Notes on the White Plastic Chair

1. What do you want, chair?

"If you think of brick, for instance, you say to brick, ‘What do you want, brick?’ Brick says to you, ‘I’d like an arch.’ And 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 short-changing it.”

—Louis Kahn

Woody Harrelson as David Murphy in Indecent Proposal, the 1993 American drama film, referencing Louis Khan’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 plastic, for example).

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

1. 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

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 no idea about. 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 the Monobloc chair. But, I am glad that I did. I will try and break down this review into its pieces now.

Construction: While I just got this last weekend, it looks and feels like it was shipped packed very well.

Assembly: I read many reviews stating that assembly was hard with the Monobloc chair. But, I am glad that I did. I will try and break down this review into its pieces now.

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 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.


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) transforms into a symbol of nonbeing. Yet emptiness doesn’t mean nothingness and zero. "What do you think of that, chair?" Chair says, ‘I’d like an arch’... and if you say to chair, ‘Look, arches are expensive,’ Chair says, ‘I’d like an arch’.

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 iconization. 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.”


4. The Unthought Chair

Conclusion: If you are wondering 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.

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. That chair is a white plastic chair.

The Unthought Chair

The color white.

“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 not exist in itself, white cannot 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 colors, 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 imperiled. 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, it is a shade of white. We can never fully grasp it. It is always changing, and the more we try, the more we blur the distinction between white and other colors. Asking friends to propose a similar object..."
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 Twin-Go, or the straightforward functionality of a plastic takeaway coffee lid.

Here we are referring specifically to the variants of the Grossfeld resin garden chair with names such as Aphrodite (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.

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
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, 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. 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.

9. The welfare state
In Mexico, the white plastic chair fits the vocational 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
Silla Boston Bianca, The Home Depot
Unbranded Backgammon Patio Chair
Adams White Polypropylene High-Back Chair
Adams RealComfort White Polypropylene Adirondack Chair
Grosfillex Pacific Stacking Patio Dining Chair
Topaz Cofa Monobloc Chair
501 Uraltex Low Back Armchair
1401 Uraltex Germania Chair
Majesty Uraltex Chair
Stellar Uraltex 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.

Stacks of white plastic chairs in Progreso, Yucatan, Mexico

11. The real estate information booth
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.

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.

— APRDELES, Xavier Nuño Guillart, Fabien Cappello, Luciano Concheiro, Theo Michael, and Benny Shaffer

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