

# going beyond archetypes

*a story about inspiration, limits, and communication*

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Going beyond archetypes: a story about inspiration, limits, and communication

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## WHEN THINGS GO WRONG, WHAT DO WE DO?\*

*I am lost. Frustrated. Overwhelmed.*

As designers, we are often faced with the challenge of creating something new and original. However, this can be difficult when we are constantly building on existent knowledge and experience. Here I found myself questioning the very essence of design and its purpose. What else can be created? Does 'new' even exist? How can we get away from knowledge and experience in the creative process?

My search for answers led me to question the role of archetypes - the collective in-built visions of how things should look and work. I began to wonder if these archetypes were the creativity-blockers, making it difficult to be truly original.

Know your enemy, they say, and that was what followed. I embarked on a research journey to understand what makes an archetype and if it is prone to change. The answers were crucial for me, questioning how can I contribute to the world by creating, where do I find my own place, meaning and inspiration. Moreover, I hope that other designers also find this work inspiring. After all, challenging norms to create for the future and changing contexts, proposing fresh ideas is an ambition that we all share.

\* blame something, of course

## KEYWORDS

archetype, connection, conversation pit, market standard, object categories, prehistoric

## ABSTRACT

Archetypes, as universal patterns or prototypes, are deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness and shape our expectations about the appearance, function, and meaning of objects. However, as products and their contexts change, it becomes necessary to find ways to break away from existing archetypal images. This thesis explores the development of archetypes, the boundaries of object categories, and innovations in order to overcome archetypes and challenge typical scenarios.

Through research, this thesis finds that archetypes follow their roots and are difficult to radically change. People are more likely to accept objects they are familiar with, and unfamiliar objects may be rejected due to misunderstanding. Furthermore, storytelling plays a significant role in product acceptance and contributes to the product's aura.

The final outcome of this thesis is a mobile, modular conversation pit that challenges archetypes in several ways. It revises the traditional conversation pit, proposes a setting that encourages genuine communication rather than distractions, and encourages people to disconnect from their smart technologies and connect with each other. Inspired by the prehistoric room with a fire pit in the centre and reminiscent of the symbol of a WI-FI, this conversation pit is a synthesis of the findings from the exploration of archetypes.

# CHAPTER I

*knowing the enemy or research about archetypes*

## INTRODUCTION

Jung describes archetype as a universal pattern of thought, which lies in unconsciousness and is inherited from the past as collective experience. According to him, they are 'primordial images' and 'inherited mode(s) of functioning' (Jung, 1959). Archetypes appear through produced images, are psychologically controlled, and organize thinking (Lewis, 1989). When it comes to objects, archetypes can also be described as original models, prototypes, from which similar objects are created, or patterns (Monö, 1997).

Mankind has been exploring different shapes and their applications for different purposes since immemorial, and because some forms fit the needs they have become the archetypes. According to Heskett (2002), the evolution of forms is influenced by new technologies and cultural changes. Further, object appearance and function strongly relate to current product signs, which are the market's conception of how products are usually presented in their gestalt - the arrangement of parts that make the whole (Monö, 1997) or the concept of 'dominant design' - a market standard of product architecture (Abernathy & Utterback, 1978). The establishment of such market standards results in decreased product variety and minor changes based on the same product architecture (Dell'Era & Verganti, 2007). While human conceptions influence the development of objects' appearances and archetypes, they also depend on various constraints such as ergonomics, industrial possibilities, object categories, or styles. It could be argued that constant production focused on incremental changes in products results in overproduction and causes problems.

Therefore, it is worth challenging the existing norms in design and considering changing contexts in which the designed artefacts and their meanings should also change, especially when facing overproduction, sustainability, and socio-cultural issues. This study aimed to summarise and structure findings from previous publications about object archetypes and categories, types of innovations and provide some ideas for going beyond archetypes when creating for the future.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Knowing the fundamentals of design development, understanding the perception of objects and their categories, and addressing different contexts help build a strong basis for designers. Moreover, this knowledge enables creatives to challenge the existing norms and propose possible futures. Therefore, this research explored the following questions:

- How do archetypes develop?
- What do archetypes represent and mean?
- What are the boundaries of object categories?
- What are the potentials and risks of novelties?
- How to go beyond archetypes?

These questions are worth exploring in terms of finding ways to create for constantly changing contexts and propose solutions that function, are exciting, yet manage to challenge the existing norms. Even though a significant amount of research was conducted to explain these different issues, this study aimed to summarise the key findings to provide some ideas for overcoming archetypes.

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY**

This research consists of a narrative literature review, an interview with an expert, and a visual research. The aim of the narrative literature review was to see how other authors have explored these research questions, summarise them, and propose how to go beyond archetypes. The interview was conducted with Anna Wahlöö, who defended a Ph.D. thesis about phenomenon modern furniture classics in a contemporary Swedish context. The goal was to highlight the most significant insights from her research and discuss the questions that current research explored. The visual research was done in order to see how other professionals challenge archetypes.

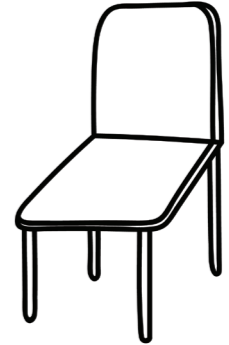
## THE CONTRIBUTORS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHETYPES

The establishment of a product plays a significant role in the development of archetypes, but other factors, such as technological breakthroughs or ergonomics, also result in different patterns in the development of archetypes. Rampino (2011) argues that a form that works the best to serve a function is not the only reason for archetype consolidation. Sometimes the archetype can result from industrial choices, which means that a product's basic architecture has been accepted as the market standard (Rampino, 2011; Abernathy & Utterback, 1978.) Here, it is possible to draw a connection to the concept of copy, discussed in the interview. Wahlöö points out that no object is worth copying if it is not good. It explains why, after the establishment of 'dominant design' to achieve market share, the following products focus on incremental changes in appearance (Utterback, 1994).

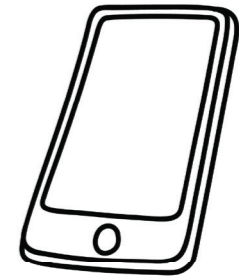
Once we start looking into archetypes, it becomes clear that they are not necessarily how objects look today. Since many circumstances influence the development of archetypes, the situations of what these images depict also vary. For instance, an archetype can be the most generalised image of a specific object category. Regarding this, a pattern in the archetype of chair development was discussed in the interview, concluding that, in this case, the archetype is the most reduced image of all the existing chairs instead of representing the best, most comfortable, or most influential chair. Another interesting situation is the development in electronics and technologies that often results in totally new products that neither have archetypes nor market ideas of their function representation. The renewal of such objects might be so rapid that they do not have current product signs and can easily be replaced with new ones (Monö, 1997). However, as mentioned earlier, once a new product becomes accepted as the market standard, it may result in new archetype. Moreover, an archetype may not depict the modern object. Monö gives an example of a steam locomotive that was replaced by the electrical one, resulting in the current product sign being changed drastically (Monö, 1997). However, the current product sign of the first prototype was so strong that the image of the steam locomotive remains in road signs or toys. A similar pattern is seen in the category of lighting objects. The first archetype of the lighting objects is the sun, then came the fire which was followed by many other lighting objects, whereas today, it represents a light bulb (often with a top or a base, depending on the typology). Despite a light bulb remains an archetype because of its strong image and enormous impact on society, the category of lighting is very diverse and rarely depends on the archetypal image. To conclude, the development of an archetype strongly depends on the object category, industrial choices, technological breakthroughs, and other factors. Thus, the archetype can depict the first prototype, change over time, or represent a reduced image of the whole category. These examples are presented in the next page.

*What do images of archetypes depict?*

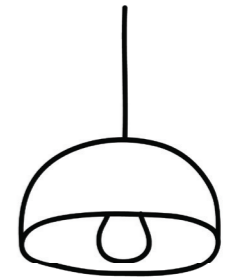
1. archetype = reduced image of the category



2. archetype = established market standard/  
current product sign



3. products do not follow archetype, but archetype  
remains



4. first prototype = archetype ≠ current product sign



## THE ORIGINS, REPRESENTATIONS AND MEANINGS OF ARCHETYPES

If we compare archetypes with the following ones, we see that new images often follow the previous ones, like a shape of a torch is quite similar to the shape of a floor lamp. As Selle and Nelles (1984) point out: 'Neither the gas lamp nor any electric light has ever - before Peter Behrens - managed to make do without references to the past; even the automobile was only slowly able to free itself from the coach form.' However, going further we notice that sun, fire, gas lamp, oil lamp, or light bulb - all have something in common. A fundamental characteristic of these objects is a concentration of a light source that reminds of a ball (sun). Similarly, the most important attribute of chairs, tables, or their former archetypes - stones is a level, which fights gravity, making them suitable for a specific purpose. Having references to the past is not just a result of humanity preferring things it is familiar with. Firstly, it can be the case that new products need to be applied for existing structures: electric trains ride the old railways, or new light bulbs fit previously acquired lamps. Moreover, as some forms have been developed for ages, they resulted in the rules of ergonomics which set strict limits and boundaries for new products. Also, it is a result of human understanding of objects. Krippendorff (1989, p. 14) claims: 'Something must have form to be seen but must make sense to be understood and used.' According to the author, there is a contradiction in making a new thing that makes sense as in one way it requires innovation, while in another asks to repeat the history. Finally, a vision of how an object needs to look goes together with limitations of possible ways to produce the product.

It becomes clear that same like design, archetypes are not just a visual matter: they do represent expectations, history, choices, trust, reliability, or agreements. For instance, if we compare archetypes of different types of accommodation, we see that they all have a roof that represents a basic human requirement of a living place. Moreover, it is interesting to discuss the meanings of objects and their archetypes since they, differently than the fundamental characteristics, change over time and strongly depend on the context. The chair is a great example to see how the meanings can change. According to Eickhoff (2010), the roots of the chair are in the sacrificial stone altar, which was split into two parts (a table and a chair) once people decided to sacrifice animals instead of other human beings. This action made the stone also a symbol of authority, putting humans in a higher position. The same is to be said about what followed next - the king's throne also meant power. Certainly, it is not so long ago that chairs were offered to people, thus blending the boundaries of hierarchy and ending up with new meanings that depend on different contexts.



## THE BOUNDARIES OF OBJECT CATEGORIES

As previously discussed, the development of archetypes varies among product categories. Changes in object categories can lead to changes in archetypes and when boundaries of object categories are challenged it can result in new archetypes. Bloom (1996) tried to explain what makes a particular object an object of its kind. The author suggests that 'something is a member of a given artefact kind by inferring that it was successfully created with the intention to belong to that kind.' He also argues that different object properties vary in their importance in determining the category they fall in. Thus, even dissimilar objects can belong to one kind when more essential qualities, like shape, match. It is crucial to note that when a created object reminds something from another category, it does not make it fall into this category. The author provides the drawing of a dog that looks like a cat as an example. He argues that it does not become a drawing of a cat - it is simply a bad representation of a dog. While this statement can be hard to argue with, it can be challenged in certain situations. One such example was discussed during the interview when we talked about a hypothetical object: a lighting cube that is at a stool's height and sturdy enough to sit on, which makes this object both a lamp and a seat. When discussing if such an object is a bad representation of both object categories or a successful dis-attachment from archetypes, Wahlöö suggested that this depends on the situation. For instance, if living spaces are getting smaller, in the future multifunctional objects may become new design classics. Moreover, as the research by Rampino (2011) shows, the problem of object classification can be related to typological innovations that relate to departure from archetypes and are rare yet radical. Therefore, when a new object is hard to assign to an object category, it does not mean it is unsuccessful. Instead, this can signal that a typologically new object is created or boundaries of categories moved. To conclude, changes in object categories contribute to changes in archetypes, and challenging object categories can lead to the emergence of new typologies, move boundaries of object categories, and result in new archetypes.

## THE POTENTIALS AND RISKS OF NOVELTIES

When it comes to novelties, different authors agree that when an object's appearance is overly novel, it can be misunderstood (Monö, 1997) or even rejected due to difficulties for the user to categorise the product (Rindova & Petkova, 2007). On the other hand, while some innovations may lead to negative emotional responses (Mick & Fournier, 1998), they can be cheered if the product's potential is understood (Rindova & Petkova, 2007). Even though innovation is often seen as the introduction of new technologies into a product or its manufacturing process (Baglieri, 2003), more factors can lead to different types of innovations. As Rampino (2011) states, form, mode of use, and technology can be the starters for innovation. According to the author, a new approach in one or a combination of these innovation levers results in aesthetic, meaning, typological innovations, and innovations of use. Also, archetypes are altered differently depending on the type of innovation. For instance, when it comes to aesthetic innovation, incremental changes in a product's appearance do not change its archetype (Eisenman, 2007). The same is said about the innovation of use, suggesting that aesthetic innovation and innovation of use are incremental innovations since they do not differ a lot from archetypes (Rampino, 2011). On the contrary, typological innovations rarely have commercial success but when radical solutions result in forms unthinkable before and obvious afterward, they can break the dominant archetypes and create new ones (Rampino, 2011). The author also states that same as typological innovation, meaning innovation is a radical type of innovation, and only markets' understanding, which takes time, makes the product successful. To sum up, typological and meaning innovations are the most radical ones and therefore create the strongest emotional responses. Despite difficulties that novel solutions may face because of being unusual, requiring an understanding of new meanings, and breaking the norms, the most successful forms can overcome existing archetypes and emerge as new ones.



## GOING BEYOND ARCHETYPES

The discussed literature and interview show that archetypes change over time influenced by various factors such as changes in object categories, sociocultural contexts or technologies. As presented earlier in this research, radically new solutions can be difficult to accept and change formal archetypes but the most successful forms are able to overcome existing beliefs. Since cultural, social, and technological contexts influence the development of archetypes, these issues should be the starting points to address when creating for the future. As Verganti (2009) states, many parties try to understand changes in these contexts and envision how people give meanings to objects so it is important to take a broader perspective and focus on the meanings of things. Moreover, innovations are created using several starting points (form, mode of use, technology). They can work separately or in groups to create novel products that result in aesthetic innovation, innovation of use (incremental and not changing archetypes), or typological and meaning innovations (can break dominant archetypes and establish new ones) (Rampino, 2011). Also, when challenging archetypes, the boundaries of object categories should be questioned, since they are strongly related. Humans are likely to categorise, and when an object is hard to be mapped out onto existing categories, it can be rejected. However, as research suggests, questioning object categories can result in new archetypes by changing the former or proposing new ones. Finally, archetypes can be examined through different design practices. While this research was mostly focused on the industrial design field, as discussed in the interview, other practices can work, too. For instance, critical design challenges the status quo which helps reveal what is possible, impossible, or necessary (Gransche, 2022). Also, speculative design enables thinking about the future and critiquing the present (Auger, 2013). Altering archetypes can be complicated and not always necessary, especially if only for the sake of novelty. However, living in the constantly changing world requires questioning the here and now because every decision impacts the future. Researching cultural, social, and technological contexts, questioning boundaries of object categories, using the form, mode of use, and technology as the initiative for innovation, and applying different design practices can all work when trying to go beyond archetypes.

## PLAYING WITH ARCHETYPES

Every creation is made with an intention. Whether it is to improve function, aesthetics, apply technology, spark emotion, tell a story, give critique and so on. As research suggests, consolidating new archetypes is a complicated and long process. Also, it might be that there is no need for a radical change, which still may happen by chance. Therefore, here comes the word play - while some designers challenge archetypes aiming to propose innovations, others, driven by curiosity, may simply do it for fun. Carelman's illustrations of impossible objects are great examples in which author plays with archetypes, often by questioning their affordances - as can be seen in the famous image of a 'Coffeepot for masochists' (figure 3). Some other examples include Ettore Sottsass 'Flying Carpet' (figure 5) or 'Pratone' by Gufram (figure 6). Mixing functions by combining archetypes, changing size of objects, proposing new meanings or challenging technological capabilities are some of the most often seen examples of playing with archetypes (more examples on figures 1; 2; 4; 7).

One of the goals of this research was to find ideas of where to start and what to do in order to go beyond archetypes. Therefore, after summarising the findings, here is a checklist providing some ideas:

1. Questioning norms (why so? SO WHAT? what if? why not? really?)
2. Changing gestalts (the way object's function is typically presented):
  - form: scalling/ reducing/ upcycling/ combining...
  - mode of use: new/ advanced/ surprising...
  - technology: emphasising/ changing/ doing opposite...
  - meaning: symbolic/ status/ nostalgic/ fun...
3. Playing with one's expectations

And the list goes on...



Figure 1. Panton, V. 1969. *Living Tower*



Figure 2. Storms, B. *InHale*



Figure 3. Carelman, J. 1969. *Coffeepot for masochists*



Figure 4. Song, S. *Objet-E*



Figure 5. Sottsass, E. 1972. *Flying Carpet*



Figure 6. Derossi, P., Ceretti, G., Rosso, R. 1971. *Pratone*



Figure 7. Poll, M. *Do Hit Chair*

## CONCLUSION

This study explored archetypes, their development, and possibilities to overcome them in the creative process. The development of archetypes is influenced by various factors and, depending on their establishment, archetypes can be easier or harder to change. It can be seen that the replacement of archetypes is a slow and continuous process in which new images obtain some elements from the former ones. Moreover, radically new solutions can lead to rejection or anchor new archetypes when the new form's potential is understood. However, it is important to note, that physical environment has been developing for ages and certain rules or norms are the result of specific shapes fitting particular needs perfectly, hence novelty for the sake of novelty may be redundant if it does not function properly. Also, it is presented, that archetypes may be challenged by using different methods or design practices.

## INTERVIEW WITH AN EXPERT: ANNA WAHLÖÖ

The interview took place on the 6th of December, 2022. We met with Anna Wahlöö at Lund University where she works. During the interview, Anna told about her academic work. Also, we discussed the questions that this research explored. Below is a summary of our discussion.

### The background

Anna Wahlöö has defended a Ph.D. thesis about the modern furniture classics in a contemporary Swedish context, exploring why and how objects become them. She analysed the concept of a classic in itself: the way it works, and the factors contributing to it. According to Wahlöö, some of the properties design classics share are simplicity of design and functionality. Moreover, the development of design classics is influenced by the power factors: regular people, commercial businesses, media, museums, and institutions, because these parties share an interest in the existence of good design and classic pieces. In her research, she also talked about aura - a phenomenon of the feel of an artefact when certain attributes of an object make it interesting while other qualities may be excluded. Lastly, she discussed the concept of copy, which relates to having a significant amount of replicas and interpretations of design classics. As the research by Wahlöö suggested, any idea is worth copying if it is not good.

### What makes an archetype

If we asked someone to draw a chair it would probably be a drawing of two rectangles and four legs, even though it is not an image of the most comfortable or efficient chair. Thus, it was discussed in the interview, if an image of an archetype can depend on human abilities to represent objects visually or verbally stating that archetypes are more complex structures in the way we think about objects. Also, Wahlöö found out during her research that classics for the following generations become reduced. This contributes to the idea that an archetype is a reduced image of a specific object category.

However, different patterns in the development of archetypes can be seen among various object categories. In the book 'Design for product understanding', Monö gives an example of a steam locomotive, which was replaced by an electrical one. Its archetype was so strong that sometimes we still use this image to picture locomotives, even though they have completely changed. Also, as discussed earlier, objects in the lighting category rarely remind the archetype, but the picture remains, which can be a result of the impact that electricity had on society. The example of crystal chandeliers given by Wahlöö illustrates this development of an archetype: 'When electricity came, crystal chandeliers were still designed as the old ones, but since light bulbs were such high technology, they were put outside the chandelier for

everyone to see them. When the technology further developed, it was understood, that one should hide it.'

### Functions and categories

In determining possible uses of an object, affordances play an important role, too. Despite hanging a coat on a chair we do not see it as a hanger, so what makes it fall into a particular category? As Wahlöö said, categorising makes it easier for us to understand the world, but maybe sometimes there is no need to do it. For instance, this can even relate to sustainability: 'If you have a glass, a vase, or something similar, maybe you do not need to produce three things.' She also mentioned that in folklore tradition people were especially good at making furniture with different usages, such as tables with storage, or benches that can also be beds.

Multifunctional objects may not remind specific archetypes which makes it tricky to categorise them. Therefore, a hypothetical object: a lighting cube that is at a stool's height and sturdy enough to sit on, which makes an object both a lamp and a seat, was discussed. If we take Bloom's example of someone drawing a dog, that looks like a cat, which does not make this dog fall into the category of cats because it is a failure of representing a dog, the question is if the hypothetical lighting cube is just a failure or a successful dis-attachment from archetypes. Wahlöö suggested, that this depends on the situation: 'It could be that there is no space to have both a lamp and a chair.'

### Going beyond archetypes

Many researchers agree that if designers go too far, this can lead to misunderstanding and result in the rejection of the proposed idea. However, as seen in the industry, the establishment of a product is the reason why following products of the same kind tend to look similar when companies try to get their market share. In terms of overproduction, the need for new products has to be thoughtful, acknowledging that products are going to be created and produced because of the development of technologies, materials, and new challenges that humanity faces. It is also true that people are driven to always improve what exists. Moreover, interpretations of the past by storytelling through new products can be relevant, interesting, and contribute to the concept of aura.

Even though industrial design plays a significant role in the development of archetypes, other design practices can also work to challenge them. For instance, critical or speculative design can be the tools to give critique to the present and discuss possible futures. However, as discussed in the interview, such design fields might have problems reaching bigger audiences.

*I would love to thank Anna for joining me for this interview.*

# CHAPTER II

*starting the design process*

## **GOALS AND CONSTRAINTS**

At the start of my research, I aimed to discover a recipe for moving beyond archetypes, implementing it, and proposing a new archetype. However, after conducting primary research, I realised that archetypes only change over time. With this in mind, I shifted my focus to challenging existing archetypes by distancing myself from preconceived notions of how things should appear or function. This approach was crucial for me to receive feedback on my work at the end of the semester. I chose to concentrate on everyday objects that are firmly established, as they are the most resistant to change and are deeply ingrained in our consciousness. Additionally, I aimed to make the project enjoyable, whether by presenting a fun and ironic concept or by bringing people together to have a good time.

## 1ST BRIEF

The way humankind imagines and builds material environment is related to archetypes, that appear as collective visions, formed over a long course of history and therefore pretty hard to be changed. The goal of this project is to challenge existing norms and question the boundaries of everyday objects.

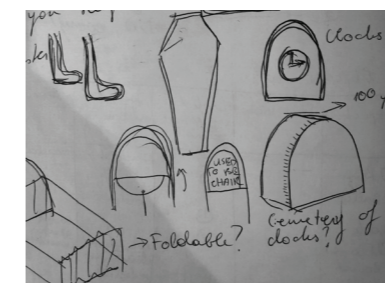
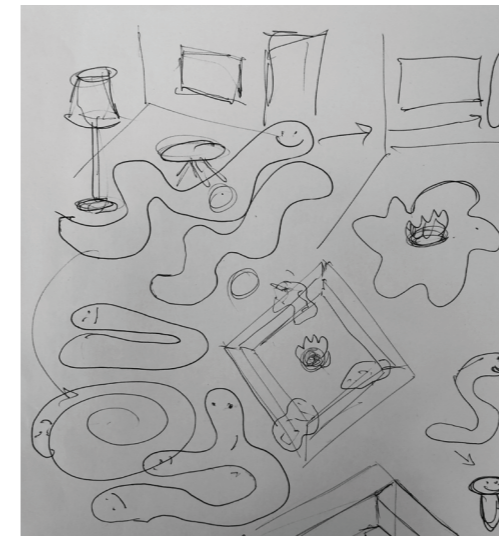
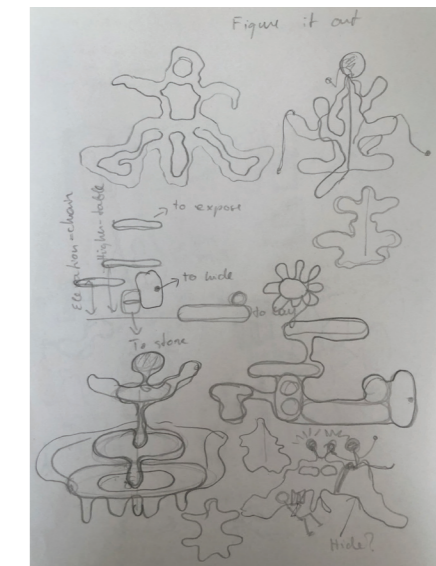
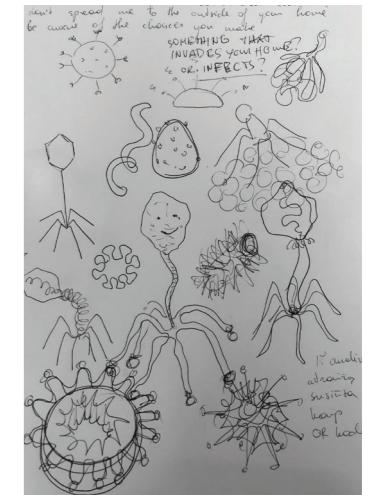
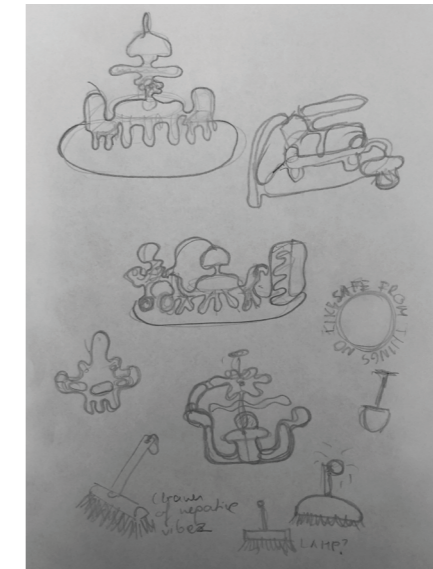
To allow for exploration in various directions, I opted to begin with a broad and open brief and refine it throughout the process. Thus, further research with a specific focus on a particular area had to be carried out later on. Some of the first directions and ideas are presented further in this paper.

## IDEATION PHASE 1

Following the initial brief, I engaged in ideation, quick sketches, and experimentation, exploring various approaches such as combining and flipping furniture, utilising unconventional production methods, and using symbols to imbue new meanings into objects.

Some of the initial ideas that emerged included upcycling archetypes by playing with form that does not necessarily represent purpose, bestowing superpowers on basic objects, questioning object autonomy by exploring their functions, challenging production methods by revisiting technology, considering the mortality of objects by contemplating the fate of our material world, viewing objects as viruses by examining their scale of production, or regarding objects as living entities.

Despite these ideas, I still did not feel particularly excited by any of them, prompting me to go further in my search for inspiration.





## CHAPTER III

*Skara Brae and settings for communication*

### **SKARA BRAE, CONNECTION, AND ARTIFICIAL INSANITY**

Continuing my research, I delved into the history of various objects and stumbled upon the fascinating pictures of Skara Brae - a Neolithic village in Orkney, Scotland that was occupied from around 3100 to 2500 BC and uncovered in 1850 (figure 8). The village was buried under sand, which served as a protective layer, and was eventually washed away by the sea (Springer, 2021). The villagers crafted their furniture and storage from stone, since wood was scarce on the island (Smardzewski, 2015). While Skara Brae may not boast the oldest known examples of furniture, the pictures of it provided me information and inspiration.

As I continued to examine and scrutinize the images of Skara Brae, I became increasingly aware of the central role played by the fire pit in the household. It had a sense of warmth and intimacy, as I envisioned family gathered around the fire, cooking, talking, and enjoying each other's company.

However, in today's society, with modern technology and social media dominating our lives, the concept of communication has taken on a completely different meaning (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Wi-Fi has become one of the most ubiquitous symbols of communication and connectivity, representing something that most people cannot live without - internet access. Yet, numerous studies suggest that social media use can be linked to negative emotions such as social anxiety and loneliness (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). These findings raise important questions: How can we differentiate between what is real and what is artificial? How can we preserve our sanity in an increasingly artificial world? Will we be able to maintain genuine connections with others?

This line of thinking prompted me to contemplate objects that facilitate real-life conversations, which led me to the concept of conversation pits.

## THE RETURN OF A CONVERSATION PIT

The conversation pit, a sunken seating area that gained popularity in the 1950s, was designed to foster intimate conversation and social interaction during gatherings with friends and family. Although it creates a cozy atmosphere and invites face-to-face conversation, there are also potential drawbacks to this architectural feature. One concern is safety, as the recessed area on the floor can pose a tripping hazard. Additionally, communicating with someone standing above the pit can be uncomfortable for those sitting on the lower level. These safety issues, along with changing design preferences and the emergence of TV, which changed the sitting arrangement to draw attention to the screen instead of talking, led to the decline of conversation pits in popularity.

However, to me, the coziness of the conversation pit is reminiscent of the ancient fire pit, and some design journals suggest that conversation pits are making a comeback for several reasons. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic has made people miss in-person communication, and the conversation pit provides an intimate space for face-to-face interactions. Secondly, with the rise of social media and digital communication, people are looking for ways to connect in more meaningful and tangible ways. The conversation pit offers a physical space for genuine conversation and socialising.

To address the safety and problematic installation concerns associated with conversation pits, modern designs, instead of a sunken area, can offer a raised platform with built-in seating providing the same cozy atmosphere. With these modifications, the conversation pit can continue to provide a comfortable and intimate space for gathering and socialising.

## CONVERSATION PIT VS SOFA

Since both categories changed each other throughout history, it is fascinating to compare them from various angles, including their meanings and characteristics. Upon closer analysis, it becomes apparent that the advantages of one category often coincide with the drawbacks of the other. For instance, while sofas offer greater versatility and ease of use, conversation pits can be challenging to integrate into a home, have safety concerns, and there are fewer options available on the market.

Conversely, conversation pits foster genuine communication and a sense of togetherness, while sofas are more about convenience and function, drawing attention to distractions. Notably, the conversation pit possesses a greater degree of symbolic and emotional significance compared to the sofa, which inspired me to consider new symbols and meanings that it could adopt.

In summary, by exploring the distinct characteristics of sofas and conversation pits, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how they complement and diverge from each other. On the next page there is a summary of comparison between these two objects.



The comparison between conversation pit and sofa:

CONVERSATION PIT

real conversation  
togetherness  
intimacy  
gathering memories + experiences  
family  
sitting + talking  
relaxing

built-in, often recessed  
hard to change  
large  
safety hazard  
has entrance  
closed  
static  
not a lot of choices

TO SUM UP:

static, hard to install and change,  
unsafe, not a lot of choices

more about real being together and  
emotional value

SOFA

watching TV  
gathering  
relaxing  
memories + entertainment  
self + family

moveable  
easy to install and change  
safe  
various sizes  
open, direction oriented  
no entrance  
many choices

TO SUM UP:

less about being together, more  
about distractions, more function-  
oriented, less emotional value

easier application, great variety



THINGS TO DO:

Take the conversation pit from the ground so people can have it without destroying their floor! And throw out the TV.

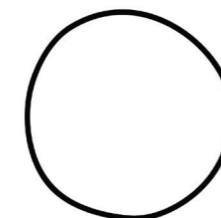
IDEA: BRINGING BACK (PREHISTORIC) INTIMACY

As I saw real communication in danger, the idea was to bring back the intimacy and real conversation by challenging a typical layout of a living room with a sofa. Contrary, the project should focus on the luxury of being offline, by gathering people and encouraging them to leave technologies behind.

A final brief sounded like this:

The way humankind imagines and builds material environment is related to archetypes, that appear as collective visions, formed over a long course of history and therefore pretty hard to be changed. The goal of this project is to challenge the living room as a place of real communication instead of distractions that modern technologies create and propose a concept for a conversation pit which also uses symbol(s) which contribute to the storytelling.

Not only I thought about a conversation pit as an interesting object to bring back to life but also tried to look for new meanings it could have or symbols to use which would correspond to today's context. For instance, if we think about the conversation pit as a place to hide from all the madness and distraction, it increases the sense of safety. Otherwise, this object can be thought of as a place to have, focusing on making it more democratic and achievable to a wider population. However, some people say, that offline is the new luxury, hence in the process I decided to focus on these symbols: the circle, which symbolises equality, togetherness, and creates the border, fire which relates to the gathering of people, dating back ancient times, and Wi-Fi - a symbol of connection these days.



border  
togetherness  
equality



gathering  
warmth



connection



## MARKET ANALYSIS

In order to get an overview of what the market has to offer, I did some research, by looking at examples showing traditional in-built conversation pits (figure 9), the ones that are put on the floor, or modular (figures 12; 13). Also, I looked into examples that focus on providing new meanings and have some sort of poetry and storytelling, for instance, the 'Tawaraya Ring', created by Umeda (figure 10), depicting a conversation pit as a boxing ring.

Some examples are more functional and focused on ergonomics, while others provide flexibility in terms of body position which is not defined by a shape of a product. Also, modular conversation pits provide an opportunity to personalise the arrangement but often cause it to be quite spread instead of having the main attention point. Moreover, there are examples where conversation pits work as multifunctional objects, for instance, like a sofa bed (figure 11).



Figure 9. Miller house, 1953-57, Korab, B.



Figure 10. Umeda, M. 1981. *Tawaraya Ring*



Figure 11. Becchi, A. 1971. *Anfibio*



Figure 12. Klugis, U. 1973. *Terrazza*



Figure 13. Paulin, P. 1970. *Dune*

# CHAPTER IV

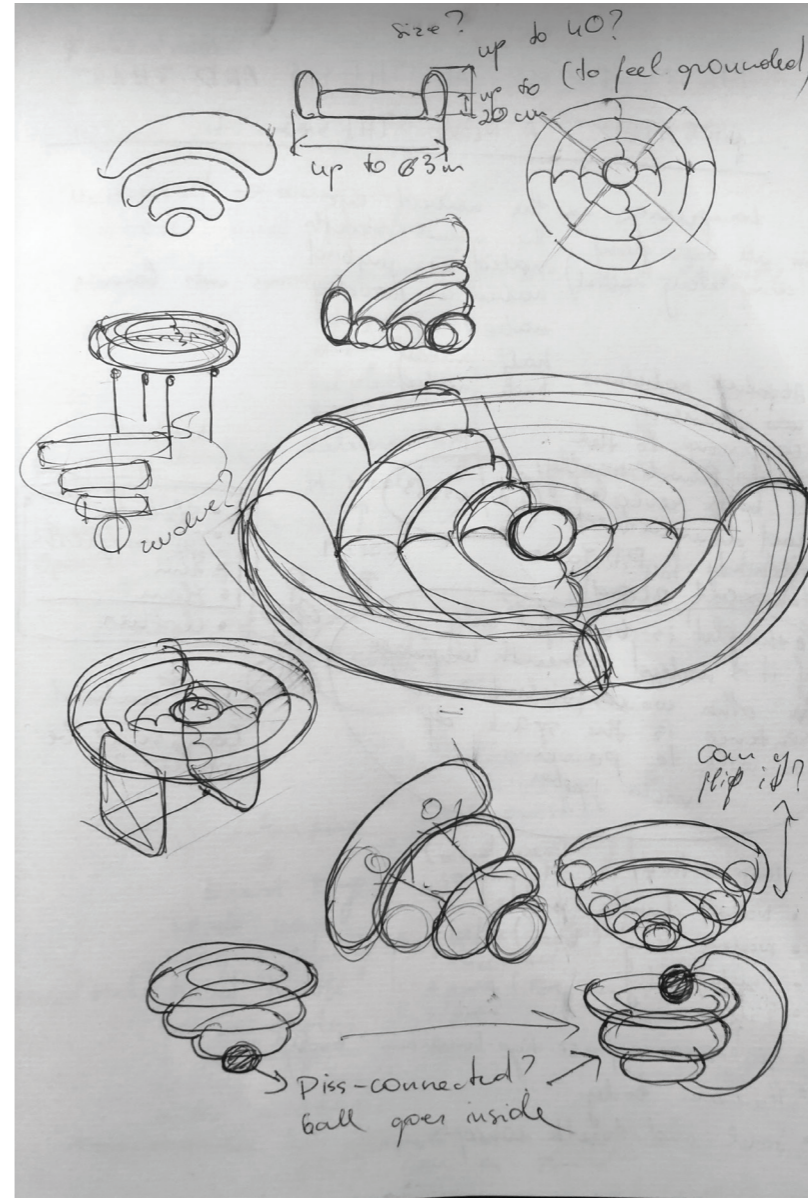
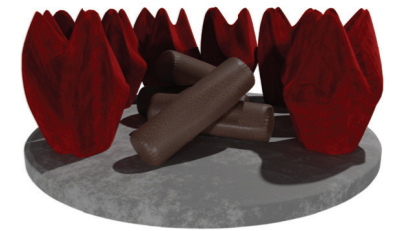
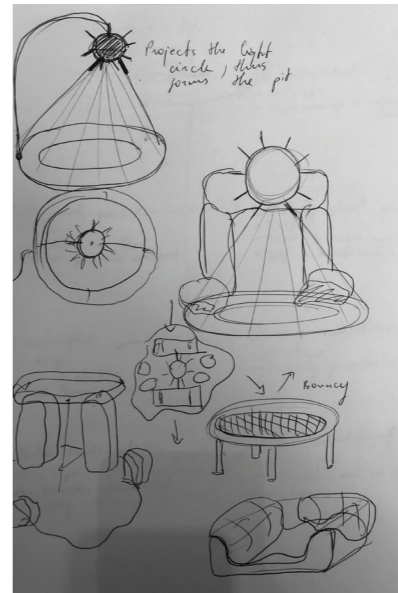
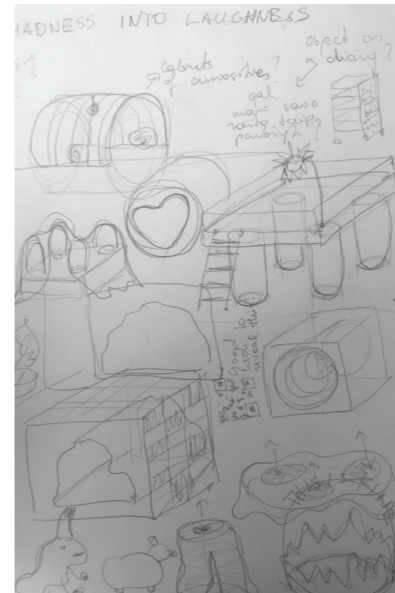
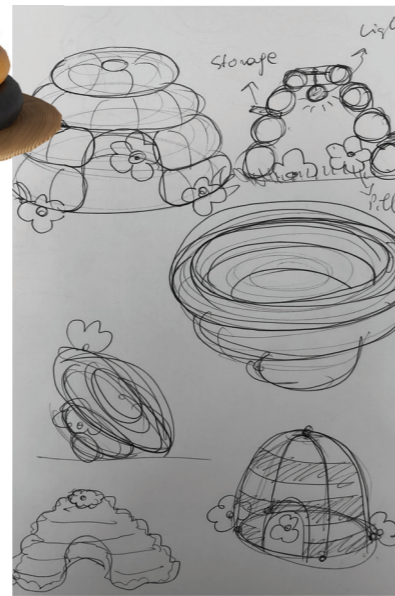
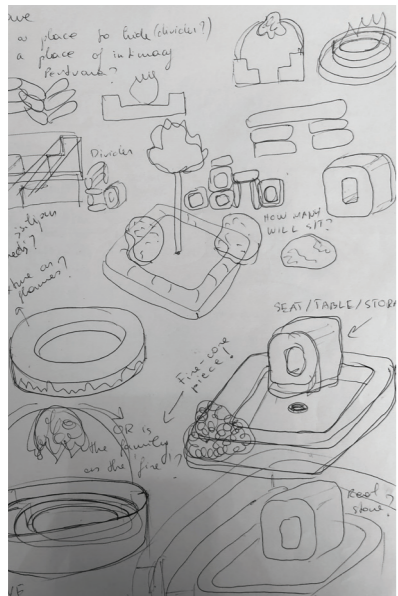
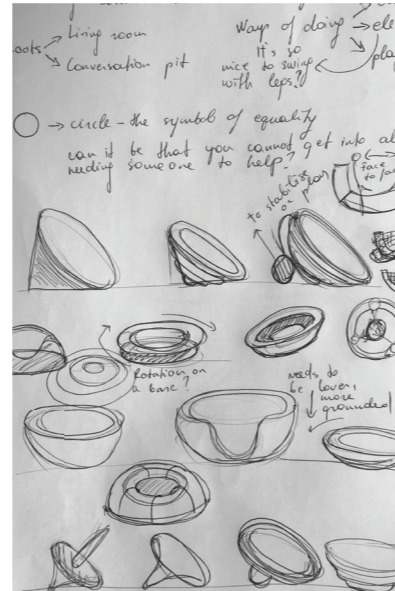
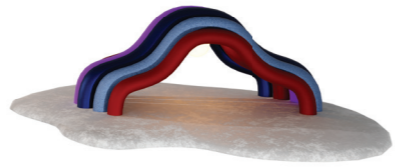
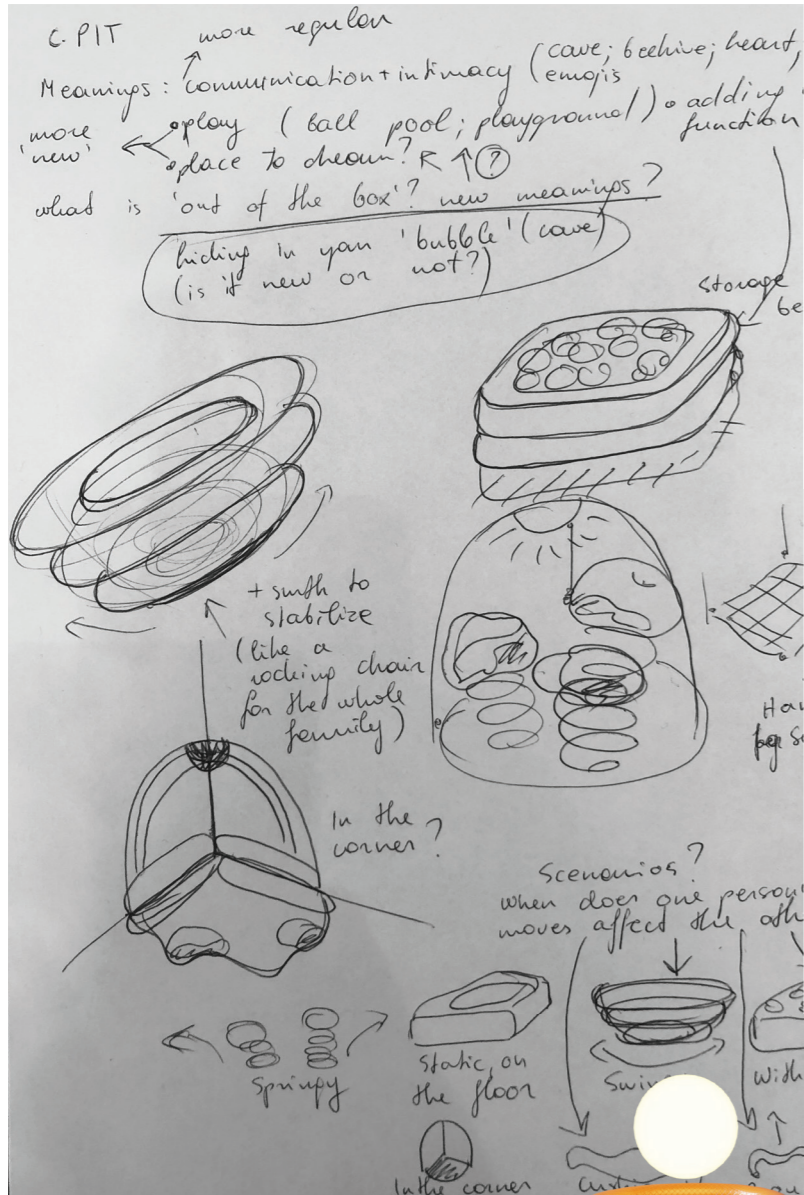
*design process*

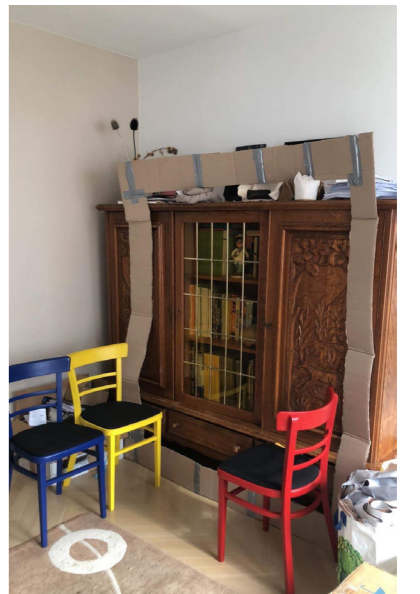
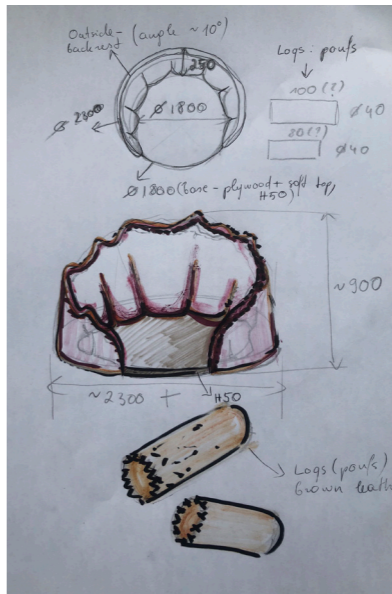
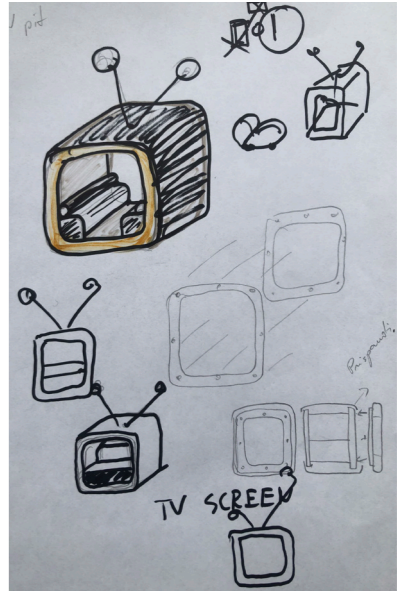
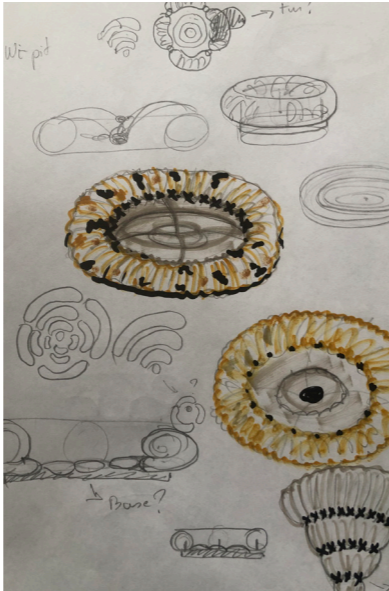
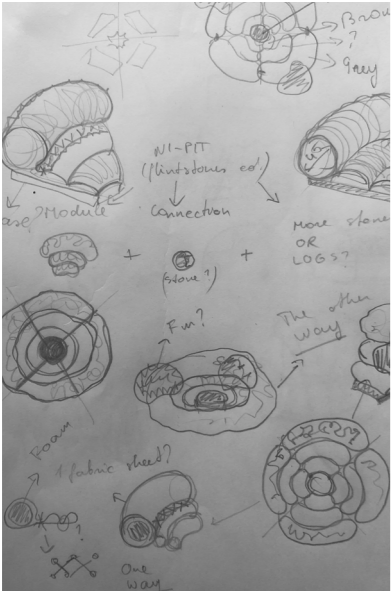
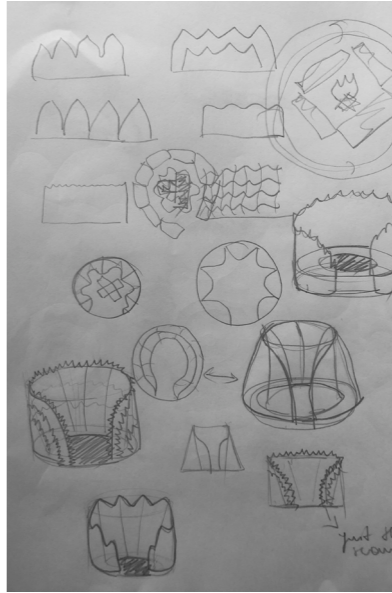
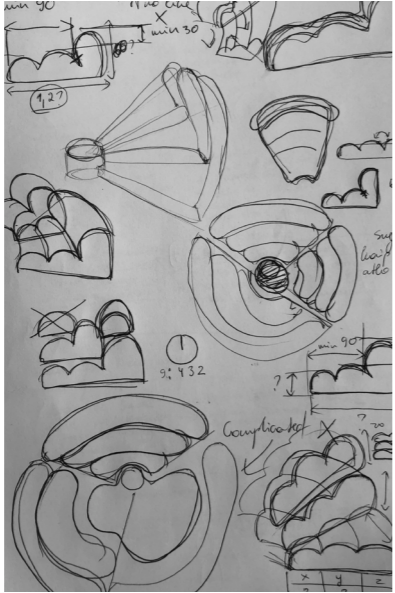
## IDEATION

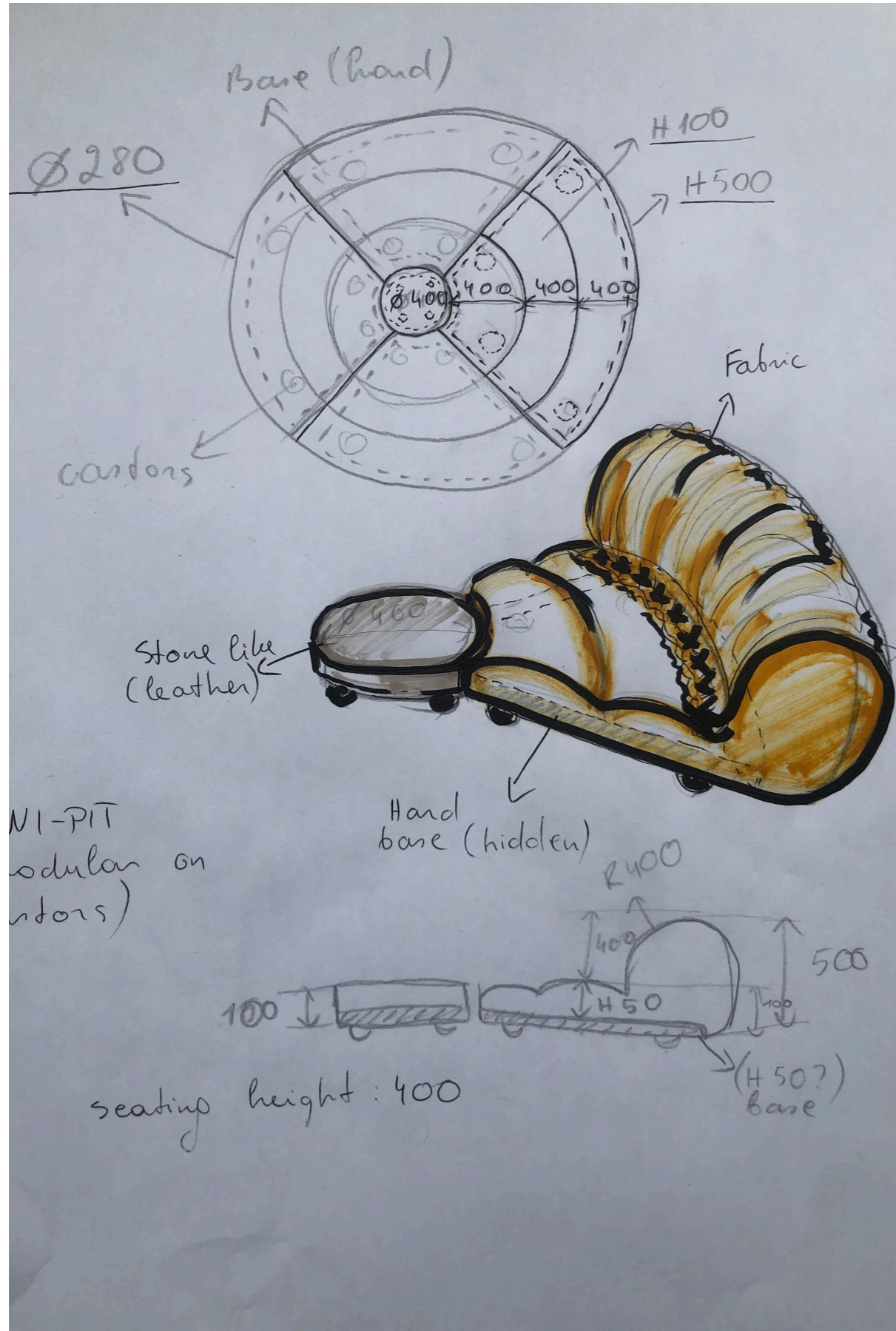
I started with sketches and quick renderings to explore different ways. The aim was to experiment with symbols and ways of interacting or functioning. Some of the ideas were more illustrative, while others focused on enhancing interaction by adding a play element.

There were a few concepts that I liked the most: WI-PIT which had a hint of a symbol of Wi-Fi, fire-pit which was an illustrative take on sitting next to the fire, and TV-pit, which I saw as a joke of becoming a celebrity yourself instead of watching TV. I took them further by doing mock-ups and some real-scale tests. After this, the decision was to continue with the WI-PIT, which I believed made the most sense, both by storytelling and functioning.

In the latest phase of ideation, I had two versions of a WI-PIT: one as a solid soft body, like a giant pillow, and the other as a modular and mobile set of furniture. The latter was the chosen concept as it provide more freedom of installation and exploitation.







## DEVELOPMENT

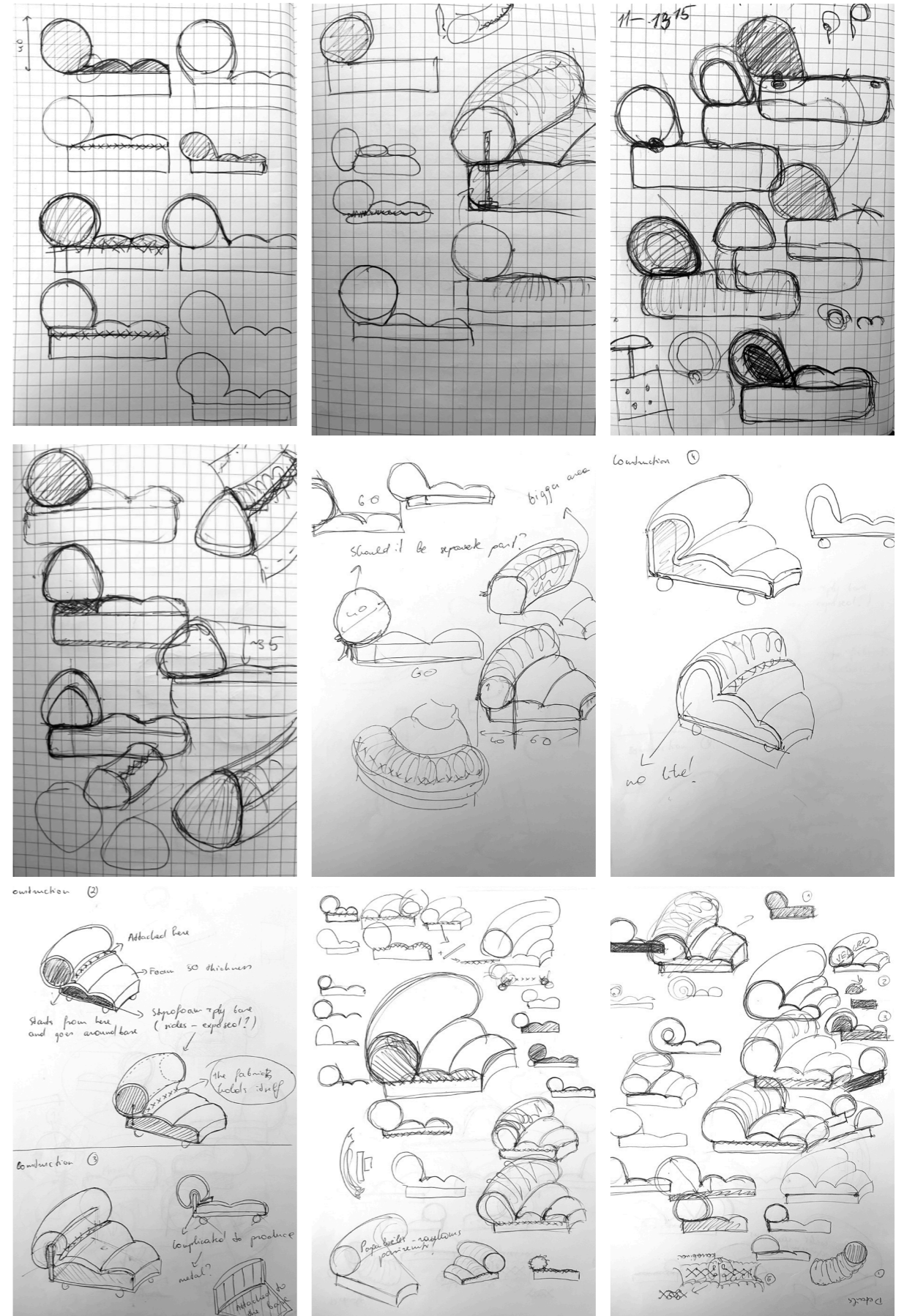
The development started with a set of requirements:

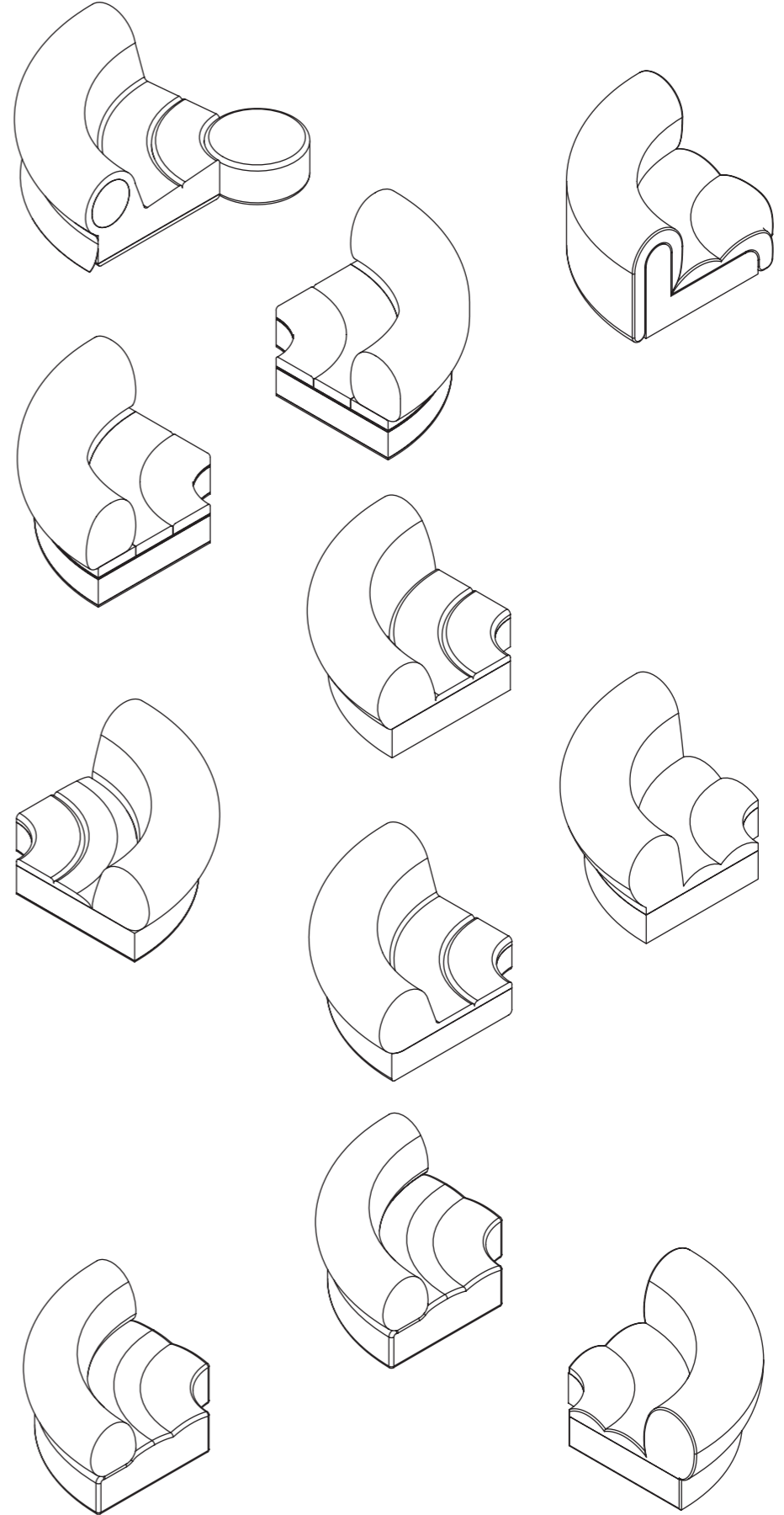
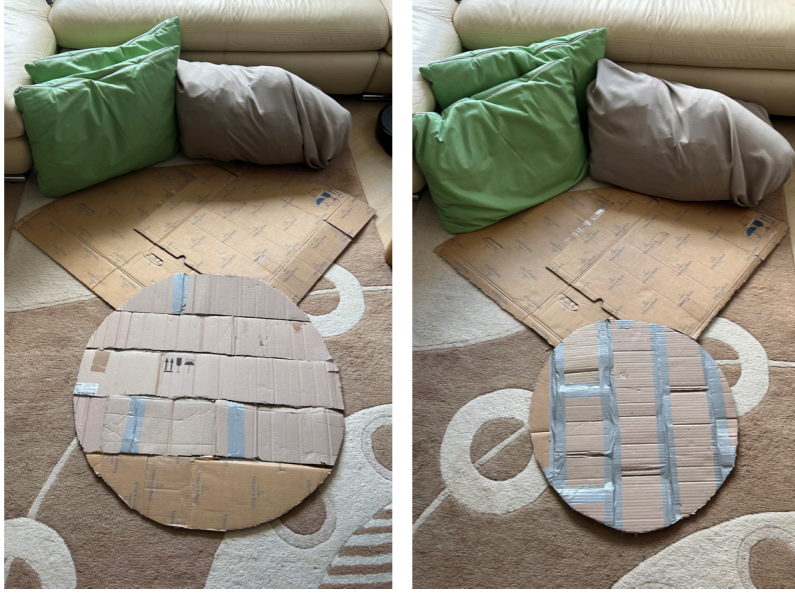
1. symbolism - use symbol of WI-FI, create a border
2. modular + mobile - more freedom for installation and exploitation
3. possible to connect and separate
4. comfortable to sit, yet not too high in order to be able to get out if connected
5. possible to take down the upholstery

Therefore, the actions that followed were:

## 1. Finding proportions

Sketching and 3d modeling were followed by quick cardboard and upholstered backrest tests to get a sense of dimensions. At first, I wanted the backrest to start from the ground, as it was in my sketches, but realised, that on the real scale, it would look giant. I wanted to come up with proportions that were both comfortable, functional, and readable as a WI-FI symbol, therefore I experimented with the radiuses, lengths, and heights of the modules. Even though the first idea was to have one module as a solid piece, disconnecting the backrest from the sitting part made it easier to produce and transport.

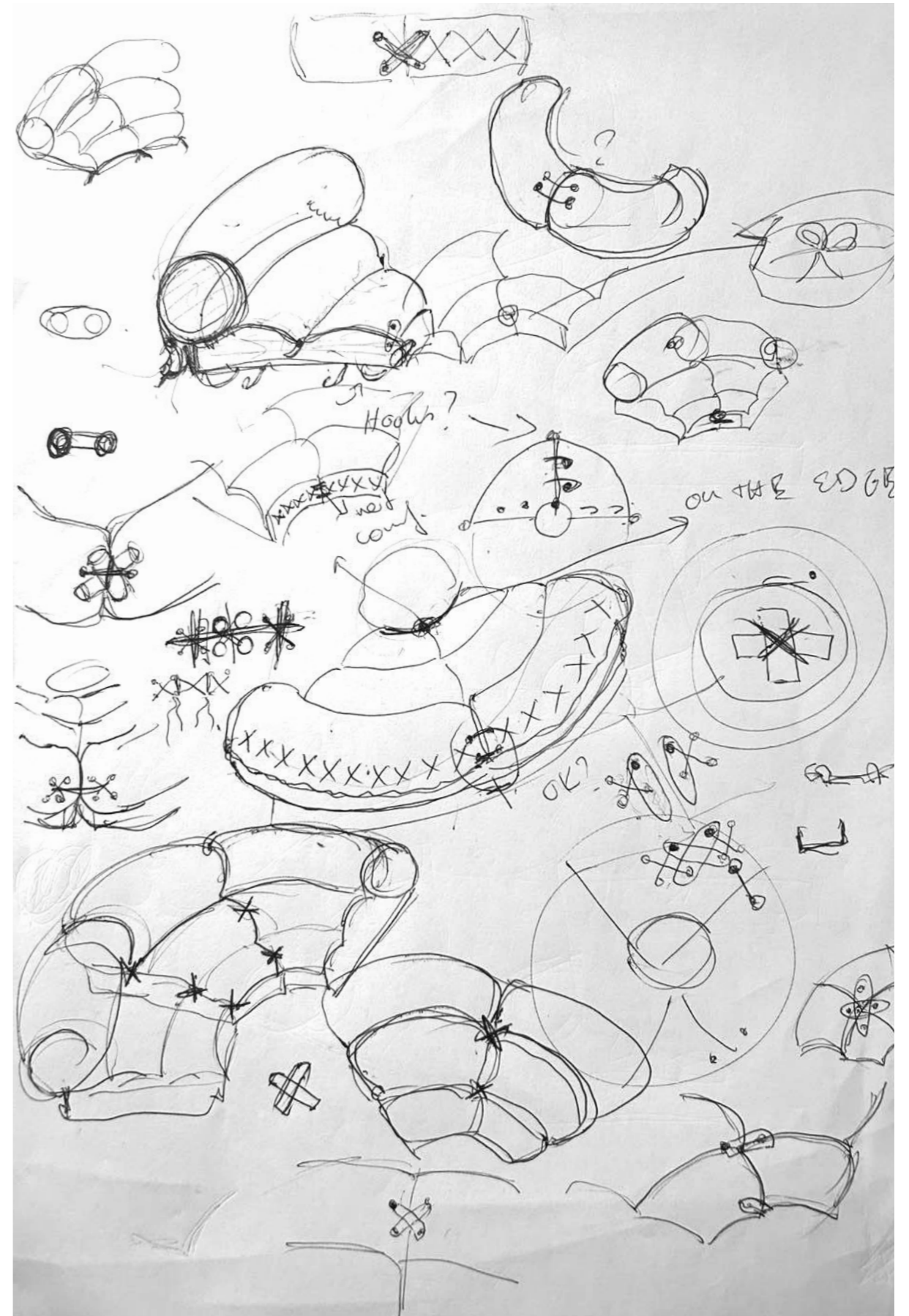




## 2. Planning of connecting elements

I looked on the market to see in which ways modular sitting furniture was connected in other products. The most commonly used things were special fasteners, belts, or ropes. Many examples were not suitable in my case as they did not deal with easy separation, and only focused on individual arrangement of a modular product.

After this, I did some sketches and tried to identify the points at which modules had to be connected. The round shape and a pouf in the centre made it harder to find the right element. Many scenarios were thought of including the use of magnets, zippers, wheel brakes, and so on. I realised, that when modules are not standing in a circle, they must connect both in the front and back, whereas if they stand in a circle they can only connect through 4 points in the outside corners. Also, I realised that I could not place the connectors directly on upholstery because they would not provide needed strength and could rip up the fabric. Since I did not want to overly complicate aesthetics, after some quick mock-ups and tests, I got the idea to make custom connectors, that worked as hooks on the bottom.



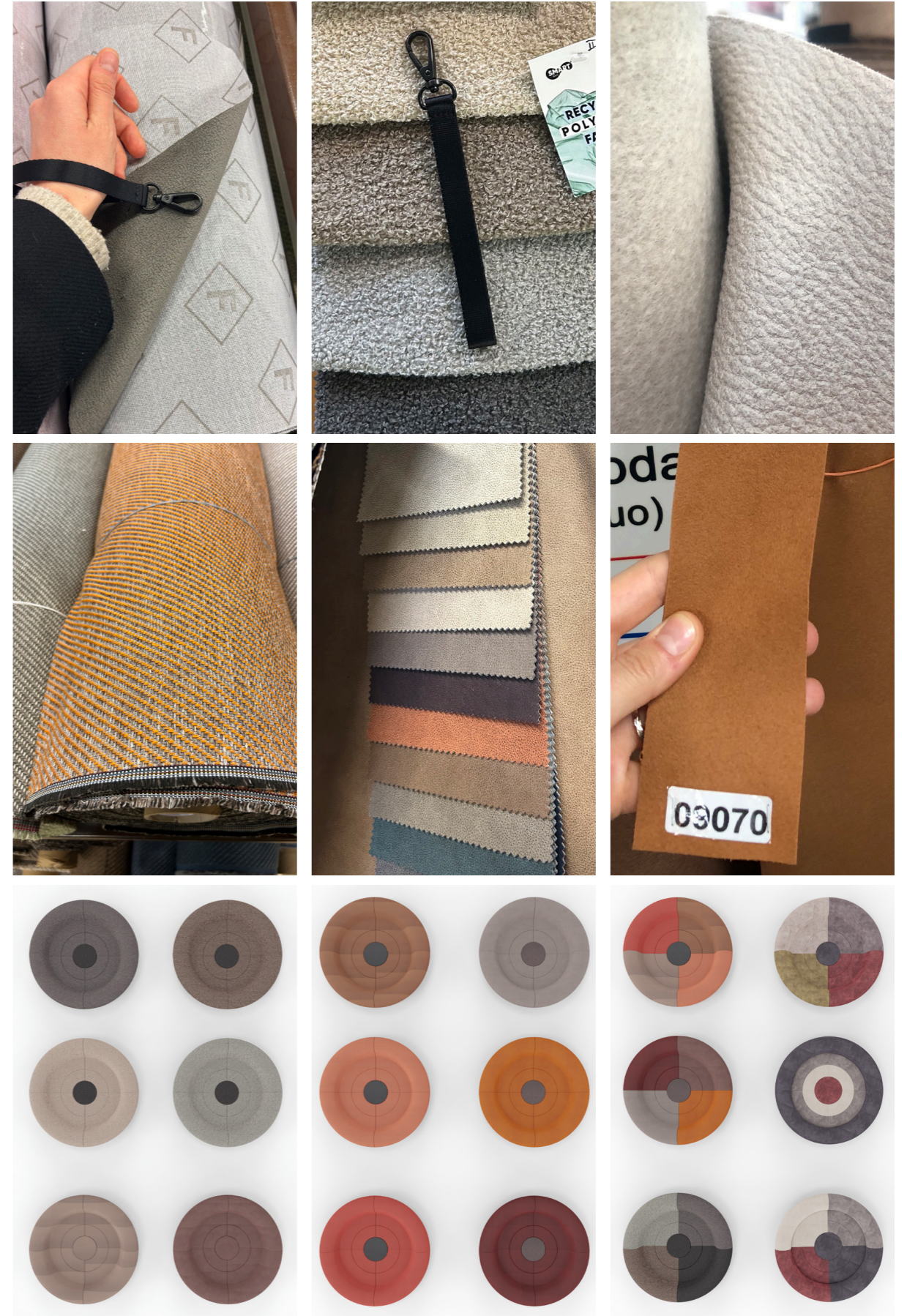


### 3. Defining aesthetics

I was greatly inspired by The Flintstones, as I saw this series as a great example of mixing between past and present. Also, the sense of prehistory was a thing that related directly to my concept and its origin. This was where the idea to use the eyelets for upholstery came from. Important to note, that they had to serve not only as decorative elements but work for putting up and taking down the upholstery.

Harder than I imagined was to find suitable fabrics. Firstly, after consulting the tailor who made the sewing part, I realised that it is better to avoid woven fabrics because of my plan to use eyelets, as the structure of the fabric is more prone to damage. The other issue was the accessibility of materials (regarding shipping times, not having enough in stock, or companies not selling to private customers).

Finally, the primary idea was to have all parts in one color. However, as I started choosing materials I did quick renderings on the go and felt that having the object in one color may make it quite boring and huge. Therefore, I decided to have four different colors, which also contributes to the fact that this is a modular piece of furniture so different combinations of colors could be possible.



## BUILDING THE FINAL PROTOTYPE

When I got the main sizes and decision about overall construction, I started building the final prototype. Important to note, that it worked as a tool to test everything on the go and allowed me to make small changes along the production to be sure the modules are comfortable to sit on. Also, the carcass of the final prototype is built by using substitute materials (mostly OSB and styrofoam, having plywood and wood where it was crucial for strength) which was faster and cheaper at this phase, yet still allowed me to express the idea.

At first I started by building the bases and testing proportions of the backrests. This was important, because in reality when parts were getting their dimensions and shapes, the feeling of sizes felt very different again as compared from the view in the drawings. Also, the comfort had to be checked along the way. Totally round backrest, which I preferred due to aesthetics, turned out to be less comfortable than the ones having more back support and a bit of an angle. Since making this object comfortable was a priority, I sacrificed the idea of completely round backrest and tried to figure out the combination between comfort and desired look. After finding the right shape, the production of backrests started. At the moment, they are done from glued foam blocks that were wire-cut to form a needed shape. In reality, the idea is to have them moulded, which was too expensive now regarding the fact that only 4 pieces were needed.

Despite the plan to use eyelets, in the process of sewing a decision to get rid of them was made. One reason was the extra effort this feature required, both in terms of production and function, making it very time-consuming to do the upholstery this way and tie it later. Also, the use of hidden zippers was still inevitable, because opening the backrest upholstery only in one place would not allow to put the fabric on. Lastly, when I checked the look of the eyelets on a real scale model, I did not like the way it looked - it felt too much.

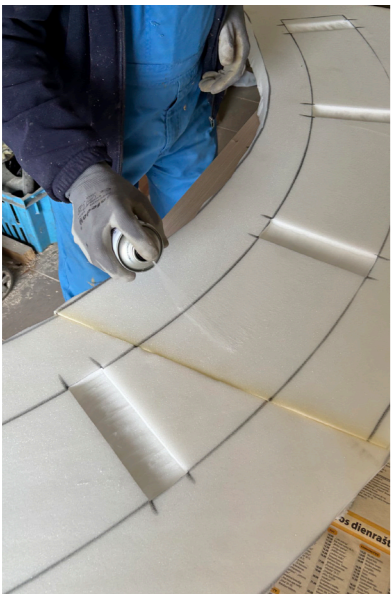
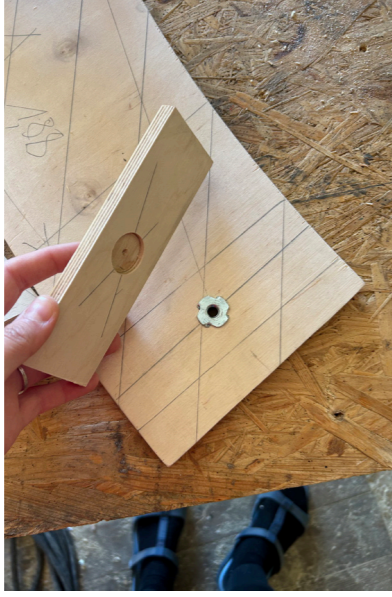
One of the trickiest parts was the easy connection and separation of modules. Even though I had a plan to produce custom-made connecting elements to be put on the bottom, as I did the sitting parts I wanted to check the suitability of this decision and noticed some issues which made me think about other possible scenarios. To sum up, connecting was problematic due to many obstacles:

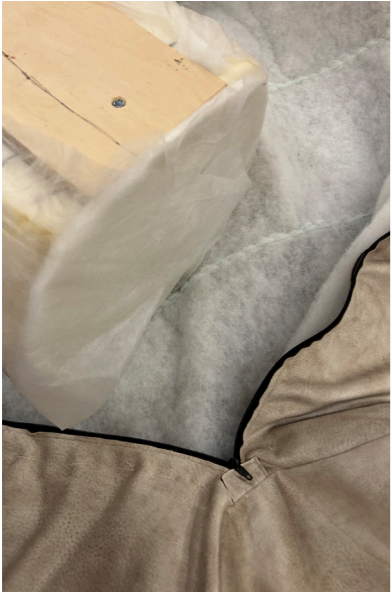
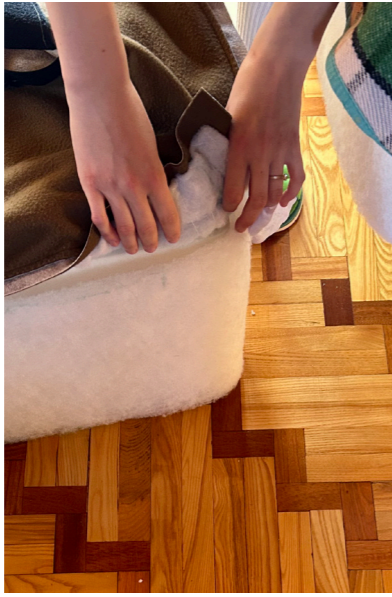
- placement (connectors were uncomfortable to reach if on the bottom; impossible to reach in the centre when all pieces were connected)
- the need to be easy to connect and separate (too many steps, complicated)
- the stability (connecting elements did not provide enough stability)
- the strength (could not be attached to fabric due to danger to rip it; did not hold pieces together)

aesthetics (keeping a clean look, hiding connectors)

Finally, I decided to make changes and use traditional soft furniture connectors. Firstly, because of being sure they are going to work. Secondly, I did not want to overly complicate using of the product. The same applies to not complicating it visually - additional details were a danger to aesthetics. This connector works in this way: in the need to connect one part goes into another, in need of separation a person needs to slightly lift one module, which does not make it a big problem because it is quite lightweight, and then rotate the connector to the inside which can be done with foot.







# CHAPTER V

## WI-PIT

*Imagine 5000 years ago where humanity has invented the upholstery.*

*Warm, inviting and emotionally bonding as an ancient fire pit, cozy and comfortable as a conversation pit - here is the WI-PIT.*

*A modular and mobile conversation pit inspired by prehistoric intimacy, aiming to bring people together, to connect... by disconnecting from artificial realities.*





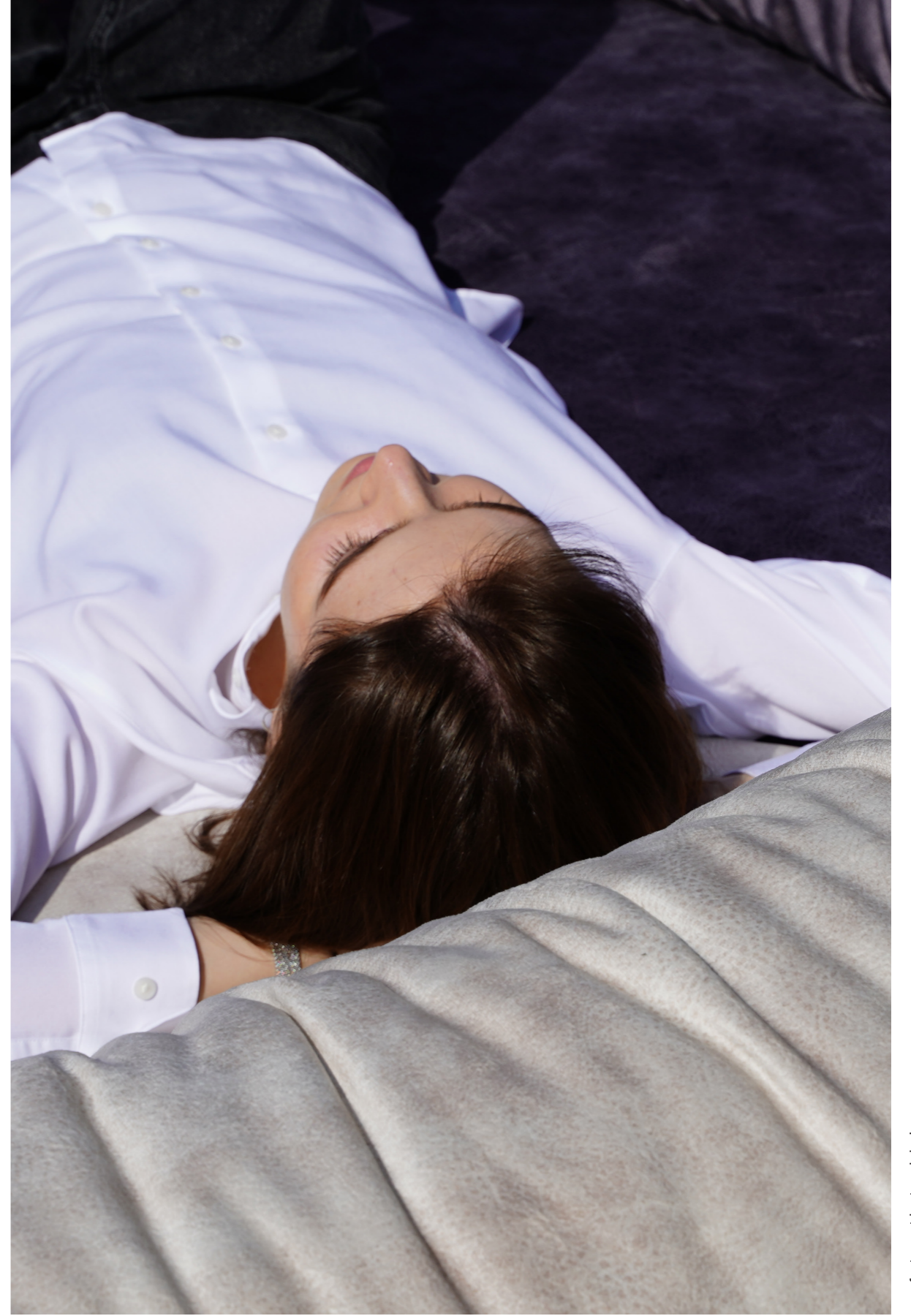


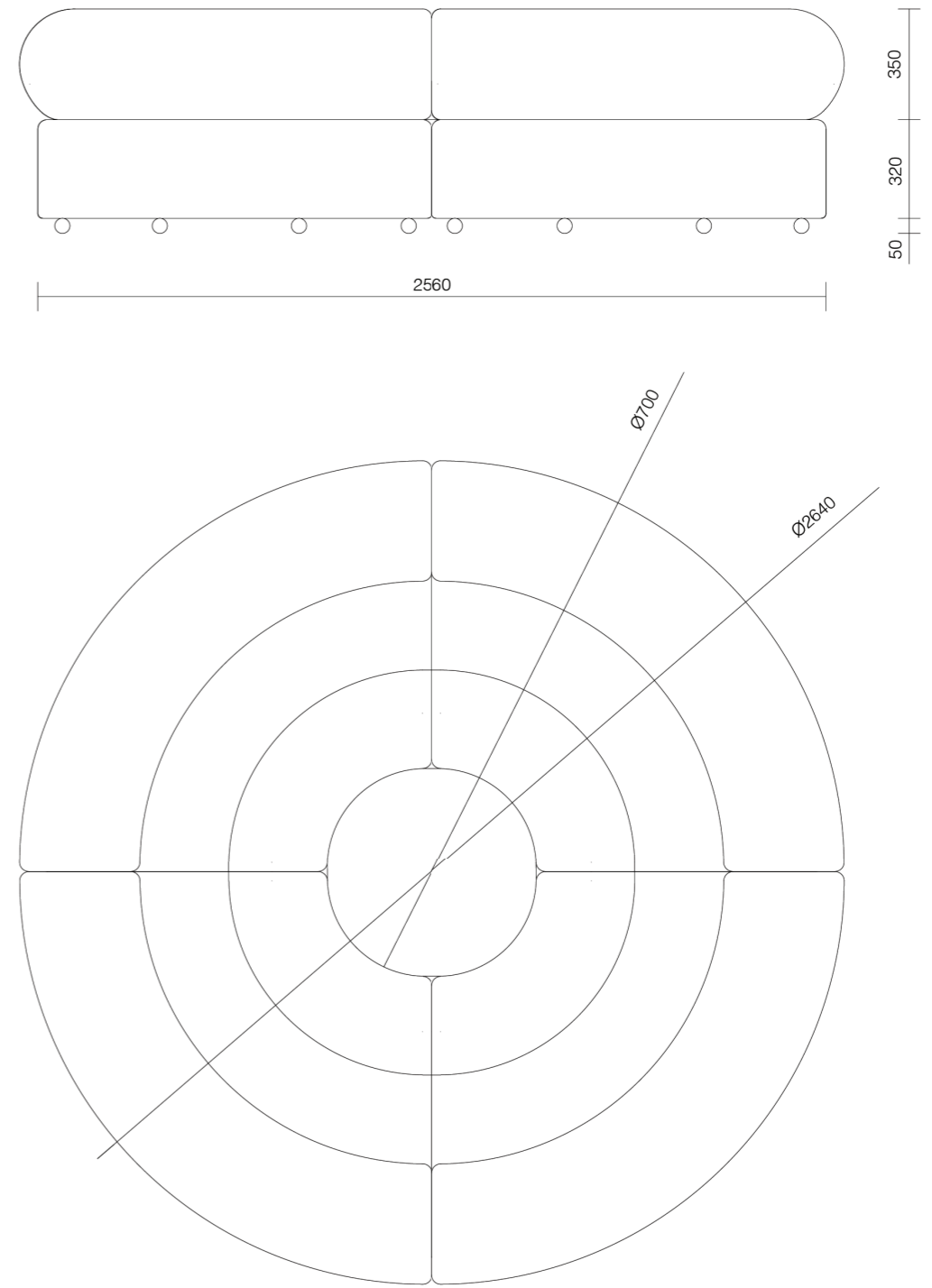
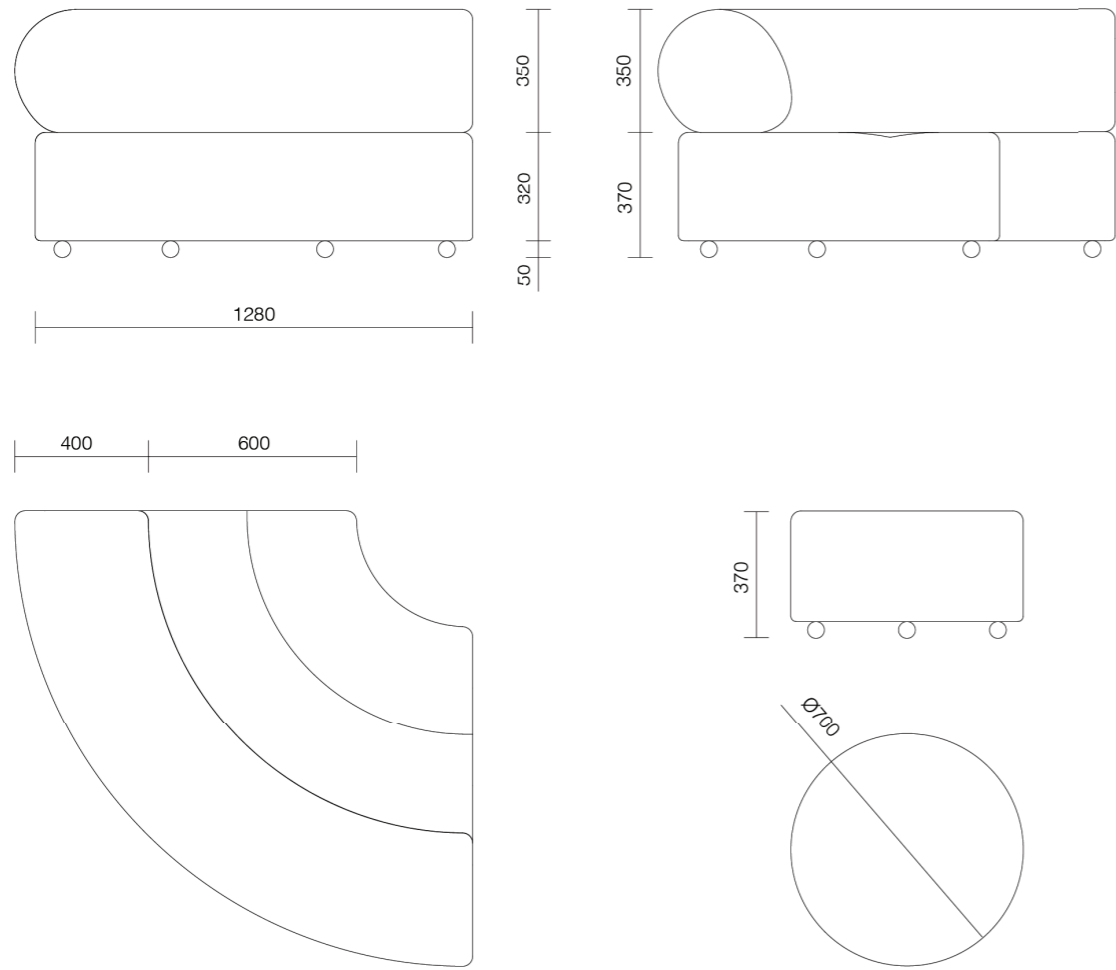












**COLOURS, MATERIALS, FINISHES**

Proposed colourways differ in colors, materials, finishes, and overall mood.

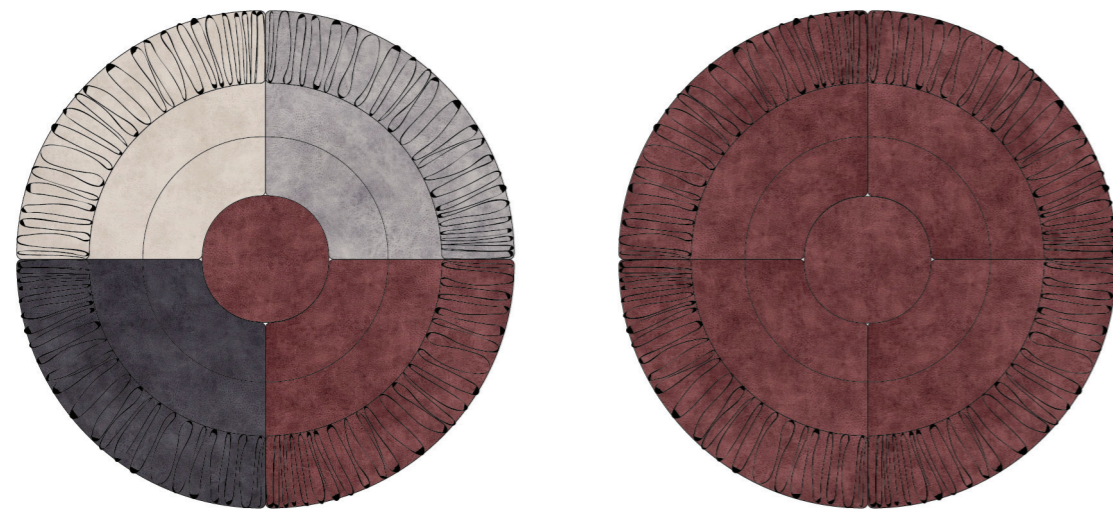
One can choose between ultra soft and slightly shiny knitted velvet, which has a leather-like pattern, curled bouclé that adds coziness, or brown shades of natural leather, creating a luxurious and timeless look as it ages nicely.

WI-PIT can end up in different combinations by mixing colors, playing with textures, or finishes. Otherwise, the whole conversation pit can come in one selected material, making a statemental and seamless look.

**KNITTED VELVET**

Alvaro (supplier: Litena)

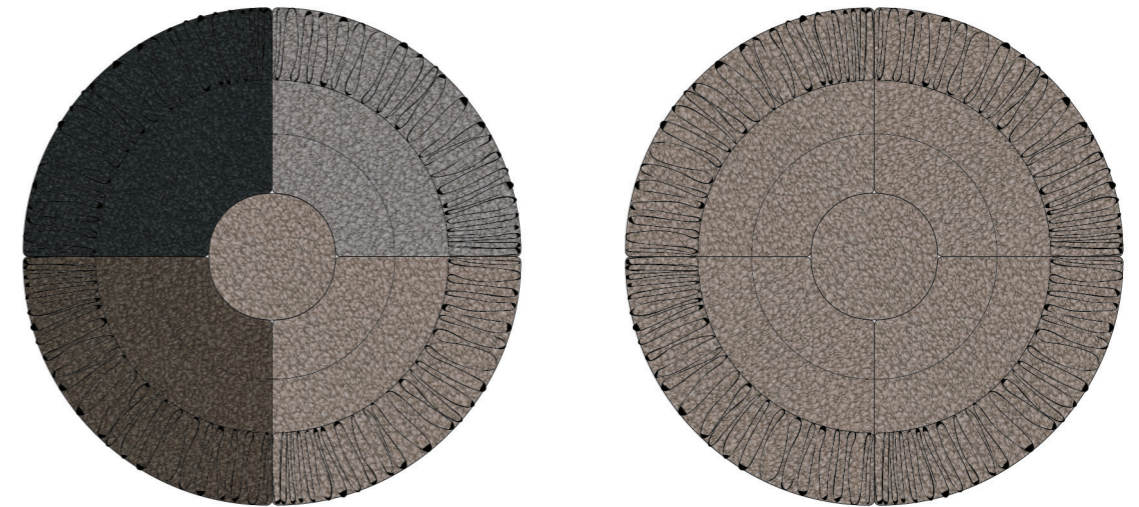
100.000 martindale  
100 % polyester



**CURLED BOUCLÉ**

Elle (supplier: Kvadrat)

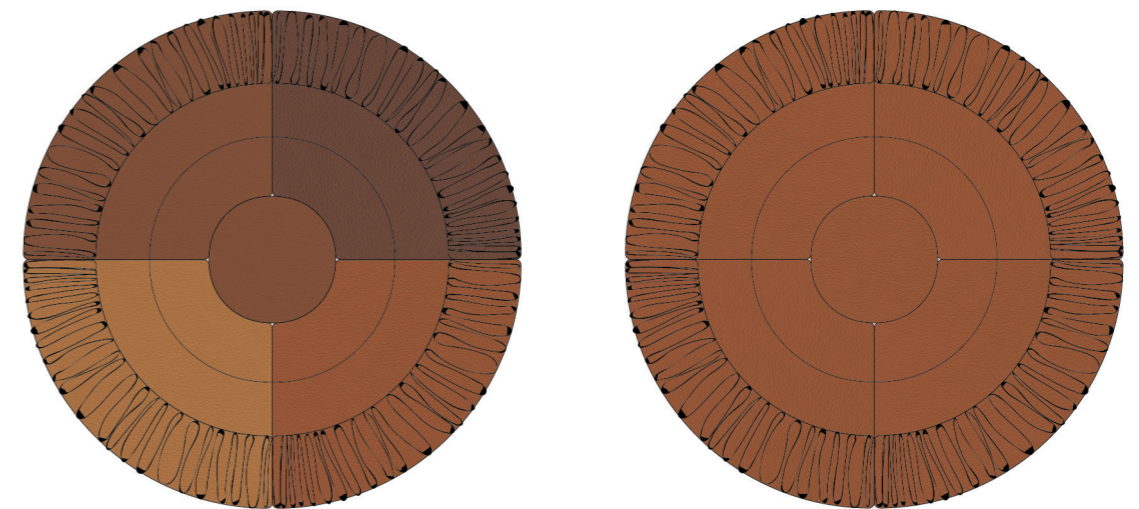
70.000 Martindale  
25% cotton, 20% viscose, 20% polyacrylic, 20% new wool, 15% nylon



**LEATHER**

Vintage (supplier: Camira)

100.000 Martindale  
100% leather



# CHAPTER VI

*realisations and discussion*

## **THINGS LEARNED, THINGS DONE, AND THINGS FOR THE FUTURE**

First and foremost, the project has started with frustrations and ends with a significant amount of acquired knowledge, inspiration, and a set of tools for bringing back creativity in moments, when things feel to lead nowhere. This, I believe, is a personal accomplishment and is going to help me in the future. The goal to find a reason to create and have fun in the process is met, despite the challenges that led during these few months.

This master thesis contains two parts that I see as equally important: the research and the concept development. The research allowed me to go deeper in terms of understanding the design fundamentals and origins, as I did analysis based on archetypes, while the final proposal is a synthesis of my findings, thoughts, and a reminder for me about being brave when experimenting with concepts that make you curious.

The final proposal is a modular, mobile conversation pit. Firstly, since the goal of this master thesis was to challenge existing norms, it is met in a way this concept revises a traditional layout of a living room with many objects inviting for distraction. Secondly, storytelling, which, as the research proved, has a great impact on product acceptance by giving references to the past, causing emotional responses, played an important role to bring back to life and reimagine an object, that was gone for some time. Finally, this project revised the modern way of communication, raised important questions about being connected with people these days, and encouraged us to maintain a real conversation in a world where things are rapidly becoming artificial.

Henceforth, I do believe this project has a future, though certain things should be improved, which I concluded after building the prototype. For instance, the number of rods required to connect the backrest to the sitting part can be reduced, whereas cutting corners of the sitting parts and filling them with foam would help to remove sharp edges. The way to connect the pieces could also be improved. Given the fact, that at this phase the goal was to present the concept, the future development requires revising and testing the construction and detailing the upholstery.

#### **AKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Among a long list of people I need to thank, there are a few honourable mentions I would like to make here in my report.

Firstly, I want to thank my supervisor, senior lecturer Per Liljeqvist, for inspiring discussions, support, and creative freedom. Also, my examiner professor Claus-Christian Eckhardt for invaluable insights. I want to thank the lecturer, Fil. dr Anna Wahlöö for accepting to have an interview and sharing her thoughts. Moreover, thanks to Alma Garjonyte - Ciulcinskiene, she sacrificed her nights to finish sewing the upholstery on time. To my father, who helped me build the prototype. And finally, to Arminas, for unconditional support, encouragement to take risks and challenge my limits, long discussions, and believing in me.

And to all the others that were around and supported me in one way or another.

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