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National College of Art and Design

Faculty of Design

Department of Industrial Design

Creative by Nature

Nature's influence on Finnish Design

and it's Significance for the Future.

by

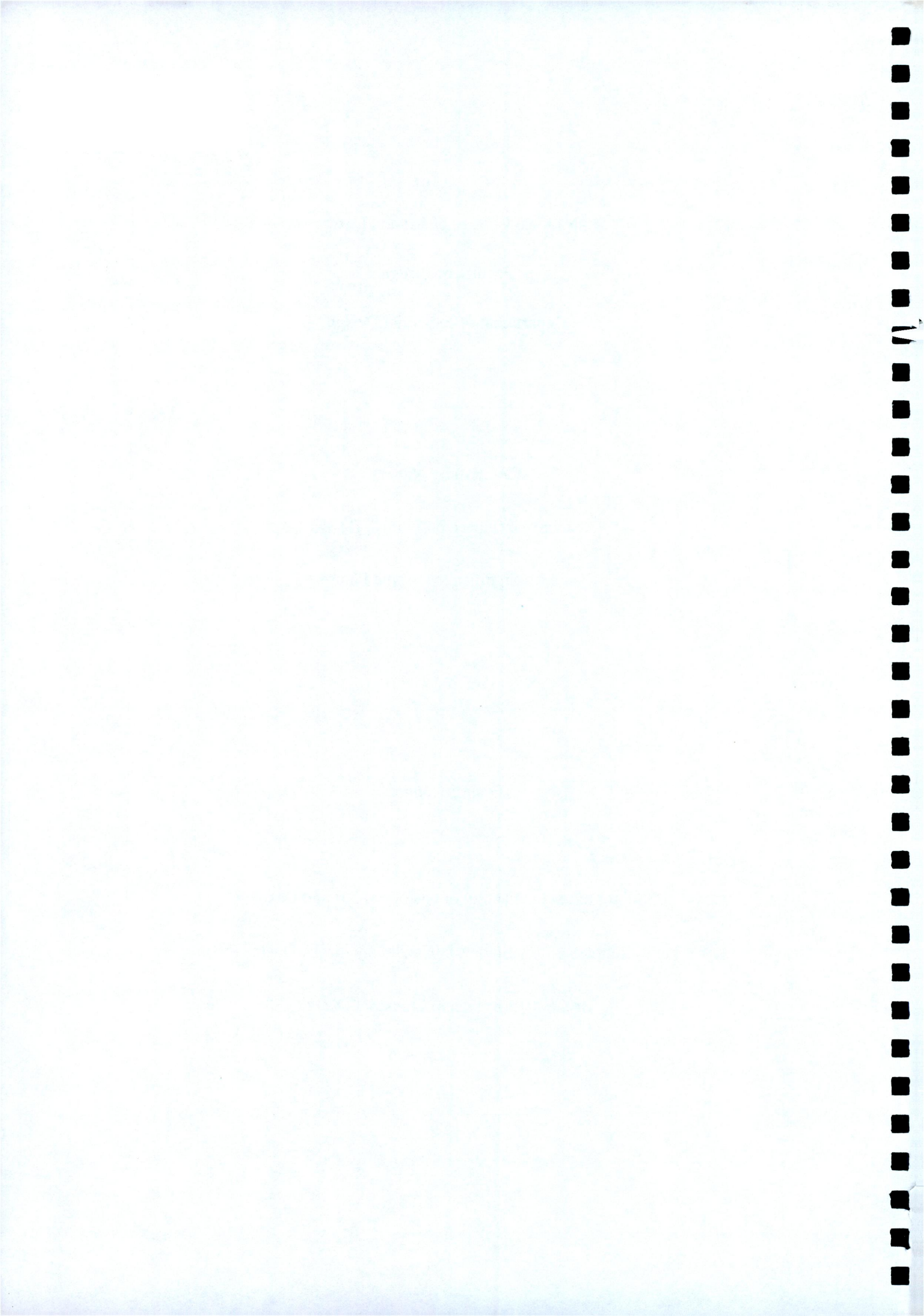
Peter O'Connor

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design

and Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of

Bachelor of Design in Industrial Design

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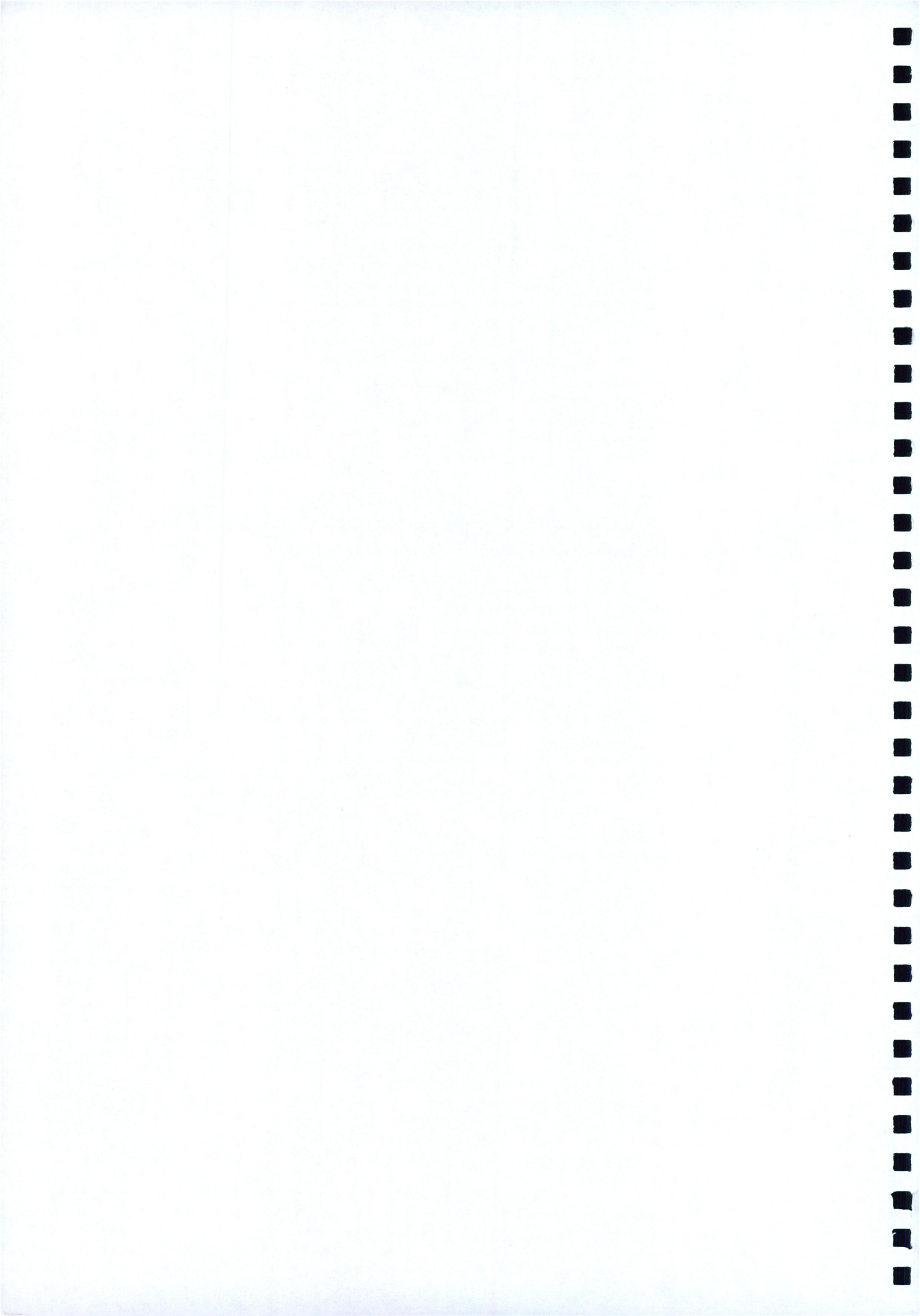


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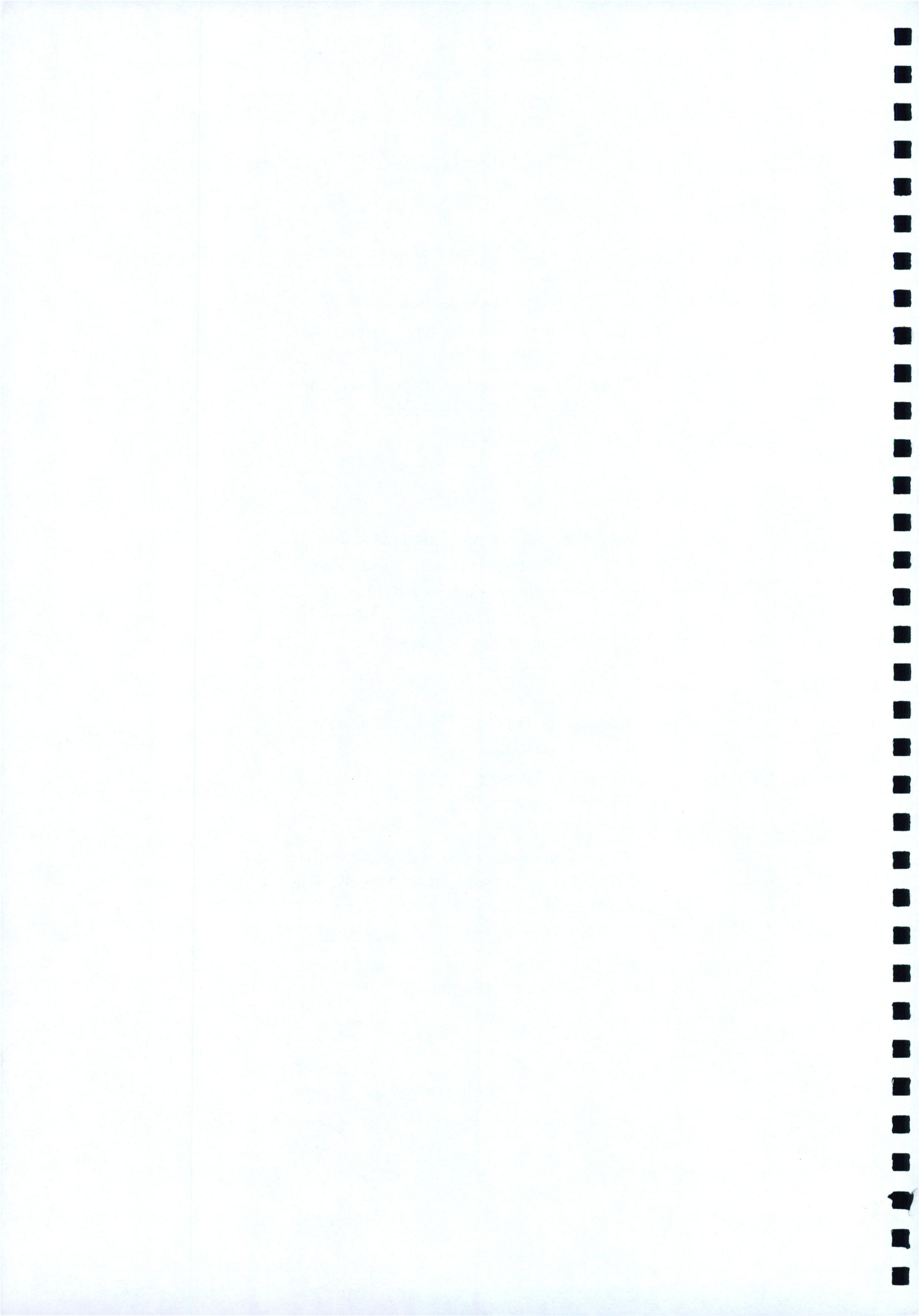
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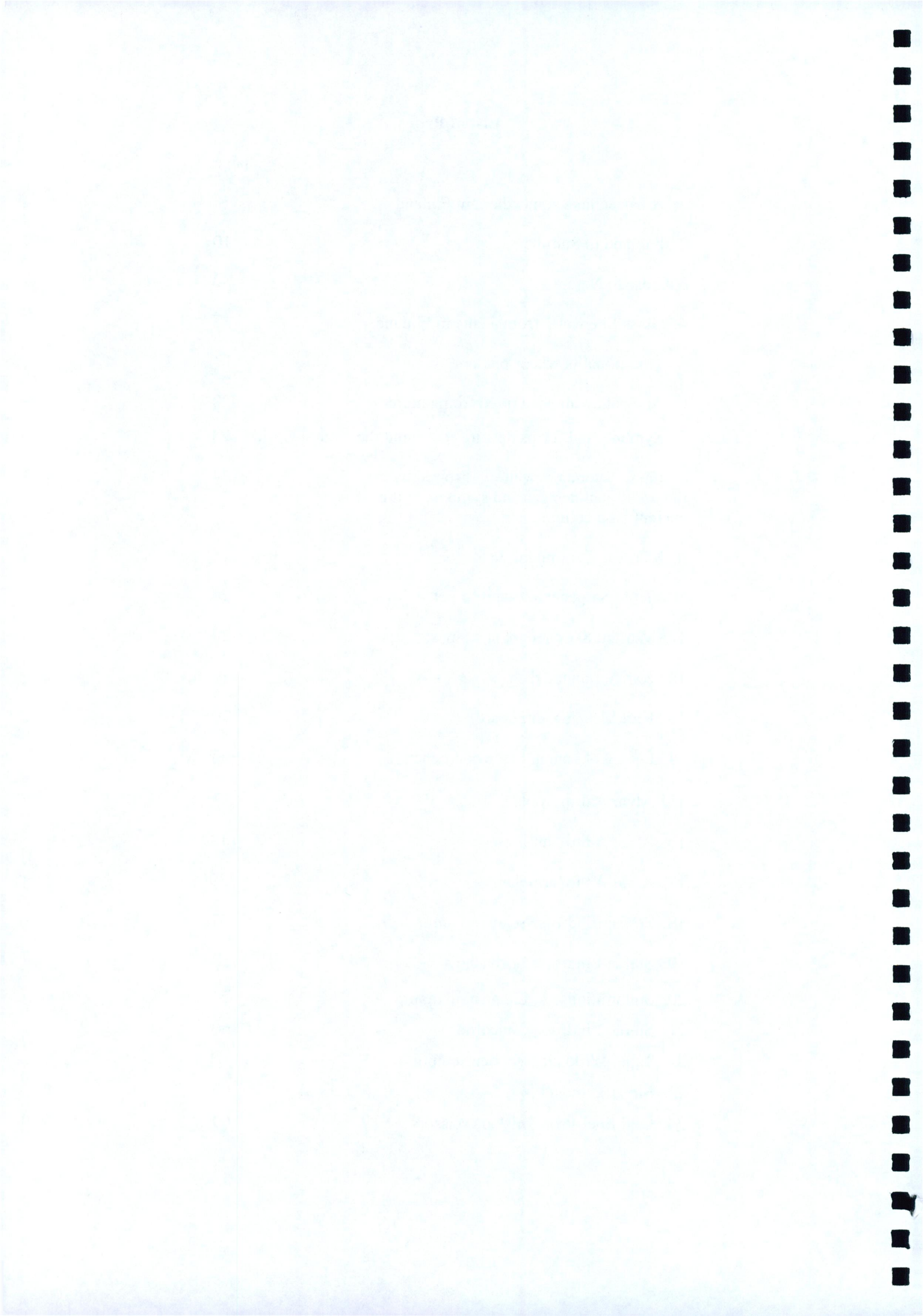
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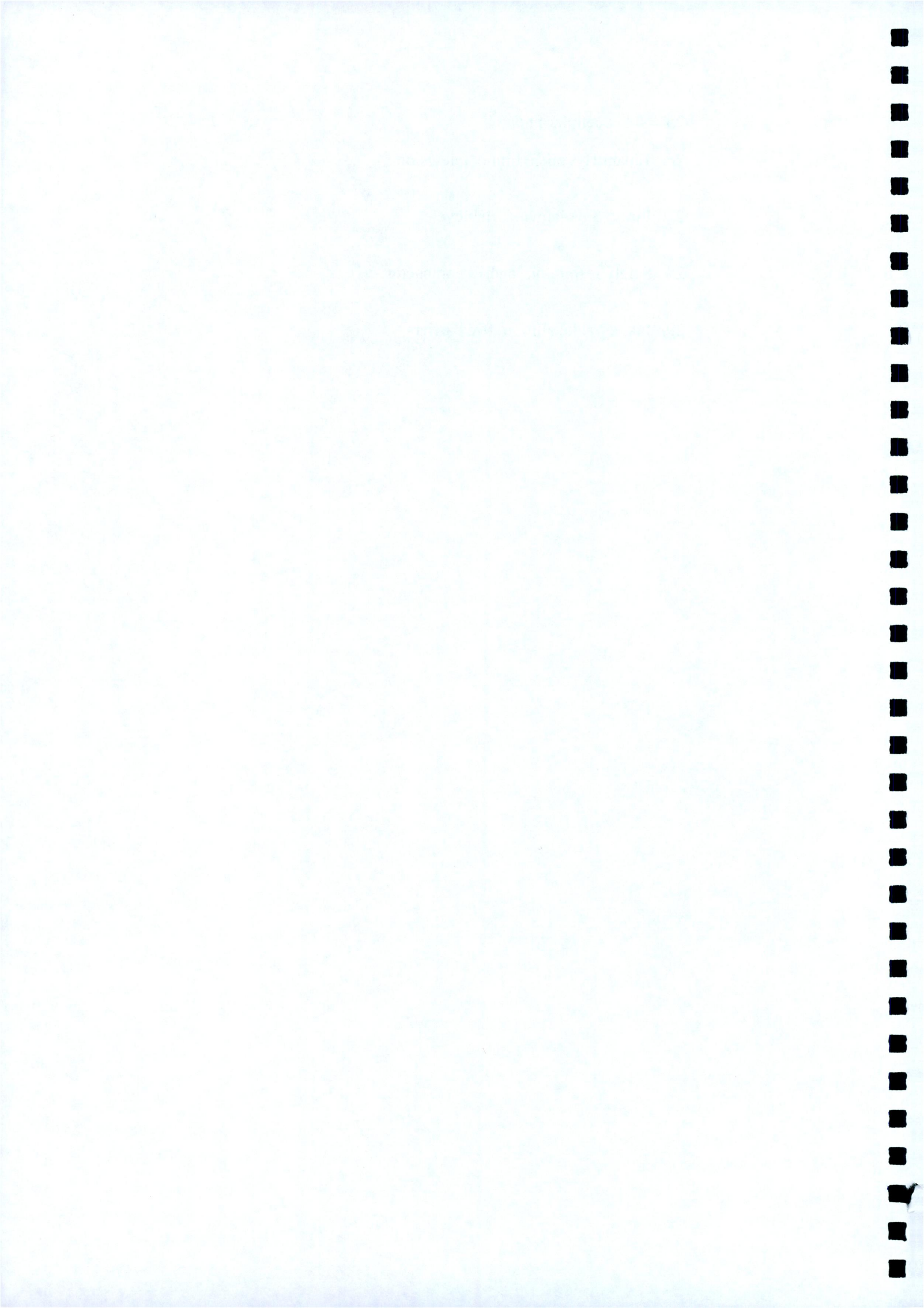


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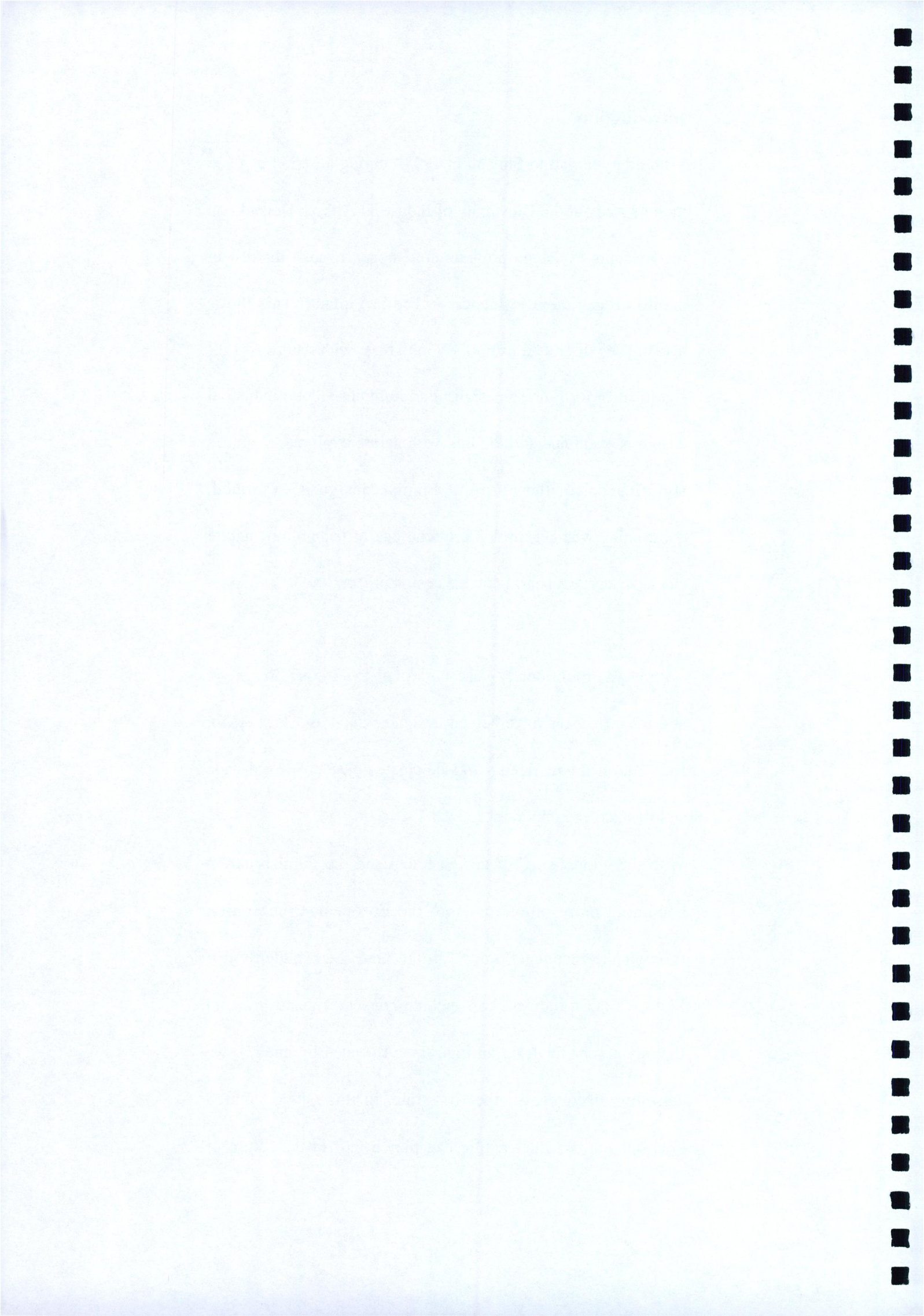


Introduction

Inspired by a visit to Finland in 1993, during a period of three months study at the University of Industrial Arts, in Helsinki on the Erasmus exchange programme, I began to take interest in nature's remarkable influence on life in Finland. This thesis investigates the relationship the Finns have with nature and it's significance for Finnish design. Furniture design and industrial design is examined and the link with nature explored. Nature's significance for the future of Finnish design is examined, questioning whether, in this artificial age of technology, nature can have any real bearing on the design process.

Nature was traditionally very important to Finnish designers, and it's influences have helped designers such as Alvar Aalto, Eliel Saarinen and Tapio Wirkkala create objects of world-wide significance and importance.

With the 'globalising' of design today and the Finnish nation becoming more integrated into the European Community, through the recent union of Europe, and the broadening of Finland's main industries to include consumer electronics (at first sight very far from an industry influenced by nature), we can now discover, for the first time, in this newly created environment, whether nature can play a part in the future of



Finnish design.

Most of the literature available on Finnish nature and design concentrates on the arts and crafts movements, which put Finnish design on the map back in the 1940's and 50's. In his book Soul in Design Tapio Perriainen gives an account of Finnish design charting the origins of it from the ancient peasant cultures to today's modern electronics age.

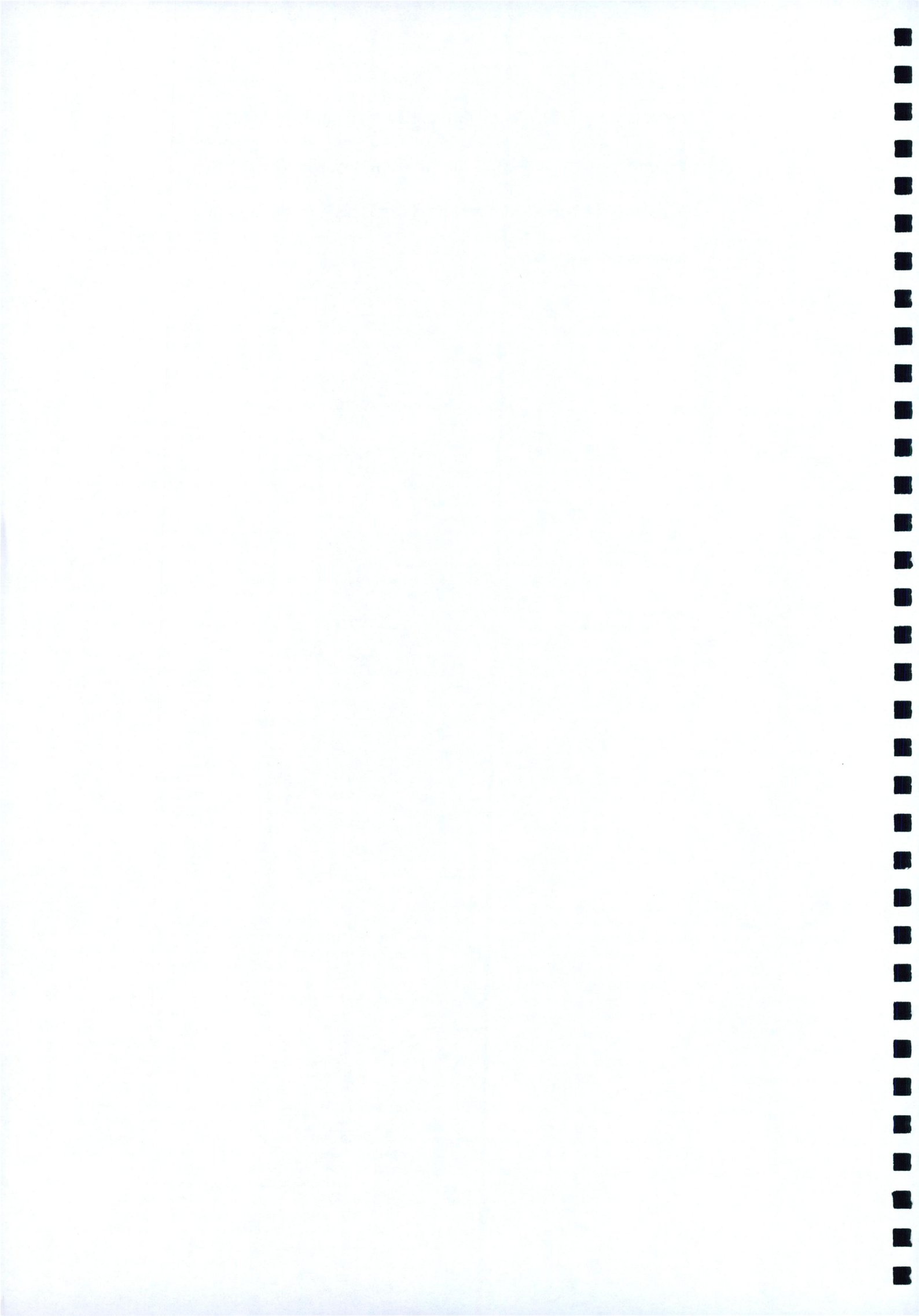
Perriainen recognises the special quality Finnish design possesses and demonstrates this through a selection of Finland's great designs (designs that have a close relationship with nature), from the well-known classics of the 1940's up to today.

The catalogue from the 1981 Tapio Wirkkala exhibition in Helsinki gives us an insight into the force behind the creation of some of Finland's greatest 'natural' designs. Following his career up through the years, Wirkkala demonstrates his own personal design philosophy and shows how he is continually inspired by nature.

More recently though, the question of Finland's continuing relationship with nature has arisen, examining topics such as the conservation of her natural resources, and the introduction of



recyclable goods. With Finland's electronics industries becoming more important to the economy, the decline in popularity of her wood-based products is seen as the loss of nature in Finnish design.



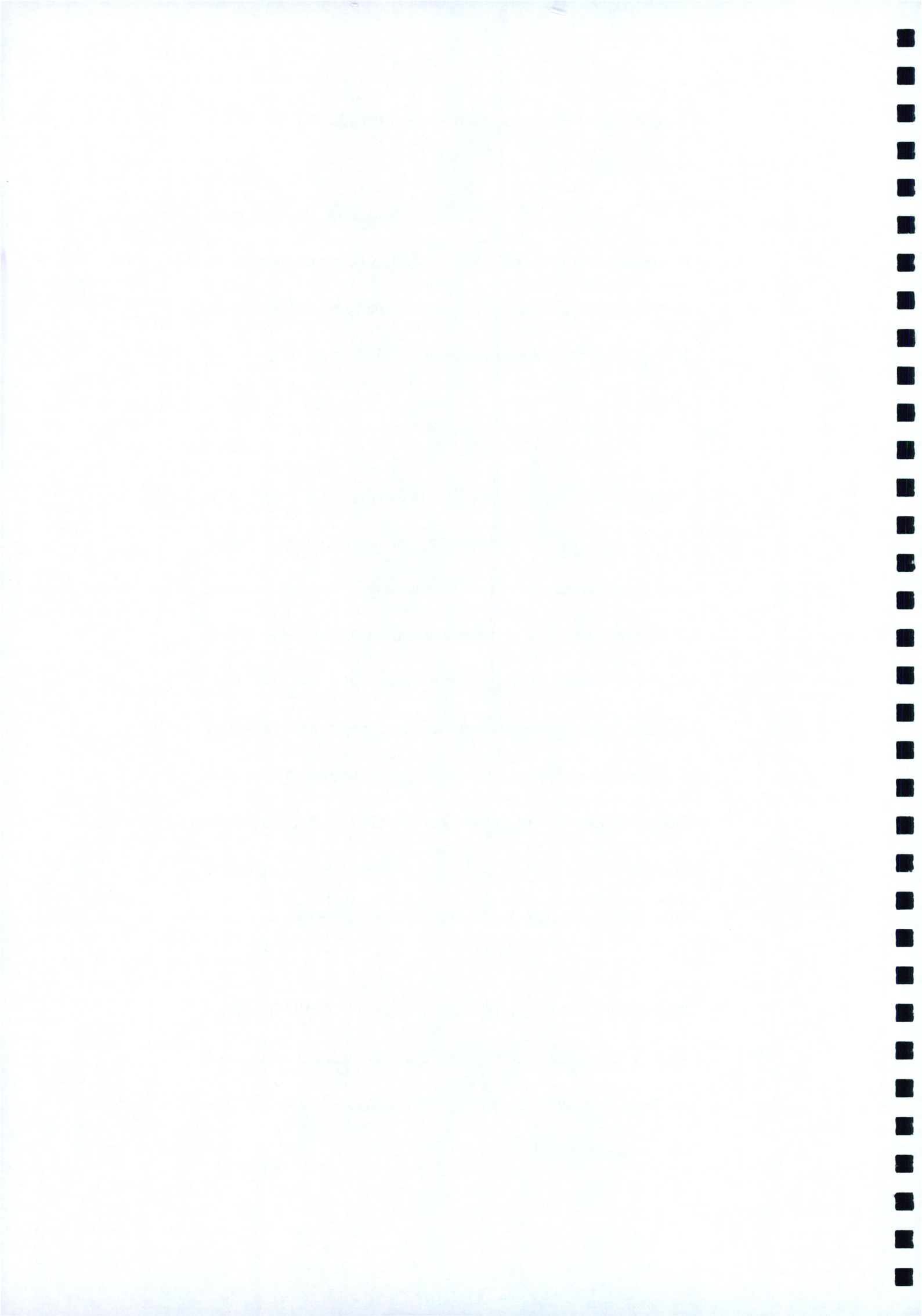
Chapter 1: Nature in the Culture of Finland.

A Feeling For Nature

Nature is all around us. It is all encompassing. It is the most powerful force on earth. More creative than any human, its diverse natural gifts to us, range from the giant to the minute. Nature has a profound and unceasing effect on all of life - it is all life.

The most unique element in Finnish society is its closeness to nature. This overwhelming feeling for nature is unlike that of any other European country. It manifests itself in every section of Finnish life today, and has done so since Finland was first inhabited. Hundreds of years of physical and cultural isolation, located on the border between the east and west has resulted in a nation very self-sufficient and independent. These two characteristics, among others, have made the Finnish people turn to and trust the one factor that has remained the same, the one stable and unchanging element in their lives - nature.

The primary and most obvious way nature physically manifests itself is through the natural landscape. So, to better understand the Finnish people's relationship with nature, we must first look at the landscape itself.

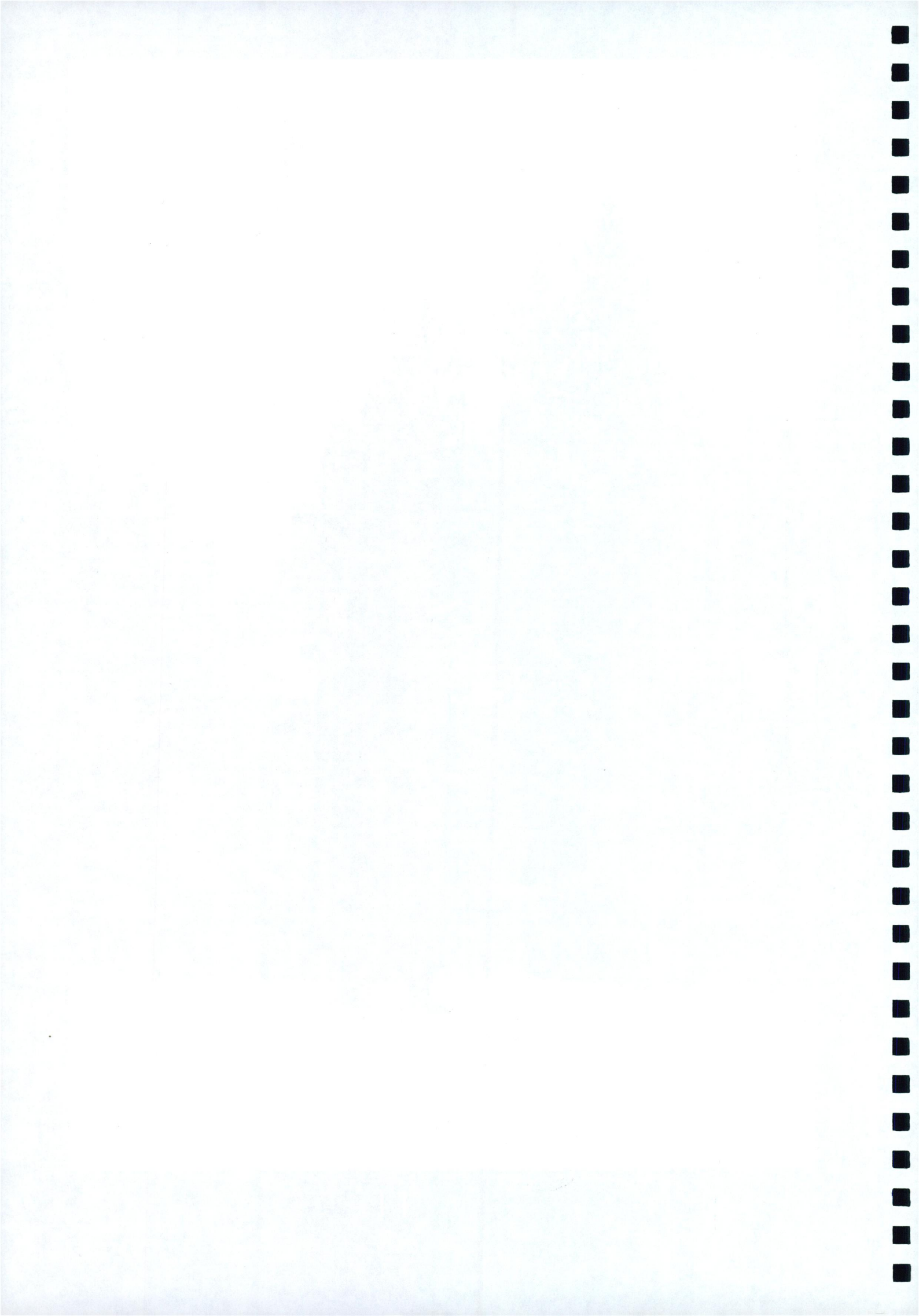


The Finnish landscape created during the Ice Age is made up of thousands of lakes and large areas of forest (most of Finland lies in northern coniferous forest zone). During the Ice Age glaciers moving under great pressure created the unique pattern of small lakes and long continuous rivers that run diagonally across Finland, from the north-west to the south-east. These lakes (187,000 in total) break up the country into a landscape of shallow lakes, small islands and dense forest. So it is not a surprise to learn, Finland (relative to its size) has more lakes than any other country in the world. The beauty and purity of Finland's lakes is the most noticeable thing about the Finnish landscape. Extensive areas of sea and lake dotted with numerous small tree-covered islands form the famous Finnish archipelago. And the Finns know how to put all those lakes to good use. Fishing, a national pastime is popular all year round, even in winter when a thick layer of ice cover the lakes. Apparently, this is where the Finnish quality of 'sisu' (roughly translated as 'determination at all costs') was created when the peasant fishermen used their traditional hand-powered drills to cut holes in the lake ice to fish in the water below sometimes waiting for hours in sub-zero temperatures, for a bite.





1. A frozen lake somewhere in Finland.



The Finns have an affinity with nature, and seem to enjoy trying to defy the ravages of the harsh climate. This behaviour is in-built in the Finnish character today, and has been passed down the generations to today's Finns from their hardy ancient ancestors.

The Origins of Nature in Finnish Culture

It is widely known that the ancestors of today's Finns, coming from the Baltic shores and from the then Kingdom of Sweden, settled first on the banks of the rivers, and used the natural resources of lake and forest to build villages and towns. The vast system of lakes they discovered formed routes that were used as a means of communications and transport between towns and villages, before roads were built or the invention of the telephone.

The first settlers, many of them hunters and fishermen, cultivated the land along the banks of the lakes and rivers, and were slow to move inland. Trade and commerce developed rapidly around the towns and villages that grew up. Soon, families from far off inland villages, travelled often through harsh and unpleasant weather conditions, and with the constant threat of disease, to trade with the people of the coastal towns.

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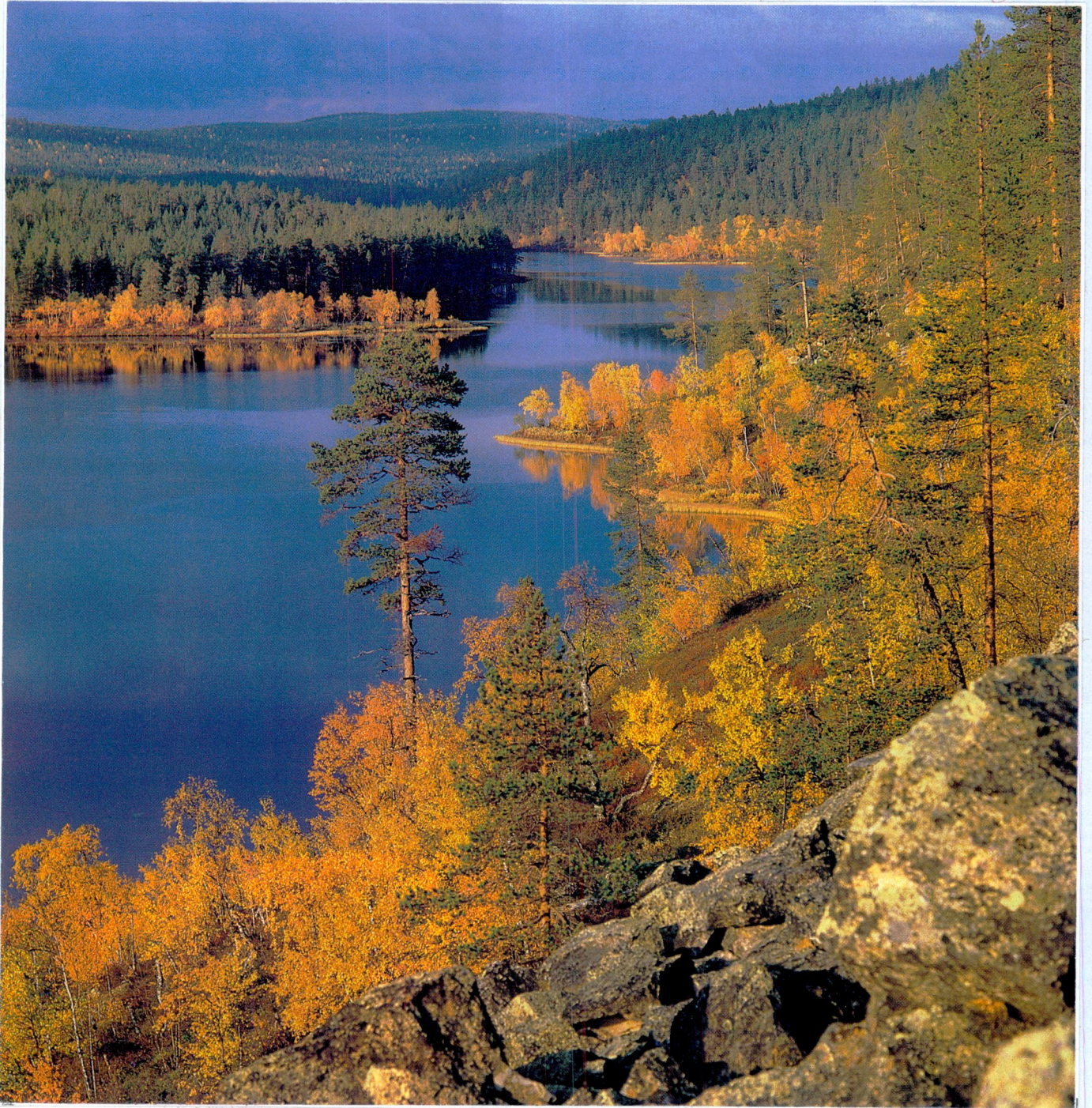
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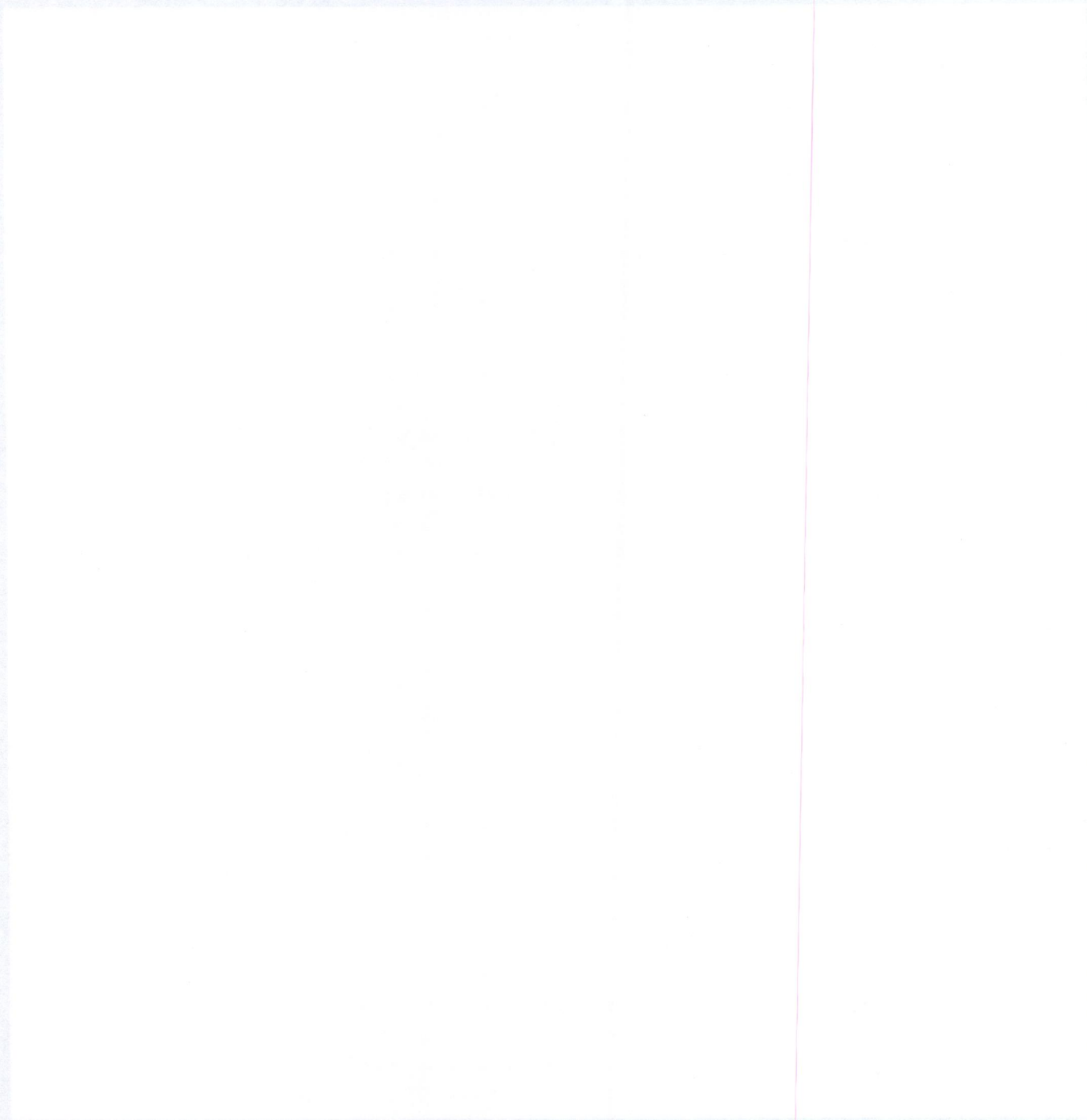
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2. Lapland in Summer

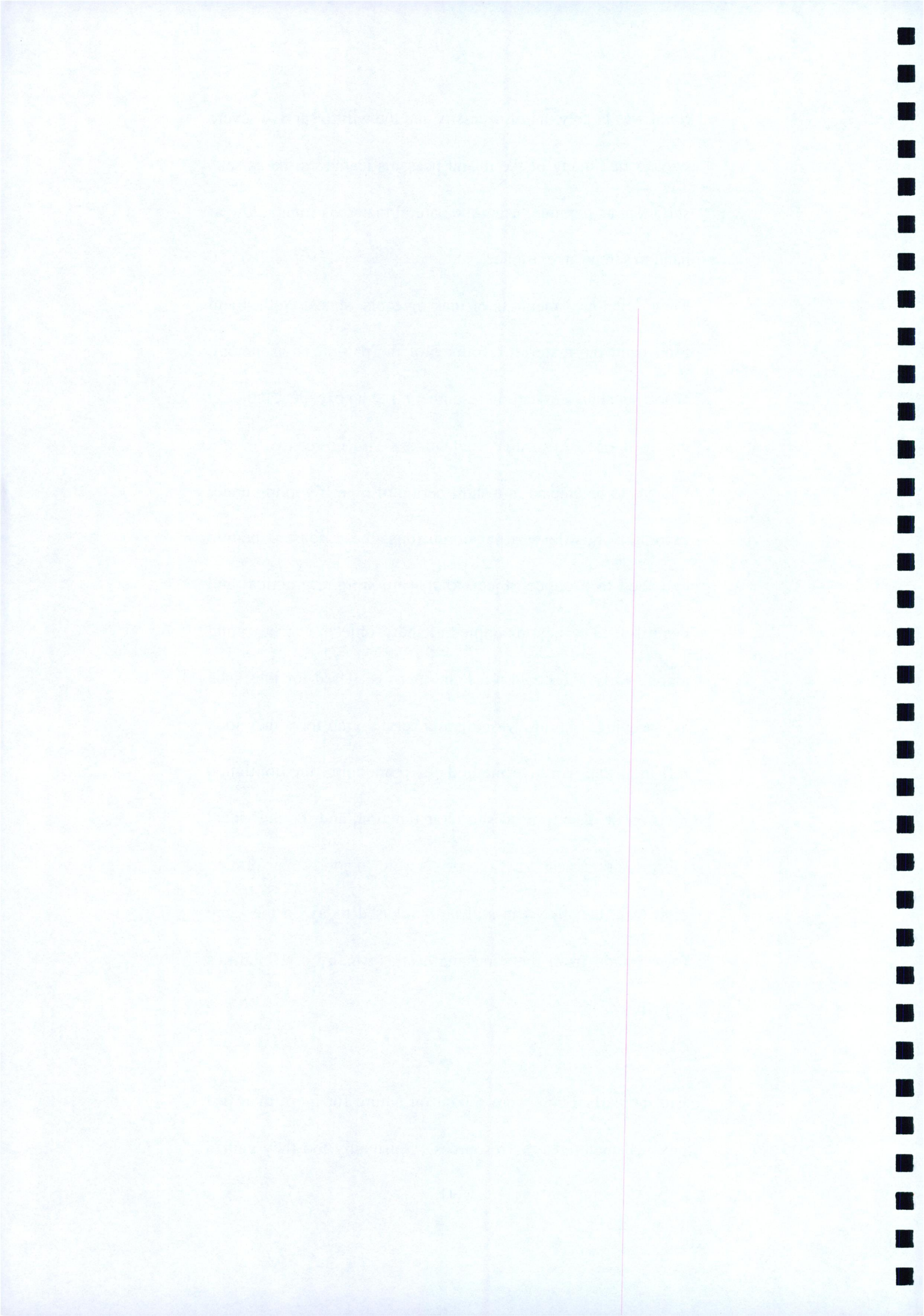


So, it was largely out of necessity and the will to survive severe winters that many of the inland peasants learned to be as self-sufficient as possible, using the natural materials found close at hand to scrape an existence.

They developed methods of making tools, shoes, clothes and food from the material resources of the natural environment.

Wood, an abundant natural resource, made an excellent building material enabling individual houses and many towns and villages to be erected in a short period of time. Working under extremely hostile weather conditions, these peasant people managed to produce objects that were simple, practical and beautiful. The best examples of these objects can be found among early household tools and utensils. Used for jobs such as sweeping, beating, washing and carving, the form they took reflected the primitive methods of production, the continued revision of their form to suit their function, and the individual lifestyle of the peasant. Some tools were so good at performing their task, that they can still be purchased today, in the same form, made from the same material, in many of Helsinki's department stores.

But the early Finns were reliant on nature for more than just physical materials and resources. Spiritually too they gained

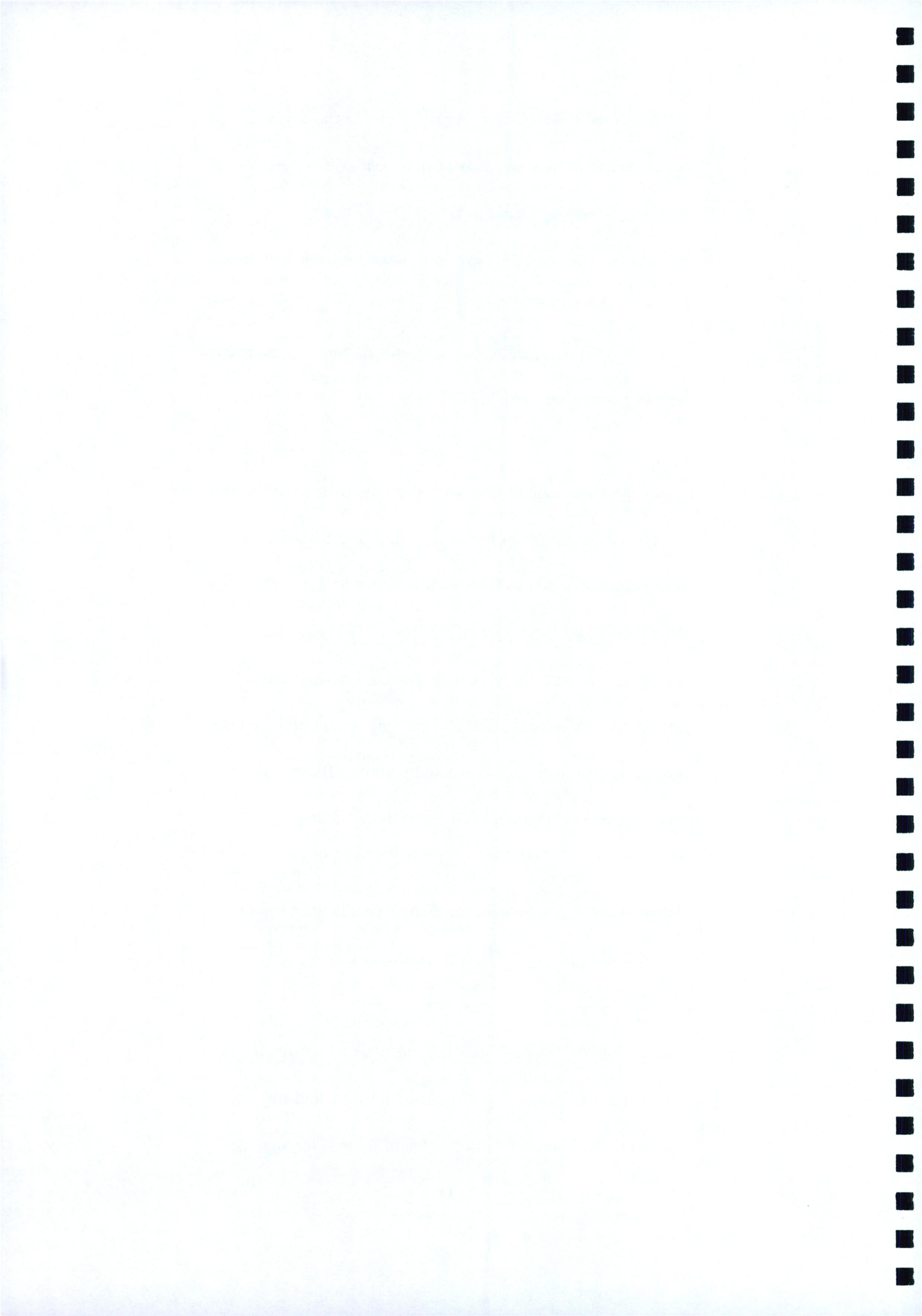


from nature. Religious rituals, customs and traditions developed from their close association with the natural world. Wooden carvings, thought to be ancient religious relics, dating back to the 18th century, have been found throughout Finland. Many of them depict scenes of the natural landscape with particular attention paid to the wild animals, such as the native bear, lynx, reindeer and elk.

Today the Finns cannot live without close contact with nature. In July they escape from towns and cities to get back to nature, and the peace it gives off to their summer homes. There are more than 300,000 cottages on the shores of Finnish lakes many with the now compulsory sauna. Popular activities commonly associated with nature, particularly during winter holiday time, include sports such as, cross-country skiing, fishing, boating, canoeing, hiking, angling, of course, rally car racing.

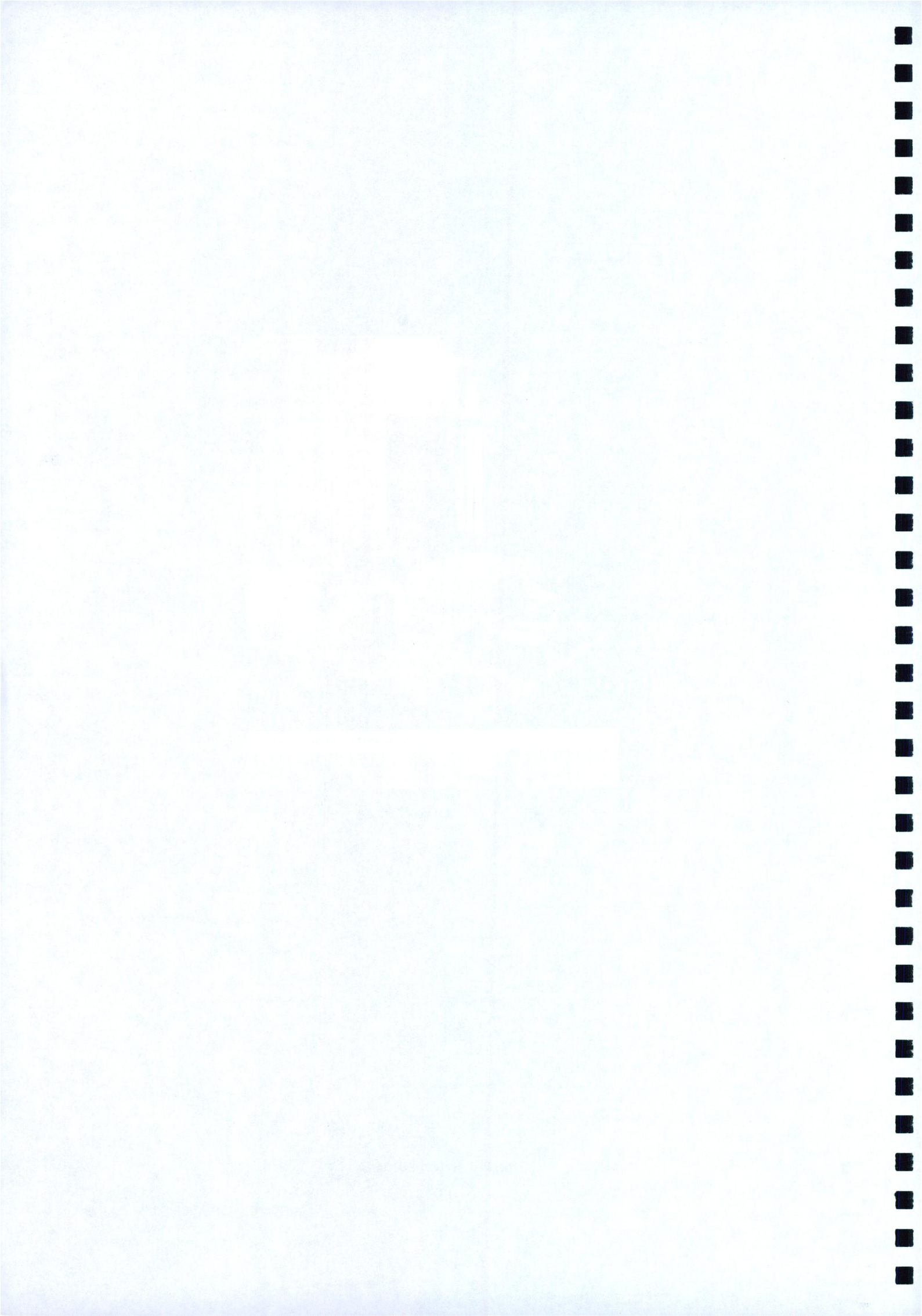
Being close to nature meant the Finnish people have had to live their life according to the laws of nature.

Historically the ancient Finns depended on nature for the raw materials and resources for building and making tools. Hallowed tree trunks were used as boats to travel through the





3. Close to nature



vast system of lakes, allowing the earlier settler to conduct trade and explore new lands. Their whole existence centred around the natural resource wood. This great dependence on wood as a major natural resource brought Finns closer, over a period of time, to a greater understanding of the laws and workings of nature. They began to emulate and interpret these laws in their primitive designs, producing objects of strict functionality with no room for waste or excess - just like nature.



Chapter 2: Nature and Finnish Design.

Design in Finnish Folk Culture

"Design is for man, and man is part of nature"
(Gaynor, 1984, p.226)

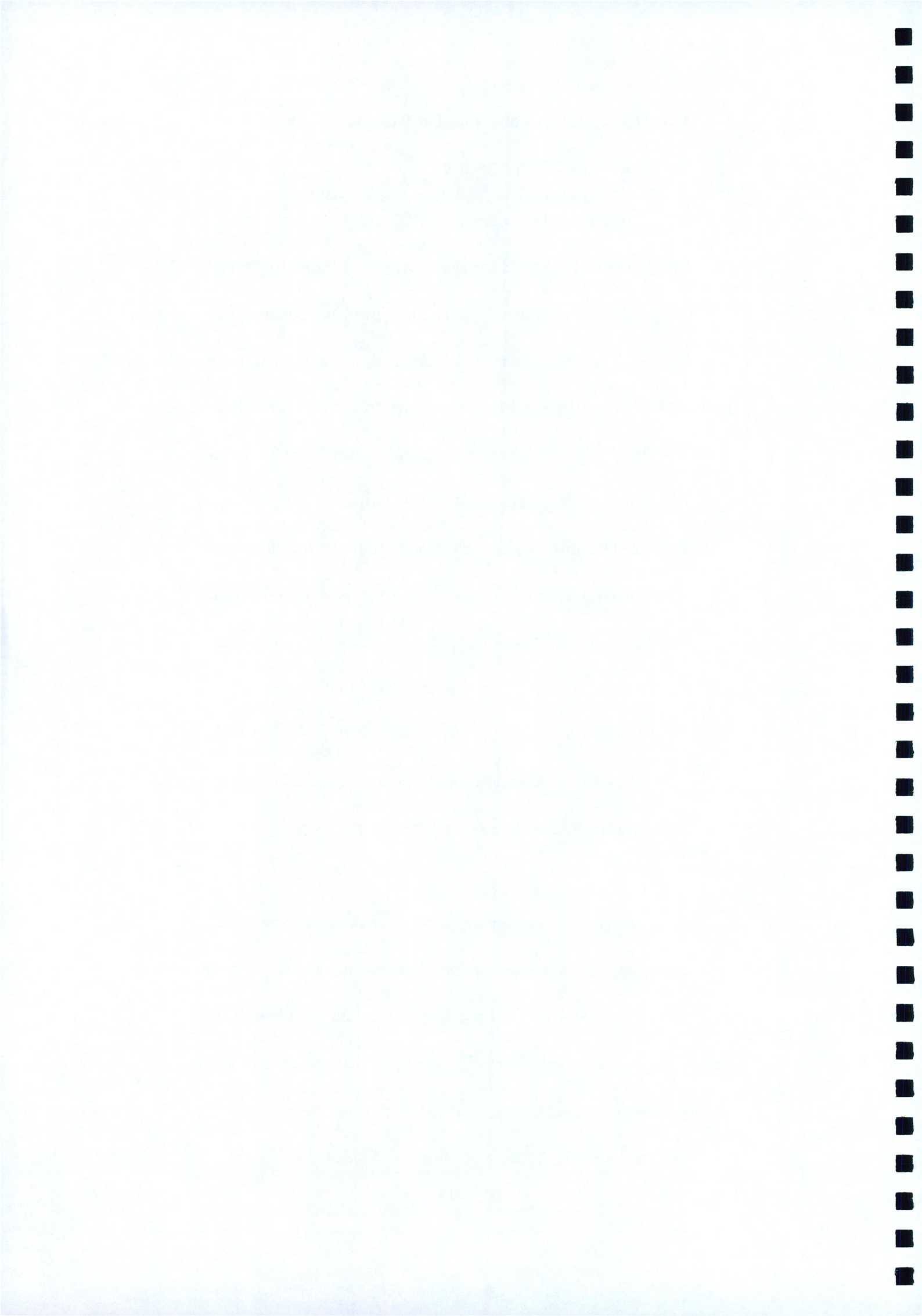
The basic and inherent characteristics of Finnish style and design have been present since the Finns lived as a peasant race.

The spirit of the people, their character, the environment in which they live, and the rituals, customs and traditions associated with that environment have shaped how the Finns live, work, and of course create art and design.

In ancient Finnish folklore, the relationship of Finns to nature traces its origins back to pagan times, when they worshiped the many gods and spirits that represented nature and the elements.

Finnish design is based on these ancient folk traditions which, over the centuries, have developed from the interaction between the natural environments and the culture of the people.

From the humble beginnings of the ancient peasants primitive existence, with a simple log cabin for a home, and reliance on natural resources for food and livelihood, simple and beautiful designs emerged. Devoid of all excess ornament and decoration, these objects, many of them functional household tools and utensils, were the precursors of Finnish design today.



With industrialisation reaching Finland late, new processes of manufacture infiltrated a society where, up until then, primitive craft was practised. These two seemingly opposing practices- industrial manufacture and craft manufacture- merged surprisingly quickly. And since those early beginnings, they have collaborated harmoniously. Senior 'factory' workforce were even given titles such as 'mastercraftsman' demonstrating that the Finns perceived no conflict between art and industry.

In these remote countries a powerful art movement is forcing its way into the general art development of Europe andwill undoubtedly, ere long, claim greater public attention. (McFadden (Ed.), 1982, p.11 quoting from The Studio, London, 1901).

The simple and primitive forms used by the industrialists, soon emerged as a functional style, now recognised as distinctly Finnish. Just as the ancient peasants had a dislike of wastefulness so too did the industrialists.

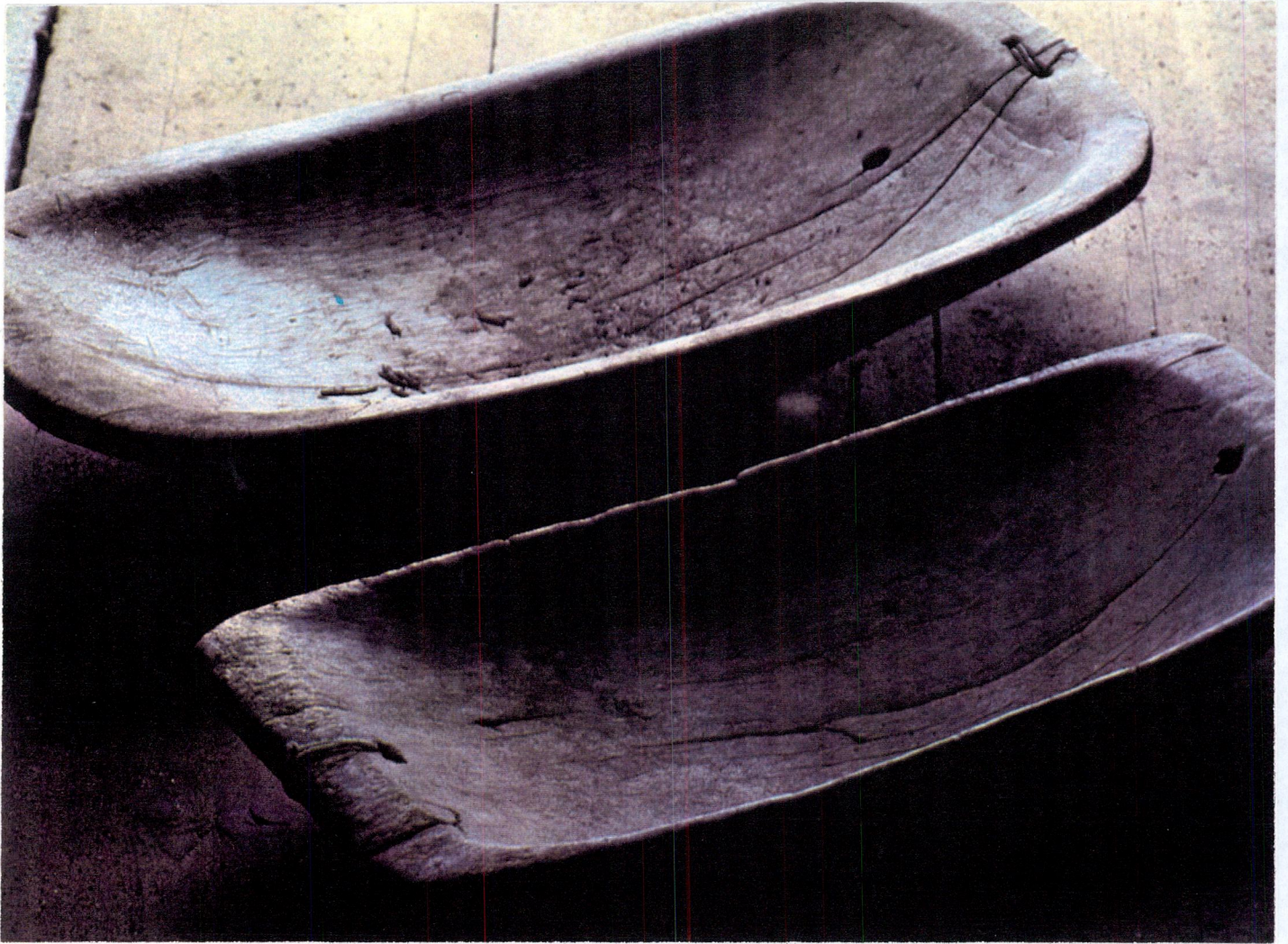
The most unique element in Finnish design is its closeness to nature. Nature has provided artists and designers with shapes, colours, forms and textures, and of course raw materials, and has even influenced the treatment of those materials. Obviously, with long, dark and cold winters dominating the





4. Glass-like water from a lake in Finland. Many artists and designers have been greatly influenced by such a scene.





5. Traditional bowls or platters made from carved birch used for serving food.

Finnish calendar, all forms of design, particularly outdoor design is going to take into account the changes in climate. To this end, most items of outdoor design in Finland, from street lamps to bus shelters have been 'winter-proofed'. The 'moderate' temperature in the capital Helsinki can drop as low as - 20°C in winter. Consequently, the Finns have adapted both in lifestyle and design (well, these two are inseparable anyway) ways of combating the cold. All houses and apartments are built with steep-sloping roofs, small window areas and heavy insulation. Roads are cleared of snow every day when a barrage of trucks and snow-mobiles hit the streets. Buses, trams, and metro's have double-glazed windows.

Nature's Inspiration

Finland's long, dark and snow-covered winters have provided the theme and form for many products of craft and industrial design. Hundreds of years of virtual isolation located 'on top of the world' has taught people to trust their senses, to rely on the work of their hands, to accept and appreciate the ways of nature. In the history of Finnish design this link with nature takes many different forms - 'respect for the soul' of the natural materials, placement of buildings in harmony with the environment and inspiration derived from the forms of nature.



In his book Soul in Design Tapio Perriainen illustrates this point perfectly.

The most typical forms of the visual identity of European culture travelled far into the Finnish lakelands and wilderness. The neo-classical form-language borrowed its design partly from nature and partly from the logical way of thinking of European man, with the help of which the forces and phenomena of nature were put into order.

The forms and colours of classical architecture were well suited to the social structure of its time, also in Finland. Country houses were traditionally unpainted or painted with red ochre. The light grey or yellow neo-classical wall, with its white pillars and window sills, differentiated the manorhouse of the mansion from the other residential quarters or annexes. In addition, the symmetry and ornamentation close to nature was in good harmony with the surrounding trees and woods. (Perriainen, 1990, p.11).

"Close to nature was in good harmony with the surrounding trees and woods". This describes perfectly the concern of the Finns in preserving their natural landscape. The Finns are extremely aware of their beautiful scenery and natural treasures.



Natural Materials

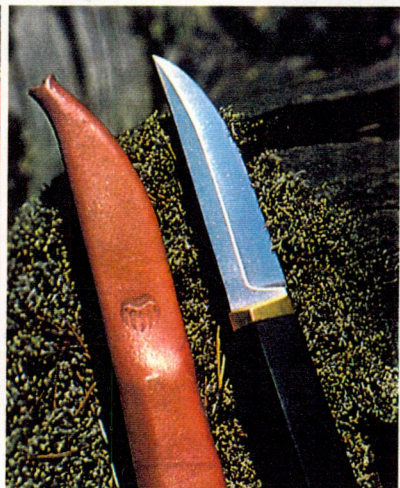
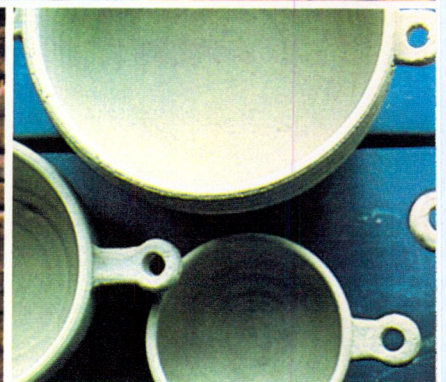
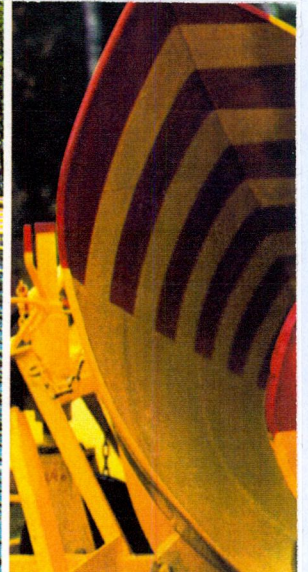
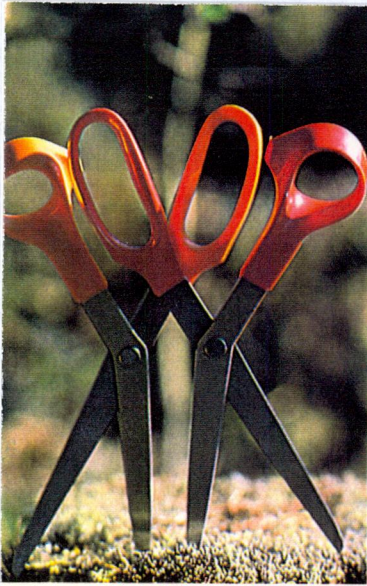
One of the primary ways we connect to the natural world in design is through natural materials. Natural materials such as wood, stone, clay and wool have a long history of use, both functional and decorative in Finland.

The Sami people, a peasant tribe from northern Finland, demonstrated a great respect for nature through the use of natural materials. They made traditional houses or kota from a frame of wooden sticks covered with animal skins. They used primitive natural dyes developed from forest plants, to decorate their simple wool clothes. They kept reindeer for meat, reindeer milk, skins, fur and of course to pull their sledges. Dried out reeds harvested from the lakes during summer provided them with the raw materials from which they made baskets. They produced simple tools and cooking utensils, such as spears and goblets, by carving and shaping the wood, chopped from the local birch trees.

Wood

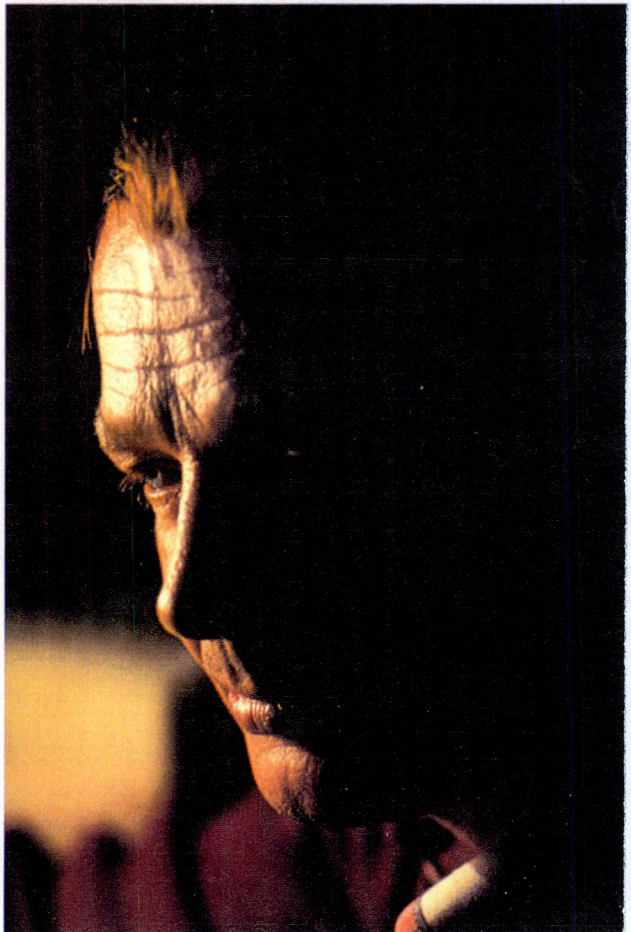
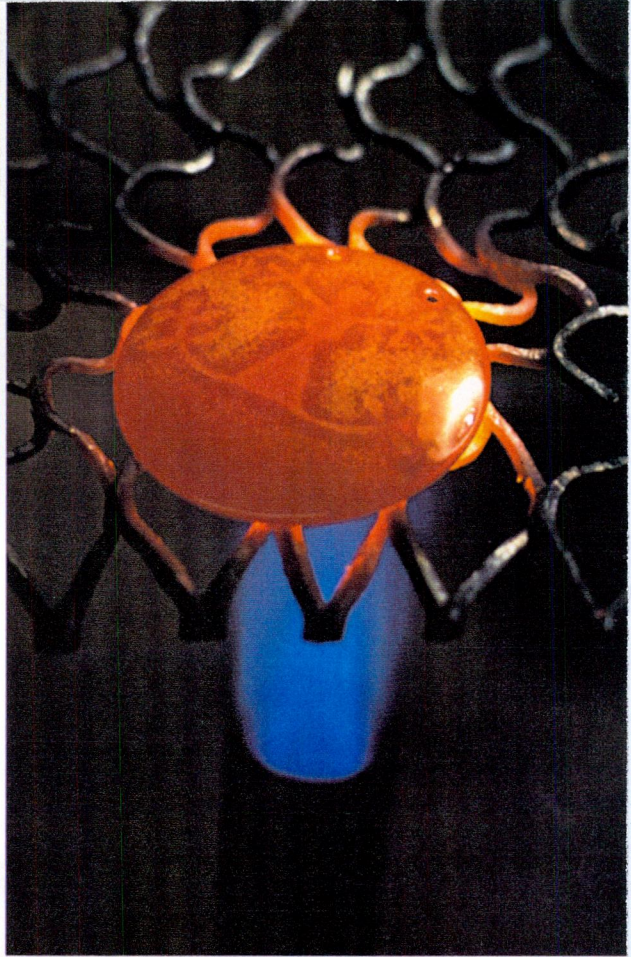
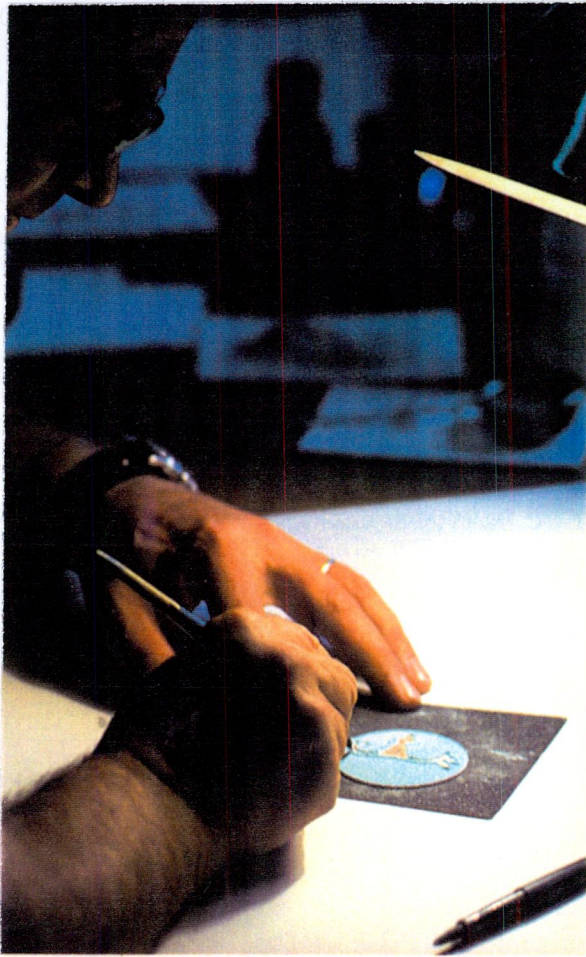
"Wood is like man. It is born from a seed, grows and reaches towards the light". (Periainen, 1990, p.108).





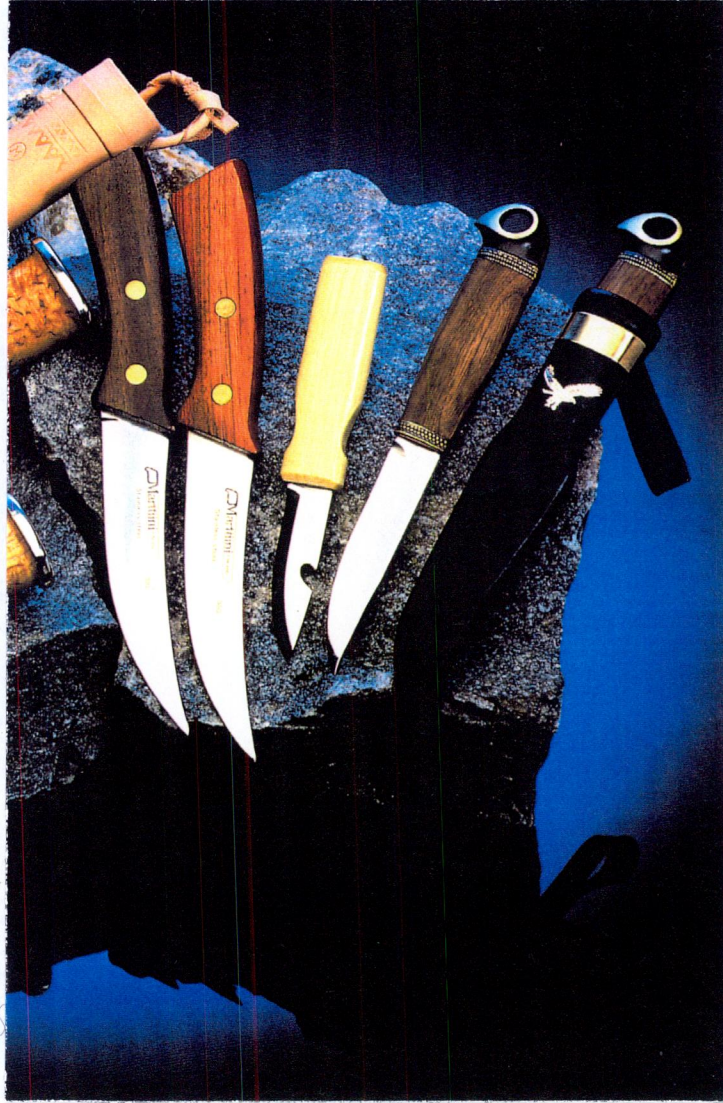
7. Symbols and ritual developed around the natural world.



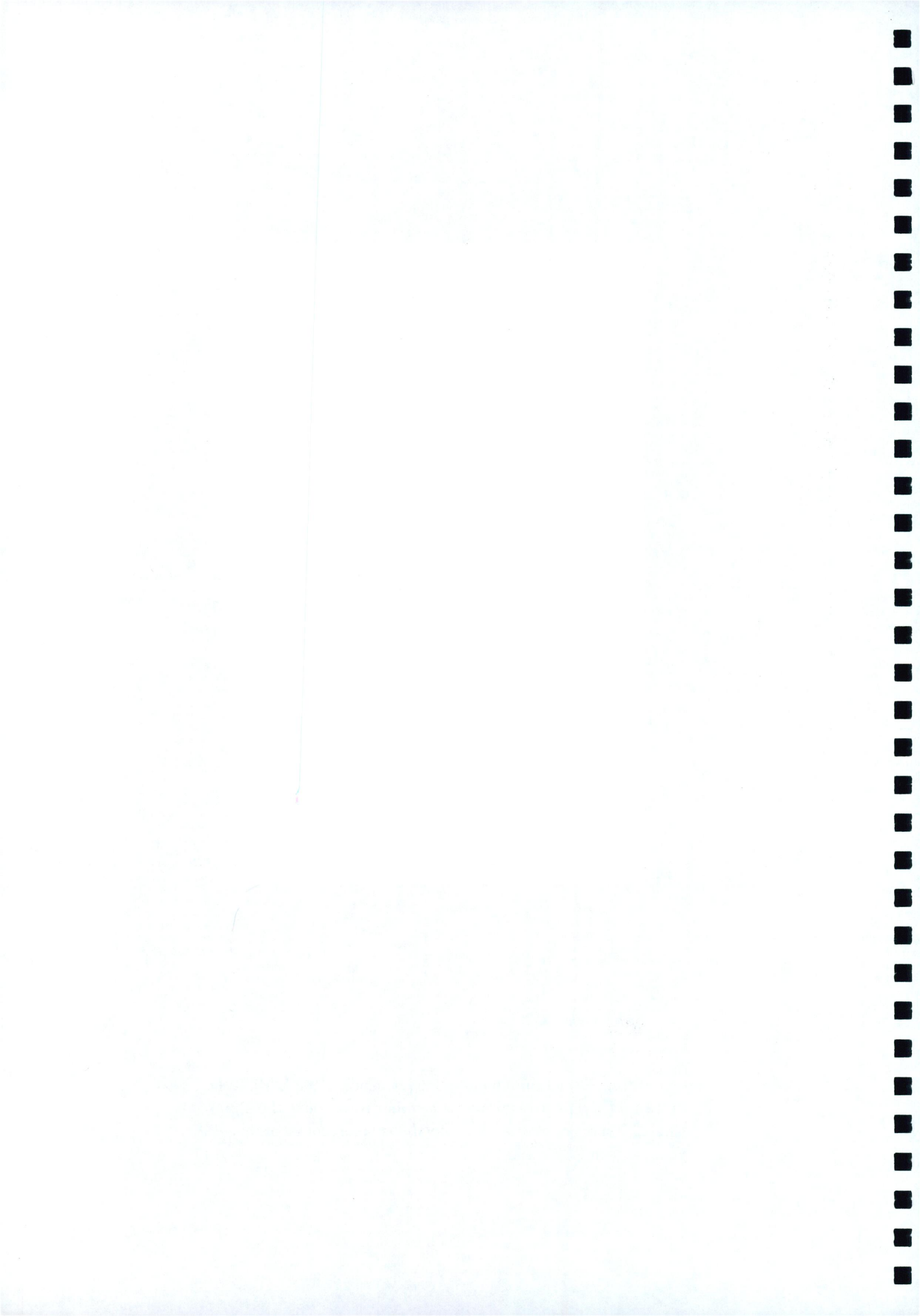


8. Lasse Talonen, jewellery, inspired by the traditional designs and symbols of the ancient lapp culture.





9. Marttiini, Sami (lapp) hunting knives, made at the J. Marttiini knife factory in Rovaniemi, a Finnish town near the Polar Circle. There are 60 traditional models manufactured at this 70 year old factory.





10. Timo Sarpaneva, cast iron pot, designed for the Pori works of W. Rosenlew and Co. in 1960. It is based on the traditional cooking pots used by the ancient Finns. The teak handle is removable and can be used to lift off the lid.



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*These oval 'stumps' by Markku Kosonen, 1992,
are made of elm, linden, rowan root,
curly birch, poplar root, ash root,
pine root and goat willow root.*

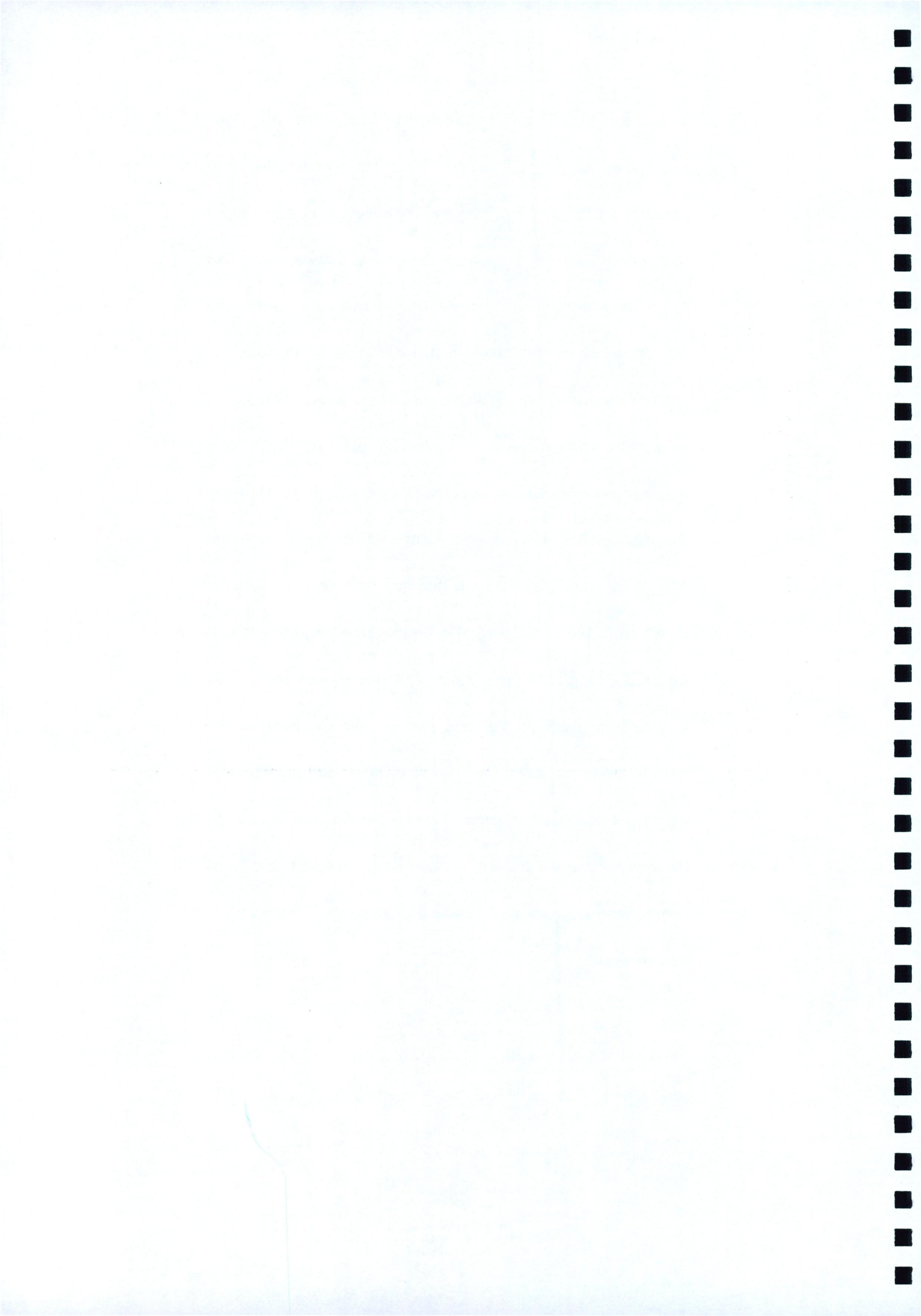


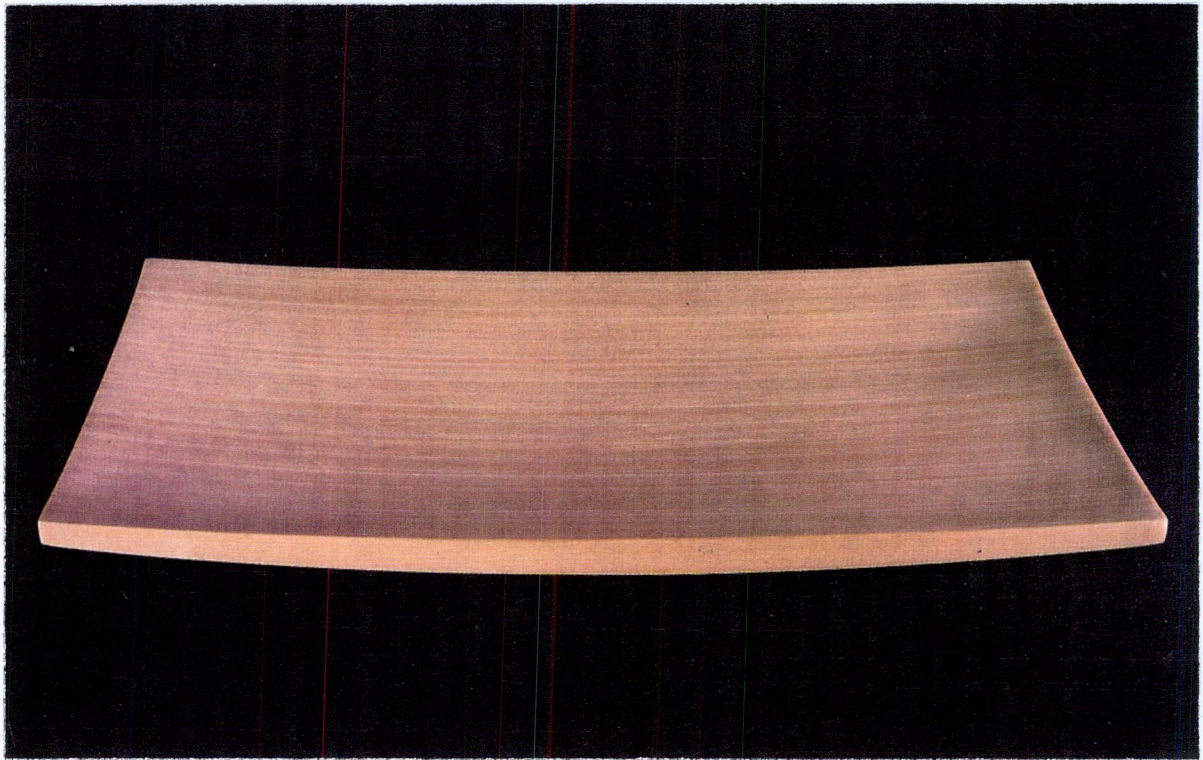
The diversity of woods chosen shows the Finns great obsession with exploring new natural materials.



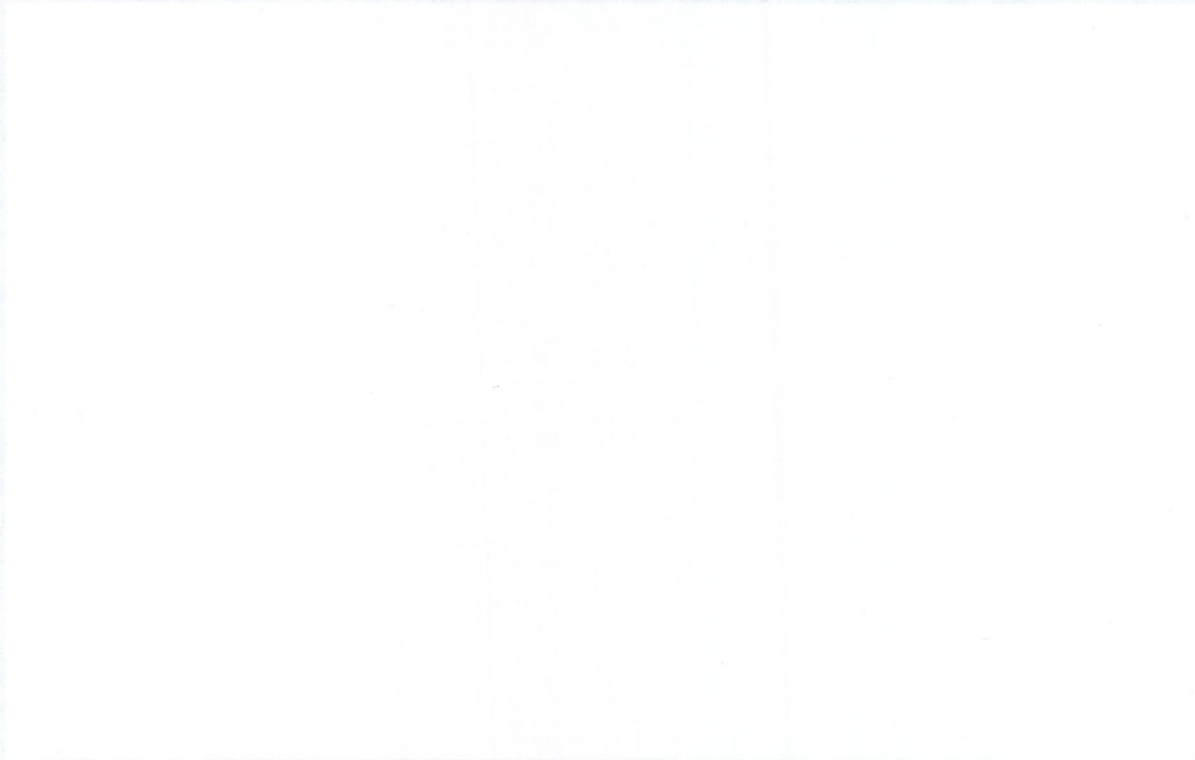
Wood was clearly one of the earliest and most important materials used by the Sami people. It was strong enough to employ as a building material and could easily be made into a number of functional 'household' objects. At times it seems like everything is made from wood in Finland - the sauna, the houses and apartments, boats and ships, bridges and churches, and of course furniture. With the ancient peasants almost totally reliant on wood for every conceivable use, the Finns have developed a special relationship with this natural material. As the years passed they became masters at constructing almost everything from wood, but all the time with very little waste. Apart from the fact that it was an extremely important raw material, wood also had a major spiritual significance. The God's of the Sami people were said to have lived among the trees in the forest. Ukko, the god of thunder and lightning, and his wife Raumi, mother nature, were believed to have controlled the weather and the seasons. Consequently, wood, to the Sami people represented a vital physical and spiritual link with the natural world.

Today that link is still evident throughout Finnish society, especially in the work of artists and designers. Kari Virtanen (b. 1948) a carpenter, craftsman and furniture designer from Nurmo



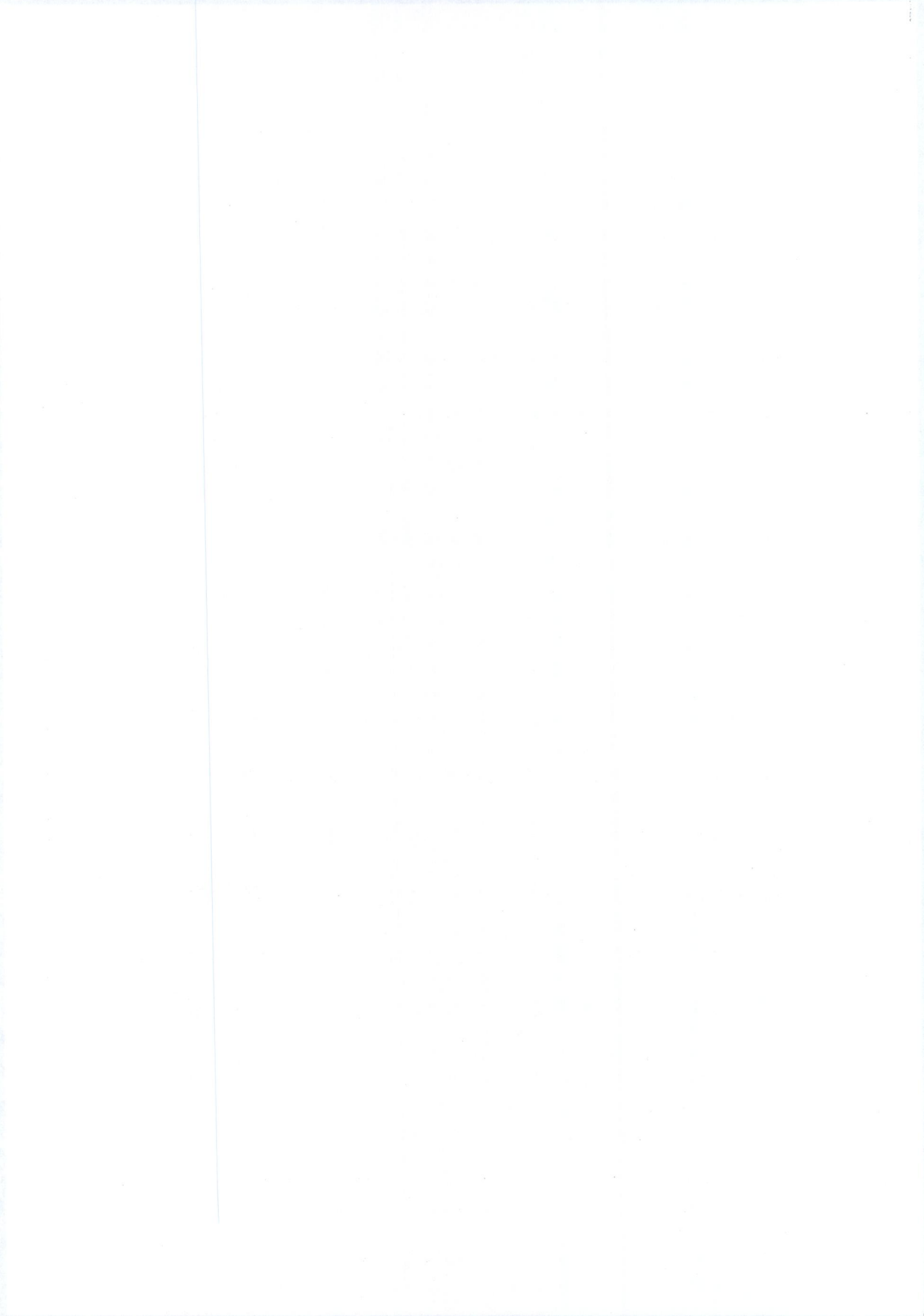


12. Kari Virtanen, dish, birch coloured plain joints, 1985.

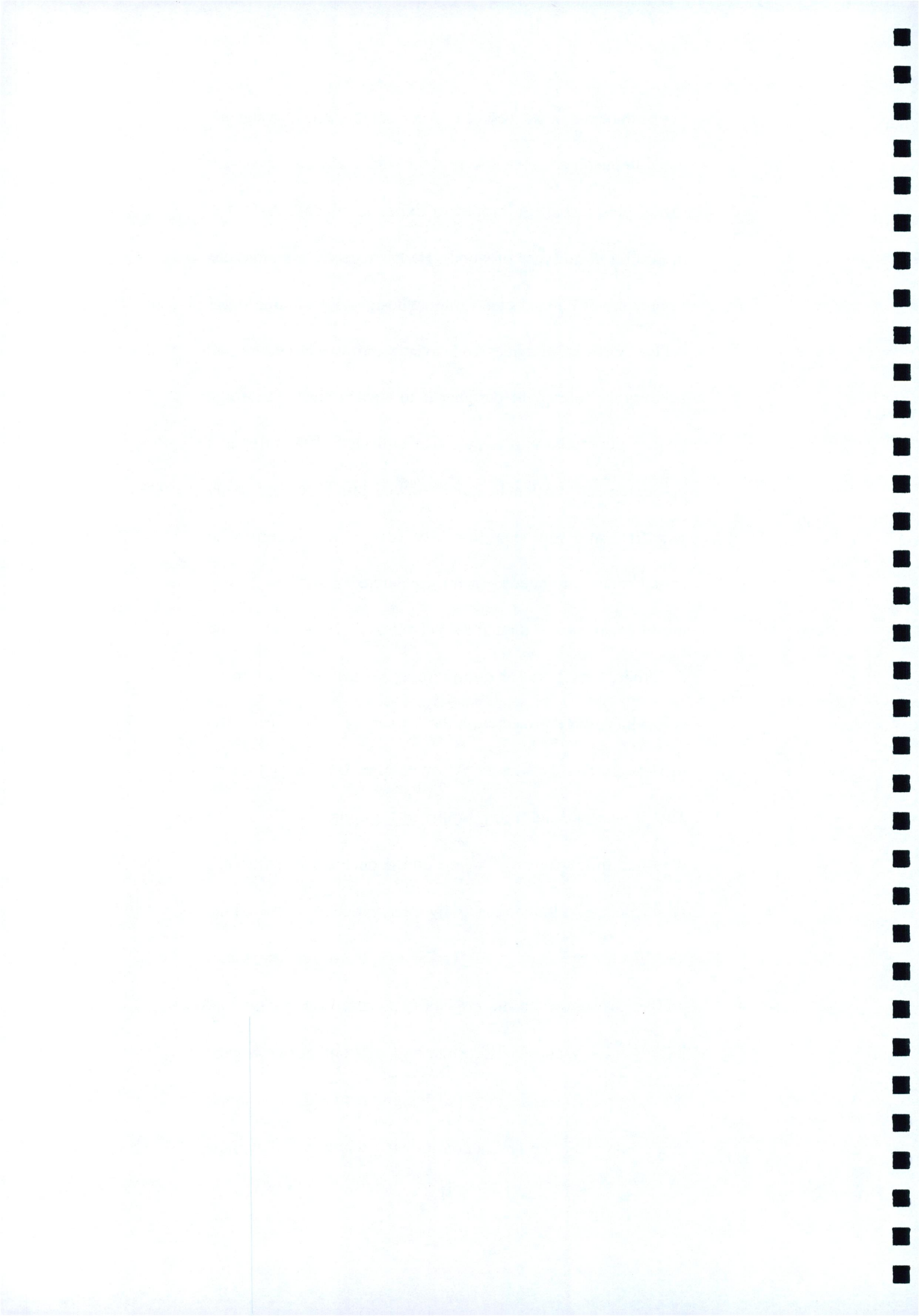




13. Kari Virtanen, cupboard, birch, 1989.



in Ostrobothnia in the west of Finland, demonstrates through his work an ongoing love and respect for wood. He continues after thirty years as a craftsman to experiment and study the intricacies of all types of wood. He has received commissions from many of Finland's top furniture designers, including Alvar Aalto. Virtanen disagrees with today's throwaway culture and believes the role of the designer is to create objects from high quality materials with a style that will last. His skills as a carpenter and craftsman have allowed him to create many beautiful and timeless pieces of furniture. Recently he demonstrated his interest in further exploring and developing methods of using 'unusable' varieties of wood, i.e. wood considered useless for commercial exploitation, when he collaborated on a project with the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki and the Finnish Association of Interior Designers. The project entitled 'From Forest to Furniture' set out to see whether other types of wood could be used in furniture production. (At the moment only three varieties - spruce, pine and birch - are used commercially). Both designers and craftsmen worked on the project, exploring ways of sawing, joining, gluing and finishing the new and unfamiliar woods. Eleven practical and beautiful designs resulted, with many going into full-scale production, proving that even today, new



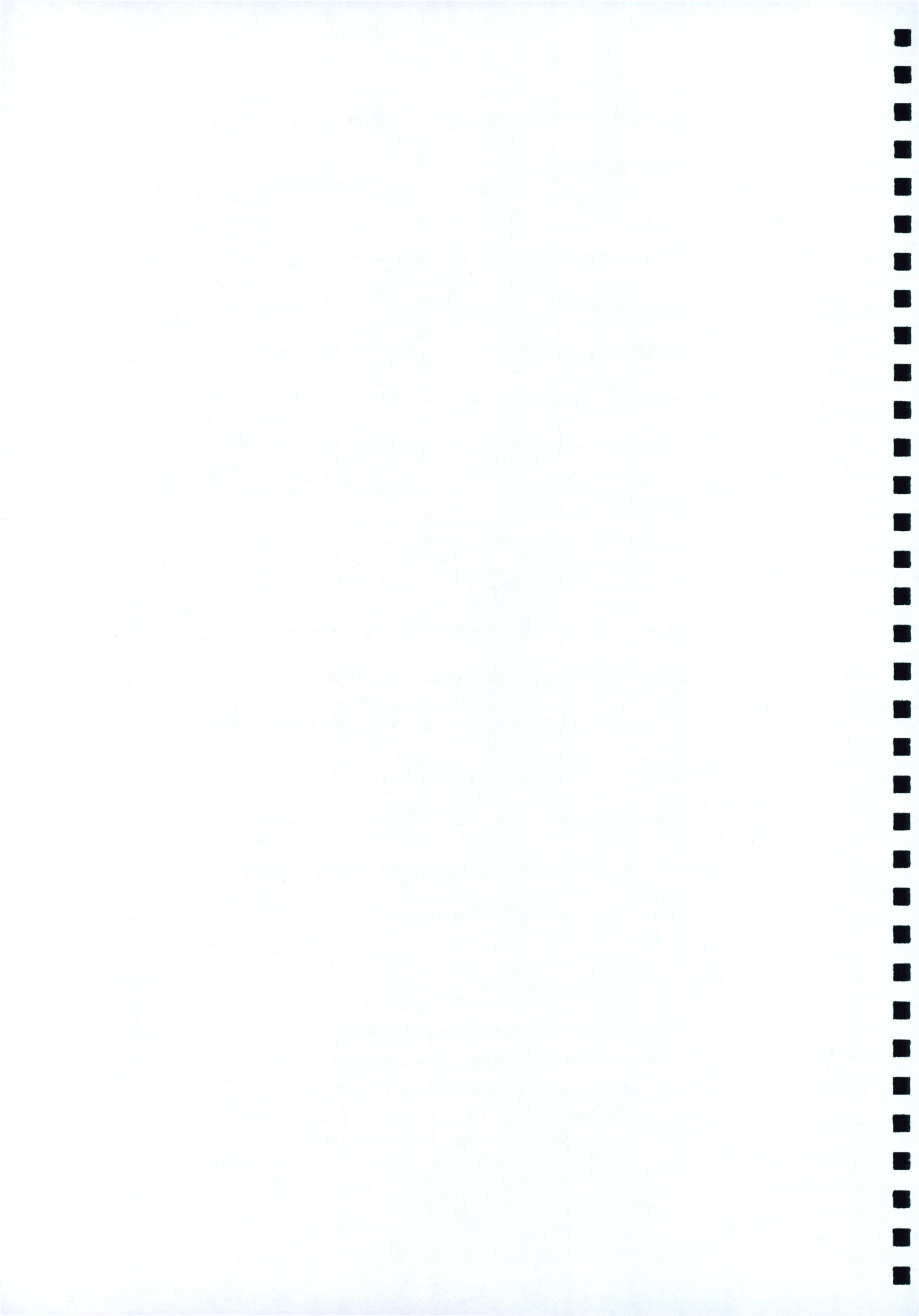
wood and unexplored methods of production are there waiting to be discovered.

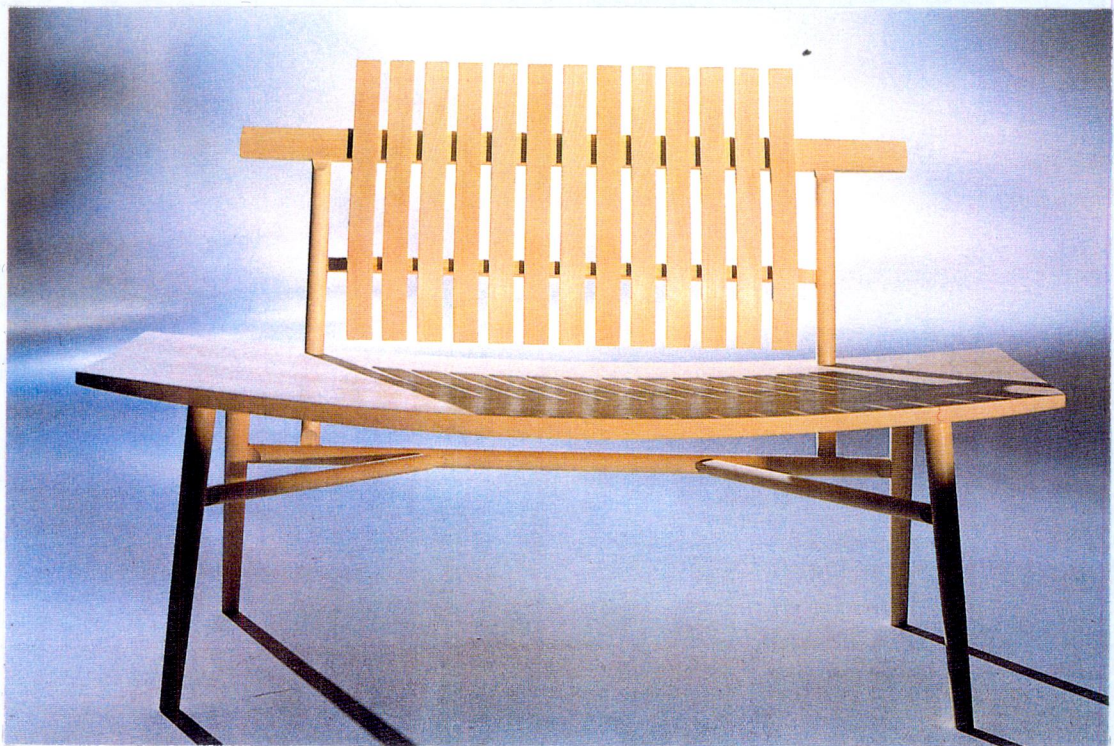
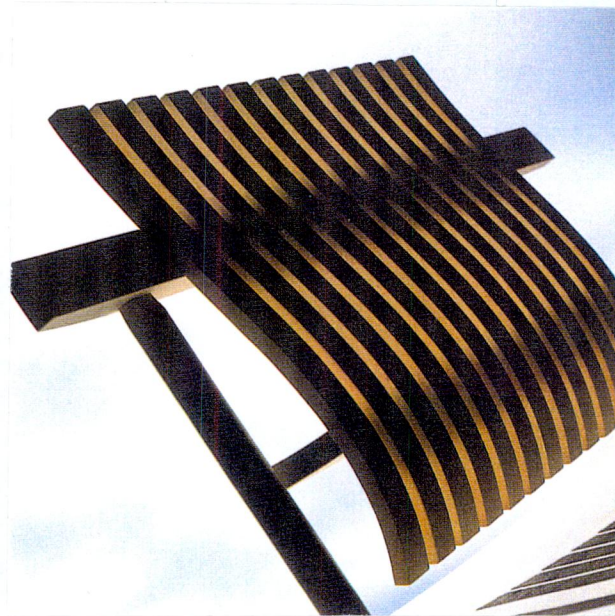
Traditionally the primary woods used for furniture production were ash, birch, pine and oak. During the Finnish design boom of the 1940's, teak was also used, but birch, the Finnish favourite managed to maintain its popularity, and is synonymous with Finnish furniture today. Of course wider range of wood is now used. To maintain the supply of birch and pine, the two most commonly used woods, other species have also been recently propagated for commercial use.

Wood of all types, is often dismissed by many many young designers as being a material that has been explored and exploited to it's full potential, and that offers nothing new. This is not true.

Eeva Kokkonen, a student of the University of Industrial Arts, who contributed to the From Forest to Furniture project, was one such designer who took full advantage of the opportunity to work with new woods.

Eeva Kokkonen chose basswood as her material and with no hesitation set out to design a bench. She wanted to obtain the greatest possible sense of contact. The material's even quality, resistance to splitting and lightness led her to





14. Eeva Kokkonen, basswood bench finished in wax, 1992.



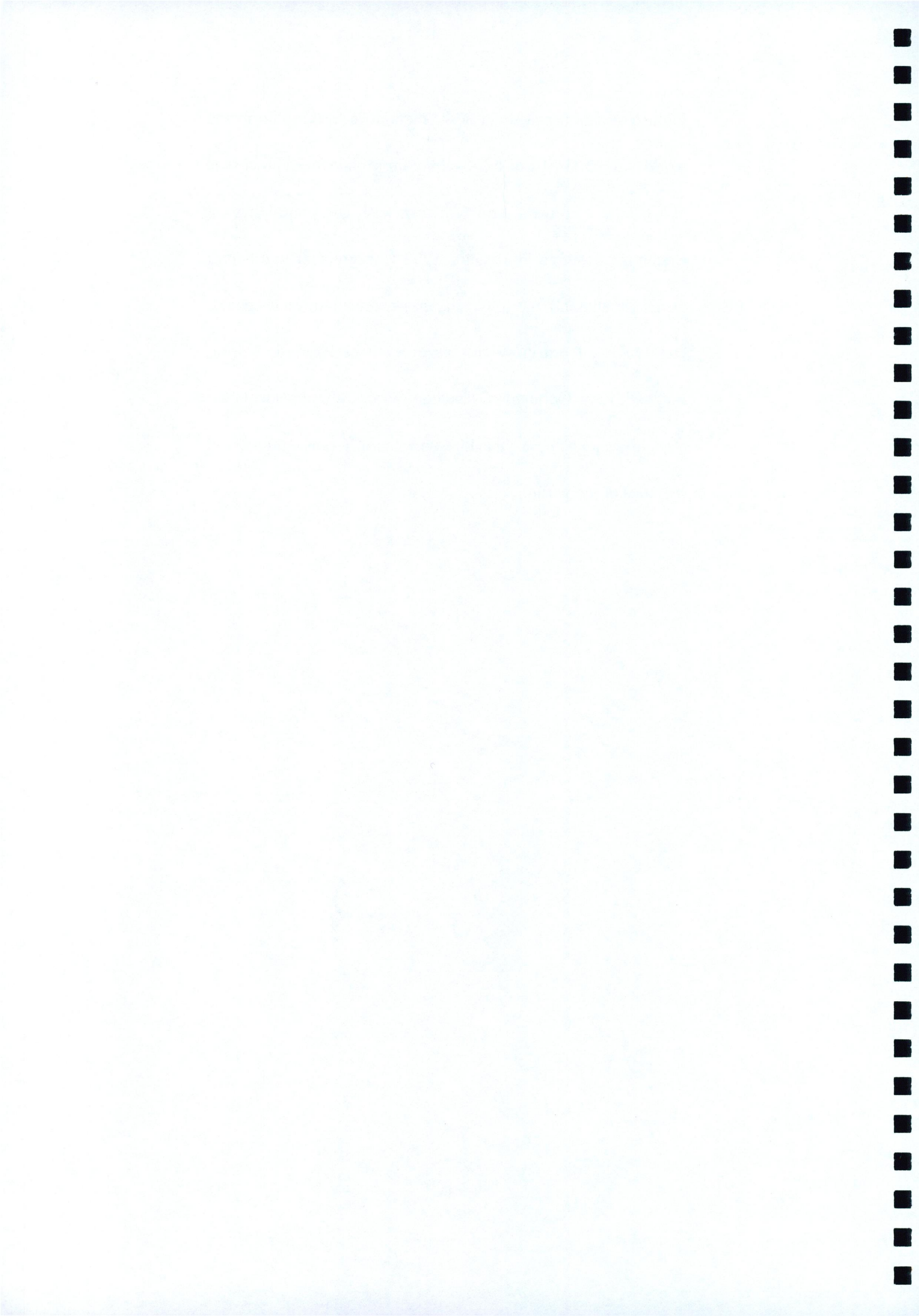
create a big, uniform seat. Basswood's softness limits the choice of joints. If they are too delicate, they will not hold up, and loose joints are a problem. Basswood is easy to work as Kari Virtanen noted in planning the elegant seat. The long, thin surfaces are flexible but can withstand weight. In order to preserve the fair colour of the wood, a wax finish was used. This also brings out the fineness and uniform grain of the material". (Joensuu (Ed), 1992, p.42).

Kokkonen is typical of many of the students studying at the UIAH. One only has to walk the halls and corridors of the university building (once used as a factory by the famous ceramic company Hackman (Arabia) to see numerous examples of thoughtful, and more recently, thought-provoking designs ranging from new and exciting chairs using the still-popular laminated plywood production process, to cupboards and coat stands finished in colourful water-based dyes and grunge - inspired deconstructive joints.

Open-minded and youthful tutors teach the processes of design and encourage and nurture individuality, in my case recognising and respecting the culture and society in which I grew up. They are well travelled and energetic teachers who, though 'haunted', by the past, both physically (by the rantings of the conservative Finnish design royalty) and spiritually (by the ever-present ghost of Aalto and Saarinen) have recognised the failings of the

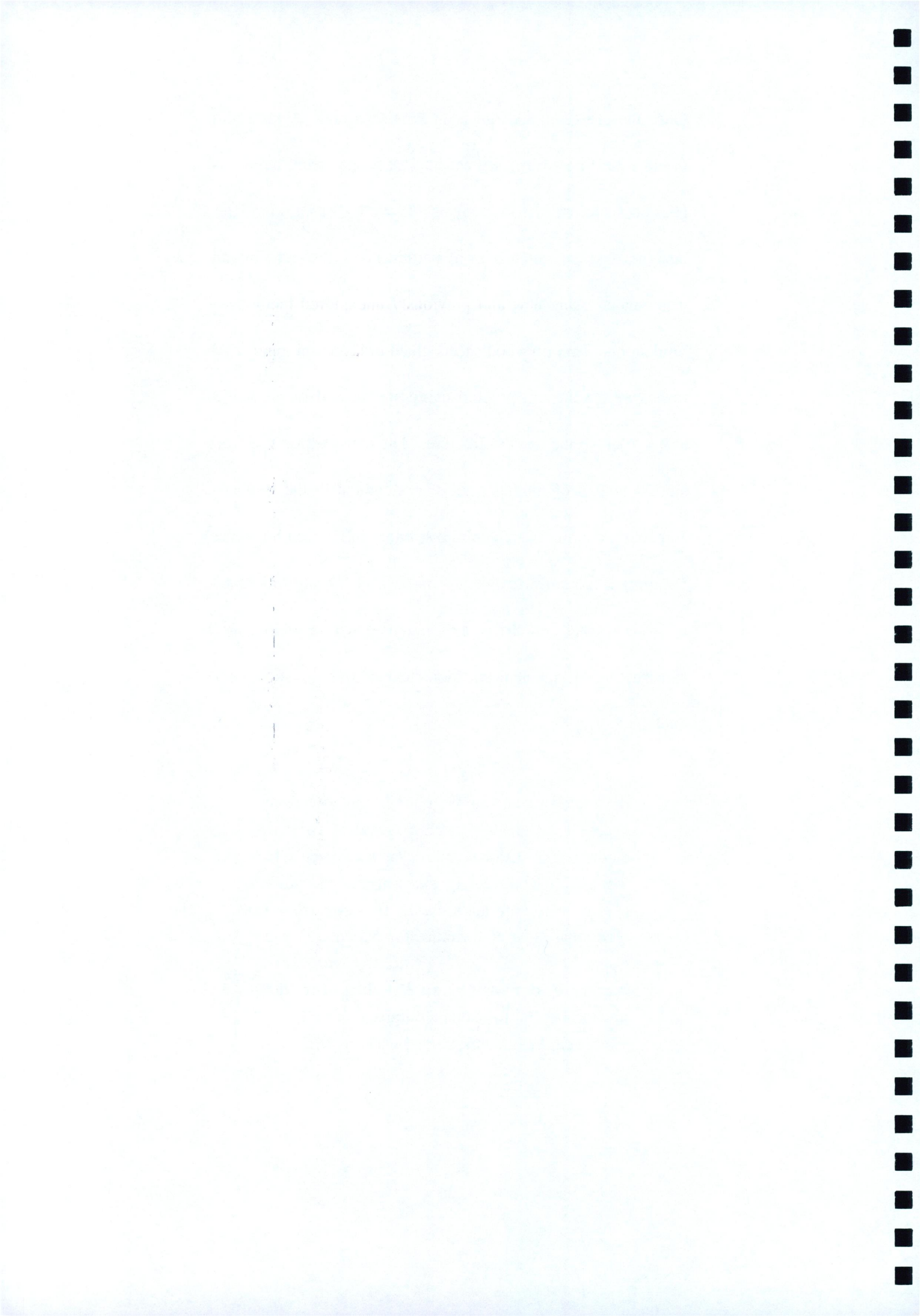


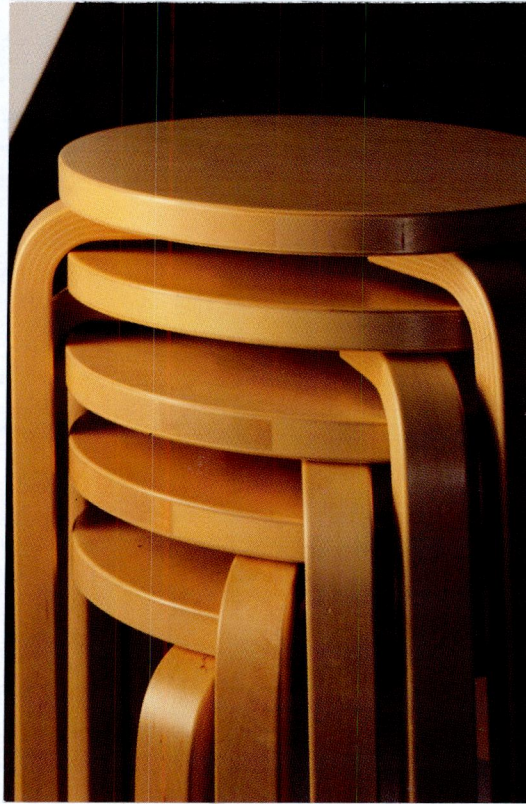
Finnish situation and see a new potential in 'waking up to the world'. A small part of this 'waking up to the world' process is using new materials, and working with forty students on Erasmus exchange in January 1993 (the greatest number of exchange students the university has received since it began). Originating from countries as diverse as Ireland, Korea, England, Italy, Germany, Canada and France these students are recognised as being a vital link with the different cultures and societies of the world.



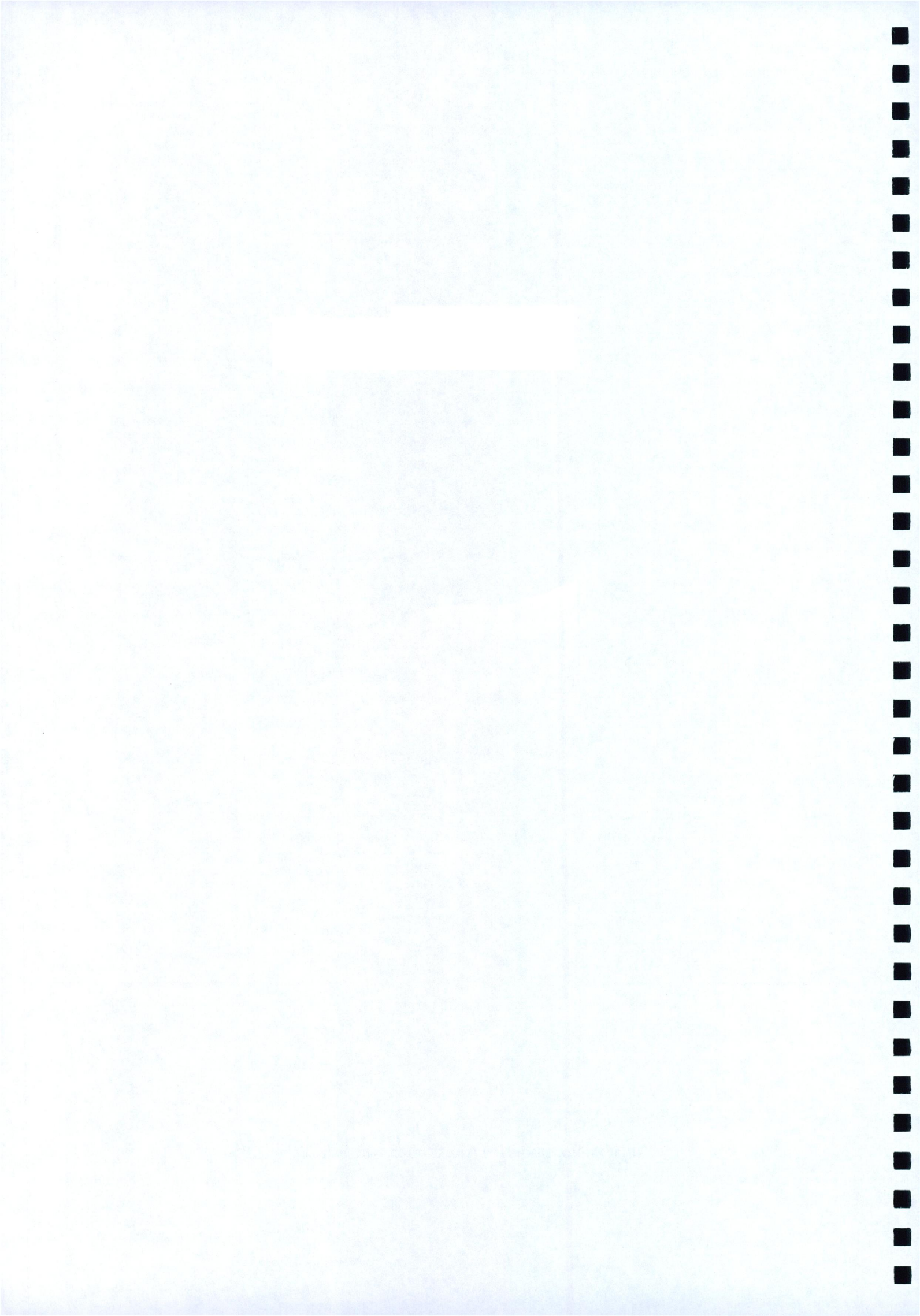
Once the most famous figures in Finnish design, Alvar Aalto, (1898 - 1976) also had a great interest in exploring materials. His most successful and recognisable work, the Paimio Chair, designed for the sanatorium at Paimio in south-west Finland, was created using new and previously unexplored methods of production. Thin plywood sheets glued in layers on top of each other, were bent and pressed using steam, and then cut into strips to make the chair's structure. The construction was very similar to that of tubular steel chairs created in the Bauhaus. But Aalto, coming from a culture strongly influenced by nature, interpreted the construction in a more user-friendly material - birchwood. Aalto had first experimented with a tubular steel construction for the chair but soon changed over to wood, as he explained.

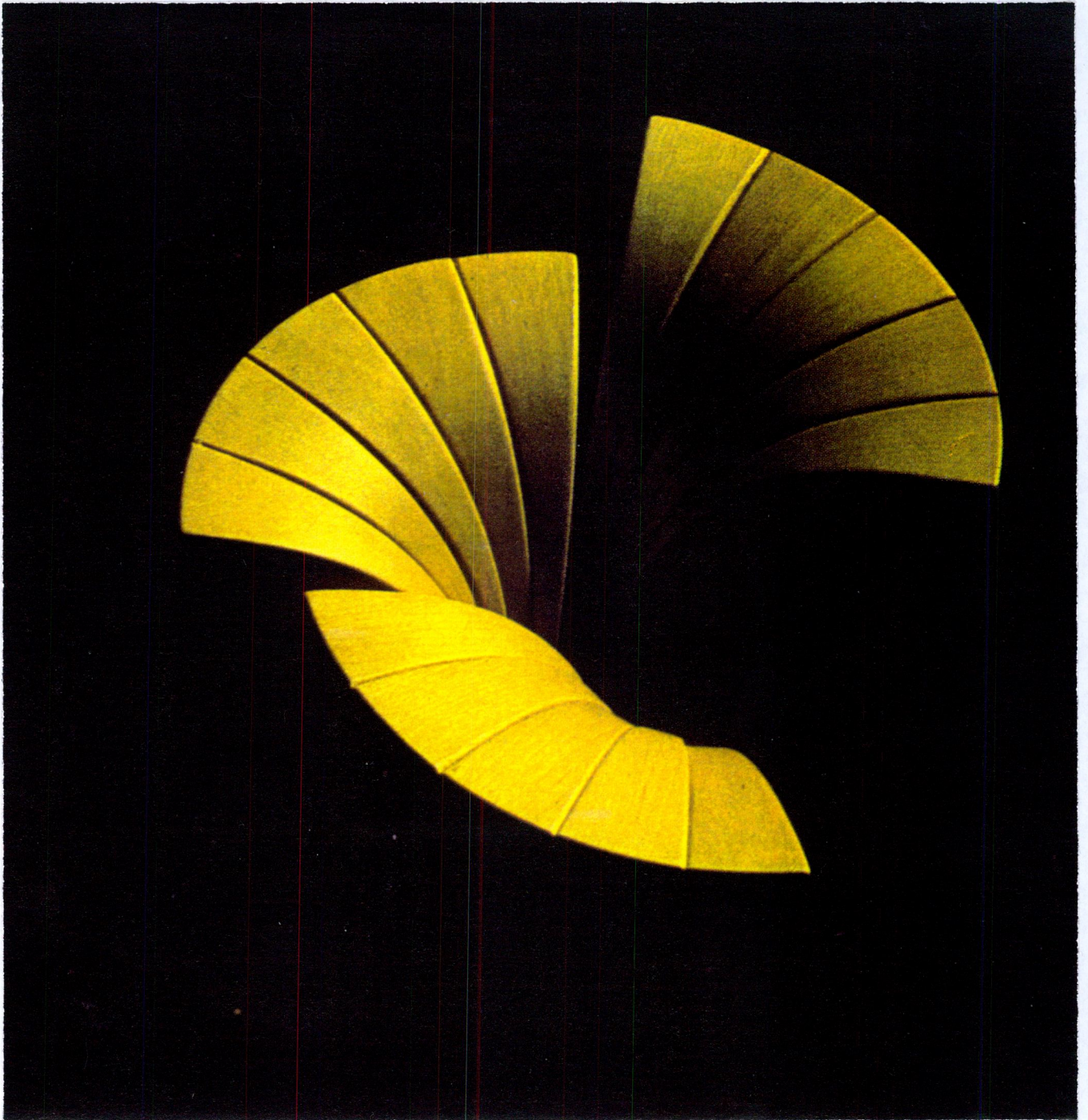
the nickel or chromium plated steel furniture seems too harsh, psychologically, for the environment of sick people. And so we began to work with wood, using this warmer and more pliant material as a basis to construct a functional style of furniture for patients. From these beginnings, we gradually went into furniture construction, not just for the sanatorium, but for general purposes as well. (Sembach, Leuthauser, Gossel, 1991, p.121)





15. Alvar Aalto, stools for Artek, birch with ash veneer, 1954.





16. Alvar Aalto, fan-legs used in the production of birch tables and stools, 1954.





17. Alvar Aalto, armchair, Model 41, laminated bent birchwood frame, seat of shaped, varnished plywood for the Paimio Sanatorium, 1928.



As with the Paimio Chair most of Aalto's furniture originated out of the need for furniture for his architectural projects. Concerned with the overall look of his buildings he designed every aspect of them, including the furniture. Another well-known design by Aalto is his fan-leg stool and table, also designed in conjunction with a building - the Viipuri town library. Again, birchwood was used with the legs sawn and laminated to give the stool a flowing and natural form. The common characteristics that link the ancient Sami people with Alvar Aalto, Kari Virtanen and Eeva Kokkonen, is a respect and understanding of natural materials and perhaps more importantly, a willingness to continue to learn from nature.



Under The Weather

Obviously nature also influences Finnish design through the climate. The changing seasons have a major effect on the mood of the Finnish people, from the optimism and festival-like atmosphere of the summer, with its twenty-four hour sunshine, to the pessimism and depression of the dark winter nights. Living in close contact with nature, with long, dark and cold winters dominating the calendar, and a thick blanket of snow and ice covering the ground for nearly four months of the year, the Finns have come to accept the ways of nature, and have learned to benefit from it, without doing it harm. The harsh winter environment and the struggle for survival that it has imposed over the centuries have played a major part in forming the character and lifestyle of the Finnish people.

The harsh climate has also encouraged the development of many industries of great importance to the Finnish economy. These include scientific experimentation and data-collection industries which can only be located in sub-zero environments such as Lapland, the development of winter insulation materials and processes used in the building, transport and clothing industries, the construction of wind-powered stations and 'farms' to harness the force of the wind found in Lapland. Public roads and walkways are built using the most winter-friendly surfacing

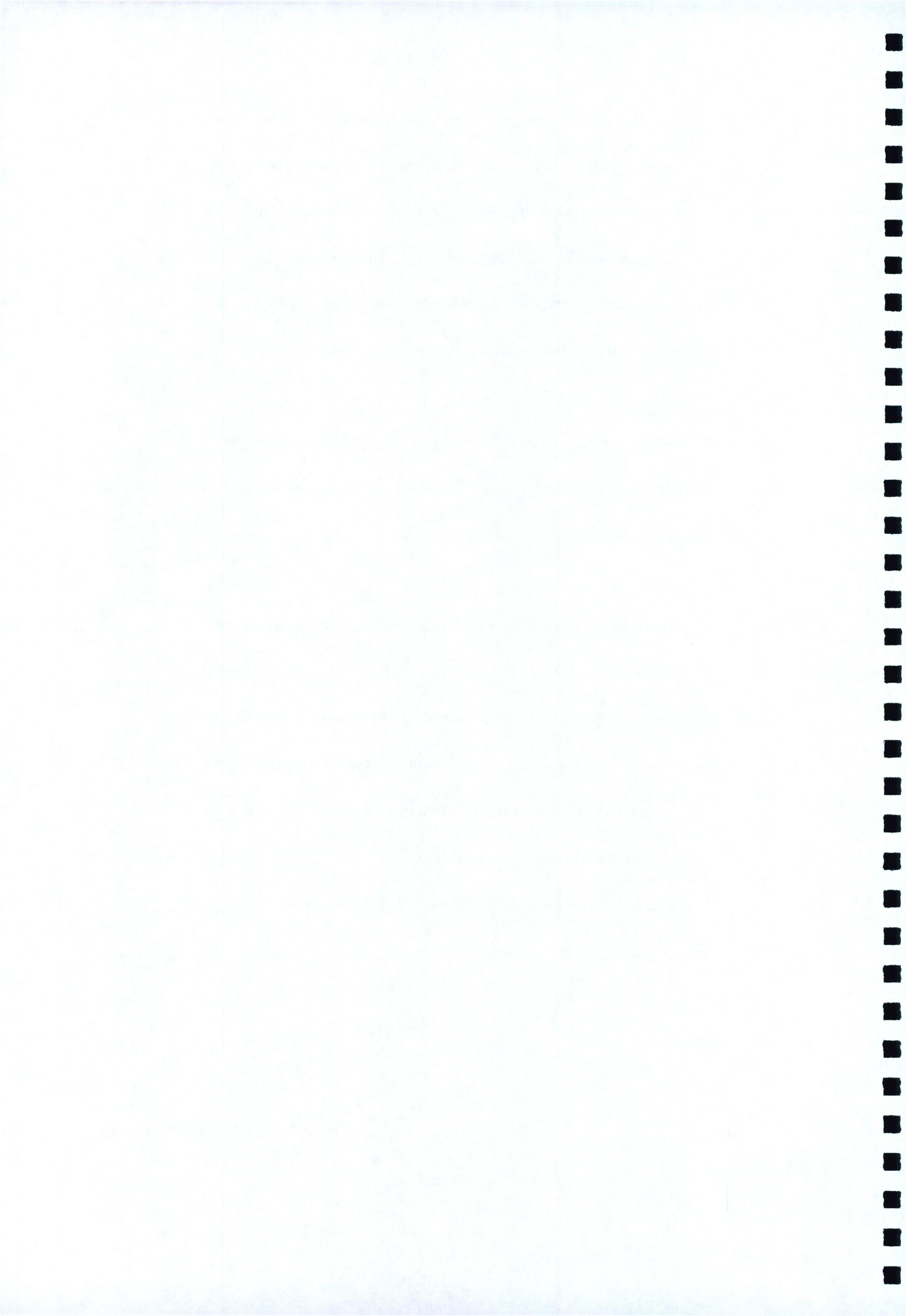


to prevent the build up of snow and ice, and to maintain a safe level of grip for humans and cars. Outdoor letter-boxes are self-contained shrines to the cold. Lined up in rows along the sides of apartment blocks, they never let in rain or snow, the lids never stick (even in sub-zero temperatures) and they look good, even on the darkest of winter mornings.

Industries producing outdoor sports equipment, outdoor work clothes, snow-mobiles and ice-breakers have also developed new technologies to combat the cold.

Many Finns cannot cope with the persistent darkness and cold of the winter season and suffer from the so-called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Sufferers experience symptoms like severe lethargy, weight gain and extreme tiredness and depression. This is a serious problem for Finland, which has the highest suicide rate in the world.

This is the down side of living so close with nature.



Chapter 3: Conservation of Nature

Nature, as we have established, was a very important element in the lives of the original Finnish settlers and has, after centuries of cultural, political and technological changes, maintained its importance to this day. So it is natural today's Finns are developing ways to conserve it for the future. To this end, the Ministry of the Environment was established. Since it was set up in 1983, many environmental acts have been passed, regulating noise pollution, the control of chemicals and hazardous waste and the protection of scenic rivers and areas of natural beauty. This forward thinking on the part of the Finnish government demonstrates Finland's serious concern for the conservation of the natural environment and has prompted many central European countries to take similar action. She is not just sitting back and admiring nature, but is concerned that it should stay unspoilt, for future generations. It must be noted this took place during the early 1980's before environmental issues such as global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer hit the world headlines.

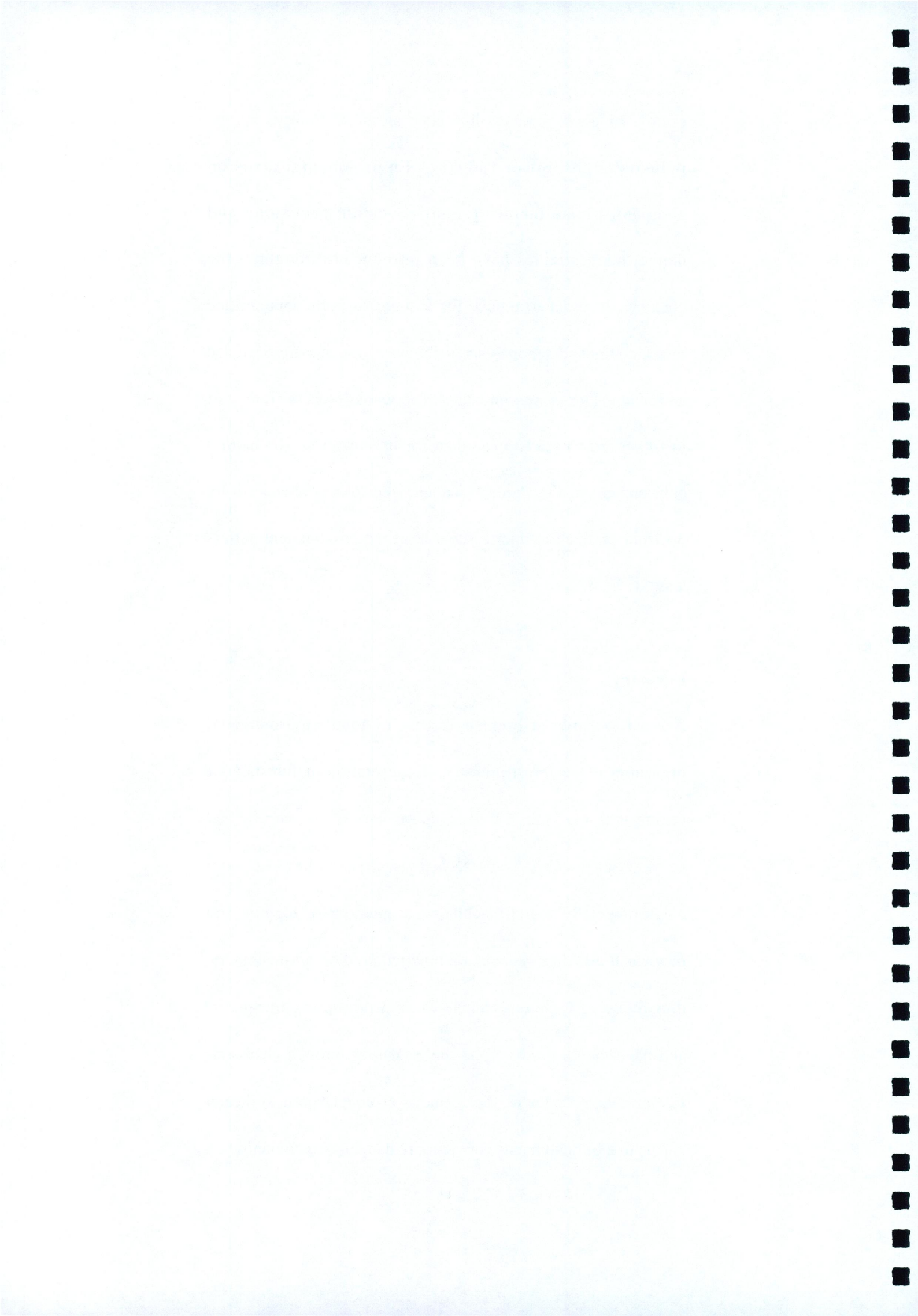
But the legislation passed in 1983 was only a small step toward addressing the complete problem of environmental conservation in Finland. Since then great improvements have been made to the environmental laws, by integrating them with the main



sectors of government policy such as the economy, energy, industry, transport or forestry. Environmental taxes on companies manufacturing non-recyclable packaging and dangerous pesticides have been introduced throughout the country. In order to reduce the amount of pollutants emitted into the atmosphere, analysis of the way products are designed and manufactured was initiated. The whole process from start to finish must now be examined for its impact on the natural environment, and the 'green' characteristics of a product built-in. So from production line to scrap-heap the environment suffers less.

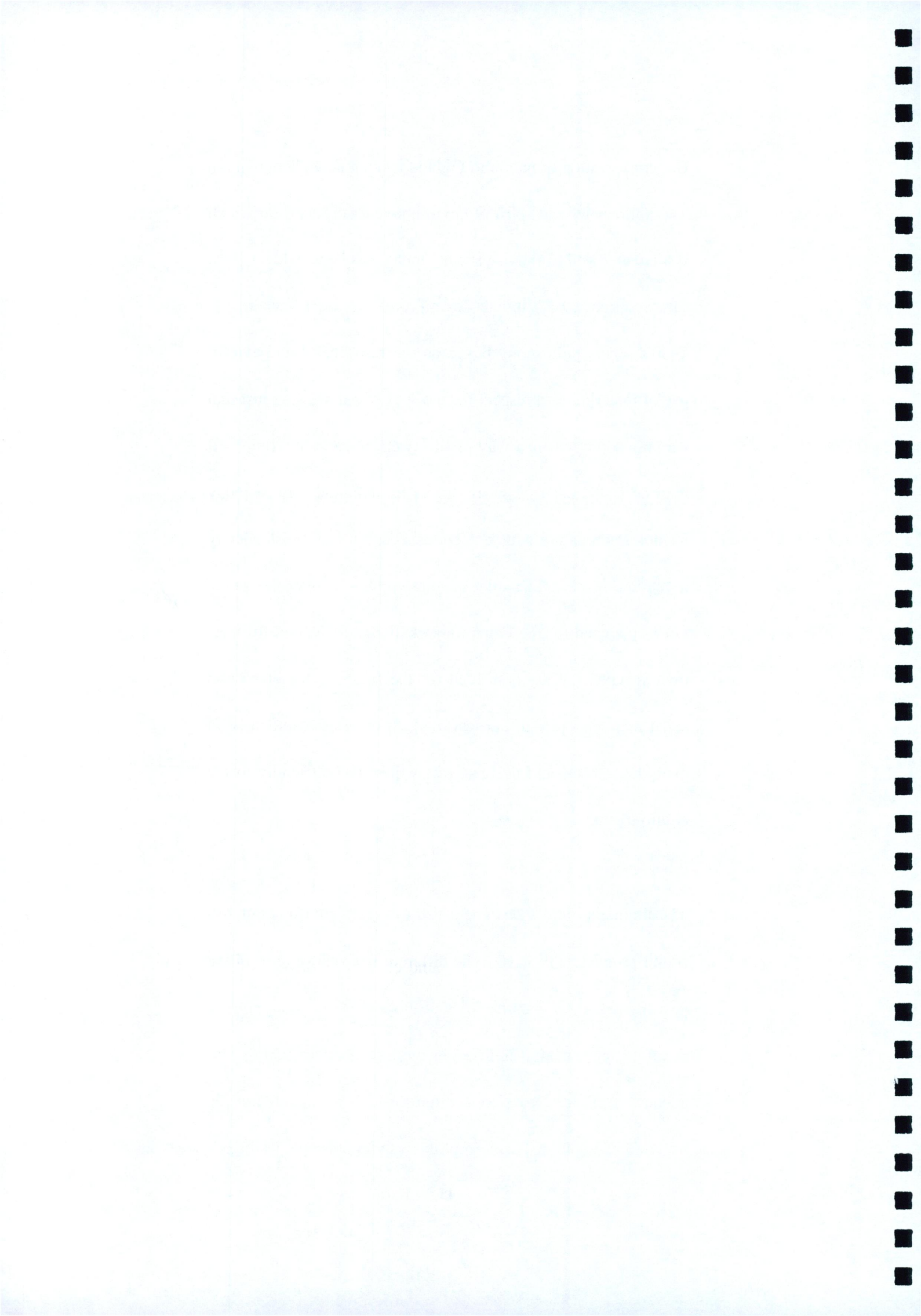
Forestry

A good example of Finnish success in 'total' environmental protection is the forest industry. Regeneration of forests after felling is now required by law and is carried out on 200,000 acres of forest every year. New legislation has brought about environmentally sound machines and methods of logging and new clean-air filter systems are now required on all machinery, thus reducing toxic emissions. During processing into paper and paper-based products the timber passes through chemical-free production lines (e.g. chlorine is no longer used to bleach paper) to eliminate the use of yet more dangerous pollutants.



But conservation of nature in Finland is not a new phenomenon. The philosophy and spirit of environmental conservation which is alive and well in Finnish society today, has been evident since the emergence of 'Finnish design' on the world back in the 1930's. This philosophy based on the resourceful and careful use of materials and respect for the soul of nature, isn't just that - a philosophy - it is a way of life (well, most of the time). It may be fashionable or 'green' for us in mainland Europe today to look upon nature with a 'deep respect', but in Finnish society a genuine respect for nature has grown slowly, over the years, out of the need for the Finns to work alongside nature, for their own survival. What is needed for the future is for that same spirit or philosophy of conservation, to manifest itself in solid everyday objects and designs, that will truly be friendly to the environment.

The methods today's designers use to create environmentally-sound products will have to be different from those used in the past, by designers such as Alvar Aalto and his contemporaries. A totally new design philosophy will be needed, taking into account a product from conception through to manufacturing, use, and eventual disposal - a philosophy appropriate to today's



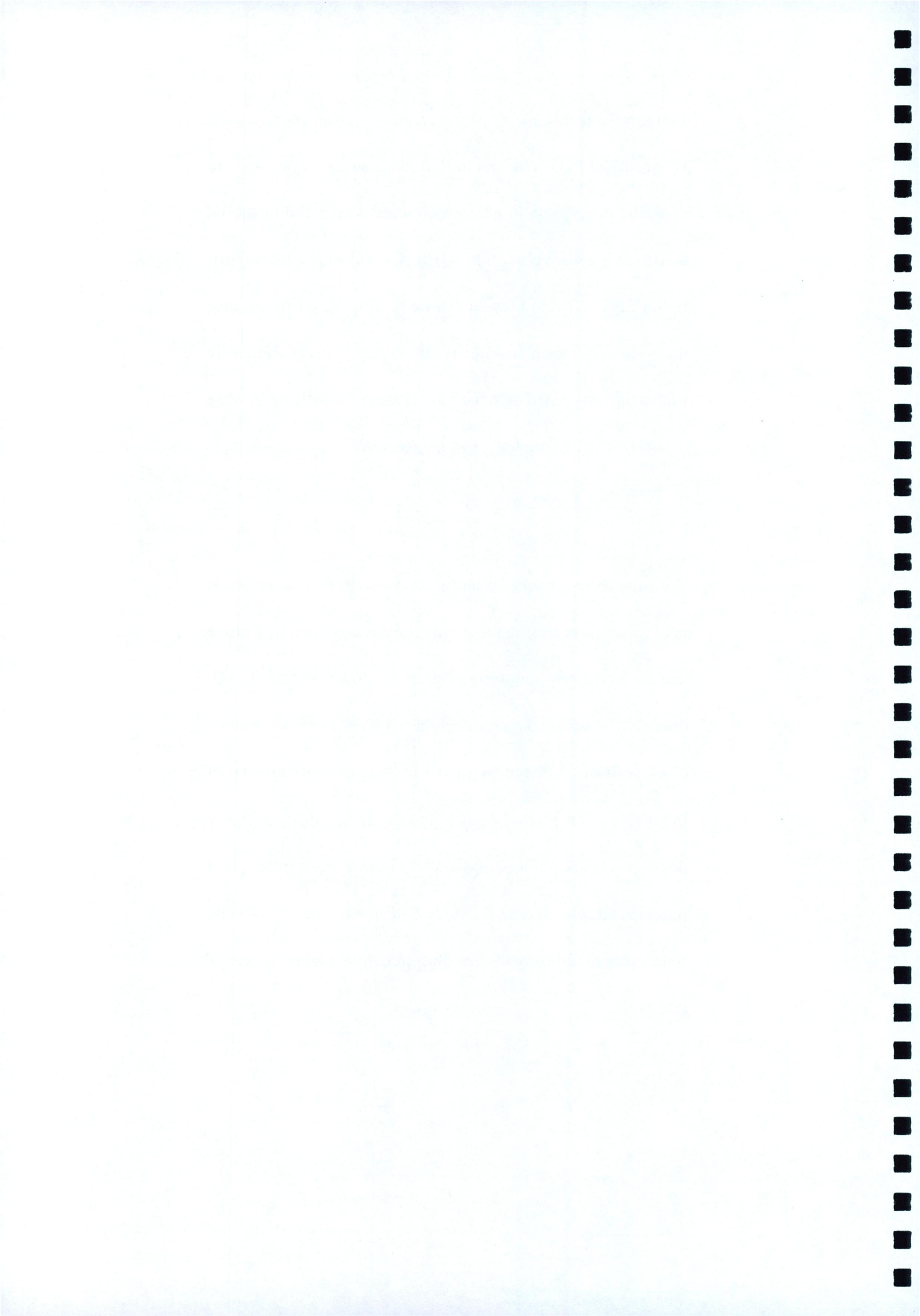
society - not only Finnish society, but the new and rapidly developing global society also. If this encouraging trend for total eco-friendliness continues, Finnish industries may soon emerge as the leading producers of 'green' design.

Examples of new and revised thinking in Finnish design can be seen in the work of architect and designer Tuomo Siitonen. His three-legged chair, created for a recent Artek exhibition of furniture designed by architects, is a good example of 'creative conservation'. Using new and innovative production techniques utilising a carbon-fibre compound and moulded in one piece the chair is strong, durable, light and can be manufactured to an attractive, highly-finished state in a very fast production process. The strength-giving properties of the carbon-fibre material have allowed Siitonen to keep the form extremely simple and functional, giving a physical and visual lightness to the design. By using the most modern production techniques and materials, Siitonen has managed to create a practical, beautiful and environmentally-sound object relevant to society today.



Jorman Savolainen, an industrial design student at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki has tackled the problem of traffic congestion in our overcrowded towns and cities, by designing a bicycle. The Urb, a stunningly beautiful, lightweight foldable bicycle can be used to travel to the bus, underground or train station. It can then be quickly and easily folded up and carried onto the train or bus. On arriving at one's destination the whole thing can be reassembled in a few simple movements.

With the over-production and over-consumption of products being widespread throughout most of the countries of Europe and the world, any new design philosophy to be introduced, will obviously have to take on board the problem of environmental conservation. Finland, with it's relatively short history of industrialisation probably has a greater chance than any other developed country of re-organising it's industries, designers, and infrastructure to include a mandate of environmentally-sound production (mobilising it's manufacturers into a future of 'green' products).



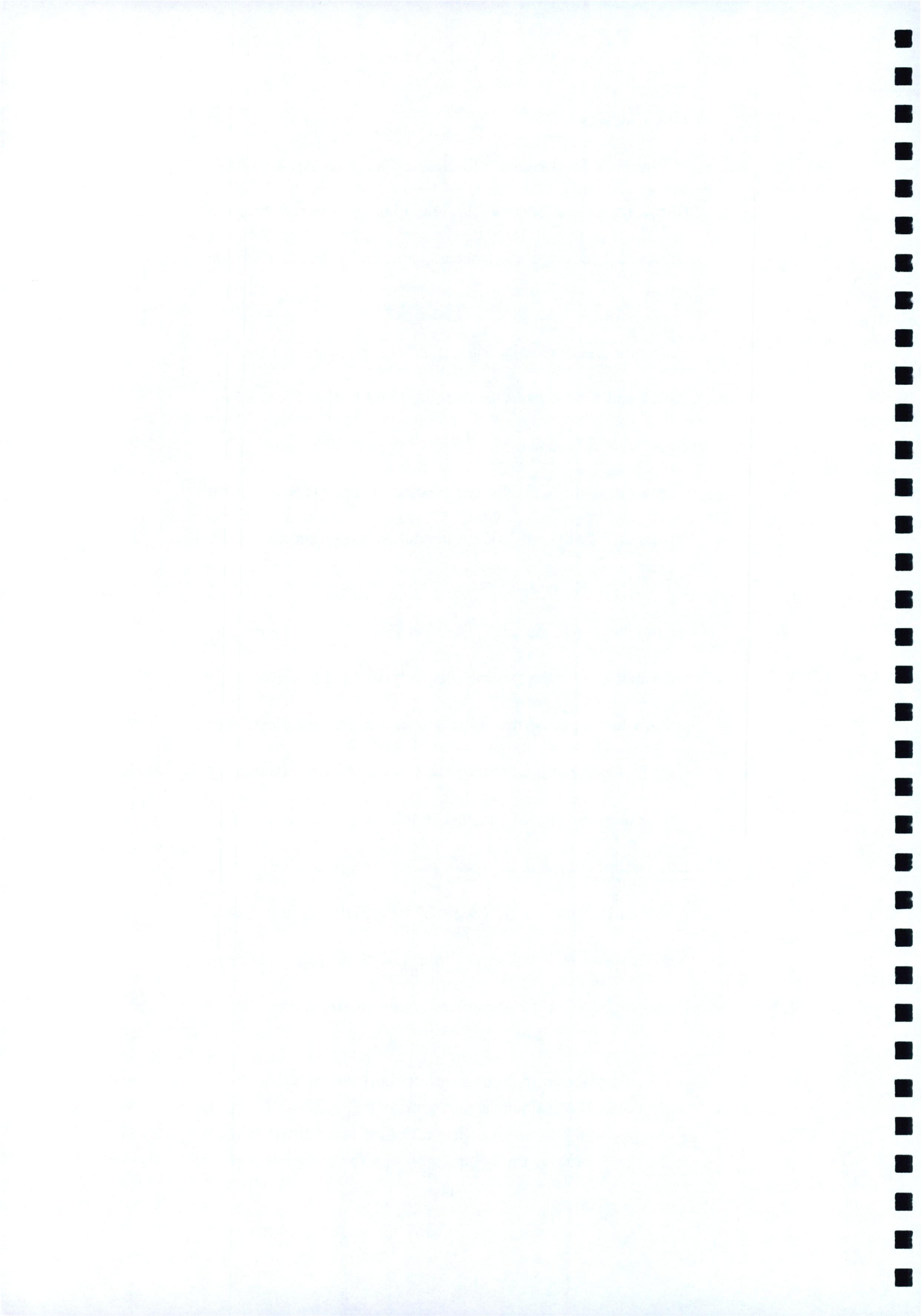
Old Classics

If Finland's craft-based 'old classics' such as Alvar Aalto's furniture, or Hackman's (Arabia) glass and ceramics have conveyed a message of 'closeness to nature' (whether it is true or false) in the past, the recent development of Finland's consumer electronics industries, including companies such as Finlux and Nokia, looks set to bring Finnish design into a new era of 'closeness to nature'.

These companies producing electronic products featuring lasting and distinctive styling combined with interchangeable parts across the product range, and manufactured from high-quality recyclable materials, have put Finland on the map of the consumer electronics world. Recently Finland has even been dubbed the 'Japan of the North' - with its growing electronics industries becoming more important to the economy than many of its craft-based product manufacturers.

It is worth noting that the rector of the most prestigious design school in Finland, the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, Yrjo Sotamaa feels that craft-based design has had its time in the spotlight. Now it is the turn of consumer electronics.

Despite the tradition of craft skills and applied arts, the resident artists working in glass and ceramics at factories for companies like Iittala and Arabia, the future, belongs to industrial



design. If you really want to create a better world you have to use industrial technology. (Jones, 1990, pp.42-50, quoting Yrjo Sotamma)

The in-built Finnish reserve and conservative nature has helped realise this statement. Taking a cautious approach when building up its consumer electronic industries, it has slowly developed an exceptional command of electronics and information technology. Examples of this new Finnish know-how include thin electroluminescent monitors for use in the medical and space industries, mobile telephones capable of competing at the highest level, mammograph equipment, and metal detectors used in almost every airport in the world.

A New Meaning for Conservation of Nature

Conservation of nature could also be interpreted another way, to conserve the 'notion of nature' in Finnish design for the future.

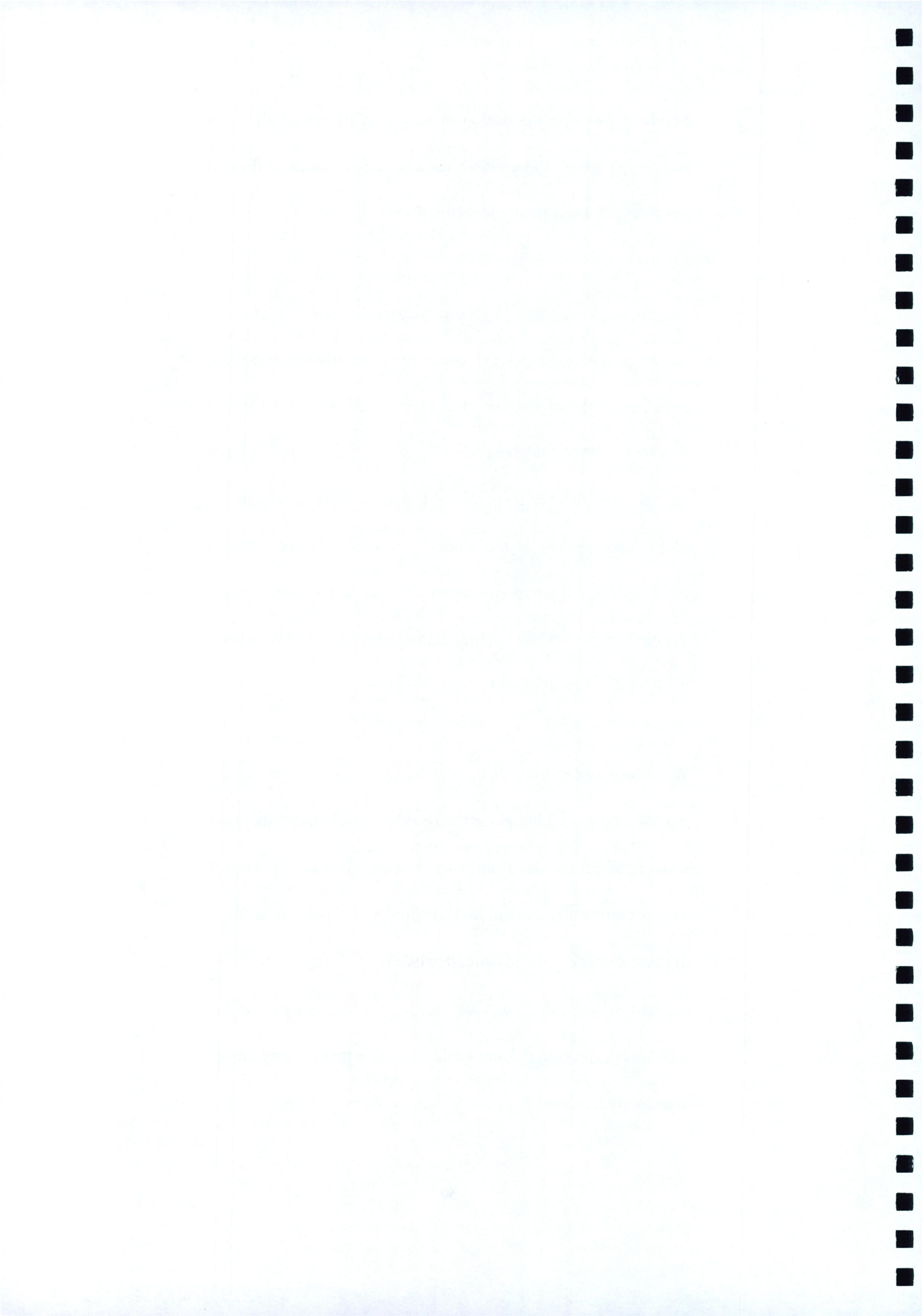
The 'notion of nature' is the cliché we all like to attach to Finland. Coming from another culture, we may mock the cliché of living with nature and respecting the laws of the natural world. But if one lives in Finland for a period of time, these notions (they are really more than just notions) begin to sink in, and one starts to understand the real Finland and its very real relationship with nature.



Maybe conserving the 'notion of nature' in Finnish design is a bad thing. Finland along with most of the countries of Europe has changed dramatically in recent times.

Recent improvements in communication over the past three decades has brought all the countries closer together (weakening the distinctive character of Finnish design in the process). We should remember, however, that Finnish design emerged during a period of virtual isolation. In fact the position of Finland "on top of the world" provided a foundation for creating this unique environment. In the past influences and trends from the leading cultural nations passed very slowly, over the long distance through Europe to Finland.

World influences have in the past changed Finland of course, but the changes taking place today are more obvious especially to an outsider coming from a western culture such as Ireland. This is particularly evident in the capital where one can now see many examples of 'advanced western culture' with Anita Roddick's Body Shop, the American giant McDonalds and the numerous Levi stores doing business in this traditionally closed and isolated society.



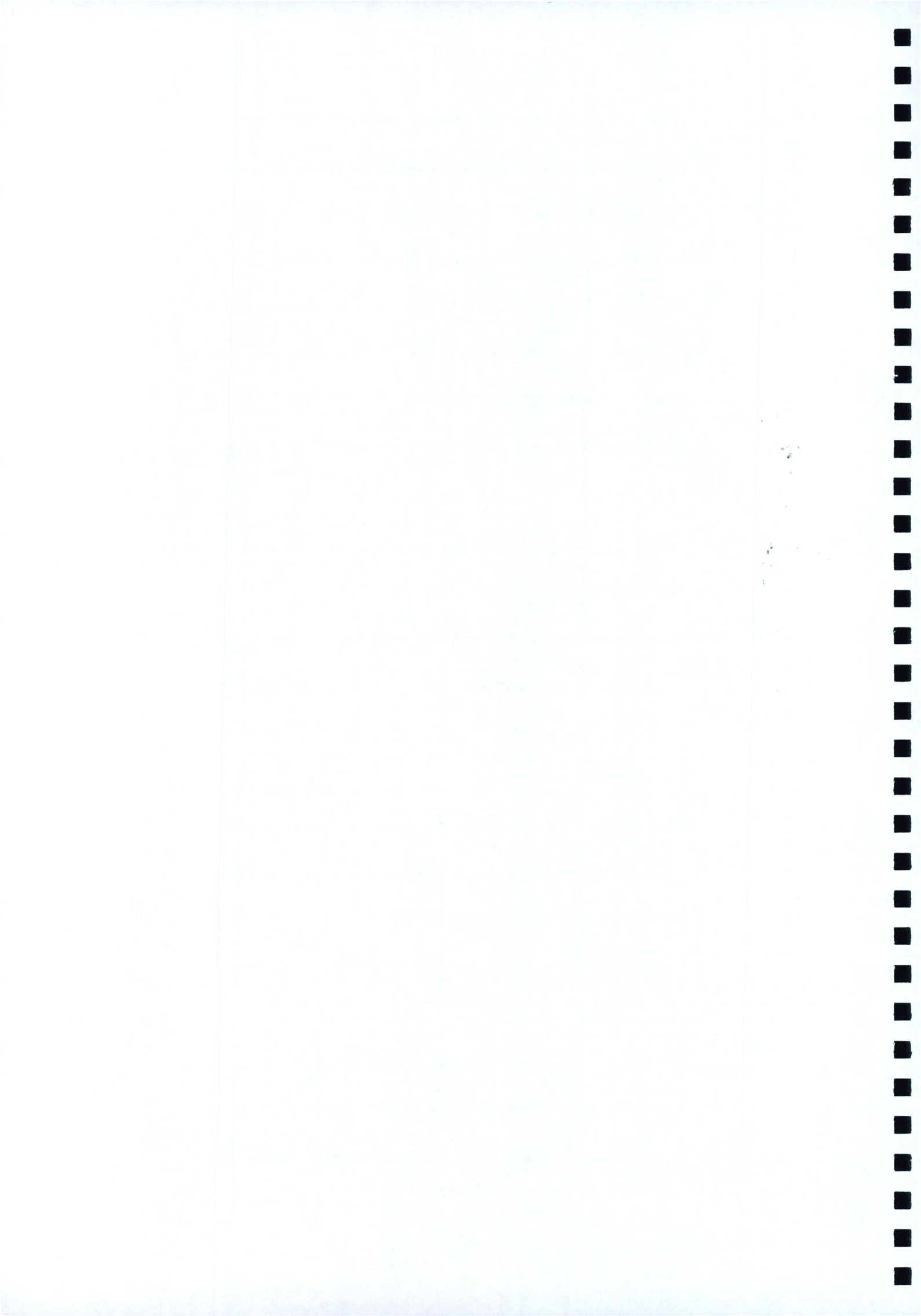
World influences have also changed the environment in which Finnish designers work and the processes they use. For a long time, when the rest of the world's designers got on with the business of experimenting with form and materials, going through the trends of deconstruction, minimalism, grunge and the material-conscious 'high touch', Finnish designers were sitting on their laurels. Heavily reliant on Finland's 'old classics' they wanted no outside influences to disturb their world.

Today influences from the global popular culture effect a wider number of nations, almost instantly.

Nature in the past (in the form of geographical 'isolation') has allowed Finnish designers the freedom to explore organic and free-floating forms without the restriction of mass-production, or global marketing schemes.

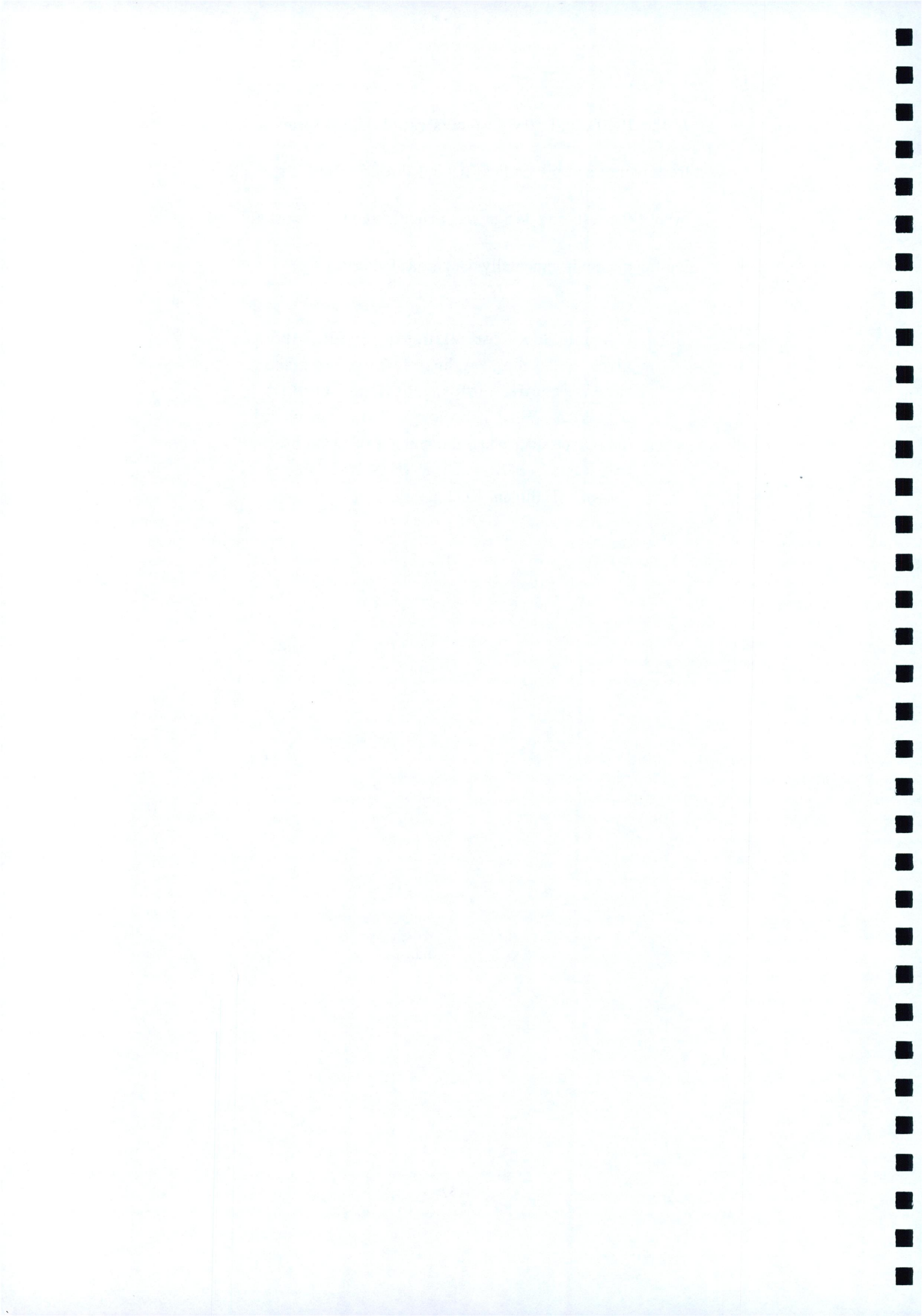
With most of Finland's citizens fluent English speakers (English being the global language), and young Finns embracing the global culture faster than ever before, 'clinging to the past' in society and design is no longer appropriate.

The trouble with conservation in Finland is that her image of 'closeness to nature' came about in another era - one not troubled by the ozone layer hole, pollution or traffic congestion.



In the 1940's and 50's designers could derive forms directly from nature and use endless natural resources and it way okay, even if the resulting design was manufactured in a wasteful and inefficient, environmentally dangerous factory.

Our uniquely close relationship with nature gives us the moral right to fell trees to make saunas, chairs, tables, stools and endless fripperies. What if no one will buy out most famous product when the amount of wood used and wasted on the making of Aalto stools is known? (Hallman, 1992, p.93).



Chapter 4: Nature's role in the Finland of Tomorrow.

E.C. Membership - Friend or Foe

Finland along with Norway and Sweden, has recently applied for membership of the European Community. By joining the E.C. Finland will have to enter into European affairs. This will come as a sharp break from the past, as the Finns have traditionally held onto their independence and sense of national identity by excluding themselves from European affairs. With little or no help from other nations, Finland has, over a period of time, formulated and developed her own laws and government policies. She has remained a peacefully independent country for the majority of her history, and has kept out of the many wars that occurred in Europe at the beginning of the century. But now Finland is hopeful to gain E.C. membership. Why is this? What has happened to cause Finland to make this apparent u-turn in policy?

Recently the Finnish economy has suffered a severe set back, with unemployment rising faster than ever before. The decline in the economy has been caused partly by the collapse of trade with the former Soviet Union. Finland has always relied on Russia for a large percentage of her total exports, which dropped dramatically overnight, leaving the Finnish economy in

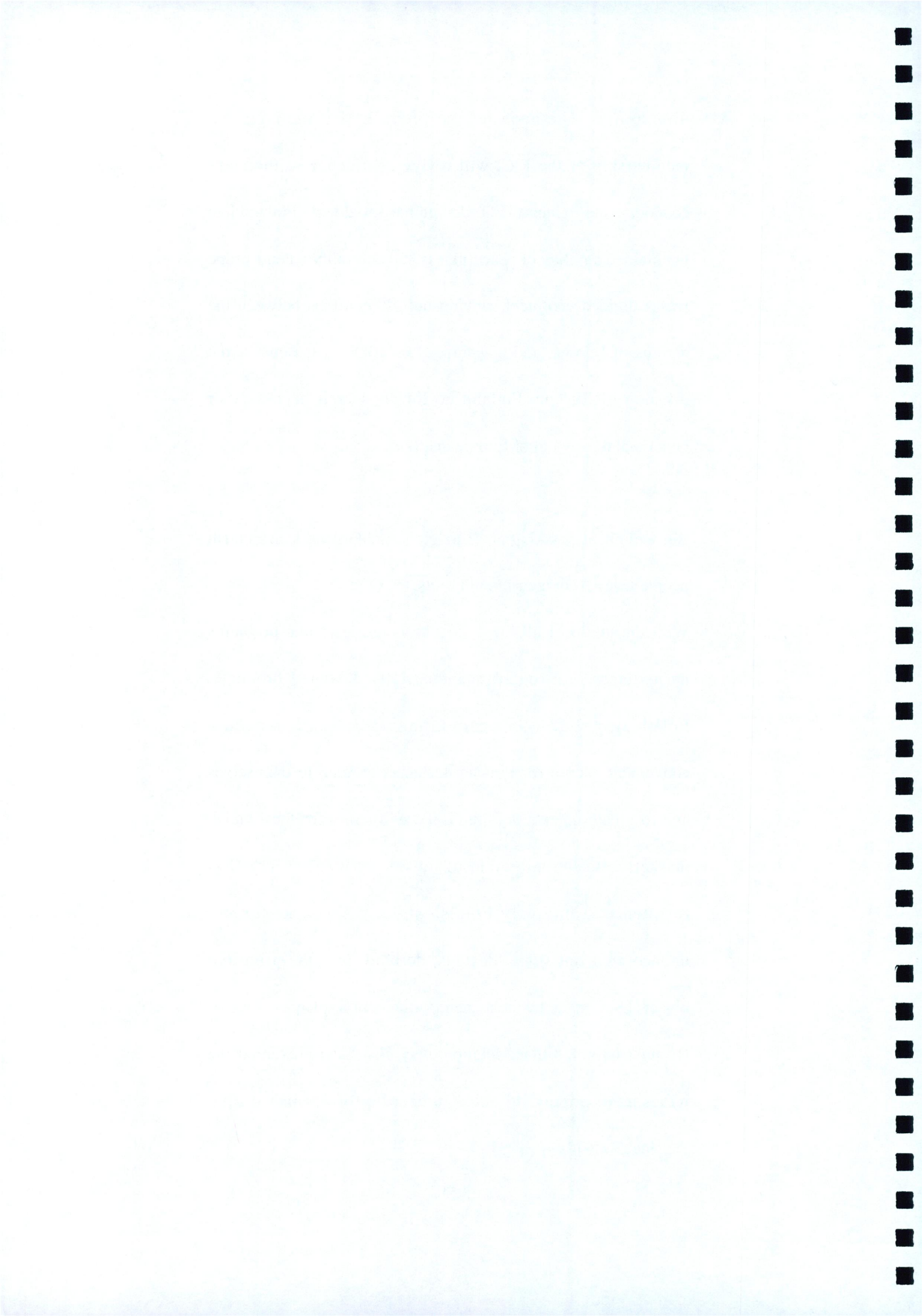


dire straits. The hope for the future is that the potential membership of the E.C. will revive confidence in Finland's economy, and lighten the burden on her shoulders. Finland had maintained a policy of peacefulness and neutrality when Europe was a divided continent, staying outside conflicts between the nations of Europe, and of course Russia. With the end of the division of Europe, Finland no longer sees it necessary or beneficial to stay out of European affairs.

But will changes taking place to 'globalise' Finland lead Finnish people away from their natural roots.

With the union of all the European countries come problems particularly with regard to industrially designed products. Political, cultural and geographic isolation has been a convenient excuse for Finnish designers to keep to themselves and to create objects the 'Finnish way' mainly for the Finnish market, with the minimum of outside influence. This has resulted in a uniquely Finnish style, with stark, simple, undecorated functional designs, derived from the primitive objects hand-made by the ancient peasants of Lapland.

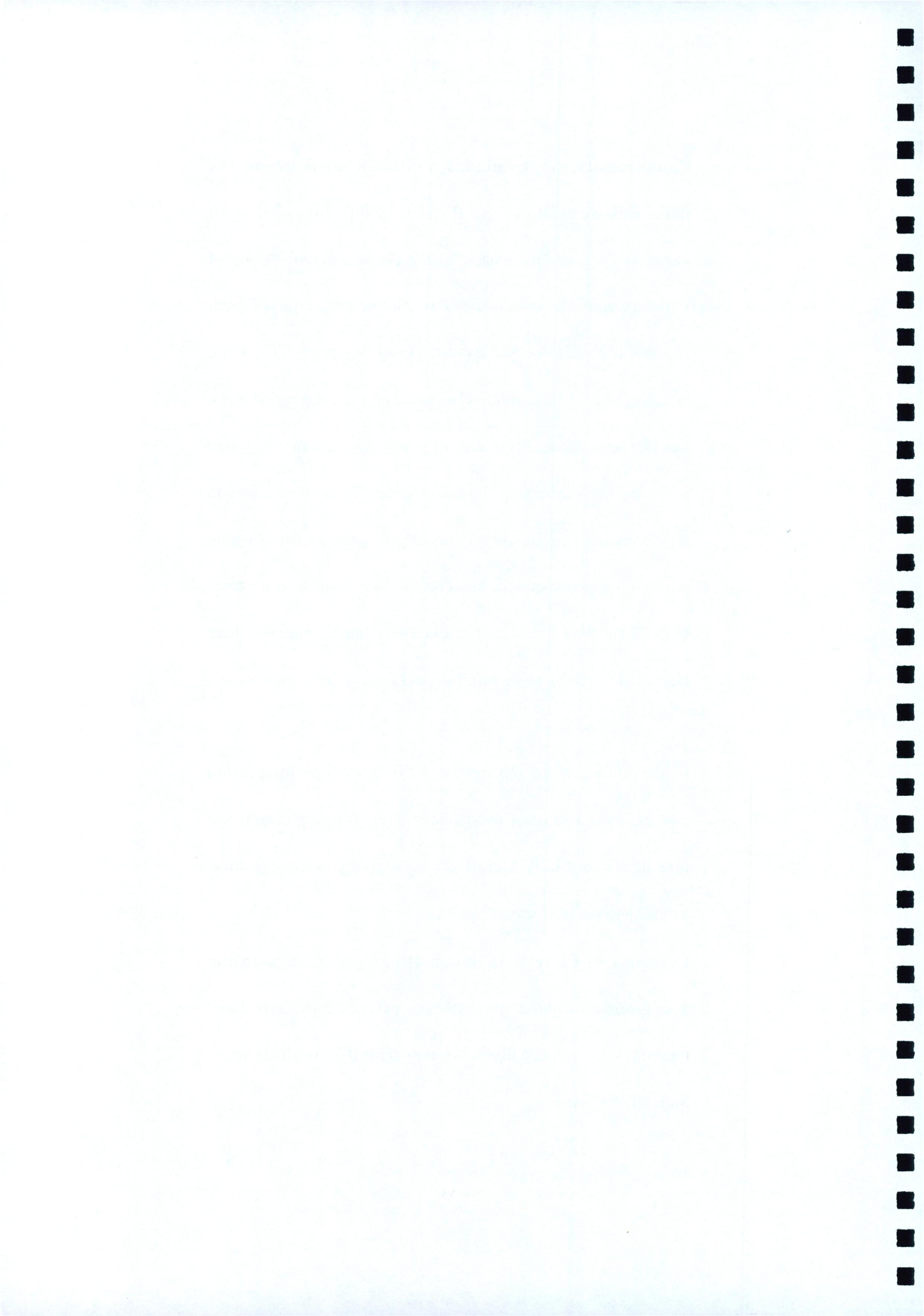
(It must be noted that 'isolation' may also have prevented the widespread popularity and appreciation of Finnish design 'outside' Finland).



Consequently, single-minded, puritan designs trends and industries were allowed to flourish in this environment of isolation ('behind God's back' as the proverb goes). Many of Finland's craft-based industries have, in the past, enjoyed great success at home, due mainly to the ongoing appreciation and consumption of their relatively staid and unchanging designs. Old classics such as Alvar Aalto's Savoy vase can still be found adorning the shelves of Helsinki's department stores, season after season. This situation is ridiculous when so many young talented designers are willing to prove themselves to companies such as the household and kitchen equipment manufacturer Hackman (Arabia) or the furniture and craft retail outlet Artek.

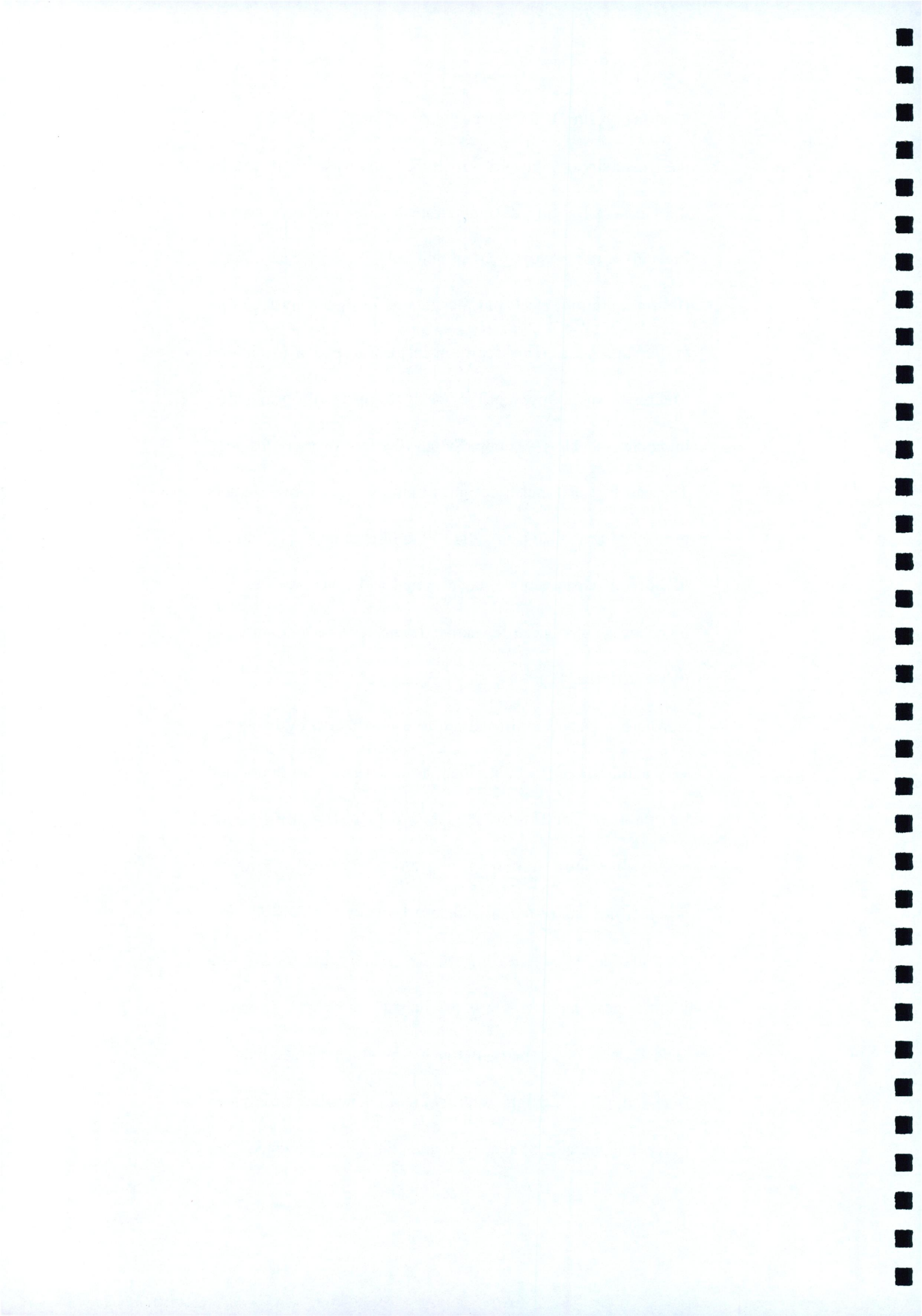
In the future, when the first signs of European integration emerge, these and other companies will be forced partly by the lure of a potentially lucrative new market, to change their 'clinging to the past' mentality.

Evidence of early change can already be seen with the acceptance into the mainstream of the bold, arrogant, uncompromising and distinctly non-typical Finnish designer Stefan Lindfors.



Lindfors (b.1962), a former student of interior architecture at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki was 'discovered' by the German lighting designer Ingo Maurer during a visit to Finland in 1988. Scaragoo, an adjustable halogen lamp, made from aluminium, steel and plastic was designed by Lindfors earlier that year. This scorpion-inspired creation fascinated Maurer to such an extent, he asked to put it into production immediately. Thus was born Stefan Lindfors - genius designer. The bad boy of Finnish design, Lindfors's every move shatters the typical Scandinavian mould. With little or no respect for the tradition of clean, simple, undecorated and functional designs, he believes the work of his native designers to be dull and rigid (work that takes Finnish design nowhere).

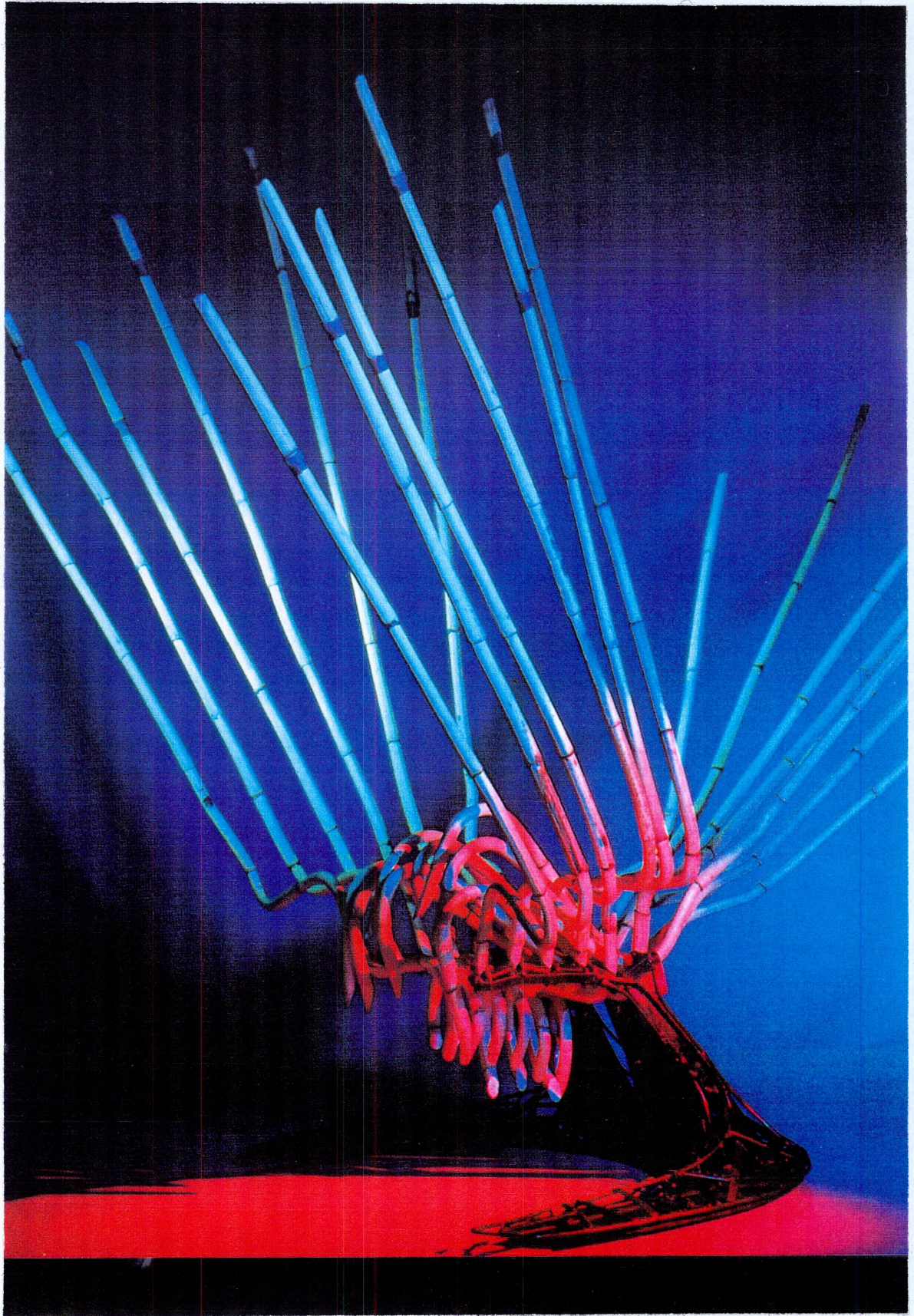
But he has taken Finnish design to a new place, by being the very antithesis of it. Being loud, arrogant and self-opinionated has paid off for Lindfors. The world is listening. This relatively young, unknown, and more amazingly, 'Finnish' designer has captivated an audience (largely outside Finland!). Lindfors has amounted contracts for design work to take him into the next century. He is privileged that he can fly out of Helsinki very often and be in touch with global trends, more so than the 'older' design establishment. Uncompromising in everything, he says what he feels and thinks, with no regard for





18. Stefan Lindfors, Scaragoo lamp, halogen, aluminium, steel and plastic, produced by Design M. Ingo Maurer, 1988.

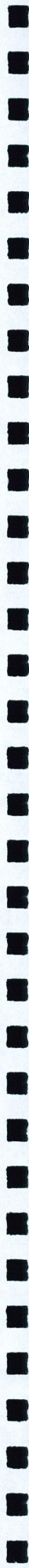


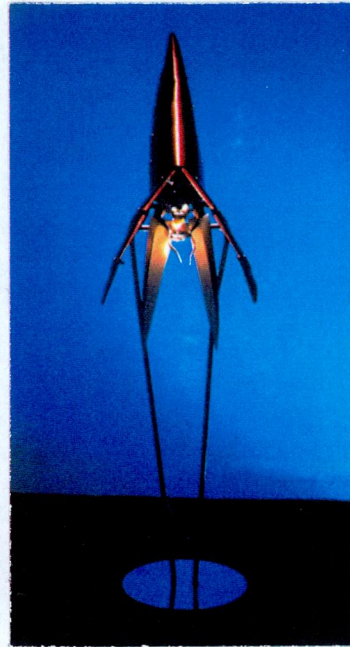
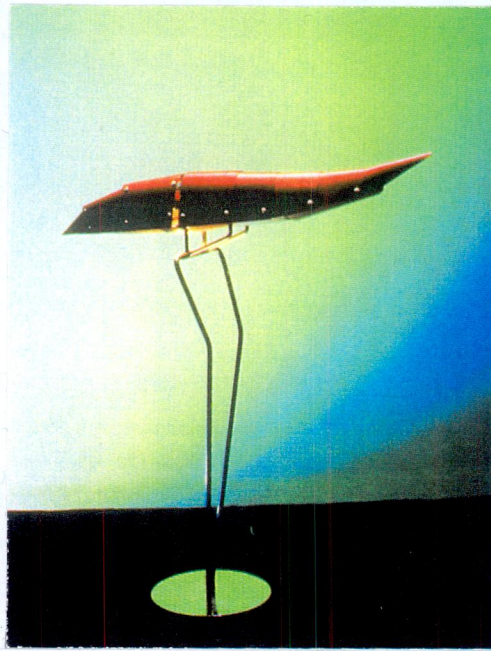


19. Stefan Lindfors, Gorbachov, Sea Anemore, cane, steel and rubber, 1987.

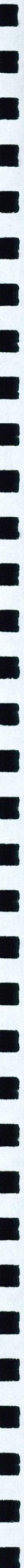


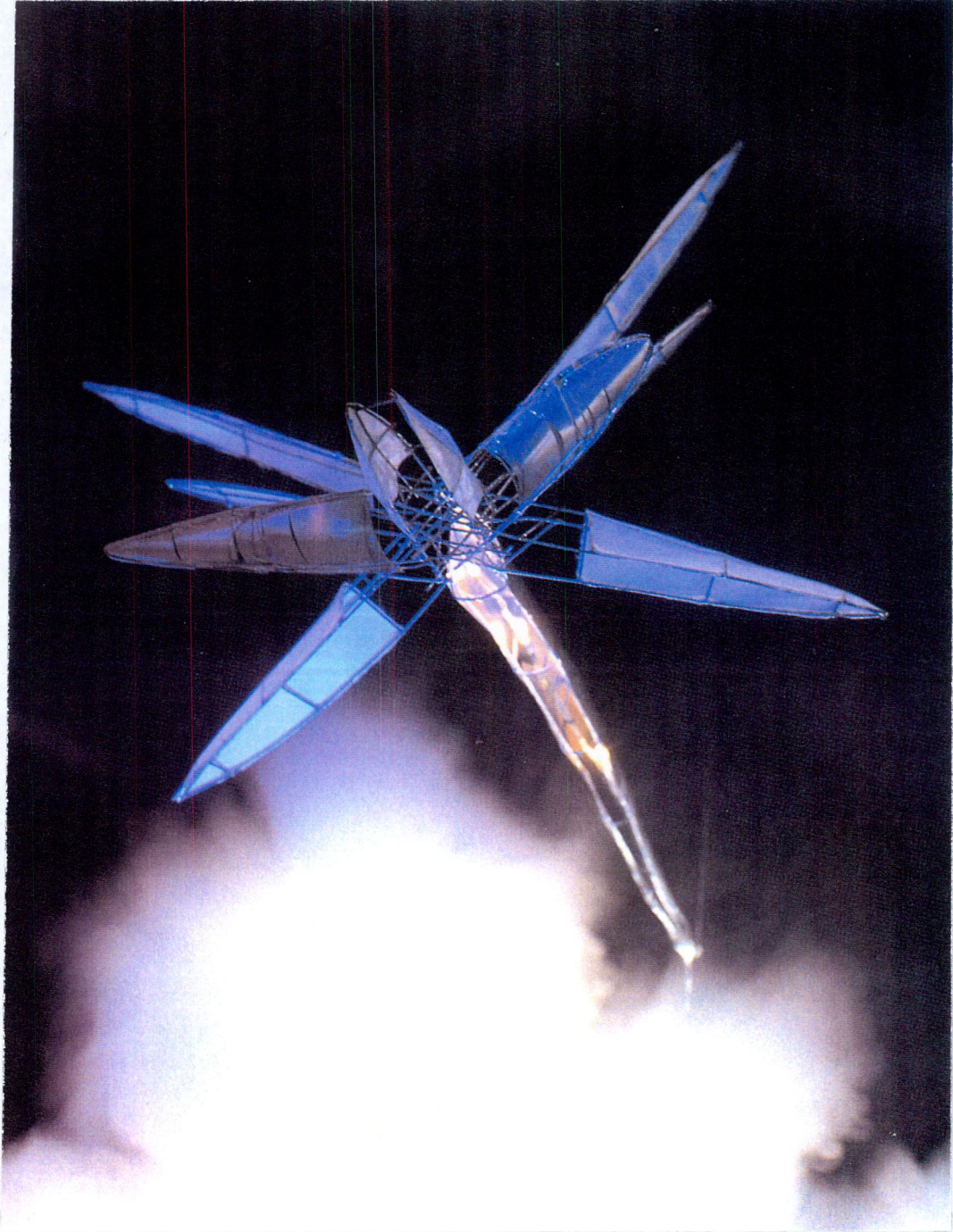
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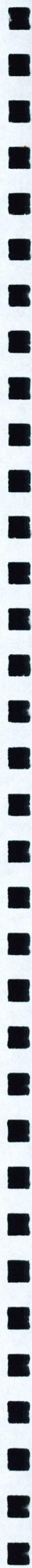


20. Stefan Lindfors (b. 1962) Langustinux adjustable halogen lamp (prototype) (top), cast aluminium chair (above) 1993.





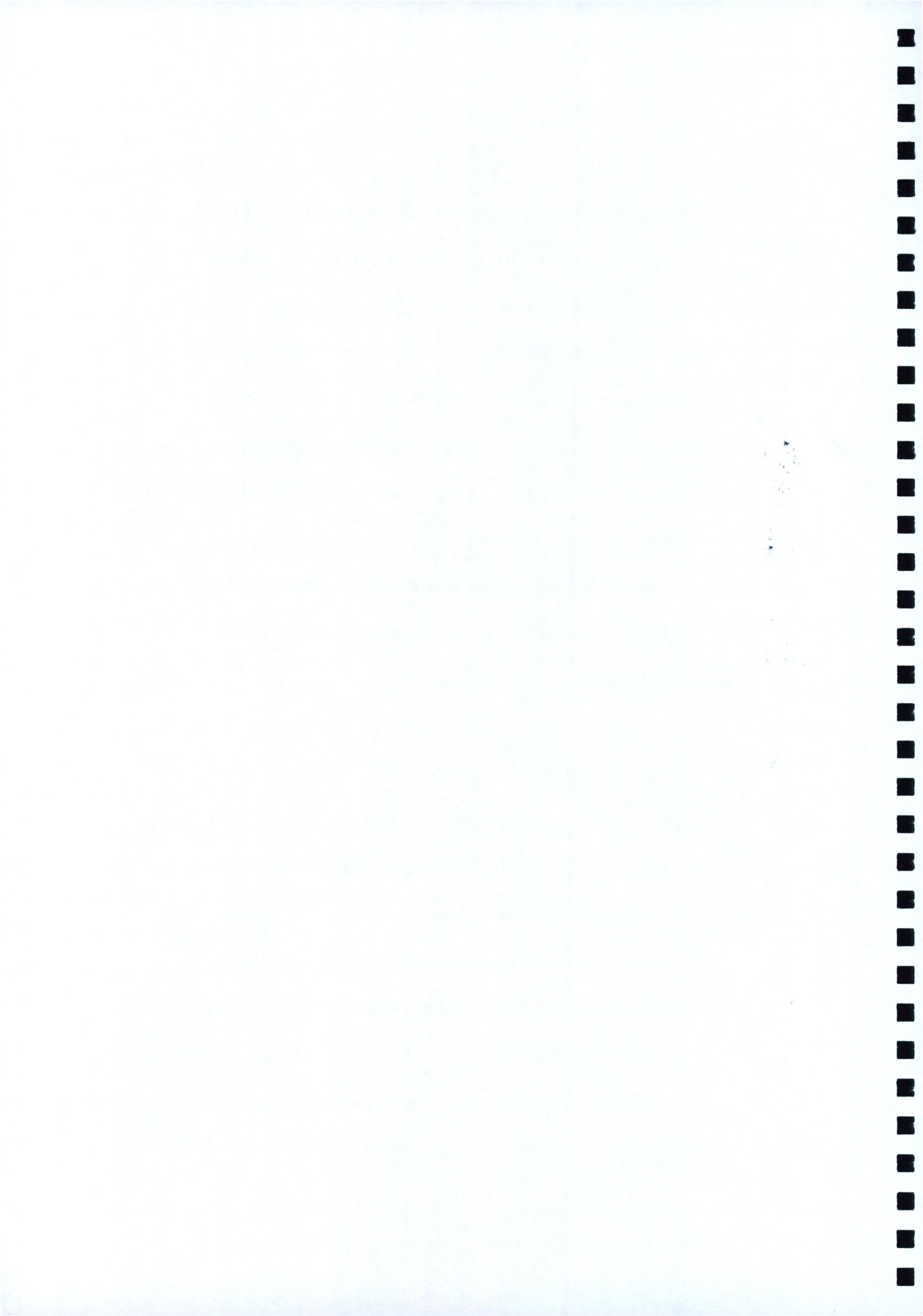
21. Stefan Lindfors, Concorde sculpture for the new domestic terminal of Helsinki - Vantaa Airport, 1993.



the consequences of his actions.

Young designers such as Lindfors may look upon Finland's past history of design with boredom, as having produced a succession of dull and staid designs, no longer desired by, or appropriate to today's society. But a large part of the philosophy behind some of Finland's 'classics' was for in-built and lasting appreciation of design, allowing an object to improve with age and not dismissing it as a passing fad. Design that touches something spiritual and lasting, deep within the human psyche is closer to the truth. That vital link with the spiritual and physical sides of the natural world are evident in the work of the artist and designer Tapio Wirkkala.

His work, throughout the years, in all kinds of wood, stone, metal and glass, using many processes and methods of manufacture is inspired by the numerous organic shapes found in nature. The fact that nature is all around us, at all times (whether we can obviously acknowledge it or not) is explored to its full potential in Wirkkala's designs, both for domestic and sculptural use. This immediately helps give his work a global appeal, touching something in our consciousness, which crosses all boundaries. It is very appropriate that design such as

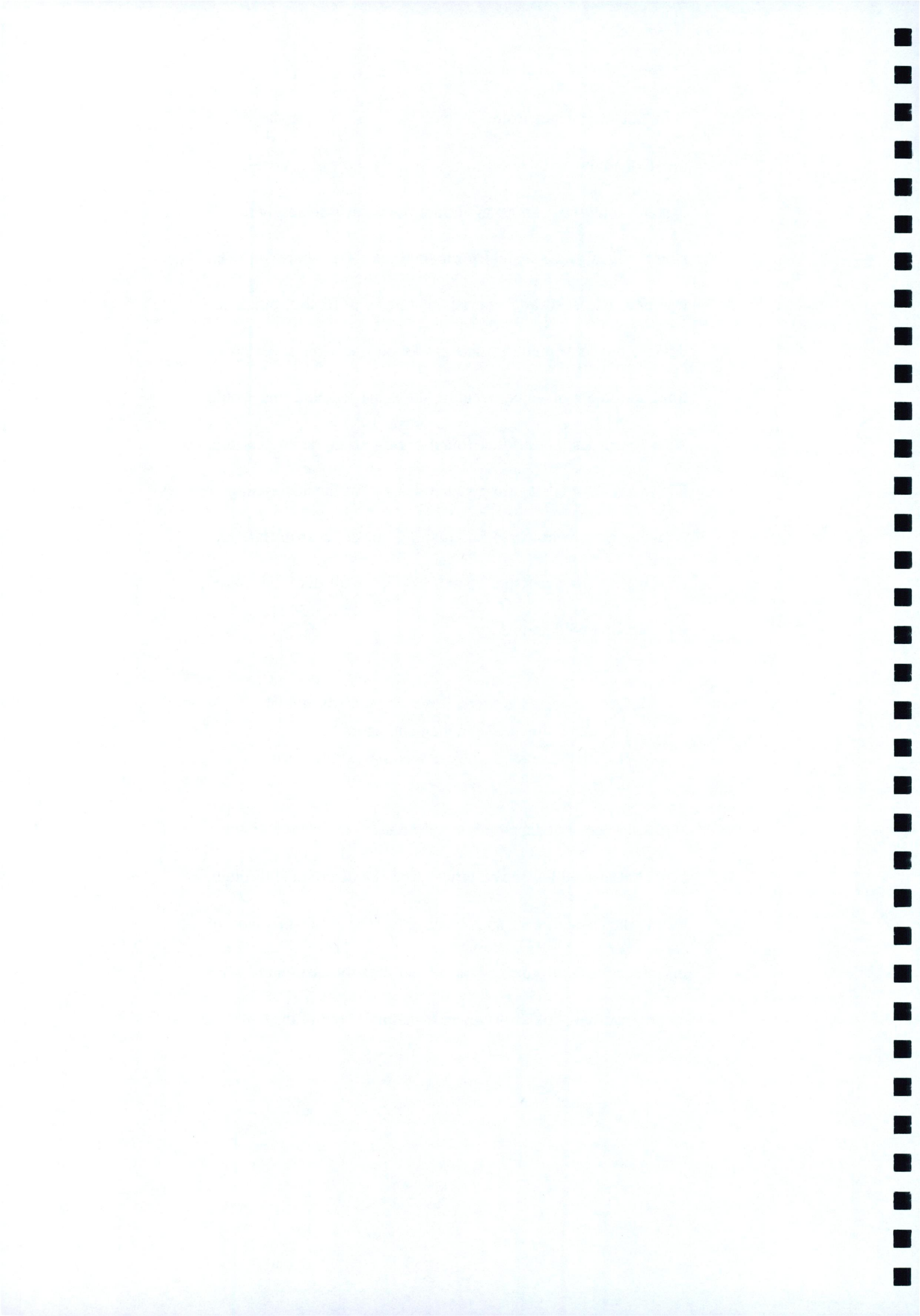


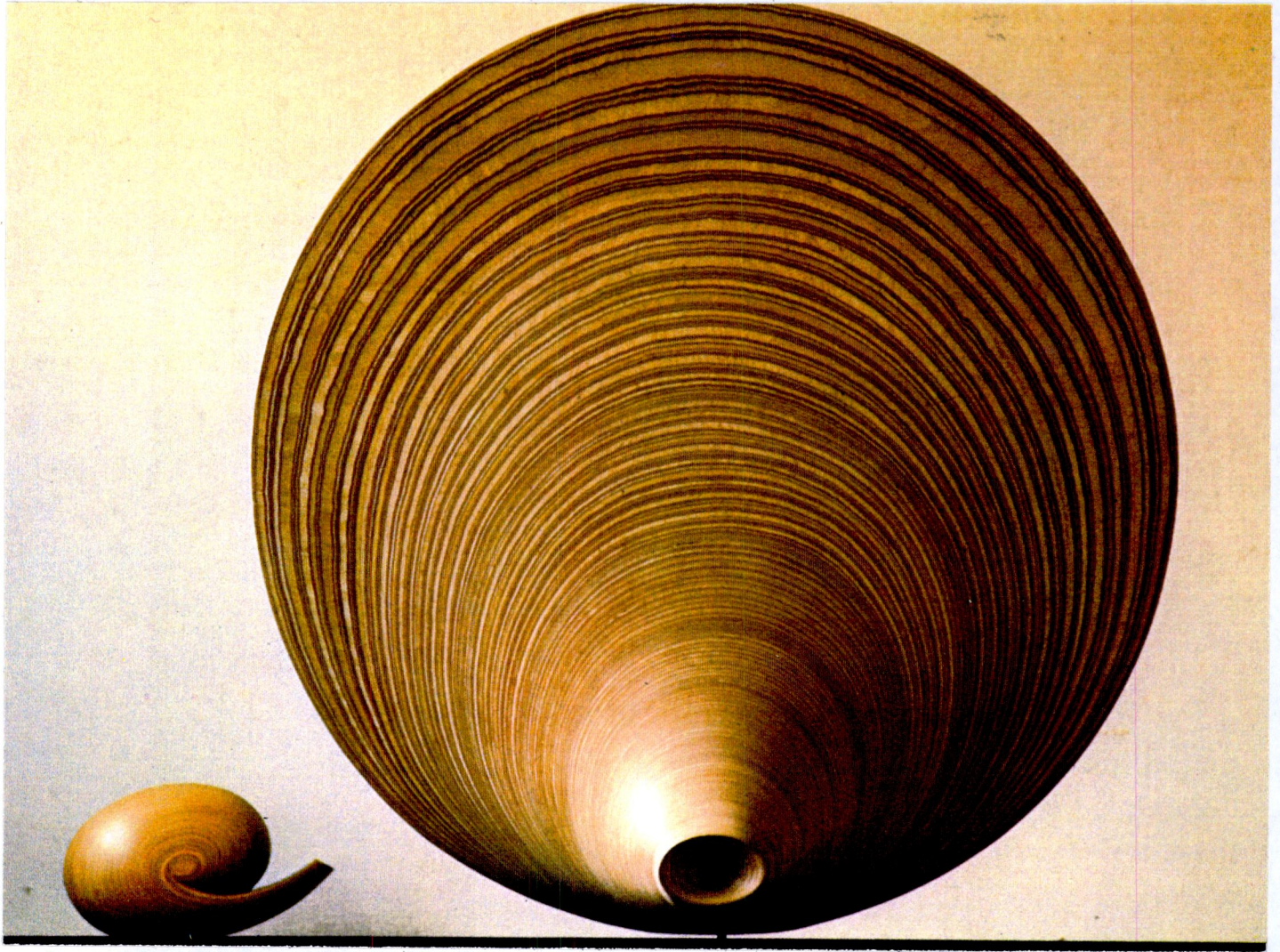
Wirkkala's emanates from Finland, whose people are one of the most in touch with nature, at it's most natural. Wirkkala's designs could be seen as an antidote to today's society with it's sharp edges and surgically clean lines. His work is to be touched, caressed and cherished, not as a 'flashy' object of design, but as something that grows on one over a period of time, an object of value, creating the same reaction one would have for an ancient artifact found during an archeological dig. His work is not created to give a quick fix for the advertising or pop-disposable culture, but instead seeks to stimulate the unchanging characteristics found deep in us all, like the inbred instincts of a wild animal.

"At it's best, his work flows organically out of the interaction between man and nature".

(Finnish Society of Crafts and Design, 1981, p.17).

Wirkkala does not shape the wood he uses, to achieve his own aims, but instead lets the material's true character shine through, by treating it with care and sensitivity. The result of many of his pieces of sculptural work are so closely associated with nature that they look as if they grew naturally out of the earth.





22. Tapio Wirkkala, wooden sculpture; his laminated wood forms respect the nature of materials.

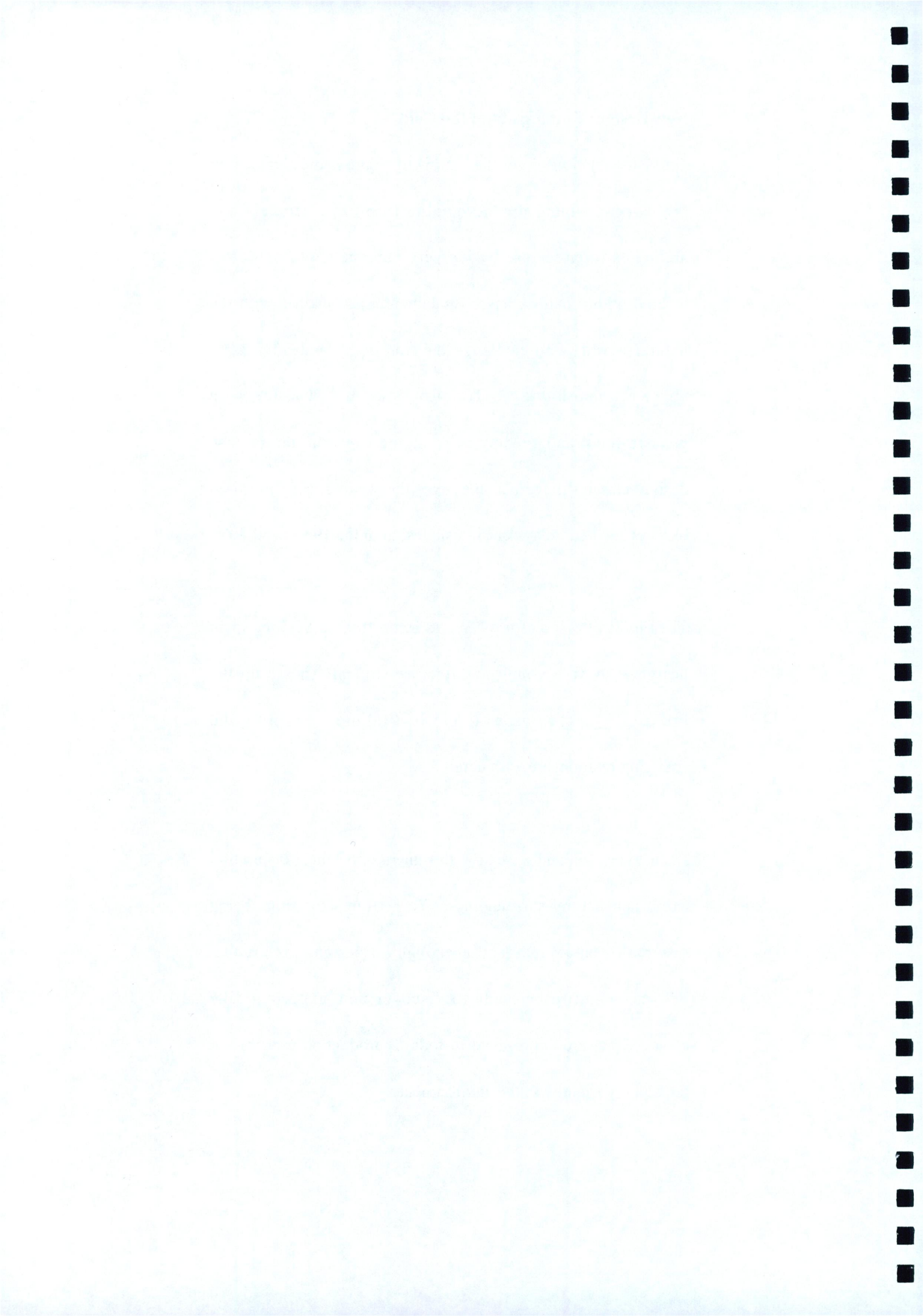


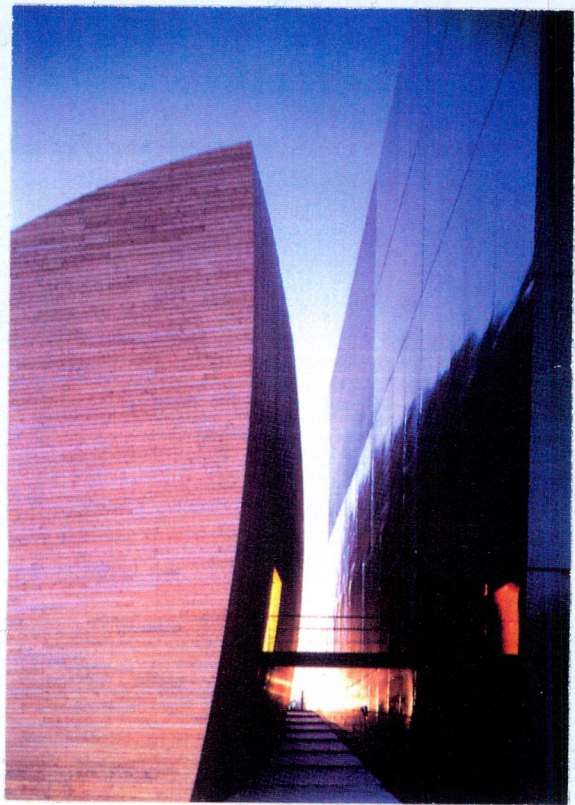
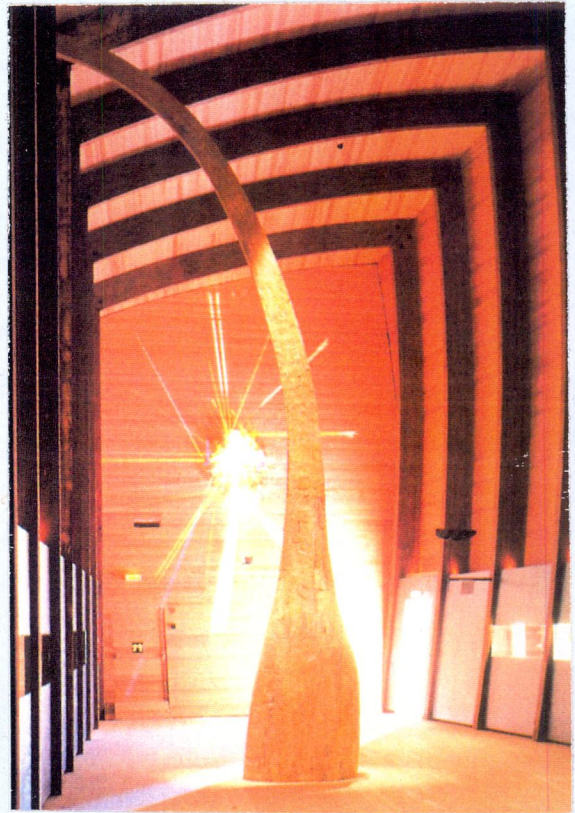
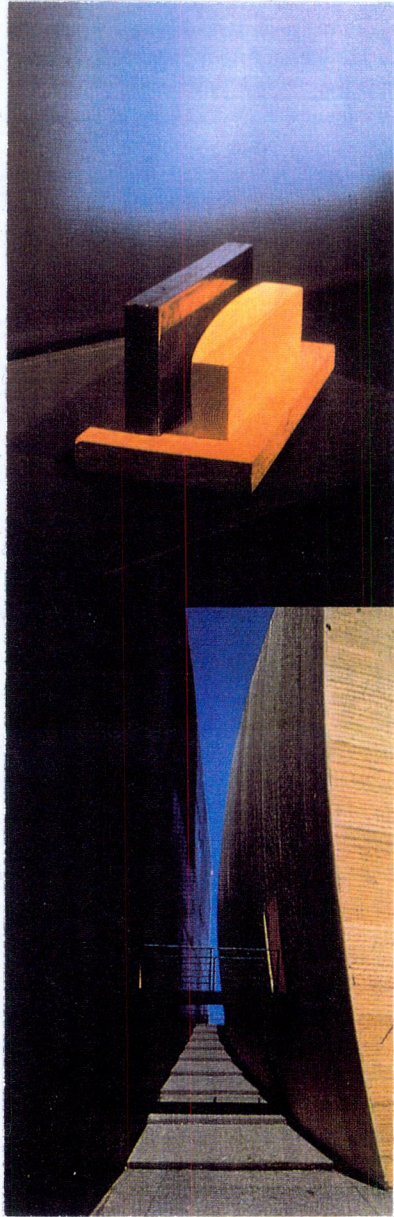
New Design: Coming out of the Cold

Today the relationship of the Finn with nature is most evident in the work of young up-and-coming furniture designers and architects (architecture by its very essence being outdoors, located within nature, has a fundamental association with the natural world) who challenge the traditional and often staid image of Finnish design. Tediously respectful of nature, with great restraint and subtlety of form and function, the Finnish design 'classics' have become, over the years boring and tired icons of the better days of Finnish design in the 1930's and 40's.

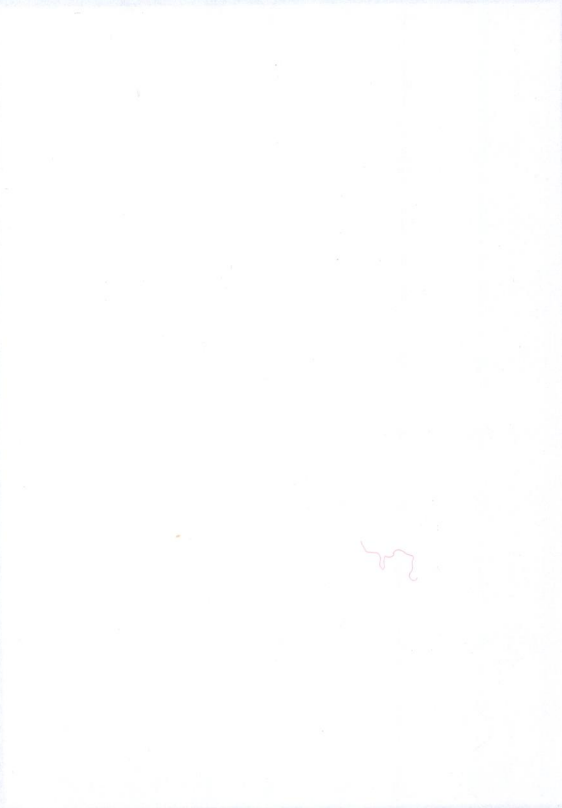
The Finnish Pavilion for the World Expo 1992 in Seville, Spain designed by five young architecture students (made up the group Monark) is an example of Finland's ongoing and changing relationship with nature.

Even today Finland's creative designers draw their inspiration from their natural surroundings. Yet, at the same time, being inspired by nature may not be enough for design in the future. Efforts, ought to be made to discover new materials, like plastics, that are appropriate to today's production process but are equally friendly to the environment.





23. Monark, the original miniature model (top left). Machine and Keel (above) buildings held in tension by the narrow chasm of space rising between them.



Nature in the Finnish design of tomorrow may not be as obvious as before. Components made from recyclable material, less components making up a product may be the way nature manifests itself in tomorrow's designs.

Finnish design in the 1930's and 40's took the forms and styles of the moment and applied a natural material to them, in order to humanise them.

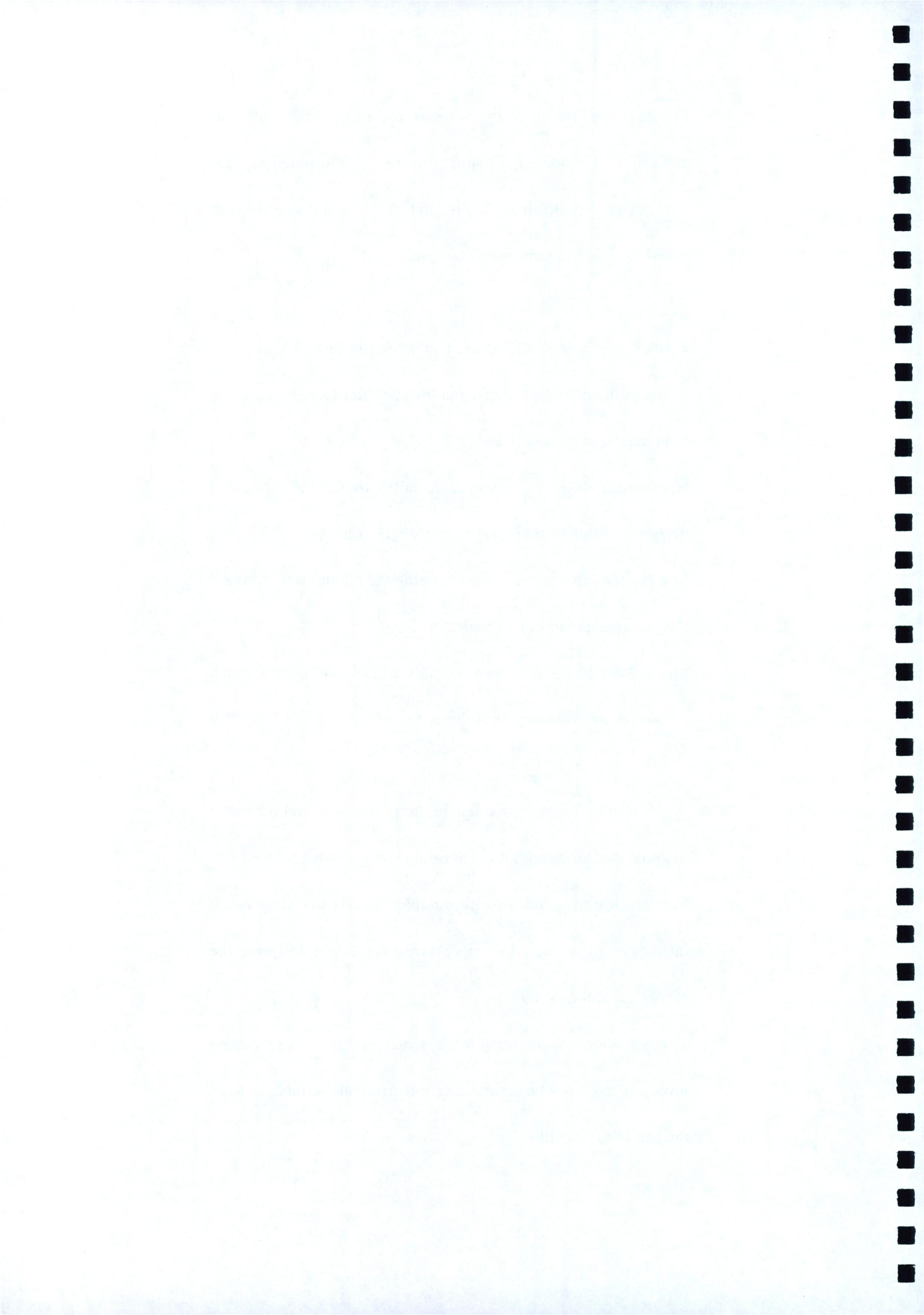
Humanising designs today may mean improving the process of design in order to save energy, materials and waste. The total process needs to be humanised keeping the air and water around factories clean and free of pollution.

The end product is no longer the only consideration- how much wood is wasted making an Aalto chair.

When we buy Finnish products in the future, we should be able to know that they are totally environmentally sound.

Finnish design is solid, self-contained and is not very much influenced by mainland Europe. Great figures of design in the 1950's are still revered.

This situation cannot remain the same, Finnish design has to grow and becomes better and take into accounts influences from the rest of the world.



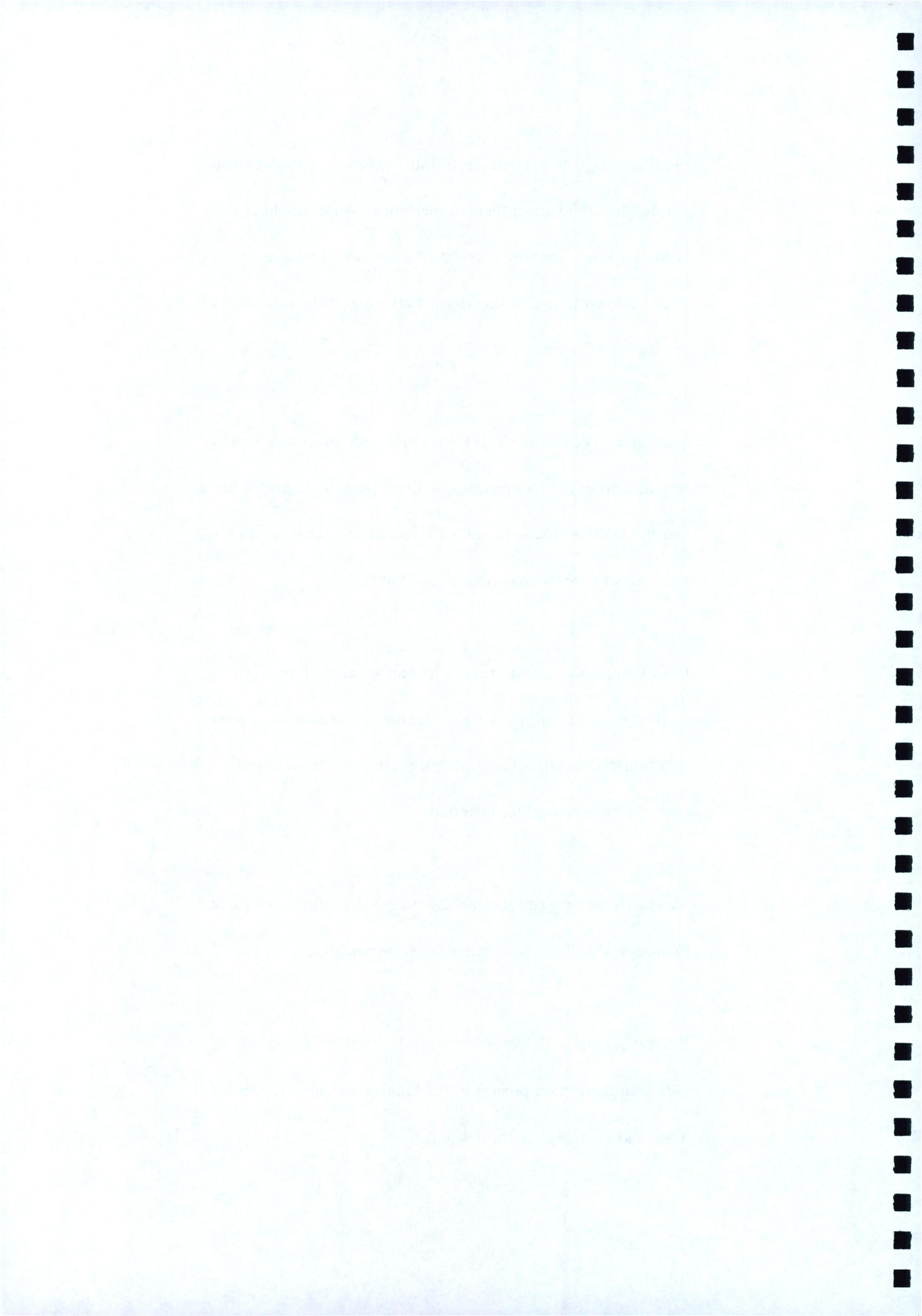
Finnish design to remain fresh, must take on new ideas and philosophies, and adopt them to their own. An example of this is Stefan Lindfors, who worked from who and what he is (a young person living in the 1990's) creating designs from the original spirit of nature.

What has given Finnish design world recognition is that it stemmed from the fact that people lived close to nature. They had the skills to make things with their own hands, and they knew how to use the materials around them.

Does Finnish design, in order to remain successful, on a world market, need to follow in the direction established - i.e. pure functionalism, with minimal styling and decoration and an overwhelming respect for materials.

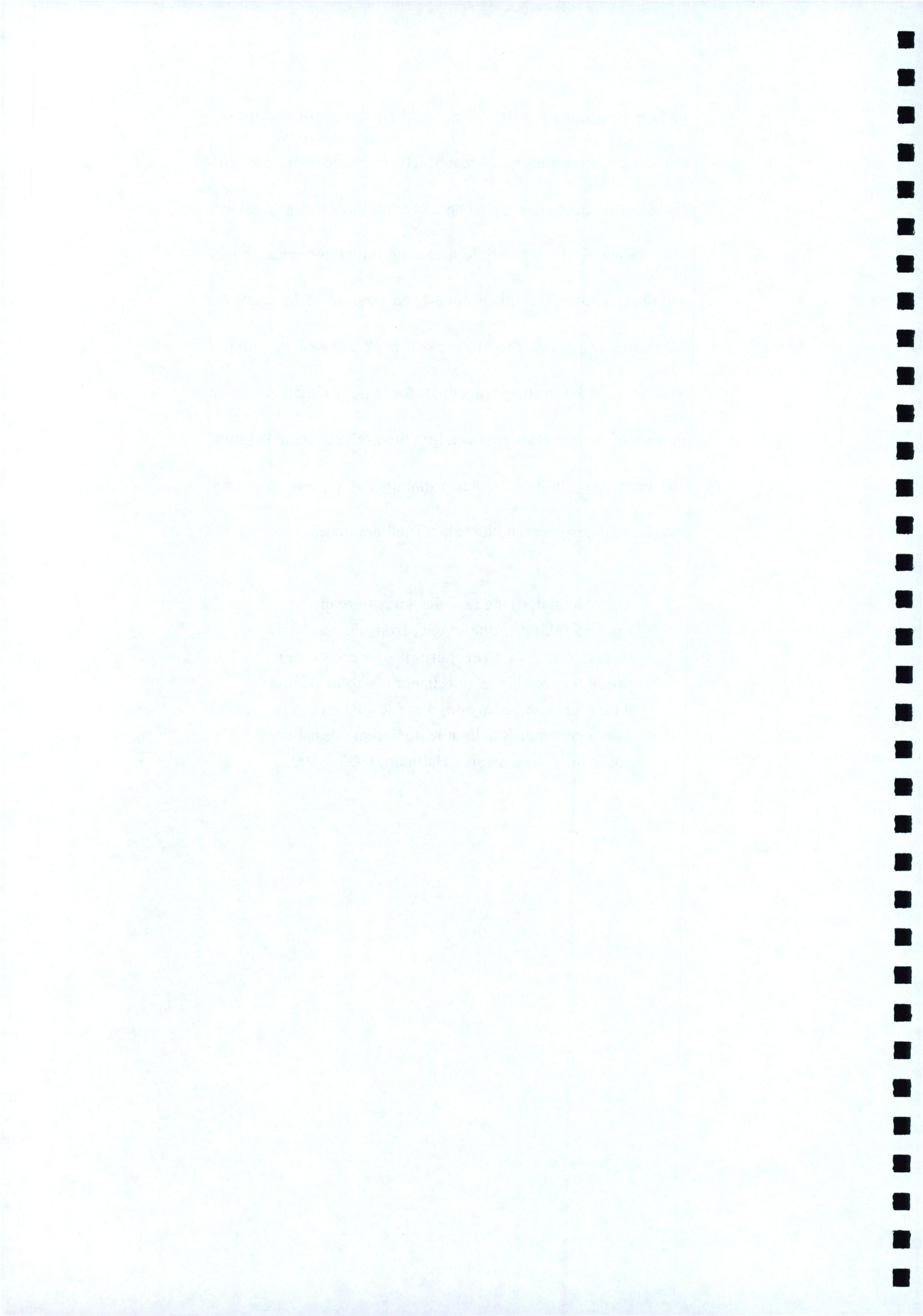
Maybe its turning full circle - New Age is returning to early fundamental beliefs about nature (environmentalism).

Even working with natural materials, such as wood, using industrial production processes, the Finnish love and respect for wood shows through in the design.



Jarkko Reiman's furniture, created in the main for mass-production, uses industrial manufacturing processes, but still manages to retain strong elements of traditional designs, mixed with influences from today to create an integrated whole. His Riimi chair, uses the much developed method of lamination, originated by Alvar Aalto, for the seat back and easily available birch dowels, interestingly detailed, for legs. Reiman is one of a group of fourteen designers calling themselves Huonekaluliek (the Furniture Shop Movement) mainly comprising of young and talented designers, both students and graduates.

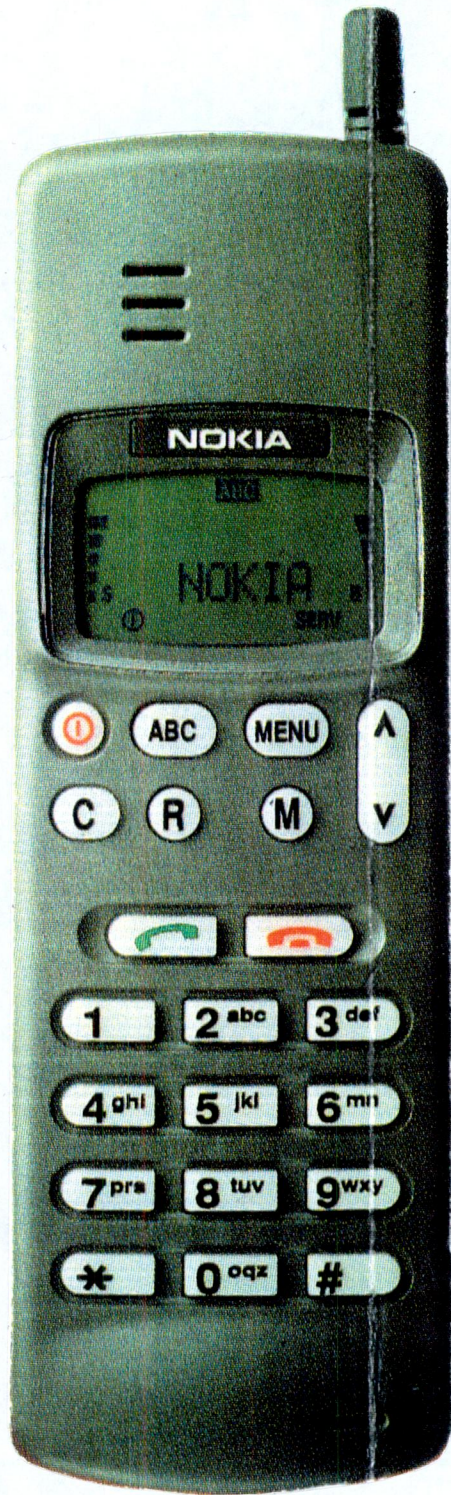
The idea underlying new design is to return from linear thinking to the cyclic, from disposability to recycling . . . the garden of new design, products are things one becomes fond of and which present an image, a sense of belonging. The final result is a durable item, that doesn't cry out to be thrown away. (Hallman, 1992, p.93).



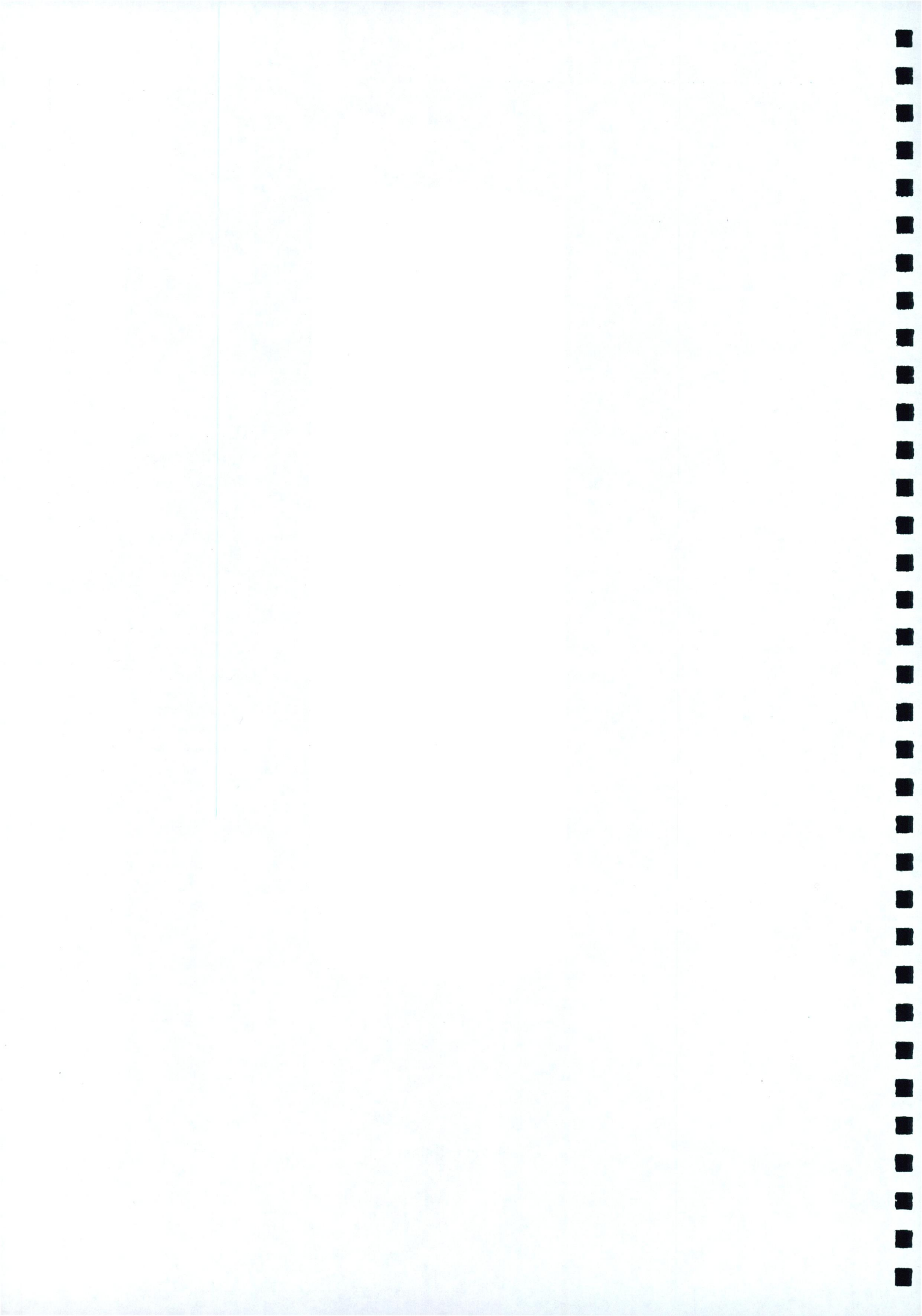


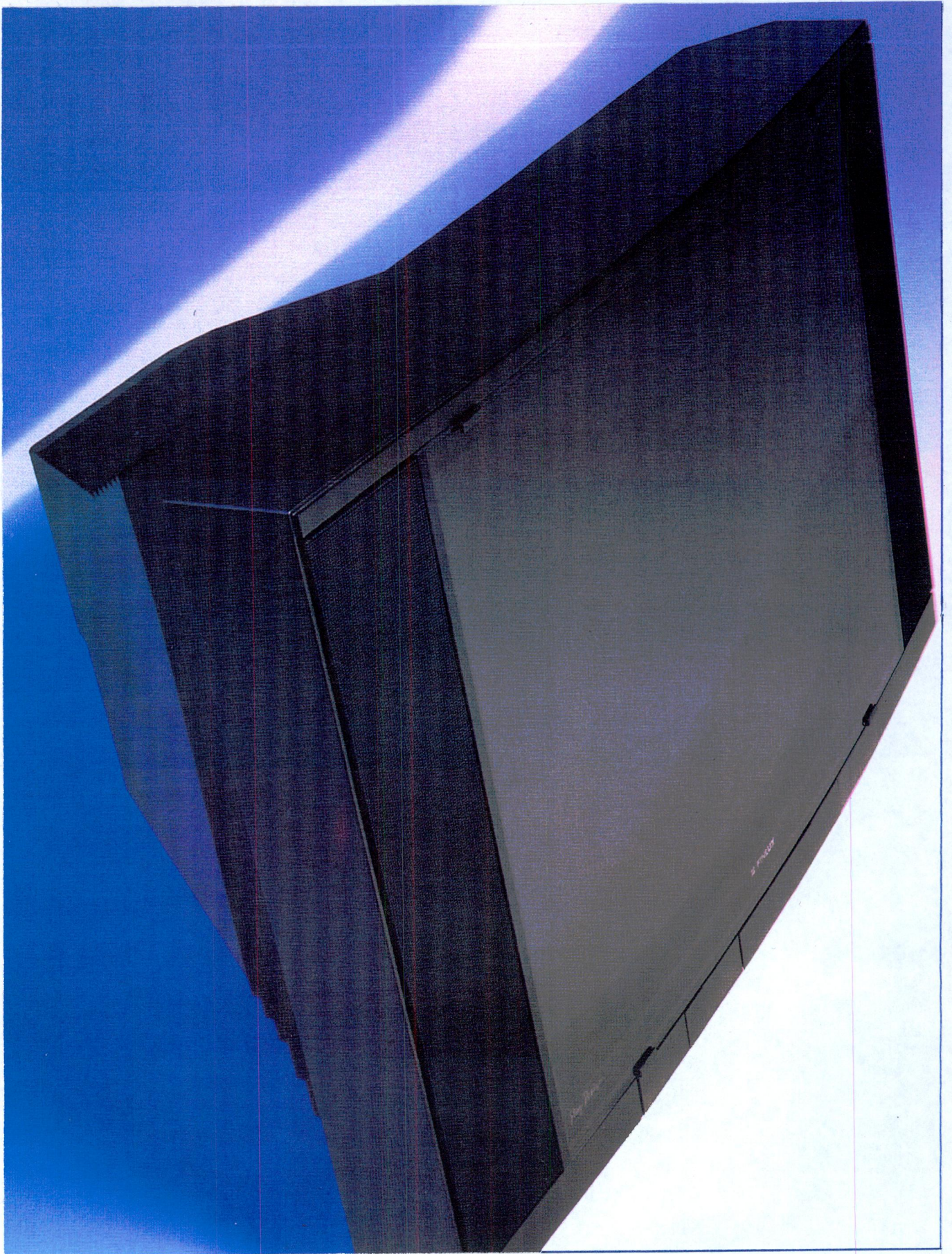
24. Olaf Backstrom, Fiskars scissors, stainless steel, plastic. Lasting, distinctive and functional design has maintained its popularity for over 20 years.





25. Nokia cellular phone





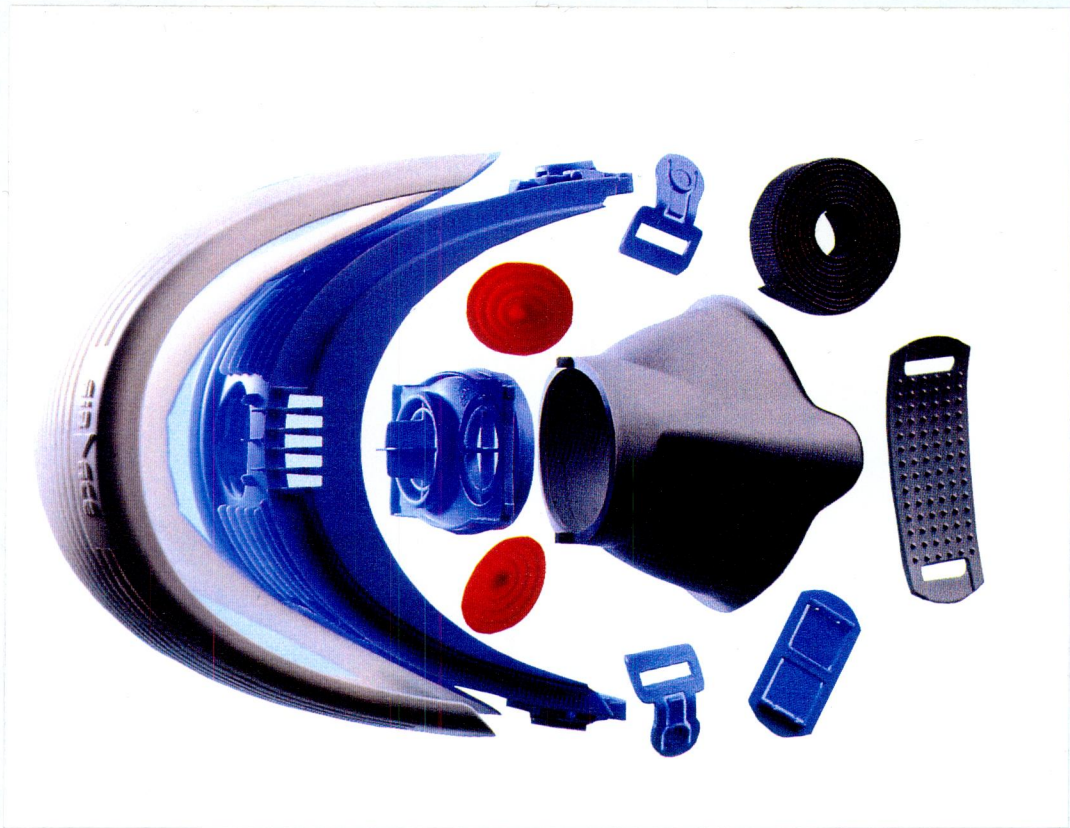
26. Tapani Hyvonen, Finlux television, lasting and distinctive design along with a high level of quality has ensured the popularity of Finnish electronic goods in recent years.



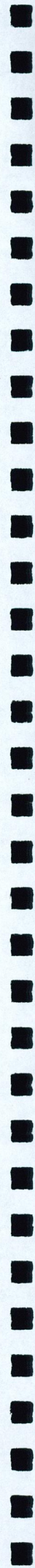


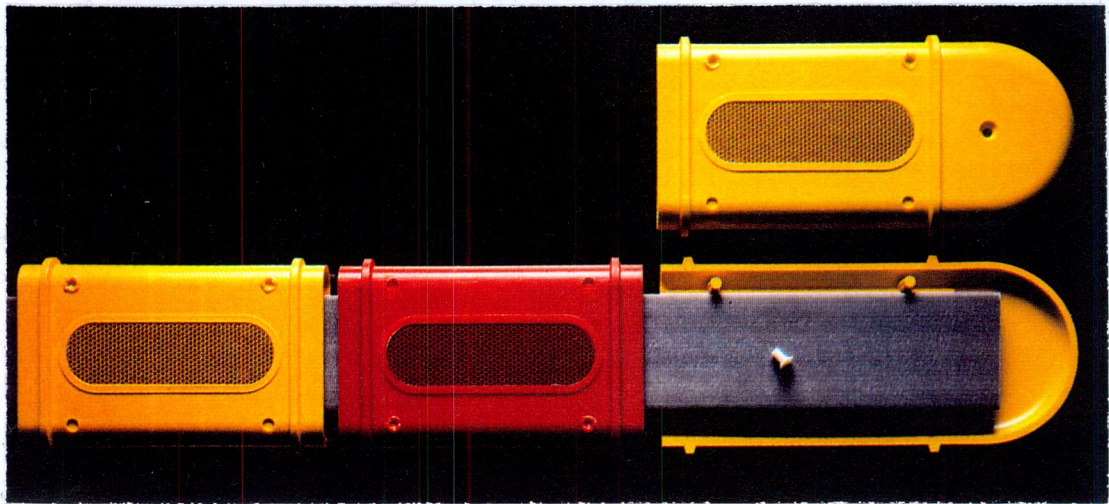
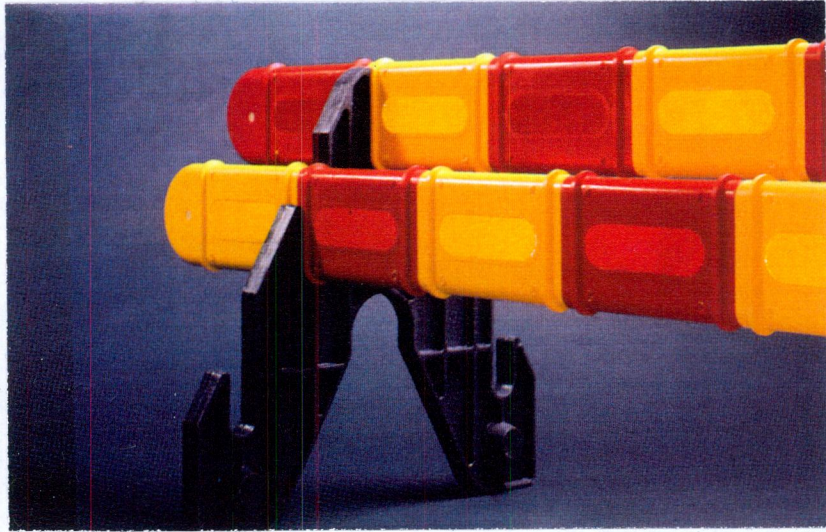
27. Jormo Savolainen, student of the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, Urb foldable bicycle for use in the city, 1992.





28. The components of a safety respirator for work or leisure use; all parts are marked for easy identification when recycling (top). The Tana sanitary landfill compactor, compressor, crushes and reduces waste (above).





29. Jukka Vaajakallio, traffic barriers, made from 100% recyclable plastic, with easy to assemble environment - labelled parts. Produced by the Oljenkorsi Group specialising in ecological product design.



Conclusion

Any discussion on Finnish design must begin with the concept of the Finnish style. Does this concept still have validity? Is there such a thing today? That depends on what it is taken to mean. Considered largely as just a style outside Finland, it has in fact developed from ancient functional objects used by the peasant of Lapland. Many Finnish designers even now try to keep the idea of 'Finnish design' alive, employing it not only in production, but also for promotional purposes, since the style has gained a high degree of international recognition.

But the ideas behind today's products are different from the ideology of the 1950's, that the term 'Finnish Design' can hardly be used nowadays without conjuring up misguided images of birch furniture and curved wooden sculptures. Simply put, the concept of 'Finnish Design' largely belongs to a society lost to past.

Nature in design; is it a tired cliché that Finland hangs onto, something that should be abandoned now she is entering the global community, or should it be preserved for the future.

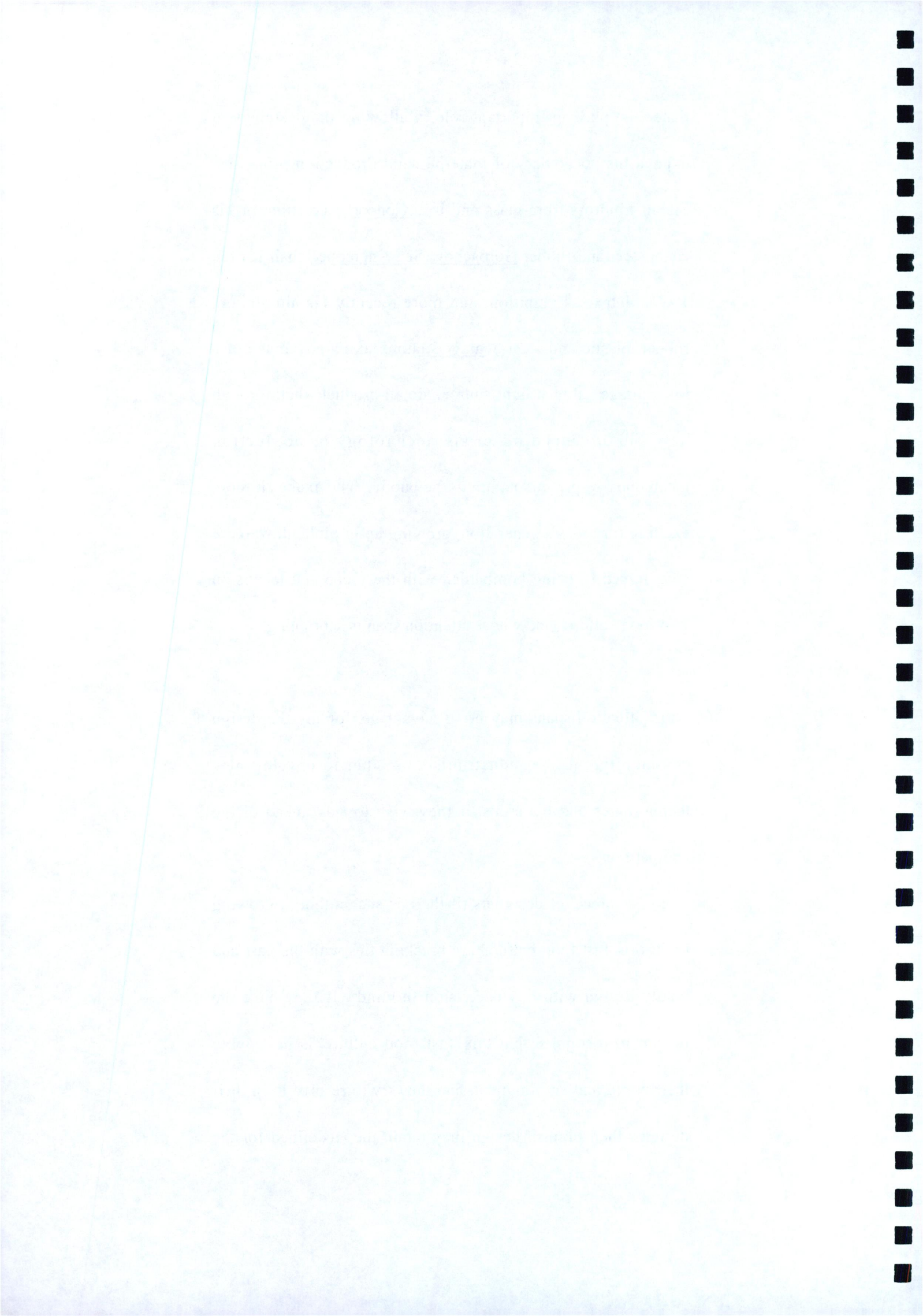
Today developing technologies, such as electronics and new



materials, play an important role in allowing the designers to expand his vocabulary of material and production processes. Stefan Lindfors fibre-glass and iron Concorde creation, or his cane, steel and rubber Gorbachov (Sea Anemone) chair for the 1987 'Metaxis' Exhibition, and more recently his aluminium, rubber, plastic and steel Scaragoo lamp, taking advantage of a low voltage halogen light source, are all products that, through new and advanced materials, technology or production techniques 're-present' nature to the public. This makes it more exciting for today's generation, growing up in Finland, who are accustomed to being bombarded with the video and television 'fast food culture', and whose attention span is shortening.

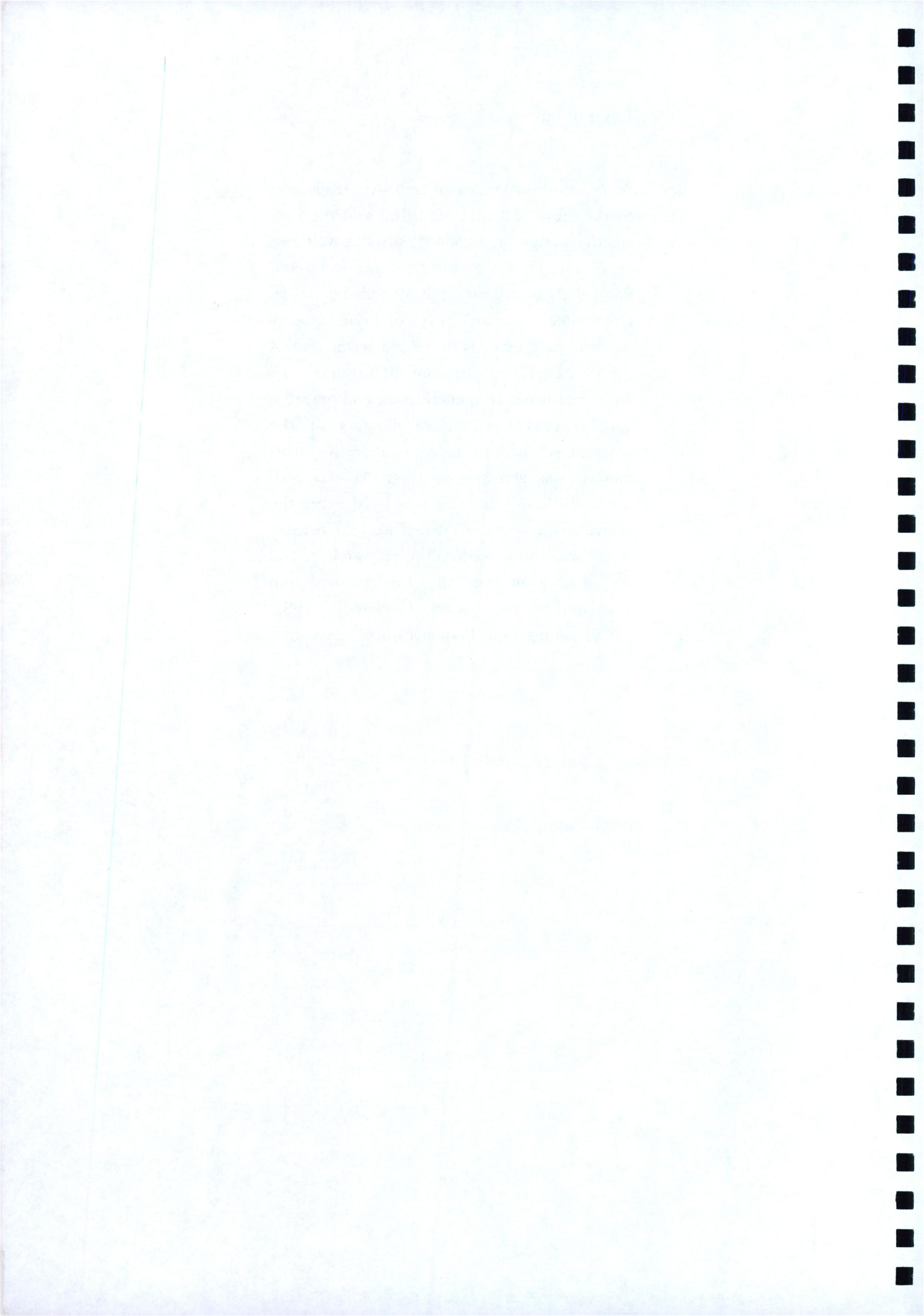
Short attention spans may be of advantage, forcing the design community and the industrialists together to develop new technologies and materials, if they wish to stay ahead of the competition.

The new 'breed' of designers (if there is such a thing), growing up in this 'fast food culture' are breaking ties with the past and boldly design with a wider vision in mind. If they have the insight to recognise that this 'fast food culture' is destroying their world and environment, and they try to resolve it, in their designs, then Finnish design may retain the (redefined for the



1990's) image of 'closeness to nature'.

At present Finnish design embodies tendencies of the 'new-old' folk tradition and the new creative design on a national basis as well as a more anonymous general internationalism. Particularly noteworthy is the direction of design development: towards ways of saving energy and materials, towards forms and aesthetics that give greater flexibility and better serve the emotional needs of modern man, and toward a careful survey of these aspects of the environment and our material culture that have failed to keep abreast of progress. At its best, all the work being done in this field bears the characteristic marks of Finnish design: closeness to nature, and a stark simplicity and refined frugality alongside the unrestrained and exuberant joy of creation. (McFadden, 1982, p.225, quoting Tapio Periainen).



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