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ARCHITECTURE

Inhabiting a Piece of Art: It's Not Always So Pretty

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)
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Heartfelt, thought-provoking and at times hilariously funny, the 2008 documentary film “Koolhaas Houselife” made Ila Beka and Louise Lemoine cult figures in the European architecture world. A look at the difficulties of living with an architectural masterpiece — one that was designed by [Rem Koolhaas](#) for Ms. Lemoine’s paraplegic father — it touched a nerve with those who have always been suspicious of the gap between the idealism of many architects and the realities of everyday life.

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Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

A platform that moves through a house's various levels in the film “Koolhaas Houselife.”

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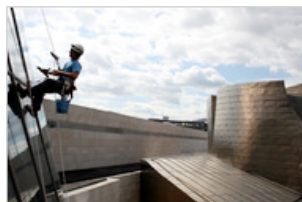
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Storefront for Art and Architecture

A member of the cleaning crew at work on the Guggenheim Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry.

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Since that success, the two have gone on to make three more films that explore similar issues, including one on [Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum](#) in Bilbao, Spain, and another on [Richard Meier's Jubilee Church](#) in suburban Rome. None of them are quite as revealing — or as funny — as the first.

But all four films, which are each about 20 minutes long and are on view at the Storefront for Art and Architecture on the Lower East Side through Feb. 27, feel like fresh takes on architecture, avoiding the clichés about architects as pretentious eggheads oblivious to their clients' needs (although there is a scene about a leaky roof). They represent an unusually earnest, and long overdue, effort to explore a fascinating question: What is it like to live or work inside a piece of art?

The Lemoine home was especially fraught in this regard. A three-story house in Bordeaux, France, with a vast, glass-enclosed living area sandwiched between two concrete-clad slabs, it is centered on a mechanical platform that moves up and down, from the wine cellar and TV room to the living space to the upstairs bedrooms. It was designed to be big enough to accommodate not only Ms. Lemoine's father, who had used a wheelchair since a car accident in 1991, but his desk as well — and thereby to help the house “reassert the position of the French male within the family,” as Mr. Koolhaas once said.

When the father died, in 2001, the platform also became a constant reminder of his absence. When it moves up to the bedroom level, it leaves a gaping void in the middle of the living room floor.

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Laura Linney on stage



Storefront for Art and Architecture
A scene from a film on Richard Meier's Jubilee Church.

This material would seem to be irresistible for any filmmaker, and at first, if you know the story, you wonder why it was left out of “Koolhaas Houselife.” But one of the strengths of the film is that it never plunges into cheap melodrama; the father is never discussed, nor is the fact that Ms. Lemoine once lived there. Instead the opening scene shows the family maid with a mop in her hand,

silently standing on the platform as it rises through the house's various levels. With a somewhat bemused air, she steps off and begins her daily chores, shaking out the curtains, scrubbing floors, vacuuming the staircase and in the process transforming the house from an act of poetic imagination to a seemingly straightforward series of practical problems.

At one point a gardener carefully arranges a hose into a loose coil, its form echoing the spiral of the house's main driveway. At another a caretaker pokes the base of a window looking for the source of a leak. Water suddenly starts to pour down the face of a concrete wall, spilling over a television set and onto the floor. Everyone scurries around, looking for buckets.

From there, the film transforms into a kind of mechanical ballet. Once again the platform rises slowly, this time carrying an empty chair and desk. As it clicks into place, its rails drop down until they are flush with the floor. Somewhere else a porthole window pops open, then bounces rhythmically up and down. Two burned pieces of toast pop out of a toaster. (In case you don't get the point, a clip from one of Jacques Tati's comic sendups of ruffled middle-aged Frenchmen unable to cope with modern life flickers across a television screen.)

The most charming sequence in the film, it goes to the heart of the filmmakers' point: to demonstrate that architecture's real meaning exists in small details, in the little victories and defeats that make up everyday life. In the process, they humanize the work itself. Reduced to a series of mechanical operations, the building is nonetheless as alive as the people inside it, with whom it is locked in an awkward dance.

Some of the later films are more uneven, partly because the filmmakers could not get the same degree of access, partly because the narratives — which generally move from big architectural ideas down to the nitty-gritty of daily life — start to feel predictable. The films are at their weakest, interestingly, when the architecture drifts too far into the background, and humans take up all the space.

The film on the Bilbao museum includes a beautiful series of shots of window washers as they rappel up and down the structure's undulating glass-and-titanium surfaces. Suspended from ropes, one of them says he met his wife while she was a tourist visiting the museum, and he was working. “People find us more interesting than the art,” he says.

But the camera quickly moves outside, where the museum becomes a kind of stage set for tourists and street performers. A young bride is captured in front of the building, tossing a bouquet into the air. Not far away, a group of tourists sits on a low stone barrier trying to make origami sculptures out of crumpled tinfoil, an apparent reference to the building's titanium skin. What you never see are the actual galleries, which are treated as if they were irrelevant to the whole museum experience.

In the newest film, on an addition to a winery in Pomerol, France, by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, the architecture virtually disappears. The owner's son gives us a tour of the various rooms, earnestly mapping out the architects' vision, but the camera stays in tight on him, and you never get a real feel for the spaces they designed. Toward the end, a large group of workers dressed as cowboys roasts marshmallows at a party in the new dining hall; it's a colorful moment, but they could be anywhere.

Mr. Meier's church gets a fairer shake in its film. After a few overhead shots of the

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building, the camera settles on the priest, who offers appealing interpretations of its curved walls: They remind him of an oyster, with the congregation as the pearl, or they could symbolize enormous sails, pulling the [Roman Catholic Church](#) into the future. We meet a guard whom the church has posted at the door to prevent services from being overrun by architecture pilgrims. Eventually, the congregation, which is there for Christmas Mass, spills out into the plaza in front of the church, and the magic of the building’s delicate forms is driven home.

All these films strive to place everyday people back at the center of the story, where they belong. And when the balance is right, as it is here, you begin to imagine a silent dialogue between the architects and those who inhabit their creations, as if they are struggling to understand one another across differences in time, space and perspective.

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