

Friends of E.1027

A scandal of French neglect

2 May 2013 | By Michael Webb



It is incomprehensible that Eileen Gray's legendary love nest has been left to languish by the French authorities

Eileen Gray would be spinning in her grave at Père Lachaise if she could see her first and best house as it is today. In 1929, she completed E.1027, a compact white villa perched on the rocks of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, looking out to the harbour of Monaco. Vandalised and abandoned in the late 1990s, it was bought by an agency of the French government and declared a historic monument in 2000. Architect Renaud Barrès, who had written his thesis on the house, prepared a detailed restoration plan, and was joined by Burkhardt Rukschcio, an architect who won a Europa Nostra award for his restoration of Adolf Loos buildings. They withdrew when Pierre-Antoine Gatier, chief architect for historic monuments in the region, asserted his right to restore the house even though he had had no experience with modern buildings. He spent 600,000 euros over six years on an incomplete restoration that outside experts consider seriously flawed.

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For the past four years the house has been shuttered, and, but for a few token visits, closed to the public. Metalwork is rusting, cracks have reappeared in the walls, and there has been little maintenance. It's a tragic fate for a unique icon of Modernism, a total work of art that Eileen Gray created over three years as a refuge from Paris that she planned to share with her mentor and lover, Jean Badovici. E.1027 was a code for their names, and though she accepted his advice on technical issues, the design was hers – yet contemporaries were reluctant to believe it. In the same years, Charlotte Perriand applied for a job with Le Corbusier, and was told, 'mademoiselle, we don't embroider cushions here'. The master displayed the same arrogance in 1938-39 when he was staying at E.1027 as a guest of Badovici, and painted eight bare walls with gaudy murals. Gray was outraged and banished him. He later built Le Cabanon on a neighbouring plot as his own summer retreat, and died while swimming at the beach below in 1965.



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Le Corbusier (flaunting his infamous shark bite scar - top) painted some explicit murals without asking permission and was subsequently banished from the house by Gray

Like Perriand, and Lilly Reich who worked with Mies, Gray humanised Modernism, emphasising liveability over abstract principles. 'Exterior architecture seems to have interested avant-garde architects at the expense of the interior,' she wrote in 1929. 'As though a house ought to be conceived more for the pleasure of the eyes than for the comfort of the inhabitants.' In later years she observed that, 'the poverty of modern architecture stems from the atrophy of sensuality'. As pictured and described in a special 1929 edition of Badovici's magazine, *L'Architecture Vivante*,* the house is sensual yet rigorous. It follows Le Corbusier's five points – a crisp white block, raised on pilotis, with a flat roof, horizontal windows and an open plan – but it goes much further. The furnishings and many built-ins that Gray designed for the house are all configured and located for convenience. Subtle accents of blue refer to the Mediterranean, which is framed by sailcloth awnings. Rooms open onto terraces or the garden, and screen walls articulate the main salon, concealing the entry and a shower. Witty touches abound: a lifebelt suspended beneath the pipe railing balustrade, as though this were a boat; and stencilled injunctions – 'entrez lentement' and 'défense de rire'.

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The house was a portrait of its creator and the life she meant to live there. It is a cousin of the Rietveld-Schröder house in Utrecht, the Eameses house-studio in Los Angeles, and other personalised dwellings, more than the universal statements other Modernists were erecting. Why has such a remarkable achievement been so shabbily treated? Everyone concerned had the best of intentions. The property was purchased by the Conservatoire du Littoral, which preserves 12 per cent of the French coastline from the kind of crass development that has disfigured much of the Côte d'Azur. They delegated ownership to the Commune of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, which paid its share. The mayor wanted Barrès and Rukschcio to do the restoration, holistically and at a fair price, but was pressured to accept the choice of the Ministry of Culture, which demanded its own appointee in return for half the funding.

Gatier wanted to honour Eileen Gray, declaring that 'my job is to conserve what has survived, rather than restore it – a minimalist intervention'. Unfortunately, he has strayed from that promise. Original glass and light switches have been replaced by modern versions; exterior stairs and pipe rails have been reconstructed in the wrong dimensions. Gatier painted a wall of the salon in colours that may have been tested by Gray but do not appear in the 1929 photos. Several modern restoration experts agree with the critical report prepared by Barrès and Rukschcio. John Allan of Avanti Architects finds 'disturbing evidence of a project that was poorly conceived and inadequately executed'. The smaller rooms and garden are still unrestored, and the interior is bare. Useful progress has been made – the house is in much better shape than it was in 1999 – but Gray's masterwork demands a level of authenticity and meticulous detailing that is presently missing.

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From the start, there has been an absence of leadership and supervision. The steering committee of 10 state and local representatives was unable to question Gatier's choices or review the quality of workmanship. The Commune was given a management contract through 2010, but lacked the funds, staff and expertise to exercise that responsibility. The contract has not yet been renewed and the Commune is being advised to retain ownership but pass the burden of management to a non-profit foundation. This might grow out of the local Association Étoiles de Mer that was established in the 1990s to safeguard the entire site even before it was purchased by the state. Pressure for action is building. The Fondation Le Corbusier is a strong advocate for change. Docomomo has urged action and offered its help. Le Monde published a scathing article.



Eileen Gray was also an accomplished furniture designer creating pieces that were very advanced in style and sophistication for their time

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An Irish filmmaker, Mary McGuckian, will incorporate the house in *The Price of Desire*, her feature on Gray, and that should stir public interest in this sleeping beauty. It's essential that a responsible entity be entrusted with the task of raising funds to maintain and administer E.1027, correcting errors and completing restoration, while training docents to conduct tours of the site. Gray, and her countless admirers, deserve no less.

Republished by *Éditions Imbernon*, 2006. Peter Adam's splendid biography *Eileen Gray, Architect/Designer* (Harry Abrams, rev ed, 2000) puts E.1027 and Gray's later houses in the context of her life and work

Head photograph c/o *Manuel Bougot*