozens of magazine covers of the *Ball* chair. Women lying with their legs twisted towards the ceiling in the globe-shaped chair, and a businessman lifting the telephone handset on its wall.

He pushes the door back and there is the original itself. Over 50 years old but still with an air of futurism. Gleaming white and round like a sputnik.

– It wasn't actually the shape that came first. The idea was to make a big chair in which the whole family would fit.

No, it started with the material. Fiberglass was the latest and hottest thing to mould furniture with. Just a few years prior, Arne Jacobsen had made the *Egg*, that too a piece that encloses its user in a cocoon. But it wasn't a ball. Not like the one Aarnio was about to make.

The design not only turned on its head the idea of how a chair should look. It also had significant advantages in the manufacturing process, says Professor Aarnio.

– A round shape gives maximum strength to minimal material.

The solution is as easy as it is ingenious, and typical of Aarnio's design. But for a rookie designer, the transformation from concept to product was not as smooth.

He developed the prototype completely on his own. A full-scale prototype required a large space to build it, which he found in a

boat factory in Salo, northwest of Helsinki. A father of small children, Aarnio commuted there from his temporary job as a teacher. He cast the fiberglass shell in a plywood mould, but it was hard to get it right. It "required probably ten tries" before he had machined it to a glossy surface that was nice to look at.

– It was very hard to make and I was close to giving up. But Pirkko said: "You will make it now, or someone else will do it before you."

It finally became a ball. A white capsule with soft red upholstery to curl up in. Finnish furniture company Asko insisted on taking it to the fair in Cologne under the name *Ball*. The rest is history. A week after the fair, 30 countries had bought the chair. Mary Quant put it in her famous London boutique, Grace Kelly bought one and every magazine with future ambitions put the ball on their cover.

– It is a human trait to want to curl up and hide. Just as it is human nature to like swinging and having fun, says Aarnio.

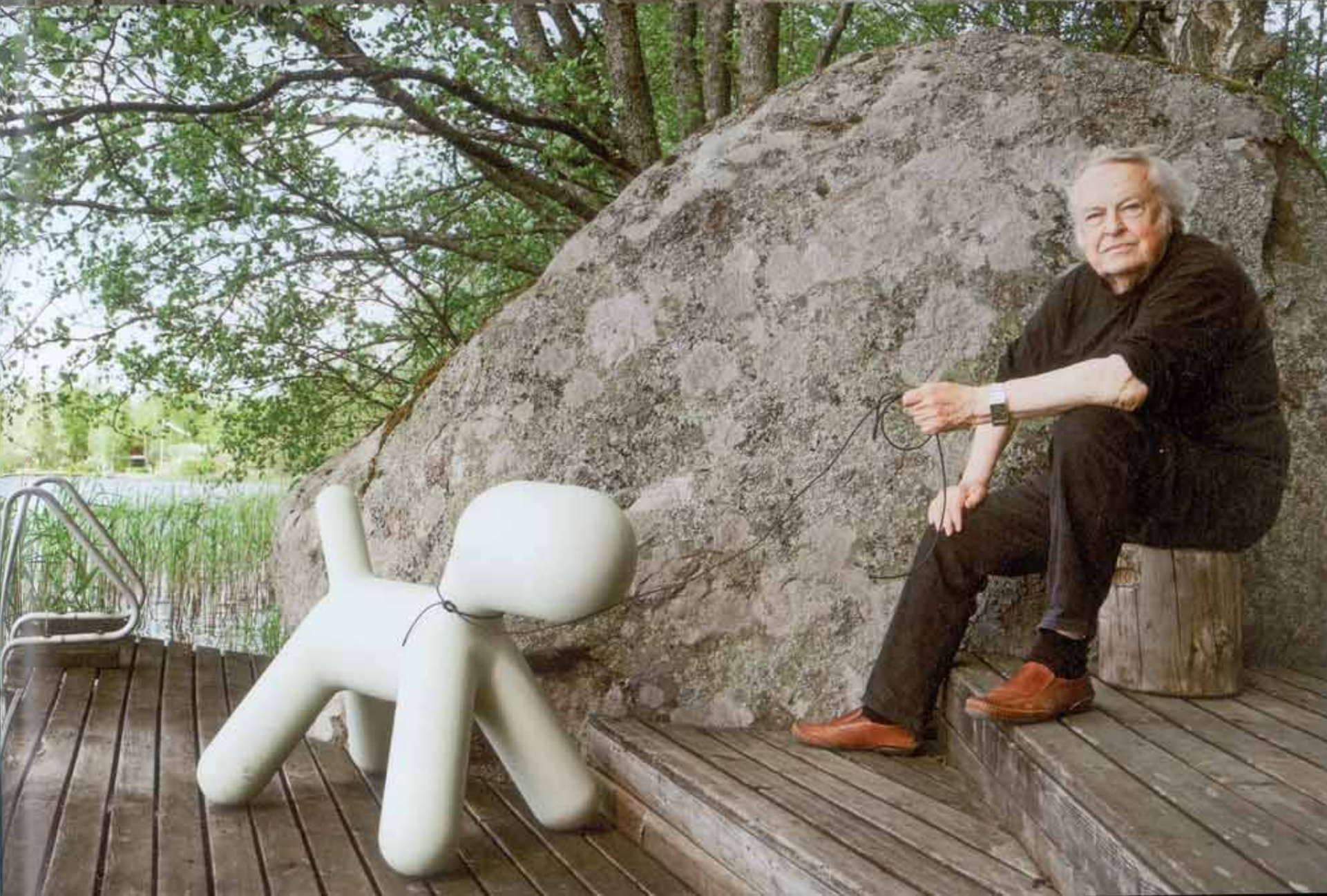
He dreamed up more colourful plastic pieces to sit on. A gleaming large pastille that swings in all directions, three tomato red balls linked together in one, and puffy horses with sit-friendly saddles.

The design fit the sixties perfectly. The post-war years were over and Finland's economy and industry were booming. People streamed into the cities that were characterised by both pop culture and progressive politics.

Aarnio made another round capsule: *Bubble*. At first, he thought of putting a reading lamp in the ball, but he had a better idea. A transparent shell would let in more light. It didn't stop there. A new technology made expensive moulds unnecessary. Hot air could form an acrylic sheet into a half sphere in the same way that soap bubbles are blown. Hang it on a sturdy chain and the pop era had yet another icon.

– New materials have always interested me a lot. I think I stay a step ahead and usually ask the manufacturers who come here to meet me to bring their newest materials.

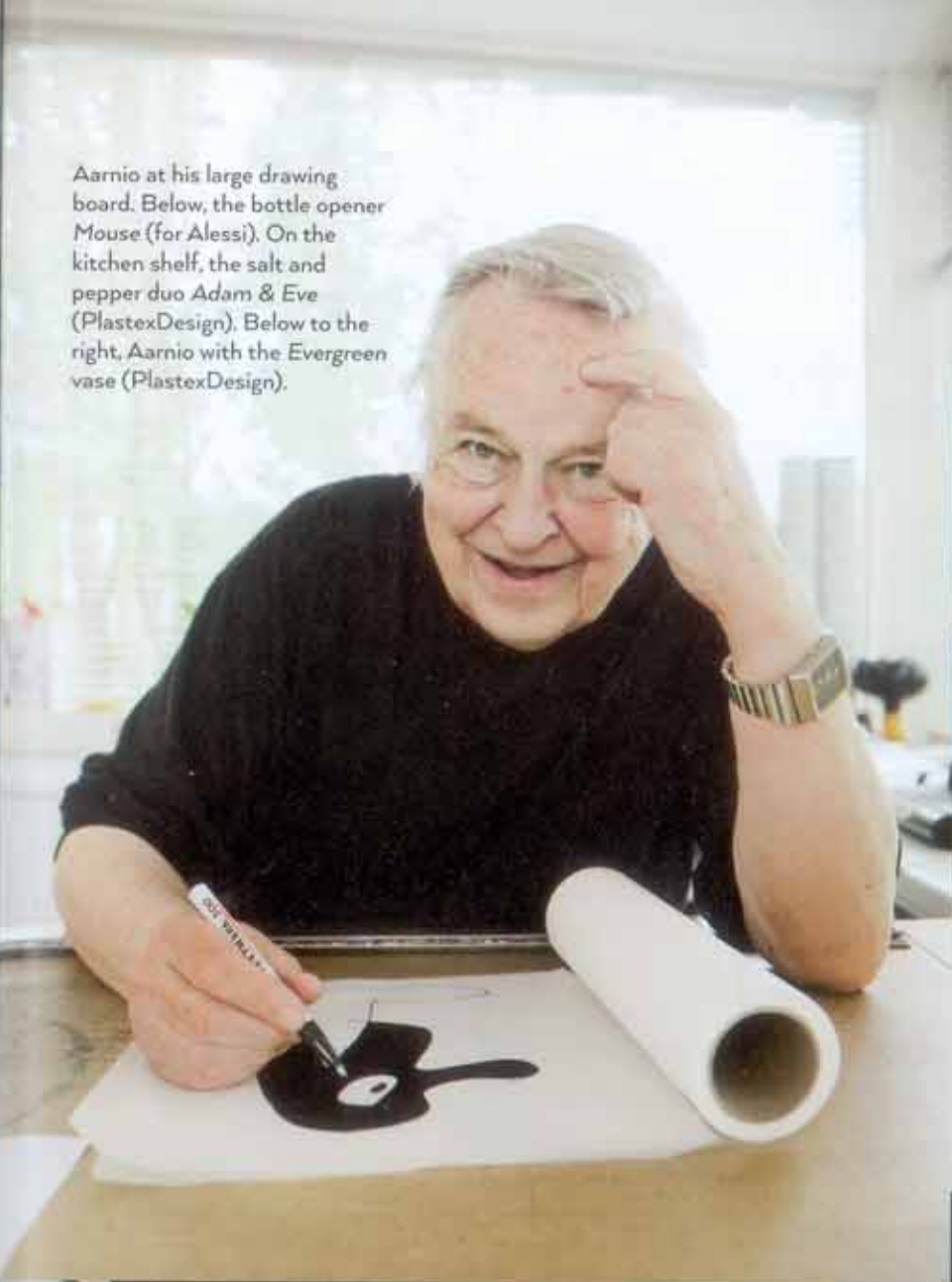
The design craze went the same way as the economy. The oil crisis in 1973 burst it. Now moulded plastic was swapped for cheap wood, and Pantone colours for natural stains. It would take almost three decades for the design world to once again make way for colourful curves.





Above: The lamp *Double Bubble* (2001) for Melija. This image: Poster with the happy penguin *Pingy* for Magis (2011).

Aarnio at his large drawing board. Below, the bottle opener Mouse (for Alessi). On the kitchen shelf, the salt and pepper duo Adam & Eve (PlastexDesign). Below to the right, Aarnio with the Evergreen vase (PlastexDesign).





Aarnio in the zoo. To the right is the new version of Nuusku, manufactured in sustainable wood material from UPM Grada. It was launched this year in Milan.

## 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT EERO AARNIO

### ODD PROJECTS

Some projects do not come about in the same way as others. Like the guitar Copacabana.

– A guitar enthusiast contacted me after having seen the table Copacabana. If you place two of my Copacabana tables next to each other, it looks like a guitar.

But Aarnio knew nothing about playing the guitar, and less yet about its construction. Did he turn the project down? Not that time. He built a guitar after the guitarist promised to help.

### SCALE 1:1

The work process starts in one way only: "With a paper and pencil." If Aarnio knows what he wants, it is quick. Otherwise not.

Everything is drawn to a scale of 1:1, be it a cup or a green dinosaur. Dino was extra hard to get down on paper: a three-dimensional and plastically formed reptile. Aarnio drew it from three aspects to give the decision maker a good idea, from the front, top and side. Everything in full scale. He does have a drawing table that beats most in size.

### MATERIALS OF THE TENS

"All my design is meant to last," says Aarnio before he tells me about his latest favourite material. Grada plywood is ecological and looks like wood, but its composition allows it to be bent with relatively low heat and totally without difficult metal presses. At the last Milano Fair, Aarnio unveiled his first product in the material. Nuusku, an ornamental animal that is described as "cheeky and curious."

### THE EMPLOYER

"There are companies that live entirely on my designs. Like Evergreen who make my vases and employ very many. In Lapland there is a small family business that originally made the interior of the Ball chair. Most of my things are produced in Finland, and a small part in Italy and Spain through companies like Alessi and Vitra."

### THE NAMES

The pieces are given names that are both international and close to their functions. But it wouldn't be Eero Aarnio if it didn't come with a dose of humour. Recently, the Rosinante was launched for Portuguese Vondom. For why not name a rocking horse after Don Quixote's horse? Or take the blockbuster watering can for Alessi. "She just looks like a Diva," says the Finnish funnyman.

---

**EERO AARNIO IN NUMBERS:** 1932 born in Helsinki 24 years old when he married Pirkko Attila 1957 graduated from current Aalto University 1959 and 1961 children Marja-Leena and Rea were born 1962 started his own studio 2007 received the honorary title of Professor by the Finnish President 2 Red Dot awards for the lamps *Ghost* and *Bright* 22 museums have Aarnio furniture, including MoMA and V&A

---



*"Pirkko is the central point in my life. She is the one who says if it is good or bad."*

---

The comeback came with the nineties and the retro trend. The Finnish factories were once again spewing out fibreglass furniture. Eero Aarnio now began to launch new things with unmistakable character: organic shapes, function at the core, and a playfulness that comes from the most simple, most pure ideas.

– I live on royalties. That means that I must make everyday items that people like and want to buy. Then new materials and new ways to process them appear with every decade, and my own knowledge is developed simultaneously.

Now we are in a new millennium with bright colours, *blobjects* and vintage auctions all the way. Eero Aarnio? Bigger than ever. Retirement is out of the question, the 82-year old is tirelessly spitting out new products.

The latest includes a 3D printed furniture series for children. Eero Aarnio shakes some miniatures out of a box and places them on his drawing table.

– This actually took seven hours to print. I start many of my projects with the security of total ignorance.

No prejudice at all, he adds laughing. *Boxi* came about as a three-dimensional puzzle to put in a box and consists of four chairs, a table and two benches.

– You must think in order to fit them back in the box.

There is something architectural over many of his projects. Had it not been for the maths, he says, he would have applied to architecture school. Instead he settles with being inspired by the world of large-scale projects. His favourites include deconstructivist Frank Gehry and Richard Meier's white monument.

– Pirkko and I have driven round Europe and America looking at everything from Le Corbusier buildings to Gaudí in Barcelona and the Vitra Design Museum.

What does he say of his own design? Well, it may be a bit more international than typically Finnish. He does feel a bit un-Finnish.

– Finland needs more innovation. Even though I am already a known name, there are companies here that don't dare take in my designs. If you present a new idea, they immediately think about the price tag. Take Italy. There the attitude is much more optimistic.

Fresh fruit and nuts await us in the kitchen. Some sort of rye crisp boats have been filled with a mixture of blue cheese and something that crunches nicely. Courgette, says Pirkko and reveals the recipe.

Next year the Aarnio pair will have been married for 60 years. In their home, the workspace blends with the private. In one end of the open plan house are large worktops with piles of drawing utensils and paper, in the other are towering bookcases and inviting reading chairs. Eero Aarnio's furniture is scattered everywhere and a majority has come about as solutions to what has been needed at home in the form of chairs, children's furniture and storage.

When asked of Pirkko's significance on his work, Eero Aarnio



The vase *Evergreen* is designed for hospital environments in unbreakable SAN plastic. The four sizes can be stacked inside one another.

declines to answer. Instead he walks over to her. He puts his tape measure in her hands, well used and full of spots.

– Pirkko is the central point in my life.

He draws a perfect circle in the air. Pirkko is standing right in the middle of it.

– When Pirkko gets up in the morning, she looks at what I have sketched. She is the one who says if it is good or bad.

Do you ever design together? Yes, he says and picks up a vase where it is stacked in two of the same kind.

– I drew this for hospitals.

He lets go of it and it bounces on the stone floor. The plastic is intact. Adapted to an environment with heavy activity, yet nicely designed in red, white and black.

– Pirkko said it would be nice as a lamp, so I made one.

Eero Aarnio has become an old man, with an awe-inspiring charisma. At the same time, his house is like a Wonderland, where the hallucinogenic cookies have been swapped for Finnish rosettes and the Cheshire cat for a slightly red-haired Pirkko. The design furniture is like an enchanted forest and a young boy peers out from Aarnio's 82-year old eyes.

– Dreams, fantasies and illusions. That is the answer to your first question. That is the core of everything I do. ☺