

magazine

**THIS YEAR'S
BEST-DRESSED
BRIDES MIGHT
ADAPT GRANNY'S
DRESS OR SHOP
AT OXFAM**

Finnish lines

Eero Aarnio's Ball Chair is a modern classic. But he's not resting on his laurels

NOTHING AGES as fast as yesterday's vision of tomorrow. There are some honourable, timeless exceptions. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is one; the furniture of the Finnish designer Eero Aarnio is another. Small wonder, then, that Kubrick kitted out his film's space station with Aarnio's minimalist, modernist furniture.

It is 42 years since Aarnio's first landmark creation, the Ball Chair, shook European furniture design from its postwar torpor. Even today, the far side of 2001, the Ball chair and Aarnio's other milestones continue to capture the excitement of the future, the zeitgeist of tomorrow.

Aarnio's ideas have never stopped flowing. If anything, the 75-year-old seems to be gathering steam. His Puppy chair was a big hit after featuring in Channel 4's *Big Brother*, and his Double Bubble lamp nearly stole the show at last year's Eurovision Song Contest, in Helsinki. He has just finished a design that looks destined to be another classic: a simple desk lamp with the elegance of a swan's neck.

The irony of Aarnio's career is that his designs, so ingenious that they require no explanation, attract constant intellectual analysis. He brushes off such talk with a loud laugh and self-deprecating Finnish humour as he prowls restlessly around his bright, airy, self-designed house, near Helsinki.

"People always ask where I get my ideas from. I have no idea. What should I say? I have a box and I take out one idea every day?" he says, laughing. "For me this is not modern or futuristic furniture. It's today. It's how I live," he says in his living room, which is so full of his designs that some others have had to be banished outside.

A handful of blue and red plastic Pastil seats sit in the garden, as much of a cheeky two fingers to the wintry Finnish landscape as they were to the design establishment in the 1960s. A German

magazine at the time recorded the effect the Finn's designs had on 1950s formality and fustiness: "Aarnio's furniture encourages us to be on first-name terms and talk about light-hearted, pleasant things."

Aarnio was born in 1932 in Helsinki. His mother found his first designs – papier-mache soldiers – drying in her oven one day. After design school, his first furniture drew on traditional Finnish design. By the early 1960s, however, he seized on the possibilities offered by the new fibreglass and plastics – materials ignored by his design-school professors.

His breakthrough came in 1963, when he took a hollow sphere, sliced off the side, fixed it at one point and upholstered the hollow interior. The Ball Chair was born. Recognition and success were still some way off, however. "In 1964 I had a wife, two children and no money," he says. "We had just bought an apartment, but it wasn't easy to find work as a freelance designer."

Opportunity came knocking in the form of an advertisement in a Helsinki newspaper placed by the owner of a growing Swedish furniture company. "He was looking for designers from Finland. I made the trip to see him. But I figured that my designs were too avant-garde for him," says Aarnio. "Still, I came very close to joining Ikea."

Instead Aarnio found success on his own. In 1965 he caused a sensation at the Cologne furniture show with the Ball Chair, hailed as a "room within a room" and "something between a piece of furniture and a piece of architecture". The chair put Aarnio on the map, and he began producing designs that turned the industry on its head.

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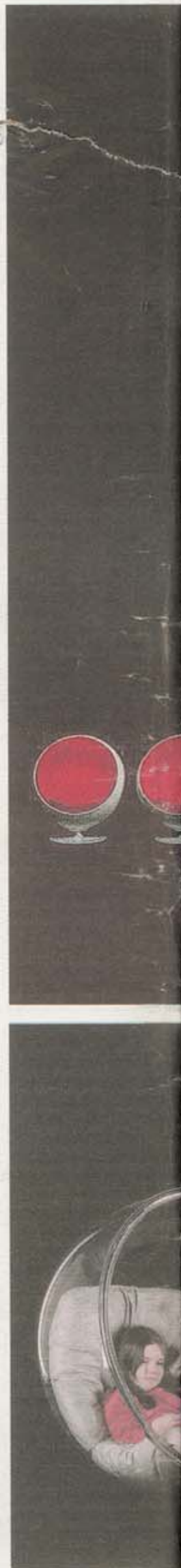
always begin with that," he says. "I also have a very strong idea of colour from the start. I use my own colours, not the standard palette."

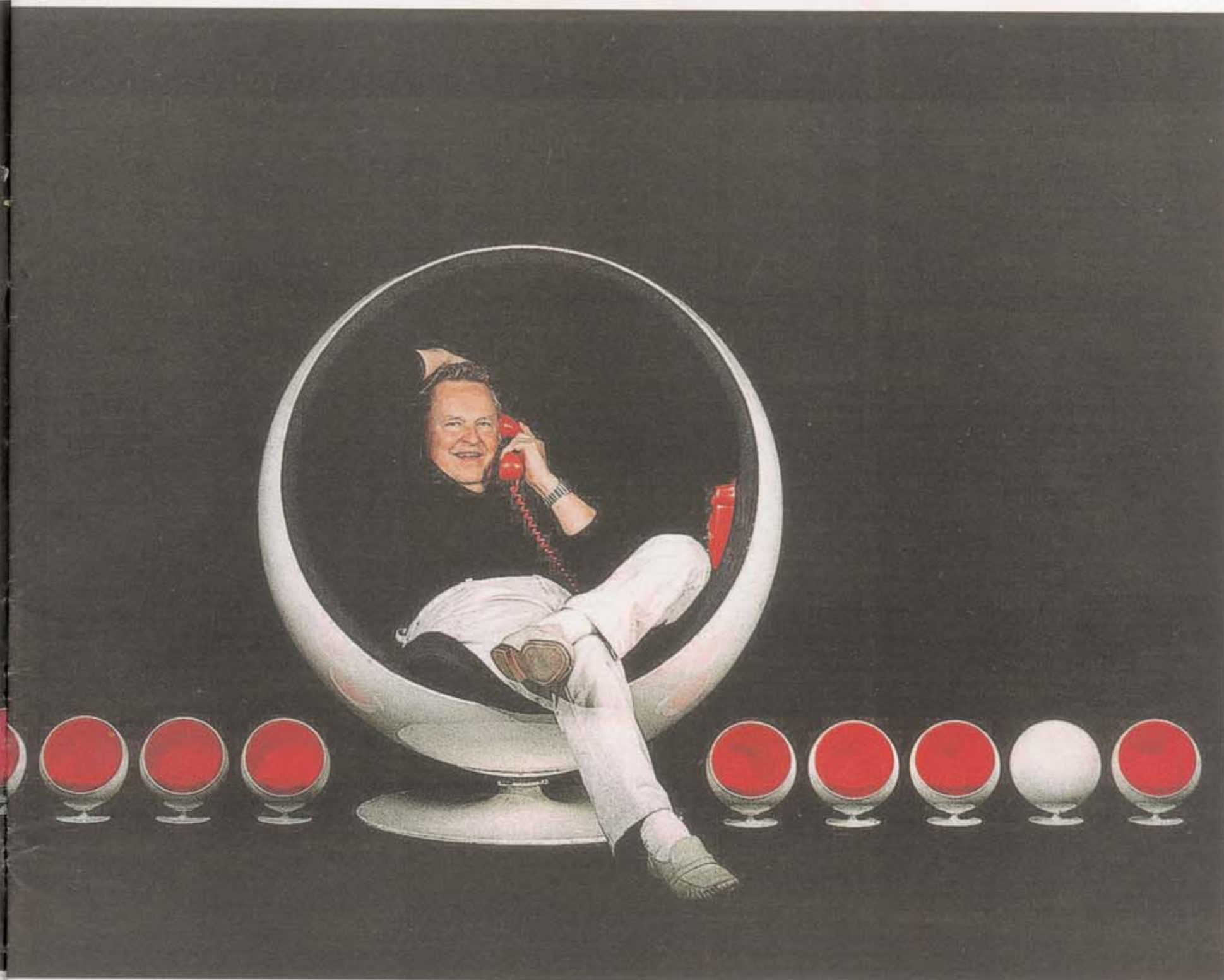
Pirkko Aarnio has been living with her husband's ideas for 47 years. "Sometimes I'll wake up at five in the morning, and he's sitting here in the living room and says: 'I have a hell of a good idea!'" And sometimes, she says, his ideas differ greatly from those of the people who encounter his furniture. "A local library had to get rid of several Ball Chairs because the children were doing things in them other than reading," she says with a smile.

"I can't help if people have dirty minds," says Aarnio, laughing, before revealing one of his home's hidden features: a sliding door, covered from top to bottom with magazine covers – from *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, among others – featuring his Ball and Bubble chairs and a selection of sex kittens. "I don't know why women always undress in my furniture," he remarks airily, pointing out proudly that he is the only man to feature, indirectly at least, on three *Playboy* covers.

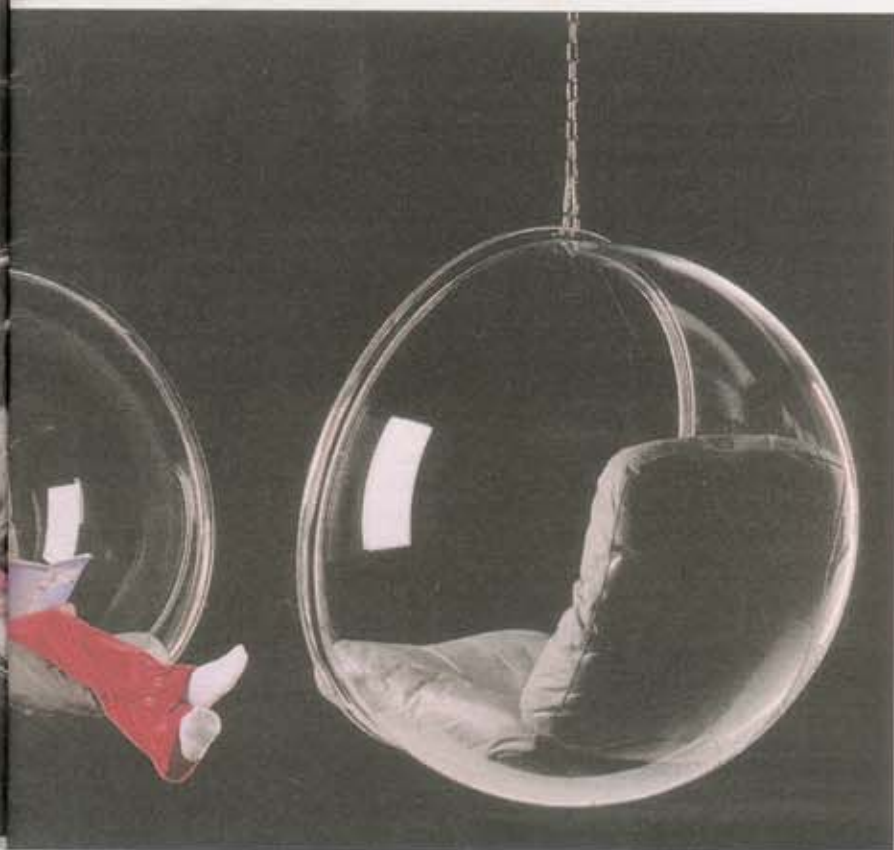
Sitting in his traditional Finnish smoke sauna, Aarnio is more thoughtful about his work. On a bench overlooking the glinting lake outside, he suggests that his designs are modern variations on traditional Finnish design. "If anything I've drawn inspiration from the Finnish national museum," he says. "The designs of the plates and cups and buttons there are just wonderful. It was design by necessity: they had to be simple and good."

Eero Aarnio designs, with their flirtatious curves and proud colours, might seem a world away from peasant kitchenware, yet they share the same functionality and durability. And his designs are quintessentially Finnish, he says, the unmistakable product of a young country. "A Frenchman once said to me the Ball Chair could never have been designed in France, because





ABOVE: Eero Aarnio in one of his Ball Chairs. LEFT: His Bubble Chairs have also become iconic



'First comes the feeling, then the shape, then I think: Is this really possible? If yes, then I continue. The shape has to be comfortable; I always begin with that'

France has such a long furniture tradition, and for better or worse it is locked into tradition," he says. "Only in a new country like Finland is something like this possible."

His 1960s designs capture the dynamism of a late industrialising country anxious to share in the optimism of the era – as well as the need of a small country to be noticed from its corner of Europe in the shadow of the Soviet Union.

Aarnio's work has experienced an extraordinary revival in recent years, featuring in countless magazines, books and music videos, as well as in films such as *Mars Attacks!* and *Men in Black*.

After 45 successful years in the business, Aarnio exudes the energy of a man half his age. He also bucks the trend of nearly all other artists, designers and architects, who, after a certain point in their careers, begin repeating their earlier works.

Today the only people who copy Aarnio's work are diligent Chinese product pirates. "My ideas are stolen a lot," he says with a shrug. "It's hard to protect designs like mine, but, as Coco Chanel said, they never make copies of bad things." □

Eero Aarnio furniture is available from Inreda, 71 Lower Camden Street, Dublin, 01-4760362, www.inreda.ie