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Eileen Gray's Modernist Villa Is Reborn on the French Riviera

By EMMA O'KELLY JUNE 18, 2015



The designer Eileen Gray created E1027, her first architecture project, with her lover Jean Badovici. Manuel Bougot

ROQUEBRUNE-CAP-MARTIN, France — “No naked bathing,” reads a sign on the beach here on the French Riviera.

Nudity wasn't always forbidden in these parts. In the 1930s, Le Corbusier would sunbathe and swim naked here (he drowned during his morning dip in 1965). He also painted in the flesh, and covered the walls of a nearby Modernist villa, E1027, with eight of his murals. It caused a huge dispute between two of the 20th century's greatest designers. The murals were charged with provocative sexual imagery. The house wasn't his, but had been created by the aristocratic

Irish designer Eileen Gray with advice from her lover Jean Badovici. Gray, who was bisexual, apparently never forgave Le Corbusier for “defacing” her walls. The argument is still dissected in architecture circles, and is a central theme of “The Price of Desire,” a film about Gray's life to be released in the fall.

This month, E1027 (with the murals) opens to the public for the first time, by appointment only. It was Gray's first architecture project, her seaside escape, which she completed in 1929. The E is for Eileen, the 10 and the 2 for the tenth and second letters of the alphabet, J and B (for Badovici), and the 7 is for G. Gray was extremely private and wanted the house to be a romantic retreat; Badovici, on the other hand, liked to invite artistic guests like Le Corbusier to stay. After just two years in the home, the couple split. Gray gave Badovici E1027 and moved to the nearby village of Castellar, where she built herself a smaller house and relaxed in peace.

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The living room of Gray's villa contains a mural by Le Corbusier, at the back.

Manuel Bougot/FLC, via ADAGP, Paris, via ARS, New York 2015

Badovici died in 1956 and a string of subsequent unsympathetic owners modified the house and threw out much of Gray's original furniture.

"The vandalism started in 1938," with Le Corbusier's murals, said Michael Likierman, founding chairman of Habitat France and the Grandvision Group and a local resident, "and was pretty much continual."

In September, Mr. Likierman was approached by the coastal protection agency, the Conservatoire du Littoral, to raise funds for the renovation. It had purchased a semi-

derelict E1027 in 1999 from absent heirs, and passed it to the town of Roquebrune to manage. This sufficed until the town had neither the financial nor technical means to take it any further. "There was no master plan," Mr. Likierman said.

From 2007 to 2013, the French state donated 250,000 euros, about \$285,000, toward repairs. Mr. Likierman, who had skillfully restored the 1920s garden Serre de la Madone in Menton in 2006, took over when those funds dried up.

The result is that E1027 is approaching its original state, though there is still much work to do. Mr. Likierman hired a German conservation architect, Claudia Delvaux, to work from old photos and recently discovered plans to restore carpentry to Gray's precise dimensions and source fixtures and fittings from the correct period.

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Compared with the villas of Monaco across the bay, it is a modest house, 130 square meters in total, a simple cube raised on pilotis. Perched on the craggy hillside, its strategically placed windows optimize views across the azure waters. Inside, curved walls, cubbyholes and two-way doors affirm Gray's nautical intentions. A concrete spiral stairway leads to the roof through a glass doorway that resembles a funnel; delicate glass doors spill along a sweeping terrace and contemporary-looking Nice shutters are testament to Gray's avant-garde ideas.

She was also the mistress of small spaces. Gray was 51 when she created E1027 and was by then well versed in designing furniture for bijou apartments in Paris, where she lived for most of the year. Every nook and cranny of her seaside retreat is lined with tiny drawers and cabinets that open at artful angles. She even took into account how the light would fall on their contents. Cupboards reveal fold-out reading tables and little stands on which to put drinks, bathroom mirrors open up so you can see the back of your head.

She used her favorite palette throughout — black, white and gray — though certain walls are daubed with brilliant turquoise and aubergine, and stenciled with her quirky, organizational inscriptions: “Les dents” appears on the tiles next to the basin in the master bathroom; “Oreillers” is written on a cupboard where pillows were to be stored; “Pardessus” marks the spot where one was to hang overcoats. They are strict and playful at the same time and hint at an obsessive nature.

A British furniture producer and retailer, Zeev Aram, has also been a benefactor to the restored villa. Mr. Aram first met Gray in 1973, when she was 96, blind in one eye and had faded into obscurity. For three years until her death in 1976, they collaborated to mass-produce her designs and today he holds the license to manufacture her furniture.

In 2011, Mary McGuckian, a director, approached Mr. Aram, who donated 24 reproductions (they are still there) to the house for the filming of “The Price of Desire.” Starring Orla Brady as Gray, Vincent Perez as Le Corbusier, Francesco Scianna as Badovici and Alanis Morissette as Gray's music-hall lover Damia, the movie was all shot on location at the house and helped jump-start the project.

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Many pieces, such as the Day Bed (1925) and the black lacquer Folding Screen (1930), were created before the house was built or after Gray had left it. Whether this matters or not is a moot point. The house is, after all, a museum now. More vexing (though only mildly so) is that Mr. Aram's newish designs do not carry the same patina as the house's weathered walls, floors and tiles. Plans are also afoot to borrow some of the original nine Eileen Gray pieces that the Pompidou Center has in its collection. In November, a pair of Gray's Transat chairs that formed part of the estate of the late British designer David Collins, sold at Christie's for 22,500 pounds, or about \$36,000.

Mr. Likierman estimates that a further €250,000 is needed to complete the renovation project in the next two years. Some of the carpentry is not up to desired standards, the gardens need landscaping, and many of the fixtures and fittings from the correct period need to be found and installed.

"It's a shame it has taken so long to achieve so little," Mr. Likierman said. "We have made cosmetic changes, but there is still a lot to do."

Plans include creating a visitor center, library and bookshop in an empty villa next door. But first his team must fine-tune Gray's masterpiece.

"Everything," Mr. Likierman said, "will be taken back to how it was in 1929."

E1027 opens on June 26 by appointment.
