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## Imaging and Imagery in Architecture

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IMAGING AND IMAGERY IN ARCHITECTURE

EDITED BY

Alessandro Luigini

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# WISE DESIGNS FROM UNCERTAIN HANDWRITING AND NEW COMMUNICATIONS

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## ESSAY 130/08

ARCHIVE

MODEL

INTERPRETATION

COMMUNICATION

This brief study investigates some undated drawings by Eileen Gray, which are kept at the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London. Uncertain graphic clues, verbal notes and similarities of sign, may lead us to assume that some of the representations were produced close to the end of the Second World War while others, and this is confirmed, just after 1950. However, the extraordinary compositional strength, the indecision of the sign but not of the idea, the unfinishedness that suggests an aftermath, make these drawings timeless and, likewise, waiting for a future. For these reasons, going beyond the fences of a defined and circumscribed temporality, Eileen Gray's representations refer to a digital reading that

can highlight the contemporary characteristics of her architectures; on the other hand, the idea of living inherent in the Irish artist's most famous house, the E1027 of 1926, in which container and content make up the uniqueness of the image, is still a reference for many designers today.

Through the graphical investigation of some of Eileen Gray's drawings, the outcome of a hermeneutic process, this contribution attempts to link apparently uncertain patterns to new images that may make it possible to overcome both an enigmatic reading of these projects and the temporal limits within which they are contained. The digital models produced will help to bring these projects back to life and make them real.

## INTRODUCTION

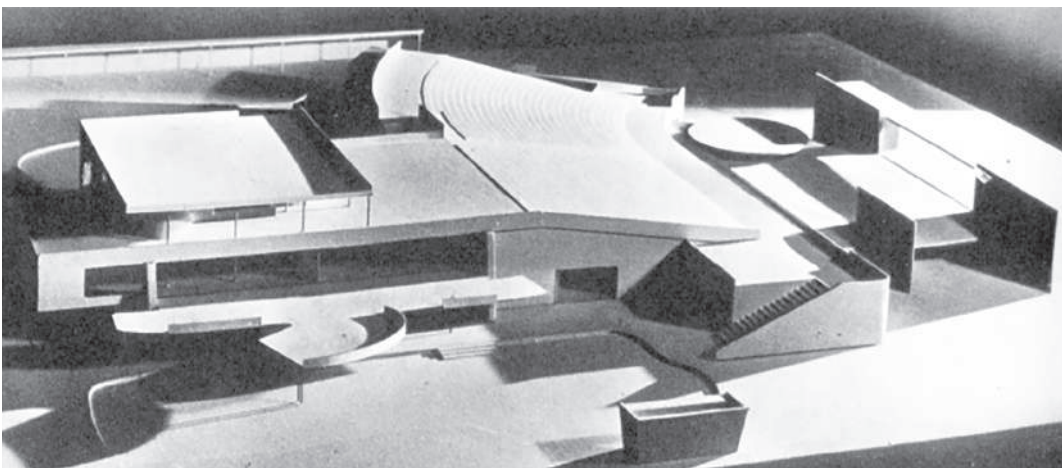
Eileen Gray was one of the most important figures of the Modern Movement who worked until the 1960s in deliberate isolation. She was rediscovered more as a designer than as an architect in the late 1970s, soon after her death. A figure who remained in oblivion for about thirty years because she was overwhelmed by a spectacularity that did not belong to her.

His architectural production, at least the one known in glossy magazines, is essentially limited to the house in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, built between 1926 and 1929, which represented a *unicum* in the panorama of the Modern Movement and at the same time an extraordinary case study for research on architectural criticism, which elevated the building to an exemplary model.

There are many architectural projects in the archive that were never realised by Gray, covering a period of time between 1926 and 1961.

After 1932, the year of the end of her relationship with Jean Badovici, her life partner with whom she lived in the house in Roquebrune, Eileen Gray led a very reserved life almost as if she wanted to disappear from the scene. During this period, she devoted herself to a number of works includ-

**Fig. 1** Eileen Gray. Project for a Social and Cultural Centre. Model photo. London, V&A Museum.



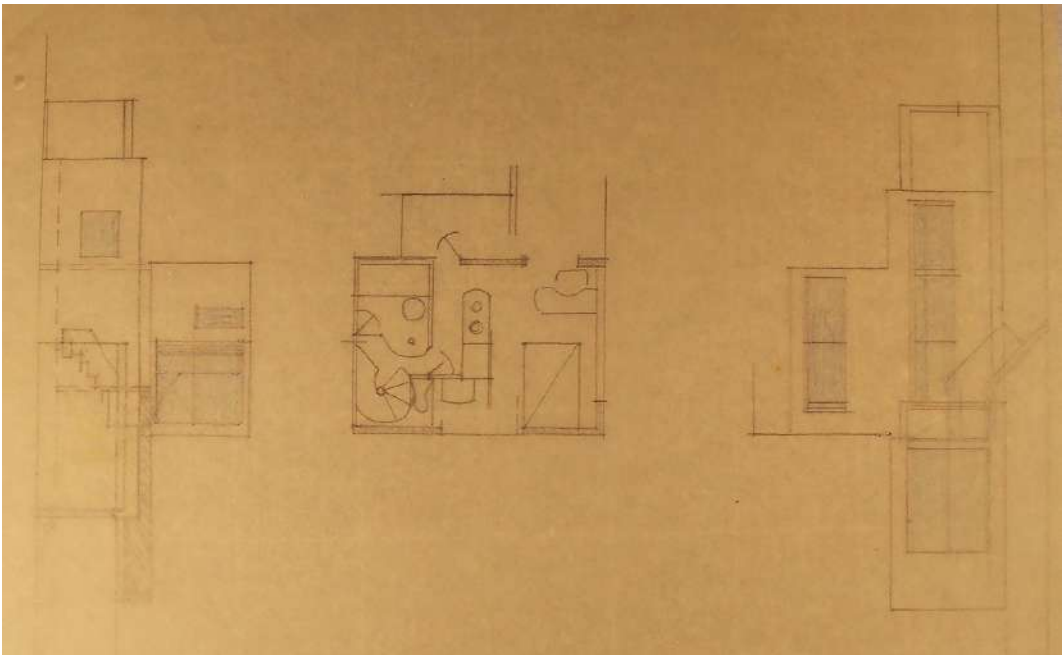
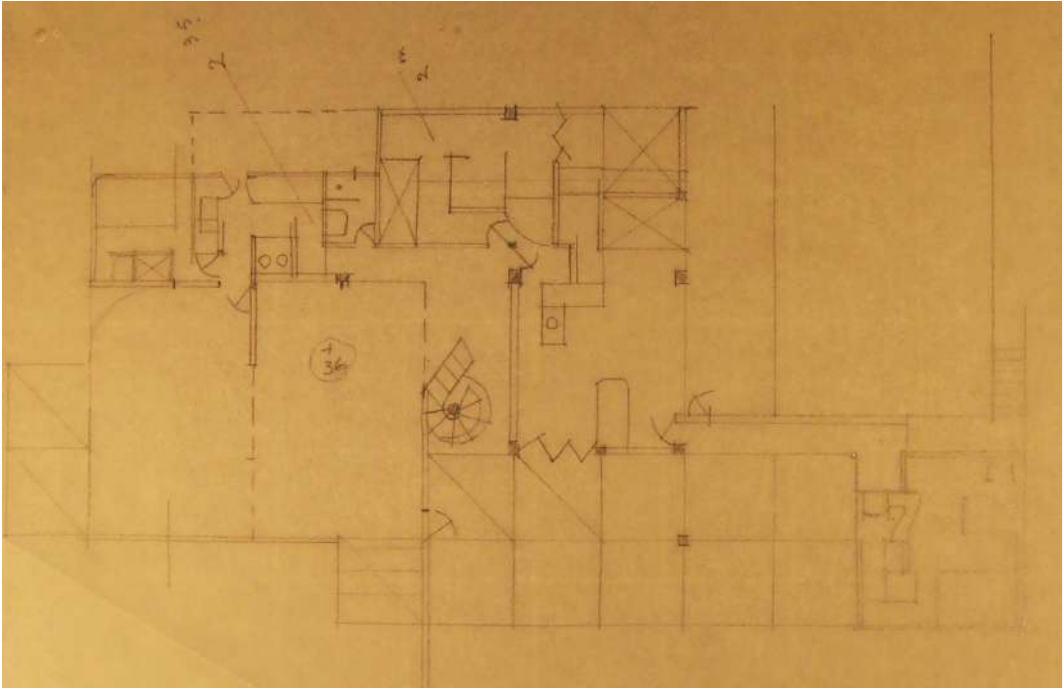
ing the *Two-storey House*, which was certainly drawn up during the Second Great War, the proposal for a *Social and Cultural Centre* (Figure 1), the revisitation of some previous projects and others for hypothetical clients.

After 1956, the Anglo-Irish artist decided to build her own portfolio by collecting the projects to which she was most attached. This date is very significant because in the same year Badovici died and the UAM decided to organise an exhibition in his honour; on this occasion E1027 was attributed to Jean Badovici with the collaboration of Eileen Gray for the furniture. Probably this unfortunate episode induced Eileen to collect some of her work in a systematic way, to try to remedy the macroscopic attribution error: Eileen's portfolio represents a kind of architectural autobiography.

#### THE TWO-STOREY HOUSE

The design drawings for the *Two-storey house* were drawn up as early as 1942. This date can be traced from the only biography on the Irish artist, and Parisian by adoption, written by Peter Adam in 1987, in which the author states that in 1942, Jean Badovici sent Eileen a letter with a plan attached; it concerned a plot of land purchased by the Romanian architect, probably in Casablanca, for which Badovici asked Eileen to draw up a plan.

The archives of the *Victoria and Albert Museum* only hold three sheets relating to the project. Peter Adam claims that Gray produced many drawings and even a model for this project, material that was lost when German troops destroyed the flat in Saint-Tropez in 1944, where Eileen found refuge during the war and where she continued to work. It is not possible to know how many designs Eileen produced, whether Badovici wanted to build a house for himself where he could spend his future holidays or whether he took a commission and asked Eileen for help, as was often the case. One can only speculate, however plausible.





**Fig. 2** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Two-storey house*, 1942. Ground floor plan. London, V&A Museum.

**Fig. 3** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Two-storey house*, 1942. First floor plan and fronts. London, V&A Museum.

The representations received are orthogonal projections regarding plans and elevations (Figures 2, 3). They are drawings that seem incomplete and appear uncertain if one refers to a canonical representation; the reading of the spaces is not immediate and one must observe them carefully to understand the articulation of the project.

Most probably, due to some uncertainties of the stroke, the transparent support and the presence of a modular repetitiveness, it seems evident that Eileen used graph paper for the drafting of these drawings. Their apparent uncertainty disappears when a closer reading is made.

The drawings relating to E1027, which are kept in the archive, also contain the same uncertain handwriting as the *Two-storey House*; the ink drawings relating to it are posthumous to its construction and were made for dissemination and not for its actual construction.

The relationship between drawing and design in Eileen is evident; her handwriting coincides with her imagination and the building site is the shaping of her idea.

This concept was wisely expressed by Alvaro Siza in a his paper:

speaking in general terms, those who choose to do architecture do not need to 'know how to draw', let alone 'draw well'. Drawing, understood as an autonomous language, is not indispensable to design. Much and good architecture has been and is done in bengal [...] However, as far as drawing is concerned, any child expresses himself with freshness and rigour; as do misfits and madmen. Drawing is a form of communication with the self. (Siza, 1997, p. 17)

The few uncertain representations that have survived induce an attentive reader to enter the interstices of the project and imagine a possible spatial articulation. Gray's drawings are thus images that solicit the construction of new images and in this sense their communicative power lies in the solicitation of an imaginative journey.

Representations such as those of the *Two-storey House*, destined to remain in drawers, find their meaning today thanks to

the work of those who keep the archives; these drawings are not only testimonies of a way of drawing but are above all images of a way of thinking that is absolutely current.

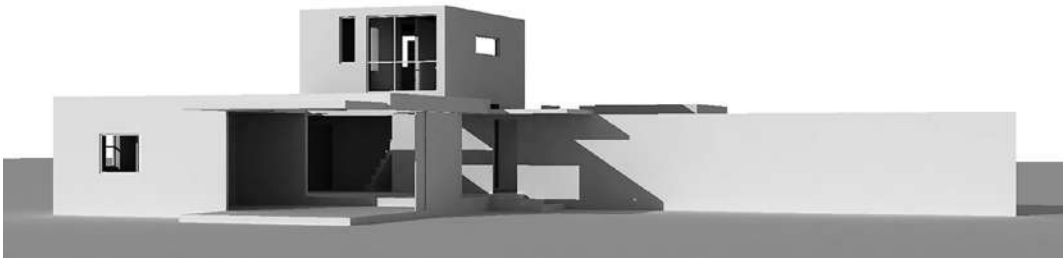
Eileen Gray's thinking in fact anticipated many themes in architecture and design, making her one of the pioneers of contemporary architecture.

In this sense, in 1968 Joseph Rykwert wrote in the pages of *Domus* about the E1027 "such a total intervention of the designer in the creation of the environment today is not an exception, but in the 1920s it could be said to be an anticipation". (Rykwert, 1968, p. 33)

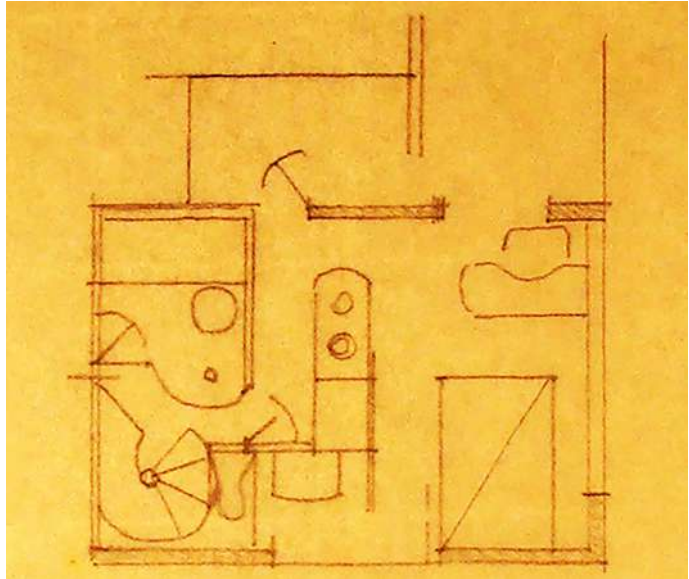
The *rediscovery* of Gray's work after his death leads to a number of considerations: firstly, it concerns his production, the characteristics of his work demonstrated a modernity that was unusual for his time; secondly, it should not be understood as a homage to historiography but as an indication of the modes of design; thirdly, finally, it is that his way of looking forward to an uncertain future takes on contemporary connotations. This last consideration explains the extent to which the designs of the *Two-storey House* are to be understood as suspended in time, a character of timelessness is to be attributed to them.

All of Eileen's projects are different from each other, although some procedural similarities can be traced. The design of the ground floor of the *Two-storey House* informs us of flexible spaces in which interior and exterior merge into a spatial unicum through large angular openings in the servant spaces.

**Fig. 4** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Two-storey house*. Redrawing.



**Fig. 5:** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Two-storey house*, 1942. First floor plan. Bedroom and bathroom. Detail. London, V&A Museum.

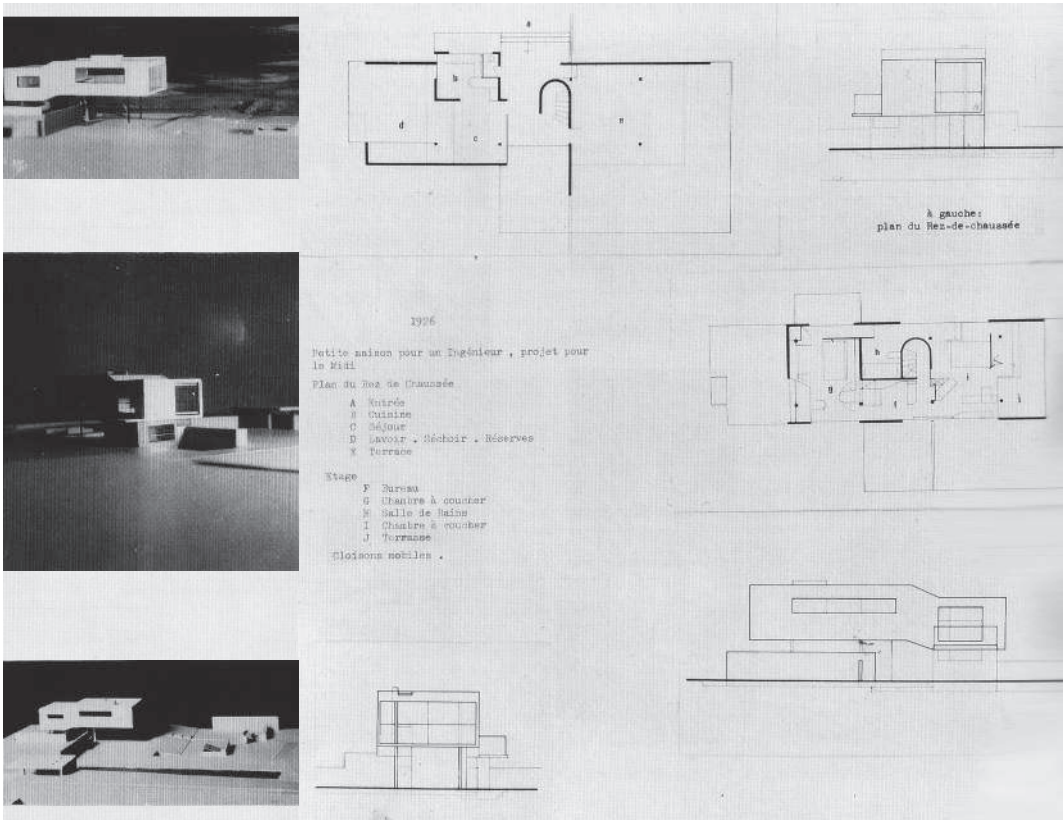


Eileen, knowing Badovici's way of life, who liked to surround himself with friends and artists, designs a house in the image and likeness of the Romanian architect (Figure 4)

For Eileen Gray, living comes before building, borrowing Martin Heidegger's famous essay; and again, contradicting Le Corbusier, she states that "a house is not a machine to be inhabited, it is a man's shell, his extension, his liberation, his spiritual emanation". (Gray, 1929, p. 16) Observing the plans of the two-storey house, it is evident how Gray, albeit in an apparently schematic manner, pays particular attention to the furnishings of the rooms (Figure 5); container and content are designed together, his architecture is to be understood as a 'work of art in everything'.

#### *SMALL HOUSE FOR AN ENGINEER*

The drafting of her own portfolio was an opportunity for Eileen Gray to review a number of projects and rework them. Among these was the *Small House for an Engineer*, which Ste-



**Fig. 6** Eileen Gray. *Small House for an Engineer*, 1926, revised 1952. Portfolio table.

fan Hecker and Christian Muller (1993) date to 1926 and which was redesigned and redesigned by Eileen after 1956. The thirty years between the two design solutions suggest that the Anglo-Irish artist's way of doing architecture was essentially a research on herself and that the project was never considered definitively finished for her. This project can be interpreted as her model house, a kind of theoretical project. It cannot be excluded that some projects associated with hypothetical clients such as *engineer, professor, F.G.*, were exercises on his idea of living, a sort of small graphic and imaginative poems.

The archives of the *Victoria and Albert Museum* hold six design drawings for the *Small House for an Engineer* that deviate, apart from the prominent rectangular footprint, from the layout reworked for the portfolio.

The time lapse between the different elaborations suggests that this project cannot be dated, although paradoxically it could be placed in the 1926-1956 time frame.

The archive drawings concern a general plan drawn in pencil and coloured pencils, a ground floor plan with the upper floor indicated, an ink version of which exists, and three sheets containing three elevations. On the other hand, the 'portfolio table' (Figure 6) contains three photos of the model, two floor plans that are completely different from those in the archive, the three elevations that are identical to those in the V&A and a legend.

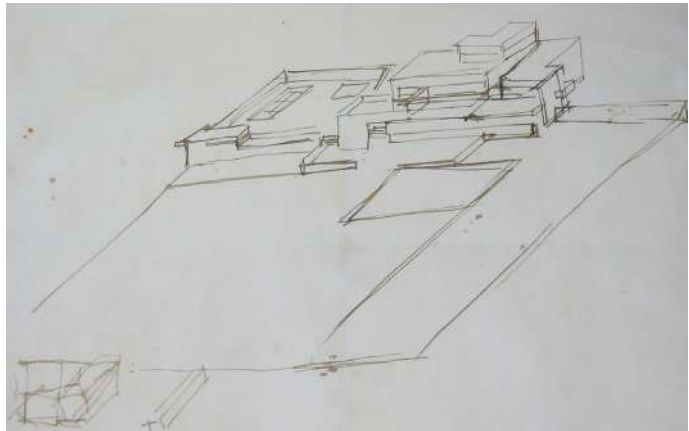
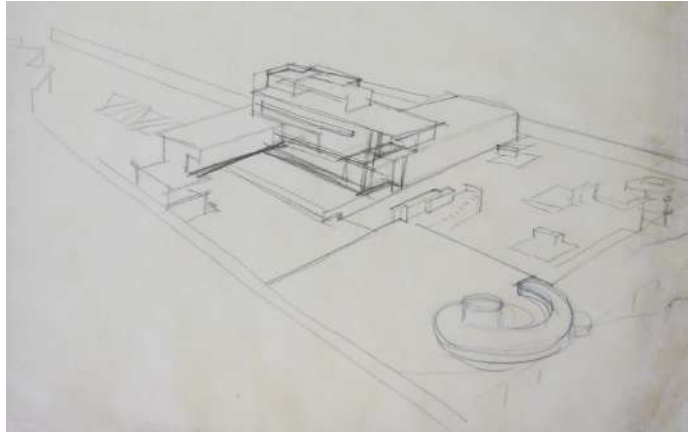
The portfolio represents Gray's only way of communicating architecture, orthogonal projections and physical models are the only representations deemed suitable for disseminating his ideas; like the *Small House for an Engineer*, other projects in the portfolio are also shown in the same way, such as the *Elliptical House*, also of extraordinary modernity, and the *Project for a Cultural Centre*. Three-dimensional drawings are not part of Eileen's graphic repertoire, the perspective sketches traced in the archive are in fact very meagre but nonetheless full of meaning; two study drawings concerning the design of a *Four-storey house* are emblematic in this respect (Figures 7, 8).

Gray tried in every way to fill his own gaps in drawing and his knowledge of architectural practice. In this sense Peter Adam recounts that

Eileen had set up a library containing also specific works on architectural problems such as *Manuel de Perspective et tracé des Ombres à l'Usage des Architectes et Ingenieurs et des Eleves des Ecole Speciales* by Planat and *Ad Quadratum, Etude des bases Geometriques de l'Architecture religieuse dans l'Antiquite et au Moyen Age decouvertes dans la cathedral de Nidaros* by Fredrik Macody Lund. The subjects of these books show how tenaciously she pursued her studies and recognised the need to learn the codes of representation. Eileen had been, in her student years, interested in architecture, but entirely self-taught; she had no architectural training. (Adam, 2000, p. 172)

**Fig. 7** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Four-storey house*, 1934. Perspective. London, V&A Museum.

**Fig. 8** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Four-storey house*, 1934. Perspective. London, V&A Museum.



However, Eileen had had the opportunity to approach practical issues related to drawing codes. Badovici introduced her to a young architect, Adrienne Gorska, born in Russia in 1898 to a Polish family. Adrienne had met Badovici at the *École Supérieure d'Architecture*, where they had both been students; she had just graduated and was designing a building. Adrienne involved Eileen in the project and taught her the first steps in the direction of architectural design. However, Eileen had to feel like an amateur as she continued to study in secret. She realised the importance of drawing practice, but her character would not allow her to ask for help from the architects

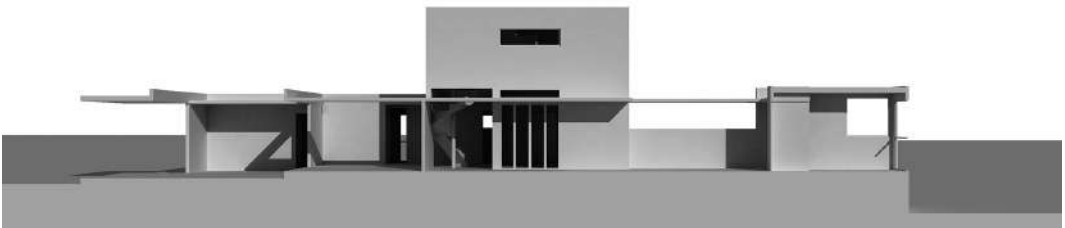
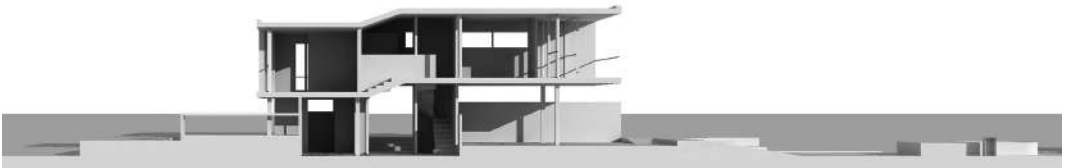
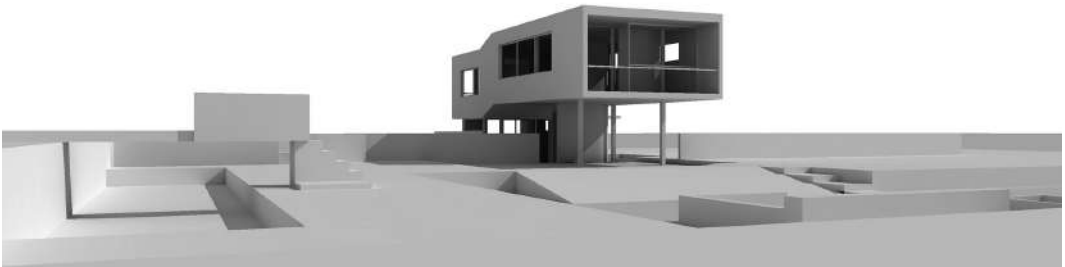
she knew. Perhaps she could have confronted Mallet Stevens or Pierre Legrain, who had asked her to collaborate together, but –probably– the fact that she was both a woman and an amateur architect led her to get closer to small professionals, always remaining distant from the lights of the architectural scene. "I regret that I did not learn a lot about façades, but there are not many people I could have learned from" (Adam, 2000, p. 172), Eileen must have felt lonely, perhaps she would have liked to go back to her De Stijl friends but she did not dare, and continued to make plans for imaginary houses, such as the adaptation of Adolf Loos' house

### COMMUNICATING UNCERTAIN SPELLINGS

Eileen Gray's projects, those that have remained in the drawers of the archives and are little known, such as the *Two-storey House* or the *House in Boulevard des Madaleine*, require a contemporary graphic reading like the projects themselves. Investigating Eileen's works through new three-dimensional representations is not only a tribute to the artist but also an offering to architectural historiography and to that part of history that has deliberately isolated Eileen in her extraordinary limbo, made up of continuous artistic research on herself.

To communicate the uncertain handwriting of some of his projects, the three-dimensional model was chosen as the method of restitution of Gray's thought; this may seem a banal and in some ways obvious choice, but it is not so. It is well known that the three-dimensional model is not an outcome but a starting point. In the case of the restitution of Eileen's designs, images were produced in a style that Eileen would certainly have appreciated, that of her *maquettes* (Figures 9-12).

Only if a close relationship is established between the investigator (the draughtsman), the object investigated (the project) and the subject investigated (Eileen Gray) can new





**Fig. 9** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Small house for an Engineer*, 1926 revised 1952. Perspective. Redrawing.

**Fig. 10** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Small house for an Engineer*, 1926 revised 1952. Perspective. Redrawing.

**Fig. 11** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Small house for an Engineer*, 1926 revised 1952. Perspective section. Redrawing.

**Fig. 12** Eileen Gray. Project for a *Small house for an Engineer*, 1926 revised 1952. Perspective section. Redrawing.

communicative images be produced, which are not merely virtual but the only existential reality of the project.

The images are deliberately monochromatic not only because perhaps Eileen, had she still been alive, would have produced them this way, but also because, as Riccardo Migliari (2008) writes:

the synthesis images, in fact, are in addition to the archive images, which are all old black and white photographs. Let us imagine for a moment what a jarring contrast these old photographs of today's lost works would have generated, if compared with a cloying and colourful digital hyperrealism! [...] The digital image, saturated with colours and materials, would have revealed all its extraneousness: extraneous to the poetics of less is more, extraneous to memory, extraneous to the intentions of the designers and, above all, extraneous to the revolutionary message that those architectures carried, in their time, and still carry, in our time. (Migliari, 2008, p. 11)

## CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating the data at our disposal, we could say that Eileen Gray could not draw, but as is well known, this is explicitly a matter of technique, because the line between drawing and design is very thin and blurred.

There are drawings that by their expressiveness, their handwriting and the content to which they refer have made history and have become true icons of architecture. On the other hand, there are extraordinary drawings that are personal expressions, small fragments of desire and memory that become manifestos of one's own position regarding the practice of architecture; others, in the case of unrealised projects, contain instead the pure idea of the author, becoming admirable images of an architectural principle that remains unknown with respect to its realisation (Gregotti, 2014).

To the drawings of the former type belong the sketches by Le Corbusier, to the latter and to the former the sketches by Alvaro Siza, with which the reader associates his constructions and photos of his completed architecture rather than orthogonal projection drawings of his projects.

Eileen Gray's sketches cannot be associated with a construction; the construction is the three-dimensional interpretative model that enters into the interstices of the project to communicate it in the way that suited Eileen best, the model. Today, the model is no longer static but dynamic, it is dissected into several parts, analysed, through a more attentive reading of the spaces it allows us to enter into the interstices of the project and return the idea of its author.

Yet those sketches are Eileen Gray's voice, the word of her design, she who in life had no need to write about her idea of architecture. The models are her posthumous word, they are her way of communicating today if she were still alive. They keep her alive by expressing the contemporary essence of her designs. Drawing has this power: through new images it holds the threads of memory and, in this case, induces new reflections on the project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In sharing the positions expressed, the result of common elaborations on a research that takes on the character of a non-finite like Eileen Gray's projects, the paragraphs Introduction, House for an engineer and Conclusions are to be attributed to Francesco Maggio, while the paragraphs The Two-storey House and Communicating uncertain spellings are to be attributed to Alessia Garozzo.

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