

1. What do you want, chair?

"If you think of brick, for instance, you say to brick, 'What do you want, brick?' And brick says to you, 'I'd like an arch.' And if you say to brick, 'Look, arches are expensive,' and I can use a concrete lintel over you. 'What do you think of that, brick?' Brick says, 'I'd like an arch.' And it's important, you see, that you honor the material which you use. You don't bandy it around as though you said, 'Well, we have a lot of material around. We can do it one way; we can do it another.' It's not true. You can only do it if you honor the brick and glorify the brick instead of just shortchanging it."

—Louis Kahn



Woody Harrelson as David Murphy in *Indecent Proposal*, the 1993 American drama film, referencing Louis Kahn's 1971 lecture

In Louis Kahn's famous University of Pennsylvania 1971 lecture, he goes through the exercise of asking a brick what it wants in order to make a case for the honesty of materials, and the implicit conclusion seems to be that an architect "honors and glorifies" a brick using it where it is most appropriate (an arch, in this case) and by not hiding it (painting it or covering it in plaster, for example).

What would happen if we repeated Louis Kahn's lesson, but instead of asking the honorable and glorified brick what he wants, we posed the same question to the humble white plastic chair (also known as the Monobloc chair)?

- Some differences between a brick in an arch and a white plastic chair in a space: the brick cannot move, but the white plastic chair can; the position of the brick (the arch to which it belongs) is usually decided by an architect, but the position of the white plastic chair is not, etc.

2. White Outdoor Rocking Chair - 600 lb. Capacity



**White Outdoor Rocking Chair - 600-Lb. Capacity**  
 by Semco Plastic Co Inc  
 ★★★★★ 463 customer reviews  
 | 79 answered questions  
 Price: **\$99.99** & FREE Shipping  
 Color: **White**  
 Assembly options: **Get expert assembly Details**  
 Without expert assembly | Expert assembly +\$80.00 per unit  
 What's included  
 Durable rugged construction  
 Won't warp, rust, blister, or peel  
 Easy 4-piece assembly  
 Extra-large seat for maximum comfort  
 Easily cleaned and resists scratches and stains  
 Compare with similar items  
 New (4) from \$99.99 & FREE shipping

The White Outdoor Rocking Chair - 600-Lb. Capacity, sold on Amazon by Semco Plastic Co Inc

"First off, I am very skeptical of ordering a chair off the internet that I have never sat in. After two months of trying to find one of these chairs to sit in before buying it, I finally caved in and ordered one. I am very glad that I did. I will try and break down this review into its pieces now.

Assembly: I read many reviews stating that assembly was hard with this chair. It took me all of five minutes, and that was with reading the directions twice. A little WD-40 on the dovetail, and let gravity do the rest (letting the chair drop from about 10 inches off the ground onto the ground in the upright position a couple of times per side).

Construction: While I just got this last weekend, it looks and feels like heavy plastic construction that should last for years. I have had my share of plastic chairs that bend/break over the years, and I do not see that happening with this chair.

Comfort: First off, it is a hard plastic chair, so expecting it to be soft and plush is ridiculous. That being said, I am a long-legged 6'-2" 270 lbs. and have a Pillsbury dough-boy physique, and this chair is an incredibly comfortable rocker for me. The only slight modification I would make is to lengthen the seat bottom, but that is due to my extra long legs and I should add that it isn't uncomfortable. The back is high enough that I can lean my head back and rest it on the chair while rocking. It is even wide enough that I can sit my wide bottom on the seat while wearing my holster, and nothing rubs!

Conclusion: If you are wondering about whether this chair is nice, well it definitely is. I am a natural born skeptic of everything, but I give this chair a 5 star rating for what it was designed for. A solidly built, all weather, comfortable rocking chair that larger people can comfortably fit in."

— Review by Craig Hicks.

- Hicks, Craig. "Great Chair!!! Customer Review." Amazon, 2014. [https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1UNJ7Z-6G3RTBB?ref=pf\\_vv\\_at\\_pdctrvw\\_srp](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1UNJ7Z-6G3RTBB?ref=pf_vv_at_pdctrvw_srp).

3. The context-free object



A white plastic chair somewhere in the world

"Virtually every object suggests a time and place. The Monobloc is one of the few objects I can think of that is free of any specific context. Seeing a white plastic chair in a photograph offers you no clues about where or when you are. I have a hard time thinking of other objects that are equally independent of context. Asking friends to propose a similar object, most people suggest a Coke can... but I can tell you that Coke is presented very differently in different countries, in glass bottles as well as cans, with labels in local languages. The Monobloc offers no linguistic cues, no obvious signs that it's been localized. Wherever you are, it's at home.

For me, the Monobloc isn't so much a glimpse of the future, where we suspect that mega-corporation will blur distinctions between Albania and Afghanistan. Even McDonalds, the avatar for global homogenization, makes heavy investments in localization. If it didn't, it would be very hard to sell beef burgers in majority-Hindu India. It's going to be a while before McChicken Tikka (an excellent sandwich, by the way) is so pervasive that its wrapper doesn't reveal that you're at an Indian McDonalds, not a Japanese one.

The Monobloc is a reminder that the world is still filled with the local, the unique, the distinctive. Globalization may be homogenizing the world, but most objects still offer some context. The few objects that defy localization deserve some special form of lionization. They've achieved a level of design perfection where they don't require adaptation to be as successful in Africa as they are in suburban America. Dismiss them at your peril—context-free objects like the Monobloc have achieved a sort of global celebrity that few humans could ever hope for."

- Zuckerman, Ethan. "Those White Plastic Chairs – The Monobloc and the Context-Free Object." ... My heart's in Accra, 2011. <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2011/04/06/those-white-plastic-chairs-the-monobloc-and-the-context-free-object/>.

4. The Unthought Chair



Cover of *The Unthought Chair* by León Kaminsky. Paidós, 1982

*The Unthought Chair* is a book by the Argentinian psychoanalyst León Kaminsky, published in 1982 by Editorial Paidós as part of their *Biblioteca del hombre contemporáneo* (Contemporary Man's Library), about a chair that is in some way known to the individual, but about which the individual is unable to think.<sup>4</sup> That chair is a white plastic chair.

- Some other text on the unthought: "There Is an Unthought Known Between Journalism and Politics", "Violence: The Unthinkable, the Unthought", "The Shadow of the Object, Psychoanalysis of the Unthought", "The Sublime and the Unthought", "Strategy Against the Unforeseen and the Unthinkable", "The Unthought in Philosophy", "The Position of the Unthought", "Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious", "The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought", "Football: Dynamic of the Unthought", "The Irruption of the Unthought", "Dynamics of the Unthought", "World-systems as Unthought", "Thinking the New: Of Futures yet Unthought", "The Unthought In 'Jady Warhol': Sexuality and Art", "A Politics of the Unthought".

5. White



The color white.

Some excerpts from *White*,<sup>5</sup> the book by Kenya Hara, graphic designer, curator, writer, and since 2001, art director of Muji, the Japanese home goods company:

"White is a particular unusual color because it can also be seen as the absence of color. In the old days, Japanese referred to the latent possibilities that exist prior to an event taking place as *kizen*. Insofar as white contains the latent possibility of transforming into other colors, it can be seen as *kizen*."

"White can be attained by blending all the colors of the spectrum together, or through the subtraction of ink and all other pigments. In short, it is 'all colors' and 'no color' at the same time. This identity as a color that can 'escape color' makes white very special. Not only does white's texture powerfully evoke the materiality of objects; white can also contain temporal and spatial principles like *ma* (an interval of space and time) and *yohaku* (empty margin), or abstract concepts such as nonexistence and zero."

"White can be seen as the basic form of life or information that emerges from chaos; it is that extreme form of negative entropy that is bound and determined to make a clean escape. Life radiates color, while the innate tendency of white is to escape color to reach the opposite side of chaos. Life comes into this world wearing white, but it begins to acquire color the instant it assumes concrete form and touches the earth, like a yellow chick emerging from a white egg. White can never be made manifest in the real world. We may feel that we have come into contact with white, but that is just an illusion. In the real world, white is always contaminated and impure. It is no more than a vestige, a sign pointing towards its origins. White is delicate and fragile. From the moment of its birth it is no longer perfectly white, and when we touch it we pollute it further, though we may not realize it. Yet, all the more because of this, it stands out clearly in our consciousness."

"In some cases, white denotes 'emptiness.' White as noncolor transforms into a symbol of nonbeing. Yet emptiness doesn't mean 'nothingness' or 'energy-less'; rather, in many cases, it indicates a condition, or *kizen*, which will likely be filled with content in the future."

- Hara, Ken'ya. *White*. Lars Müller Publishers, 2010.

6. The Negative Corner



Detail of The Negative Corner in a white plastic chair

The Negative Corner (poetic license) has taught us that preconceived aesthetic ideas about how things should look are data viruses that infect brains. Sometimes these viruses can be sacrificed in the altar of mass stacking. We are talking about the Negative Corner of the front legs of the white plastic chair, the most significant yet underrated detail in design mythology.

In early 90s Greece, probably across the entire country, but more specifically right outside Thessaloniki, in Michaniona and Agia Triada—possibly the global epicenter of the white plastic chair<sup>6</sup>—people would stamp out cigarettes on them. The smokers wouldn't even look while they performed this act. They would keep talking. It would happen near the top of the right front leg, right in the Negative Corner. A faint yellowish mark would forever commemorate the event.<sup>7</sup> Close inspection would reveal tiny bubbling where the core of the cigarette impacted the plastic. The melting of thermoplastic polypropylene takes place at around 200 degrees Celsius.



Observing the Negative Corner in the 80s should only have been allowed for adults as it could create a cynic out of an innocent child. It was obvious that this detail was included for stacking and structural rigidity purposes yet it was still radically “wrong”. Theo was around ten when he first observed this detail and still remembers it: the moment modernism died inside him, never to resurrect. After this, it was much easier to swallow postmodern details like the shape of a Renault Twingo, or the straightforward functionality of a plastic takeaway coffee lid.

6. Here we are referring specifically to the variants of the Grosfiller resin garden chair with names such as Aphroditi (a nod to Botticelli for the chair’s back that resembles shell patterns) and Vendalia (Greek for hand fan). These could handle loads of up to 250 kgs easily, thanks to the aforementioned Negative Corner but also because the arms—absent in the cheaper spinoffs—connect the seat to the back.



These marks are reminiscent of the Germs Burn, a cigarette burn mark that fans of the punk band the Germs would get on the inside of their wrist. This form of ritual body modification could only be administered by someone who had already had it, meaning that it would be a result of the direct line of burns from Darby Crash, cofounder of the Germs.

**7. Two images in a book from the MUAC library**

Jorge Bobadilla found the following images in a book from the MUAC (University Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City) library, but for the time being, we don’t remember anything else (and we can’t find them online).



**8. Evolution**



Stacks of white plastic chairs in Progreso, Yucatan, Mexico

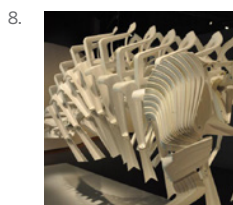
At another place, Progreso, Yucatan (Mexico) in 2018, looking at these white plastic chairs stacked on the sand—although most would probably never admit it—one subconsciously recognizes articulated spinal cords and other bone accumulations like the ones of European catacombs. There has to be a connection. The success of the white plastic chair must have come from this evolutionary twist regardless of its other benefits: it’s the comfiest chair ever, it doesn’t require cleaning, if you shoot it with an AK-47 it still works just fine, and it lasts a million years.

It is no coincidence that more than a billion of these chairs, the furniture equivalent of a shrimp, have been sold in Europe alone. Although there are no official numbers, we can do some extrapolation and make the claim that humans are outnumbered by white plastic chairs.

Many plastic chairs have been converted to whale skeletons by artists,<sup>8</sup> and many whales have become plastic chairs by being buried in the sand for millions of years only to liquefy into oil and then plastic. No other chair has this distinction.

Somewhere in Switzerland, there is a museum-bar dedicated to H. R. Giger. Someone will one day go there and leave stacks of plastic white chairs.<sup>9</sup> Giger’s spirit will quietly accept the gesture because the plastic chair is to Giger’s iconography what a chicken is to our collective fantasies of Jurassic T-Rexes: a relative that one cannot disavow.

We are still waiting for a hard sci-fi movie where the main spaceship is fully furnished with white plastic chairs.



Artist Brian Jungen’s *Shapeshifter*.

9. If someone painted the chairs black, then this experiment would become invisible.

**9. The welfare state**



Seashore restaurant in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, Mexico

In Mexico, the white plastic chair fits the vacation model of the post-revolutionary regime established by the PRI, the ruling party for most of the twentieth century. Although this system clearly had some authoritarian and repressive qualities, it was also anchored in mass politics and the implementation of social public policy—perhaps more related to the twentieth century welfare state. The white plastic chair appears more in small seashore restaurants than large all-inclusive resorts (see Cancun) or the boutique hotels of neohippie neoliberalism (see Tulum).

Some names of the most popular commercial versions of the white plastic chair are:

- Silla Confort Chapala de Plástico, Coppel<sup>10</sup>
- Silla Boston Blanca, The Home Depot
- Unbranded Backgammon Patio Chair
- Adams White Polypropylene High-Back Chair
- Adams RealComfort White Polypropylene Adirondack Chair
- Grosfiller Pacific Stacking Patio Dining Chair
- Topaz Cofta Monobloc Chair
- 501 Uratex Low Back Armchair
- 1401 Uratex Germania Chair
- Majesty Uratex Chair
- Stellar Uratex Chair

10. The fact that one of the most popular versions in Mexico is named after a famous summer vacation destination (the Silla Confort Chapala de Plástico) is significant.

**10. Correct Use of the White Plastic Chair**



Correct use of the white plastic chair

You know this too: a restaurant with plastic white chairs is to be trusted blindly. It is a signal of the impossibility of the fish not being fresh, an indication of utter confidence in the food itself.

A white plastic chair doesn’t need cleaning either: an oily stain need not be scrubbed because we know it will be perfectly wiped off when we decide to do it. That is, we only clean the things that we think (and thus fear) will become permanently stained, such as kids and white t-shirts. Stains of pita gyros only add to the charm.

Plastic has done great harm to nature but never by means of the white plastic chair, since every white plastic chair that has ever been produced is still in use:<sup>11</sup> it is the perfect material for the perfect object.

If you want to find great images of plastic chairs do not google “white plastic chair” but anything else that comes to mind, and you will find images of white plastic chairs.



Perhaps the most used white plastic chair in the world.

**11. The real estate information booth**



Real estate information booth for a commercial space for rent in 59 Marsella, Juárez, Mexico City, Mexico (March 2019)

The real estate information booth is an architectural typology that usually consists in two white plastic chairs, a white plastic table, a parasol, a drinking water fountain, a sign and multicolored polyethylene pennants tied from the most visible points. They are on the sidewalk, and their program is the promotion, for rent or sale, of the property in front of which they are located

— APRDELESP, Xavier Nueno Guitart, Fabien Cappello, Luciano Concheiro, Theo Michael, and Benny Shaffer

*Notes on a White Plastic Chair* (version 1.0.0) was written in Mexico City, Madrid, and Cambridge (Massachusetts) and printed in MACOLEN in Mexico City, Mexico on March 23, 2019. It was distributed in the real estate information booth for a commercial space for rent in 59 Marsella, Juárez, Mexico City, Mexico, in the context of the architecture festival Mextrópoli and later in A quien corresponda, an exhibition at Harvard Graduate School of Design’s Kirkland Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.