Eileen Gray: Operating in Dialogue

Modern movement architect Eileen Gray was forgotten in her time, but now her influence resonates throughout the field. Here, a rarely seen conversation between Gray and architect Jean Badovici about their E.1027 house reveals Gray’s architecture of “mind and heart”.

INTRODUCTION Caroline Constant
DIALOGUE Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici
PHOTOS Eileen Gray, courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland
Gray (1878-1976), an Anglo-Irish architect whose practice was centred largely in southern France, realised fewer than 10 buildings during her long career. Yet her ability to combine architecture, gardens, furnishings, fabrics and fittings, all directed toward the reintegration of architecture and daily life, led Gray to create settings with an evocative quality that is rarely found in the work of her avant-garde contemporaries. Celebrated in major exhibitions at the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt (1996) and more recently at the Design Museum in London (2005) and Centre Pompidou in Paris (2013), Eileen Gray’s creative output has a subtle and elusive appeal that is attracting a growing body of admirers.

The recent resurgence of interest in Gray’s work stems largely from the vast amount of archival material that the National Museum of Ireland acquired between 2000 and 2008, and which its curator Jennifer Goff analysed in her book Eileen Gray: Her Work and her World. This material has in turn inspired two new films: Gray Matters, a documentary directed by Marco Orsini and The Price of Desire, a feature film directed by Mary McGuckian. Although both films begin with an account of the 2009 Christie’s auction in which Gray’s Dragon Chair fetched a record price of £19.4m, they point to the broader significance of Gray’s work in the decorative arts and architecture.

Central to the two films is E.1027, a house on the Mediterranean coast outside Cap Martin, France, which Gray designed for (and with input from) her companion, Romanian architect Jean Badovici, between 1926 and 1929. The design reflects Gray’s awareness of the work of contemporaries such as Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier and Gerrit Rietveld, among others, and her interest in engaging their architectural concepts in dialogue. By challenging yet working within such modern movement precepts, Gray sought to overcome the cold, inhuman qualities associated with abstract forms by engaging the subjective qualities of experience. E.1027 is itself the focus of the written dialogue From Eclecticism to Doubt, first published in 1929 in a special issue of Badovici’s avant-garde periodical L’Architecture Vivante and now republished in translation in Disegno.

E.1027 was named a Monument Historique in 2000. Owned by the Conservatoire du Littoral, it underwent a heavy-handed and historically problematic restoration in the 2000s – at the hands of Pierre-Antoine Gatier, the state-appointed Architecte en Chef des Monuments Historiques – a task undertaken more effectively through the recent efforts of Michael Likierman (founder and CEO of the French arm of Habitat) in cooperation with architect Robert Rebutato, who was raised in the bistro next door in the company of Le Corbusier. The aim is to organise, as a study centre, the series of seaside buildings in Cap Martin: E.1027; the Rebutato bistro/residence Étoile de Mer (1948) and “Unités de camping” (1957), designed by Le Corbusier and built at the instigation of Rebutato’s father Thomas; and Le Corbusier’s adjoining cabanon (1952) and workshed. The official inauguration is tentatively scheduled for late June 2015.
Gray represents the most substantive voice in the E.1027 dialogue. While Badovici introduces themes associated with avant-garde theory (such as geometry, abstraction, mechanisation, hygiene, functionalism and the avant-garde), Gray opens them up to a relational logic that contrasts the manifesto’s assertive tone. She exploited dialogue for its capacity to expand upon certain dichotomies prevalent in modern movement discourse: body and spirit; reason and intuition; order and flux; science and art; individual and collective; particular and universal. Rather than view such categories as mutually exclusive, she sought their points of convergence and overlap. The title of From Eclecticism to Doubt is itself dialogical; it reflects the uncertainty that accompanied the early 20th-century rejection of historic styles and the resulting quest for rigorous and logical bases for architectural form.

Gray occasionally wrote in prose, using that form to engage Le Corbusier’s own writings in dialogue. In her Description of E.1027 (which was published in 1929 alongside the dialogue, parts of which appear on the following pages), she qualified certain statements from his Vers une architecture (1923). To Le Corbusier’s assertion that “Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light,” Gray responded, “If lyricism can be dedicated to the play of masses brought together in daylight, the interior should respond to human needs and the exigencies of individual life, and it should ensure calm and intimacy.” She countered his assertion that “The plan is the generator” by declaring her priority for human experience of their interiors and the work of her avant-garde counterparts. Gray represents the most substantive voice in the E.1027 dialogue. While Badovici introduces themes associated with avant-garde theory (such as geometry, abstraction, mechanisation, hygiene, functionalism and the avant-garde), Gray opens them up to a relational logic that contrasts the manifesto’s assertive tone. She exploited dialogue for its capacity to expand upon certain dichotomies prevalent in modern movement discourse: body and spirit; reason and intuition; order and flux; science and art; individual and collective; particular and universal. Rather than view such categories as mutually exclusive, she sought their points of convergence and overlap. The title of From Eclecticism to Doubt is itself dialogical; it reflects the uncertainty that accompanied the early 20th-century rejection of historic styles and the resulting quest for rigorous and logical bases for architectural form.

To Gray, a house was not an object to be apprehended through intellectual detachment, but a flexible structure whose occupants would invest it with life. “External architecture seems to have absorbed avant-garde architects at the expense of the interior,” she wrote. “As if a house should be conceived for the pleasure of the eye more than for the well-being of its inhabitants.” Linking her critique of the building-as-object with her a-theoretical stance, she concluded, “Theory is insufficient for life and does not respond to all its requirements.” At a time when technique has again begun to dominate architectural discussion, this provocation is well worth revisiting.

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The Large Room

The house has been built for a man who loves work, sports and entertaining. Although it is very small, its layout should permit the occupant to welcome friends and entertain them. Only the “camping” style allows this otherwise exceptional difficulty to be resolved: one has resorted to it without thinking for an instant that it might result in a normative method, nor that it will be the style of tomorrow, but simply as a convenient response to an exceptional circumstance.

To allow for entertaining numerous guests one has made a convertible room of 14m by 8.3m. Since this room is to be used for other purposes, a low wall has been provided at its end that allows the entire ceiling to be visible from any point, while concealing a dressing area, complete with shower, linen chest, cupboard, etc. Against the full wall is a large divan of 2.2m by 2m, where one can stretch out or sit, for resting or conversing comfortably, an indispensable item that can be converted into a bed. The cushions can be placed around it like satellites to extend the divan by 4cm, providing comfortable and relaxing seating.

Opposite the dressing area, an alcove shelters a small divan at the head of which one has provided a flat storage unit containing pillows, mosquito netting, tea kettle and books. A flexible table with two pivots allows for reading while lying down. A white lamp bulb mounted between two panes of blue glass provides sensible light. At the head of the small divan a double door provides access to a covered terrace that is sufficiently large to hang a hammock. A metal door is housed in the thickness of the wall, as well as a shuttered door with pivoting slats to allow practical ventilation and give the sleeping figure, if he leaves the first door open, the impression of being outdoors. For warm summer nights, a pierced opening high in the fixed part of the glazed frame at the foot of the bed provides excellent cross ventilation. Above the small divan a thin cable at human height allows the mosquito netting to be extended at night.

When viewed from within the room, the entry partition consists of a series of racks that end in a deep vertical segment of the celluloid half cylinder, which encloses a column of gramophone records. This is the music corner, and the felicitous arrangement of the partition serves to amplify the sounds. The tea table is made of tubes that can be retracted and it is covered with a cork sheet to avoid the impact and noise of fragile cups. It includes discs for fruits and cakes and a narrower end on which one rests the cup that one is about to offer.
Jean Badovici: Don’t you fear that this return to fundamentals, this systematic simplification that seems to dictate modern art, will only end by grounding this art in general, and architecture in particular, in a purely theoretical pursuit that is too intellectual to satisfy the demands of both our minds and our bodies? The human being is not a pure intellect. And when one sees these large buildings with smooth lines and especially these interiors, where everything seems to derive from strict and cold calculations, one must ask whether people could be satisfied living in such a place.

Eileen Gray: You are right. This return to essential elements, this emancipation from all that was ineptential, responded to a need. It is necessary to liberate oneself from such oppression in order to experience freedom anew. But this state of intellectual coldness that we have reached, which corresponds only too well to the harsh laws of modern mechanisation, can be no more than a passing phase. We must rediscover the human being in plastic expression, the human intention that underlies material appearance and the pathos of this modern life, which has initially been expressed only in algebraic terms.

JB: To what pathos are you referring?

EG: To the pathos that is inseparable from all real life.

JB: In short, you mean to rediscover emotion.

EG: Yes, but a purified emotion that can be expressed in a thousand ways. It is not a pure intellect. And when one sees these large buildings with smooth lines and especially these interiors, where everything seems to derive from strict and cold calculations, one must ask whether people could be satisfied living in such a place.

JB: Do you think that inspiration will ever suffice for such a task?

EG: It is life itself, the meaning of life, that provides inspiration, but inspiration and faith can no longer provide knowledge as complex as that required today—knowledge of the conditions of existence, of human needs and aspirations, passions and needs, as well as technical knowledge and material means.

JB: You demand that the architect have a universal mind?

EG: Almost! But the essential thing is that he understand the meaning of each thing; that he know how to remain straightforward and sensible, without neglecting any means of expression. The most diverse materials will be useful to him in turn, and he will be able to express what he wants of the life around him through the judicious use of new materials as much as through the structural framework of the building.

JB: Do you advocate a return to feelings, to emotionalism?

EG: Yes, but once again to an emotion that is purified by knowledge and enriched by ideas and does not exclude the knowledge and appreciation of scientific achievements. It is only necessary to demand of artists that they be of their time.

JB: You intend that they be of their own era and express it.

EG: Yes, without any artificial of any kind. The work of beauty is more genuine than the artist.

JB: But how can one express an era and, above all, one like ours that is so full of contradictions, where the past survives in so many respects and where, on the other hand, one sees such extreme points of view?

EG: Every work of art is symbolic. It conveys, it suggests the essential more than representing it. It is up to artists to find, in this multitude of contradictory factors, those that constitute the intellectual and emotive framework of man as both an individual and a social being.

JB: Against all excesses, but without neglecting modern consciousness while guarding ideal that is able to satisfy the most general aspirations, passions and needs, as well as technical knowledge and material means.

EG: It is life itself, the meaning of life, that provides inspiration, but inspiration and faith can no longer provide knowledge as complex as that required today—knowledge of the conditions of existence, of human needs and aspirations, passions and needs, as well as technical knowledge and material means.

JB: But could so systematic a unity be achieved without losing the individuality of the architect?

EG: Indeed, strictly speaking, there is no essential more than the specific. And life is simultaneously mind and heart. Formulas are nothing; life is everything. Everything has been simplified to death. Simplicity does not follow from simplification, particularly such crude simplification. Everything has been simplified to death. Simplicity does not follow from simplification, particularly such crude simplification.

JB: Aren’t you afraid that the material life will thus overwhelm the spiritual?

EG: The public has already reacted against such a misinterpretation and brought swift justice to it. The introduction of camping furniture, deck chairs and folding furniture into a room intended for rest or work is just such an excess. No more intimacy, no more atmosphere! Everything has been simplified to death. Simplicity does not follow from simplification, particularly such crude simplification. Everything has been simplified to death. Simplicity does not follow from simplification, particularly such crude simplification.

JB: In short, you want to react against fashionable formulas by returning to the past.

EG: No, on the contrary, I want to develop these formulas and push them to the point where they reestablish contact with life, to enrich them and incorporate reality within their abstraction. Art is not just the expression of abstract relationships; it must also be...
“Formulas are nothing; life is everything. And life is simultaneously mind and heart.”

> encapsulate the most tangible relations, the most intimate needs of subjective life. In addition to inspiration, genuine scientific experimentation is needed to sustain it.

JB You want architecture to be a symphony in which all inner forms of life are expressed.

EG Exactly. In its dream and reality will find equal support.

JB Decoration could be a powerful aid in this.

EG Architecture must be its own decoration. The play of lines and colours should respond so precisely to the needs of the interior atmosphere that all detached paintings or pictures would seem not only useless, but detrimental to the overall harmony.

JB Isn’t that what so-called avant-garde architecture sought to accomplish?

EG In a sense, yes, but in one sense only. For the avant-garde, architectural creation must be self-sufficient, with no consideration for the atmosphere that the inner life calls for. It is a creation of proportions that are sometimes intelligent, but detached from its main object, which is the living human being. It relies on the occasional, the accidental, when only universal sentiments should be conveyed and fulfilled and only the human being should be considered, but the human being of a particular era, with the tastes, feelings and gestures of this era.

JB Yes, but all the same it was the avant-garde who first stressed the need to respect proportions in order to create well-balanced objects.

EG The avant-garde has only reminded us of a very old and often forgotten principle, while overlooking the fact that proportions and balance were only present in art because they existed first of all in life, as vital principles. It is over-intellectualised: an art of thought and calculation, but lacking in heart.

JB It is true that many works are a bit cold, but isn’t that because we are influenced by the recent past? And aren’t the principles of hygiene partly responsible for this coldness that disturbs us?

EG Yes! Hygiene to bore you to death! Hygiene that is badly understood, because hygiene excludes neither comfort nor activity. No, the avant-garde is intoxicated by mechanisation. But there is more than mechanisation; the world is full of vivid allusions, vivid symmetries that are difficult to discover, but nevertheless real. Their excessive intellectualism suppresses that which is marvellous in life, just as their misunderstood concern for hygiene makes hygiene intolerable. Their desire for strict precision has made them neglect the beauty inherent to all forms: disks, cylinders, undulating lines and zigzags, ellipsoidal lines that are like straight lines in motion. Their architecture has no soul.

JB It is clear that they build houses just like engineers build their machines. But is that necessary?

EG In terms of technique, yes. But technique is not everything; it is only the means. One must build for the human being, that he might rediscover in the architectural construction the joys of self-fulfilment in a whole that extends and completes him. Even the furnishings should lose their individuality by blending in with the architectural ensemble.

JB Today’s architects scarcely speak of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation. Can you explain the meaning of anything but standardisation and rationalisation.

EG It’s always the same thing. Technique becomes the primary concern. By focusing on the means one forgets the ends. If we aren’t careful, standardisation and rationalisation, both excellent means for reducing costs, will only lead to providing buildings that are...
> even more deprived of soul and individuality than those we have seen thus far. One seeks a type of architecture more than a genuine style. But for a certain type of architecture to have true value, it must correspond to a generally accepted conception, to a collective taste, to an ideal. How can we achieve such a result if we build without the least concern for the inhabitants' well-being and personal comfort and if we don't take into account their human need to discover in the places where they live certain characteristics that express their individual personalities and their own tastes? How can architects who focus only on minimising costs both satisfy public taste and please the elite? Besides, it seems inevitable that this kind of typological research can only lead to extreme simplification and ultimately to concepts that are as poor as they are limited.

**JB**
The search for a building type evidently coincides with economic circumstances against which one can do nothing.

**EG** No doubt!

**JB** But is it necessary to present something as ideal that results only from such an unfortunate necessity?

**EG** I think that most people are mistaken in the meaning that they have agreed to give this word “type.” For them “type” is synonymous with a creation that is simplified in the extreme and destined to be reproduced in series. But I understand otherwise. To me a maison type is only a house whose construction has been realised according to the best and the least costly technical means and whose architecture achieves the maximum perfection for a given situation; that is to say, it is a model, not to be reproduced ad infinitum, but that will inspire the construction of other houses in the same spirit.

**JB** Certainly it is along these lines that research into the architectural “type” of our era should be understood. Far from being dangerous, research of this sort would become not only an economic necessity, but a logical and moral one as well. Besides its great advantage of opening up enormous possibilities for future pursuits, it encompasses a sort of fundamental unity, which, through its diversity of details and multiplicity of applications, will increase the value of future developments. The type should not respond solely to commercial concerns. It must express the psychological reality of an era.