

# GOOD DESIGN '51

as seen by its director and

*The Good Design program co-sponsored by our most gargantuan buying center—Chicago's Merchandise Mart, and our liveliest museum—New York's Museum of Modern Art, was launched at the Mart during the winter of 1950 with an exhibition installed by Charles Eames. Simultaneous publicity and country-wide retail store promotions aimed not only at persuading buyers and the public to attend, but at raising the general awareness of design in this field. Items were added during the June market, and in November a duplicate exhibition was opened in New York at the Museum.*

*Last January 15th Good Design went into its second year with an entirely new collection and an entirely new installation—by Finn Juhl, the Danish architect already known in this country for his exquisite furniture.*

*The crucial responsibility of choosing the objects in Good Design is borne by a three-man jury, two members of which change every six months. The permanent member is Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. of the Museum, who is the director of the program. We have asked both Mr. Kaufmann and Mr. Juhl to tell us what they think of their project, which statements appear below.*



by EDGAR KAUFMANN, JR.

**T**HE Good Design exhibitions mean differ-

ent things to a great many people—this confusion will continue as long as Good Design is a live activity. When its meaning is clear, and generally accepted by all concerned or affected, it will be time to put an end to the Good Design program. But that is not nearly yet.

To me, these exhibitions are an instrument of knowledge, a job of research undertaken twice a year to find out what the relationship is, that season, between the home furnishings trades and the progressive designers. A frank statement of the findings is presented to the world at large as agreeably as possible in a milieu sympathetically designed and strategically located.

Why should such research be published in the form of an exhibition? Because it is an index of the degree and direction of enterprise in a field which reveals us to ourselves. Home furnishings are the least self-conscious confessions of any society, hence among the more indicative and dependable ones, fascinating to watch and full of meanings.

Good Design does not represent the best that our designers are capable of; it can

show only the best that they have been able to get across in our community—for it is limited to purchasable products.

Good Design does not represent a current average of commercial design for the home; it is limited to courageous and progressive work. Good Design does not represent popular taste; who could hope to give a coherent statement of what that includes?

Good Design does not represent the high ideals of a special group of museum folk—perhaps, as rumored, ivory-headed and dwelling in ivory towers—for it is limited to the existing market. Good Design does not represent any ultimate judgment of any kind; it is a current comment (as inclusive as the generous cooperation of manufacturers, designers, and their agents will permit) on the most hopeful aspects of the actual scene in home furnishings, a comment made by small, changing committees of deeply interested observers with varying backgrounds. One permanent member, myself, permits some of the experience gained in one season to be made available on later occasions.

Good Design can sell merchandise because the public is naturally receptive toward new and progressive ideas, especially if these are endorsed by people with no axes to grind. In this sense, an otherwise rather

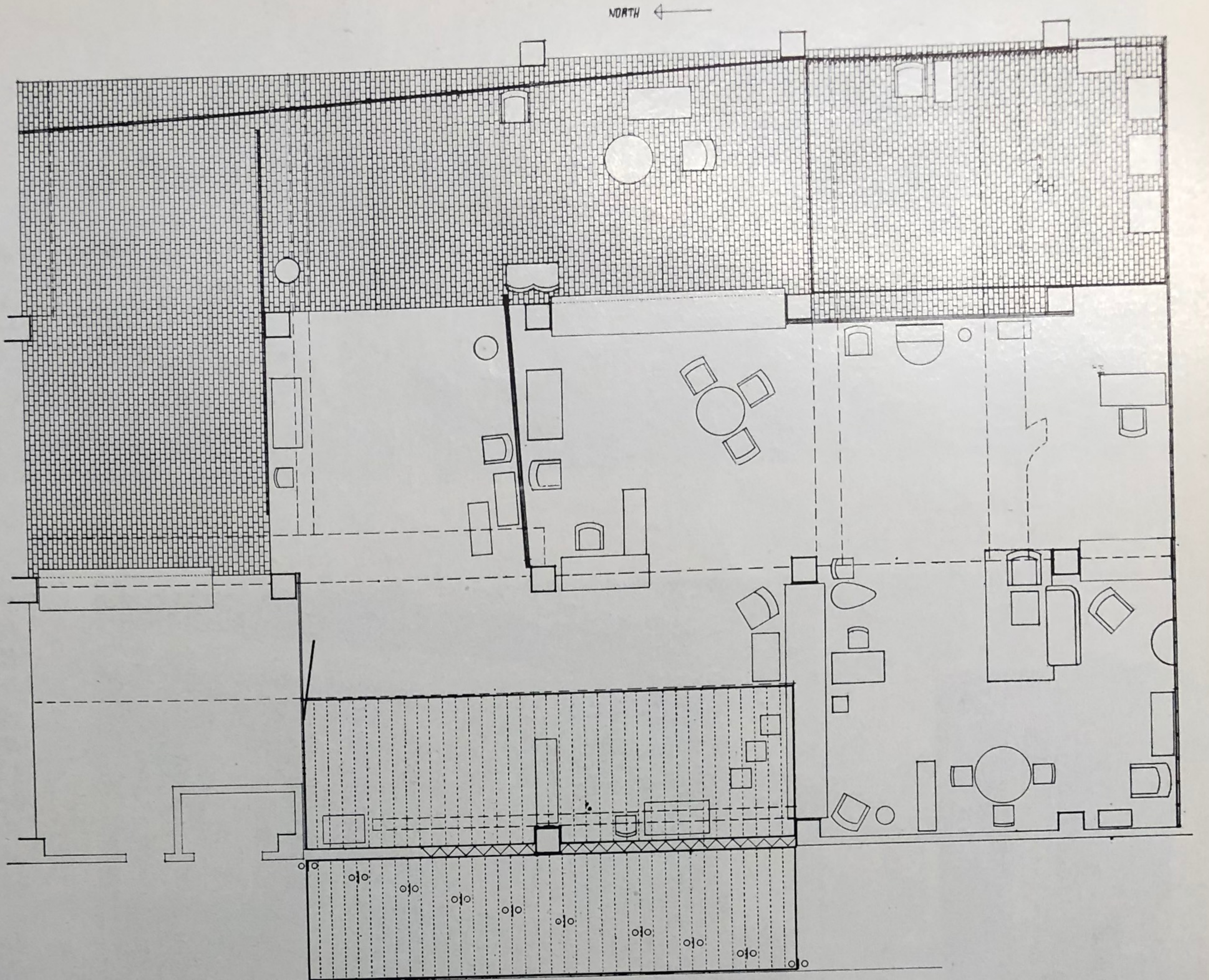
sluggish sector of the market is stimulated. This helps to decrease the disadvantages suffered by modern design, still subordinate as it is to imitative and bastardized wares which swamp the market quantitatively and dominate most promotional activity. Good Design serves the public as a buying guide, it serves the designers as an index of current achievements, it serves the manufacturers as a focus of design trends, it serves the retailer as a basis for securing an additional market. It could do each of these things better, and suggestions of how to do so are always welcome.

Good Design serves the student, a term which here is meant to include critics and teachers, as an instrument of knowledge. If museums and schools are to play a role in developing a more satisfactory way of life geared to technology and to democratic processes, this will never be accomplished by insisting on preconceived, officially sanctified values. Only by keeping closely in touch with actual developments, by nursing the healthy and lively elements latent within them, and by a continual subjection of value judgments to the tests of practice and use can anything worthwhile be achieved by students. Within its limits, I hope that Good Design is an instrument for doing these things.



by its designer

*Plan of the new exhibition: Though most of the walls are transparent, exhibition designer Finn Juhl sends the visitor on a prescribed tour that starts in the corridor, where bright yellow cards hanging from the ceiling in set-back order spell out Good Design on the way to the entrance. Changes in color, in flooring from matting to brick tile, and in ceiling levels and lighting (see plan page 103) break the area into subplots.*



PLAN

by FINN JUHL



**T**O accept the job of designing the background for Good Design is to accept the idea behind the exhibition itself. It is an important and a wonderful thing to happen, that producers, represented by the Merchandise Mart, can join the Museum of Modern Art in such an effort.

As a foreigner, I was at first struck by the differences in approach to design problems in Europe and the United States, but in the end I find myself more interested in the similarities.

In the past most articles in this field were designed or created for a special purpose and a specific individual. (In Europe this still happens very often.) Good results for one person might inspire others to want something similar, and so types or models were created.

Today in every part of the world lots of articles are designed for larger-scale production without this close bond between designer and consumer. In itself this need not entail any danger, because human beings are so much alike, basically, that a good and honest designer, guided by his own personal feelings about purpose, function, material, and surroundings, will find a great group of human beings willing to accept his ideas.

Nevertheless something has been lost. In

the first case the piece of furniture was designed as part of a whole; but the mass-produced object, no matter how well designed, is a thing in itself, forcing its ego on the surroundings.

I have noticed—as many others must have done—a great similarity between the work seen in Good Design and the furniture I found in Milan. In Italy, with its vast store of beautiful old objects, houses, works of art, it seems understandable that a contemporary designer, in the natural hope of being seen and heard, should be forced into producing extremely dramatic work. In the United States, although the overpowering ornateness and magnificence of the Italian background are missing, it seems to me that the designer has the same tendency to overdramatize. I have tried to find the reasons, and to me it seems to have some connection with the methods of trade.

To be frank and unfortunately blunt: what I fear is that the two-markets-a-year schedule forces the designers to be too superficially eager to please. The Good Design idea courts the same danger—as do similar exhibitions in Europe—even though the direction of the exaggeration is different. Many of the objects have too little modesty, too little of the inner value which manifests itself in daily use. Many of these objects

pretend to the artistic values of a Calder, and they trick you and me because they have the easy charm of a smooth salesman, the gaiety and drama of a poster. The joke grows stale and not quite decent when repeated day in and day out.

We are told in defense that this or that is so much better than what was designed (or produced without design) in the past. This is a point and a good one—for anyone concerned with creating still better objects. We are also told that this or that object is cheap, and that the low price makes it available to the man in the street. May I be allowed to repeat an old truth of greater importance in the long run, that an object can be inexpensive only in terms of its virtues, rather than in terms of a price tag. Another tendency is worrying me. I could easily find European examples, but allow me to use an American. When for instance Charles Eames designs a chair of molded plywood and does an excellent job of it, it is acknowledged as a work of art on a footing equal to any work of architecture or of fine art. It is. But the use of molded plywood is held in such reverence as an intrinsic factor (Continued on Page 160)



Good Design 1951



Both photos · Fran Byrne

Carl Ullrich

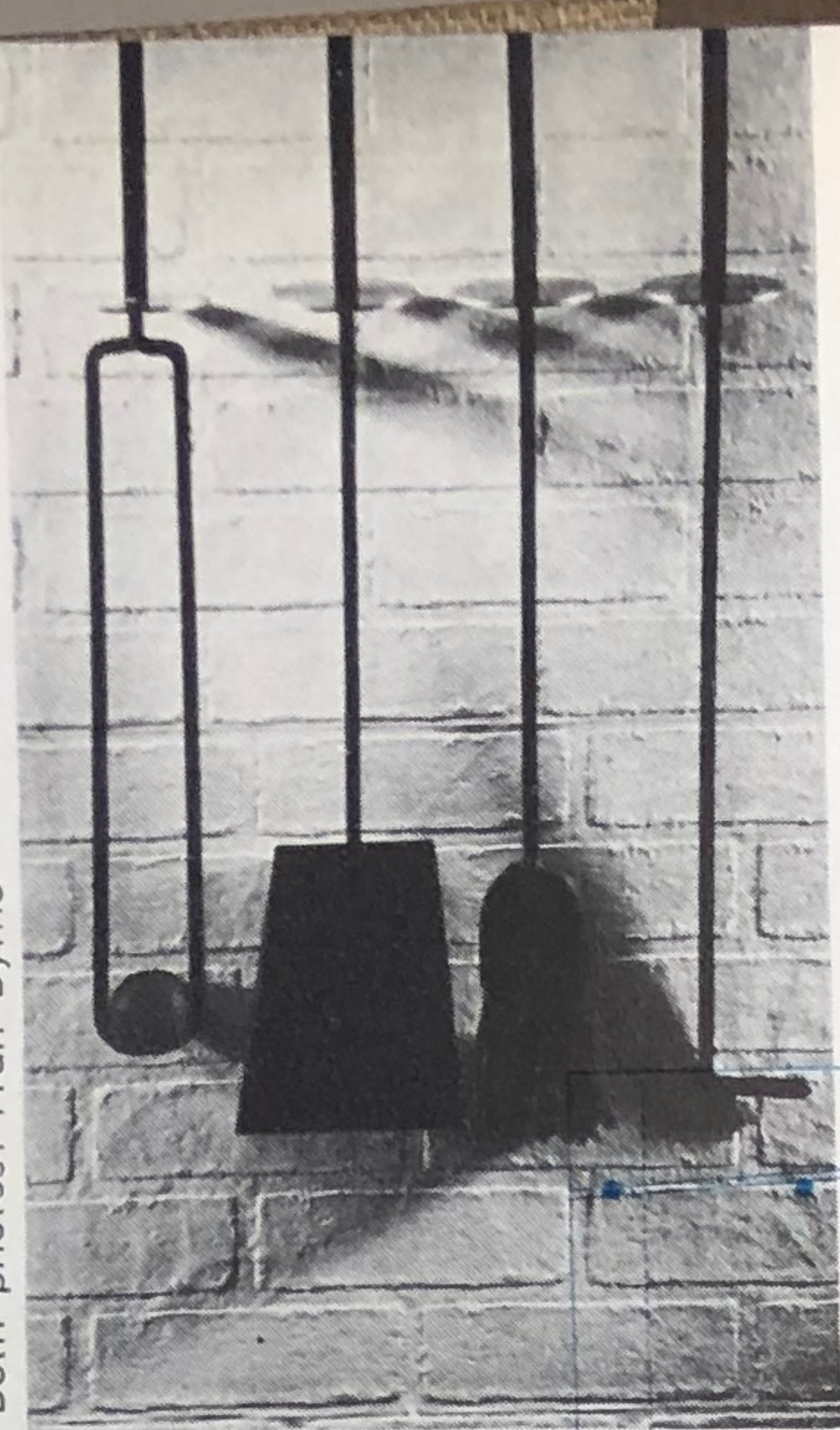


Above, left to right: garden pot from *Architectural Pattern*, Ron Fidler's steel and saddle leather chair, metal and wicker chairs from House of Italian Handicrafts, George Nelson's Lazy Suzan table from Herman Miller, Eames storage units. Furniture at left includes iron, glass, and latex foam furniture from Avar, Inc.

Designer Juhl did not know what the committee of judges—William Friedman of the Walker Art Center, Hugh Lawson of Carson Pirie Scott & Company, and permanent member Edgar Kaufmann—would place in his setting, nor did he see the space before the hectic construction period, which was curtailed by the need to continue the 1950 exhibition almost until the opening of the 1951. Juhl used fresh but gentle colors, floors of brick tile meeting pale cocoa mats, a trellis of white wood backed by green, column sides of white, clear orange, light blue, a lemon yellow wall, a transparent partition of water green glass. On this stage the exhibits will stand or fall on their own merits, but Juhl has seen to it that the spectator will feel comfortable, exhilarated, and has a chance to study each item undistracted. The uncrowded arrangement will still look uncrowded at the June market, when the number of exhibits may well be doubled.



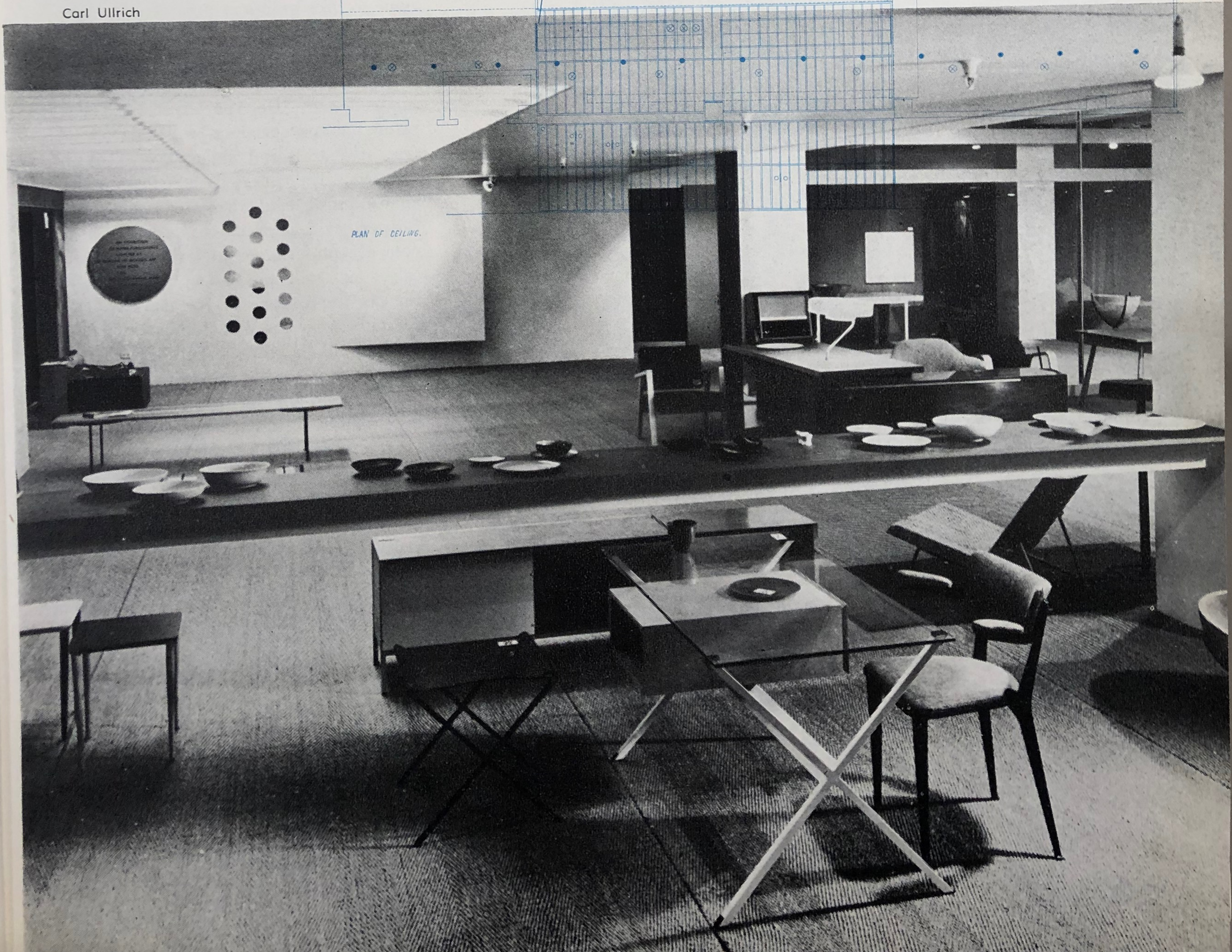
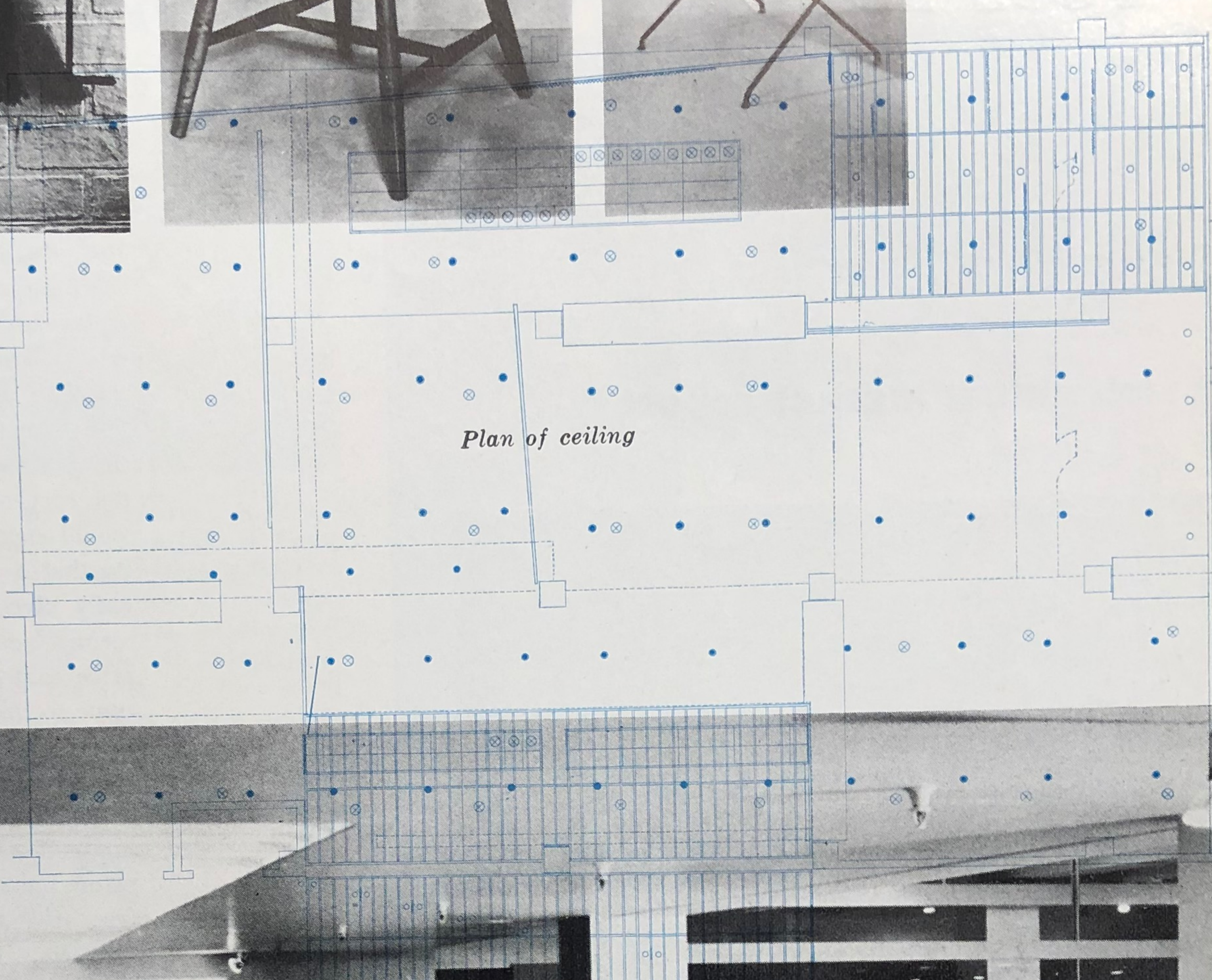
Both photos: Fran Byrne



Above, left to right: Felmore's brass and black iron fireplace accessories, Akerblom pin chair from Swedish Modern, Flagg & Stewart's iron chair from J G Furniture Company.

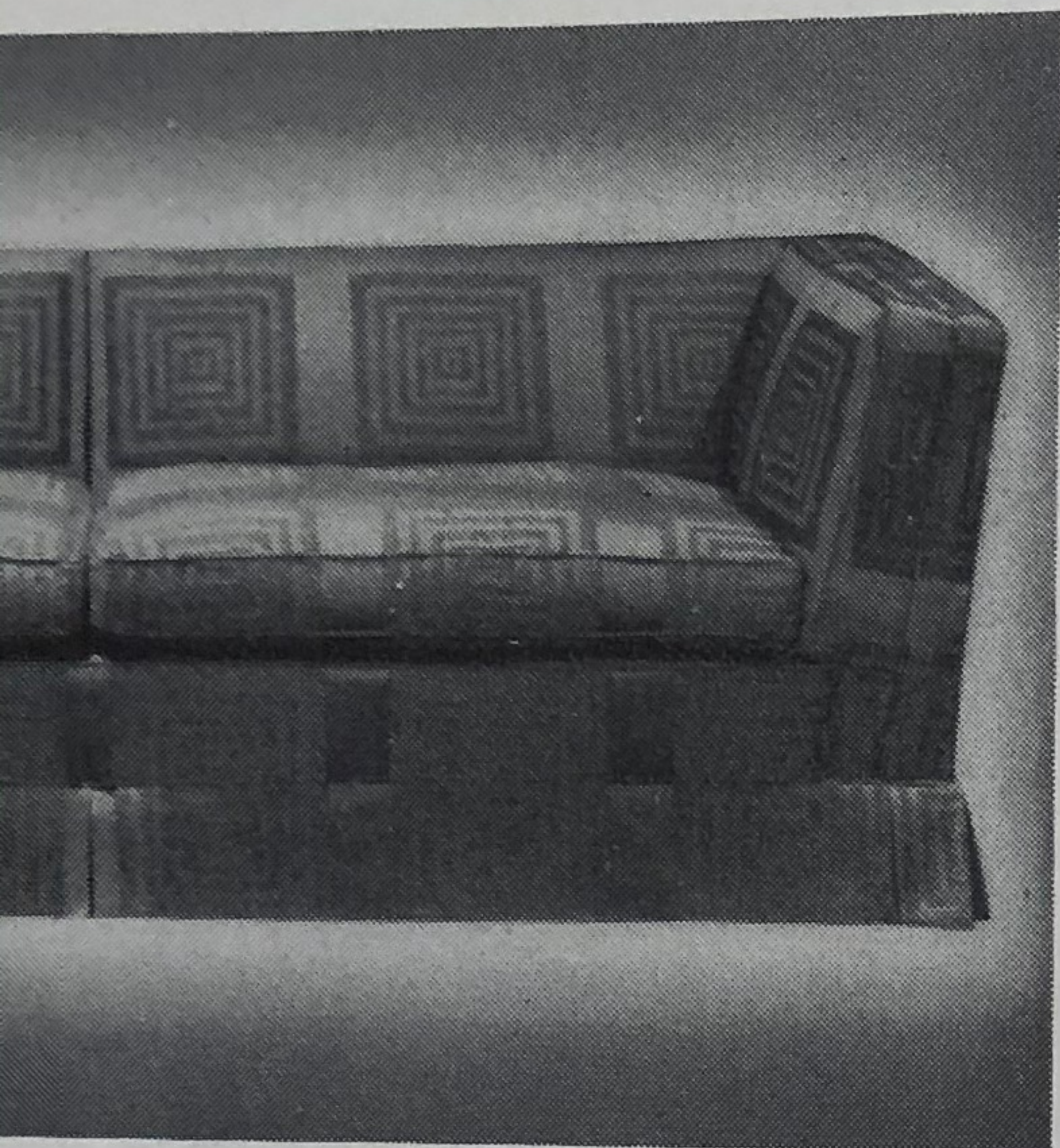
Below: Franco Albini's glass-topped desk from Knoll Associates, English Ernest Race upholstered cast iron chair from Waldron Associates.

Carl Ullrich





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**CATALOGUE**

**Good Design '51**

(Continued from Page 101)

of its artistic value, that hardly anybody seems interested in trespassing. I would reason quite to the contrary and say: Eames has proved that molded plywood is a wonderful modern material and has shown so logically how it can be used so as to serve a function, interpret a sense of form, and—in the type with metallic legs—express a method of construction, that I look forward with the greatest expectations to his own or other designers' work in this same field, which has not been explored as it deserves.

Now you cannot force designers to be as inspired and imaginative, and you have to accept with gratitude what moderately talented designers offer you when they are at their best. But when I want a chair or some other practical tool, I hate to be shown pseudo-Calder; I much prefer a real Calder or Mondrian or Marini to any tricky object in disguise. All over the world there seems to be this tendency of being interested only in the formalistic problems.

What I look forward to is earnest research and study, which mass production not only allows you but forces you to do.

What I fear is that many producers regard design as some sort of fancy paper into which they can wrap their products like Christmas gifts.

What I believe in is that design should be only one of many coordinated attempts to improve the products we use in every day life, made by a team consisting of producer, laborer, engineer, and designer, for the benefit not only of all these participants but also of the public.

One cannot create happiness with beautiful objects, but

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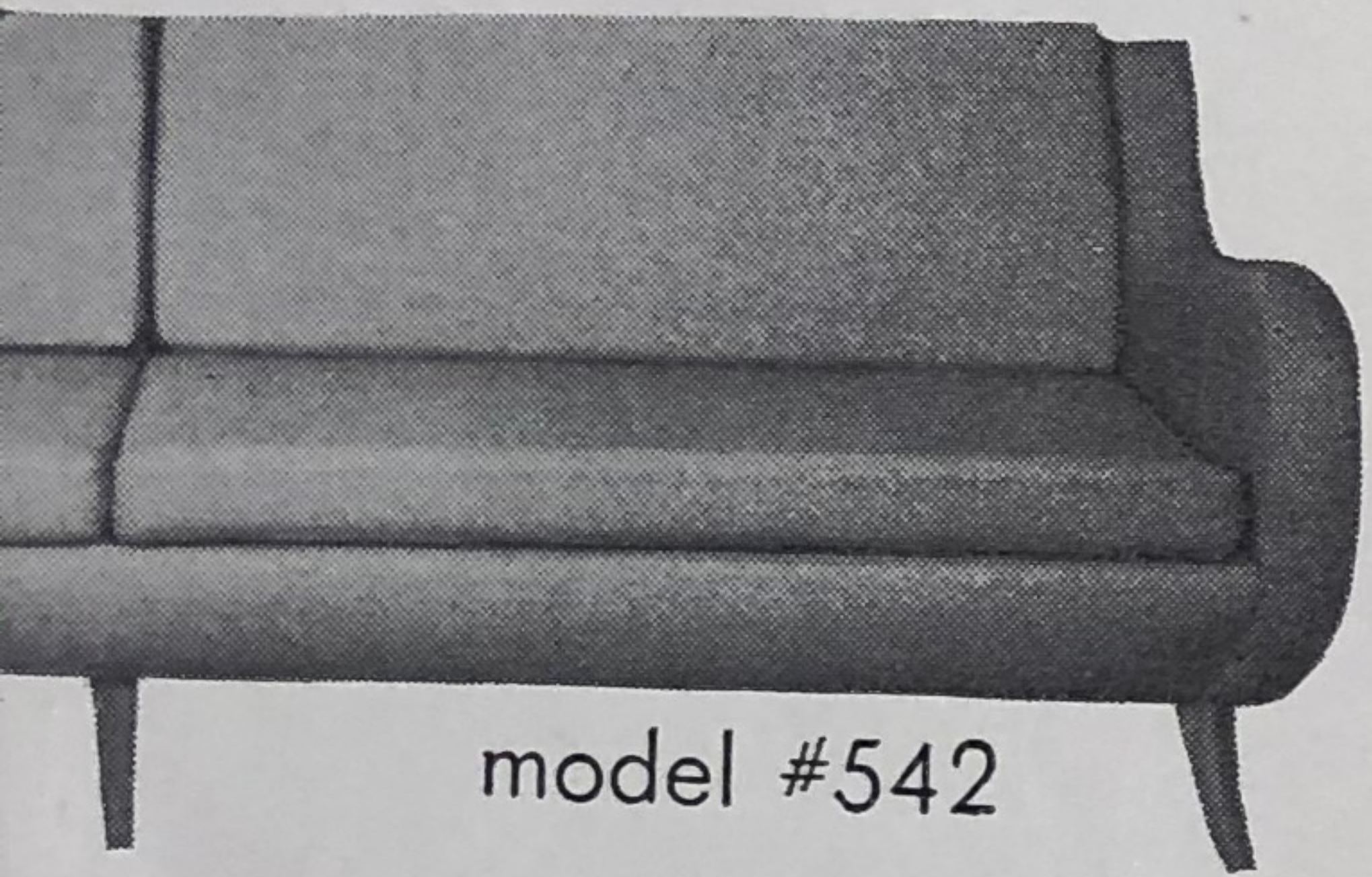
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one can spoil quite a lot of happiness with bad ones.  
It is very much a question of ethics.

Showing the very much enlarged photo of the 7000 year old pot in the new Good Design exhibition was one way of trying to express some of these ideas. The rest of the backgrounds were designed to create a sensation of spaciousness, and allow the items on display every chance to tell their story. I believe that exhibitions of this kind should give every object a fair trial; one should not try to cover up for less happy things.

May I end where I started: I am convinced that Good Design is an instrument which can be used to great advantage in furthering the cause of Better Design, not only in the United States but in every part of the world.

### **Furniture News**

*(Continued from Page 115)*

eagerly awaited venture into modern slated for the June market is a group designed for M. Singer & Sons by the fabulously versatile, fabulously imaginative Milanese architect Gio Ponti. To insure the satisfaction of customers who insist on an American flavor in their surroundings, Singer then engaged Bertha Schaefer to do still another modern line, probably reasoning that a New York decorator originally from the South, who had done traditional as well as modern interiors, and whose knowledge of painting and several applied arts enabled her to maintain a lively and well respected gallery, had the requisite background and experience for the task—not an illogical line of reasoning. Barring shortages, this line will also be presented at the June market.

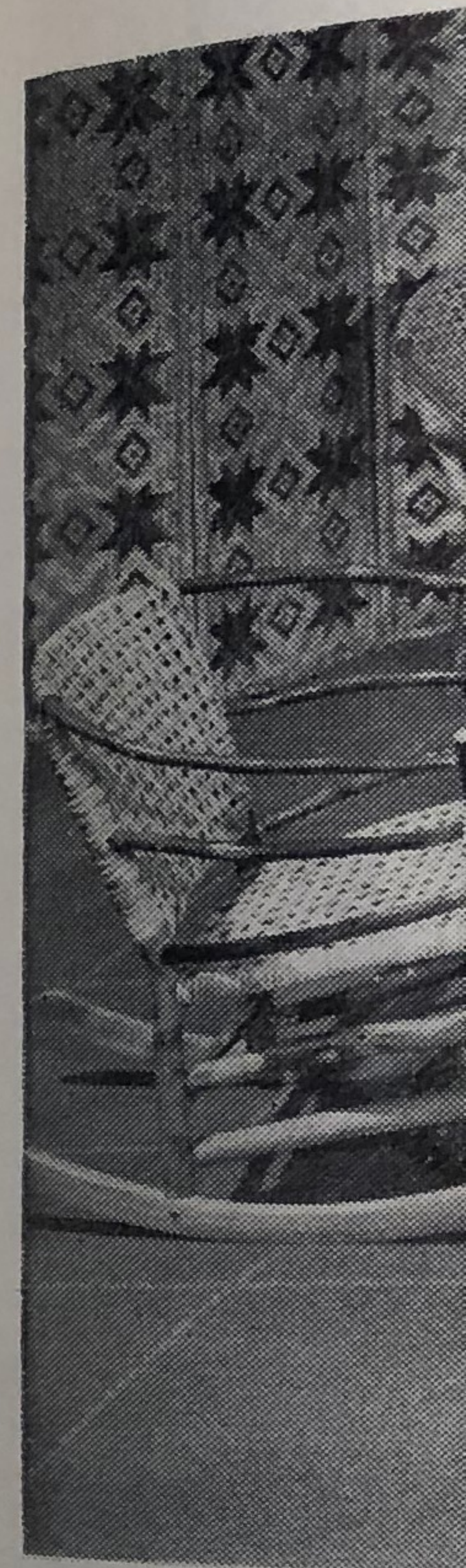
Right now the Singer showrooms have several new upholstered chairs and sofas of 18th century derivation. The one we most vividly remember was exceptionally well adapted to small spaces because of the shallowness of its

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