



Tomato chair outside Eero's lake-side sauna house.

#### THE "FINNISHED" PRODUCT

Bubble, Ball, Pony, Pastil, Tomato, Formula - Eero Aarnio's furniture is iconic.

It screams futuristic, groovy, James Bond and yet, remains as fresh as the day it was created.

If you were to describe the spirit of the latter half of the 20th century with a dozen design objects, Finnish furniture maker Eero Aarnio's Ball and Bubble chairs would be high on the list of top 12 hits. All are still in production and now sell more than when they were first launched. Decades after they were created, these bold plastic statements remain undated.

A half an hour's drive from Helsinki, Aarnio lives with his wife, Pirkko, in a house he designed and built himself on the edge of an enormous lake. He's also built his own traditional smoke sauna on the water's edge. It's a home to which his family - two daughters with two children apiece - can come in summer and at Christmas.

"This house began with a garage that I converted to be a self-contained place where my daughter, who lives in America, and her two children and husband can come to stay. "After all houses are for people. Cars they can stay outside."

Aarnio has lived here now for 12 years. It's possibly the longest he's been in one spot when he tells me that he has lived in 17 different houses since he married in 1956, all except 4 of them in Helsinki.

Throughout the house and dotted through the garden are the prototypes and produced examples of his designs. They are playthings for his grandchildren and himself, used and loved pieces of household furniture often left outside to suffer the extremes of Finnish weather: ice, snow, cold, sun, heat, rain. Through all that they look as good as the day they were made.





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A half-hour drive from Helsinki, Aarnio lives with his wife, Pirkko, in a house he designed and built on the edge of a lake. He's also built his own studio and smoker sauna at the water's edge. It's a family home to which his two daughters and their children can come in summer and at Christmas time.

Eero's design office - showing some new office chair plans on the back wall.



Bubble chair - hung low



Pony being prototyped by Eero in 1962

Aarnio, who has been designing furniture for 40 years on a freelance basis, also designed the house with his working life in mind. Entering through the winter garden-like porch and on down into the lounge area, Aarnio's office area sits in behind.

A large gliding wall of white closes the space off from the rest of the house, leaving it with its own entrance to the bathroom. The sliding wall serves a dual purpose, upon it he will stick his one to one scale drawings of the corporate furniture he is designing. For the past 20 years, Aarnio has been designing office furniture for Martella and EFT.

"Since 1962 I have worked as a freelance designer and all the time it is some sort of survival game. This is a small country and I am very successful but the furniture needs are not great. This is not Germany, or France or America. But it is why I stay busy: to live and because I enjoy working."

"I like the corporate work because it's very logical and practical and it's easy to do because there are producers. The contrast to this work are the designs I do for Adelta," says Aarnio about his funky chairs, stools and tables."

"That's the problem in Finland, when I have ideas I have to pay for it myself – the first prototypes. I have more ideas than the capacity to do them. That's why need a big factory to sponsor me. No worries about whether it makes good business sense, just try it out and see what happens. Often from there great things come."

"And, if there's nothing in the brain," indicates Aarnio tapping his forehead, "then go fishing. Catch salmon and smoke it. Have a sauna. This is why I love this house because it is designed for my work and it works perfectly."

"I remember once trying my Pastil out on the lake to see if it would flip over. I went over twice, both times hitting my head on the bottom and seeing stars. It was why I designed Formula which is very safe and very stable."

Formula was also inspired by Mika Häkkinen's world championship and is remarkably sleek to sit in. It takes you, as does his newest work, The World's Best Rocking Chair (chosen as the iconic image for Habitare 2001, Finland's largest and most prestigious homeware show), on a ride.

Rakishly good-looking, a lover of good cars and driving, Aarnio, who is closer to 70 than even he is willing to admit, is living proof that the extremes of indulging in the sauna ritual – much heat followed by plunging in cool water and more heat – might just be the elixir of youth. But his innovative approach to materials and continuing optimism in his design are also factors in his perpetual youthfulness.

As a young man starting out, he says he wanted to create something that said "here is a new design and a new designer". His 1963 Ball Chair was the answer. It is handmade in the same way that fibreglass boats are built. There is a mould for the outside and hand laminated inside.

"It was 1962 when I started. I was freelance, with a wife, two children, no work. I wanted to design furniture – a big, roomy easy chair."

The prototype came from pondering and sketching and deciding why not a completely round chair. Within this period Aarnio met one of Finland's chief executives for the Coca Cola company and wanting to get sponsorship to produce the chair approached Coca Cola with it painted in the famous red and white colours of the brand. While impressed, the company could not see its way to producing the design.

Coincidentally, a large German furniture company Asko had come to see Aarnio's wooden furniture. Always open to an opportunity, Aarnio made sure the Ball was in the room when the executives arrived. They were fascinated, saw the potential and decided to take it to the Cologne Fair in 1965. It was a huge success, ending by being sold to 30 countries.

"It was so successful and it really made me. From there I have been able to do so many other works, such as the Bubble chair. I designed it in 1968 after the Ball, which I found very comfortable to sit in but very dark. I put a light inside the Ball but I wanted a window and then I thought, could I use a transparent material.

"At first it was on a base but it wouldn't fix properly and it looked ugly and then I got the idea, why not hang it? The Bubble is made from acrylic sheet and it is my smartest design. No mould is needed because it is made exactly as you would a soap bubble. You blow it up.

"You heat the material, it becomes very flexible and you can place the steel tubing in and press it into the acrylic. You place it on a table covered with material with a hole in the middle and you blow through the hole. It's a very simple process but all the windows and doors of the factory must be closed because the material is so pliable when it is hot that any wind will cause it to reshape. You could easily end up with a parabola or something else."

For Aarnio his work in plastic, fibreglass and acrylic is the perfect juxtaposition to the world of corporate furniture.

And the contrast to this world of big drawing design is the work he does for Italian company Valli & Valli, designing furniture handles. The small detailed drawings Valli & Valli require can be faxed to the company and are the sort of complete contrast he loves.

Up and coming for Aarnio is a new table he says is scheduled to be shown at Cologne and, as with many things he does, will probably all come together in the last minute. He believes procrastination is an "international sickness".

Due out this year is a portfolio Aarnio's work. Edited by a Chinese architect who has been living in Finland for 5 years, the book comes as a glossy 200-page English edition, followed by a Chinese version. It was, at the time we met, the project that was consuming Aarnio's time. Collecting his drawings, sketches and photographs together, he was excited about the prospect: "No one has done a book before."

Text by Louise Upton.  
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Formula chair permanently outside in the garden

