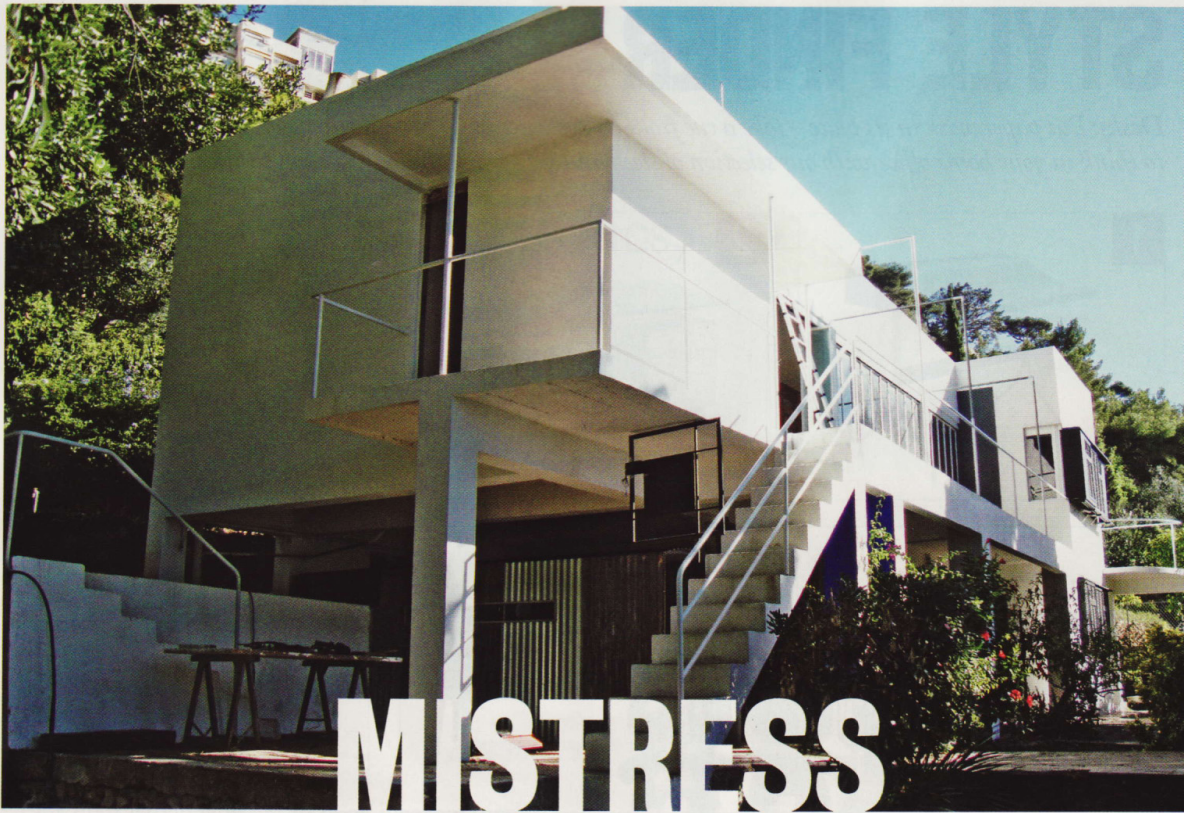


Friends of E.1027

Mistress of Minimal



MISTRESS OF MINIMAL



Eileen Gray is one of the most significant designers of the twentieth century; as restoration of one of her rare architectural projects nears completion, it's time to look back at the work of this deeply private, pioneering woman Words Sue Herdman

E.1027 is a curious name for a house. But then the property that Eileen Gray built for her client and lover, Jean Badovici, the Romanian-born editor of *L'Architecture Vivante*, is an unusual building. Created between 1926 and 1929 on an isolated rocky outcrop overlooking the Bay of Monaco in southern France, the sleek, white house is early Modernist in style, but with a difference. E.1027 was no Le Corbusier-type machine to live in, but a deeply personal space, a unique experiment in architecture and design, with practical, humorous touches, all created by an architect who, although untrained, produced an absolute classic.

E.1027 is code for the couple's names. The E from

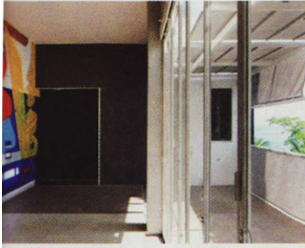
Eileen, the 10 for J, the tenth letter in the alphabet; the 2 for B, and the 7, G. L-shaped and flat-roofed, built from reinforced concrete, it was designed as a holiday home; life was to be led outside as far as possible with open-plan interiors where one could eat, sleep, rest and relax.

Gray wanted to make the most of the difficult site. The house is raised on stilts to catch the breeze, with railings around the building like those of a cruise liner, for leaning over and gazing out at the white horses on the water. Terraces extend the feeling of outside in and adjustable horizontal windows and shutters allow for maximum light and

Herdman, Sue. "Mistress of Minimal." *Grand Designs*, November 2011.

Friends of E.1027

Homes Grand Master



air inside. A partition of glass panels transforms the kitchen into an outdoor room, while sailcloth awnings, a wall-mounted marine chart and rugs woven in the colours of the sea give the house a maritime ambience.

The pared-down lines of the building belie the warmth of the welcome Gray wished for those who visited. 'Entering a house,' she said, should be 'like the sensation of pleasure when one arrives with a boat in a harbour, the feeling of being enclosed, but free to circulate...' More pleasure came from the pieces of furniture that she designed for the house – iconic items, the originals now fiercely fought over by collectors. In 2009, her otherworldly Dragons armchair was sold at the auction of the collection of Yves Saint Laurent, an ardent admirer of Gray's designs, for £19.4million.

Gray's furniture for E.1027 was so innovative that much of it preceded the work of Mies van der Rohe, Charlotte Perriand and Marcel Breuer. She called it her camping style: flexible, practical, chic and light enough

to be moved with ease. There was her sleek glass and steel E.1027 table, which could be raised or lowered, designed so one could eat in bed. There were cantilevered bedside tables with pivoting arms and adjustable reading stands; a foldaway gate-leg table covered in cork, so that a drowsy sunbather would not be disturbed by the sound of tea cups clattering on the tabletop. In the living-room porch she placed her leather-upholstered Transat chair, and her fat Bibendum armchair close by. Le Corbusier, a regular visitor, praised these designs as being 'so dignified, so charming and full of wit'.

Looking at Gray's designs today, it seems incredible that this shy, retiring girl, born the youngest of five into aristocratic Scottish-Irish gentry in 1878, could have become one of the most avant-garde designers of her time, even if during her lifetime she remained in the shadows. Early family life had been divided between a beautiful Irish Georgian country home and a Kensington townhouse. In 1901 she entered London's Slade →

far left and above
Views of the south facade of the E.1027 villa, which is currently undergoing renovation
centre top
Le Corbusier was a frequent visitor, painting a number of murals
centre middle
These concrete stairs, connecting the first-floor living room with the garden, have been fully restored
centre bottom
The guest room on the ground floor has a private bathroom and another of Le Corbusier's murals

Berenice Abbott: Friends of E.1027 and Agence Pierre-Antoine Gallier, ACIHM

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Friends of E.1027

Homes Grand Master



top The balcony off the living room opens on to the view of the sea, and features sailcloth awnings reproduced to the original design

above Le Corbusier left his mark with another mural in the area linking the living room and bathroom

School of Art, where her attendance was patchy. By 1902 she was living in Paris with two fellow students, one the sculptor Kathleen Bruce, future wife of Robert Falcon Scott (of Antarctica fame). It was on a visit back to London that Gray stumbled upon a lacquer repair shop which ignited her fascination with lacquer design.

Gray also absorbed all that Twenties Paris had to offer: the Moulin Rouge, Diaghilev's Ballets-Russes, Fauvism and Cubism. She cut her hair, shed her long gowns, adopted sharp suits, experimented with lovers of both sexes, accepted commissions to design interiors and even opened a shop – *Galérie Jean Désert* – that the critics loved. Among those who admired her work was Badovici and it was he who pushed her to collaborate with him to design her first house, E.1027.

Their relationship was not to last. By 1932 Gray had stopped going to E.1027. Le Corbusier, who loved the house, continued to visit, painting erotic murals there, to Gray's outrage. In time she designed →

EILEEN GRAY A LIFE IN DESIGN

The Honourable Kathleen Eileen Moray was born on 9 August 1878 in County Wexford, Ireland, to an artist father and aristocratic mother. The name Gray came later, gleaned from her mother's family.

In 1901 she entered, but only occasionally attended, the Slade School of Art in London.

Gray moved to Paris in 1902, returning to London to care for her sick mother, and study lacquer techniques.

By 1906 she was back in Paris, where she studied with the Japanese lacquer craftsman, Seizo Sugawara. She moved into an apartment on Rue Bonaparte, her main home for her lifetime.

In 1913 Gray exhibited her lacquer work and won her first important commission, from the couturier Jacques Doucet.

She returned to London during World War I with Sugawara, working from a studio in Chelsea.

By 1919 she was back in Paris and working on her first complete interior for an apartment on Rue de Lota, which led to other commissions.

*In 1922 she opened her shop, *Galérie Jean Désert*, selling rugs, lighting and furniture, which she started to create using tubular steel.*

In 1926, the design and build of E.1027 began.

1937 At Le Corbusier's invitation, Gray exhibited her plans for a Vacation Centre at the Paris Exposition. Typically, never one to push herself in public, she did not attend the opening and soon after began a long period of reclusiveness.

1972 The revival of interest in Gray's work was sparked by the Jacques Doucet auction and an exhibition at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. Zeev Aram, a London furniture maker, reproduced three pieces of her furniture.

1976 Following a fall, Eileen Gray died in Paris on 31 October. That evening the news of her death was broadcast. It was the first time her name had ever been heard on radio. She never married, nor had any children.

21 years
suntob

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above The house was designed with a long balcony along the south-facing side with views over the garden and the Bay of Monaco

another house for herself not far away, above the resort of Menton.

Architecturally she was not to do much more, but designing social-housing projects, many of which were unrealised. And from a design perspective, her output was small. As a result, her work was almost forgotten, a fact that did not bother the reclusive, self-reliant (and wealthy) Gray. Four years before her death in 1976 at the age of 98, this changed. A Paris auction of the collection of fashion designer Jacques Doucet sold one of her lacquered screens for £22,000; a fantastic sum at the time. Design pundits awoke, and today some see her as the predecessor of solo female architects such as Zaha Hadid.

What, though, was the fate of E.1027? Badovici died in 1956; not long after, Le Corbusier persuaded a wealthy Swiss widow to buy the house. On her death in 1982, it went to a doctor, who sold all of Gray's furniture. In 1996 he was murdered at the house; abandoned and empty it was then occupied by squatters and swiftly deteriorated. Gray's stunning *maison de mer* fast became a sad shipwreck. In 1999 the house was purchased by the municipality of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, with support from, among others, the Friends of E.1027, and was later classified a National Monument. It is owned by *Le Conservatoire du Littoral*, a restoration programme is being project managed by Pierre-Antoine Gatier, ACMH (*Architecte en Chef des Monuments Historiques*).

Much of Eileen Gray's work is still in private ownership, but you can see pieces at MOMA, New York, the *Centre Georges Pompidou* and the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris, and the V&A Museum, London. A permanent exhibition of her work, including the original E.1027 table, is held at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. **GD**

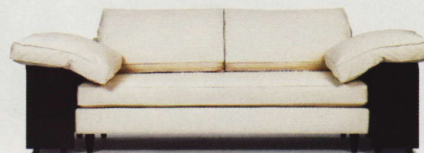
For the latest news on the opening of Eileen Gray's home, visit the Friends of E.1027 website (e1027.org)

FAMOUS FURNITURE

Eileen Gray masterminded some of the most iconic designs of the twentieth century. Here are five of her key pieces



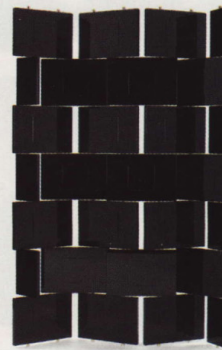
1 Bibendum This chair's inviting curves were inspired by the iconic Michelin Man, whose name is Bibendum. Created in 1926, it features a polished chromium-plated tubular steel base and upholstered seat covered in either fabric or leather. From £2,215



2 Lota One of many original items that Gray conceived for Madame Mathieu-Lévy's extravagant apartment on Rue de Lota in Paris in 1924. Like many of her pieces, the sofa is multi-functional, transforming into a bed with removable cushions and detachable side boxes. From £3,695



3 E.1027 table First created in 1927, the height-adjustable E.1027 has remained one of Gray's most celebrated pieces thanks to its flexible design, intended to indulge her sister's love of breakfast in bed. It features a polished chromium-plated tubular steel frame with a clear or tinted glass top (also available in a satin black finish). From £575



4 Brick screen After training with a Japanese artisan, Gray became an expert in lacquer techniques, which she put to good use on many of her pieces including the Brick screen. It features moveable lacquered panels, on a nickel-plated framework. It's a staggering £39,750



5 Day bed A true bohemian design created to give guests the freedom to sit or lie in any direction. Produced for Gray's E.1027 home, it has an upholstered mattress covered in wool, fabric or leather and a fully upholstered sprung base. From £3,655

Eileen Gray's designs are all available from Aram (020 7557 7557; aram.co.uk)