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Eileen Gray: E-1027

analize
Born to an aristocratic family in Ireland in 1878, she first studied at the Slade School for Fine Arts in London and then settled in Paris in 1907 where she began a career that spanned seven decades. In Paris, she studied drawing, painting and, drawn to the austerity of the material, the techniques of lacquer. She also began to design furniture and interiors. Elegant, intelligent and independent, Eileen Gray’s nonconformist and brilliant mind led her to a uniquely creative life at the turn of the century.

Gray’s first commission for interior design came in 1919, a project for the architects and designers of the De Stijl group in Holland. Inspired by the Rationalist forms of the De Stijl group, Gray began to create a stronger sense of modernity and unconventional use of materials and forms. From this came her famous lacquered “block screens,” which used isosceles triangles in proportion to the room and the architecture of the building. After 1927, Gray worked primarily as an architect, designing a modernist house for herself for which she also created appropriately minimalist furniture. Her work conveyed a stronger sense of modernity and unconventional use of materials and forms. Gray now began to create unique furniture, “suited to our existence, in proportion to our rooms and in accordance with our aspirations and feelings.” A brilliant formal play on the concept of asymmetry, Gray’s Nonconformist chair displays her sense of irony, while her famous side table—also asymmetrical—displays the rational principles of modernism that increasingly defined her work.

After 1927, Gray worked primarily as an architect, designing a modernist house for herself for which she also created appropriately minimalist furniture. Her work now began to convey a stronger sense of modernity and unconventional use of materials and forms. After 30 years of fame, the importance of Gray’s work was again acknowledged. Today, she is recognized as one of the first female designers and architects of her day. After Gray’s death in 1976, her work has become a key reference in modern design. Eileen Gray died in 1976.
In 1925, the pair began to explore the area around Saint-Tropez, seeking an appropriate site on which to build a summer refuge for Jean Badovici. She subsequently discovered an isolated plot - inaccessible by car, but within walking distance of both a railway station and a sandy beach - along a rocky stretch of coastline. Gray bought the site and spent three years in Roquebrune, taking prime responsibility for both design and construction, while Badovici visited frequently to assist in technical matters. The name of the villa, E-1027, is a cipher for the architects' intertwined initials: following the E, the numbers 10, 2 and 7 represent the alphabetical order of the letters J, B and G, respectively. Built between 1926 and 1929, E-1027 was a unique experiment in architecture and design. Eileen Gray combined built-in furniture with ingenious spatial planning to engage the user with the building and site, incorporating the sun and the sea into the very experience of the house.
Diagram of the sun scheme and orientation with different types of lines differentiates the paths for visitors, residents and servants.
Gray declared: "This house has been built for a person who likes work, sports and receiving friends." E-1027 looks much bigger than it is. It has two bedrooms, a maid's room, utility rooms and a large space, partitioned with screen furniture that could serve as a living room, dining area and cloakroom or guest room. The main living area overlooks Monte Carlo harbour and the bedrooms face the rising sun. Service spaces are isolated: the kitchen, adjoining an outdoor cooking space, is separate from the rest of the house. Gray felt that each room should remain independent of the others, arguing that "everyone, even in a house of restricted dimensions, must be able to remain free and independent. They must have the impression of being alone, and if desired, entirely alone." Each room has a balcony and access to the garden.
Nunc est bibendum
Horacije, Ode
In the most intricately detailed portions of the house—the bathroom, stairway, and the passage linking the dining alcove and bedroom—Gray filled every cubic meter with concealed storage compartments, each designed to accommodate a specific item. The villa provided what she called the “minimum of space, maximum of comfort.”
Le Corbusier wrote: ‘I am so happy to tell you how much those few days spent in your house have made me appreciate the rare spirit which animates all the organisation inside and outside.

Over the decades, Le Corbusier made a number of visits to Eileen Gray’s Roquebrune villa. In 1958, he wrote, ‘I was so pleased to hear that you had bought the Villa E-1027, the most beautiful house I have ever seen. Eileen Gray, my friend, is the only one who has understood the meaning of this design. She is the only one who can build such a house.’

Eileen Gray was obsessed and haunted by E-1027, the seaside villa she built at Roquebrune Cap Martin in 1929. Over the decades, he sought to possess her ‘maison en bord de mer’ in a multitude of ways. It may have been the last house he visited before his death, as he was on the roof of E-1027 when he had a heart attack and fell to his death. After he died, the footpath serving the area was designated Promenade Le Corbusier. In time, as Gray’s reputation faded, some would even credit him with the design of her villa.

E-1027
It was not until 1968 that the name Eileen Gray returned to the public domain when the critic Joseph Rykwert published an appreciation of her career in Domus magazine. Her work then featured in a few small exhibitions and was the unexpected hit of a 1972 auction of the contents of Jean Doucet's apartment. Aram, a London-based furniture company, put some of Gray's archive designs – notably the Bibendum Chair and E-1027 table – back into production. The owner of the company Zeev Aram remembered how exacting she was in analysing every element of the reproductions.