



Back to the Futuro: the spaceship house that landed in Yorkshire

Dreamed up in Finland and shaped like a flying saucer, Matti Suuronen's 'house of the future' turned out to be an impractical curio - but its atomic-age aesthetics are still alluring

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Like jetpacks, flying cars and robot butlers, the Futuro was supposed to revolutionise the way we lived. Unlike those other staples of an imagined future, however, this architectural oddity actually existed. A colourful pod in the shape of an ellipse, the Futuro was a sci-fi vision of the future, offering us a living space light years away from what most of us were used to. Nicknamed the Flying Saucer and the UFO House, it was symbolic of the ambitious space-race era. But as the Futuro celebrates its 50th anniversary, the revolution it promised clearly never happened. Aficionados estimate that of the 100 or so made, only 68½ (more on the half later) remain.

One belongs to Craig Barnes, an artist based in London, who saw a Futuro in a “dishevelled and tired” state while on holiday in Port Alfred, South Africa. He decided to mount a rescue mission. “I have family out there,” he says, “and I’d been seeing this Futuro since I was about three. I viewed it as a spaceship. I drove past in 2013 and workers were knocking down a garage next to it. I panicked and managed to trace the owner.”



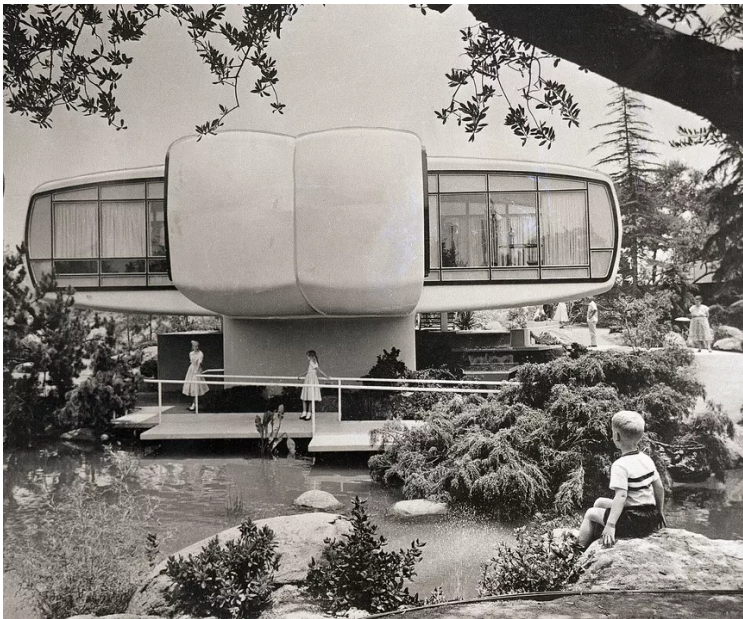
Planning the future ... Matti Suuronen, who pioneered the use of reinforced plastic. Photograph: Espoo City Museum

Barnes learned of plans to relocate the Futuro to the grounds of a guesthouse, where inflatable green “aliens” would be installed and dry ice pumped from underneath. “I thought it was ungracious to treat an old lady in such a fashion and, over five insane days, bought it, had it dismantled and arranged for it to be shipped to the UK.”

The Futuro looked as if it came from outer space, but actually it was from outer Finland. It was designed by a Matti Suuronen, an architect and keen volleyball player who was part of Finland’s national league. “He had been commissioned by a childhood friend to design a cabin on a ski slope,” says his daughter Sari. “The family needed a place on the steep hill where they could stay for the weekend, warm up and have some meals.”

The cabin housed eight people and was held aloft by steel legs. The curved shape meant snow couldn’t settle. It had fixed seats, a kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms and a central table. Cooking was done using a portable “fire box”. And, because it measured a mere eight metres across, the pod could be transported on a flat-bed lorry or hoisted into position by helicopter.

Suuronen pioneered the use of reinforced plastic and manmade materials such as polyester resin, fibreglass and acrylic. Another of his creations was a petrol station in Lempäälä, south-west Finland, made principally from plastic. Motorists often took lengthy detours to visit it.



Dream on ... House of the Future, built by Monsanto at Disneyland in 1957.
Photograph: Bettmann Archive

Born in 1933, Suuronen claimed the Futuro was purely an application of mathematics, but many believe he was influenced - perhaps subliminally - by science fiction. Flying saucers had emerged in the late 1920s, brilliantly imagined and drawn in American pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Science Wonder Stories*. By the 50s, they often featured in films, among them *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Forbidden Planet* and *Earth vs the Flying Saucers*.

The first exemplar of space-age architecture is thought to be the House of the Future, installed at Disneyland, California, in 1957. Designers were asked to imagine how housing might look 30 years hence. The fibreglass structure was set on a pedestal and had four symmetrical wings. More than 20 million people visited during the 10 years it was standing.

But the architect chiefly associated with atomic-age houses is John Lautner. His most famous work, the Chemosphere, was built in 1960, overlooking San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. A one-storey octagon, it is perched on a nine-metre concrete pole and reached by funicular. Its current owner is Benedikt Taschen, founder of the eponymous German publishing house and, significantly, a comic-book fanatic.



Up, up and away ... John Lautner's Chemosphere house, now owned by publishing magnate Benedikt Taschen. Photograph: Andrew Holbrooke/Corbis via Getty Images

While Lautner and others indulged wealthy patrons and corporate sponsors, Suuronen had a more homespun, utilitarian vision for the Futuro. He based his company in Espoo, a city near Helsinki, most famous for being the home of the Finnish Museum of Horology - and for spawning the death metal band *Children of Bodom*, frequent toppers of the country's album chart.

Suuronen designed his own family's home and lived there with his wife, Sirkku, a professional pianist, and their three children. His eye for detail was such that he could read technical plans upside-down. Even at their busiest, Suuronen did not employ more than a dozen people and each started work at 10am, thanks to the boss's fondness for a lie-in.

In 1968, the Futuro was displayed at the Finfocus export fair in London, positioned on the upper deck of a ferry moored on the Thames. More than 400 enquiries were logged and media interest was high. On 20 July 1969, the day Apollo 11 landed on the moon, the New York Times carried a piece with the headline: "Saucer-shaped house arrives on Earth."

A licence to manufacture the Futuro was granted to around 30 companies throughout the world. The sole UK recipient was Waterside Plastics, in the mill town of Todmorden, West Yorkshire. The company had evolved from Fielden Brothers, a major textile concern run to a benevolent ethos. Almost 2,000 people had once been employed in 11 of its mills. The commitment to the Futuro (and to similar projects such as "Sharky the unsinkable sloop") was a gallant but doomed attempt to leave a legacy. The company folded in 1979.

The surroundings in Todmorden - all narrow, sooty streets and factories chiselled into the steep Pennines - could not have been more incongruous. The town's mayor, Donald Rigg, arranged for a prototype of the house (the only Futuro ever manufactured in the UK) to feature in the 75th anniversary of Todmorden's borough charter, in 1971. That summer, it was mounted on land outside a medical centre and used as a ticket office for celebratory events. Hundreds turned out to see it paraded through the streets by lorry and then put in place by crane. It looked as if the locals had captured a spaceship.



'We caught a UFO' ... Todmorden, West Yorkshire, meets the Futuro in 1971.
Photograph: Amy Holt/Roger Birch Collection

The first Futuro installed as a bona fide residence was at Lake Puula, near Espoo. Futura 001 was purchased as a summer home by Finnish comedy actor Matti Kuusla. Locals said it was out of place in a rural environment. This pattern was repeated elsewhere, especially in the US, where permission to erect them was often refused. Banks were reluctant to provide finance and then the 1973 oil crisis, which saw prices quadruple, effectively ended the Futuro experiment. Plastic had been viewed as an inexpensive building material but oil is required in its production, and costs for the house rose prohibitively. In a few short years, the Futuro had become a curiosity rather than a force for revolution.

While many of the 100 or so Futuros made have been destroyed or vandalised, others have found new lives - as restaurants, children's play rooms, targets for shooting practice and a dog kennel. One even ended up as a VIP room at 2001 Odyssey, a strip club in Tampa Bay, Florida. "Say 'spaceship' at the door for free entry," reads its sign. Several are exhibited in museums and a building in Frankfurt has half a Futuro (it was sliced in two) bolted to its side.



Home comforts ... inside Craig Barnes' restored Futuro.

Suuronen spent his final years short of money. “He was too kind and blue-eyed to be a businessman,” says Sari. “He did not know how to take advantage of the fame of Futuro, to make money out of it. He had many health issues and didn’t have the energy to pursue more designing contracts. A recession in the 1990s slowed construction in Finland. He was also too slow to lay off his personnel and he used up my mother’s inheritance. The bank took their house and sold it at auction for very little money. So they lost everything.”

Suuronen died in 2013, aged 79. He had cancer, as well as heart and respiratory problems. “He was always very optimistic about his health,” says Sari. “He played volleyball up until his last operation. He never lost his vivid, creative mind and his lust for creating something more for the world.”

Meanwhile, after years of hard work and at great expense, Barnes has renovated the Futuro he bought in South Africa. The spherical house was exhibited in London on the roof of Matt’s Gallery and installed at Central Saint Martins, then shipped to Le Havre, northern France, for the city’s summer festival this year. “The Futuro shouldn’t be viewed as a flawed and failed utopian ideal,” says Barnes. “It’s a wonderful space to bounce around ideas. Everything about it is a celebration of the imagination.”

The patent for the Futuro, meanwhile, has remained with the Suuronen family. The house of the future may yet return.

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