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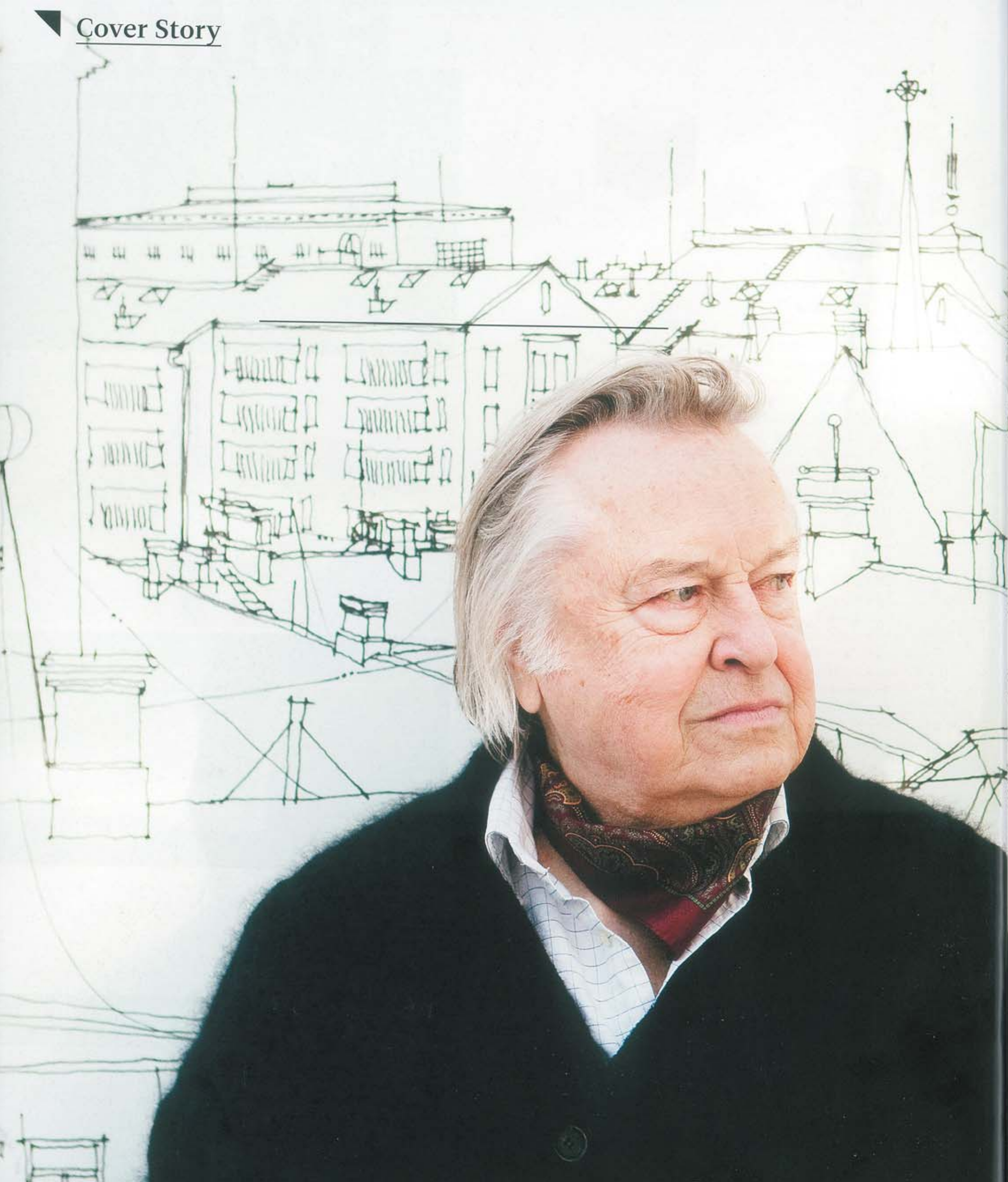
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other Finnish success
stories

The Magical World of Eero Aarnio

Legend talks about his life and work

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The Playful World of

Eero Aarnio

TEXT: ANNA RUOHONEN PHOTOGRAPHY: JULIANA HARKKI STYLE: JANIC LEINO MAKE UP: LAURA PIMIÄ

The grand old man of Finnish design *Eero Aarnio* has created his own design world during his long career. Its lure is a result of wild ideas and creative joy.

A HAIR OF smoke rises from a wooden bowl. The alder sticks underneath it are already in embers. No wonder, the bowl has been in the baking oven for four hours. It is full of chunks of lamb meat and whole potatoes.

The dish is called särä. Särä is the only dish Eero Aarnio cooks. He might be known for the design world as a modernist, but that is not the case in the kitchen. This is a traditional Finnish dish, so old that most Finns have not heard of it, let alone tasted it. The recipe dates back 1000 years.

Aarnio also offered särä for Finnish Broadcast Company YLE's filming crew who made a documentary of the designers work last year. With cameras rolling he soaked the lamb pieces of the wooden bowl. He had mixed three kilos of sea salt in the water and carried a big stone from his yard to keep the bowl under water.

"Särä is so good," Aarnio says stretching the word so to emphasise his message and leans back on the white sofa in his living room. He is dressed in black.

Besides the Eastern Finnish traditional food, Aarnio loves the lakeside smoke sauna at his family farm, built properly with a ground roof – another tradition that reaches back over a thousand years. This is something that amazes journalists from all over the world who meet Aarnio at his home. This particular sauna tradition is unheard of outside Finland: Sitting naked in a smoky sauna and then off to the lake.

But above all, Aarnio loves creating tension. He does it on purpose and skilfully—and sometimes manages to amuse even himself.

When Aarnio, now 77, started his career, he was called the "bad boy" of design. In the 1960s he started making objects of

fibreglass. Other Finnish designers used natural materials like wood. Then, in line with the rising individualism of the era, Aarnio made a fibreglass chair, in which you sit alone, unheard of before. The Ball Chair shot Aarnio to world fame.

Aarnio also took exceptional pictures of his pieces. No almost sterile, architectural shots against a monochrome background here. The Pastil chair for example has been pictured floating in a lake or with Aarnio riding downhill on it.

He still likes to surprise. Out of the blue, he designed Trioli, a joyful children's chair for Italian furniture company Magis in 2008.

Clearly, Aarnio is an exceptional talent with an exceptional career. He has soon run his own company for 50 years and most of his designs are still in production. He calls his designs a world. But the world is not restricted in objects it also includes a curious, amused attitude.

But as the world famous designer reminisces on his life, he manages to tell a story of a pretty normal Finn of his generation.

AARNIO LIVED HIS childhood in wartime Helsinki. His home building was hit with a bomb during the Second World War. As a young boy during the post-war depression his family had a garden and Aarnio had to think of ways to preserve potatoes in freezing winter temperatures.

Aarnio was the first of his family to graduate high school. He became a father at a young age and has been married to his wife Pirkko for 53 years. Twice, he has made the Finnish dream come true by building his own house.

In consequent anecdotes he tells of the success of his world touring retrospec-

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Cover Story

tive exhibition in Mexico—more than 55 000 visitors in the Franz Mayer Museum in 2007—and of how he managed to find a cheap car from a little add in the local paper. The car was his Porsche 928.

Yes, every Aarnio story comes with tension, conflict and surprise.

Aarnio's home, the centre of his world exhibited in numerous decor magazines, also contains a surprise. The glass walled house sits by birches right by a lakeshore only 30 kilometres from downtown Helsinki. There, in the middle of the Finnish lake view, stands a plastic tree.

EERO AARNIO TALKS on the phone.

"I'm fine with everything, as long as it gets finished," a curious ear hears him saying.

Aarnio's drawing desk is in the corner of two big windows. Behind the glass opens a sight with the lakeside birches and a forest. Aarnio's neighbours include elks, foxes and bears that occasionally wander too close to the habitation. Some time ago, one of the foxes ate a frozen Christmas turkey from the porch. The largest fish caught in the lake weighed over eight kilos. Ants live on the roof of the house.

"Our mistake, we settled on their territory," Aarnio says.

Then there are the extraterrestrial looking plastic objects. They are Aarnio's furniture, like *The Tree*, the room divider produced by Martela. It was introduced at the Milan Furniture Fair in 2008.

There is also a watering can on the drawing desk. It stands tilted forward like it's spout was ready to spit out water. Aarnio designed the can for Finnish company Plastex in 2008. He visited Plastex's factory related to a piggy bank design he made for development cooperation organisation Plan. The company's blow moulding machine impressed Aarnio. "You just had to give it something to eat."

The first piece Aarnio offered to the company was the watering can. And then he offered a hanger and children's play blocks.

This is exactly how Aarnio works. He offers his ideas to manufacturers. Or rather, this is how he works in Finland. Foreign companies like furniture manufacturer Magis, home accessory company Alessi and Valli & Valli, that manufactures handles, all have contacted Aarnio.

While making his own career, Eero Aarnio has managed to spot one of the

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evident disadvantages of Finnish economy – the lack of self-initiative.

The commissions planning the future of Finnish economy could use a long lesson on the white sofa in this house, which is already a must for design bloggers.

Nine out of ten of Aarnio's products are manufactured in Finland. That's the way he wants it. And this is exactly what the YLE's documentary was about: a designer with ideas that provide work for numerous people in different professions.

"Finnish companies lack initiatives. I call companies and tell them: this is what we should make," Aarnio says seemingly slightly upset.

In the meantime industries, like the forest industry, have a hard time making profit. As a result, the production of everyday objects escapes to countries with smaller production costs.

Aarnio thinks that Finnish companies are too quick to assume the role of a subcontractor.

"Many Finnish companies concentrate in trying to find the cheapest possible methods of production. That's a competition they can't win. Companies should concentrate in making their products as brilliant as possible."

Aarnio tells the story of the Plan piggy bank. He wasn't satisfied with a box that could be opened by pulling the two sides apart with a knife. And no, he didn't want the box to have the ugly little pivot left by the seam of the mould. The piggy bank had to open without aid and the surface had to be smooth. After persuasion, the manufacturer was convinced that a higher price doesn't matter if the product is stylish.

"Quite simply, Finnish companies should come up with products that can be priced so that it is lucrative to produce them here. Finland is full of creativity, we can do whatever we want," Aarnio says and sinks in his thoughts for a moment. Then he adds: "At least I can. I have done it. And I will do it in the future."

The first Eero Aarnio designs for Italian firm Alessi hit the markets this year. There are many other things in the works as well.

He also still has a design dream. We will return to it later.

When Aarnio presents his smoke sauna, he tells how the stove was built. After that he explains how he lights the first stove-

full from the top, not from underneath the logs. It makes the wood burn clean. Then he explains the burning process briefly.

Later, pointing towards the lake, he recollects the time he packed the boat full of champagne and rode to visit a friend on the other side of the lake with his wife—and explains how an electric outboard motor functions.

And yes: he comes to explain how the right kind of primordial särä is made.

Aarnio is interested in how things function. This might be why he is able to design the whole manufacturing process for his products.

He explains how he met a young designer who didn't know the manufacturing costs of a chair he had designed.

"A designer has to know mechanisation and be able to see the hidden expenses, like mould making costs. Making a chair cannot cost a thousand euro. It has to be closer to twenty."

Aarnio is constantly looking for manufacturers and new building methods for his products. And he believes that practise is the best teacher. Well, practise and house building. He urges young designers to build a house. It teaches design, manufacturing, project managing, and to appreciate manufacturing professionals.

But he still has something to design; the aforementioned dream. One day Eero Aarnio will design an electric car.

"At the moment the success of electric cars is a question of technical issues. When technology allows it, the best looking car will be the best selling car."

IT IS THE beginning of September. The Helsinki Fair Centre exhibition hall is dim, but the stylishly minimalist stands are brightly lit. Some stands are so stripped

that it is easy for a visitor to feel out of place. The step from the dark to the light feels rude, almost like harassment.

This is Habitare, an annual furniture, decor and design fair in Helsinki.

In the back of the hall a two-year-old speeds to an enthusiastic sprint. He screams with excitement, jumps on a dinosaur and begins a relentless ride.

The floor of Eero Aarnio's stand is flocked with colourful plastic Dinos.

This stand is meant for play.

The walls of the stand are covered with some of the hundreds of pieces written of Aarnio in the past decades. The headlines tell a unified story: Living legend. Energetic and passionate. Un sobreviviente de la era espacial. Designer du bonheur. L'enfant de la creation. Ich bin ein renaissance-designer. Sydämeltään suomalainen - A Finn by heart.

In the articles, journalists describe Aarnio as a warm-hearted renaissance man, a super-sympathetic genius, a slightly restless personality and as a 70-year-old running about like a young boy.

At the stand, the two-year-old runs to the Doggy play blocks and then to the Trioli chairs. Aarnio doesn't want to raise his products on a pedestal, but rather set them on the floor. He thinks of them as consumer goods.

Even adults are keen to play with Aarnio's designs. Tipi, the bird-resembling chair, had to be relocated at the Cologne furniture fair, because grown men rocked it until it was almost broken. People rock the Bubble Chair so hard that even the designer is terrified.

How does Aarnio know how to get people, who are normally so serious, to play?

"I don't know. It just happens. For some reason, people get inspired by my world."

In the articles, journalists describe Aarnio as a warm-hearted renaissance man, a super-sympathetic genius.

