

Design

Eero Aarnio: A Style That Stays Around

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In the atrium of the Embassy of Finland, there are no lava lamps, but one can almost hear the strains of "Good Vibrations." The '60s are in full swing.

The venue is easily explained: An imaginative Finnish furniture designer named Eero Aarnio dreamed up three of the era's greatest hits: a space capsule for lounging, a soap bubble for swinging and a candy-colored pod for rocking. Radical at birth, they are no less startling today in "Pop Fantasies: Furniture Design by Eero Aarnio," which opened at the embassy Thursday.

"It's like a walk on the moon," Aarnio says. "It's a trip through my head."

And how. The 1960s put men in space and women in miniskirts. Pop art and a free-thinking youth culture exploded myths, changed fashion and altered lifestyles. Furniture designers adopted modern materials — foam, plastic, fiberglass and inflated vinyl — to translate social currents into bolder forms. Edges were rounded and landings softened. Colors began to pop.

Aarnio burst into this global design swirl in mid-decade. The designer, now 72 and the picture of a hipster in black fleece and leather, tells the story as if events occurred yesterday.

He built a futuristic fiberglass chair in the shape of a globe in 1963. The womb-like capsule languished at home until 1966, when a visiting representative from the Asko furniture factory insisted on taking it to the Cologne Furniture Fair. As the Ball chair, it took off. Art directors saw it as the tangible expression of "tomorrow" and photographed it for magazine covers. Fashion diva Mary Quant put one in her London shop. Orders came from the shah of Iran, Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby and Sammy Davis Jr.

The prototype had to be produced by a manufacturer of fiberglass boat hulls and was white. After Asko figured out how to make them,

the capsules were offered in orange and red as well. The Ericsson company broke new ground by installing a red wall phone in the Ball chair's interior.

The Bubble, which dangles from a sturdy chain, followed two years later and was sexier. Its clear acrylic globe left swingers fully exposed. Aarnio says he only wanted to have more light for reading than the Ball chair allowed. He now considers the 1968 design his "cleverest." The body is made without costly molds. A sheet of clear acrylic is softened with heat, then laid over a special table with a hole in the center. After the sheet has been braced with a steel ring, air is blown through the hole to inflate the acrylic "like a soap bubble," Aarnio says.

The Bubble's appeal endures. In the exhibition, a Playboy cover from December 2000 features the transparent orb as a holiday ornament, with Carmen Electra tucked inside. Bang & Olufsen's current catalogue uses a Bubble to set the scene for 21st-century home electronics. In Washington, two Bubbles are on order from the M2L showroom, which markets Aarnio's designs, for the lobby of a residential building in Columbia Heights.

The retrospective, spanning the 1950s to 2003, was created two years ago for the Kunsthalle Helsinki. Museum director Maija Tanninen-Mattila, who joined Aarnio in Washington, believes that his work is as much conceptual art as functional design. The colorful plastic pod chair, which resembles a giant M&M, is pure pop art. But the exhibition emphasizes function by inviting visitors to sit in the chairs.

On a quiet morning before the opening, the designer offered a guided tour. He eased in and out of Ball chairs (including one now equipped with a retractable computer screen and keyboard)



ABOVE AND BELOW LEFT: PHOTOS BY KATHERINE FREY — THE WASHINGTON POST; PASTIL CHAIR PHOTO BY STUDIO SEMPRE, EERO AARNIO ARCHIVES

Eero Aarnio swings in his iconic Bubble chair at the Embassy of Finland as his Double Bubble lamps glow behind him. Below left, the futuristic Ball chair took off in the late 1960s. The plastic Pastil pod chair, below right, was almost named the Pill.

and bounced on an outlandish green foam-filled Pony seat, which he swears was ordered for the boardroom of an unnamed Texas oil company. With an expansive wave, he pointed to new work: a forest of Double Bubble lighting fixtures, which vaguely resemble inflated Mickey Mouse ears.

There was nothing radical about the designer's youth. Aarnio was born in Helsinki in 1932. He talks of blowing bubbles as a child, while bombs rained down. He studied industrial and interior design at the Ateneum Institute of Industrial Arts and worked as a photographer for the National Board of Public Building. Some of the most memorable photographs of Aarnio's furniture were taken with his own Hasselblad camera. He worked briefly for Asko, then set out on his own, producing striking contemporary interiors and exhibition designs with graphic textiles, shag carpets and snaking modular sofas.

But the 1960s design euphoria lasted only as

long as the economic boom, which collapsed with the 1973 oil crisis. Plastics became too costly, and the zeitgeist shifted. Organic curves and color remained mostly out of fashion until the late 1990s, when architects and industrial designers rediscovered rounded forms, setting off a boom in retro styling.

Aarnio is benefiting. His vintage classics were revived in 1990 by the Finnish company Adelta, and the collection has been expanded.

At the exhibition, Ambassador Jukka Valtasaari tried out an immaculate white fiberglass chair from 1998, inspired by Formula One racing cars. He was especially enthusiastic about a new rocking chair with a tubular steel frame and black leather seat. The design recalls Bauhaus modernism, from which '60s designers eagerly broke away. Aarnio laughs at the comparison but doesn't disagree. After the '60s, Aarnio designed practical office furniture in steel and wood.

The exhibition recalls a moment of optimism, promise and humor that enabled designers to create voluptuous tomato chairs and mushroom stools. The colorful plastic Pastil pod seat, which was created as a legless rocking chair, narrowly missed being named the Pill. A banner unfurled over the front of the embassy shows how the seat accentuated the impact of miniskirts. Times have changed. At the opening, pods were most popular with men in long pants. But the vibrations were still good.

Pop Fantasies: Furniture Design by Eero Aarnio. Through May 8 at the Embassy of Finland, 3301 Massachusetts Ave. NW. Open daily except March 25-28. Phone 202-298-5886 to confirm hours. Free.

