

FORAGING

A Circular Search For Futuristic Nostalgia

By MARY BILLARD

THE minute I saw the posters for the coming movie "Men in Black II," I felt an undeniable rush of lust, triggered by the sight of the two egg-shaped, space-age chairs sheltering those suave alien chasers, Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith.

I time-traveled back to around 1967. I was 12. The futuristic chair was for sale at the Dayton Hudson department store in my hometown, Edina, Minn. (Memory places the chair in the store's oh-so-groovy "Out of Sight" department, along with plastic polka-dot blow-up pillows and the requisite Op Art posters.)

But it seemed that Edina wasn't quite ready for this particular embodiment of 60's style. The floor sample sat unclaimed for weeks on end, its sticker price plummeting with each passing day. Even my own mother failed to be won over by its charms; she eventually bought me a Brentwood rocker.

Now, however, this once-ultramodern chair had become retro. Maybe it was time to actually own one.

With a little research on the Internet, I found that the chair of my memory might have been the classic Ball Chair, the brainchild of the Finnish designer, Eero Aarnio. Mr. Aarnio, a pioneer in the use of plastics, first conceived of the Ball Chair in 1962, and when it was produced a few years later it quickly became a modern icon, one that used geometric forms to create a sheltering cocoon.

I readily found a source for the Ball Chair, currently in production, and priced from \$3,900 to \$4,200 (M2L Collection, 215 East 58th Street, 800-319-8222). Vintage models of these chairs have fetched around \$4,000 at auction, according to Peter Loughrey, director of 20th-century furniture and decorative arts at the Butterfields auction house in Los Angeles. He strongly recommended checking out the condition of a chair before buying one. "Restoration isn't easy," Mr. Loughrey said. "There are not a lot of conservators around in plastics and fiberglass. People take them to Corvette body shops."

Vintage or new, the Ball Chair wasn't my chair. While I certainly admired it, something was amiss. I didn't get the same visceral rush I had experienced 30 years earlier.

So Mr. Loughrey suggested another 60's era contender: the Sunball, designed by Günter Ferdinand Ris and Herbert Sell-dorf. The Sunball is the "seminal bastardization" of the Ball Chair, according to

James Zemaitis, director of 20th- and 21st-century design at Phillips, de Pury & Luxembourg, an auction house in New York. "It is taking Austin Powers to the next level, a total flip-out ottoman, drink caddy, and the ball can be shut with a lid over it." It costs \$10,000 to \$15,000. I tracked down a photo, but that wasn't the model either.

Looking back at the "Men in Black II" poster, I realized what was wrong. It was the oval cone shape that I needed. An egg-shaped version is readily found. The Total Immersion Audio Chair at Hammacher Schlemmer sells for \$1,699.95 and features custom-built Surround Sound speakers. It still wasn't me. I couldn't remember any speakers. And the interior armrests broke the smooth curves of the cutout front opening; comfort rather than style.

Frank Novak, a co-owner of the Modernica chain of midcentury Modernist furniture stores, including one in SoHo, knew exactly what I was talking about. He had leased props to the "Men in Black II" design team from his West Coast ware-

house. I was mortified to learn that I lusted not for the pure, but for the impure. He placed the oval versions of the egg chair in the design world's gray area, a pedestrian knockoff of a groundbreaking design that lacks the original's sublime symmetry. "There are probably 10 versions of the egg chair," Mr. Novak said. "There's a couch version. And one where the egg is a little more open, and there are cushions that sit inside of it." Mr. Novak did not have the chair matching my exact specifications.

The cold truth is that the chair I covet, slightly egg-shaped but not too eggy, oval, sleek and uncluttered by speakers or armrests, appears to exist only in my imagination. And in Hollywood movies.

BACK IN BLACK

Chairs from a movie poster set off a time-traveling quest.



ONE IDEA, MANY SHAPES The designer Eero Aarnio in his Ball Chair, which spawned a host of slightly altered imitations, including one used in the movie "Men in Black II."

Adelta