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## Gray matters

**DESIGN:** Winona Ryder is to take the title role in a new film on the life of Irish designer Eileen Gray. **FRANK McDONALD** visits E1027, the villa she built in the south of France in 1929, with film maker Mary McGuckian

EILEEN GRAY, THE long-neglected Irish avant-garde designer who spent most of her life in France, is finally to be celebrated in film, with Winona Ryder cast in the starring role. And producer-director Mary McGuckian knows exactly how to present it – as a richly deserved “apology” to Gray by the great modernist architect Le Corbusier.

Titled *The Price of Desire*, McGuckian’s latest movie will tell “the controversial story of how [Swiss-born] Le Corbusier effectively effaced the phenomenally influential and inspirational contribution of the elegant and elusive Eileen Gray to 20th century modern architecture completely from history”. In other words, it will take sides.

I met McGuckian at E1027, the curiously-named seaside villa Gray built in 1929 on an elevated site at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, near what has become that congested high-rise slum for wealthy tax exiles known as Monaco. It was a different place then, and her sleek two-storey house with its flat roof was so sensational that “Corb” fell in love with it.

E1027 was code for Eileen Gray and the Romanian-born architect and critic Jean Badovici, who had encouraged her to design it. The E is for Eileen, 10 for Jean (J being the 10th letter of the alphabet), 2 for Badovici and 7 for Gray (using the same calculation). Nobody could say that these two lovers weren’t being awfully, awfully clever.

Although she was primarily a lesbian and had a string of affairs with artists and dancers, Gray fell for Badovici, who was 10 years younger than her when they met in 1923. He was editor of *l’Architecture Vivante*

She found the site at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in the mid-1920s and threw herself into the task of designing the house that Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) would later try to pass off as his own. After spending a few days there with Badovici, he sent Gray a postcard extolling its “rare spirit . . . so dignified, so charming and full of wit.”

Corb then carried out some “alterations” to its interiors. At Badovici’s instigation, he “animated” the house by painting a series of Picasso-style murals on “dull, sad walls where nothing is happening”, as he later explained. When Gray found out about what he had done, she was hopping mad, describing the murals as “an act of vandalism.” There is photographic evidence that Corb even painted at least one of the murals while nude. Quel horreur! During the Second World War, German soldiers billeted in the villa used them and an external one at the lower level for target practice. Etched in plaster rather than painted, it was “restored” several times over the years, just like the others.

McDonald, Frank. “Gray Matters,” *IrishTimes.com*, February 25, 2012.

## Friends of E.1027

Gray had long since split up with Badovici and built another modernist house for herself outside Menton, not far away. “It was the making of the thing, not the thing itself that interested her”, we were told. She spent much of the rest of her long life (she passed away in 1976 at the age of 98) living in a rented apartment on rue Bonaparte in Paris.

In 1949, Le Corbusier published photographs of the murals without mentioning that the house – vaguely identified as being “at Cap Martin” – had been designed by Gray, and not by him. He also crowded its setting by building a cabanon for himself alongside and a two-storey hostel of “camping” cabins on higher ground to the rear.

Coincidentally, in 1965, after diving off the rocks to have a swim right in front of E1027, Corb suffered a heart attack and died. Soon afterwards, the pedestrian route that leads to the house (and to his cabins) was renamed Promenade Le Corbusier – as if Eileen Gray never had anything to do with it. Thus, an “apology” is overdue.

We were given a tour of the house by Jean-Louis Dedieu, deputy mayor of the municipality of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, which is contributing 40 per cent of the still-unknown cost of its painstaking restoration; the remainder is being funded by the French state (50 per cent) and the Alpes-Maritimes département (10 per cent).

As Dedieu explained, E1027 had been vandalised by squatters after its last private owner, Peter Kägi (“he was an alcoholic and drug addict”) was murdered there by his gardener in 1996. Kägi had sold off its contents – including Gray’s trademark circular bedside table and Bibendum chair – for €390,000; they would fetch a lot more today. In 2009, Gray’s “Dragons” armchair made a record €21.9 million at a sale of furniture owned by Yves Saint Laurent.

Paris-based Irish architect Patrick Mellett led a campaign to save the house, but approaches to the Irish Government for funding to preserve this “little piece of Ireland in the south of France” fell on deaf ears. Instead, it was purchased in 1999 by the Conservatoire du Littoral (Coastal Conservancy) and declared a French national monument.

E1027 is not a large house. Entered from the rear, it seems almost grim. The small hallway, with its stencilled advice to *entrez lentement* (enter slowly), opens indirectly into a long livingroom with a continuous run of steel-framed windows facing the sea. The small stove-like fireplace at one end almost looks like an afterthought.

The full-height windows and French doors open onto a long balcony, shaded by shutters and sailcloth blinds – all now restored. Gray wanted the house to look and feel ship-like, saying that its maritime character “arose, inevitably from the setting”. The concrete work is quite crude, as if seaside villas should be rough-and-ready.

There is also a bedroom and en suite bathroom on the main level, with original fittings (cabinets, wardrobes etc) designed by her. A narrow spiral staircase leads down to the lower level, where there is another bedroom, a second bathroom and rather cramped maid’s room. One of the delights is a door that opens in two directions.

# Friends of E.1027

The concrete staircase also leads upwards to the gravel-covered roof space, which is entered via an elegant steel-framed glass “funnel”. From here, looking out over the trees, there is a spectacular view of the bay of Roquebrune, the shimmering Mediterranean and massively over-developed Monaco and Beausoleil to the southwest.

As Jean-Louis Dedieu told us, Eileen Gray designed two types of furniture for E1027 – deckchairs in what she called le style camping and more formal pieces, such as her Transat chair, which was inspired by transatlantic ocean liners, as well as the glass side-table and Bibendum chair, named after the character created by Michelin tyres.

Fortunately, when Peter Kägi put it all on the market, the Centre Pompidou in Paris exercised its rights of pre-emption on the sale (through Sotheby's in Monaco) and acquired some of the most important items. These will be featured, among many other works, in a major Eileen Gray retrospective exhibition in mid-2013.

In 2002, the National Museum of Ireland acquired the contents of Gray's apartment at 2 rue Bonaparte, close to the River Seine, and put these original pieces – together with much archive material – on permanent exhibition in Collins Barracks. At last, her immeasurable contribution to 20th century design was being recognised at home.

It will take a long time to finish restoring E1027, where detailed paint analysis is now being carried out to establish the original colour scheme. But there is no question of painting over Corb's murals. The powerful Paris-based Fondation Le Corbusier won that argument; after all, whatever Gray thought, they are an integral part of the villa's history.

The part of Le Corbusier in Mary McGuckian's movie – set to start shooting next summer, with a budget of €10 million – is to be played by Swiss actor Vincent Perez. But McGuckian intends that Eileen Gray will be the heroine, with Corb cast as the villain. And so, in the case of E1027, it should be.