

Friends of E.1027



Architecture
The Observer

Eileen Gray's E1027 - review

In 1929 designer Eileen Gray built this graceful modernist villa on the Côte d'Azur as her love nest. So began a story of betrayal, neglect and, latterly, hope... To see pictures of the restoration, [click here](#)



Rowan Moore

Saturday 29 June 2013 19.05 EDT



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Eileen Gray's E1027 house in France: 'delicate, white and ship-like'. Photograph: Courtesy of Friends of e.1027

For a place built for peaceful retreat, Eileen Gray's [E1027 house](#) has endured more than its share of violence and strife. It was at the centre of a conflict between Gray and Le Corbusier, while a later owner was murdered there in 1996. Now its long-drawn-out restoration is provoking accusations of botching and disrespecting Gray's work.

Moore, Rowan. "Eileen Gray's E1027." The Guardian, June 29, 2013.

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Delicate, white and ship-like, E1027 is perched above a bay on the Cote d'Azur whose wildness was, when it was finished in 1929, the opposite of the worldly charms of nearby Monte Carlo. The bisexual Gray designed it with input from her then lover Jean Badovici, as a refuge for them both, and the name intertwines their initials: the E is for Eileen, the 10 and the 2 for the tenth and second letters of the alphabet, J and B, and the 7 is for G.

Until then a [designer](#) mostly of furniture and interiors, this was Gray's first house, and its spaces unfolded from the furnishings, designed by her, to the landscape. Other modernists, Corbusier included, treated their houses as statements, and as proud temple-like objects, into which chairs and tables (also manifestos of design intent) might be inserted. Gray was lighter, more playful, subtly and carefully attuned to the sun and wind.

Too much so for Le Corbusier. In 1938 and 1939 he stayed there as a guest of Badovici, who had by then parted from Gray, and painted murals, crude and garish, on its walls. He did so, [as one photograph records](#), nude. Seemingly affronted that a woman could create such a fine work of modernism, he asserted his dominion, like a urinating dog, over the territory. Gray saw his painting as a violation, and was furious. He, however, didn't stop there: he acquired land nearby and built his own retreat, [a wooden cabanon](#), above the stretch of sea in which, in 1965, he would die.

As an act of naked phallocracy, Corbusier's actions are hard to top, for which reason the E1027 story is now widely known and taught in architectural schools, as emblematic of the sexual politics of modern architecture. But the site is also significant for the grace and quality of the house, and for the rarity of its being designed by a woman: the architectural profession is still disproportionately male, and in the 1920s was much more so. Le Corbusier's cabanon, meanwhile, is also remarkable.

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Since 2000 Gray's house has been the responsibility of the commune of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, contracted to them by its owners, the Conservatoire du Littoral, and it has proved a burdensome responsibility for this small authority. They originally wanted to follow the advice of a young architect Renaud Barres, who had produced a study on the possible restoration of the house, and to work with another architect, Burkhardt Rukschcio, who has won awards for his restoration of modernist buildings. The Ministry of Culture, however, which supplied half the funding, encouraged the appointment of the chief architect for historic monuments in the region, Pierre-Antoine Gatier. Unquestionably knowledgeable about restoration, Gatier however had little experience of modern buildings.

≈600,000 and several years later the restoration is incomplete, and its permanent opening date uncertain. Barres and Rukschcio have produced a dossier which details, with convincing photographic evidence, departures from Gray's intent: thickening of metal rails, original glazing and light switches replaced by standard 21st-century products, a stair clumsily misplaced and mis-dimensioned, a colour scheme different from the 1929 version.

It is also, for now, devoid of furniture, the originals having been sold through Sotheby's in the early 90s. As [one Eileen Gray chair](#) sold for \$28m in 2009, breaking the record for 20th-century furniture, it is not feasible to return the originals, but without her pieces the interiors are quite unlike those she first made. Le Corbusier's repulsive paintings meanwhile, still dominate - the sane thing would be, if not to destroy them, to relocate them, but as they are also items of heritage this is unlikely.

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Jean-Louis Dedieu, the deputy mayor in charge of the project, defends it. Some adjustments of detail, he says, were necessary to deal with the corrosive effects of sea air, "while respecting the philosophy of the place". He cites as justification Eileen Gray's own words, that "nothing is fixed, everything must evolve". He has not, however, placated the critics: the architectural writer Michael Webb has described E1027's current state as "tragic", and *Le Monde* has got on the case. The British architect John Allan, who is experienced in restoring modernist buildings, found "disturbing evidence of a project that was poorly conceived and inadequately executed".

It is not all doom and gloom. Thanks to the efforts of the commune E1027 is at least in a better state than it was in the late 90s, when it was close to disintegration. [Zeev Aram](#), who runs the London modern furniture shop Aram Store, and who was a leading figure in the rediscovery of Gray in the 1970s, is supplying replica furniture. Eileen Gray is also the subject of a film, *The Price of Desire*, with Shannyn Sossamon and Alanis Morissette, being made by the Irish director Mary McGuckian. It will, says McGuckian, "be about the way she underpinned 20th-century architecture". She says that much of it will be centred on E1027, with Le Corbusier, played by Vincent Perez, portrayed as Salieri to Gray's Mozart.

The film production is helping to support some parts of the restoration, including the replication of those lost light switches. The ever-increasing interest in Gray should also be to the good, and there is no shortage of eminent architects who would like to support a work of this significance. There is plenty of goodwill and interest, the only question being how they are directed. There is talk of a not-for-profit foundation taking over responsibility - in principle an excellent idea, depending on who exactly makes up the organisation. It would need real commitment and expertise, and no egomania.

There is also talk that the whole site, including the cabanon, might be sorted out and made suitable for visiting by the time the next big anniversary comes round. This is 2015, the half-centenary of Le Corbusier's death. Even now, it seems, his colonisation of what was first Eileen's place is hard to escape.