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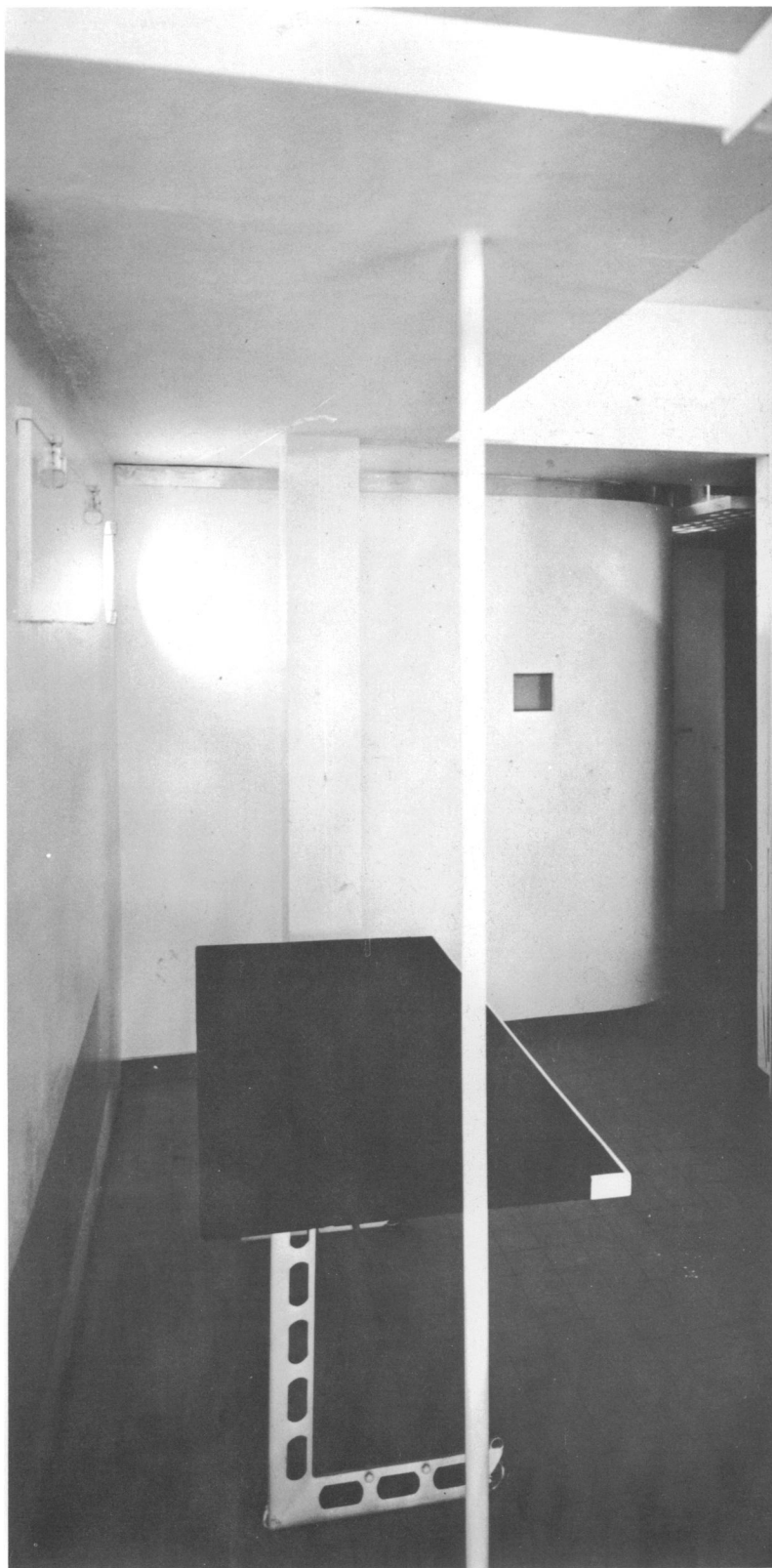


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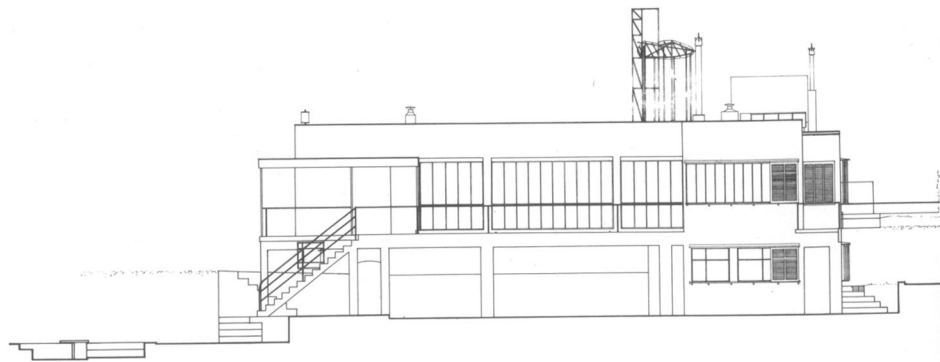
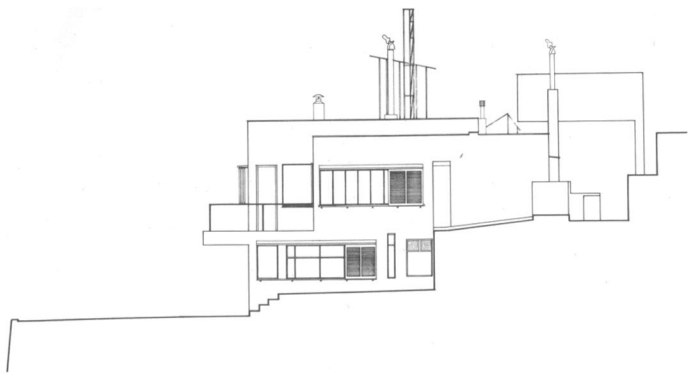
## Eileen Gray: two Houses and an Interior, 1926-1933

Joseph Rykwert

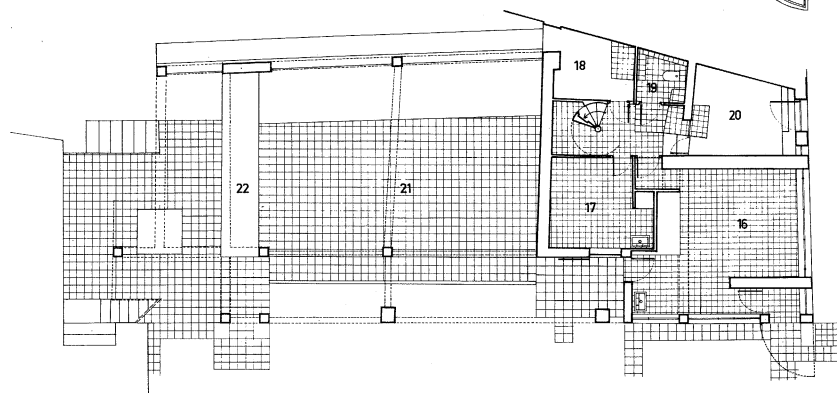
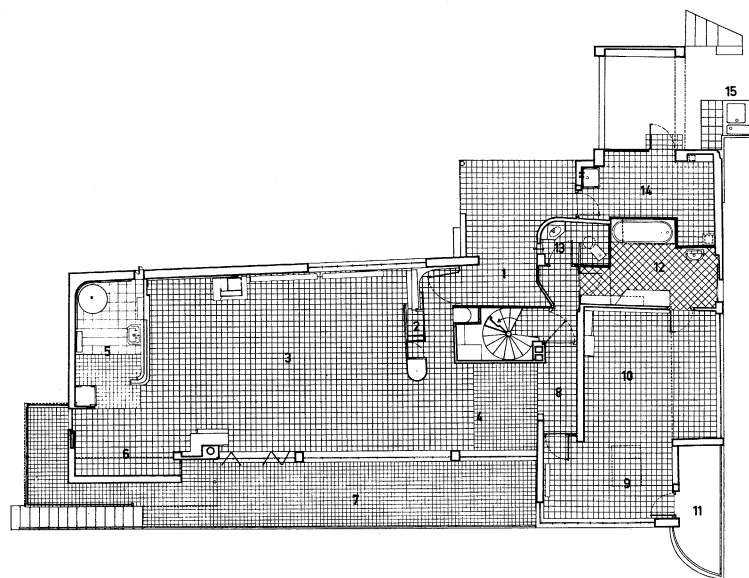


For an architectural *oeuvre* two houses, a few interiors and some unexecuted projects might seem excessively modest. In the particular case of Eileen Gray the modest quantity is in sharp contrast to extraordinary quality: quality high enough to set her among the masters of the modern movement however condensed her accomplishment. In particular it is the sophistication and assurance of her work which seems most surprising: her very first building, designed in 1926 — though not occupied until 1929 — already displayed a full and original understanding of the language of the modern movement up to that date, and gives it an original interpretation.





- Eileen Gray  
Roquebrune, Cap Martin**
- upper level**
- 1 entrance
  - 2 closet
  - 3 living room
  - 4 foyer
  - 5 bathroom
  - 6 sleeping alcove
  - 7 upper terrace
  - 8 hallway
  - 9, 10 master bedroom
  - 11 terrace
  - 12 bathroom
  - 13 lavatory
  - 14 kitchen
  - 15 laundry area
- lower level**
- 16 bedroom
  - 17 dressing room
  - 18 service entrance
  - 19 bathroom
  - 20 service
  - 21 lower level living area
  - 22 storage



This first building, a house at Roquebrune, was taken by Jean Badovici, the editor of *Architecture Vivante*. Badovici was, of course, well aware of all that was going on in modern design and would have been particularly familiar with what was going on in Paris. Through some of the time when this building was being designed he must have been working on the 1927 issue which published in detail the buildings at the Weissenhof colony in Stuttgart. When Eileen Gray had met Badovici she was already involved in matters of design. She had been one of the earliest women students at the Slade School of Art in London just before 1900. Some time later — about 1917 — she moved to Paris to the apartment she still occupies in the Rue Bonaparte. And although for some time before World War I she had apprenticed herself to a Japanese lacquer craftsman in London, and had travelled widely — particularly by air in the early days of air travel — Paris has been her home since then.

Before World War I she had opened an atelier round the corner from her

flat, in the Rue Visconti, first making lacquer objects, then other furniture. At this time she also received her first commissions for complete interiors. In 1922 she showed a room at the *Union des Artistes Modernes*, which brought her into contact with other exhibitors, notably J. J. P. Oud; it was probably at his suggestion that the Dutch review *Wendingen* devoted an issue to her furniture, fabrics, interiors, when she exhibited again in the *Union des Artistes Modernes*, and opened a shop, dealing mostly in her own designs: various pieces of furniture as well as carpets and rugs, and some fabrics. There were some excellent light fittings and screens in lacquer, the material she employed so very originally and brilliantly.

The issue of *Wendingen* was introduced by Jan Wils, a member of the de Stijl group and the architect of Amsterdam Stadium; it also carried an article about her work by Jean Badovici, who was then already co-editor, with Albert Morancé, of *l'Architecture Vivante*. Before this time her work had occasionally declined — naturally

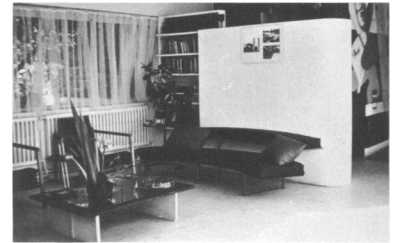
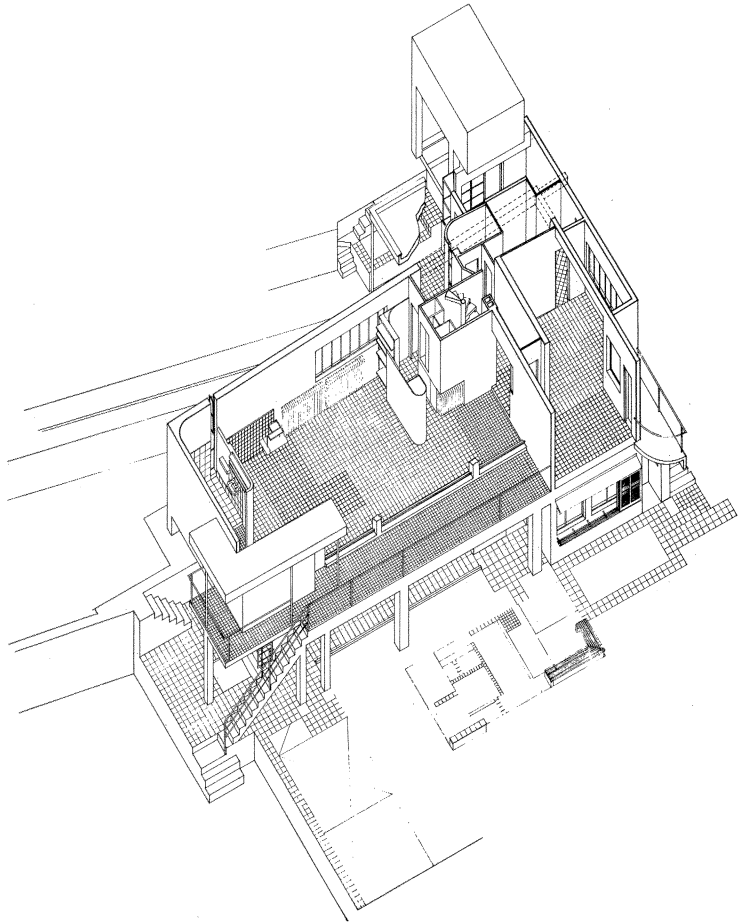
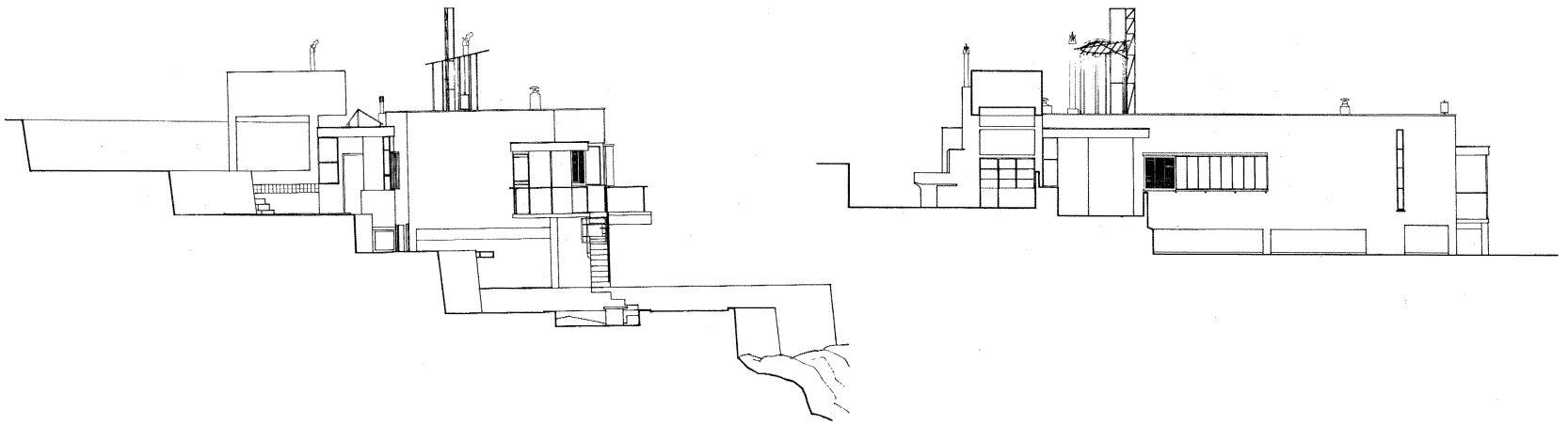
enough — to what is now called *Art Déco*. But even about her earliest pieces there is a modest elegance, a formal nicety and a sharp appreciation of the quality of material — whether poor or noble — which is nearer in spirit to the work of Loos, or even Mies than to Djo Bourgeois or Francis Jourdain.

The meeting with Badovici was to prove decisive for Eileen Gray. He appreciated the particular inclination of her talent and suggested that she should venture into architecture. There seemed to be no client at hand, however, and Eileen Gray decided to build for herself. She found two sites on the Riviera, one at Roquebrune, the other at Castellar; both were sloping sites which presented great difficulties as far as main facilities and the supply of building materials were concerned; but both commanded magnificent views. The first house to be built was the one at Roquebrune, the one which was to become Badovici's home. She began work on it in 1926; the house was not occupied until 1929 however, and was then also

published in *l'Architecture Vivante* as the *Maison en Bord de Mer*.

In this house at Roquebrune Eileen Gray's previous work is eclipsed and transformed, purged of any *Art Déco* velleities. How much this is due to Badovici's influence is now difficult to tell; certainly he had a familiarity with all the latest developments of the modern movement which Eileen Gray herself probably lacked. The nature of this influence may be illustrated by the analogous case of a contemporary: Pierre Chareau's only interesting work in the early 'thirties was done during his collaboration with B. Bijvoet. But when Bijvoet went back to Holland Chareau's work lapsed from any distinction; Eileen Gray's on the other hand had from the outset been lighter and much more accomplished than Chareau's and simply took on a decisive turn after 1925: it continued to develop, and to grow in assurance.

*The publication of the maison en bord de mer* has a long preface (*De l'éclecticisme au doute*) in the form of a dialogue between Badovici and Miss



Gray. It contains an appeal (unusual for its time) against the over-intellectualising of architecture; for a dramatising of the essential forms to which *sachlichkeit* had purged building. This dramatisation might be brought about, or at any rate nearer, if as much attention was paid to the design of interiors as was then paid to exteriors. Interiors had hitherto been neglected by the best modern architects: it is worth remembering that at the time she had designed the house, le Corbusier was still using Thonet chairs and club armchairs, and that it is almost contemporary with the Bauhaus masters' house.

Miss Gray also explicitly disassociates herself from the excesses of open planning, from what she calls *le style camping*. The *Maison en Bord de Mer* is indeed hardly an open plan at all. On the contrary it is almost reasoned out into a container for a carefully articulated way of life. The visitor approaches along the north wall of the house, to a porch which connected the hall and the kitchens (outdoors for the summer, indoors for the winter). In the porch the visitor

had to turn around 180° before he could open the front door. This introduced him directly into the space of the main living room, through a section of it screened by a hall cupboard. But this very large room (approximately 40' x 15') is further marked out into a recessed dining area next the entrance, and by a fireplace at the further end of it, which screens an auxiliary bedroom in a recess; this has a shower-room adjoining it, screened from the main space by cupboards analogous to the ones which screen the hall space, and make it into a kind of boudoir.

The living room opens onto a terrace, from which it is divided by a range of sliding-folding windows; these open out against two columns. The terrace is further screened from the outside by a set of engulfing awnings which shelter it against the southern and western sun. The entering visitor, who peers through the slatted blinds which screen the horizontal window strip nearest the entrance, may have his view entertained at four levels: at the same slats, at the window behind it, at the southern sliding-folding

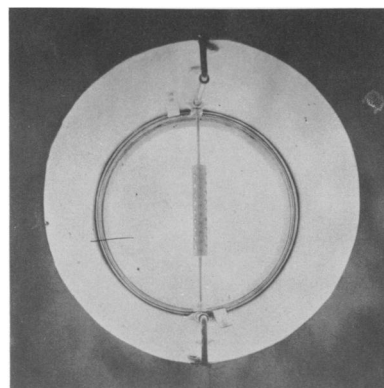
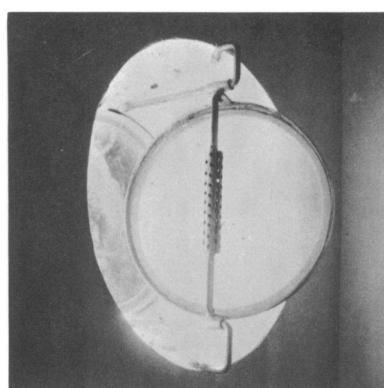
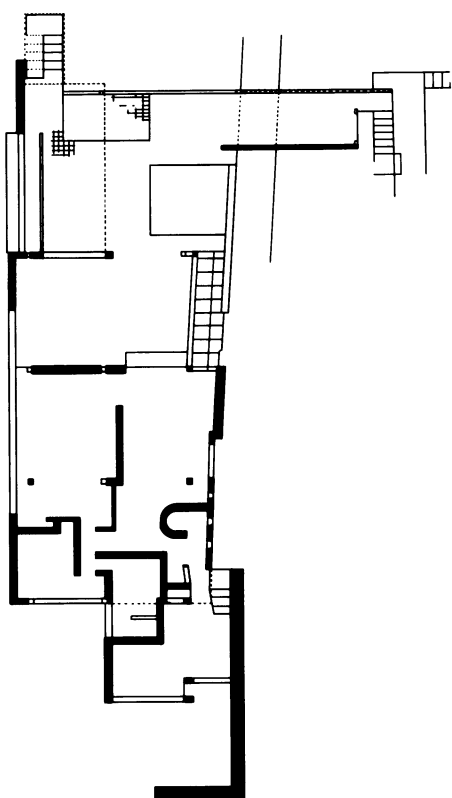
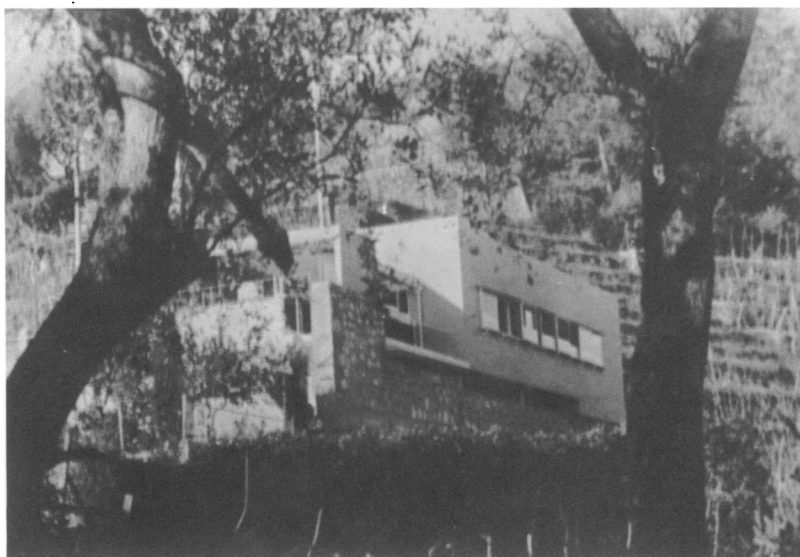
window and at the terrace awnings. Correspondingly, anyone inside the main living room knows himself to be separated from the outside world by an intermediate zone.

The bedroom may be entered either from the front hall through a bathroom suite or from an isolated atelier, but not directly from the living room; a spiral staircase leads down to a guest room and a servant's room under the pilotis, as well as to a sheltered terrace.

With all this, an enormous care has been taken over the surfaces, as much — if in a rather different spirit — as in Eileen Gray's earlier work. For instance, the main ceilings are not plastered, but are in painted exposed concrete, the roof slab being suspended from the beams so as to avoid the unpleasant details at the joint of wall and ceiling, and the cracked ceiling plaster. But it is not only the structural surfaces and the colors which are so carefully arranged. The house was conceived as a design problem in the spirit of the preface quoted earlier, and a whole

range of furniture including the now famous wood-frame upholstered chair and the armchair in rolls of white leather (which Eileen Gray now calls 'la Chaise Bibendum') created for the occasion. She also designed and wove all the rugs for the house: so that with its decorations and furniture, the house formed one of the most remarkable 'ensembles' of the time.

The fate of the house has been kind, curious. Le Corbusier had befriended the fisherman who bought the adjoining site, and when this fisherman enlarged his house to include a small *bistro*, Corbusier built a small cabin adjoining it. Towards the end of the war he painted five of his major wall-pictures in the house, which then still belonged to Badovici, but has now passed to Madame Staalberg, who has treated it as the great heritage which it certainly is.

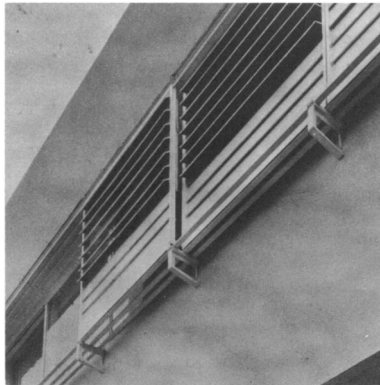
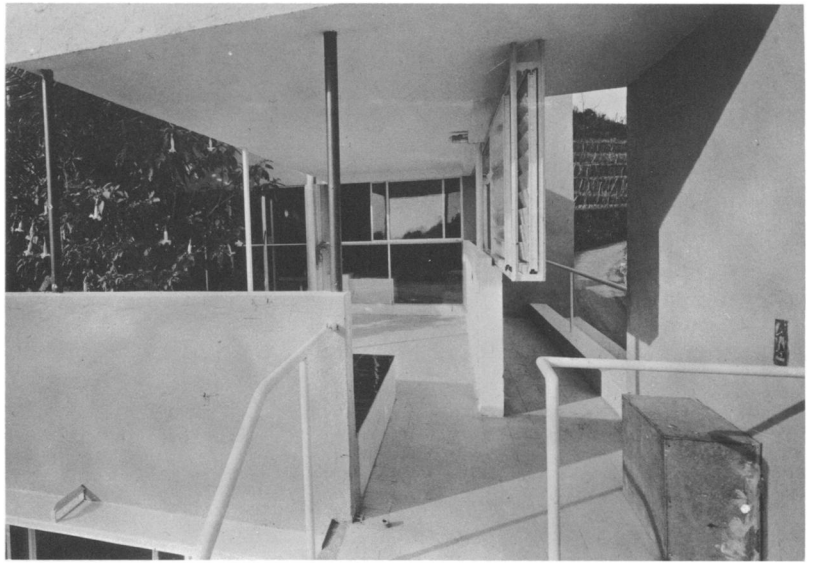
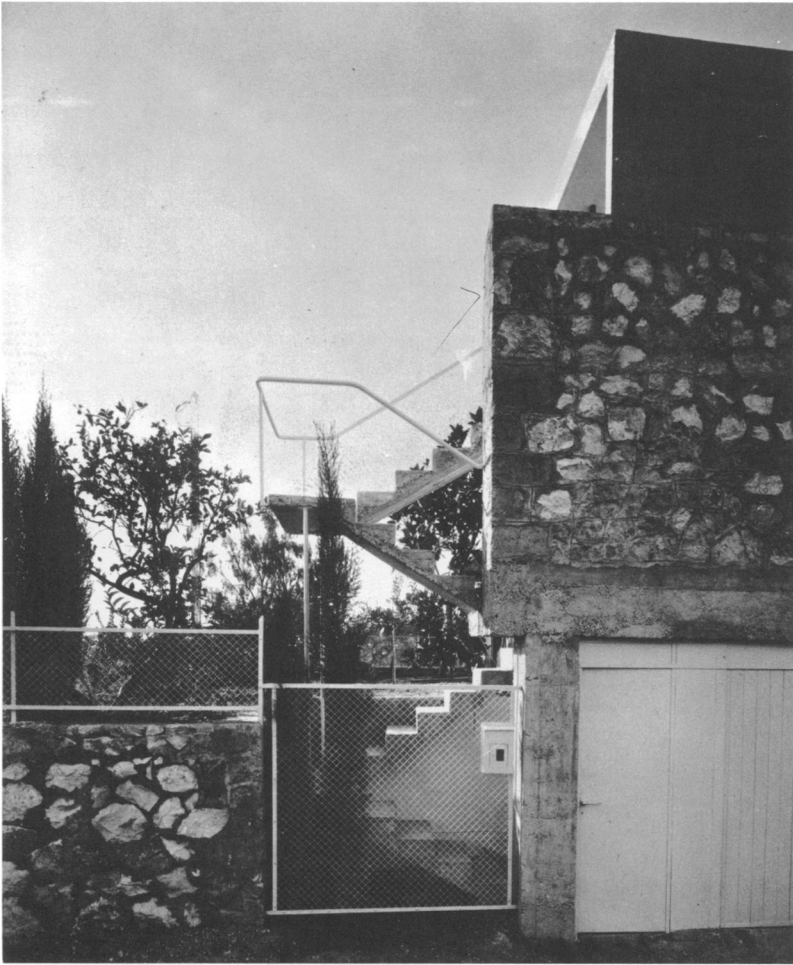


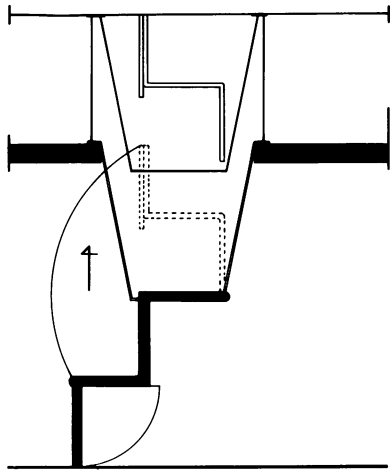
The other of the two houses, at Castellà, has had a much less distinguished fate: just after the war it was bought by Graham Sutherland, who belongs to that anecdotal and calligraphic English artistic tradition which is implacably opposed to modern architecture, indeed to any serious architecture which can't be usefully considered as a ruin. And he has 'adapted' the house to his taste, so destroying its exquisite integrity. Yet the Castellà house, as I have suggested earlier, is a much more accomplished exercise. Again, the main rooms are on one floor; the house is built on a terraced hillside. While at Roquebrune the piloti rose out of the waterside cliff, at Castellà the smooth concrete walls rise, rather irregularly, out of a random rubble podium. The main approach is through the terrace this time, over a passerelle from the garden, and up an open concrete staircase from the street. The terrace opens onto two panoramic views. The blinds, which were used on one small horizontal window at Roquebrune, here act as a fully-fledged *brise-soleil*, much as the awnings had done at Roquebrune.

But they not only act as a *brise-soleil*: Eileen Gray was already using the adjustable louvred metal blinds as separate structural units — since they run in heavy and very visible metal frames — and assume great importance in the visual complexity of the house: at one point, the North-east view from the terrace, the inner space is separated from the outside with only a dwarf wall supporting an independent *brise-soleil* of the kind I have just described.

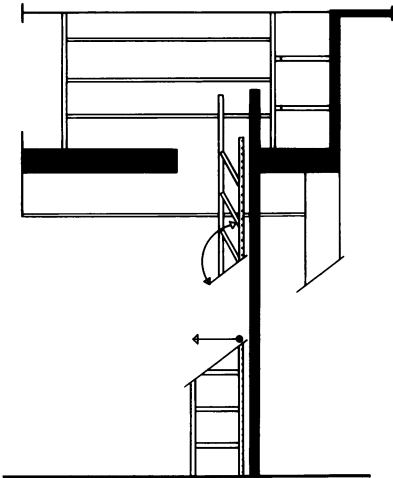
As at Roquebrune, such details are very much part of the whole organisation, as are the furnishings. The main bedroom, for instance, which faces the same direction as the terrace — for the view — that is, north-east, has a circular glass dome let in the ceiling to catch the sunlight. This opening may be screened with a counter-balanced circular shield. The main clothes cupboard in the same room, which serves to articulate the dressing-room area, has rounded ends, and opens by sliding half the metal 'capsule' horizontally. There are several further such fresh and brilliant touches even in this one

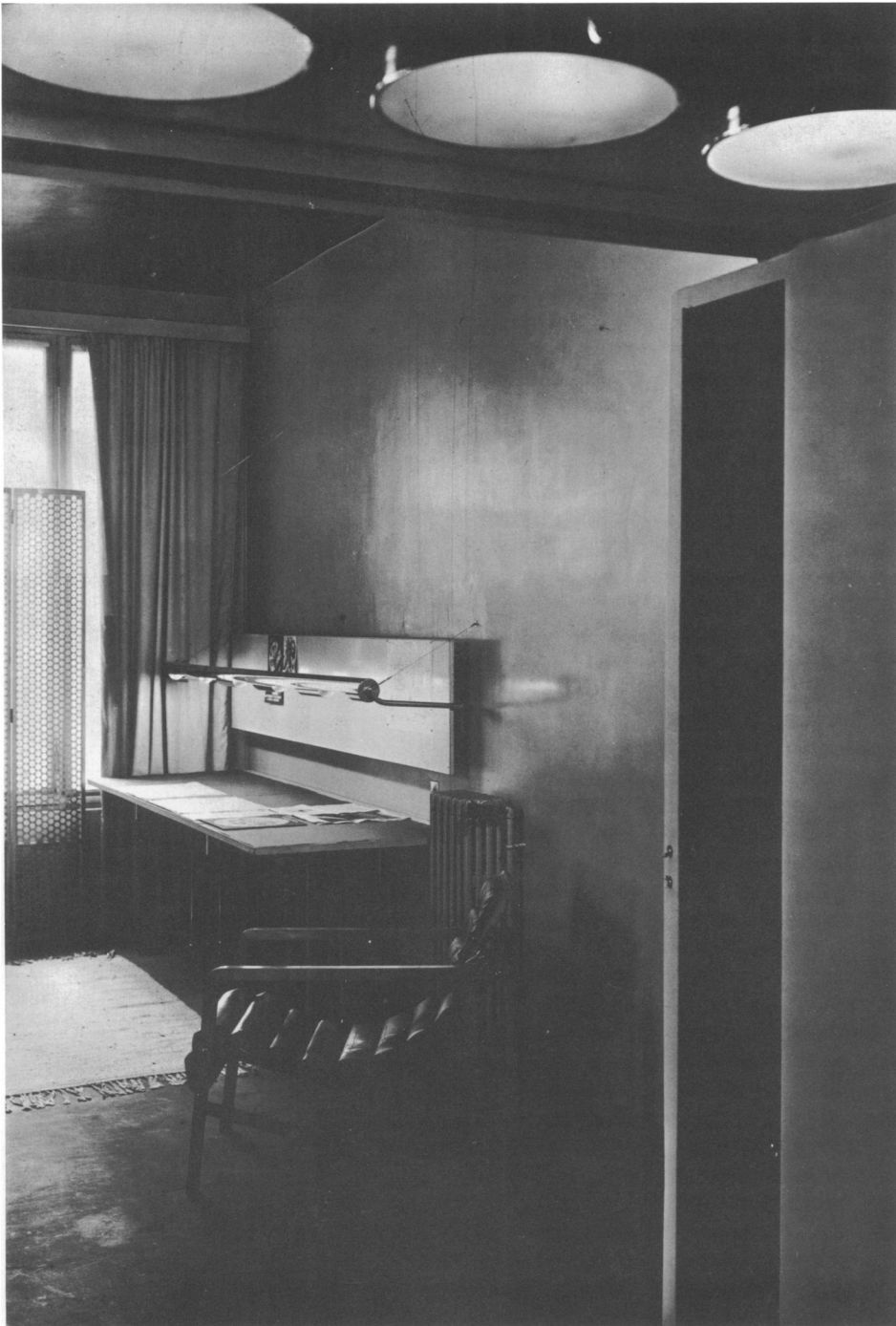
room; the formal sophistication of the detail is backed by the use of colour and texture. Again, as at Roquebrune, everything bears the mark of having been carefully considered. The upholstery has not only been supervised by the designer, but she has designed and had woven the materials as well as the rugs and carpets. Those of us familiar with latter-day proceedings, when an architect may think it in order to dictate the whole furnishing and even the details of the decoration to his client for fear that he might 'spoil' his building by use, may find some comfort in these proceedings. Eileen Gray built for herself; the houses were original, carefully considered, and matched to an open, relaxed way of life. In spite of the concentration on the intimately useful detail, the overall form is sufficiently strong to survive the kind of harsh treatment implied by a series of frescoes of Le Corbusier (though not the grosser evisceration, which no building, however strong, could survive).





folding-stair to storage in entrance hall





The same care which she gave to the houses she spent on the design of a tiny one-room apartment, 24' x 15' (i.e. a golden section) producing a habitable space which almost has the quality of a Moholy-Nagy 'light modulator'. The main space, 15' square, is a bed-living-room, with the kitchen, bathroom and hall neatly packed into the remaining 9' x 15'. The tightly packed uses are screened from each other both by a primitive form of flexible door and very ingenious perforated metal screens.

This room, more than the houses in a way, provides an example of the kind of dramatisation she had talked of in *De l'éclecticisme au doute*. Her work is always modest, reasonable, yet so fresh and exquisite as to be exhilarating. In the Paris where Giacometti had been earning his living making wrought-iron fire dogs, it could not have a great success. Indeed there is very little executed work after this: most of it is projects such as the pre-fabricated elliptical-section house (1937) and the sculptor's studio of 1937. Of 1937 too, the large model for the holiday centre for the Pavilion de

*l'Esprit Nouveau* at the world exhibition (Le Corbusier's 'tent' pavillion), and some later schemes: much furniture before the war as well as some commissioned interiors; there is some work after the war as well, but all this is outside my province.

It is the houses and the one-room apartment which remain her most important 'standing' achievement. A tenuous achievement it may be, but unmatched for a relaxed and elastic control of the visual ambience, control which fits both a style of living and a built form and yet is sufficiently independent from the latter to allow for a transformation to a radically different life-style.

