

Friends of E.1027

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MAGAZINE - DESIGN | ARCHITECTURE

Le Corbusier's Role in the Controversy Over Eileen Gray's E.1027

How one of the 20th century's most important historic houses—designed by Eileen Gray, with murals by Le Corbusier—was nearly destroyed



WHITE HOUSE | The restoration of Eileen Gray's E.1027, photographed above in 2010, began over decade ago. Among other problems, some of the original features were replaced with inferior materials. © MANUEL BOUGOT

By **ALASTAIR GORDON**

Aug. 19, 2013 5:40 p.m. ET

A HOUSE IS NOT A MACHINE to live in," wrote the pioneering modernist Eileen Gray in response to Le Corbusier's oft-quoted line about a house being a *machine à habiter*. "It is the shell of man—his extension, his release, his spiritual emanation." Born in 1878, Gray met the renowned Swiss-born architect and artist in Jazz Age Paris, and while influenced by his coolly planar style of modernism, she would go on to develop her own distinctive integration of architecture and furniture design, a

Gordon, Alastair. "Le Corbusier's Role in the Controversy Over Eileen Gray's E.1027." The Wall Street Journal, August 19, 2013.

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softer but no less revolutionary sensibility that reached its apotheosis in a crystalline house hovering over the Mediterranean in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, that she called E.1027.

PHOTOS: THE RISE AND RUIN OF A
MODERNIST MASTERPIECE



Anglo-Irish Gray worked on E.1027's design and construction from 1926 to 1929 with her lover at the time, the Romanian-born architect and magazine editor Jean Badovici, and everything about it was premised on her love of the sea and sun, like its floor-to-ceiling windows and sunken solarium lined with iridescent tiles. An ingenious skylight staircase rose from the center of the house like a spiraling nautilus made from glass and metal. Instead of a sentimental seaside

name, Gray chose a streamlined numerological symbol for her relationship with Badovici: "E" was for "Eileen," the "10" and "2" represented Badovici's initials—according to their place in the alphabet—and the "7" was for "G," so that Gray was, in a sense, embracing him: E.1027.

Despite its auspicious beginnings, the house—one of the most important examples of domestic architecture in the 20th century—is shrouded in the kind of intrigue that one usually associates with Italian castles or crumbling English manors, not sparkling flat-roofed structures in the south of France. Maybe it's the coastal railway cutting too close to the property line, or Gray's own disaffection with Badovici. Maybe it's the German soldiers who used the walls for target practice during World War II; or Peter Kägi, a gynecologist and morphine addict, who bought the house in 1974 and was murdered there in 1996; or the homeless droguers, who squatted there after the house was abandoned and spray-painted the walls with cultish graffiti.

The worst slight of all happened after Gray broke up with Badovici and moved out of the house they designed together. Badovici was in awe of Le Corbusier and invited him to stay on several occasions, and E.1027 became something of an obsession for the architect. Even though he had once praised Gray for the subtlety of her design, Le Corbusier ended up painting eight large wall murals between 1938 and 1939, both inside and outside E.1027, all drawn in shallow depth with Cubist elements, some with charged sexual imagery.

Her supporters feel that the defacing murals should be removed and the house restored to its 1929 condition. But Le Corbusier is more famous than Gray, and the

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murals have been deemed works of art—national treasures, even—and accordingly preserved and restored. One suggestion was to create scrims that could be pulled over the murals when Gray scholars were visiting and then pulled back again when Le Corbusier scholars were on site. But nothing has been done to resolve the conflict. The house remains shut to the public, mired in disrepair and bureaucratic deadlock.

“Eileen Gray would be spinning in her grave at Père Lachaise if she could see what’s going on,” says Michael Webb, an architectural writer who visited E.1027 last year and was shocked to find rusting metalwork, cracks in the foundation walls and many of the rooms still unfinished. “It’s a sad fate for such a wonderful work of art.”

THE IRONY IS THAT after years of relative obscurity, Gray is more famous today than she’s ever been. Her furniture—lacquered folding screens, expanding side tables, industrial lamps—has reached stratospheric heights at auction. Her Dragons Armchair sold for \$28 million in 2009 and set an auction record for 20th-century furniture. A much-celebrated retrospective of Gray’s work was recently on view at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and featured a partial reproduction of E.1027’s living room. (Gray designed many of her most famous furniture pieces for the house, including the low-slung Transat armchair and the iconic Satellite mirror.) There’s even a movie in the works, *The Price of Desire*, by Irish director Mary McGuckian, with Shannyn Sossamon cast to play Gray and Alanis Morissette as her lover. (According to her friend and official biographer, Peter Adam, Gray was high-born, quiet, enigmatic, frequently withdrawn, bisexual and extremely private about her personal life.) Still, Gray’s late-blooming success seems to have made little difference to E.1027’s uncertain fate.

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By the time Le Corbusier started painting his murals over E.1027, Gray was already ensconced in Tempe à Pailla, another house of her own design in nearby Castellar, just to the north of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. When she heard about the murals, she was incensed and felt the act to be a desecration of her original vision. Her friends saw it as graffiti by an envious competitor. Adam

called it “rape.” At the very least it was a callous display of disrespect for another artist’s work. Le Corbusier tried and failed to buy the property on several occasions and, in the end, settled for an adjacent lot where, in 1951, he built a cabin and studio that loom over the site on a hill directly behind E.1027.

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In the years that followed, the villa survived leaking roofs, the murder of Kägi and its eventual abandonment until, in 2000, it was in danger of being demolished altogether. That was when the Conservatoire du Littoral, a conservation agency, stepped in and bought the property from Kägi's estate in partnership with the township of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. (The town paid 78 percent of the cost and agreed to take responsibility for the property for the next 30 years.) The house was officially designated a historic monument, and a plan was proposed to restore the property and turn it into a combination museum and study center. Foundation walls were shored up, colors analyzed, leaks repaired. At last, it seemed as though Gray's iconic house would finally get the respect it deserves.

Yet in keeping with E.1027's twisted history, the promised rescue was compromised. The restoration has been dragging on for more than a decade. "This is a real scandal, but no one dares talk about it," says Renaud Barrés, a French architect who supervised early restoration efforts and refers to the current program as a "massacre."

Pierre-Antoine Gatier, official architect in charge of historic buildings for the Alpes-Maritimes region of France, took charge of the restoration in 2003, but much of the effort has been botched. The housing for E.1027's distinctive skylight has been improperly replicated, according to Barrés, who, with architectural historian Burkhardt Rukschcio, prepared a 22-page report that details many of the problems with Gatier's restoration: original 1920s electric switches replaced with modern-day fixtures; new mass-produced glass when the original mottled glass was still intact; porch railings—a key element in Gray's overall design—not reproduced according to original dimensions.

Michael Likierman, a retired entrepreneur who lives in nearby Menton and has been raising funds for E.1027, says the situation is "worse than a hornet's nest. All of these people, all of these different agencies have their fingers in the pie, and that's why nothing gets done, and so much money has been wasted." He agrees that Gatier might not be the right architect for the job. But Likierman sees an even bigger problem that has nothing to do with aesthetics. When he offered to help buy a neighboring villa and turn it into a visitor's center, Likierman says local authorities blocked his efforts. "The town sees no added value."

In defense of the E.1027 restoration that was conducted under his supervision, Gatier says, "Restoration is a complex and cultural act. Choices may be challenged, but they deserve a debate. The villa E.1027 is a legendary and fragile work, and I wanted to treat it with the greatest respect."

Jean-Louis Cohen, professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and an

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4/10/2015

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expert on 20th-century European modernism, views the situation with philosophical detachment, citing the fact that Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier's famous house in Poissy, France, underwent numerous phases of restoration before reaching a final satisfactory form. "The current state of E.1027 bothers me, but mistakes can be fixed," says Cohen, who is curator of the Le Corbusier exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art that closes at the end of this month. "There's nothing easier than replacing an electric fixture," he says. "The process is stuck, but the solution is very clear."

The battle for E.1027 seems intractably bound up with the fight for Gray's legacy—both of which have been colored, and perhaps overshadowed, by Le Corbusier. In the end, she outlived him by 11 years. Le Corbusier drowned while swimming off the beach at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, just below E.1027, a possible suicide. Gray died peacefully in Paris on October 31, 1976, at the age of 98. On that very last morning she sent her maid out to buy cork and other materials because she wanted to start work on a new project.

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