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Reasons to Research in the Mediterranean Area

Editorial #14

Research and Reasoning in the Mediterranean Area

Marinella Ferrara

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HISTORICAL PANORAMA

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E-1027: Shifting Paradigms and Aesthetic Outcomes in a House by the Mediterranean Sea

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Keywords

Design Aesthetics, Eileen Gray, Mediterranean Design Heritage, Body/Mind Comfort, Cap Moderne

Abstract

This paper, far from structuring a historical discourse, aims to analyze how the heterogeneity of the pieces by designer Eileen Gray, furnishing the *E-1027* villa, perfectly fused with the spaces, generating interesting aesthetic outcomes. The *E-1027* was Gray's first architectural accomplishment, designed in a sort of life-long companionship with critic and journalist Jean Badovici, on the site of Roquebrune - Cap St. Martin, now *Cap Moderne*, in that strip of Mediterranean coast renowned as *Côte d'Azur*. The uniqueness of Gray's style mirrored the shifting paradigms of the late Twenties, between Paris and this Mediterranean bay of the French Riviera, also hosting other relevant heritages, such as Le Corbusier's *Cabanon*, his *Camping Units* and the beach kiosk *l'Étoile de mer*. According to Nelson Goodman's theories, as expressed in *Ways of Worldmaking*, expanding the qualities of the communicative functioning and symbolizing also to what is not-just-art, we will also briefly explore, along a pragmatist perspective, how design pieces can produce an aesthetic experience. Eileen Gray's approach to design, framed by the lights and the vibrant lifestyle of *Cap Moderne*, will add a historical aura to our questioning, showing how aesthetic judgments and social changes may widely impact on design insights and innovations.

1. Introduction

The *E-1027* villa by designer Eileen Gray, also known simply as *Maison en bord de mer*, built on that strip of Mediterranean coastline worldwide renowned as *côte d'Azur*, on the shores of Cap Martin-Roquebrune bay, now renamed *Cap Moderne*, was somehow intended to make history, and not just because on the same site as Le Corbusier's *Cabanon*, *Camping Units* and the beach kiosk *l'Étoile de mer*. The motivation driving us towards reconsidering such a paragraph of design, in the frame of Mediterranean cultural identity and heritage, is related to the desire of highlighting the footprint left by *Modernism* and its resonances in such a once wild and remote bay in the South of France, that turned to host the core of a true revolutionary attitude also in terms of women emancipation, design syntax, and new inspiring paradigms, reflected both on the architecture as well as on the furnishings of Gray's house. This paper, based on the few bibliographic references available, will be then an attempt to move along an analysis, according to a pragmatist thinking, of how the heterogeneity of materials and shapes of some of the once mainly one-off and site-specific design objects, as well as those of the non-custom ones, generated interesting aesthetic outcomes, including in their phenomenology several aspects of a time shifting perspective, while melting with the architectural volumes of the whole house. Completely forgotten, even squatted, and almost vanished into the wild nature, the *E-1027* villa went finally under major works of restorations and was brought back to its original splendor, reopening to public in May 2015, following to a plan started in year 2000 and supervised by Pierre-Antoine Gatier. Often defined as a *living*

organism (Mygairou, 2013), entirely conceived and inspired by the human body, the *E-1027* hosts today the redesigned versions of former furnishings, mirroring the original designs, some of which were, as said, created by Eileen Gray just on purpose for the place, in line with the tradition honored by other design and architecture masters. Though her fame was indeed tarnished and blurred for several years, and finally unveiled by historian Joseph Rykwert through the pages of Italian magazine *Domus*, only in 1968, Irish designer, naturalized French, Eileen Gray, had been part of that vibrant vague known as *colonie anglaise de Montparnasse* (Laurent, 2013), literally getting all the vibes of that Parisian atmosphere nourished by the artistic avant-gardes, the Deco scene, the new fashion and jewelry experimentations, as well as the finest taste of a unique generation of *Décorateurs*. Besides such a strong French influence, it seems relevant to highlight also the impact that Victorian and post Victorian movements had released on her younger years of education at the *Slade School of Fine Arts* in London, capturing the resonances of Morris's *Arts and Crafts*, together with the literary redundancies of Wilde's aestheticism. Such a background could not help but blooming later on under the lights and the suggestions of the French Riviera, melting with the echoes of ancestral myth and historical recalls, already present in Gray's iconic poetry since her early years of activity, as disclosed also through the names of some of her pieces (i.e. *Syrenes; Destin; Macédoine; La Toilette de Salomé*), then revamped through modern insights and desires.



Figure 1. *E-1027* by Eileen Gray. Courtesy: *Cap Moderne*, France.



Figure 2. *Bibendum* armchair by Eileen Gray, 1930 ca. Courtesy: *Centre Georges Pompidou*, Paris, France.

2. From Paris to Roquebrune: Resonances of the *Roaring Twenties*

As previously mentioned, all Gray's designs, both in terms of architectural spaces as well as design pieces, were human body inspired, but definitely detached from the classic modules and schemes, as first elaborated in ancient Greece or revisited across the centuries by that truly Mediterranean Vitruvian approach, or as even further elaborated by her contemporary colleague Le Corbusier. Her interest for designing accordingly to the human body was rather pervaded by an embracing sensuality, revealing a sort of *Desynchronized Measure* (Mygairou, 2013), fusing body and mind in a kind of hypnotic spiral, tending towards a full involvement. Basically, a sort of today's *Full Experience* approach, though delivered at that time in terms of synesthetic total artwork, such as a *Gesamkunstwerk* or *oeuvre d'art total*, engaging the body throughout the entire palette of senses. As Nelson Goodman claims in *Ways of Worldmaking*, works of art indeed are not the only things that can symbolize, insofar also architectural spaces, as well as *architectural objects*, as Umberto Eco used to semantically define design objects, can also take on a symbolic role and produce an aesthetic experience. Based on a pragmatist thinking, the process of how objects of common use can also function communicatively, can be analyzed developing a critical line of questioning up to disclose the intimate relationship that prevails between the user's body and an object, as well as the body's impulses and suggestions leading further to the conception of a specific object itself (Russo, 2016). Trying to zoom on what was the Parisian lifestyle in the early-middle Twenties, it is possible to seize at least some

of the insights and main trends that might have contributed to shape and define Gray's objectives, mindset and languages. It is not by chance that the second decade of XX century is often sided by the adjective "roaring", perfectly describing those winds of changes and some women emancipation attitudes, that so effectively and directly impacted also on fashion and design, as already started few years earlier. Women bodies were now finally freed from suffocating corsets and unwieldy dresses and, consequently, gestures and postures also started to follow such a process of liberation from old fashion styles and etiquettes. Such a new body/mind comfort status immediately reflected, especially for women, to new designs in terms of everyday life, including new furniture, new materials, news shapes, likely to outline the landscape of the new rising society in which dynamic and social roles were finally acknowledged also to female figures. Eileen Gray was able to translate all these new lifestyles and settings into her designs, creating not just new design pieces, quite in line with the main trends of *Modern Movement*, but also adapting Le Corbusier's philosophy of the house seen as a *machine à habiter* in terms of modern women's needs, aesthetics and comfort. It seems of relevance to mention that, apparently, Eileen Gray never entirely embraced the new architectural waves spreading all around Europe, she rather quoted some *De Stijl* or *Modernist* hints into her works, though sticking to a personal style, structured along several anthropological and ethnographic suggestions, such as the *Orientalism* of her lacquer furniture or the minimalism and archetypal designs of her rugs, coming out from a cult African art inspired movement, so popular among Parisian top bohemian chic upper classes, as promot-

ed, for instance, by heiress, socialite and collector Nancy Cunard in her *Negro Anthology* (Buot, 2008). While attempting an analysis of some of *E-1027's* pieces of furniture, we find all these echoes among some of the chairs, the stools, the coffee tables, the self-standing cabinets or the rugs furnishing this Mediterranean villa. *Modernist* chrome metal tubes stand together with different textiles, as well as wooden frames, supporting synthetic leather seating, just as several modular volumes find new ways of arranging their spaces in a functional *Coiffeuse* or *coiffeuse-paravent*, specifically conceived for a modern woman's needs. As also in those almost futuristic folding dining tables or adjustable coffee/tea tables, due to be turned into popular and renowned gallery pieces. As previously said, the majority of the design pieces, now furnishing the restored *E-1027* villa, were entirely redesigned, and their rights have been detained by British design company *Aram* since 1970. This explains why some of them are currently in production and therefore part of the company's catalogue.

3. Changing paradigms: lifestyle and design at *Cap Moderne*

One of the design objects, that mainly intrigues the visitors of the villa, is no doubt the well-known armchair *Bibendum*, a truly iconic piece, able to provide not just a synthesis of Gray's approach, but also to deliver a clear and loud message about the changing paradigms of the Modern times. This is actually one of the design pieces furnishing *E-1027*, that were not realized specifically for the site, but that incredibly fused with the fluidity of the interiors at a point that it seemed custom made for the place itself. Indeed, the *Bibendum* chair, supported by a polished chromium plated

tubular steel base, also characterized by a two overlapped rolls back, that owes its name to the popular *Michelen* man made of tires, as designed by O' Galop and that, according to a main stream of critics, it was to inspire even the renowned blow inflatable *MoMa* armchair created in 1967 by Lomazzi, D'Urbino, De Pas, was first conceived in 1926 to be part of the furnishing of some Parisian upper class apartments, and it was also included, though only in 1930-31, in the one belonging to Madame Mathieu Lévy, one of Gray's best friends and collectors, situated in Boulevard Suchet. The design of this armchair deserves to be further analyzed as iconically showing the impact of social changes on style and therefore on aesthetic paradigms. As previously mentioned, fashion revolution, as well as those rushes openly proclaiming women emancipation as core issues of the new modern era, inevitably and hopefully impacted also on product design. Women were finally moving freely into their practical *prêt-à-porter* clothes, that Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiapparelli or Madeleine Vionnet, were active advocates of, previously supported also by the sophisticated charm, but equally comfortably-shaped pleated dresses by Mariano Fortuny (Russo, 2017). All this generated a consequent expanded range of movements and postures that reshaped also chair and seats design in general, according to an indisputable equation that the way we dress inevitably influence the way we move and then the way we sit. A woman was finally allowed to cross her legs in public, to lay on a seat back, to use her full body to communicate her presence and to fully bloom in her personality. Of course, these new habits first impacted on socialite and main lifestyle icons, but were to spread around pretty soon mainly throughout the Western

or Westernized world. All these new Parisian born revolutionary habits were soon exported in Southern France whenever social life exploded throughout the year in Côte d'Azur, getting even revamped by the lights of Mediterranean Riviera. The *E-1027* house was indeed essentially conceived for an independent and emancipated woman, ready to open the door of her nest to people, sharing her visions and spare time in a cozy, though dynamic, balance of volumes and materials, enriched by the lights and shadows reflecting on the white of the façade and the proximity to the sea. According to *Aram*, still detaining, as said, the rights of the *Bibendum* chair, besides the shared memories of the designer herself, this piece was indeed a sort of feminist response to all the strictness of Le Corbusier's *Grand Comfort* armchair. But while this latter was officially released only in 1929, as still squared and anchored to rigid modules, *Bibendum* was instead centered on circular and therefore embracing, mellow shapes, allowing and inviting to a more informal and nevertheless audaciously sensual posture. We can also observe how these unconventional rushes found their way of expression through design also in another seat, and precisely in one of the pieces specifically designed for the site itself, and now also included into the *Aram* collection. The design piece we refer to is the one called *Non-Conformist*, a polished chromium plated tubular steel framed chair, partially leather upholstered, whose first prototype seemed to appear between 1925 and 1926. The name itself, of course, was not issued by chance. It was indeed a sort of provocative statement of the new role gradually allowed to women in society. The accurate description provided by the producer, quoting the designer's will, specifies that one arm-

rest is missing just for the purpose of granting an expanded range of movement and let the body more freedom in movement, allowing forward folds or unrestricted rotations to the opposite side.

3.1. *S.D.*: an easy move-around revolutionary coffee table

The same self-affirmation and manifesto of independence and emancipation is also traceable in the side/coffee table designed for the *E-1027* dining space. In all the versions of both the adjustable and the fix ones, this latter named *S.D. Table*, there is a sort of handle, symbiotically melting with the whole metallic tubular structure, allowing the user to easily move it around even just with one hand. Also the one named after the house itself, the *E-1027 Table*, adjustable at different heights and eventually turning also into a useful bedside table, was designed according to the same principle of being eventually easily moved around, in line with the needs of the user. After all, the idea itself linked to the “mobile” nature of these design pieces reflects the etymology still present in the Italian as well as in the French words *mobile* and *meuble*, from late Latin *res mobile*, in a time when, due to Barbarian incursions, only a chimney was the only fixed piece furnishing even old villas or castles. However, several centuries later, this same idea was to be reedited by French Napoleonic camp furniture, until capturing indeed the easy-to-move style of a woman and designer who was indeed a pioneer of the field in Modern times. According to Eileen Gray’s lifestyle, a working and busy woman did not need anybody’s help to displace no matter what piece of furniture around the house, especially if the interiors were specifically designed as a sort of forerun-

ner contemporary open space to live, work and spend spare time in. So, both the *S.D. Table* (now produced under the name of *Occasional Table* and also available with two rounded cornered square disks, instead of just with the two classic circular ones), as well as the *E-1027* adjustable table, were conceived to easily slide their base under the bedside or an armchair to enjoy breakfast or just keep working or sketching in a comfortable and informal position. And if the bases of the *E-1027* table, now internationally acclaimed and ranked among the most popular *Modernist Design* iconic pieces, are in glass or more often in transparent cellulose acetate, at least in the first versions, the table-tops of the *S.D./Occasional Table* were in MDF high gloss lacquer finish, recalling the very first production of one-off Art Deco inspired pieces for Parisian apartments, or for the *Jean Desert Gallery* collections, realized by Eileen Gray, after being accurately trained by Japanese master Seizo Sugawara, a former Tokyo Fine Arts, who had relocated in Paris at the beginning of XX century. These heterogeneous inspirations and such a rich background, also nourished by subliminal social activism and a pioneer spirit, found the right place to flourish and reach its climax in a corner of the beautiful French Mediterranean coast, a small bay that, also due to the several vicissitudes linked to Le Corbusier's biography, was to be known as a precious treasure of Modern Architecture and Design. (Le Corbusier died just in that bay, while swimming alone in open sea).



Figure 3. Non-conformist chair by Eileen Gray, E-1027 villa. Courtesy: Cap Moderne, France.

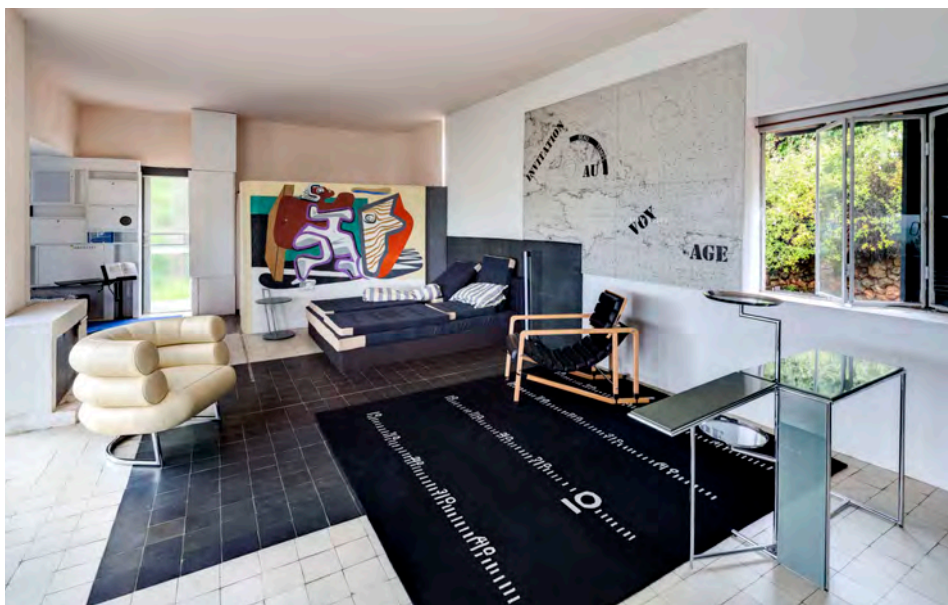


Figure 4. E-1027 interiors. S.D. table under Le Corbusier's painting. Courtesy: Cap Moderne, France.

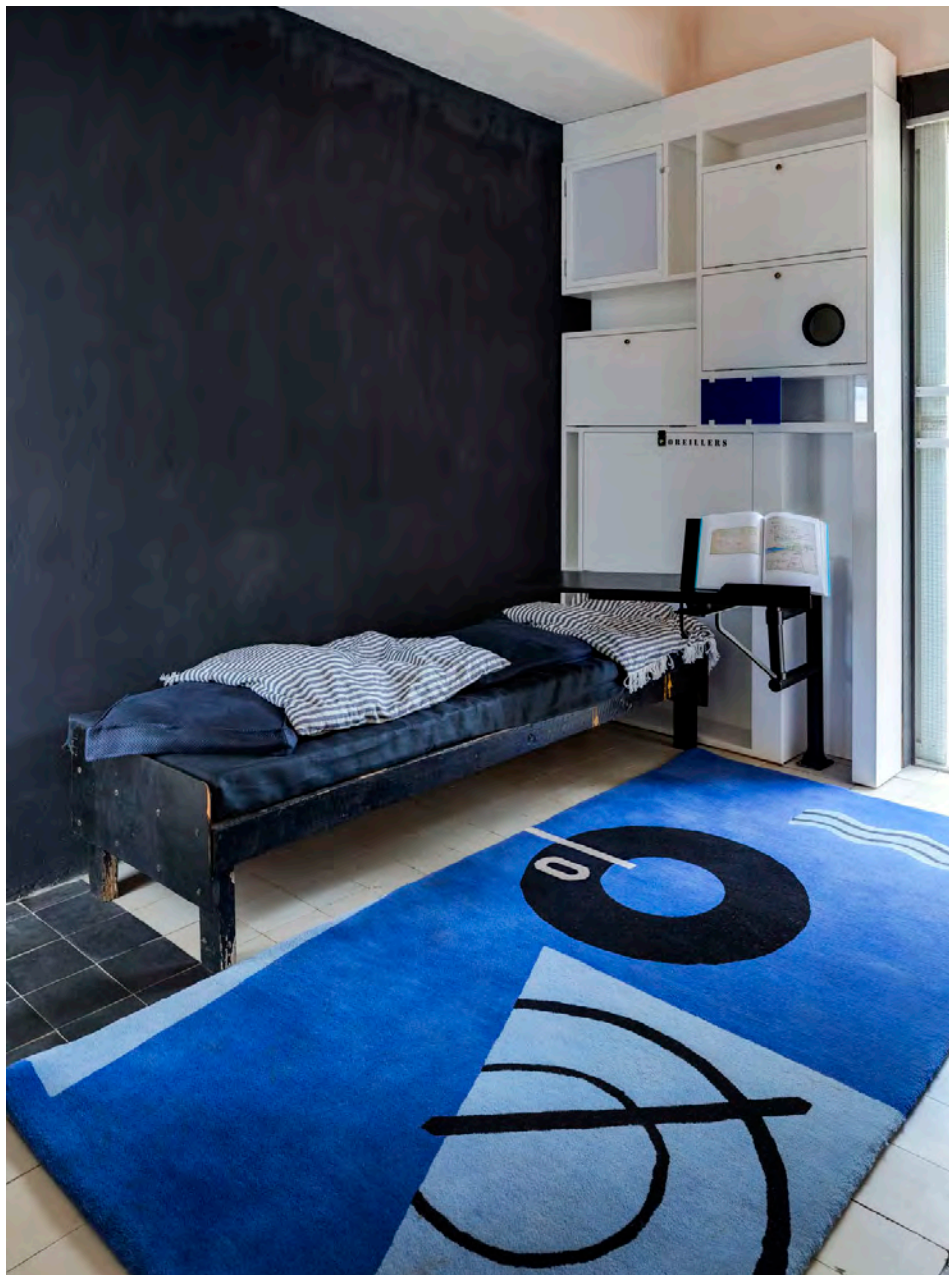
3.2. The rugs chapter: from the *Ateliers de Tissage* to Artistic Avant-gardes

Mediterranean vibes discretely embrace and enhance all the spaces and volumes of the house also thanks to the nautical inspiration of some finishing and the big map hanging on the wall of the dining/living space: *Beau temps – Invitation au voyage* it says, while introducing the visitors to lean on the terrace or to enjoy the solarium in the garden down-stairs. Also the rug, displayed on the black and white ceramic squared tiles of the first floor, recalls some marine suggestions, as disclosed also through the name: *Blue Marine Rug*, still part of the *Aram* catalogue, as well as several others. And as some of the other rugs designed by Eileen Gray, between the early Twenties and the Thirties, this one was not created on purpose for the *E-1027* house, as other versions had already been part of some Parisian interior furnishing projects supervised by the designer. Although not site specific designed, it characterizes at its best the navy inspired mood, enriching the *Modernist* style with that heritage of the *Ateliers de tissage*, that Eileen Gray used to run with Evelyne Wyld in Paris, even few years before the London *Omega Workshops* by the *Bloomsbury Group* (Filippini, 2013), crossing the rug design with some Cubist insight of the vibrant atmosphere of the artistic Avant-Gardes with the traditional geometrical style of the Berber ethnical crafts. A fusion of different and again heterogeneous suggestions, so wisely styled and assembled, as well as supported by the use of natural fibers, like cotton or wool – especially mutton wool, widely renown to better release the natural pigments and creating a gradient of shades.

4. Conclusion

The Eileen Gray chapter at *Cap Moderne* stands out as a true synthesis and not just of her whole life, as it could be also considered a sort of manifesto of women rights, translated in a new design syntax. In her attempt to balance applied arts with *Modernism*, artistic avant-gardes and ethnographical inspirations, she indeed succeeded in leaving the footprints of a time shifting figure, able to discretely define new lifestyles and attitudes that would indisputably and discretely impact on future women design generations. The communicational resonances encompassing her works disclose all the power of symbolizing finally recognized even to objects of common use, in the frame of that *jouissance esthétique* (A. Beyaert-Geslin, 2013), usually associated to the appreciation of design pieces. According to the vision she shared with Jean Badovici, interiors had to mirror the new arising society, while creating, at the same time, a warm and cozy nest for private life. All had to be shaped around the needs of human body, a new dynamic and modern body always on the run and in line with the requirements of the new speed of modern life, no matter if in a big city or on the shores of a breathtaking Mediterranean bay. After all, through the interiors and the design pieces furnishing the *E- 1027* house, she was able to create that right balance between *Modernist* functionality and *Mediterraneaness*, in terms of conviviality, open spaces and lifestyle. A perfect match of passion, sensuality and rational design thinking that is still encrypted in the name of this house by the sea itself: *E* as Eileen; 10 as for *J*, tenth letter of the English alphabet and first letter of Jean; 2 as B of Badovici, second letter of the English alphabet and 7 for G, first let-

ter of her family name: Gray. Though *E-1027* villa was not the true alcove she dreamt of, and for several reasons she rather preferred to retire in the other house she designed in Menton's neighborhood, called *Tempe à pailla*, (or *Tempe à païa*: literally *Yawn time* in local dialect) it remains as a sort of unique example of signature of the times.



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Figure 6. *Cap Moderne* site, view from the bay. Courtesy: *Cap Moderne*, France.

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