



"Sin City" has a film Web site to build enthusiasm. /3

Design / Deborah K. Dietsch

Plastic makes perfect

Design pendulum swings back to '60s

Dust off the old VW bug, the tie-dye T-shirt and the shag rug. The 1960s are back in style. New cars, fashions and home furnishings evidence the trend in psychedelic colors and bold shapes, and some vintage items from flower-power days are considered valuable antiques.

Among the prized icons of the era is the futuristic Ball Chair. Familiar to watchers of MTV videos and reruns of the 1960s British TV series "The Prisoner," its swiveling, hemi-



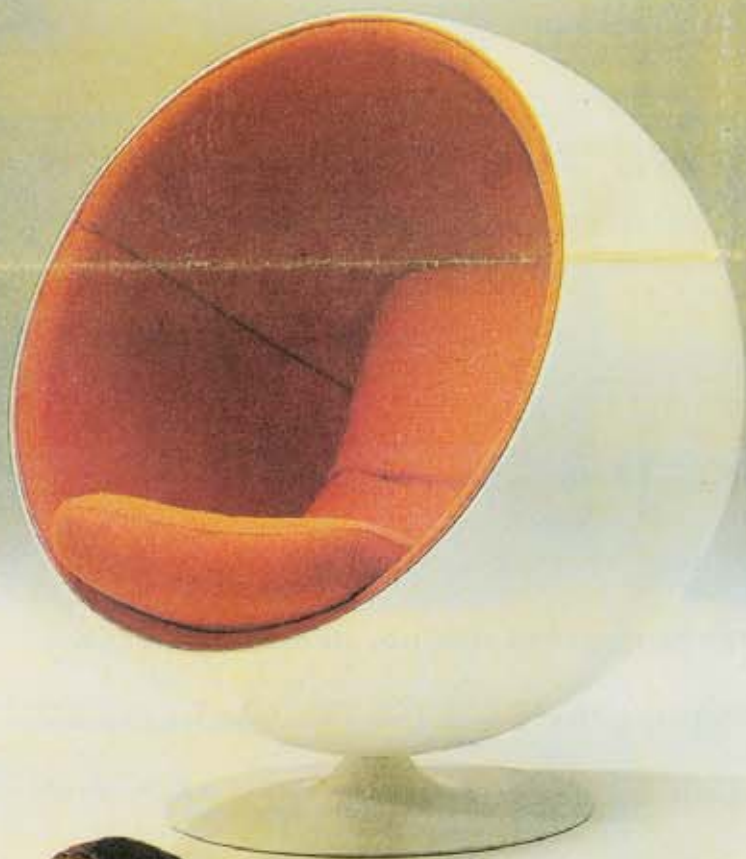
spherical capsule perfectly symbolizes the space-age spirit.

Fans of midcentury modernism may assume that this emblem of cool was created by an American star of the period, such as Charles Eames or George Nelson. It wasn't. The designer responsible for the chair is a Finn named Eero Aarnio.

Mr. Aarnio, who at 72 is still designing furniture, went on to create several 1960s classics, including see-through and UFO-shaped chairs. At the Embassy of Finland, a lighthearted display of his sculp-

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Lighthearted 1960s plastic furniture by Finnish designer Eero Aarnio, 72 (bottom left), includes his Parabola Table (above), Ball Chair (below) and (bottom, from the left) Pastil Chair, Focus 2 Chair (MDPE-Version) and plush Pony.



CHAIR

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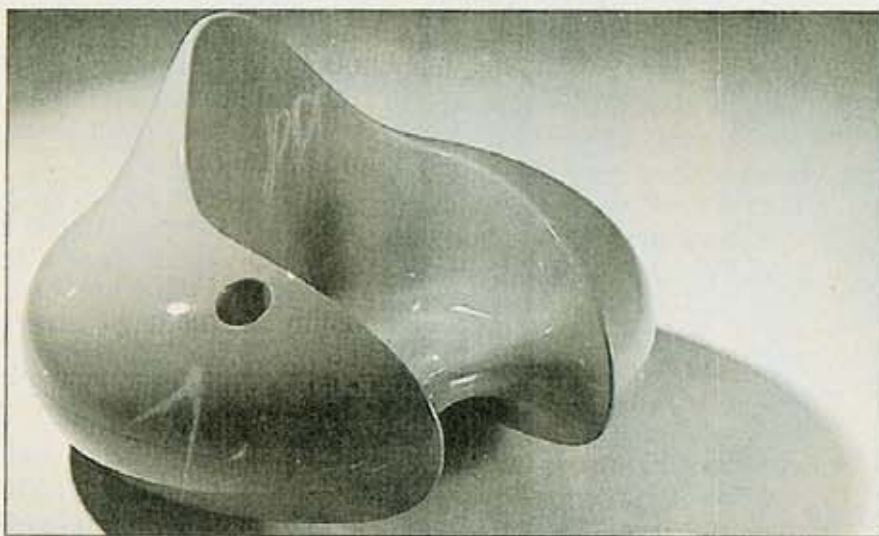
tural plastic pieces — most still in production — testifies to their lasting appeal. These brightly colored balls and bubbles still look modern, sexy and fun.

Casually arranged like a big living room, the furniture exhibit allows visitors to sit, swivel and swing on the chairs. It represents only a portion of the Aarnio retrospective staged in 2003 at the Helsinki Kunsthalle (art hall) but still satisfies with a good overview of the designer's work since the early 1960s.

Featured are not one, but three Ball Chairs under a big poster of Mr. Aarnio lounging in his design and talking on a phone wired into the side. The red-and-black Ball Chair on display turns out to be a re-



Finnish designer Eero Aarnio's Bubble Chair (above) and Formula Chair (left) are arranged as if in an expansive living room (lower right) in the Embassy of Finland's exhibition of his work.



cent prototype for an Internet cafe at the Helsinki airport.

Press a button on the side, and a computer screen automatically glides out from a slot along the rim. The designer, who was at the embassy earlier this week, said he installed the kind of small motor used for lifting car windows inside the chair to operate the mechanism.

Such experimentation is the hallmark of his career. While more famous Finnish designers such as Alvar Aalto and Tapio Wirkkala worked in wood and glass, Mr. Aarnio broke with tradition and explored newer synthetics made

possible by modern technologies. "The new materials helped me create new shapes," he said.

In 1963, the designer enlisted his brother-in-law, a glider instructor, to help build a curved plywood mold and laminate its surface with the same fiberglass as the airplanes. When the spherical shell wouldn't stop wobbling, Mr. Aarnio affixed a tubular metal ring inside its round opening — and stabilized what became known as the Ball Chair.

Though he wasn't the first to design molded fiberglass furniture — Charles Eames

produced pieces in the 1940s — Mr. Aarnio did more to elevate plastic than almost any other designer by consistently molding it into bold, sensuous shapes.

His unconventional, modern pieces are as much sculpture as furniture, and it's easy to see how they came to symbolize the swinging '60s. One of Mr. Aarnio's most iconic 1960s chairs — his favorite, he said — is the chain-suspended Bubble. A transparent cousin of the Ball Chair, it literally swings. The designer said he had a window manufacturer make the prototype of the chair in the same clear acrylic as his skylights.

Another signature piece is the Pastil Chair, an elliptical disc with a carved-out seat that's sized to fit into the opening of the Ball Chair. The birth-control pill, introduced in 1960, inspired its shape, according to Mr. Aarnio. Sexier still is the fiery red Tomato Chair with its suggestive pair of frontal orbs. Both

plastic chairs float on water, as large photos in the exhibit attest.

In these 1960s designs, back, seat and legs aren't distinguished as separate ele-

ments but are melded into a strongly identifiable, organic shape. These aren't chairs to be sat upon, but within. Both Ball and Bubble invite the sitter into their protective padded cocoons to retreat from the world; no wonder the introverted designs became symbols of the do-your-own-thing decade.

Not all the designs in the show are as enticing, however. The 1966 Chanterelle table and VSOP Cognac Chair are ho-hum variations on the stemmed Tulip furniture designed by Finnish-American designer Eero Saarinen a decade earlier.

The Polaris Chair, also from 1966, looks like a knock-off of Mr. Eames' fiberglass stacking chair from 1955.

Although the exhibit is titled "Pop Fantasies," the only true pop-art-inspired piece is the Screw Table (1991), a giant plastic version of the fastener that recalls the sculpture of Claes Oldenburg.

Happily, in recent years, the sculptural zest of the Finnish designer's early work has returned. His Double Bubble lamp (2003) is topped by two globes, which look like uneven Mickey Mouse ears. After making several prototypes in glass, the designer turned to more affordable and easily worked plastic resin.

Another recent design, the Parabola Table (2002), is an elegant balance of oval top and tapered, curved pedestal.

More playful still is the Chick Chair, a birdlike assemblage of egg-shaped head and body on yellow feet. It's a variation on Mr. Aarnio's 1973 Pony Chair, a plump, upholstered take on a rocking horse — but without the rockers. These animal seats epitomize the youthful, whimsical spirit characteristic of most Aarnio designs.

Both adults and children will enjoy climbing onto and into the furniture in this cheerful show. In doing so, they no doubt will discover the real secret behind the Finnish designer's success: Though starkly geometric, his chairs are also surprisingly comfortable.

WHEN YOU GO

WHAT: "Pop Fantasies: Furniture Design by Eero Aarnio"
WHERE: Embassy of Finland, 3301 Massachusetts Ave. NW
WHEN: March 17 through May 8; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily; closed March 25 through 28
TICKETS: Free admission
PHONE: 202/298-5886
WEB SITE: www.finland.org

