n his 1923 treatise, *Vers une Architecture*, Le Corbusier expresses his exasperation with the current state of architectural practice. Le Corbusier asserts that architects must look to engineers for inspiration: “But our daring and masterly constructors of steamships produce palaces in comparison with which cathedrals are tiny things and they throw them onto the sea!” Le Corbusier believed that the practical design of ocean liners held the key to a new architecture celebrating the technological innovations of the industrial revolution. Where Le Corbusier saw himself as the architect behind — and probably the captain of — an ocean liner, Eileen Gray, in her 1929 dwelling E1027 (fig. 1) sought to create an intimate dwelling space: a houseboat, within which worlds could be created and individual rêveries could be fulfilled. Instead of perpetuating an architecture of fortitude, Gray presented a dwelling space whose fluidity and versatility complimented, rather than resisted, the instability of the times. Through the fluidity of the floor plan, the versatility of the interior to accommodate contemplation and solitude, and the maritime symbolism throughout the house, Gray creates a nautical world within which the inhabitant has the power and agency to create their own reality. The versatility of the design of E1027 goes hand in hand with the inherent instability of Modernity as articulated by Le Corbusier in *Vers une Architecture*, and
revisited by Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Liquid Modernity*. Most poignant, the only decoration in the main room is a nautical map bearing the name of a poem from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* which is at once an emblem of the balance between order and beauty that Gray sought to master within her architectural and design practices, and an invitation to embark on an adventure within the space to explore E1027 through different lenses. Walter Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, states: “The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency towards the well-lit and airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense.” Traditionally, dwelling is associated with setting down roots but the inconstant, fluctuating, continuously expanding and shifting economic and social conditions of the 20th century called for a different mode of dwelling. The 20th century presented a deconstruction of old models of thinking, from gender roles to social structures. In *Vers une Architecture*, Le Corbusier states:

> Society is an unstable thing and is cracking under the confusion caused by fifty years of progress which have changed the face of the world more than the last six centuries have done.

This excerpt reveals Le Corbusier’s awareness of the instability of the times. Le Corbusier recognized that in an inconstant and fluctuating present, it is not practical to build dwellings firmly attached to place and time and rooted by tradition and style. In the essay “On Being Light and Liquid” (2000), Zygmunt Bauman posits that the advent of Modernity was a process of liquefying solids, of melting the old forms of social organization of the past into a new, constantly changing, fluid Modernity:

> The present-day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act. Rigidity of order is the artefact and sediment of the human agents’ freedom.

In their respective accounts, Le Corbusier and Bauman are primarily referring to the disintegration and liquefaction of the rigid social and economic systems in place in the 19th century. Le Corbusier called on architects to abandon decorative traditions and old modes of style in favour of a new architecture that sought instead to celebrate the beauty of technology, turning to the engineers of airplanes, automobiles, and most importantly, ocean liners as examples. Rather than build an architecture of austere resistance based on the innovations of engineering, Gray created a space whose versatility and malleability complimented, rather than resisted, the instability and constant fluctuation of a liquid Modernity.

E1027 was realized between 1926 and 1929 on a small plot of land by the sea in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, a small city on the Côte d’Azur. Gray built the house for herself and her then-partner, Romanian architect Jean Badovici. Gray imagined E1027 to be a place where she could entertain guests and friends. Throughout her career, Gray never received an architectural commission. Therefore she designed mostly for herself, with the exception of a small apartment she renovated for Badovici on rue Chateaubriand in Paris in 1931. From 1926 to 1929, Eileen Gray was present at the site, overseeing the construction and meticulously designing the objects that would furnish the house. The building consisted of an upper and lower level, as well as a rooftop patio and a private exterior garden. The main level consisted of two bedrooms and a large main room joined by a small alcove containing a guest bed, facing a shower. Through the use of lacquered paravent panels, the main space of the room was easily manipulated to serve as a dining area, cloakroom, living room or study space if desired. The large main room (fig. 2) served as the central space of the dwelling: within it was a bed, furniture and plush carpets of Gray’s own design, and a nautical map upon which was printed “L’Invitation au Voyage” the title of a poem from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

Gray’s invitation to the guests to embark on a voyage is complimented by the nautical symbols present both on the exterior of the dwelling and incorporated within the design of the interior. The presence of nautical symbols is undeniable: a lifesaver is attached to the façade of the house, directly under the horizontal window, and from afar, the spiral staircase protruding upward through the roof of the house with an antennae attached gives the impression of a mast. Stefan Hecker and Christian F. Muller, in their book *Eileen Gray, Works and Projects* (1993), posit that “the maritime character of the house […] arose, inevitably from the setting, from the materials imposed by this setting, and from the nearness of the sea.” If one takes
fact that the “maritime character” of E1027 was indeed inspired by the landscape and a desire to remain unobtrusive to the landscape, then this demonstrates that E1027 was designed in accordance with one of Adolf Loos essential characteristics of a house:

A house displays propriety if its appearance is unobtrusive. Theoretically, this means that it must fit in with its surroundings and continue the traditions of the city where it is built.\(^\text{10}\)

The maritime character of E1027 extends beyond the setting of the house, and is equally evident in the structural aspects and design characteristics of the house. A defining feature of the house is the horizontal window, a key feature of Le Corbusier’s five points. In Vers une Architecture, Le Corbusier presents the reader with an image of the interior of an ocean liner’s dining room, with a caption celebrating the even lighting achieved by the horizontal window. This image is reminiscent of the image of Eileen Gray’s Transat chair positioned solitary in front of the horizontal window of E1027. Amanda Levete, architect and furniture designer from the Victoria and Albert Museum elaborates on the nautical metaphor of the house and the design of the Transat chair:

[E1027 is] like a beach liner slung across the rocks. The name [of the chair], the Transat chair is the chair that you would find on a transatlantic liner, and a deck chair is pure, reductive functionalism. The very form of the chair is suggestive of a sensualism and a relaxation…\(^\text{11}\)

As this chair was designed specifically for the house, it is evident that the reference to the deck chair is both deliberate and symbolic. The evocation of the rigid functionalism of the deck chair, while upholstered with sensuous and comfortable leather, highlights a transparent architectural design, with an intention of comfortable leisure in private solitude.

The pilotis of E1027 marks a clear deviation from the five points of architecture articulated by Le Corbusier. As one of the most influential architects of the 20th century, Le Corbusier was no doubt an influence to Gray as an architect. Le Corbusier’s five points for a new architecture, published in his 1927 work L’Architecture Vivante,\(^\text{12}\) called for the replacement of supporting walls by a pilotis, a roof garden, a horizontal window allowing for even penetration of sunlight, and most importantly the free design of the ground plan. In her book Eileen Gray, Caroline Constant states that Gray’s use of the pilotis in relation to the uneven ground of the environment is a direct critique of Le Corbusier’s architecture:

Countering Le Corbusier’s use of pilotis to isolate dwelling from ground, she developed the space within the pilotis as an outdoor living room, engaging the fieldstone walls to give it privacy.\(^\text{13}\)

In creating an outdoor living room, Gray demonstrated once again her mastery of the division of space to allow a non-confined, but nonetheless private, area. While the occupant could be outside in the fresh air and still hear the ocean, the fieldstone walls allowed for an outdoor experience without the risk of onlookers. The spiral staircase positioned at the center of the three rooms led up to a roof garden terrace where one could overlook the Mediterranean. The horizontal window allowed for the even distribution of sunlight to the main floor, as demonstrated by a “sun scheme” drawn by Gray. The horizontal window on the front façade of the building was the height of an adult, and could be opened by sliding the panes of glass to the side. The right side of the building was fitted with paravent windows, a design patented by Gray and Badovici.\(^\text{14}\) The paravent window could open upwards or downwards, move to the side like an accordion, or open upwards like a traditional window. Furthermore, the paravent windows were fitted with shutters, allowing the occupant of the guest bedroom to adjust the amount of air and light that entered the room. This innovation demonstrates both the versatility of Gray’s architecture as well as the marriage between her artistic and architectural practice. Most poignantly, the paravent window serves as testament to Gray’s skill and ability as an architect in the regulation and control of the hot Mediterranean climate within her house.

In E1027, an awareness of the changing climate and instability of Modernism is evident. However, instead of turning to the sturdy innovation and technique of the ocean liner, Gray’s architecture reflects a more personal form of liberation through the versatility of the space itself. Returning once again to the main room — the boudoir/study — the most prominent deviation from Le Corbusier’s five points can be observed in the division of space...
neutralize the sensuous connotations of the boudoir, which are implied by the large bed at the end of the room. Within E1027, the flexibility of the space therefore gives the occupant the luxury of privacy and contemplation, discriminating neither against gender nor sexuality and dissolving the rigid constructs of the past.

On the wall of the main room hung a nautical map bearing the words “L’invitation au Voyage”. In her book, *Eileen Gray* (2000), Caroline Constant states:

*Overlaid with the inscriptions “invitation au voyage,” “beaux-temps,” and “vas-y-totor” (the name she gave her automobile), the collage is an inducement to travel farther afield, both luring the imagination and underscoring the limited temporality of modern conditions of dwelling.*

The Baudelaire quote is open to interpretation, and it is imperative to consider that Gray’s inclusion of this quote in her architecture is neither a direct reference to her architectural practice, nor to her sexuality, but a nod to the implications of using a quote that may be received on many levels. The quote is symptomatic of the intention of the personal subjectivity and versatility that is facilitated by the space itself. It is not a didactic tool, but rather an invitation both to embark on a voyage and to interpret the quote and space as one
wishes. It is important to examine the language used by Baudelaire and how this quote may have appealed to Gray on multiple levels.

A desire to reconcile aesthetic decorative form with abstract Modernism is a recurrent theme throughout the oeuvre of Eileen Gray, and has manifested itself through her work since her early design days as a lacquer artist. *Le Destin* is a four-panel screen design completed by Gray in 1913. One side of the screen depicts three figures: a small figure on the left, gesturing at another disgruntled figure of similar stature. The latter figure is carrying a much larger figure that lacks any expression. The figure appears to be a large grey lump of inertia. On the converse side of the screen is an undulating spiral of abstract waves. This panel is significant both in its demonstration of Gray’s skill as a lacquer artist, but also as an early indicator of her preoccupation with the balance of order and beauty, demonstrated in the abstract, organized albeit chaotic form on one side, and the organic, human sensibility on the other. In considering this, Gray’s choice of Baudelaire poem can be further rationalized. Throughout the poem, Baudelaire repeatedly emphasizes a balance between order and beauty:

*Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté*.

This balance between order and beauty manifests itself materially in E1027 through Gray’s choice of furniture and plush, sensuous fabrics and textures, tensioned with the austere, rigid Modernist aesthetic of the exterior. The floor of the room was cushioned by thick throw rugs, and the bed located at the back of the room bore many soft, luxurious pillows. Eileen Gray’s only published work, *De L’Éclectisme au Doute* (1929), a dialogue between herself and Jean Badovici, explores the duality between reverie and action:

- You want architecture to be a symphony in which all forms of interior life are expressed?
- Exactly. Reverie and action must bear equal importance.
- Decoration could greatly aid this harmony.
- It is architecture that must be its own decoration. The game of line and colour must respond precisely to the necessity of the interior atmosphere so that each detached painting, each tableau, appears not only lacking usefulness but detrimental to the total harmony of the space.  

Taking into account Gray’s disdain for decoration and for the “detached painting” —referring to the wall paintings that decorated the traditional salon—it is therefore curious that Gray would include a nautical map printed with a poem title at the heart of her dwelling space. The significance in the decoration therefore lies in the utilitarian purpose of the nautical map. Maps are tools for discovery and it is up to the navigator to situate herself on a landscape that has been created by someone else. As the only detached form of decoration in the house, and considering the multiple readings of the quote, the map is obviously a deliberate invitation extended by Gray to her guests in which she urges them to embark upon a voyage through Modernity where the boundaries of the past may be transgressed.

In her book *Vision and Difference*, Griselda Pollock quotes Baudelaire in order to demonstrate the impossibility of the female flâneuse within a Baudelairian Modernity:

*To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world and to be the centre of the world and yet remain hidden from the world — such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.*

While the divisions of public and private spaces for women within the 19th century were problematic, E1027 provided Gray and her guests a private, secluded dwelling where they were both the creators of, and centers of, their own worlds. Where Le Corbusier saw himself as the captain of a gigantic ocean liner sailing the masses through the tumultuous waters of Modernity, Eileen Gray’s E1027 is a floating nest, a houseboat, coasting through the waves within which the inhabitant can manipulate space for the creation of individual realities and solitary contemplation. The nautical symbolism present in the exterior of the house and within the design of the interior, the fluidity of the floor plan of the house and the focus on privacy, as well as the significant inclusion of a nautical map bearing a quote by Baudelaire all contribute to the embodiment of a conscious metaphor and a deliberate invitation to embark on a voyage into Modernity, where the rigid constructs of the past are exposed as porous, fluid and escapable bounda
ENDNOTES

3 Le Corbusier, 95.
7 Hecker and Muller, Eileen Gray, 60.
8 Ibid.
9 Hecker and Muller, Eileen Gray, 60.
11 “Amanda Levete, architect and furniture designer discusses an Eileen Gray armchair” Amanda Levete. Victoria and Albert Museum. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/e/eileen-gray/ >
14 Eileen Gray Works and Projects, 101
15 Hecker and Muller, Eileen Gray, 60.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Constant, Eileen Gray, 95.
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