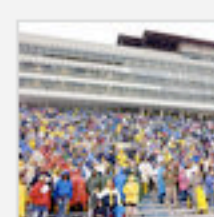


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# Ingenious and Demanding

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

"Koolhaas Houselife," is a small, smart, gently ironic, thoroughly delightful film that offers an affectionate but unflinching look at the everyday life of a contemporary architectural masterpiece—or what happens to a celebrated building after the photographers are gone.

Part of a series called "Living Architectures"—which includes "Gehry's Vertigo," a trip on the roofs of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao—by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, a husband-and-wife team of filmmakers, "Koolhaas Houselife" deals with the "afterlife" of the widely published and highly praised house near Bordeaux, France, built by Rem Koolhaas of the Dutch architectural firm OMA for the family of a successful publisher, Jean-François Lemoine, confined to a wheelchair when his life was permanently altered by a crippling automobile accident.

Designed with the express purpose of restoring a meaningful existence to its handicapped owner, this is arguably the most spectacular exercise in reconfiguring domesticity in recent times; it would be hard to find anything to equal its radical departures from convention. The result is a structure of extreme technological innovation and extraordinary beauty that has gained international fame since its completion in 1998. It has been listed as a *Monument Historique*.



Ila Beka and Louise Lemoine  
'Koolhaas Houselife' looks at a great house through the eyes of its maid.

What we are really talking about are two houses: the one with the buffed and polished public image, dramatically photographed and perfectly photoshopped, ready for a fashion shoot on an ideal day; and the house where people live and deal with the paradox of a building that exhilarates and breaks down in equal measure. It is this latter house that the film explores from the point of view of those who use and maintain it. And it is the gap between the conceptual and the actual, how architecture intersects with a world unprepared to cope with the unusual

demands of a work of art, that is its deeper and more significant theme, something glossed over or carefully avoided by the architectural establishment because acknowledging the disconnect might somehow deny or distract from the creative act.

The film examines this neglected territory and potential minefield with disarming wit and candor. What Mr. Koolhaas, the architect, politely refers to as the adjustments of "post-occupancy" the rest of us might call a reality check. Instead of the standard presentation of carefully edited images and fulsome praise by "experts," we see the daily cleaning routine and hear the commentary of the housekeeper, Guadelupe Acedo, who has successfully fought the house to a draw on her own terms.

The building is set into a hill with panoramic views of the Bordeaux countryside and the Garonne River. Glass walls open to the spectacular vista, eliminating any sense of enclosure or confinement. The structural engineering—a cantilevered slab anchored to the ground by an enormous beam—is as startlingly unconventional as the plan.

At the center of this unusual plan is a very large moving platform, on which Mr. Lemoine's wheelchair and desk were located, that goes up or down to the building's three levels, from the bedrooms above to the wine cellar below. (When he died in 2001, his widow and the architect continued to make changes and add refinements.) As the platform comes to rest at each level, it becomes part of that floor for unimpeded wheelchair access to everything at that level. A bookcase that runs the full height of the house can be reached by the occupant of the moving platform.

This is the kind of brilliantly innovative design that moves life and architecture into new realms and also tries men's souls. It requires a trade-off between the glorious and the mundane, the day-to-day maintenance and fixes needed by any house over time—exacerbated here by unprecedented design and technology—and enormous dividends in personal experience. There are those who find their lives forever changed in wonderful ways by living in such a space and those who are undone by discomforts that send them running back to the cover of reliably conventional domiciles. Some count the leaks (and they are numerous and torrential) and others see the sky.

Anyone who delights in the popular sport of debunking will be disappointed by a film that tacitly accepts the ingenuity and elegance that raises this building to art. Nor is it payback for its perceived failings, although Ms. Lemoine is one of the children who grew up in the house and is intimately acquainted with its challenges. She claims to have weathered the experience unharmed. But there is some modest mischief in casting Ms. Acedo in the role of architecture critic—so enjoy the film, if you can find it, which may be difficult. Although it has been shown extensively in art and architectural venues in Europe, to date it has been seen in the U.S. only at Harvard and the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York, the limited habitat of the architectural cognoscenti. It has achieved a certain cult status, but it deserves wider distribution. (Three short trailers can be seen on the movie's Web site, [www.koolhaashouselife.com](http://www.koolhaashouselife.com).)

Ms. Acedo is a star, a woman of determination, ingenuity and forthright opinions who can match anything the house throws at her. As the film starts, she stands on the platform surrounded by her pails, mops, brooms, rags and vacuum cleaner while it rises slowly to the strains of a romantic Strauss melody. (Actually, she does not use the platform, preferring the arduous stair route ever since she got stuck between floors and a technician had to crawl through the books to reach the controls.)

She even succeeds in confounding the notoriously self-possessed architect, in his recorded 10-minute response to the film. One sequence shows her aggressive cleaning of one of the house's most offputting features, a punitive spiral stair consisting only of toe holds in a round concrete void open to the rain, unfazed by the seeming impossibility of dragging a vacuum up it. Mr. Koolhaas is momentarily flummoxed by the irreconcilability of his architecture and her cleaning methods.

But only momentarily. He quickly redefines the subject as the collision of two systems—"the platonic conception of cleaning and the platonic idea of architecture"—which I take to be the consideration of each on an elevated abstract plane of theoretical existence. Anyone who has ever done any cleaning knows that is not where it lives.

Let us concede the point: It is clear that the job is being pursued with familiar and archaic methods and devices that seem surreally unrelated to the task at hand, revealing how out of sync the vision—no matter how beautifully executed—and the result can be. Mr. Koolhaas then moves on to a still higher plane, explaining how outmoded ways of thinking impede architecturally inspired change with examples on the urban scale.

Back to the house. Here is Ms. Acedo fashioning a spout out of a plastic cup with its bottom knocked out, placing it in a hole to direct one of the leaks into in her bucket, and here she is demonstrating the "joystick," the illuminated pole that opens the house (there are no keys) when pulled back and forth the right way, sending frustrated users to the service entrance. She rubs soap on a floor track to get a balky glass panel started after the settling of the house has jammed it. For more technical problems there is a "house doctor" on call for solutions to dysfunctional and deteriorating prototype mechanisms. Window washers appear monthly to perform acrobatics on the huge window walls.

"Well it's different you know," Ms. Acedo explains. And while she respects "the taste of others," it's "not the right way," and it's "too gray," and if she had the money she wouldn't build it. "There's nothing holding it up," she points out. "I hope it doesn't fall down." Still standing, it is besieged by busloads of earnest architectural students and Heritage Day tourists.

Beautifully photographed, the film conveys much of the magic of the house—the superb setting, the changing light, the building at dusk, the pleasure of being there. Still, it is not about to change the preferred way of looking at architecture as a flawless wonder. Aided and abetted by the media, the hyped image feeds a culture of artifice and novelty constantly in search of the new. "Koolhaas Houselife" offers a sympathetic, corrective viewpoint. This is the reality, and reality is never simple, but neither is architecture. We can accept the challenge of an art that enriches our existence and roll with the consequences, or live diminished lives.

—Ms. Huxtable is the Journal's architecture critic and the author, most recently, of "On Architecture: Collected Reflections on a Century of Change" (Walker & Co.).

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