

Friends of E.1027

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ART & DESIGN

The Tortured History of Eileen Gray's Modern Gem

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Design

By **ALICE RAWSTHORN**

LONDON — When Eileen Gray embarked on her first architectural project in the mid-1920s, designing a holiday home on the French Riviera for her lover, the architecture critic Jean Badovici, she was determined to make it as alluring as possible.

Scouring the countryside on foot, her bags carried by a donkey, she found a magnificent site on a wooded cliff in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin with glorious views across the Mediterranean to Monaco. Gray camped there to supervise construction and designed all of the furniture and fittings. She even invented the house's name, e.1027, using a numerical code that entwined her initials with Badovici's: e was for Eileen; 10 for the J in Jean, the 10th letter of the alphabet; 2 for the B; and 7 for the G.

The result was one of the most beautiful houses of the early 20th century, which was a highlight of this spring's retrospective of Gray's work at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition opens Oct. 12 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. Like many houses of its age, e.1027 deteriorated over time and a restoration project was begun. The work was originally scheduled for completion by now, but the house remains closed and a controversy has erupted over the quality of the renovation.

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Not that acrimony is new to e.1027. Romantic though Gray's vision of the house was, it has had a turbulent, sometimes violent history that belies its tranquil setting.

When Gray, who was born in Ireland in 1878, began work on e.1027, she had lived in Paris for many years, working first as a lacquer artist and then as an interior designer. In 1922, she opened Galerie Jean Désert to sell furniture that she and her friends had designed. Many of them belonged to the same fashionable Parisian lesbian set as Gray: before Badovici, most of her relationships had been with women.

Badovici, an architect as well as a critic, encouraged her interest in architecture and Modernism. The decision to build on Roquebrune-Cap-Martin was a joint one, and he contributed to the house's design. Impossible though it is to identify who did what, architectural historians concur that Gray was largely responsible for the outcome.

The house emerged as a model of a new approach to Modernism. Like contemporary houses designed by Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and other Modernist pioneers, it had white walls, large windows, a flat roof and incorporated industrial materials in its construction, but Gray's design was gentler and more sensual in spirit than theirs.

She had studied the site diligently, charting the impact of the changing weather and light on the water, rocks and greenery, to ensure that her design made the most of the surrounding natural beauty. Gray was equally assiduous when designing the furniture, devising the circular glass top of a table to stop crumbs from littering the sheets when eating breakfast in bed.

Yet shortly after e.1027's completion in 1929, Gray split from Badovici and abandoned the house. She started work on a new home, Tempe a Pailla in nearby Castellar, while he remained at e.1027. Le Corbusier often visited him and, while staying with Badovici in the late 1930s, he painted eight enormous murals on the walls. Gray, who had not been consulted, accused him of "an act of vandalism."

Having clashed with the powerful Le Corbusier, she was ostracized by the design establishment, and lived reclusively until her work was rediscovered in the late 1960s. She has since been hailed as a star of "Sapphic Modernism" and cast as a feminist heroine, notably by the

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architectural historian Beatriz Colomina, who described Le Corbusier's actions as misogynistic declaration of "war" against Gray.

Eventually, Le Corbusier fell out with Badovici and built a small wooden hut, the Cabanon, on the coastal path beneath e.1027. He died while swimming nearby in 1965. By then, Badovici was dead, too, and a Swiss friend of Le Corbusier's had bought the house. Eventually it passed to her doctor, who sold most of Gray's remaining furniture at auction. He was murdered at e.1027 in 1996.

The dilapidated house was vandalized by squatters. In 1999, it was bought by the Commune of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin with help from the French government and declared a historic monument. The commune was advised by Renaud Barrès, a young architect who had led the campaign to save e.1027, but the government entrusted the restoration to Pierre-Antoine Gatier, the architect responsible for historical renovation in the region. The €600,000, or \$800,000, project was publicly financed, though private donations were also made by Gray enthusiasts, including members of an American nonprofit group, the Friends of e.1027.

Architectural restoration is an intensely political arena that often provokes opposing views, as illustrated by a detailed analysis of e.1027's renovation compiled by Mr. Barrès and Burkhardt Rukschcio, a specialist in 20th-century architectural restoration. Completed in March, it accuses Mr. Gatier of making unnecessary modifications and replacing materials that should have been restored. Mr. Barrès believes that much of the restoration work must be redone, and contends that there has been some irreparable damage.

His criticism could be dismissed as sour grapes, but others share his concerns, including Michael Webb, an architectural historian who visited e.1027 last autumn and was alarmed by its condition. He published an article on the house entitled "A scandal of French neglect" in the British journal *Architectural Review*.

When, or if, the restoration is completed, the thorny issue of how to furnish the house must be resolved. Gray's original furniture is too scarce and too expensive. One option is to use commercial reproductions of her designs, though historical purists would prefer "scientific reproductions" to

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be commissioned.

Neither Mr. Gatier nor the commune responded to requests for comment. Uncertain though e.1027's future seems, one element of its renovation is deemed a success: Le Corbusier's notorious murals. Bénédicte Gandini, the architect in charge of restoration at Fondation Le Corbusier, said he was "very satisfied" with them. Not that Gray would be.

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