Comfort for the masses? Or a tacky blight? Seemingly overnight, the one-piece plastic chair has become a world fixture. Can you stand it?

BY MARIANA GOSNELL

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIP SIMONS

Everybody Take a Seat

MAYBE YOU'RE SITTING ON ONE right now. It has a high back with slats, or arches, or a fan of leaf blades, or some intricate tracery. Its legs are wide and splayed, not solid. The plastic in the seat is three-sixteenths of an inch thick. It's probably white, though possibly green. Maybe you like how handy it is, how you can stack it or leave it outdoors and not worry about it. Maybe you're pleased that it cost less than a bottle of shampoo.

No matter what you're doing, millions of other people around the world are likely sitting right now on a single-piece, jointless, all-plastic, all-weather, inexpensive, molded stacking chair. It may be the most popular chair in history.

That dawned on me recently after I started noticing The Chair in news photographs from global trouble spots. In a town on the West Bank, an indignant Yasser Arafat holds a broken chair damaged by an Israeli military operation. In Nigeria, contestants in a Miss World pageant are seated demurely on plastic chairs just before riots break out, killing some 200 people. In Baghdad, U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer III, during a ceremony honoring Iraqi recruits, sits on a white plastic chair as if on a throne.

My curiosity aroused, I found this chair (via the Internet) almost everywhere: at a minor-league baseball stadium in West Virginia, at roadside food stands in Vietnam, at a rustic waterside tea garden in Istanbul, at a school principal's office in Malaysia, in shallow seas off Bora-Bora (where tourists sat on partly submerged chairs and ate grilled lobster off plastic tables). Friends told me of seeing it at huge village weddings in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in cinder-block houses in Mexico.

The plastic chairs in all those places were essentially alike, as far as I could tell, and seemed to be a natural part of the scene, whatever it was. It occurred to me that this humble piece of furniture, criticized by some people as hopelessly tacky, was an item of truly international, even universal, utility. What other product in recent history has been so widely, so to speak, embraced? And how had it found niches in so many different societies and at so many different levels, from posh resorts to dirt courtyards? How did it gain a global foothold?

For one thing, the resin chair, as it's technically known, is perhaps the world's cheapest seat. In some places, you can get one for a dollar. Also, it doesn't need painting or harsh cleaning (some folks dunk theirs in the swimming pool). It supposedly doesn't dent or corrode or fade in sunlight or harbor fungus or disintegrate in saltwater or chlorine. It's so lightweight that the very old and very young can drag it around. It is manufactured in Russia, Australia, Taiwan, Mexico, the United States, France, Austria, Morocco, Turkey, Israel and China, among other countries. How many have been sold? "Beyond millions," Wade Jones, a Miami-based distributor, told me. "I couldn't begin to guess how many."

The Chair took about a quarter of a century to come into being. After World War II, progressive designers like Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen tried to produce affordable plastic furniture. "There was a long evolution from the

war, with different plastics being developed and different designers trying to exploit these plastics," says Peter Fiell, coauthor with his wife, Charlotte, of the book *1000 Chairs*. Eames and Saarinen, among the most prominent mid-century furniture designers, made chairs with "shell" seats molded out of fiberglass-reinforced polyester. But their chairs had metal legs; the plastic alone wasn't strong enough to support someone. Saarinen (who died in 1961) very much wanted to produce a chair that was, as he put it, a "structural total," as all great furniture from the past had been. But when he made his famous tulip chair—a plastic shell seat atop a pedestal—he had to sheathe the metal pedestal in plastic so the chair would at least appear unified. "I look forward to the day when the plastic industry has advanced to the point where the chair will be one material," he once said. (If he were around today, might he think, Be careful what you wish for?)

In the 1960s, European designers created chairs that took advantage of improvements in plastics technology. One was a polyethylene stacking chair that, although it had detachable legs, was made by a process that would be central to success: injection molding. Another was an armless chair of fiberglass-reinforced polyester that was all-of-a-piece, legs included, but was produced by compression molding, a process less suitable for mass production.

Then, in 1968, came what Fiell calls "one of the most important events in the entire history of furniture design." Danish designer Verner Panton, after ten years of searching for the right plastic, produced the first single-form, single-material, injection-molded chair. It achieved total design unity in combination with a high-volume industrial process. Still, Panton's chair was very high style, a single long S curve with a U-shaped base, and demand for it was limited.

Eventually, a savvy manufacturer combined plastics, process and practical design to make The Chair as we know it. "It wasn't until a more utilitarian manufacturer embraced the injection-molding process that this design happened," Fiell says. So who set off this revolution in seating? "I wish I knew," Fiell says, adding that he assumes it happened in the early 1970s. In any event, none of the current makers of monobloc chairs—monobloc meaning a single piece of plastic shaped by injection molding—is taking the credit, or the blame, for the breakthrough.

GROSFILLEX, AN AMERICAN BRANCH of a French company with a factory in Robesonia, Pennsylvania, makes monobloc chairs for what it describes as the middle- to upper-middle end of the market. Touring the factory with Dan Yearick, Grosfillex's vice president of manufacturing, I visited a huge room that held several injection-molding machines, each about as long as a locomotive. One was making an armchair called the Madras Classic, with a weave pattern on the back, in a color called sandstone.

The chair, Yearick told me, begins as thousands of BB-size pellets of virgin polypropylene (the plastic most used for the chairs these days), which are stored in a silo and piped to a hopper. Chemicals that tint and stiffen the plastic and protect the finish from damaging ultraviolet rays are added to the pellets, which fall into a 15-foot-long barrel heated to 440 degrees Fahrenheit. Then a screw about six inches in diameter with 1,000 tons of pressure behind it pushes the plastic through the barrel, whereupon the plastic melts and passes through a quarter-inch-wide hole in the side of a steel mold. The mold is chilled, and as soon as the molten polypropylene enters the cavity, it starts to harden. The time from pellets to chair: less than a minute.

Monobloc chairs may be cheap, but the equipment for making them is not. An injection-molding machine costs a million dollars. A new mold, of solid stainless steel engineered to thousandths of an inch, can cost $300,000. "You make a million of these chairs and your mold is paid for," Yearick says. "In five or seven years, you might sell the mold to a company in Africa for $50,000, and they will make a[nother] million chairs with it, and they can do it really cheap."

The resin-chair business hasn't been around long, but some veterans already remember a golden age. In the early 1990s, sales of plastic lawn chairs in North America were huge, says Rick Baker, a furniture retailer in Macedonia, Ohio. "We had a whole showroom wall of monobloc chairs stacked as high as you could go." For the most basic models, prices fell as manufacturers undercut each other, and the profit margin got so small that some companies went out of business or compromised on materials, making flimsier products. The molds are so costly that manufacturers were slow to change styles and flooded the market with clones of clones. A product that used to grace furniture showrooms and sell for $30 is now stacked, at $5 apiece or less, in front of hardware and grocery stores.

Paradoxically, perhaps, history's most popular chair engenders a lot of complaints. "They numb rear ends." "They increase perspiring." "They swallow you whole" (are hard to get out of). They're "annoying," "awful," "cursed," "dreaded," "scary," "silly," "stupid" and "ugly." The plastic chair is "in the worst possible taste," Karen von Hahn wrote in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* in 2003, "so cheap, ugly and everywhere, it even succeeds in turning something inherently beautiful that we have borrowed from Europe's great public spaces—the outdoor café, dining alfresco—into a tawdry, second-rate imitation." Hank Stuever, a *Washington Post* writer, expressed his scorn in a 2001 article, saying the "resin stacking patio chair is the Tupperware container of a lard-rumped universe."

The main objection of design critics who've bothered to comment on The Chair seems to be that it's merely a plastic version of conventional wood or metal chairs, rather than a

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new creation that honors plastic's sculptural potential. Karim Rashid, a New York City designer who has been called Plastic Man because of his respect for the often-derided material, claims the chairs started as reproductions of French garden furniture "and haven't progressed very much." After having one of them snap under him at a restaurant in Manhattan, he vowed to redesign what he calls the "omni chair." Why couldn't they be more beautiful, sensual and contemporary? he wondered. So he made sketches of several all-plastic chairs to replace the ones swamping the global market and showed them to three of the largest chairmaking companies. He got no takers.

For all the gripes about the resin chair, there are also abundant testimonials to its virtues. Want to furnish a living room until you can afford to buy fancy furniture? Sit while taking a shower after bypass surgery? Hold an outdoor graduation or provide seating in a cafeteria, nurses' station, fishing camp, courthouse hallway, trailer park? "I could not give a dance party without them," insists a hostess in Key West who gives a great many. Doug Hatelid of North Vancouver, B.C., has written that his decade-old chairs "fit the body well" and that he "chairishes" them. Fiell, the furniture historian, admits to placing several recyclable resin chairs around the yard of his vacation home in Spain. He didn't want to contribute to depleting the world's store of teak.

Although I cringe when I see white plastic chairs amid the trees at the Ontario lake I go to in the summer (where I usually sit on Adirondack chairs painted a tasteful cream), I have shed my initial disdain for The Chair. The other day I passed a community garden in a not-so-great section of Manhattan, and there among the tulips was a bunch of those white chairs, and people were sitting on them, talking, and I thought, "Way to go, chairs!" It's comforting to think that just about everybody who needs a seat can get one.

In any event, people might as well get used to it. Or so I gathered from a newspaper photograph showing a diver who'd searched in a Massachusetts pond for Babe Ruth's piano, which, according to legend, Ruth tossed off a cabin porch into the water in 1918. The diver found no trace of the piano, but he did emerge with an intact white resin chair.

The Chair is here to stay—and stay and stay and stay. ❂