

LETTER FROM FRANCE

## Restoring Eileen Gray's E-1027

Gray's seaside retreat survived Le Corbusier's act of vandalism and decades of neglect. Now this midcentury icon shines again.

By **ANTHONY FLINT**



Manuel Bougot

# Friends of E.1027

Architecture has its legends, and the one based in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin along the Côte d'Azur is a pretty good one: brilliant but unassuming female designer from Paris builds an elegant minimalist villa on the shores of the Mediterranean, and boorish male architect takes it over. Le Corbusier towers in history, and Eileen Gray fades away.

The restoration of Gray's Villa E-1027, which opened to the public in late June after decades of neglect, is part of a larger effort to put these two figures on more equal footing—and perhaps set the record straight. The new cultural heritage campus dubbed [Cap Moderne](#), on a steep hillside between Monaco and the Italian border, which includes both Gray's villa and Le Corbusier's own seaside retreat, aspires to be a living museum that will direct a new lens on the creative energy that fueled 20th century Modernism.



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*The living room, which features a replica of Gray's Bibendum chair and a Le Corbusier's mural*

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The bisexual daughter of Irish aristocracy, Gray shunned marriage and forged her own way in Paris, designing furniture and objets d'art in the Roaring Twenties. Her lover, the architecture critic and bon-vivant Jean Badovici, asked her to find a spot in the South of France for a summer getaway. Coco Chanel would soon establish her own digs nearby at the luxurious La Pausa estate, but Gray hacked her way through lemon trees and banana palms to a site inaccessible by car. There, on the hillside just southeast of the Roquebrune-Cap-Martin train station, she conjured an all-white pastoral retreat bathed in sunlight, freshened by breezes, and outfitted with sleek yet practical furnishings of leisure.

Indeed, the design of E-1027 seemed to take shape around the furniture and the way its occupants would move in physical space. Gray created built-in cabinets and drawers for summer clothes, guest rooms and nooks that allowed retreat and privacy, little windows positioned to afford spectacular views, deck-chair-style chaise lounges, and reading stands, dining tables, and tea and gramophone trolleys that extended and unfurled like something out of a Jetsons cartoon. The exterior, a rectangular box wedged into the hillside and supported by pillars, was punctuated by a simple cube with horizontal strips of dark shuttered windows.



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*The Cap Moderne site, which includes Le Corbusier's cabanon, adjacent to L'Etoile de Mer (center), and E-1027*

E-1027—the name is based on where Gray and Badovici's initials fall in the alphabet ("E" standing for Eileen, "10" for the J in Jean, and so on)—was completed in 1929, when Gray was 51 years old. She schlepped building materials by wheelbarrow, building the place herself with help from a crew of local workers. It was an astonishing accomplishment. But the villa seemed doomed from the start. It was never the romantic destination the couple had first envisioned. She wanted to snuggle; he wanted to party. They split up, and Gray ended up building another house for herself in nearby Menton.



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Gray called it an act of vandalism. Badovici, put in a difficult spot, chastened Le Corbusier and told him he had worn out his welcome. The tension underlying the affair was electric. Here was a modernist summer home so superb Le Corbusier himself could have created it—but built by someone untrained in architecture, and a woman, no less. Gray had also angered Le Corbusier—not hard to do—by quibbling with his dictum that a home was a “machine for living in.” A home, she argued, was actually a living organism.

The real trouble started a few years later, when Badovici invited his friend Charles-Édouard Jeanneret to stay at E-1027 with his wife, Yvonne. Le Corbusier, as Jeanneret had rebranded himself, had just earned international fame with the Villa Savoye, and he decompressed from work by lounging around E-1027 in various states of undress. Eventually he decided the white walls needed improvement, and he painted eight racy murals of Picasso-like female figures, some intertwined in sexy repose. Photographs captured the architect, naked in the Riviera heat, with the offending paintbrush in hand.

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*Le Corbusier, decompressing at E-1027*



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As with Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses, the debate never actually took place in person. In letters, Le Corbusier innocently explained he was just livening things up. Gray, who never sought publicity for herself, mostly just moved on. When World War II intervened, E-1027 was briefly occupied by wine-drinking Italian soldiers, who used the murals for target practice. Badovici, who owned the site, died in 1956. Le Corbusier longed to have the villa for himself and arranged for it to be sold to a wealthy Swiss widow, Marie-Louise Schelbert. But she turned it over to her doctor, a morphine addict named Peter Kaegi, who let the place fall apart. In a morbid twist, Kaegi was murdered there, in what police described as a sex tryst gone awry. After that, the villa was abandoned and occupied by squatters.

Le Corbusier, meanwhile, had returned to Roquebrune in the 1950s, when he was building the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, and continued his own search of a summer getaway. He befriended Thomas Rebutato, a plumber from Nice who ran L'Étoile de Mer, a restaurant adjacent to E-1027. Le Corbusier built five camping huts just to the west of L'Étoile de Mer, and struck a deal with Rebutato to erect his own private *cabanon* that would be attached to the restaurant on the other side. He finally had his own retreat, a tiny, super-efficient, 12-foot-by-12-foot structure based on the Modular, his design principles guiding how humans function in physical space. He loved the place so much he predicted—accurately—that he would end his days there. Fifty years ago, in August 1965, he died on his daily swim in the Mediterranean.

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Tim Benton

*The five camping huts designed by Le Corbusier, located above Villa E-1027 and adjacent to L'Etoile de Mer and the architect's cabanon*

It is the *cabanon* that was celebrated and preserved. It could be toured—with some effort, by appointment—as part of a pilgrimage of Le Corbusier's works. But now visitors to Roquebrune-Cap-Martin can finally appreciate E-1027. In the vestibule of the villa, Gray stenciled the words *Entrez lentement*—enter slowly—an instruction to leave your troubles behind and start to relax. To the left is a compact kitchen, and to the right is the main living area that includes a replica of Gray's Bibendum chair—enveloping tubes named after the Michelin Man—and the cushioned twin deck chairs, positioned to gaze out the accordion glass doors to the abundant flora and the sea. In one corner is the foldout dining table, easily moved outside to the deck; in the other a reading nook that doubles as an extra guest bedroom.



# Friends of E.1027



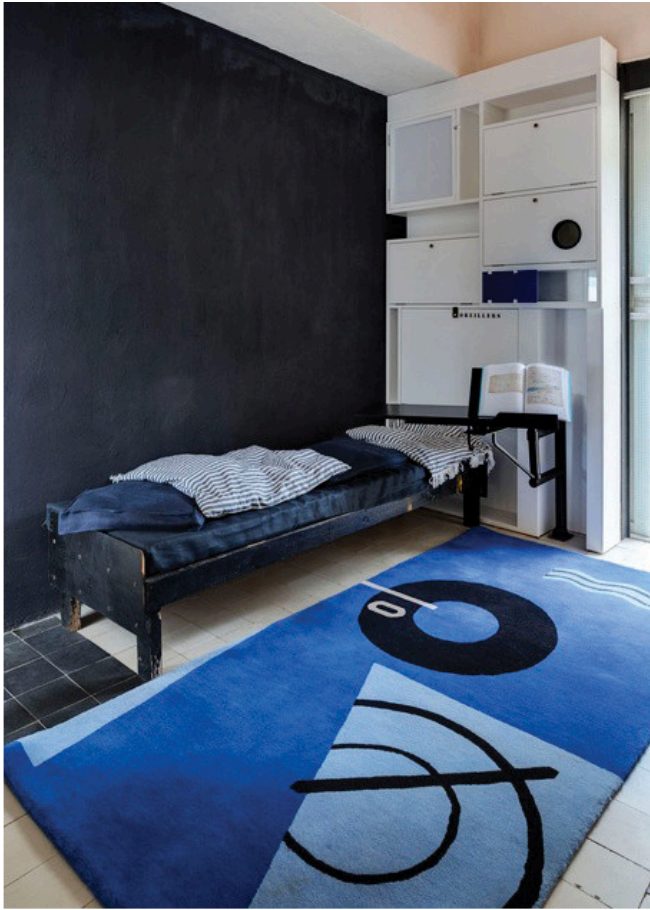
Tim Benton

*Damage at E-1027 pre-renovation*

Gray designed the house to be experienced, much like one might move through a Japanese garden; a sculpted spiral staircase connects the two levels, which have a constant relationship with the outdoors. Quite possibly the world's finest hammock is stationed at a balcony at the western edge of the villa, with unfettered views to the beach crescents of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and Monaco beyond. Gray was obsessed with light and air—but also privacy. The master bedroom and bathroom suite, tucked away on the first floor, encourages retreat.

In a deliberate violation of the clean, straight lines of Le Corbusier, there is a slight offset in the stacking of shelves and storage space, creating a sense of movement. Such unexpected details make a visitor want to stay—to open a bottle of Provencal rosé, sauté some sea urchins, and move in, just like Le Corbusier did.

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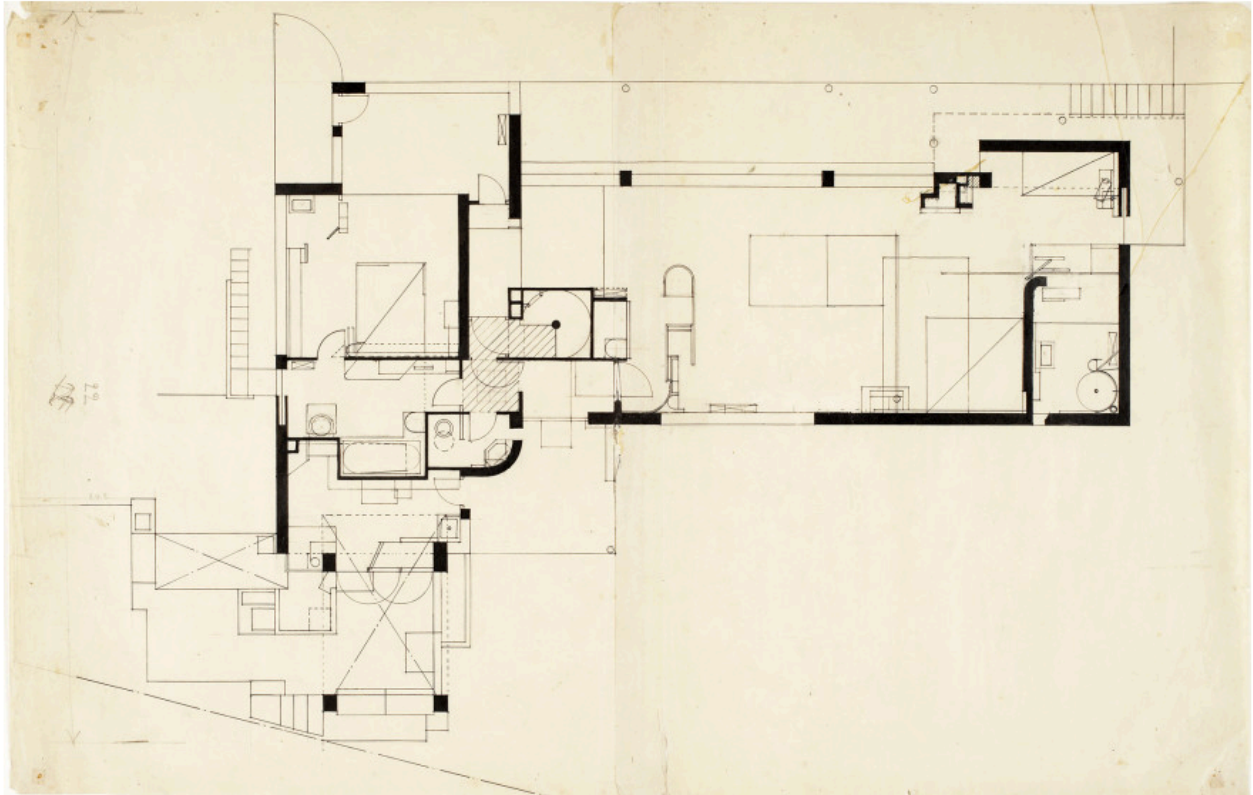
Manuel Bougot

*Living room alcove at E-1027, with restored bookcase and book tray*

Some restoration work remains, including on the spiral staircase and storage areas. But the place is in remarkably good shape, especially given that the project itself was a somewhat tortured process, taking twists and turns over some 16 years. The Conservatoire du Littoral, a coastal conservancy agency that acquired the *cabanon* in 1975 from the Fondation Le Corbusier, took control of E-1027 in 1999, in coordination with the town. The mayor of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and a succession of architects worked on the restoration. But the French bureaucracy governing historic monuments, as well as hand-wringing over things like authentic light switches and skylight parts, made for sluggish progress.



# Friends of E.1027



National Museum of Ireland

*E1027 ground floor plan*

Enter Michael Likierman, a British businessman who came to France in 1972 to launch the U.K.-based Habitat furniture company chain, and who had already embarked on another restoration project: the house and gardens of Serre de La Madone, in neighboring Menton. Likierman became friends with Robert Rebutato, the son of the owner of L'Etoile de Mer, who fondly remembers Le Corbusier as a kindly uncle. Together, Likierman and Rebutato looked to establish a coherent campus linking all the notable buildings together—Gray's masterpiece, L'Etoile de Mer (essentially preserved as it was in the 1950s), the five camping cubes, and Le Corbusier's *cabanon*.

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The project got an unexpected boost thanks to *The Price of Desire*, a drama based on the sordid tale of E-1027 that debuted earlier this year at the Dublin Film Festival. Supported by Julian Lennon, who took photographs of the production, and featuring Alanis Morissette as Gray's lesbian lover from Paris, the film was shot on site and helped speed along the restoration work, ensuring that the villa was presentable for the cameras.



Julian Lennon

*Price of Desire* still taken by Julian Lennon



# Friends of E.1027

The Cap Moderne association has powerful benefactors, led by Prince Albert of Monaco, chairman of the board of trustees, and of course Likierman, the force majeure behind ambitious plans such as transforming a warehouse building at the train station into a reception and visitor center and exhibition space. The association also hopes to purchase the vacant Villa Giori, next door to E-1027, to turn it into what Likierman calls a "laboratory of living architecture" for researchers. The total budget is over \$5 million.



Julian Lennon

*Another scene from Price of Desire*

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Cap Moderne, thanks to the way the tours are sequenced, may help to retell history. Visitors start with E-1027, proceed to L'Étoile de Mer and the camping huts, and only then do they explore Le Corbusier's *cabanon*. Which could lead to some scandalous thinking: How much was he actually inspired by Eileen Gray? The simple dining table, the compact kitchen, the acutely positioned fenestration—suddenly the *cabanon* looks more derivative and less like a unique creation. Nearly a century later, this is Eileen Gray's revenge.

That is probably taking things too far. Le Corbusier had developed most of his comprehensive theories years before he ever laid eyes on E-1027—although he only first codified his Modular concept after World War II. Yet the public opening of E-1027 coincides with a new rash of criticism of France's favorite son. A recent exhibit at the Pompidou Centre was faulted for omitting the architect's time in Nazi-controlled Vichy during World War II, which was detailed in [two recent books that raise troubling questions about the extent of his fascist sympathies](#). For those who argue that Le Corbusier is responsible for the destruction of cities, and the proliferation of blank walls and soulless towers, there is no little glee for this latest attack. He was a swaggering figure, not always particularly nice to be around, a serial philanderer, and somewhat parasitic in arranging his personal affairs. His behavior at E-1027 has been likened to a dog marking its territory.

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*Entrance to E-1027*

For his part, Likierman doesn't buy the notion that Cap Moderne is any kind of revisionist comeuppance. His goal for visitors is plain: "That they have seen the work of two architectural genii in a magical setting," he says. "And that architecture is all about human beings and their interaction."

In Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, Le Corbusier is well remembered, and his name is plastered all over the resort town. The path leading to Cap Moderne from the Menton side is called Promenade Le Corbusier; he is the star attraction. But now the untrained architect gets first billing; the architect who influenced so much of the 20th century landscape is nudged back into context.

Up on the switchbacks on the Monaco side, the white box of E-1027 is plainly visible, while L'Étoile de Mer and the *cabanon* are much harder to pick out. For those who once asked, *Who built that*—and wrongly assumed it was Le Corbusier—they now can discover the answer.