

Friends of E.1027

Designs for Living

NEXT DRIVING

Designs for Living

In the twenties and thirties, the French Riviera was a hotbed of Modernist architectural innovation. **MICHAEL Z. WISE** visits the seaside retreats built by and for some of the movement's founding figures

THE FRENCH RIVIERA is not a place generally known for its low-key style. Driving between Nice and Menton last October, I passed or was passed by Bentley convertibles, scarlet Ferraris, and outsized yachts. I rode by opulent estates secluded behind high walls and showy condominium towers looming above the beautiful landscape.

So I was somewhat surprised when I arrived at the town of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin to visit a seaside retreat designed by Le Corbusier: the architect had drawn up a one-room bungalow for himself and his wife and encased the small structure in pine planks that give it the look of a log cabin. Its modesty belies the many grandiose schemes Le Corbusier created elsewhere, including the colossal Unité d'Habitation apartment block in Marseilles and a complex of government buildings in Chandigarh, capital of Punjab, in India.

It took me about an hour and a half to get there from Nice, taking the Grande Corniche with its winding turns that overlook the Mediterranean »

The Villa Noailles in Hyères, on the Côte d'Azur.

MAP BY ENCAUNDA RIVIERA

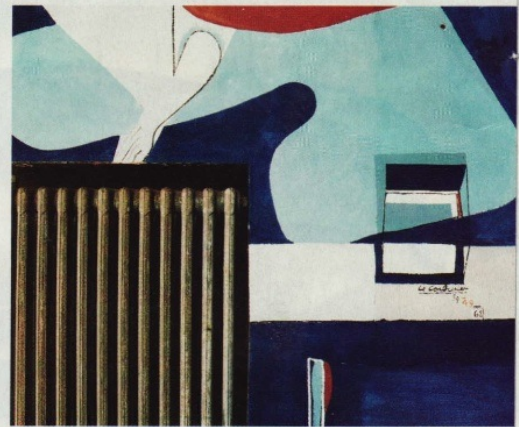
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Modern Relics Clockwise from above left: Eileen Gray's E.1027 building in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, built in 1929; detail of Le Corbusier's mural at E.1027; a vintage photo of the interior.

and the principality of Monaco. On an earlier trip to the Côte d'Azur, I had visited some of the area's art museums, like the Fondation Maeght in St.-Paul-de-Vence and the Musée Matisse and the Musée Marc Chagall in Nice. This time, I wanted to see the less-heralded sites that made the Riviera a focus of Modernist architectural experimentation. One of these, the Villa Noailles in Hyères, is newly restored and open to the public. Another—created by architect and furniture designer Eileen Gray—is due to be refurbished shortly and turned into a museum and study center, right next to Le Corbusier's already restored vacation home.

GRAY AND LE CORBUSIER had a tortured relationship. She moved to the Riviera first, in 1926, well before her tubular chrome tables, lacquered screens, and innovative chairs were collected for display in leading museums as classics of 20th-century furniture design. Gray scouted out a piece of seafront property to build on and found a rugged, stunning spot just below the railway tracks running along the Bay of Monaco.

She created a radical two-story villa, known by the cryptic name of E.1027, that I found standing

forlornly beside the bay, where it was completed in 1929 by Gray and her then lover, the Romanian architect and editor Jean Badovici. Gray saw E.1027 as a research project for modern living and a prototype for building other houses in the same spirit. E.1027 has a nautical feel: Gray hung a life preserver from the main balcony, which has a balustrade lined by stretched canvas, as on the deck of a ship.

Shipwreck better describes what I saw. Rusting steel structural supports jut out from crumbling concrete beams, and large clumps of masonry fall to the ground with increasing frequency. Disagreement over funding, among other things, has delayed the start of the restoration project. In the summer of 2004, the villa's perilous state forced the town of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin to discontinue public tours of the site. Work on the building, to be overseen by the French Ministry of Culture, is set to begin by early next year, with the villa reopening when work is completed, two years later. Le Corbusier's nearby bungalow remains accessible, and from there or the nearby public beach visitors can view E.1027 from the outside.

I was shown around by Renaud Barrès, an architect who was then working for the city of »

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Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, supervising the two properties. Barrès explained how Gray's innovative furniture designs were an integral part of the structure. There are still many built-in pieces, ingeniously crafted cabinets and closets, and even a specially designed place to stack vinyl records in an orderly fashion similar to a CD rack. Gray, who died in 1976, made a breakfast table for the house and covered it with cork to mute the sound of dishes and cutlery so that early risers would not wake other occupants. Tables and chairs that she created for E.1027 are coveted icons of modern design, still in production today.

Gray had read Le Corbusier's writings and was greatly influenced by them and by his architecture. He in turn admired E.1027. The two met through Badovici. By the late thirties, when Gray and Badovici had grown apart, Le Corbusier stayed at the house, writing afterward to Gray, "I would be delighted to relate how much those few days spent in your house have made me appreciate the rare spirit that dictates all of its organization, both inside and outside, and has given the modern furniture and equipment a form that is so dignified, so charming, and full of wit."

Between 1937 and 1939, at Badovici's invitation, Le Corbusier painted seven vivid murals in various rooms of the house. Although she no longer lived there, having built another home several miles away near Menton, Gray was enraged, since she regarded the murals as violating the spirit of her design. The precise nature of Le Corbusier's relationship with Gray remains ambiguous, and it is uncertain whether he created the murals out of esteem or envy for her accomplishment.

Whatever happened, Le Corbusier fell in love with the place and built his own retreat a stone's throw away on a terrace just above E.1027, with an equally spectacular view of the Mediterranean and surrounded by the same bougainvillea, cypress, and palm trees. The architect, who was born in Switzerland as Charles-Édouard Jeanneret but called himself Le Corbusier, built the rustic *cabanon* (cottage) in 1952 and occupied it until his death 13 years later.

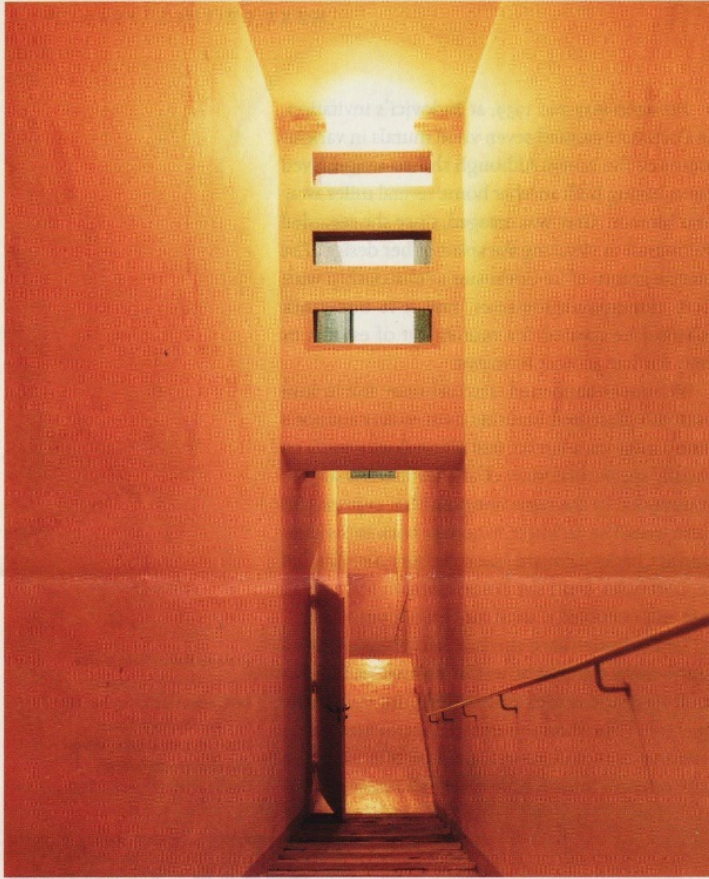
Le Corbusier used the bungalow three times a year—every summer, as well as at Easter and Christmas. He got the idea of building the tiny living quarters (less than 175 square feet in size) after traveling in a small cabin aboard an ocean liner. "A little cell on a human scale where all activity was »

True to Form Clockwise from below left: Inside Le Corbusier's tiny house in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin; an exterior view; the architect (left) at the bungalow, circa 1950.

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Grand Vision Clockwise from above: A stairwell at the Villa Noailles, designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens in 1924; an outside view; the Viscountess de Noailles, with a guest, in 1950.



provided for," was how he described it. "My cabin in Cap-Martin is even smaller than my luxury [ship] cabin," he once said. He noted that visitors were shocked at seeing the toilet right in the room, but added, "It is after all one of the most beautiful industrially manufactured objects."

The architect put his mark on the simple space by painting the floor a bright yellow, with rectangular panels of white, red, and green on the ceiling. He painted colorful murals on the plywood walls, and, perhaps inspired by what Gray had done at E.1027, designed built-in furniture, including a butcher-block table of walnut, storage compartments, and a bed. Mirrors span the inside of the folding shutters to bring in light from outside and reflect the spectacular Mediterranean vistas. Le Corbusier's bungalow stands almost as a rebuke to the glittering new construction that nowadays lines much of the adjacent coast. "It sends the message that when you build on a magnificent site you need only a little cabin, not a grand dwelling with air-conditioning," Barrès told me.

I saw very much the opposite in nearby Cap-Ferrat: the exterior of a more contemporary beacon of Modernism, the newly built seaside retreat of

British architect Norman Foster. In presenting his design to local landmark authorities for construction approval about five years ago, Foster said it was inspired by Gray's villa. I could see that both houses share nautical motifs. But the scale and form of his towering multilevel plate-glass façade is far more imposing. The architect of megaprojects like the new Reichstag dome in Berlin and the Swiss Re office tower in London opted for nothing like Le Corbusier's bungalow.

PASSING THROUGH NICE, I drove west for some three hours, until I reached the town of Hyères, where the Viscount and Viscountess de Noailles, celebrated patrons of modern art, built what started out as a small house but soon grew into a 42-room avant-garde château. The place rapidly became an important meeting place where gala balls were held for Surrealists and others. The Villa Noailles has been undergoing extensive renovations over the past decade, and its garden and much of its interior are now accessible to visitors.

The de Noailles were a trendsetting aristocratic couple of grand lineage—the viscountess was descended from the Marquis de Sade. Marcel Proust

BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY OF VILLA NOAILLES HYÈRES

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partly based his character the Duchess of Guermantes in *Remembrance of Things Past* on her grandmother. Salvador Dalí, Balthus, Man Ray, and Cecil Beaton all made portraits of her.

The couple's villa in Hyères, some 50 miles east of Marseilles, served as their winter refuge in the years before the Riviera became a popular summertime destination. The 15 bedrooms in the rambling house—each with its own private bath—saw scores of illustrious guests, including Luis Buñuel, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Igor Stravinsky, Alberto Giacometti, and Francis Poulenc.

The de Noailles had originally asked Le Corbusier to design the house, but he proved to be too difficult to work with, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe declined to take the job. "I will go to this house to have the sun," Charles de Noailles wrote in 1923 to the French Modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, who ultimately won the commission with a design underscoring de Noailles's wish for a villa that would be "interesting to inhabit." Until then, Mallet-Stevens had worked primarily on film sets, and the completed villa became the setting for Man Ray's 1929 Surrealist film *Les Mystères du Château du Dé*.

The crisp, boxy contours of the villa's concrete façade are now being repainted their original battleship gray. Nothing could contrast more severely with the quaint ocher tile-roofed houses of Hyères's nearby Old Town. Built on a steeply inclined hill atop the ruins of a medieval abbey, the villa resembles a beached ocean liner with its prow-like triangular terraced garden. This landscape was described as a Cubist composition by its creator, Gabriel Guevrekian, and is laid out like a multilevel chessboard.

Although the couple separated after World War II, Marie-Laure de Noailles continued to inhabit the house. After her death, in 1970, the structure was occupied by squatters until it was bought by the city of Hyères and declared a French national monument. The refurbished villa now has a busy schedule of art and design exhibitions, and is a key stop on the international fashion circuit, during the annual spring Festival International des Arts de la Mode, which draws designers like John Galliano, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, Helmut Lang, and Viktor & Rolf. The link between the villa and the fashion world accords with the viscountess's own interests: a style icon during her lifetime, she was a client of Elsa Schiaparelli and befriended other couturiers, among them Coco Chanel and Christian Dior.

AFTER VISITING these three great Modernist houses, I drove to Marseilles to spend the night in another acclaimed architectural landmark, Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation apartment block, which has a budget hotel on its third and fourth floors. The overnight accommodations, planned by Le Corbusier as part of his nine-story "vertical village," are certainly adequate, but have the feel of a dreary college dorm or a pre-1989 Slovak hostelry.

As I left the next day, I realized that the innovative housing project was completed the same year that Le Corbusier built his bungalow—1952. Starting my journey at that unassuming hideaway and ending it at his mammoth apartment complex, I had traveled not only the length of the Côte d'Azur, but also a good way along the spectrum of 20th-century architectural achievement. +

MICHAEL Z. WISE is a T+L contributing editor.

The Facts

E.1027

Under renovation, set to be completed in 2008; see www.e1027.com for updates.

Le Cabanon

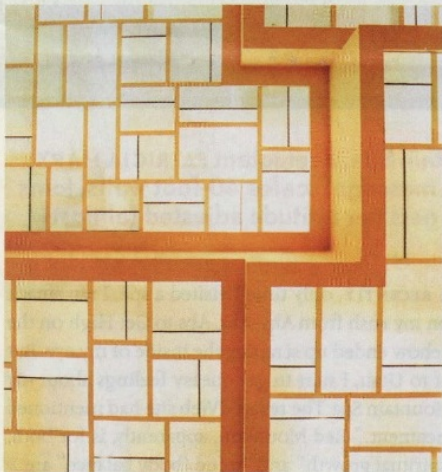
Sentier Le Corbusier, Cabbé. Tours are given Tuesday and Friday mornings by appointment. Contact the Roquebrune-Cap-Martin Office of Tourism, 33-4/93-35-62-87.

Villa Noailles

Montée de Noailles, Hyères; 33-4/98-08-01-98. For visitor information, including news about the Festival International des Arts de la Mode, see www.villanoailles-hyeres.com.

Unité d'Habitation

280 Blvd. Michelet, Marseilles; 33-4/91-16-78-00; www.hotelcorbusier.com; doubles from \$100.



The dining-room ceiling at the Villa Noailles, far left. Left: Guests in the garden, including the Duke of Kent (right), circa 1930.

FAR RIGHT: COURTESY OF VILLA NOAILLES HYÈRES