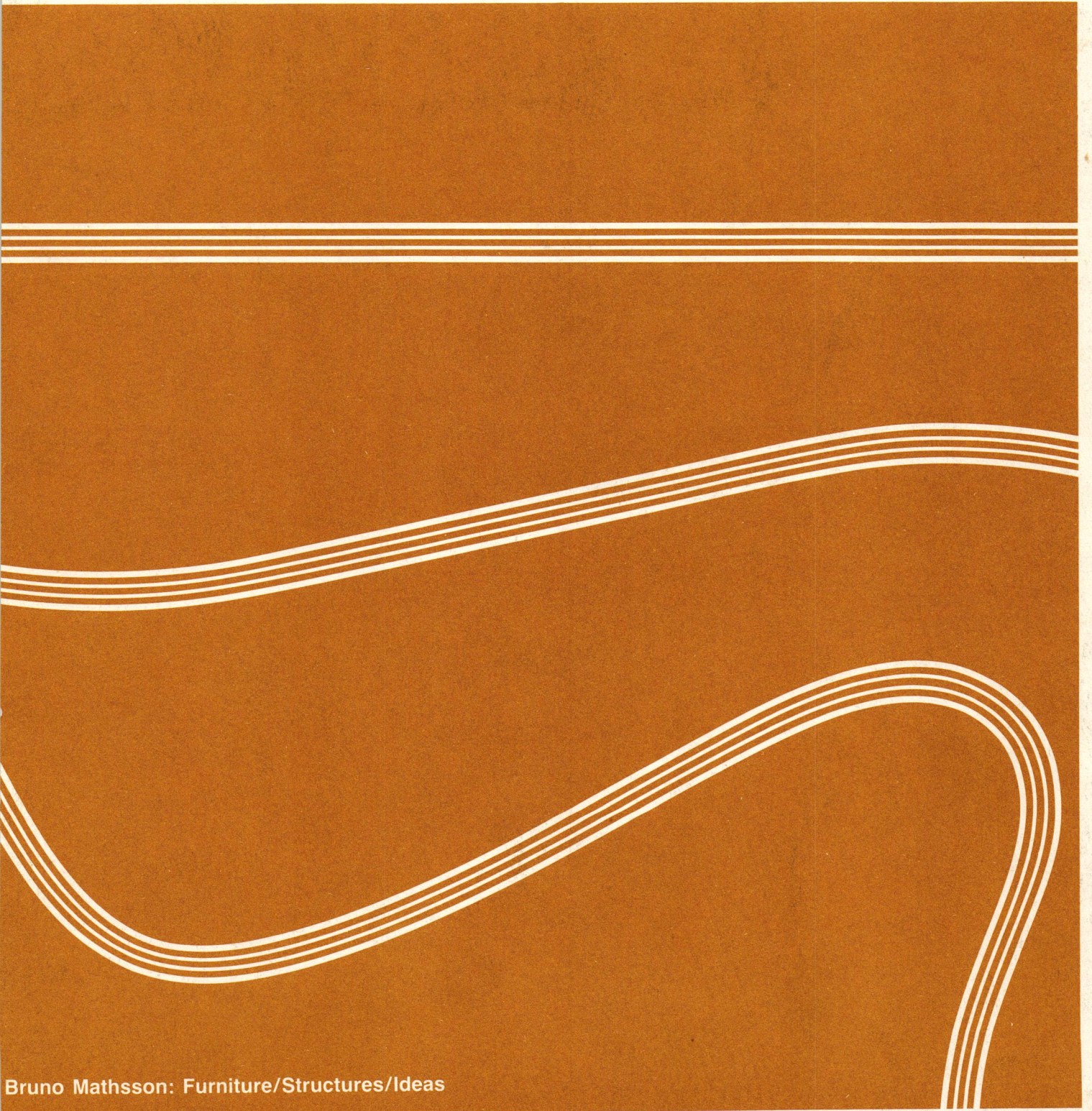


# Design Quarterly

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Bruno Mathsson: Furniture/Structures/Ideas

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**Design Quarterly No. 65**

**Bruno Mathsson: Furniture/Structures/Ideas**

**by Carl E. Christiansson**

**Walker Art Center      Minneapolis, Minnesota**



Bruno Mathsson

**Notes on Swedish Design**  
by Martin Friedman

Last fall, under the auspices of the Svenska Institutet, I visited Sweden for a brief time, talked with many people in the arts and saw examples of their work. Perhaps it's part of a Scandinavian mystique, but I found the most impressive of Sweden's current visual efforts to be exemplified by crafts and urban planning rather than by painting and sculpture.

The accomplishments of Swedish architects and city planners are well known and serve as models for the rest of the world to emulate. Stockholm itself is a classic example of a well conceived metropolis, distinguished for its remarkable system of parks, waterways, bridges and architecture integrated into an impressive urban scheme. In all of these the characteristic Swedish regard for nature and earlier traditions are in evidence.

In some new projects for public areas architects and engineers collaborate closely with artists. Perhaps the most dramatic example is Sergels Torg, the new shopping center development consisting of a complex of office buildings and stores adjacent to a huge fountain plaza. The plaza, still in an early stage of construction, marks the intersection of two major streets. It is designed in the form of a "superellipse," a fusion between an ellipse and a rectangle. This shape was developed by the Danish philosopher and mathematician Piet Hein and utilized in Sergels Torg by architect David Helldén and his associates. At the center of this "superellipse," whose length measures about 200 yards, will be an enormous glass and steel shaft to be made by the sculptor Edvin Öhrström. Ultimately, it will be possible to ascend the core of this structure for a remarkable view of Stockholm. Under the plaza will be a series of levels, one of which will serve as a restaurant, and the excellent Stockholm subway system will afford a major underground access to the plaza. In general, city planning as exemplified by Sergels Torg and by the new suburbs around Stockholm, such as Vällingby and Farsta, is more interesting than the individual buildings which form these complexes. There are, of course, outstanding individual architects such as Sigurd Lewerentz who, now in his 70's,

remains a rebellious and controversial figure. His church in Skarpnäck Parish, in Björkhagen, is at odds with most modern attitudes about building. Completely romantic in his approach, Lewerentz invokes mystery in this dramatic building. Using a native brick which he abets with a wide range of rock, stone and wood, he has created a structure alluding to an elementary Christianity – forceful and emotional – and this work exemplifies the "brutal" and highly organic spirit of some of the new Swedish architecture.

Among the outstanding works by younger architects is the dramatic new television tower, including cafe and observation decks, by Bengt Lindroos and Hans Borgström, located just outside Stockholm. This team has also designed an important church, Söderledskyrkan, in Farsta, and indeed ecclesiastical architecture, beginning with Lewerentz's buildings, is a markedly individualistic form of Swedish building. Generally, if many newer buildings in Sweden do not possess great distinction as individual structures, their virtues are in scale relationship to older buildings, to streets and parks. In Sweden, housing projects for all income levels represent one of the most interesting and advanced aspects of Swedish planning, and responsibility for the individual citizen's health and welfare is reflected in these buildings – but, as architecture many seem conventional.

A strong crafts tradition has long been identified with Sweden and has influenced present-day industrial design. For example, the widely known Orrefors glass and Gustavsberg pottery come from small communities whose entire orientation is related to a specific product. The Gustavsberg factory just outside Stockholm is an excellent example of the Swedish proclivity for extending a venerable tradition. Since the 18th century, Gustavsberg has been renowned as a world center for fine porcelain. In residence there is a group of esteemed designers, each of whom has a distinct style and produces individual works as well as designs for mass production. Indeed, the presence of these designer-craftsmen assures an important link between

the home crafts tradition and modern industrial processes. Although crafts production in Sweden is highly esthetic and technically accomplished, much of it shows evidence that the artist is institutionalized and isolated.

But, innovation is taking place in the Gustavsberg complex, where, for example, it is possible for an independent artist to work on large-scale mural commissions. A splendid example is the series of exuberant designs done especially for subway stations in the suburbs of Stockholm. Nothing could contrast more with the depressing subway stations of New York, Paris and London, and, in Stockholm's "underground," the atmosphere is attractive and vital. At Gustavsberg, these designs are painted on metal surfaces which are baked in the same furnace areas used to porcelainize bathtubs, for which Gustavsberg is also noted. To train its designers, Sweden has state-supported schools. One of these, the Konstfackskolan in Stockholm, is situated in a commodious building and has approximately 1,000 students who study industrial design, graphic design, photography, weaving, ceramics and related crafts. It is also one of the centers of teacher-training in Sweden. A vocational training center, its faculty consists of well established Swedish designers and technicians. The Konstfackskolan has the advantage of being located next to Svenskform, a large showroom of well designed Swedish products, which include furniture, pottery and glassware. Svenskform is maintained by contributions from manufacturers whose work has been accepted for display, and virtually all important examples of contemporary Swedish design can be seen there. Much of the work shown in Svenskform, an admirable index of current Swedish production, is technically accomplished, but furniture particularly lacks a sense of innovation.

Many young Swedish designers are responsive to the Japanese crafts tradition and have studied in Japan for a period of time. The Swedish home crafts tradition involves a strong relationship between art and nature, and such a relationship has, of course, also been a critical ingredient in Japanese de-

sign. Contrary to such other European phenomena as the highly technological concept of the Bauhaus and the Ulm School of Design in Germany, or to the flamboyant, highly styled Milanese design, Swedish products are more romantic, organic and refer to earlier traditions. This is not without its advantages and makes for a positive identity nowhere better exemplified than in the sensitive, closely reasoned designs of Bruno Mathsson, whose materials and forms invoke this past.

In the late 1930's a furniture style generally termed "Swedish Modern" attracted world attention. It was at this time that Bruno Mathsson's furniture came to prominence. Basically, the concepts that Mathsson advanced were closely related to the Swedish crafts tradition and reflected a concern with the development of furniture made of wood which would be practical, relatively inexpensive to manufacture and, of course, esthetically satisfying.

Mathsson, like Alvar Aalto of Finland, was interested in the textural qualities of wood and also in its plastic and structural possibilities. He explored techniques of carving, bending, laminating and finishing it, and experimented with seating surfaces of cloth webbing. His chairs, storage units, beds and other furniture are characterized by elegance and simplicity. Lightweight and carefully adjusted to the human scale, Mathsson's furniture is both informal and classical. Also, it must be considered along with that of other architects and designers such as Aalto, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Saarinen. Mathsson's new work, notably the large table whose top surface is derived from Piet Hein's superellipse, is a logical extension of the designer's earlier ideas. Bruno Mathsson produces his distinctive furniture in the small factory once operated by his father in Värnamo in Sweden's southern province of Småland. Through his pioneer work he remains an inspiration for a new generation of Swedish designers, a generation which has yet to produce a personality of comparable international stature.

**BRUNO MATHSSON:**  
**Furniture**  
**Structures**  
**Ideas**

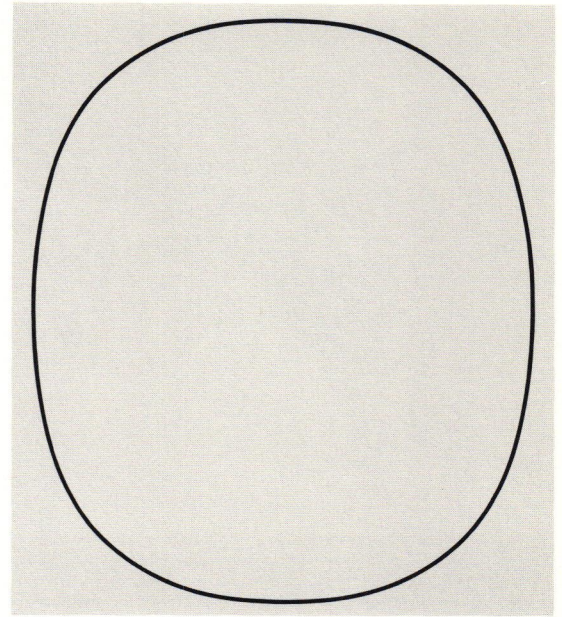
by Carl E. Christiansson

The imaginativeness of Scandinavian design at its best has recently been demonstrated in the unexpected conjunction of a mathematical equation, the form of a traffic intersection and the shape of a table-top. All involve the use of a form called the "superellipse," and the transition from city planning to furniture design required the collaboration of Piet Hein, a Danish mathematician-poet, and Bruno Mathsson, one of Sweden's most distinguished designers.

It began with a city-planning problem that arose in Stockholm in 1959. For some years Stockholm had been planning two new highways running north-south and east-west through the center of the city. Where these two traffic arteries intersect, a large central plaza—Sergels Torg—was planned. The square was to contain a fountain surrounded by an oval pool, and two underground levels with a self-service restaurant and groups of shops.

The question was, what shape should this central plaza take? The area was basically rectangular, but the conventional rectangle seemed too squared-off, too hard. Some sort of oval was required. But the ordinary ellipse would not fill out the rectangular space pleasingly, and its ends had too small a radius of curvature for traffic. The planners likewise rejected the idea of a circle made up of eight circular arcs, like scallops; this, they felt, would give the plaza a disunified and patchy quality.

Whereupon the team of architects working on the project under David Helldén called on Piet Hein, Danish mathematician, artist, poet and essayist. Asking himself what is the simplest, most satisfying curve that falls somewhere between the circle and the rectangle, Piet Hein came up with an answer—the superellipse. As he explains it, "I divined that the ideal solution would be a new type of oval in the same class as the ellipse, but calculated with a slightly higher



The superellipse

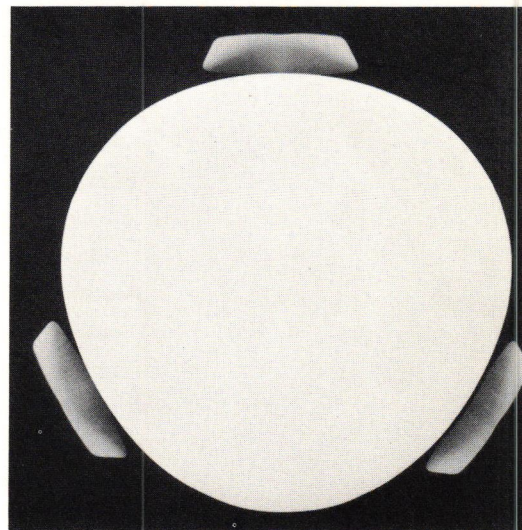
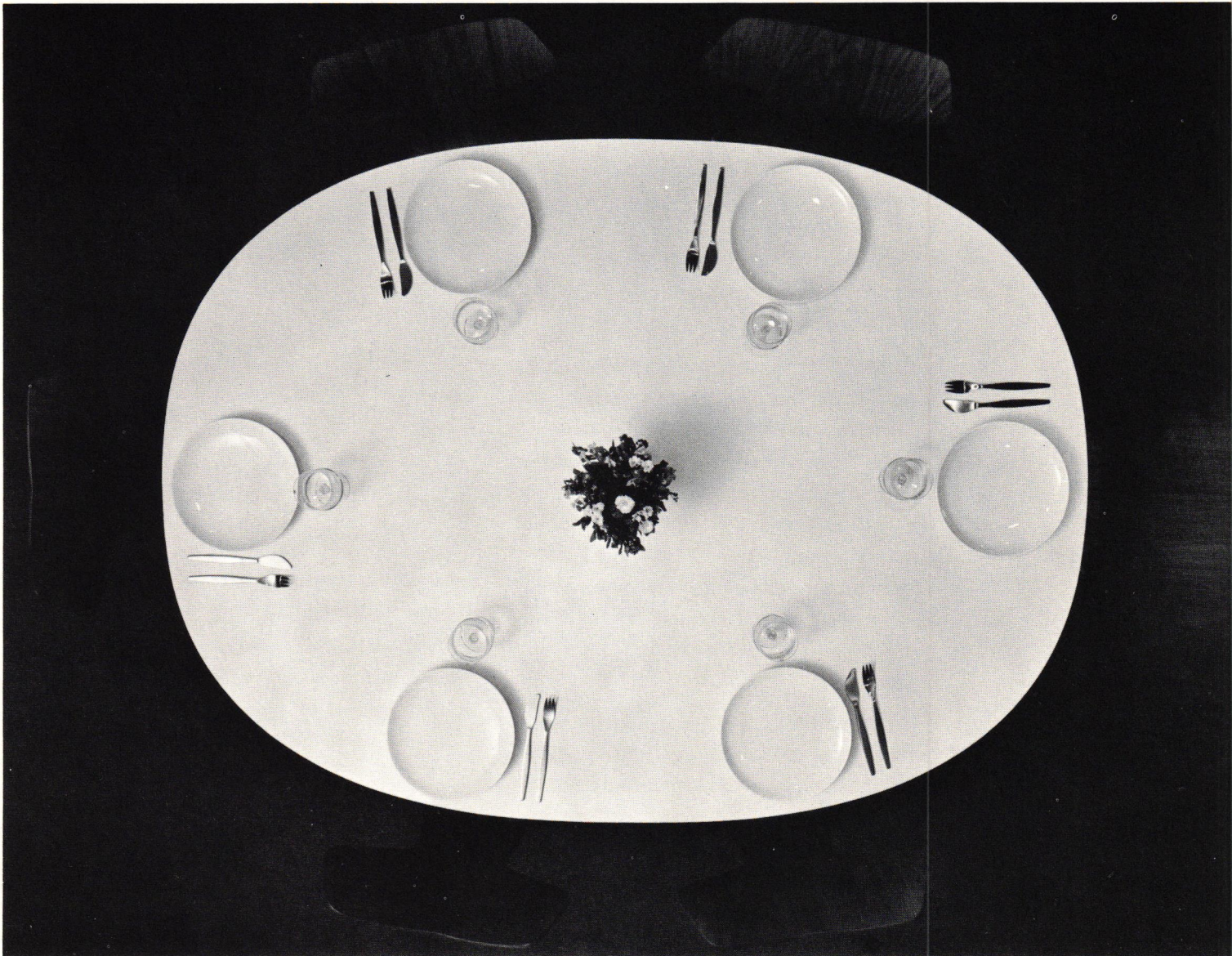
exponent, namely,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  rather than 2, in the equation for an ellipse.”\*

As a result, the oval has flatter sides, becoming more like a rectangle. This mathematically precise superellipse was judged an especially harmonious solution to the problem of Sergels Torg, and this form has also been applied to a huge partly underground structure currently being built beneath the square. When the new Stockholm center is finished—probably in 1967—it will be one of the great Swedish tourist attractions, and will undoubtedly hold special appeal for the mathematicians among the visitors.

What does this have to do with Swedish furniture design? One of the admirers of Piet Hein who was beguiled by the possibility of the superellipse was the Swedish designer Bruno Mathsson. He found the shape of the superellipse not only abstractly pleasing but also practically promising. This intermediary between the rectangle and the oval had the coherence and unity of those traditional forms but was less obvious and banal; it

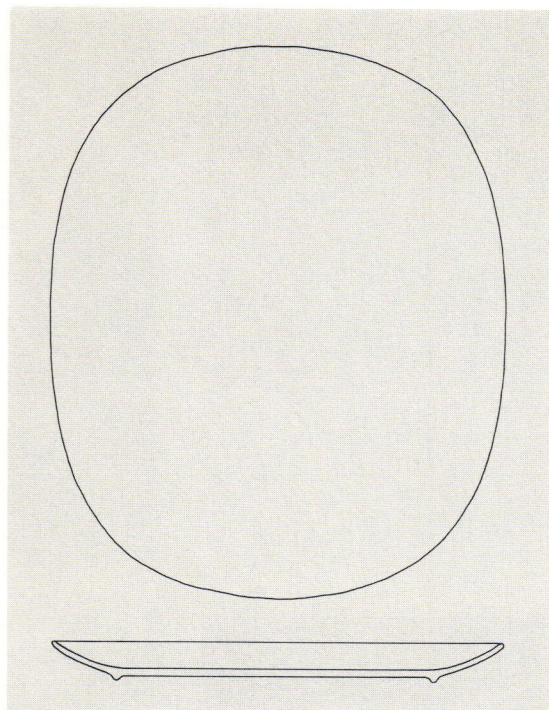
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\*The generic equation is:  $\frac{x^n}{a^n} + \frac{y^n}{b^n} = 1$



Superellipse table (above) and Triellipse table (right)  
with bent plywood chairs designed by Arne Jacobsen

Superelliptic dinner plate

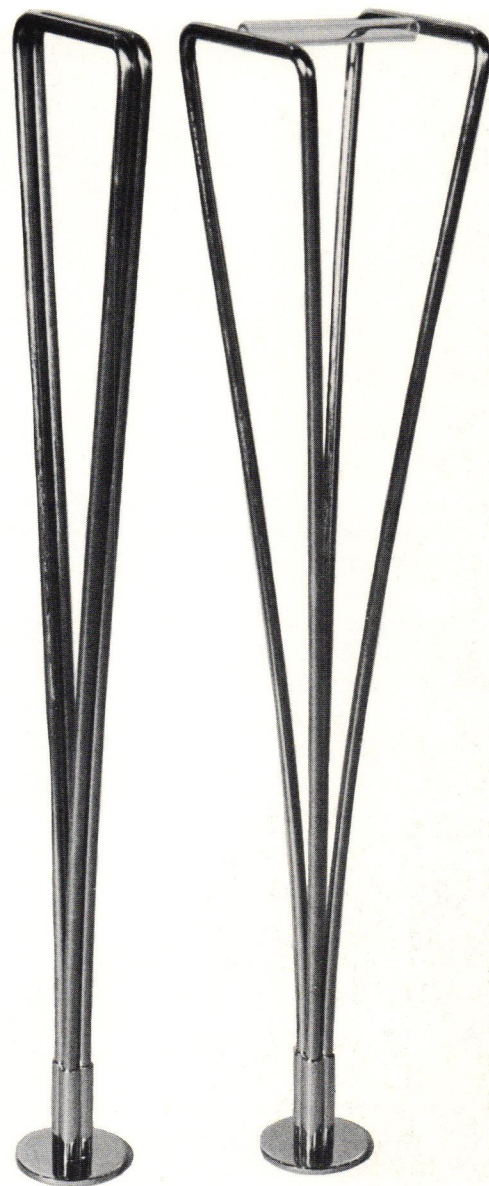


was softer and somehow more "organic." In the form of a desk or table top it would be easy to circumnavigate—for offices have their traffic problems too.

The superellipse is usable not only for tables and desks but also for beds and for tableware of glass, steel and china. Recently, the industries of Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden have turned to Piet Hein for solutions to design problems involving various forms of the superellipse.

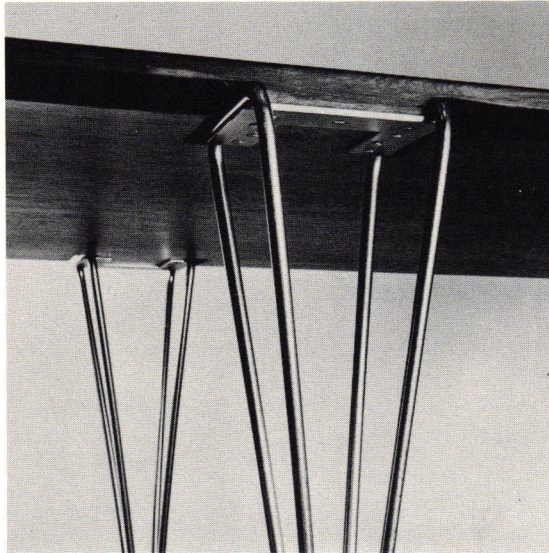
Self-Clamping Leg

To support his new superelliptical table, Mathsson sought a leg that would be solid, yet graceful and direct. Piet Hein had invented a table leg based on a new principle and further collaboration between Mathsson and Hein produced the *self-clamping* table leg. Mathsson spent two years working out the practical and distinctive form: a V-shaped metal leg whose prongs can be readily inserted into grooves in the table or desk top. The *self-clamping* leg is remarkably strong, yet elegantly slim; insertable, as the name implies, without tools; and capable of being anchored to the floor if necessary (as for use on shipboard).

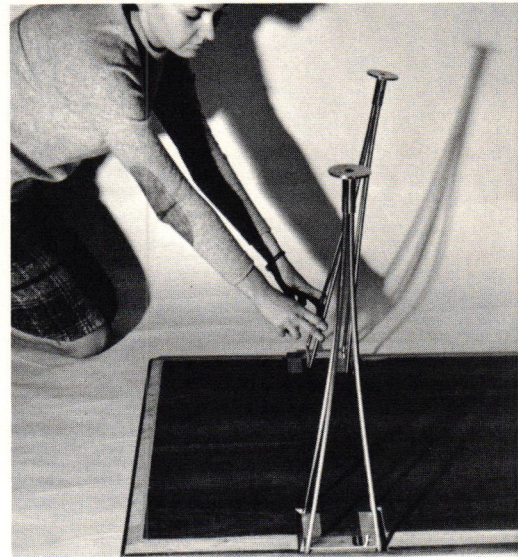


The self-clamping leg (above)

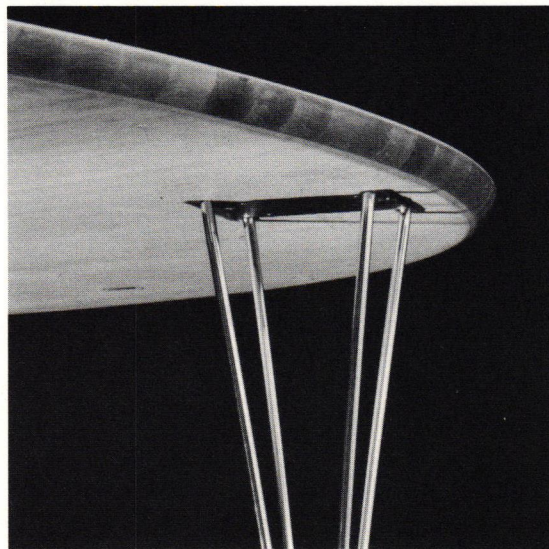
Detail of self-clamping leg (right)



The self-clamping leg is attached in a few seconds (far right)



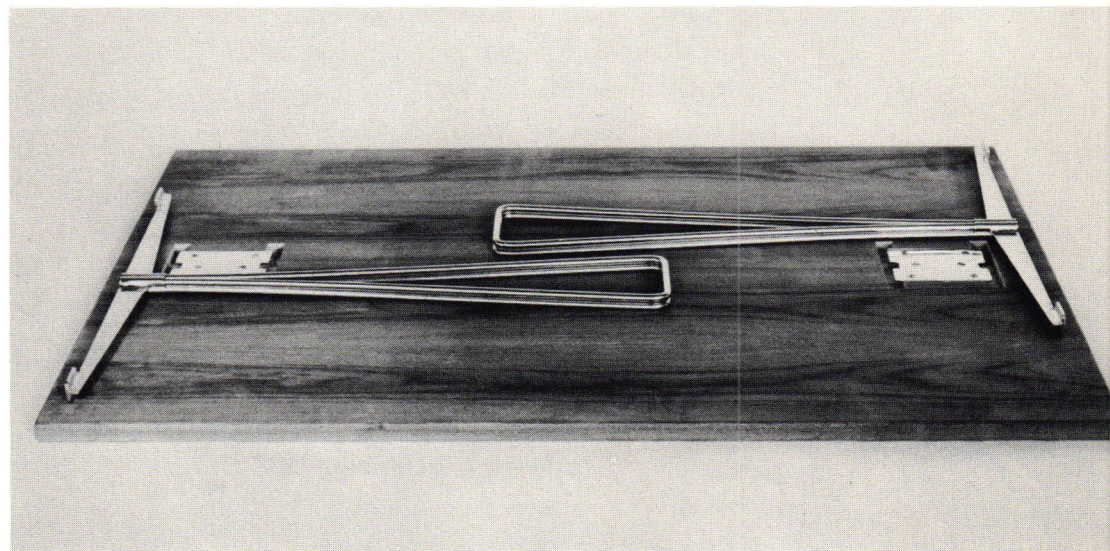
Triellipse table top with mounting plate for self-clamping leg counter sunk in table top (right)

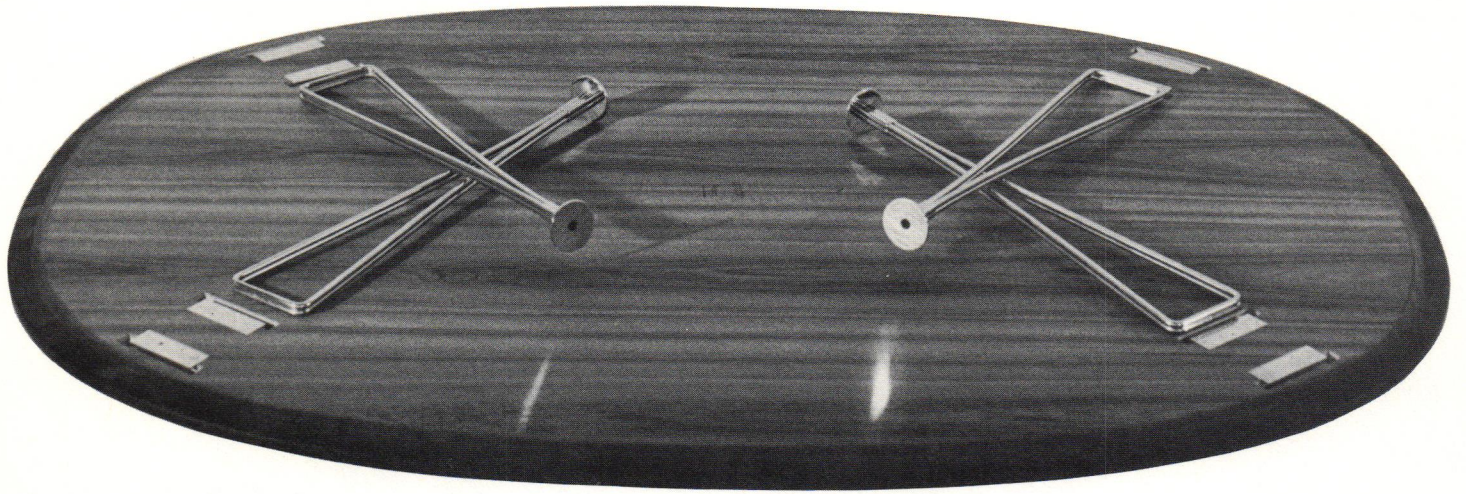


Rectangular dining table using two self-clamping legs with horizontal bases (far right)

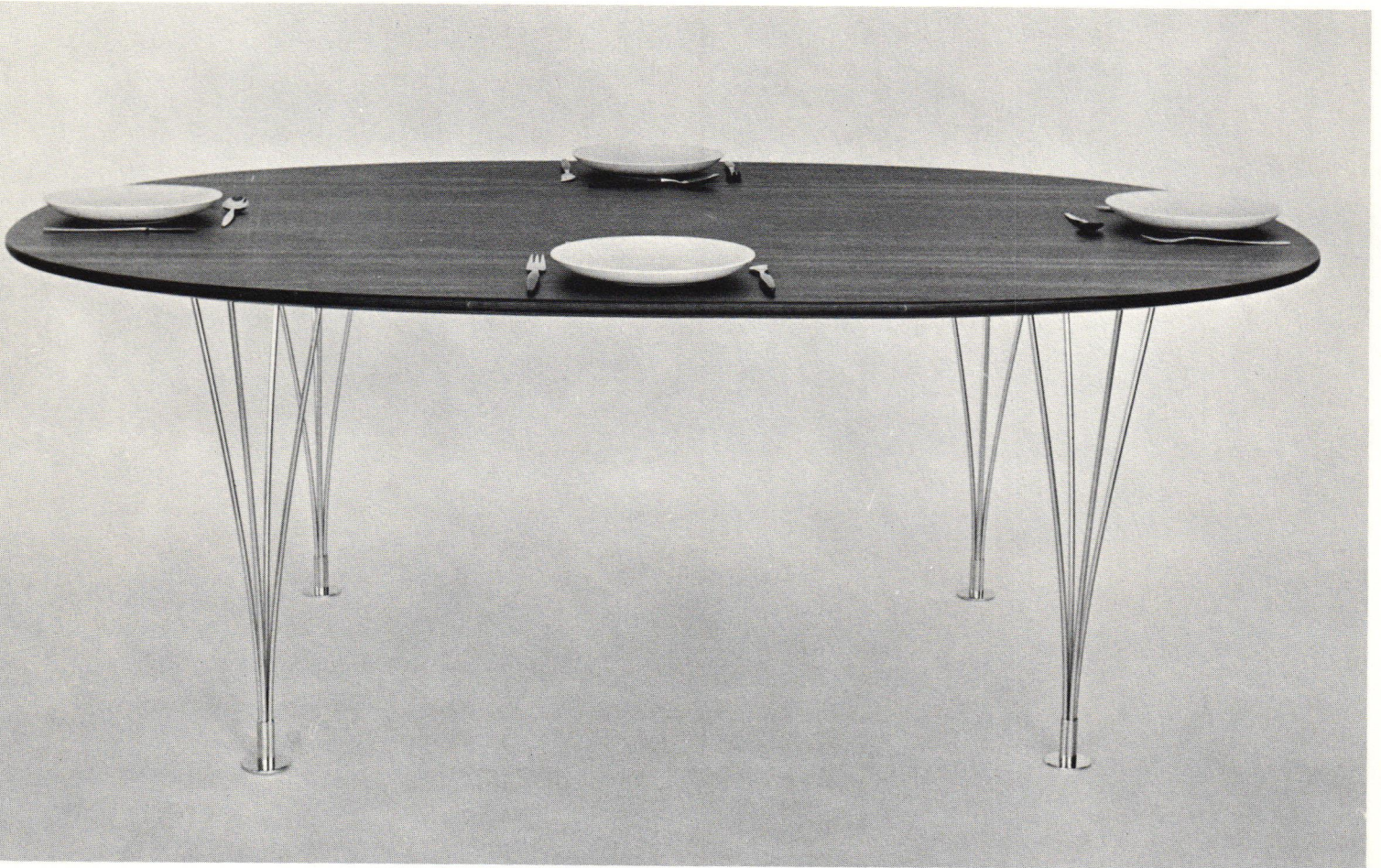


Rectangular table with self-clamping legs folded for storage (right)





The superellipse table with mahogany top and self-clamping legs—2 views





Expandable superellipse table: the two halves are held together by one self-clamping leg clipped on each side of the joint. To further expand the table's length, an additional rectangular top may be clipped between the two halves of this table top.

## Mathsson's Early Furniture Design

This inventiveness and this readiness to explore new solutions has characterized the work of Bruno Mathsson since its beginning, thirty years ago. Probably the outstanding figure in modern Swedish design, Mathsson has always gone his own way, regardless of the winds prevailing in the Scandinavian design world.

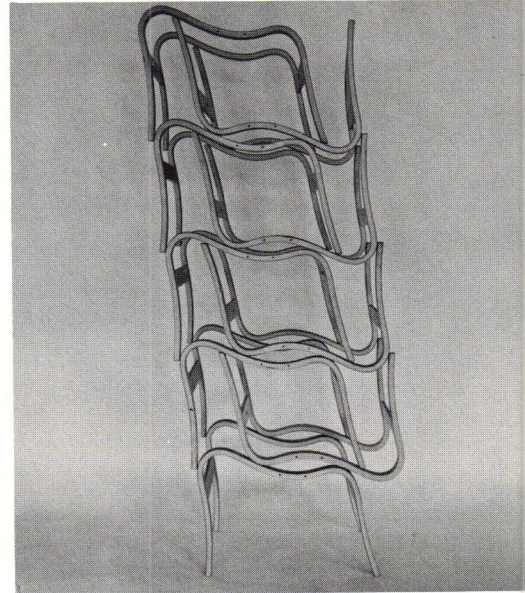
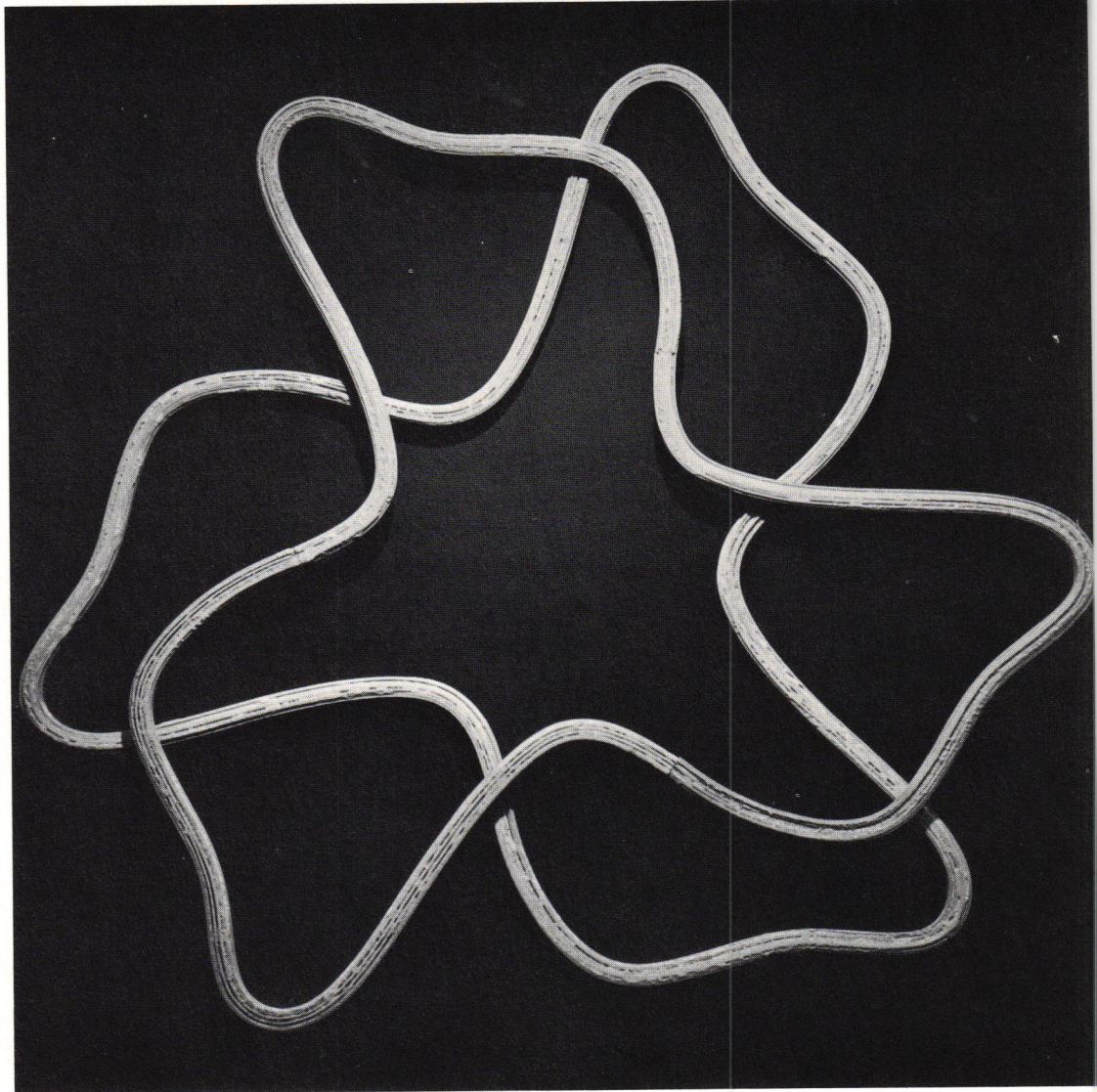
Mathsson is truly a product of his native Småland, that province in southern Sweden that has come to be noted for its energetic and industrious people. The descendant of four generations of cabinetmakers from the town of Värnamo, Mathsson began his apprenticeship in the family workshop at the age of 16. From his early years he was dedicated to functionalist principles in furniture design. But it was the functionalism of Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier that attracted him, rather than the more cubistic Swedish design of the sort exhibited at the 1930 Stockholm Fair.

Mathsson has from the beginning believed in the importance of the well-made individual piece of furniture. This belief accorded well with what was happening in the Swedish furniture market at the end of the 1920s. The trend was toward smaller houses and apartments, and families were beginning to buy furniture by the individual piece rather than by the assembled "suite."

In constructing these individual pieces, Mathsson forsook the traditional furniture design that had characterized his own family's work for decades. He felt that the traditional design had already reached its apogee in the works of traditional cabinetmakers. What was needed, he believed, was a completely new approach to furniture design. For example, Mathsson was convinced that the usual chair required that the sitter become adept at the act of sitting. He felt on the contrary that emphasis should be placed on the designing of the chair, so



air (1932). Original (above right);  
air below is a variation produced  
1965.



Laminated bent plywood components of Bruno Mathsson chairs



orking chair with black jute  
bbling



orking chair with natural ox hide



orking chair with fabric upholstery

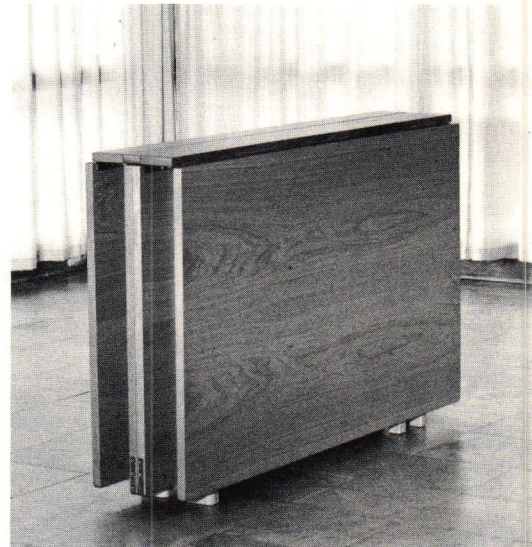
that sitting would become effortless and comfortable. Research on the physiology of postural adjustments led him to conclude that the ideal material for his chairs would be a malleable substance such as laminated bentwood. Mathsson strove to make his wooden chairs follow the gently curving form of a tree growing in nature. At the same time he did away with traditional upholstery materials in favor of a webbing woven of saddle girth which was less expensive and gave precisely the support for the back that was dictated by the curvature of the wooden frame.

In autumn 1934 the director of the Röhsska Art and Crafts Museum in Gothenburg invited Mathsson to exhibit his work at the museum whenever he felt ready. Typically modest and perfectionistic, Mathsson waited nearly two years before agreeing to exhibit. This kind of painstaking study and craftsmanship, which underlies every detail of his work, helps explain why his furniture lives among us so timelessly. Mathsson continues to insist that a chair is not ready to be exhibited or used until it can be turned upside down without hesitation: the superb workmanship reveals itself everywhere.

The 1936 exhibition represented Mathsson's first showing of the easy chairs, tables and side chairs that still belong to his standard collection. The show was immensely successful, but his furniture at that time was too daring to be accepted enthusiastically by a cautious Swedish furniture-manufacturing industry. The young Mathsson, impatient with the industry, decided to produce the furniture himself in his family workshop. Such home production meant he could make only a few pieces at a time. In order to keep his furniture from being prohibitively expensive, he decided to sell directly on order to customers, thus avoiding the costs necessitated by maintaining large inventories and dealing with middle men. To this day his furniture is



Folding expansion table (1935) oak top, birch legs

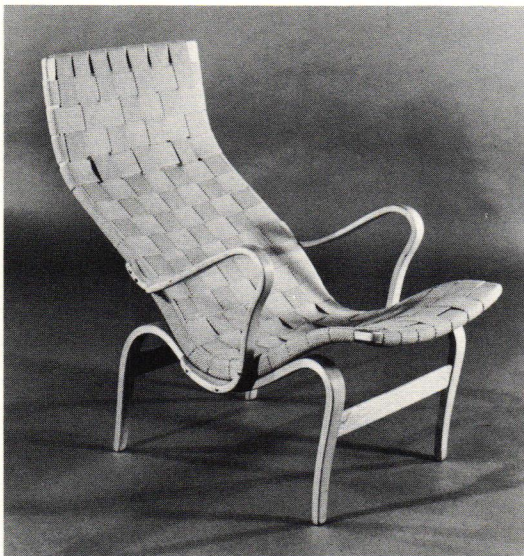


Expansion table folded for storage

one of Mathsson's first models  
with jute webbing



armchair (1940). Laminated bent  
birch plywood frame; fiber web-  
bing. (Collection Museum of Modern  
Art, N. Y.)



armchair (1940). Laminated bent  
birch plywood frame; black canvas  
webbing with white lambskin slip-  
cover. (Collection Museum of Mod-  
ern Art, N. Y.)

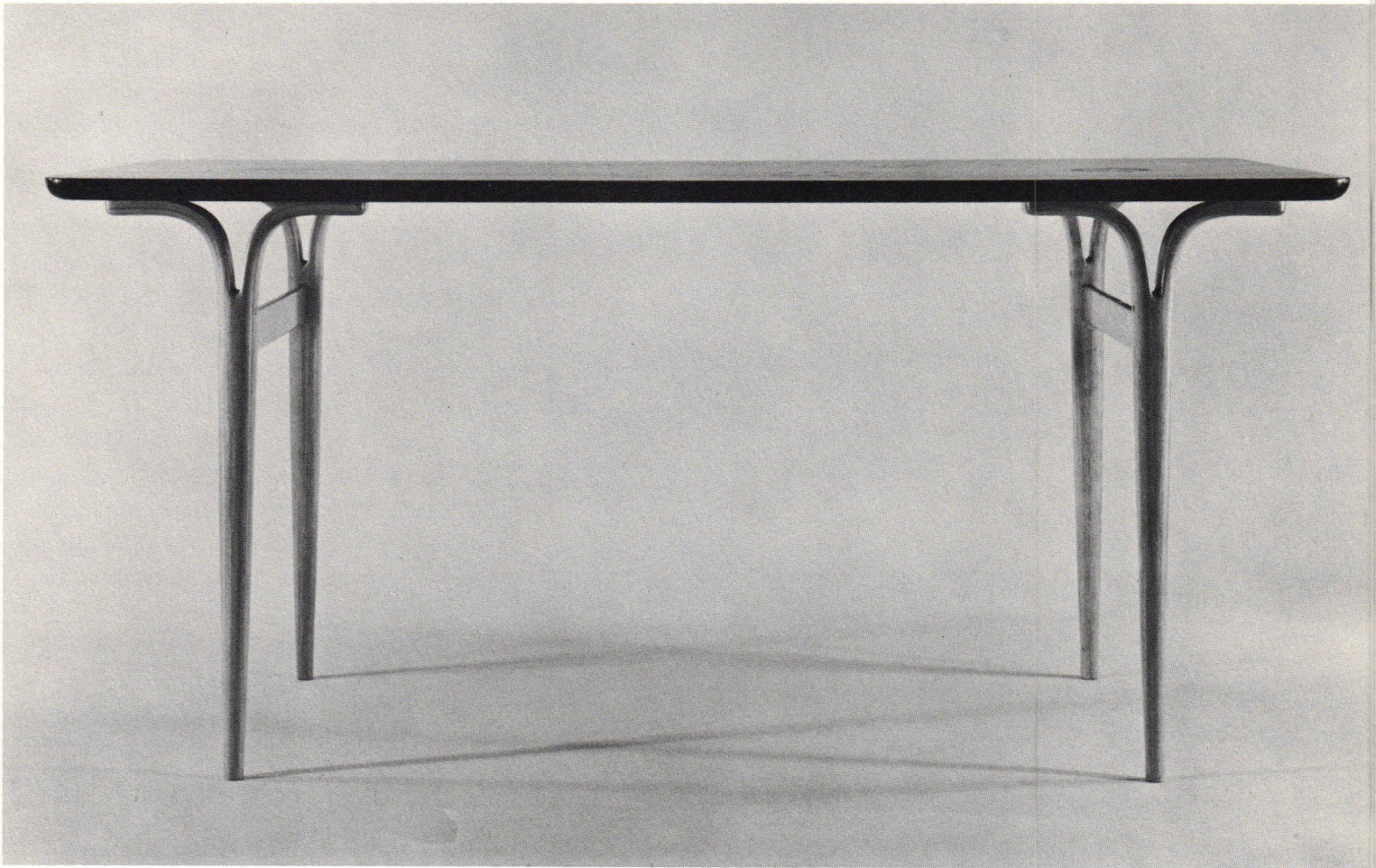


custom-made, and each piece is signed by Mathsson himself.

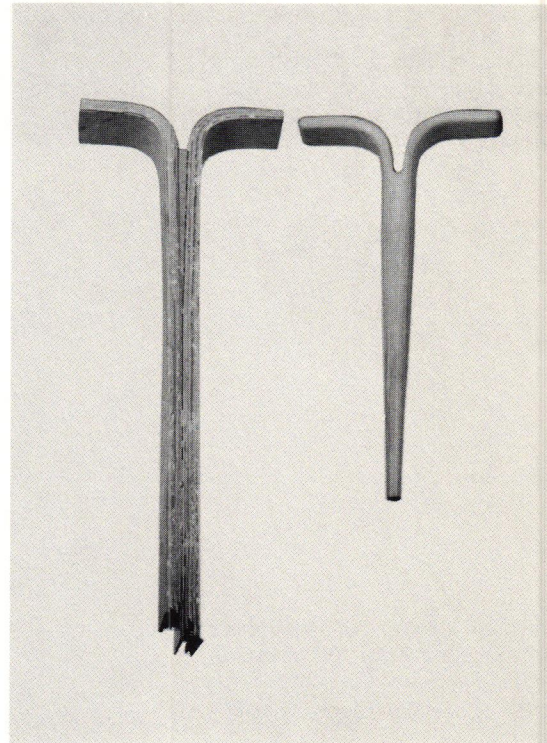
After the Gothenburg exhibition, Mathsson participated frequently in exhibitions both in Sweden and abroad. During the next few years he became one of the better-known representatives of that light, unaffected style which became known as "Swedish Modern." In 1939 the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired 20 of Mathsson's bentwood chairs, which shared the stage with Marcel Breuer's and Alvar Aalto's creations. After a visit to the museum, the famous Swedish art critic, Gotthard Johansson, said: "*One Swedish furniture designer, Bruno Mathsson, is internationally known. . . . He is beyond doubt one of the strangest people working in the Swedish arts and crafts industry. He has designed only a limited number of models, but these have been worked out so thoroughly. . . . that they can almost be called 'inventions.'* The Bruno Mathsson chairs are in the same international class as the tubular steel chairs of Marcel Breuer and the plywood ones of Alvar Aalto. When I saw them last summer, I felt, for the first time in my life, a secret pride in having been born only 15 miles from Värnamo."

With the coming of the war, Sweden was cut off from the profitable international market. As a result, Mathsson concentrated on developing home consumption and on steadily improving his models. He has always been interested in consistent quality, rather than quantity. He continued to make refinements on the original bentwood frames and introduced, in addition to the woven leather coverings, a variety of soft sheepskins as well as colored webbing of jute and hemp; the austerity of the Swedish birch frame thus often contrasts with the luxurious coverings.

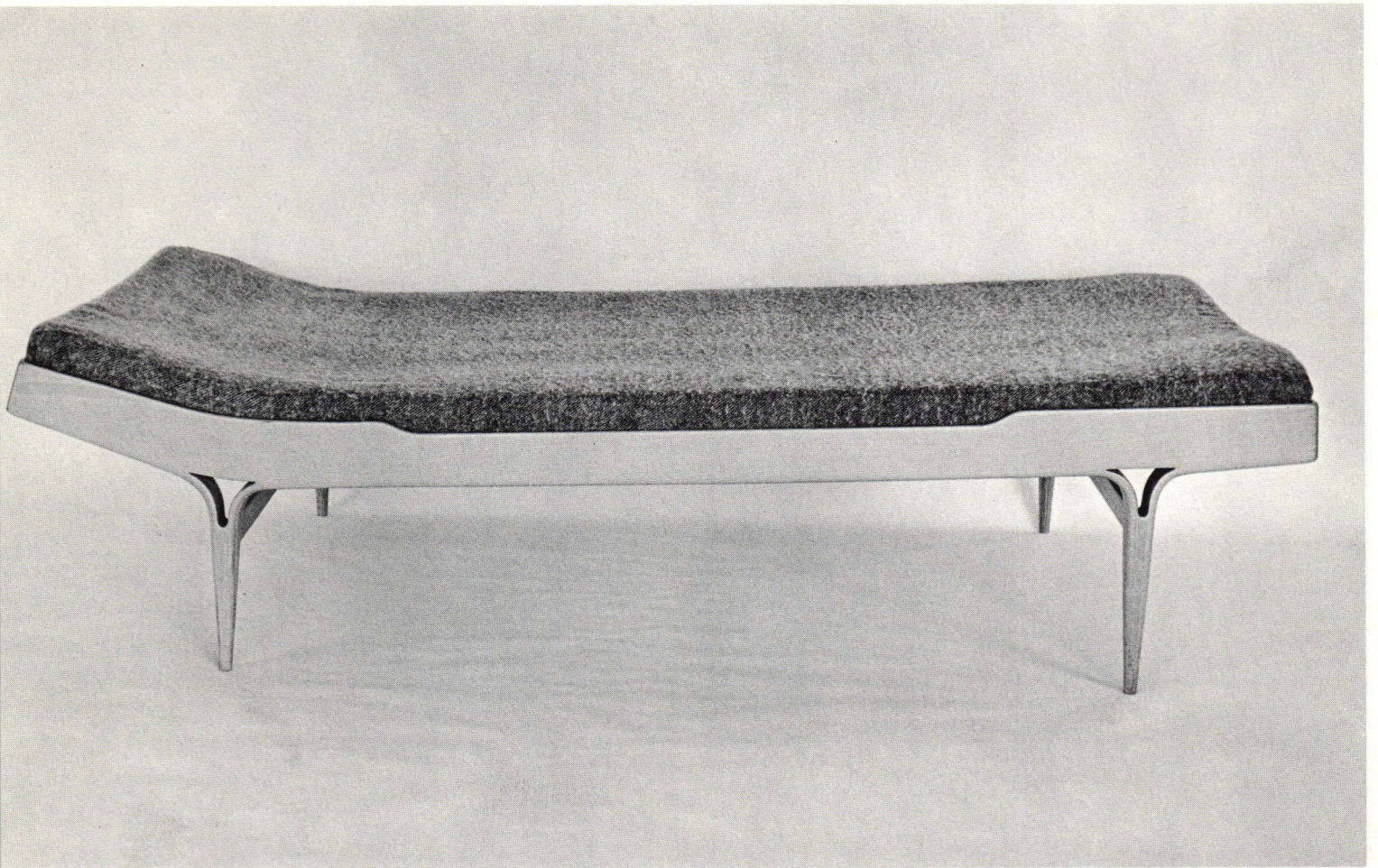
Mathsson himself has noted, "The business of sitting never ceases to fascinate me." (As a result, he designed a cinema seat in which the film-goer can remain seated while allow-



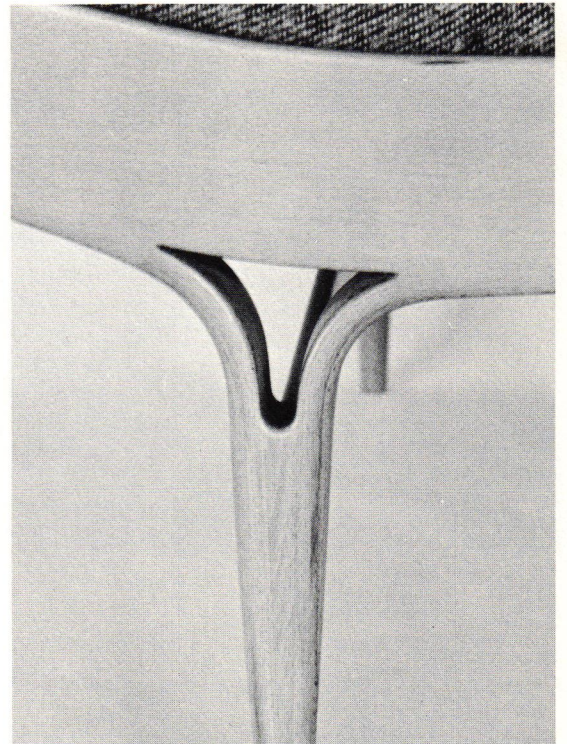
Dining Table (1953). Teak veneer top, legs of multiple layers of laminated beech. Collection Museum of Modern Art, N. Y.



Beechwood legs: during laminating process and finished



"Berlin 60" beechwood bed with foam rubber mattress. (First sketch made in 1949, subsequently produced for Interbau Exhibition, Berlin, 1957)





Armchair (1940) with head rest; black jute girth webbing (top)

"Pernilla" upholstered easy chair with ottoman (bottom)

"Pernilla 2" easy chair; natural ox hide (top)

"Pernilla" easy chair (1943-44); black ox hide webbing (bottom)

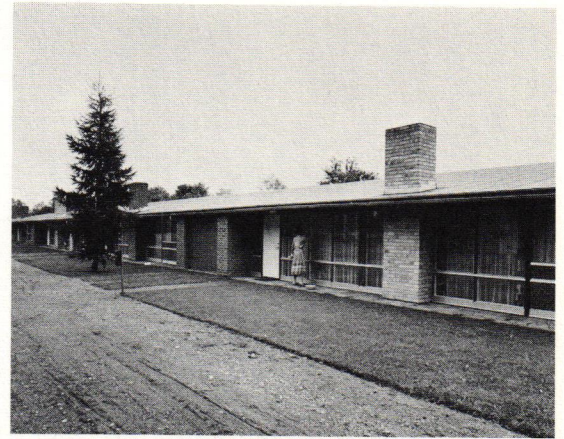
ing a latecomer to pass him, as well as lightweight office stools with typing desks at knee height.) His work chairs and easy chairs began to appear with simple sculptural arm-rests suggesting Jean Arp's "concrete art." Along with these chairs, he designed serving carts, reading tables, sectional bookshelves, sofas and table tops.

**Mathsson's Architecture**

As part of his effort to increase the comfort and attractiveness of man's surroundings, Mathsson easily turned in the mid-1940s to the study and design of houses. At that time modern Swedish houses were heavily built to withstand the frequent and severe temperature changes so characteristic of the Swedish climate: they were well insulated, with excavated basement and thick walls containing rather small windows. In short, they were houses notably lacking in spaciousness and light.

Having visited the United States just before the war, Mathsson had returned to Sweden full of enthusiasm for American houses using large glass areas in floor to ceiling window walls. He felt that such a house was feasible in Sweden, despite the severe climate, if the house were well constructed. Put the house on a concrete platform laid directly on the ground, he advised. Use a supporting frame construction that will permit the walls to be glassed from floor to roof with insulating glass. Encase electrical wires directly in the concrete platform to get around the need for central heating by means of radiators. Eliminate heat losses through the window walls by making better use of the sun's heat with a fixed, triple-glazed window.

Mathsson experimented liberally and came up with a house design that was both beautiful and practical. Unfortunately, a tradition-bound housing industry was unreceptive to the "glass house." Contractors did not like the idea of building directly on the ground, nor was the idea of hermetically sealed

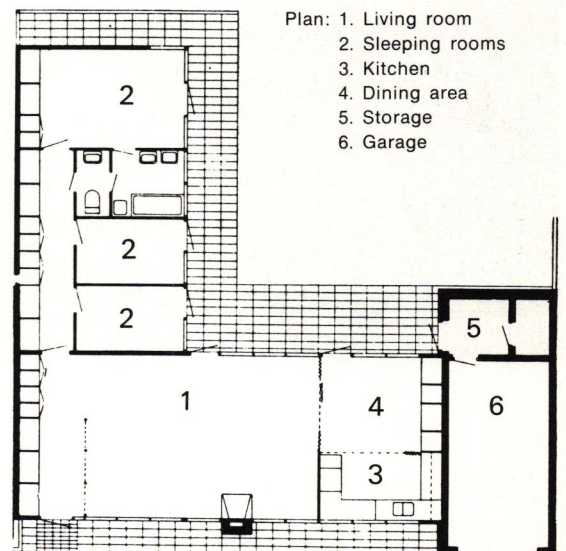


Row Houses, Kosta, Sweden

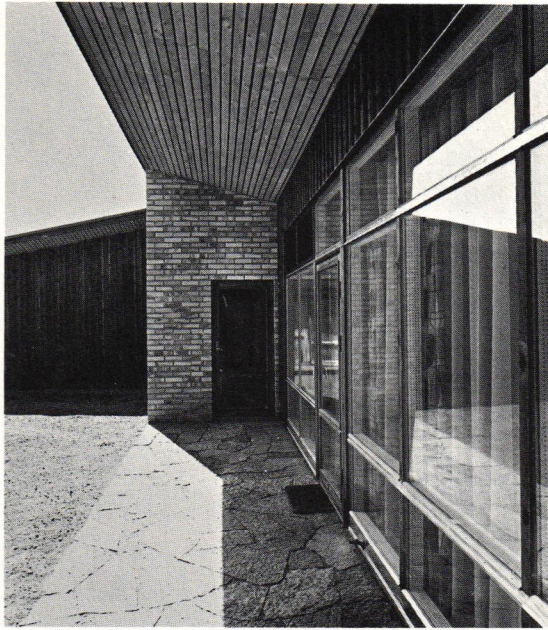
These row houses were built by the famous Kosta glass works for their employees. The size of each house is 1160 square feet.

The outer walls are prefabricated glass elements of Mathsson's own "Bruno Pane" glass walls, hermetically sealed 3-glass windows with wooden frames.

The floor and part of the outer walls are covered with glass mosaic tiles manufactured by the Kosta glass works. Heating is in the floor.







ow houses, Kosta: two views from  
arden (opposite page and right)

double- and triple-glazed windows well received in a country where people took for granted the conventional window that could be opened and closed at will.

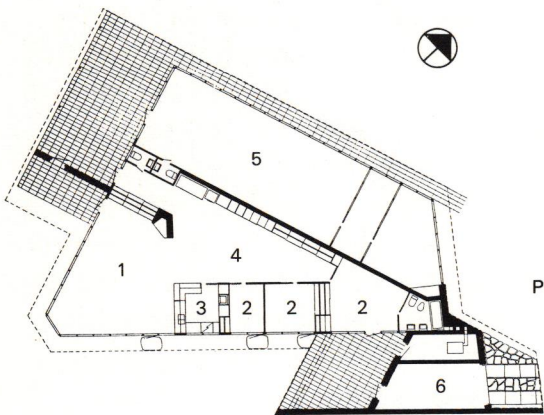
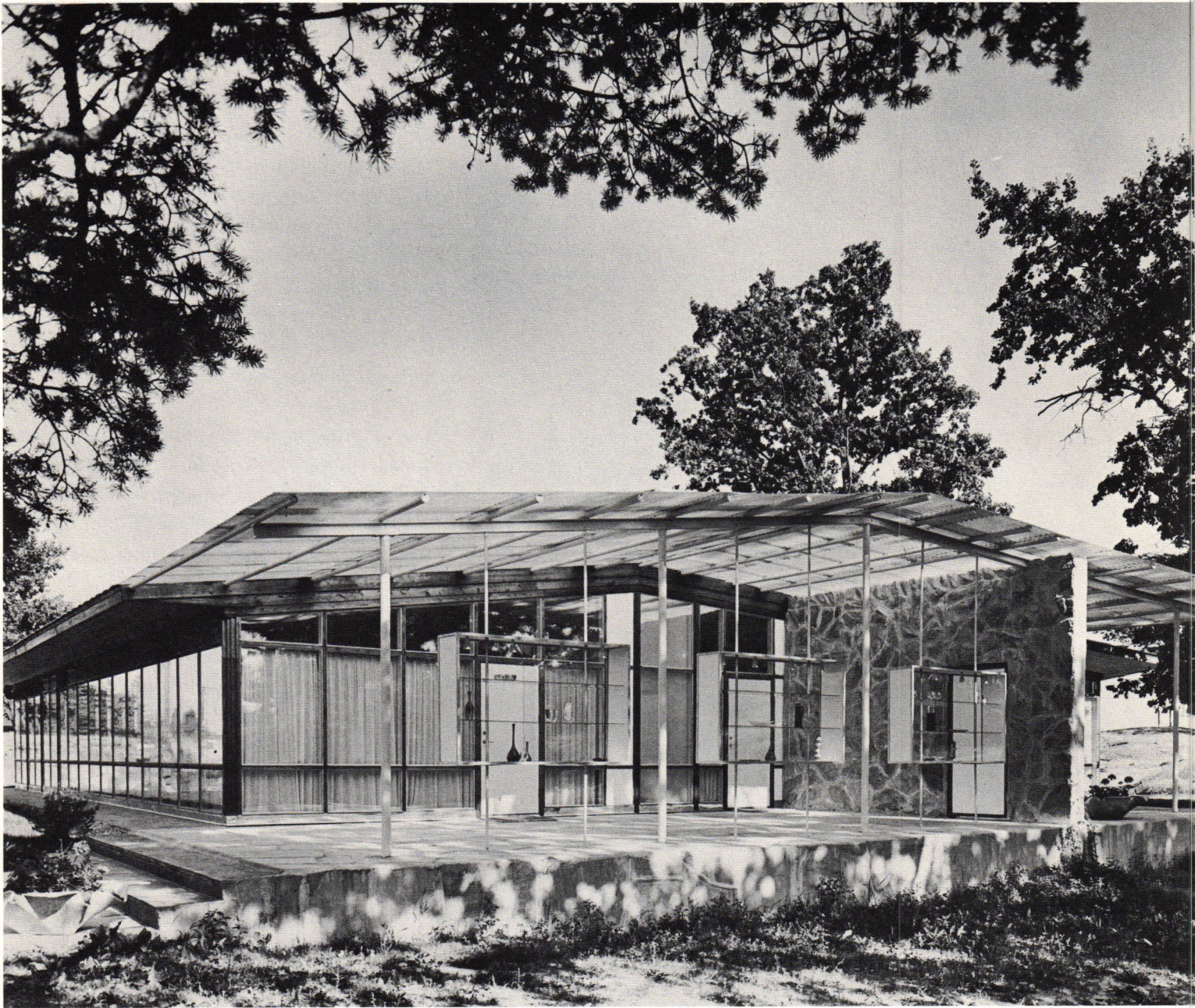
Although he could not get industrial support, Mathsson continued to experiment with large areas of glass in residential architecture, financing this work with the proceeds of his furniture-manufacturing. In 1947, he was given permission to build the first of these projects—21 row houses constructed in his home town of Värnamo. The architect-designer received further confirmation of the viability of the “glass house” in Sweden after spending the winter of 1948-49 in the United States. He found that in the northern and eastern United States, where the climate is most like Sweden’s, houses with floor to roof window walls withstood the winter cold.

This visit to the United States also gave Mathsson the opportunity to meet a number of this country’s best architects, and his discussions with them confirmed his faith in methods of construction that had not yet been used in Sweden.

During the next ten years, Mathsson built about one hundred structures incorporating large areas of glass—villas, row houses, and school buildings, as well as his own permanent exhibition hall and factory in Värnamo. The reception was more than chilly; it was actually hostile. A new ruling on the maximum size of houses soon made Mathsson’s “glass structures” unbuildable. They were just slightly larger than the prescribed limits, but to reduce the dimensions would have violated their essential feeling of spaciousness and light. “My house,” Mathsson said in retrospect, “was too modern by half and it was so cheap to build that all other builders would have been left high and dry economically. So after ten years I stopped building houses and just about broke even. But I learned a great deal in those years.”

terior view





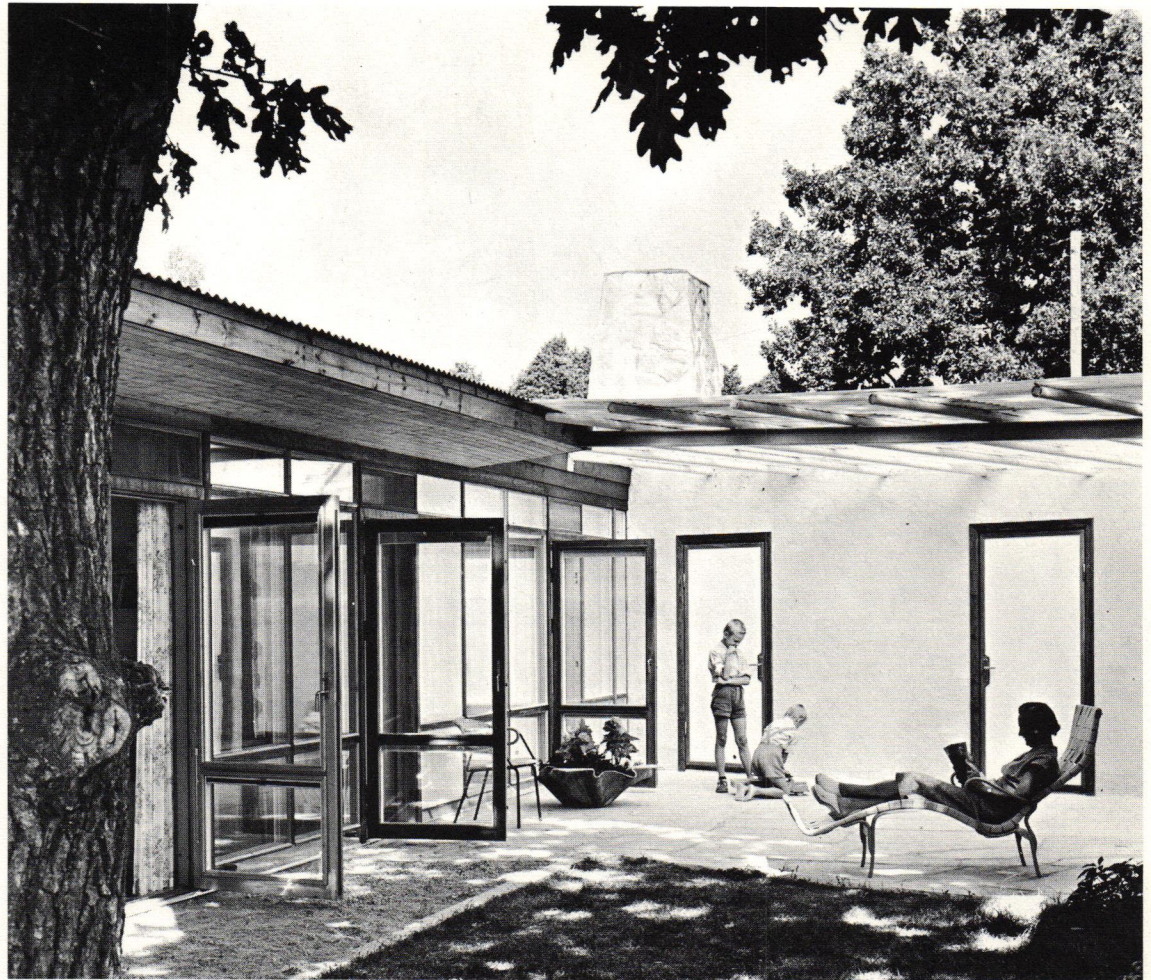
- Plan: 1. Living room with dining area  
 2. Sleeping rooms  
 3. Kitchen  
 4. Area for hobby activities  
 5. Exhibition hall  
 6. Garage

Prenker residence, Kungsor, Sweden.

The plan was determined by the narrow site, and the inclusion of an exhibition hall for the display of office furniture.

The walls are constructed with Mathsson's "Brun Pane" prefabricated glass elements. The building is constructed on a concrete platform directly on the ground. The floor is covered with Swedish glass mosaic tiles and the heating is in the floor. The sound absorbing panels in the ceiling inside the house are of natural pine.

terior, with exhibition hall at left  
posite page)



terior views of Prenker residence  
ht and below left)

Interior view



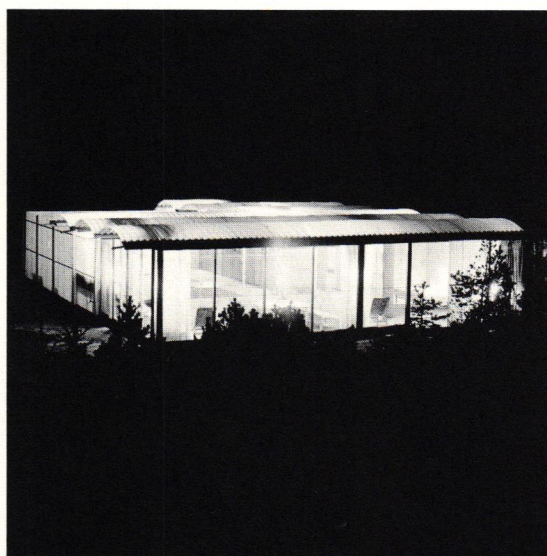
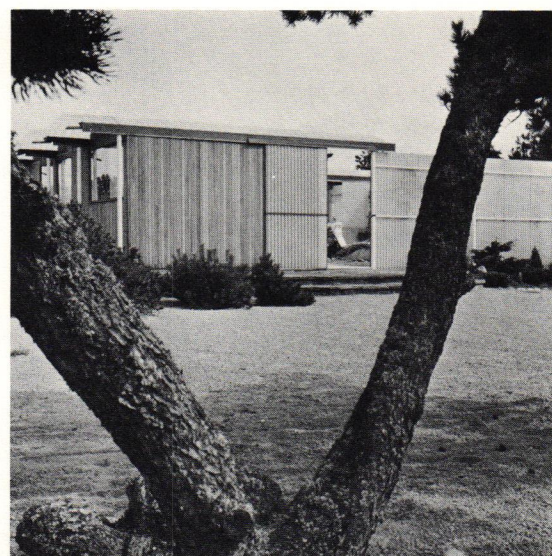


Mathsson summer house: view of living room with furniture by Bruno Mathsson

terior view showing arched roof of acrylic plastic. Interior ceiling of diagonal wood lathing (right)



terior view showing sliding doors of corrugated fiber glass, Brazilian style exterior wall (far right)



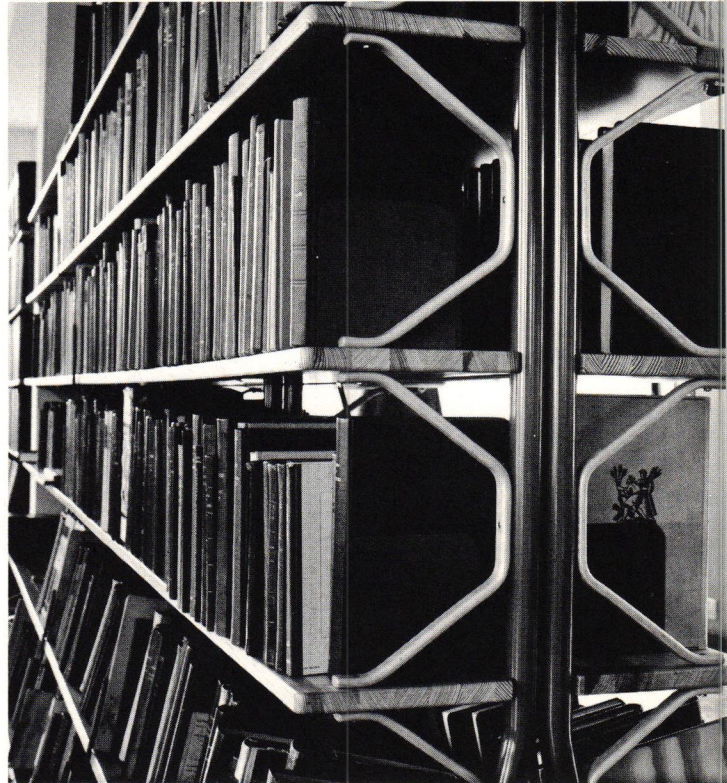
Mathsson summer house at night



View from patio showing movable kitchen appliances

The best of what Mathsson learned while working on these "glass structures" is distilled in the summer house he built for himself and his wife, a few hundred yards from the beach, outside the town of Halmstad on Sweden's west coast. Constructed over sand dunes and tucked into a forest of dwarf pines, it is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable buildings in modern Sweden: the concrete slab forms the foundation, as in the other "glass houses," and the interior floor is made of white marble. The two side walls are of glass in order to make maximum use of the brightness of the Swedish summer sun. The roof, made of canopies of corrugated acrylic plastic, and the glass walls retain the long light of the evenings and make the house glitter like a Japanese lantern when it is lighted at night.

The house has no kitchen: you sit on the sofa at the table and pull up a stove to your side; the refrigerator is in the living room, and the sink of this unconventional summer house is in the yard, "where you can splash about and wash too," as Mathsson points out delightedly. Because he believes in alternating periods of hard work and recreation, Mathsson finds it extremely important that his vacation home be a place of comfort and peace.



Municipal Library, Värnamo, Sweden; interior designed by Bruno Mathsson

Reading room with Mathsson furniture; lamp over table by Paul Henningsen (top). Interior with working chairs and shelf units (bottom)

Detail of book storage unit: grey lacquered tubular steel with natural pine shelves (top)

Collapsible writing tables used with "working chairs" (bottom)

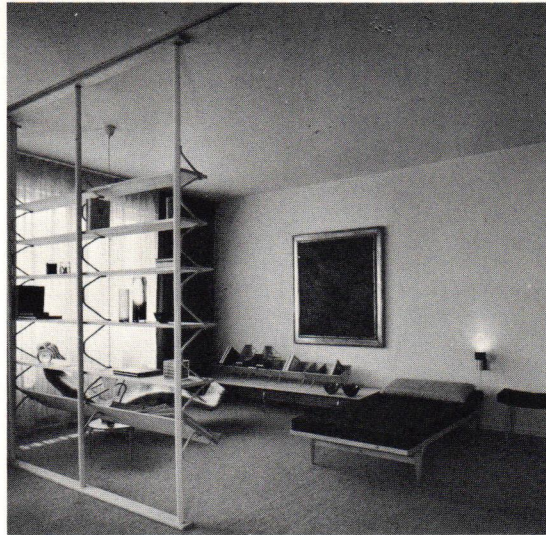


Views of the Mathsson exhibition at the Swedish Design Center, Stockholm

During the past thirty years, international interest in Mathsson's furniture and the demand for it have steadily increased. Because he designs, manufactures and distributes all his own furniture, it has an immediately perceptible unity and integrity about it. Lena Larsson, the noted Swedish interior designer, calls him a "furniture visionary," and says he has helped reconstitute not only the physical furnishings but also, in a sense, the "mental furniture" of our lives. He has done this by devoting his talents to enhancing the total setting in which this furniture is placed and by insisting on the importance of individuality in the design and production of all his pieces.

His most famous work in design can be seen in the Småland Art Archive in Värnamo, housed in the large Swed-Expo exhibition hall. Here one can see, for example, his latest contribution to chair design—the "jetson" chair. With this new tubular steel chair he has come as close as anyone to tailoring the easy chair to the sitter. The chair has a fabric sling glued directly to the steel frame, and the freehanging cloth permits it to conform to the body of the person sitting in it. Because a chair designed on these principles and with these materials is easy and inexpensive to manufacture, it could have great usefulness in trains, long-distance buses, and airplanes—wherever people must sit for long hours at a stretch.

Today, as at the outset, Bruno Mathsson is searching, exploring, moving on. When the Röhsska Arts and Crafts Museum in Gothenburg initiated plans for the celebration of their fiftieth anniversary this fall, Bruno Mathsson was naturally invited for a retrospective exhibition. The conclusion will be inescapable to the viewers: during the thirty years of hard and thoughtful work that have passed since his debut there, Mathsson has come to represent the best in *Swedish Modern*. The Italian writer, Leopardi, once said:



Mathsson furniture shown at the Interbau Exhibition, Berlin, 1957



The Småland Art Archive, Värnamo; interior design by Bruno Mathsson (above and bottom)





the "Jetson II" chair



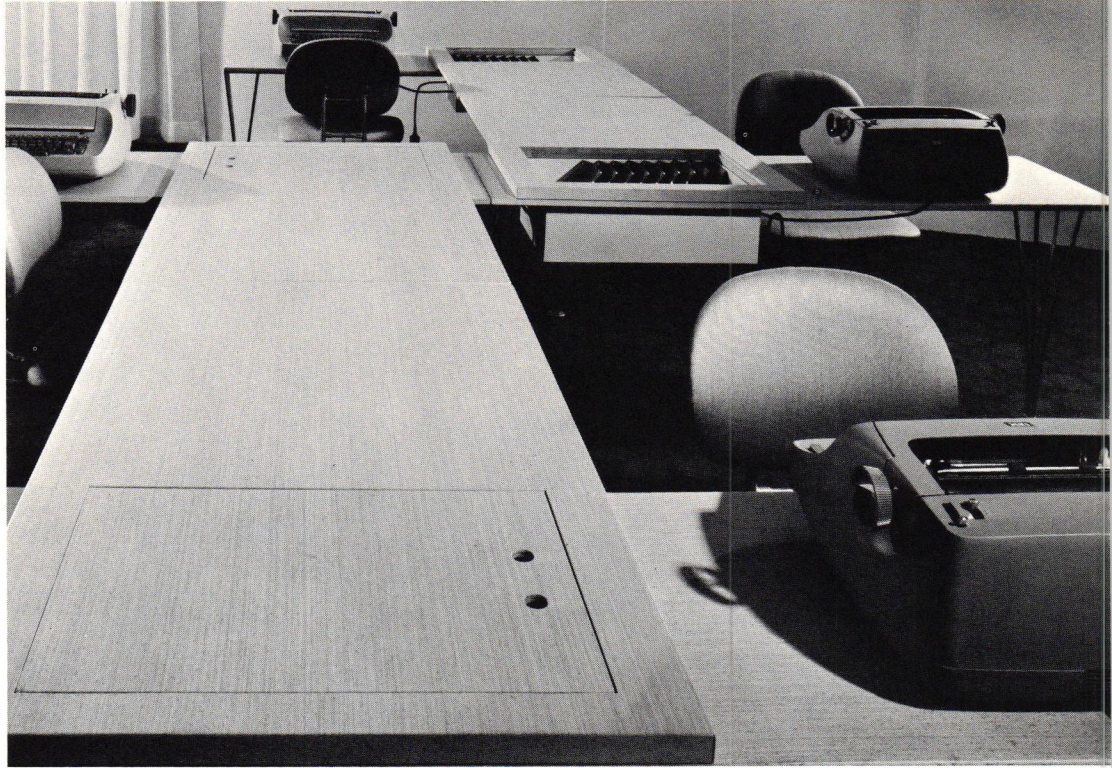
prototype for the "Jetson" chair.  
Fabric is glued to the steel frame.  
A foam rubber cushion (right)

*"He who has no strength to slay reality has no strength to create it."* Bruno Mathsson has this strength.

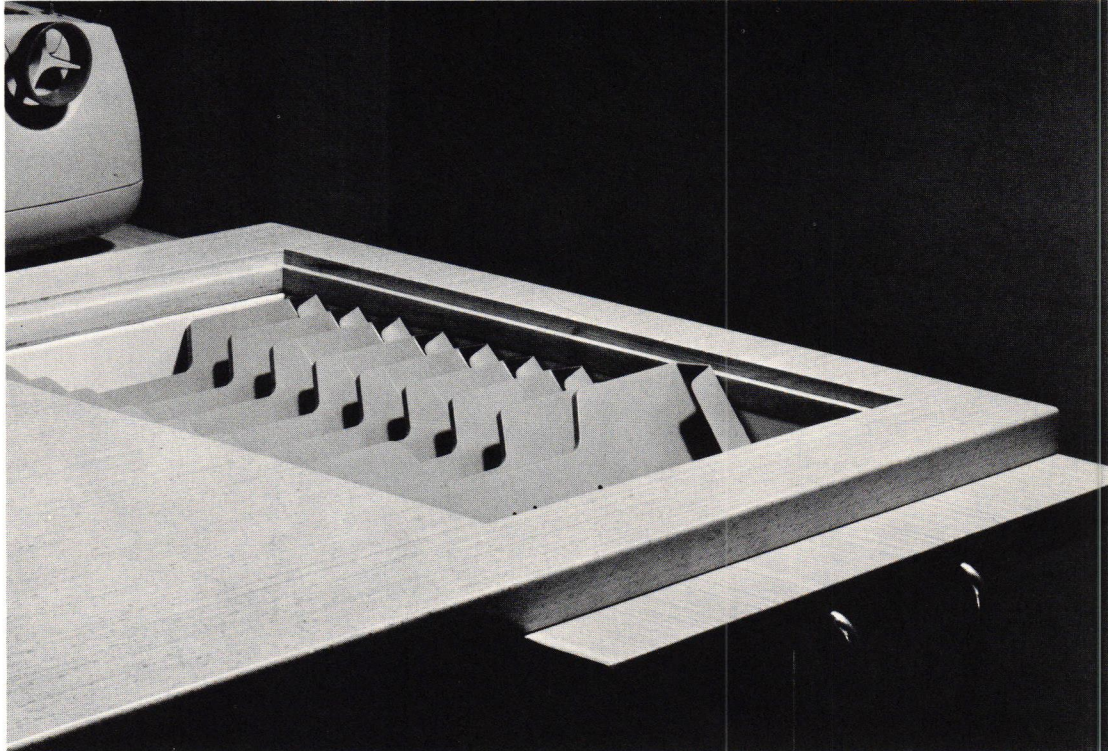
Having seen the work of Bruno Mathsson, one must not conclude that this is typical of Sweden. Like any creative enterprise that exists in an institutional context, Swedish furniture design has felt and still continues to feel the strangling hand of tradition and custom. As we have seen, the domestic reception of Mathsson's first bentwood chairs was less than enthusiastic—so much so that he was forced to manufacture them himself. Furthermore, despite his demonstrations of the viability of the "glass house," the Swedish building industry and the public failed to respond. Similarly, one could catalogue the difficulties encountered by Mathsson in producing superelliptical furniture with Piet Hein's self-clamping legs, requiring Mathsson to establish a special company to produce and sell this furniture in Sweden.

It must strike the observer as puzzling that such a design-conscious society as Sweden's, where for more than fifty years people have been educated to the need for beautiful as well as functional everyday objects, should be so inhospitable to novelty. This slackening of the pioneering spirit in Swedish design can be explained partly in terms of affluence. Paradoxically, a high standard of living appears to breed an increased search for more, but not necessarily better or more distinctive, material things. Living units are built more rapidly and on a larger scale, whether they be houses, schools, universities or hospitals. But to build big units rapidly requires pre-fabrication and standardization which are both factors that influence and limit design.

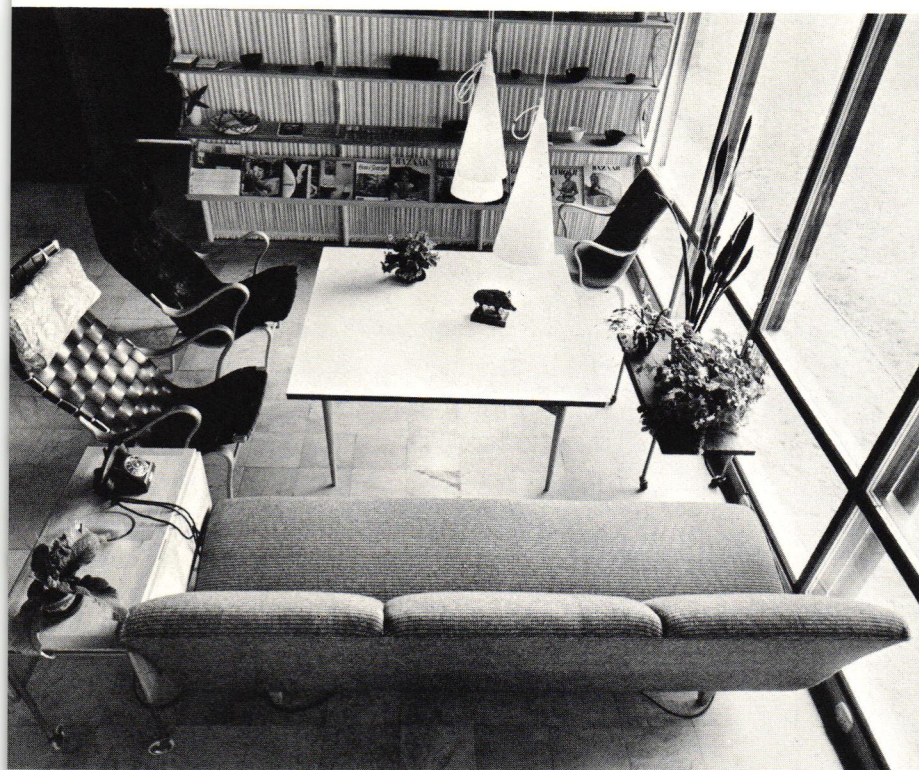
The same can be said of much industrial design, in which the big offices with established "names" receive most of the commissions. Quality does not often suffer—Swedes are too quality-conscious to allow that—but imagination does. Office and home furniture



Office furniture with self-clamping leg



Detail (right)



permanent exhibition hall for the  
of Karl Mathsson, Värnamo,  
eden. The building was con-  
ducted in 1950 on the land ad-  
jacent to the family house and work-  
shop (above and right).



side of the Mathsson showroom  
in Värnamo (right)

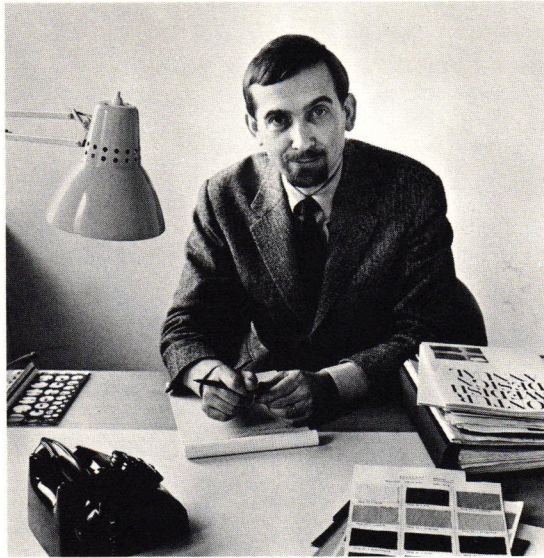


has largely become standardized to the point of dullness. The bold sweeps of the *Swedish Modern* era have been replaced by timid passes.

Some of the fault lies with the Swedish schools of art and design, which tend to become ivory towers remote from the innovations in international design and in production technology. But most of the blame lies with industries such as the furniture manufacturers. At the annual exhibitions of the Swedish Association of Furniture Manufacturers (Svenska Möbelindustriförbundet), the displays continue to represent "the same mixture as before." The booming demand for furniture exerted by the large number of World War II babies who have now reached marrying age far exceeds the supply. In such a market, many manufacturers feel that experimentation is unnecessary, costly and possibly even dangerous.

One solution to this situation would be to earmark a certain percentage of annual profits for the promotion of new models and experimentation with new materials. Furthermore, more vigorous efforts are needed to compete with several Iron Curtain countries who produce Swedish-inspired industrial design products, including furniture, at low prices. It is also necessary to inform other countries, as the Danes have done so brilliantly, that Swedish furniture at its best is distinctive, beautiful and well made.

This change cannot come about unless the better young Swedish designers are given full scope for their talents. These young designers are few in number. Any list of the major ones should include Michael Björnstrjerna, David de Mayo, Hans Ehrlin, Björn Hultén, John Kandell, Börge Lindau and Bosse Lindekrantz. The work of these young people must be recognized and fostered because it is from their ranks that the Mathssons of the future will come. No country can afford to be without such visionaries.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl E. Christiansson, 33, is president of the Stockholm chapter of SIR (Swedish Interior Designers Association) and a professional interior designer.

After being graduated in 1960 from the School of Arts, Crafts and Design in Gothenburg, he worked for a while as an interior designer in Switzerland. An educational grant in 1962 from the Swedish Institute in Stockholm enabled him to do research study in art history and architectural history at the Universities of Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan. Returning to Stockholm in 1964, he opened his own studio and, together with his wife, is presently engaged in designing the interiors for one of Stockholm's biggest office buildings.

Mr. Christiansson's extensive travels abroad have given him a fresh, international approach to design problems and he believes in "working in all areas of the design field." His freelance writing has produced a great number of articles in design magazines as well as a book about Tokyo.

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