Finding aid for the Eileen Gray architectural drawings, 1930-1947

Finding aid prepared by Ann Harrison
Descriptive Summary
Title: Eileen Gray architectural drawings
Date (inclusive): 1930-1947
Number: 2002.M.25
Creator/Collector: Gray, Eileen, 1878-1976
Physical Description: 8.0 linear feet
Repository:
The Getty Research Institute
Special Collections
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 1100
Los Angeles, California, 90049-1688
(310) 440-7390

Abstract: Sixteen architectural drawings once owned by architect and designer Eileen Gray comprise the archive. Original drawings and reprographic prints for three of Gray's own architectural projects form the bulk of the archive, with the rest being prints of drawings for two projects by Gray's colleagues, Le Corbusier and Jean Badovici. Although few in number, the drawings in this collection document key aspects of Gray's architectural work, including her interest in minimal housing and in the role of architecture in public welfare, as well as her interactions with colleagues.

Request Materials: Request access to the physical materials described in this inventory through the catalog record for this collection. Click here for the access policy.

Language: Collection material is in French.

Biographical/Historical Note
Eileen Gray came to architecture late. She designed her first structures in her mid-forties, after achieving significant success as a furniture and interior designer in Paris. With only nine realized projects, most of them renovations, Gray's small architectural output belies her importance in the development of modernist architecture in France. Perhaps architectural historian and critic Joseph Rykwert put it best when he described Eileen Gray's contribution as "condensed."

Born in Ireland in 1878 into an aristocratic Scots-Irish family, Gray moved to Paris in 1902 to study art, having already taken classes in drawing and painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. She briefly attended two art schools in Paris, but soon grew tired of the formal structure of classes and the limitations of drawing. Instead Gray entered a period of travel using Paris as her base and began exploring other artistic media on her own. In 1907 she settled permanently in Paris and began her artistic career in earnest.

Eileen Gray first designed furnishings. She was famous for her lacquerwork furniture and her rugs, produced in workshops set up in collaboration with Seizo Sugawara and Evelyn Wyld respectively. These pieces were marked by meticulous mastery of traditional craft techniques, which were then used to produce forms and designs drawn from the modern aesthetic. In 1913 she began to acquire significant clients after the success of her entry in the Salon de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs. In 1919 Gray's career was further advanced when she received an important commission from Madame Mathieu Levy to design an entire interior, not just individual furnishings, for Levy's apartment on the rue de Lota. The early 1920s was a period of transition for Gray. Her furniture designs became increasingly modern, incorporating industrial materials like steel tubing. Her interior designs appeared increasingly architectonic, shifting from elaborating and decorating spaces to creating and defining new space within an interior. She was also making connections with artists with whom she shared an aesthetic. Gray's inclusion in an exhibition sent to Amsterdam in 1922 and her Bedroom-Boudoir de Monte Carlo entry in the 1923 Salon des Artistes Décorateurs brought her work to the attention of the de Stijl architects Jan Wils and J.P.P. Oud, and led to an entire issue of the Dutch avant-garde journal Wendigen being devoted to her work in 1924. She counted among her professional friends and acquaintances Le Corbusier and Robert Mallet-Stevens, as well as Walter Gropius and Frederick Kiesler. It was during this period that Gray crossed over from interior designer to architect in the way she altered and shaped space. The transition was a gradual blurring of the boundary between the disciplines, and architectural historians disagree as to Gray's first work of actual "architecture," variously citing the 1922 design of the interior and facade of her Paris store Jean Désert, the 1923 hypothetical reworking of Adolf Loos's Villa Moissi or even the 1926 initiation of work on E.1027.

Precisely when Gray became an architect may be hard to pinpoint, but the reason for this transition is clear - Jean Badovici. When asked late in her life about her shift to architecture Gray said that the impetus was Badovici's question, "Why don't you build?" She had already been moving in that direction, but for a woman with no architectural training it must have seemed an unrealistic fantasy until Badovici provided the catalyst. Gray and Badovici first met in 1921, at a time when...
Badovici, an architect by training, was trying to establish himself as a writer and critic. In 1923 he would take on the editorship of L'Architecture vivante, one of the key modernist architectural journals of the era. Gray and Badovici soon began a personal and professional partnership, which though short-lived, brought Gray into the nexus of the French modernism.

In much the same way she had painstakingly learned the art of Asian lacquer, Gray taught herself to be an architect. She traveled with Badovici to see and study key buildings and learned by reworking architectural designs. She studied theoretical and technical books, took drafting lessons, and arranged to have Adrienne Gorska take her along to building sites. Most importantly, she had the support of Badovici and the advantage of the interactions with the circle of modern architects associated with his journal, especially Le Corbusier. The years from 1922/1923 to 1926 served as Eileen Gray's architectural apprenticeship. While still carrying on her interior design career, Gray created a series of hypothetical projects of her own and realized several substantial renovations in collaboration with Badovici. Gray's first major realized work for which she was principal architect and designer was E.1027 (1926-1929), a house on the Côte d'Azur, built both with and for Jean Badovici. The house was designed as a vacation home for Badovici and he collaborated on parts of the design, especially technical aspects, such as the window mechanisms, which he patented. However, the overall conception of the house and its construction are the work of Gray, who designed E.1027 as a response to the spatial principles and forms of Le Corbusier. Gray put into E.1027 everything she had learned reading and watching Le Corbusier and the other architects she had met in Badovici's circle. The house incorporated most of Le Corbusier's "five points of the new architecture," such as the stair to the roof and the pilotis, but at the same time it was a critique. Gray introduced new elements into the design, reacting against what she saw as the over-intellectualized approach of the architectural avant-garde, which she found too doctrinaire and lacking in humanism.

E.1027 typifies Gray's approach to architecture. Her main focus is the relationship of the building and its occupant, with an emphasis on bodily experience, on convenience and comfort. Gray's architecture is noteworthy for using light and space in original and inventive ways. She believed strongly that a house must be in tune with and respond to its setting and environment, and to that end she spent two years at the isolated site designing the structure and personally supervising construction. At a time when the modern movement focused on the exterior of structures, she was very concerned with the interior and the life that would be led within the walls. Gray sought to eliminate the traditional space designations between rooms, yet she also did not want a totally open plan, which she found sterile. Through a complex integration of interior divisions and furnishings, Gray created a sequence of multi-functional spaces designed to expand or contract or even completely change function in response to the needs and desires of the inhabitants. Gray's designs seem similar to other modern buildings in general form and appearance - all have the smooth expanses of white walls, the strip windows, the flat roofs - yet each is a different, idiosyncratic design responding to the environment of the site and the personality of the occupants.

In the 1930s Gray's work continued to develop. After Badovici and Gray ended their relationship, Gray built another Côte d'Azur house, Tempe à Pailla (1932-1934). In this house, with only herself to please, Gray continued her experimentation with space, further blurring the distinction between interior and exterior spaces, which she had begun at E.1027, and her pursuit of ingenious combinations of comfort and functionality in the furnishings. Her other projects in this period became more socially progressive in response to the shifting political climate in France with the rise of the Popular Front and Gray's own reading of Trotsky. In 1937 Le Corbusier invited her to exhibit the designs for a workers' vacation center in his Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, having seen the idea developing while a frequent guest at E.1027. World War II marks a boundary in Gray's career. She was interned as a foreign national, her houses were looted and many of her drawings and models were destroyed by bombing. Back in Paris after the war, she faded from attention, yet she still worked away in obscurity, designing hypothetical projects, reworking furniture designs, even renovating another house for herself on the Côte d'Azur beginning in 1954. As the histories of modernism began to be written, Gray was forgotten or dismissed as derivative. E.1027 still received some attention but was frequently misattributed as being the work of Badovici alone, or even of Le Corbusier. It was only shortly before her death in 1976 that Gray's work, both her furnishings and her architecture, were rediscovered and are now deemed to be an important and original contribution to modernism.

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Acquisition Information
Acquired in 2002.

Processing History
The collection was initially housed upon receipt by Vladimira Stefura. In 2013, Ann Harrison cataloged the collection.

Related Archival Materials
Most of Eileen Gray’s drawings, models and associated material were destroyed in World War II. Significant holdings of surviving Eileen Gray architectural materials are in London in the Archive of Art and Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum and in the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawing Collection. Further material is held by the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

The Getty Research Institute holds further collections relating to Jean Badovici: the Jean Badovici papers, 1925-1950, Accession no. 880412 and the Jean Badovici letters received, 1924-1951, Accession no. 850941.

Scope and Content of Collection
Sixteen architectural drawings once owned by architect and designer Eileen Gray comprise the archive. Original drawings and reprographic prints for three of Gray’s own architectural projects form the bulk of the archive, with the rest being prints of drawings for two projects by Gray’s colleagues, Le Corbusier and Jean Badovici. Although few in number, the drawings in this collection document key aspects of Gray’s architectural work, including her interest in minimal housing and in the role of architecture in public welfare, as well as interactions with colleagues.

The three Eileen Gray projects represented in the archive come from the mature period of her architectural activity. The studio apartment for Jean Badovici, the Romanian architect, editor of L’Architecture vivante, and briefly Gray’s personal and professional partner, is the only one of these projects to have been realized and is often cited along with E.1027 and Tempe à Pailla as representing Gray’s finest work. The two other projects documented here, the Maison ellipse (Ellipse House) and the Centre culturel et social (Cultural and Social Center), were hypothetical projects exploring social issues. The Badovici apartment and the Ellipse House, although very different expressions of domestic space, both relate to Gray’s ongoing interest in minimal living environments. The Ellipse House and the Cultural and Social Center are products of Gray’s growing concern from the mid 1930s onward with public welfare and conditions for the working class.

The prints of drawings for Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the Exposition Internationale in Paris in 1937 and one of Jean Badovici’s post-World War II reconstruction projects included in the collection are also tied to Gray. A frequent visitor at E.1027, Le Corbusier admired her work. He invited Gray to exhibit designs for a Vacation and Leisure Center, her first large-scale public project, in his pavilion at the exposition. Badovici took part in various reconstruction projects after the war, including the rebuilding of Maubeuge, in which Gray also played a minor role. These drawings are for an unrealized infill project with 20 houses in three clusters in the town of Hellemmes near Lille in northern France.

The drawings in the archive are original unless otherwise indicated in the inventory. The dates given for Gray’s work are project dates, whereas the dates for the Le Corbusier and Badovici projects are taken from the drawings.

Arrangement
The collection is arranged by project.

Subjects - Topics
Architecture--France--20th century
Modern movement (Architecture)--France

Genres and Forms of Material
Architectural drawings--20th century

Contributors
Badovici, Jean
Le Corbusier, 1887-1965

Architectural drawings
**Apartment for Jean Badovici, 1930-1931**

**Scope and Content Note**

Gray renovated a small studio apartment at 7 rue Chateaubriand in Paris for Jean Badovici. The studio was an irregularly shaped space, roughly 24 x 15 feet. Fresh from attending the exhibition accompanying the 1929 CIAM conference in Frankfurt focusing on minimal housing, Gray applied the principles of planning, multi-functionalism and storage that she had developed during the creation of E.1027 to this small space and decorated it with her designs. Gray was able to provide for all the varied needs of the apartment's occupant with a certain level of luxury and comfort through several means. She used metal mesh screens and sliding metallic curtains in curved tracks, as well as furnishings and decorative elements to designate separate functional spaces. She devised innovative solutions to problems created by the small size of the space, such as concealed drop-down stairs for access to overhead storage compartments, and she made design elements serve multiple functions. Badovici moved into the apartment in March 1931 and shortly thereafter Gray exhibited designs and photographs of the space in the second annual exhibition of the Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM), of which she was a founding member.

The drawing shows two sections.

**Maison ellipse (Ellipse House), 1936**

**Scope and Content Note**

The Ellipse House ties together several threads of Gray's interests: temporary structures, experimental materials and forms, and minimal housing. Said to be inspired by an aluminum Airstream-like trailer, the Elliptical House was a small structure designed for workers on remote sites, temporary disaster housing, or even a vacation home. The advantages of the structure were its adaptability, mobility and low cost. Prefabricated from asbestos cement and fiberglass, it could be easily shipped on trucks and erected (and dismantled) quickly, on almost any site with unskilled labor since it needed only a minimal foundation. The modular units, roughly 2.5 x 3 meters in size and elliptical in section, could be combined in different ways. For example, a home might be comprised of three units and an added porch.

**Centre culturel et social (Cultural and Social Center), 1946-1947**

**Scope and Content Note**

Gray's Cultural and Social Center ties in with a post-war French initiative intended to encourage young people to remain in the provinces by providing local cultural resources. The idea of cultural decentralization, reducing the primacy of Paris especially, had first been put forward by the Popular Front in the mid 1930s, but it gained new life after the war when French youth seemed to be flocking to urban centers. Like other examples of Gray's socially progressive architecture of the 1930s and 1940s, such as the Vacation and Leisure Center, the Workers' Club, the Child Care Center, and the prefabricated Worker's Colony, this project aims to use architecture and public planning to help solve problems caused by societal and economic shifts of the period. The Center displays Gray's focus on multi-functionality on a large-scale. One structure holds conference rooms, galleries, a library, and a restaurant, as well as indoor and outdoor theaters.
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<th>Flatfile</th>
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| 1** | Le Corbusier, Pavillon des temps nouveaux, 1936 December  
  Scope and Content Note  
  Print with plans, elevation, sections. |
| 9** | Jean Badovici, Ville de Hellemmes-Lille Nord, 1946 March  
  Scope and Content Note  
  Prints of drawings at various scales. |
| 10** | Site plan |
| 11** | Plan |
| 12** | Street elevation and section |
| 13** | Garden elevation and section |
| 12** | Cellar and roof plans; construction details |