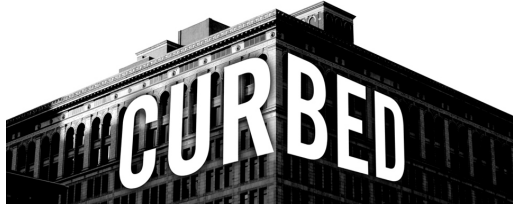


# Friends of E.1027



June 17, 2015

GRAY MATTERS

ROQUEBRUNE-CAP-MARTIN, FRANCE

## A House is a Machine for Memory: An Oral History of the Restoration of Eileen Gray's E.1027

Wednesday, June 17, 2015, by [Patrick Sisson](#)



*Eileen Gray-and Jean Badovici, Villa E.1027. Photo © Tim Benton*

## Friends of E.1027

Nearly a century since its completion, **Eileen Gray's** peerless **E.1027** villa seems in motion while at rest. With a daring streamlined shape akin to a ship's prow, the home seemingly slices into the Atlantic waters off Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, from its perch on the coast. It also continues to point forward.

Completed in 1929, the concrete cube is an uplifting vision of modern living, a unified artistic statement from an often-overlooked Irish architect and designer. Gray's vision encompasses everything from the overall site plan to the smallest detail of every shelf. After decades of neglect and disrepair, the modernist icon only just reopened last month for public tours. One critic compared the thrill of visiting E.1027 to that experienced by **"Howard Carter when he entered Tutankhamun's tomb."**

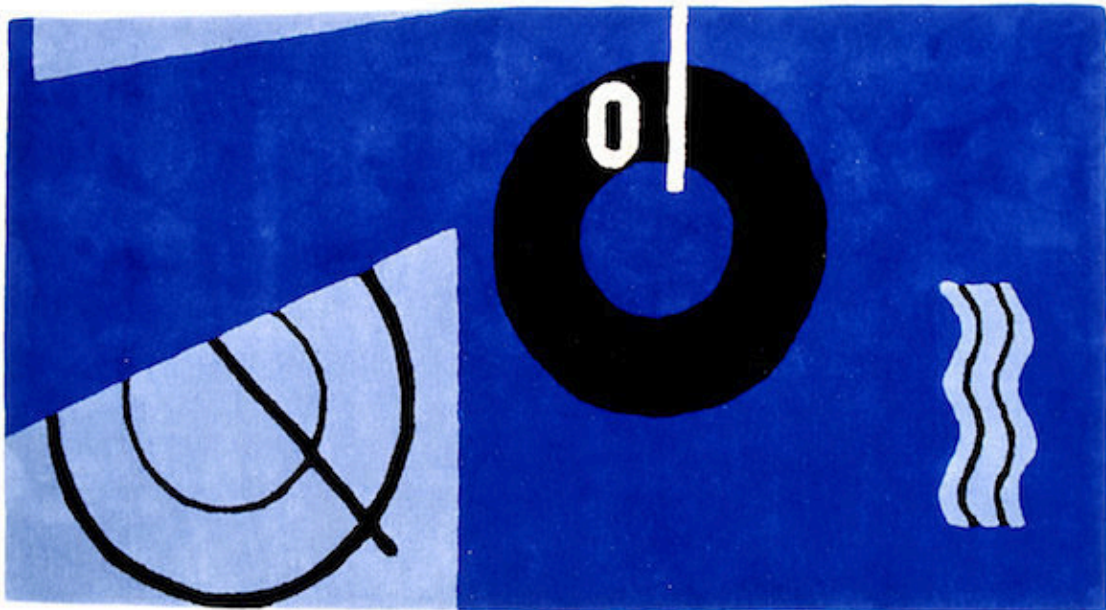
## Friends of E.1027



*The most famous shot of Eileen Gray, taken in the 1930s. Courtesy Aram.*

## Friends of E.1027

A thoroughly modern woman created this paragon of modern design. Born into an aristocratic Irish family in 1878, Gray defied Victorian expectations by moving to Paris in 1907. She ran with a fast crowd, one which exemplified the kinetic energy of the French capital in the 1920s and '30s, all while running her own design studio doing high-end furniture and lacquer work, an art form she learned from a Japanese master. Gray drove an ambulance during World War I, went ballooning with Charles Rolls of Rolls-Royce, and dated whom she wanted, included nightclub singer **Marie Louise "Damia" Damien**. (The pair could be spotted driving through Paris in Gray's roadster with Damia's pet panther sitting in the back). But she sadly became the protagonist in two age-old stories—a lover scorned, and a woman's talent overshadowed by male peers—making the story of E.1027 about much more than just an aesthetic accomplishment.



*The Blue Marine Rug Eileen Gray designed for E.1027. Courtesy Aram.*

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From 1926–29 Gray designed the house as a vacation getaway for her then-lover, Romanian architect and critic **Jean Badovici** (the letters and numbers in the name are code for their names). Their relationship did not end well, and after they broke up in 1932, Gray moved out. Badovici, for his part, remained friends with mutual acquaintance Le Corbusier, who not only staked territory right next door for his own **Petit Cabanon**, but who would later deface her creation with his own artwork.

Gray's sensual design, inspired by time spent camping out at the sight to devise to right way to reflect the sun, surf and surroundings within, is more than another coldly rational rectangle. It's telling that within the main living room of this villa, the wall contains not an abstract masterpiece or manifesto, but a nautical map. Its title, "L'Invitation au Voyage," references a **poem by Charles Baudelaire** from his collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which contains the lines "Think of the rapture/Of living together there!/Of loving at will/Of loving till death."

**Curbed spoke with more than a half-dozen scholars, artists, and preservationists who were involved in either the long-awaited restoration of E.1027 or related projects that chronicle Gray's life and career to get a better sense of what it took to reopen this legendary building, and how questions and controversy remain to this day.**

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*Eileen Gray's Paris bedroom, from the original Domus article from 1968.*

### **DOWN AND NEARLY FORGOTTEN**

*Gray's career as an architect and designer suffered after World War II. The highly regarded furniture maker, lacquer artist, architect, and designer wasn't part of an established community of modern architects, and she only received a handful of private commissions after E.1027. She spent most of her remaining years until her death in 1976 living in her flat on Rue Bonaparte in Paris working on furniture projects. Beginning in the late 1960s, a slow trickle of articles and gallery shows brought her back into the public eye. A partnership with London design impresario Zeev Aram to remake and reissue some of her designs resulted in a license for classics like her [adjustable chrome side table](#), originally made for E.1027.*

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**Joseph Rykwert, architectural critic and historian:** "Prunella Clough, a painter and Eileen Gray's niece, was a good friend of mine, and mentioned her aunt to me once or twice. I thought she was talking about her aunt doing watercolors. In fact, she brought out images of E.1027. And I was terribly taken aback. It was the supreme elegance of the thing. It was a totally individual contribution to the modern movement. No one has done anything else as elegant and as accomplished as that. She said she'd introduce me to her. So when we were both in Paris, next we went and saw Eileen."

**Dr. Jennifer Goff, author and curator of the Eileen Gray collection at the National Museum of Ireland:** "I believe the last time Eileen Gray set foot near E.1027 was just after Badovici's death in 1956. She didn't get access to the house, but she was on the property. In his biography of Gray, Peter Adam states that they drove down to E.1027, but she said that she couldn't go in because it brought back so much pain."

**Joseph Rykwert:** "I was writing for the Italian magazine *Domus* at the time and went to interview Gray for the [December 1968 issue](#). She had been completely forgotten. Much of her pre-war work had been warehoused in Toulon by the seaside, and that was bombed during the war and much of it was entirely lost. She was pleased but also puzzled that anybody was interested. 'That's an old thing,' she would say. 'Nobody is interested in that anymore.' I took photographs and they illustrated the piece, and the moment the article appeared, people were interested to meet her and talk to her. Young scholars realized there was a whole treasure to be found."

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**Zeev Aram, founder and owner of [Aram Furniture Gallery in London](#):** "I want to know about her, I read about her in *Domus*. About three or four years later, my friend mounted a small exhibition of Gray's work at the RIBA gallery with photographs and three pieces of furniture: one rack, one screen, one chair. I was rather interested and asked him to make the introduction. That's when I got to know her in 1973. She was a small lady when I met her, 93, fantastically well dressed and slightly frail. Her hair was done very well, she wore a tailor-made skirt and silk blouse, hand-made shoes, really very elegant. She had one bad eye."

**Joseph Rykwert:** "She was actually rather a vain person in many ways and didn't want to be remembered as the old lady with a bad eye. She wanted to be remembered by the photos from the 1930s."



## Friends of E.1027



*Gray's **Bibendum Chair** was based on the shape of the Michelin Man. In case Gray is considered too serious, remember Bibendum comes from the phrase "Nunc est bibendum," or "Now is the time to drink." Courtesy Aram Designs.*

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**Zeev Aram:** "When she opened her mouth, it was something quite extraordinary. Her observation with one eye was so acute and intelligent. We were working together to re-release some of her furniture, and we showed her a model of the [Bibendum Chair](#), and she was gobsmacked. She sat down, bending the arms, playing with it like she had found a lost doll in a cupboard. After about a minute, she said it should be three centimeters wider. Funnily enough, she told me the story of E.1027 [right then]. I remember asking her what happened to it. She said, 'To tell you the truth, I don't want to know. It would make me unhappy.'"

**Mary McGuckian, filmmaker, director of the Eileen Gray biopic [The Price of Desire](#):** "When you first see the house, and you see it from the distance, it's magical. It's almost an architectural student pilgrimage. Anybody who would have seen it before 2010 or 2011, they must have broken in. It was incredible that it was built in 1926, and not ten years ago. It looks like it was built a decade ago."

**Jennifer Goff:** "Gray invested so much of herself into that house and project. Not only did Badovici not appreciate her, he didn't really appreciate what she created for him. She knows a sense of disappointment from a lover totally letting her down. By the time she left to work on her next home, Tempe à Paila, Badovici already had another girlfriend who had moved in."

# Friends of E.1027



*Behind the scenes photo during the Price of Desire shoot, recreating the late '40s at the home. Copyright Julian Lennon 2014.*

## **BEGINNING OF THE RESTORATION**

*After Gray moved out in the mid-1930s, Badovici used the home for its intended purpose of entertaining. According to Goff, "Some of the most important ideas in modernism were born from evenings of drinking and partying in that house. It was a melting pot." Perhaps the most consequential invitation Badovici ever extended was allowing Le Corbusier to paint a series of eight salacious, Cubist-style murals on the interior in 1938 and 1939. Obsessed with the design of the house, Le Corbusier was supposedly jealous that Gray could create such a masterful work of art, according to many scholars. His murals incensed Gray, who felt it spoiled her building. Despite the twists and turns that befell the home over the next few decades—Nazi soldiers shot at it for target practice, Le Corbusier briefly lived there (and eventually drowned in front of it while swimming in the ocean), a former owner was murdered on the property—it was ultimately Le Corbusier's murals that spurred the French government into buying the property in 2000.*

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**Caroline Constant, author and Eileen Gray scholar:** "Le Corbusier's murals were responsible for the house being there to this day, and he deserves credit for that. He told the next owner, Marie-Louise Schelbert, not to throw anything away. Of course he wanted the home saved because it has more murals than any [of his] other building[s]."

**Marco Antonio Orsini, director of the *Gray Matters* documentary:**

"There's no road in front of it. You need to park your car and walk a third of a mile along a dirt track. On the right is a house, and on the left is train tracks. It's completely isolated. All the homes on the path are beach cabanas that don't have car access."

**Caroline Constant:** "I think it's a miracle that the property still exists just based on the value of the property alone. [Coco Chanel had the house next door.](#)"

**Zeev Aram:** "I went there once during Christmastime in the late '80s, and it was closed, so I went around and was climbing the rocks to get there. My wife got very worried. Inside, there were rats on the floor, the ceiling was stained, the concrete of the columns were split. It made me very unhappy to see that building in such a way."

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*E.1027, Cabanon and l'Étoile de Mer. Courtesy Cap Moderne.*

**Jennifer Goff:** "I was there in the 1990s when it was filled with vagrants. It was awful. It smelled of urine."

**Marco Antonio Orsini:** "There was a darkness about the house. It was a house begging for attention and repair."

**Mary McGuckian:** "The home had just fallen into disarray. Marie-Louise Schelbert bought the house at auction in 1960. She was a friend of Corbusier. Ownership was contested after Madame Schelbert died. [*Editor's note:* Supposedly a doctor who came to treat her, Peter Käigi, continued to live there after she died. Story has it that he was either shot by the gardener over a dispute about wages or by a pair of grifters Käigi had picked up in a local bar.] One anecdote has it that the man who shot Käigi was the son of a local mason who had helped Gray build the house, and accidentally knocked down a wall that had a Le Corbusier mural on it. So it might have been more on purpose than accidentally, and resulted in a feud with the doctor. Anyway, there was a period where nobody knew who owned the house."

## Friends of E.1027



Villa E.1027 living room with furniture and rugs designed by Eileen Gray and Le Corbusier's mural. Photo © Manuel Bougot

**Sandra Gering, founder of Friends of E.1027:** "I'm an art dealer, and came upon Gray when I saw Peter Adam's biography on her during a studio visit. I read about the house and discovered it was in terrible disarray; this was probably 1997, 1998. I tried to get in touch with the agent, and called him, and he said it was such and such amount of money, and thought, maybe this should be a museum. In 2000, the state of France and the municipality of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin had bought the house; it was then declared a *monument historique*. After that, we formed the non-profit to help raise more for restoration."

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**Michael Likierman, British businessman and chair of the [Cap Moderne Association](#) which oversees a trust protecting E.1027:** "When it comes to architecture, it's different. The French have a huge tradition of architecture, and they also have a huge tradition of state involvement. In the case of E.1027, you have seven state bodies involved. Then the French [Foundation Le Corbusier](#), they have the rights over the paintings. So you have eight people sitting around the table, so if you have one opinion, you can bet someone will say no, and since these opinions are supposed to be collegial, they really have to be unanimous to get anything done. You have a formula for inaction that's incredibly hard to overcome. There are moments in all projects, where it's difficult and feels like you're pulling porridge uphill."

**Michael Likierman:** "Renaud Barres was a young architect who had studied E.1027 more than anybody else. He did his thesis on it and knew it backwards and forwards. The town and *conservatoire* gave him the role to restore—he was local and cheap—and they asked him to put together the plan. At that phase, it was then understood that it had to be done under the authority of the architect in charge of historic monuments, Pierre-Antoine Gatier. You then had a standoff that lasted for two years, with the town and Barres and Gatier, and in the end, the town capitulated. That left a very bitter Barres. He's been a huge critic of what Gatier has done, in the cost and time taken, and the decisions that have been implemented."

## Friends of E.1027

**Renaud Barres** (Quoted in the [Wall Street Journal](#)): "This is a real scandal, but no one dares talk about it."

**Pierre-Antoine Gatier** (Quoted in the [Wall Street Journal](#)): "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."

**Michael Likierman**: "In 2010, the European Union ruled that it was unfair to give just one person the chance to be the architect. At that point, the Conservatoire could hire whomever they wanted, but Barres had earned so much antagonism from his criticism that the chalice was poisoned. They thought he would spend his time proving what other people did was wrong and correct it."





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**Jennifer Goff:** "The way I look at this is, there is restoration and there is conservation. The most important thing is the house has been saved. I haven't seen the restoration work myself. When I saw it before, the house was moments away from crumbling and becoming dust. If you're looking at it from a **purist point of view**, is everything back to the way it was in 1929? **Up for debate.** The debate is going to be, are you going to go back and do the plug sockets from 1929, are you going to completely remove the murals, cover them with a screen? [Again,] up for debate."

**Michael Likierman:** "There's no issue. The murals are protected by the French state. They're part of the history of the house, even if you wanted to detach them from the walls and move them elsewhere, that's not how historical accuracy is dealt with here. **You have to remember, Corbusier is one mean painter.** There's [an exhibition at the Pompidou Center](#) right now, and they are serious works of art. This one might be in an inappropriate place. There is a question of, how are people going to see Eileen Gray's vision of the house? We will have a system next spring that will screen out Corbusier's paintings so people can get a good vision of Gray's vision of how that room was."

**Jennifer Goff:** "I believe that when Gray met Corbusier, she was already a very famous designer, she was exhibiting frequently and had quite a clientele. At that time, his career was really beginning. She had a great respect for the ideas he was espousing as far as modernism was concerned. And I think he had a respect for this designer who thought about furniture beyond just a piece of furniture, how people interacted with their interiors. The actual date isn't known, but he gave Gray a series of architectural drawings from some of his most important projects to practice on; [Villa Savoye](#), Maison Ternesien and the home he did for his parents, Villa Lac Léman. That last one was a personal project; he traveled for months with the notebooks and sketches. To give something that personal to Eileen Gray does appear to suggest there was a profound respect."

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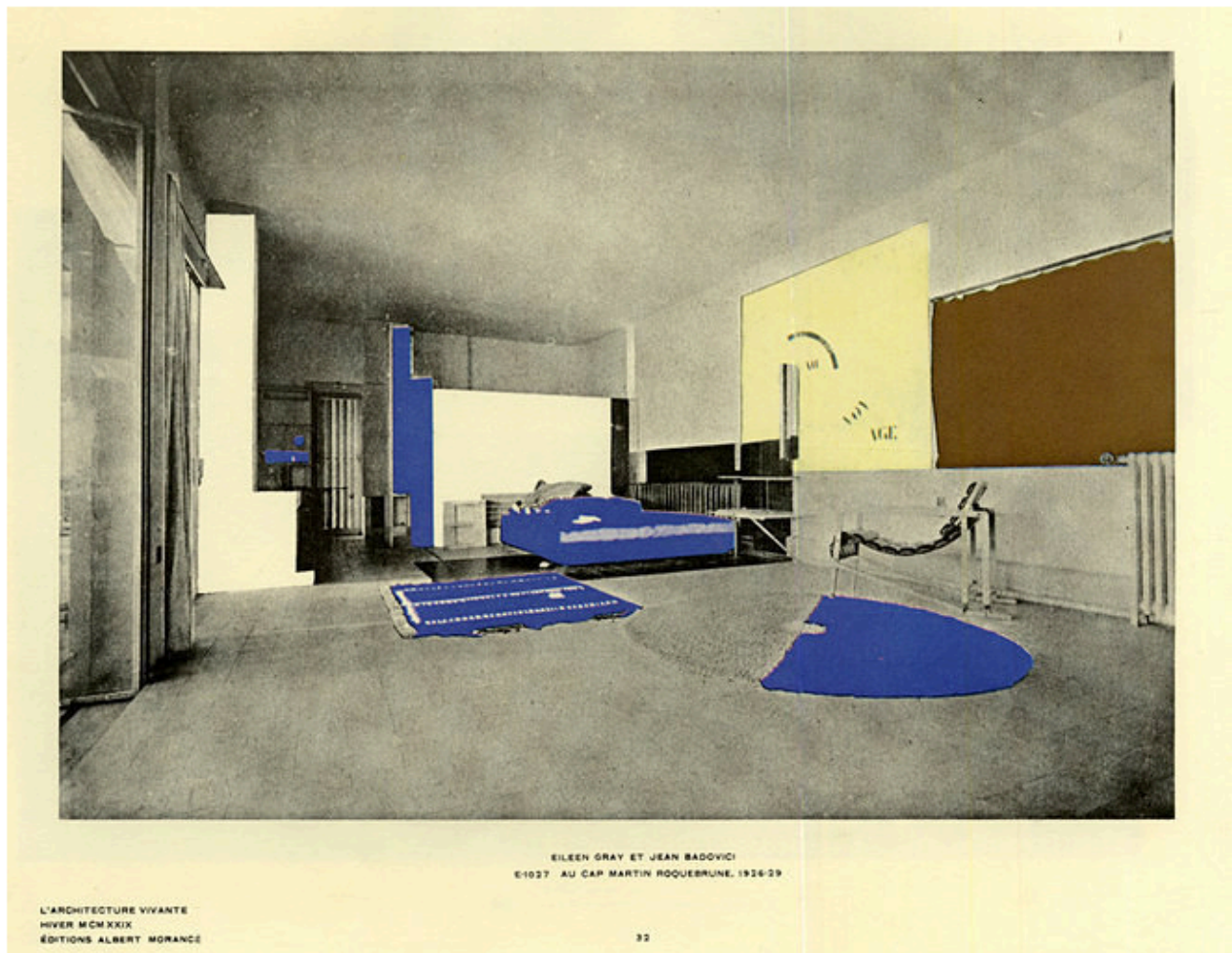


*Corbu, shirtless and relaxing inside E.1027. Photo via the [Charnel House](#).*

**Le Corbusier, in a 1938 letter to Gray after staying at E.1027:** "I would be delighted to relate how much those few days spent in your house have made me appreciate the rare spirit that dictates all of its organization, both inside and outside, and has given the modern furniture and equipment a form that is so dignified, so charming, and full of wit."

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**Caroline Constant:** "You know Corbusier's **Five Points of Architecture**? I argue that she took each of those five points and utilized them and critiqued them with E.1027. So for example, a window is not just something for framing a view, it is a layered membrane that has shutters and curtains, and various ways to open and ways for the owner to control the view and air flow. Gray's works is all about the experience of the architecture as opposed to controlling it through visual means."



*In a 1929 issue of L'Architecture Vivante, Jean Badovici's magazine, he and Gray wrote a dialogue discussing the home's design.*

## Friends of E.1027

**Eileen Gray**, writing in a 1929 issue of *L'Architecture Vivante*: "One must build for the human being, that he might rediscover in the architectural construction the joys of self-fulfillment in a whole that extends and completes him. Even the furnishings should lose their individuality by blending in with the architectural ensemble."

**Jennifer Goff**: Remember, he was the fully-fledged architect, he studied architecture. She was the 52-year-old woman. Again, ego was bruised."

**Marco Antonio Orsini**: "People still pass by E.1027. It's on Corbusier Avenue. Finally, Eileen Gray may get the credit she deserves."

**Jennifer Goff**: "I don't know anybody—and this is being bold—I **don't know anyone who has created such an intimate space that's brought so much joy**. There's something incredibly spiritual about that. I don't know another architect who created a space that can take you to another realm. It really felt like you're going off on a journey, I know that was just an idea, but for me she did it. It's the physical embodiment of Gray's manifesto on architecture, on so many different levels."

**Mary McGuckian**: "When we filmed at the house for one whole week, it was absolutely how it looked in 1929. It was perfect; we referenced everything from her original photography. It was a beautiful and serene space, a lovely place to be. At one point we took a day off, and then needed to film a scene set in 1946, when the place was wrecked and the murals were up. We were sitting there, about to call in the night shift to wreck the place, and then we started to cry. We said, let's not do that tonight. We left it there on it's own for another night, the way she would have it. It was horrific to come back and see it as Corbusier came back and lived [there] as a vagabond."

## Friends of E.1027

**Zeev Aram:** "I was there for filming, sitting in the High-Performance chair in the living room, the first time I had the experience that she had initially designed. I could sit there and just daydream. It was wonderful. It was delicious to look out and think about this lovely woman sitting there, looking at the scene I was looking at also. "

**Michael Likierman:** "Personally, what I love about her is the combination of the extremely dynamic and modern lines, and perspectives, a very daring use of architecture, and at the same time, a hugely practical sensibility: little drawers marked "pillow cases," [that sort of thing]. The combination of dynamic lines and caring about how people live isn't always found in modern architecture."

**Sandra Gering:** "It is an absolutely perfect example of modernist architecture. E.1027 and maybe the Farnsworth House, and that's it. The *pilotis* that it stands on, being near the water, the built-in quality of everything, it's perfect. I could live there in a second. It wouldn't be fair, but I would do it."

**Jennifer Goff:** "It's the idea that you're taken on a journey from the moment you walk in, from the entrance hall to the living room, to the tight little terrace with a bathroom, to a winding staircase to the lower levels. The way she thought of Badovici's bedroom, she created a space where he could sit and work and look at the sea. She thought of everything conducive to him so he could work while he entertained."

**Michael Likierman:** "I look at the interviews of her talking about her life and work and so on, she's such a remarkable woman. I find it difficult thinking of her going to the lavatory. I find her as this kind of goddess going through life with a sense of design and of art."

**Jennifer Goff:** "There's a mystery to the house, and I love that."

*Tours and visits to E.1027 can now be arranged through [Cap Moderne](#).*