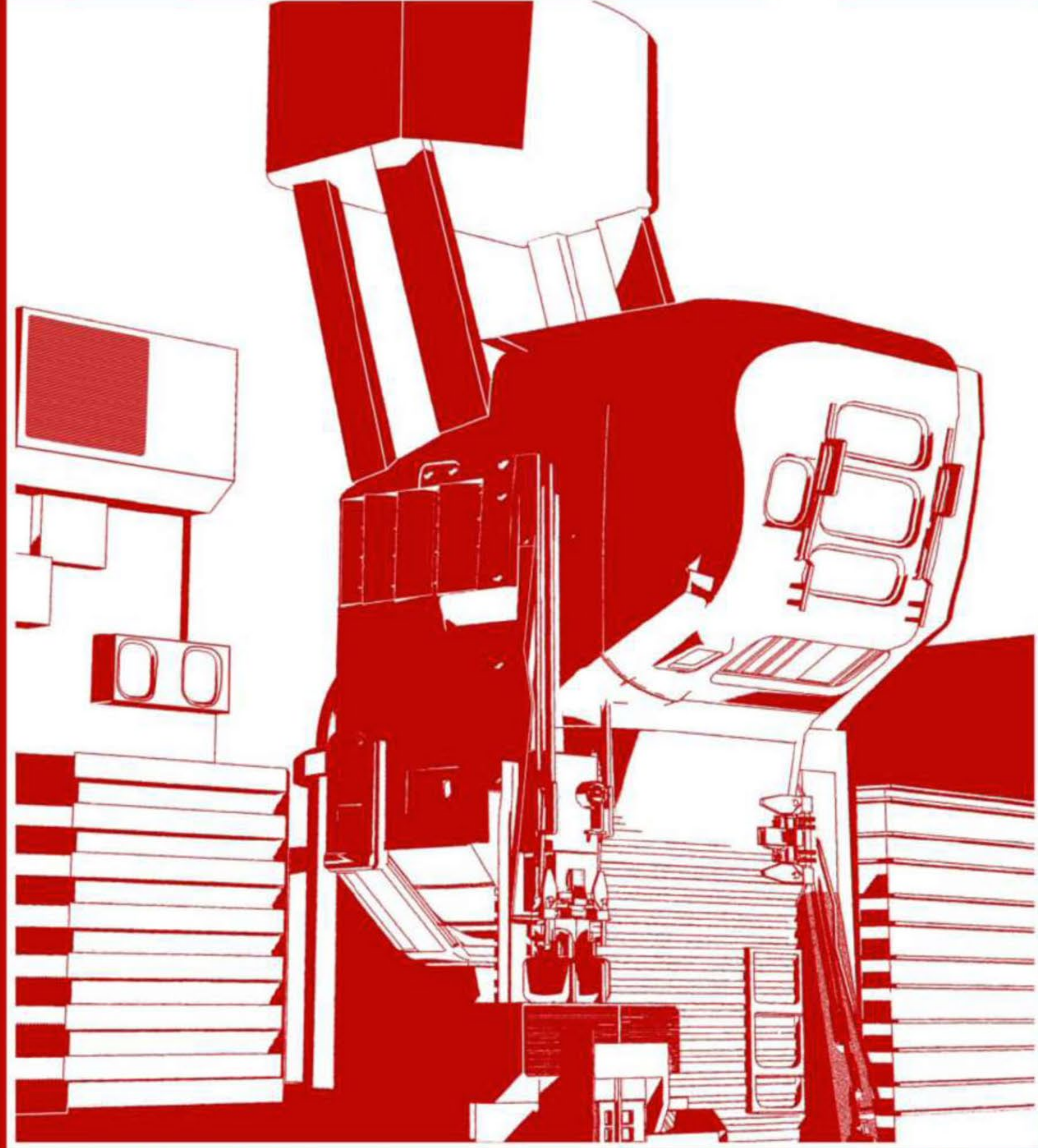


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Strategy, Tactics, and Victories of the Everyday in *My Architect*, *Exhibition*, and *Koolhaas HouseLife*

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"To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets."

de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life.

This paper explores moving image representations of the built environment through the lens of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* in order to interrogate ways in which architecture has the capacity to carry meanings as written by bodies or physical acts. User's relationships with spaces are portrayed in the following examples: childish, subversive reappropriation in *My Architect*; an intimate and intense relationship with domestic spaces in *Exhibition*; and a housekeeper's unusual and resourceful approach to an architectural icon in *Koolhaas HouseLife*. Michel de Certeau's theory of strategy and tactics is used as a way to open up the interpretation of the aforementioned practices. In Nathaniel Kahn's film *My Architect*, the son writes his own memories of his father by following in his footsteps and visiting buildings designed by him. *Exhibition* amplifies the everyday life by portraying a couple of artists, their processes, and the power dynamics between them. In *Koolhaas HouseLife*, the use of tactics offers an alternative way of viewing high architecture, from the position of the "weak" against the "proper". The selected films share the portrayal of idiosyncratic practices inside spaces that belong to the imposed order of the architectural canon. Architecture, as seen through these movies and via a corporeal experience, is something

temporal, dynamic, and subject to transitions. De Certeau's "practices that invent spaces" help shift the focus from who makes architecture to who uses it, providing an outlook that disrupts the status quo.

The on-screen dissonance between the mundanity of everyday life and what is considered "high architecture" is not only curious, delightful, and sometimes humorous, but also a powerful tool to reveal and construct new narratives on buildings and spaces. In this study, I attempt to connect Michel de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* with three separate cinematic works in order to investigate the interpretative capacity of everyday practices to construct new meanings. In Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect*, I will look at purposeless, childish, subversive practices; Joanna Hogg's *Exhibition* will provide an example of everyday life amplified through art. In the last section, looking at *Koolhaas HouseLife*, the focus will be on overlooked, hidden activities of care and maintenance. These practices will be examined against de Certeau's theories of "place" versus "space" as well as "strategy" and "tactics," to demonstrate how the practice of everyday life can alter the meaning and perception of iconic architecture, playing on the theme of the improvised versus the institutional.

Whilst de Certeau describes "place" as "an instantaneous configuration of positions"¹ and something that "implies indication of stability,"² "space," on the other hand is seen as something much more dynamic, something "actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it." "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities."³ Space is practiced, dependent on time and context, and caught in the ambiguity of transformations.

De Certeau's "strategy" represents the institutions of power, the established order, and the producers. It is "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power [...] can be isolated from an 'environment.'"⁴

Tactics on the other hand are used by consumers and "poachers", they are opportunistic ways of momentarily adapting and transforming spaces by the practice of everyday life. De Certeau defines tactic as "a calculus which cannot count on a "proper", it is something that "depends on time - it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized <on the wing>. Whatever it wins, it doesn't keep."⁵ De Certeau sees consumers and their tactics as a productive force and their practices are interpretative.

Gaston Bachelard conveys similar sentiments in "The Poetics of Space" where he writes that we can "write a room, read a room or read a house."⁶ He describes the memories of a childhood house, draws comparisons between the act of reading and experiencing space, classifying both as interpretative practices. Professor of Architecture and the Moving Image at Cambridge University, Francois Penz, is also interested in the potentials of cinema to depict "lived and practised spaces."⁷ In *Cinematic Aided Design, An Everyday Life Approach to Architecture*, Penz poses a theory that cinema provides architects with an unparalleled wealth of post-occupancy studies.⁸ In chapter one, titled "The Case for Everydayness" the author sets out the academic background of everyday life studies, mentioning key authors such as Lefebvre, Barthes, Perek, Certeau. De Certeau's literary angle and his particular interest in consumption studies and everyday people as "producers" of spaces makes him particularly relevant to this study. The movie examples discussed here also revolve around the "everyday hero" figures, the underdog "producers" set against the background of high architecture, connecting to de Certeau's theory of strategy and tactics. Anthropologist Shannon Mattern in her article titled *Maintenance and Care* touches on the power relations between innovation and maintenance, advocating that the latter is especially needed in our breaking-down world.⁹ Her emphasis on the often overlooked and subversive nature of this necessary work echoes de Certeau's ideas about tactics. Particularly useful for this study are Mattern's insights into *Koolhaas HouseLife* where she highlights the juxtaposition between the architect's vision and the practice of daily maintenance.

With these references, spaces can be seen as something which only comes to life through practices, architecture as something dynamic and potent, capable of taking on meanings which can be altered, destroyed, or written upon. The physical act, the presence of body in a place and the memory of motion constitutes our memories of a space.

MY ARCHITECT AND THE JOURNEY OF FILIAL DISCOVER

In Nathaniel Kahn's movie *My Architect*, the director writes a story by travelling to buildings designed by his father. It is crucial that he places himself inside those spaces and talks to their users and inhabitants rather than studying

them from a distance. As De Certeau put it, travel produces "an exploration of the deserted places of my memory."¹⁰ According to De Certeau, it is the activity of walking that is capable of producing "the body of legends that is currently lacking in one's own vicinity."¹¹ There are two sequences which are particularly helpful in explaining the body's writing of meaning. Firstly, the moment when the author "goes roller-blading in languid, effortless loops across the sublime courtyard of the Salk Institute, hanging over the lip of the Pacific, water trickling across, like a small boy showing off a new skill to his father."¹² The image (or rather, a sequence of images) is striking in its playfulness and sense of juxtaposition. A child's activity is located in a place known from stern and curated architectural photographs. By performing this action, the narrator reappropriates the place and makes new memories of it. Perhaps he seeks to understand it by experiencing it. Most importantly though, he writes his own story directly onto the palimpsest of his father's story, trying to become closer to him. This is further exemplified in the last part of the movie, when he visits Dhaka, Bangladesh and looks up towards the masterfully lit ceiling of the capitol building. "He never saw it finished", he says, and carries on looking up. The eyes of the son want to make up for it. It is difficult not to sense a strange feeling of spirituality and transcendence. The son and the father become very close in that moment, by spatial experience. The effect is amplified by a previous scene, in which Nathaniel Kahn is in the square in front of the capitol building and talks to a group of elderly men who praise the place created by his father. Having found out their interlocutor is the son of the architect, they exclaim in joy: "Very pleased to welcome you back!". The director is a continuation of his father's story and their closeness becomes tangible. In Nathaniel Kahn's movie, making memories or regaining memories of his father requires following the journey of his life's work.

The rollerblading sequence strikes with a sense of purposelessness. The action performed by Nathaniel Kahn is not an adult, rational movement, he is not getting from A to B, instead he is exploring the place in a carefree, childish way, which brings to mind what de Certeau wrote about spatial practice: "To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move towards the other."¹³ The director throws himself into testing "the other" by immersing himself in the spatial experience. For him, experiencing spaces created by his father is the closest to getting a first-hand experience of him. He does as well talk to various people who knew Louis Kahn in the movie but it is only through physical experience of his father's work that he can write his own memories of him, not relying entirely on the accounts of others.

In fact, the whole journey is a way of building a relationship through movement and presence. Nathaniel Kahn has to



Figure 1: Nathaniel Kahn rollerblading in Salk Institute. Image credit: My Architect (dir. Nathaniel Kahn) - film still collage by the author.

place himself against particular places which bear his father's presence and move towards the other. It is a child-like experience in the same way as children phenomenologically explore the world around them, touch, see, smell things for the first time, testing them. A space becomes a palimpsest saturated with meaning (only triggered by the presence of a body).

AMPLIFIED DOMESTICITY IN JOANNA HOGG'S EXHIBITION

Joanna Hogg's *Exhibition*'s main characters, D and H, are a middle-aged couple, both artists, living in a spectacular modernist villa in what looks like a well-off West London neighborhood. The vast majority of the movie is shot inside the house or in its perimeter and it is evident that the building plays a very important part and that D's relationship with it is intense and intimate. The director explores the house as a performance stage and canvas for the couple's conflict. Bar one shot at the kitchen sink, the scenes we observe are not of care, maintenance, or mundane activities that tend to take place inside people's homes. Instead, the director offers a glimpse of an amplified everyday through observing a couple of artists, their power dynamics and creative processes.

D uses the house not only as a stage for her performance art but also as a respite, although the boundary between life and art is very blurred in *Exhibition*. In scenes with a characteristic, static camera, the viewer witnesses D taking a nap on a window sill, perching in nooks and crannies, and embracing architectural elements. These gestures are unusual and one movie review likens D's behavior to that of a cat,¹⁴ suggesting a heightened intuitiveness and sensuality of those interactions.

On the other hand, scenes that describe D & H's relationship

are characterized by physical separation. Each artist is working in their own studio; they communicate via an intercom system and are on separate levels. H's office is above D's and the loud sound of his desk chair rolling on the floor testifies to his presence and adds to the strange tension of the scenes.

In a video conversation with a friend, D talks about the architect who designed the house and the fact that he lived in it for many years with his wife, in what was a "very happy marriage". She says "it's all in the walls, you know?" and that statement explains her actions: she believes the walls can carry energy or memory and so in her intimate encounters with the house she seeks to either unearth the previous happy memories or create her own, by imbuing the walls with her bodily presence.

Similarly to "My Architect", in "Exhibition" the protagonist's actions are deliberate and subversive, she spends time lingering in spaces. The camera centers on the heroine's body wrapped around a corner of the house. Stripped of movement (of the actor or the camera), these scenes rely on duration to build the meaning and the drama. Sound is used to unfold these shots in time, as well as micro movements of the background - the only two parameters differentiating these scenes from stills. In that sense, D's actions tread on the territory of tactics because of their unrecognized character: "[...] unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, [...] consumers produce through their signifying practices [...] "indirect" or "errant" trajectories obeying their own logic. [...] the trajectories trace out ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop."¹⁵

D's practices are particularly striking against the rational background of modern architecture. Modernism, a movement driven by rationality, light, space, and hygiene was meant to produce functional spaces but no architect could predict that the owner of the house would nap on the window sill - and



Figure 2: D and the spiral staircase. Image credit: Exhibition (dir. Joanna Hogg) - film still collage by the author.

yet it happened. In that sense, these scenes bring to mind de Certeau's tactics (which rely on time) as opposed to strategies (which rely on proprietorship of a place)

D engages in reading and writing of spaces. She receives and gives, immersing herself in the two-way process. Reaching, once again to De Certeau who draws parallels between texts and spaces and explains how the reader writes: "Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own "turns of phrase," etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals."¹⁶

D's understanding of spaces is in stark contrast with that of her friend's. "It's not really a family home, it's an artists home, isn't it." - confers a friend at a dinner when discussing the imminent sale of the property. The reasons for that opinion can be manifold: the associations around modernist architecture, the unforgiving steel spiral staircase or simply the fact that D and H live in it and built a story around it with their childless lifestyle. As a counterpoint to that on-screen conversation, the last scene shows the new owners, a family with small children, playing with a ball in the living room. The

view is detached, from street level, looking in through the property's large windows and it is evident the space has been completely transformed again.

KOOLHAAS HOUSELIFE: PRACTICES OF MAINTENANCE AND CARE

In *Koolhaas HouseLife*, the emphasis is also on the instinctive discovering of space, the improvisation, and "making-do". The movie follows the housekeeper Guadalupe Acedo and it is through the relationship of her body and the house that we learn about the architecture of it. Even though visually we might not be getting the best view of the interior (it is not shot with a wide angle lens to expose the spatial configuration of the building), by following the housekeeper's footprints, we might get a glimpse of what it is like to get under the skin of the building. The camera is right behind her back (similarly as in *My Architect*), while she opens up the curtains, squeezing in between two facade layers. The viewer can understand the width of the space, hear the footsteps and possibly understand better what it is like to be in that space.

With a child-like honesty and uninhibited forwardness, Guadalupe reveals the different particularities of the house, and its many faults too. The iconic house by Rem Koolhaas is juxtaposed with the clumsiness of everyday maintenance, resulting in a grotesque, comedic effect. Guadalupe is captured dragging a vacuum cleaner up a narrow staircase,



Figure 3: Guadalupe Acedo mopping stairs. Image credit: Koolhaas HouseLife, Beka & Lemoine, 2008 (production: Beka & Partners)

dealing with leaks or using a broomstick to close the curtains. This is particularly jarring because the house could be considered as an efficient machine for living - it was designed around a hydraulic platform lift, specially made for the commissioning owner who uses a wheelchair. In her essay titled *Maintenance and Care*, anthropologist Shannon Mattern highlights the absurdity of the near-impossible task of upkeeping the architectural gem of a mansion: "At one point, the long pole of Acedo's swimming pool net bonks the camera. The impact — and the absurdity of it — rings in our own heads."¹⁷

The movie approaches the house as if it was a body itself - a beautiful body yet not free of issues and particularities - noises, cracks, leaks. Together with the juxtaposition of Guadalupe's body, it creates an intimate and rich story. Guadalupe knows the house's nooks and crannies like no one else, her story is intimate and physical and written upon the image of Maison Bordeaux.

All of Guadalupe's interactions with the house are measured in body parts or extensions of the body (like the vacuum cleaner or mop). She knows exactly what will fit and what will not. She touches the house every day. In many ways, it can be seen as similar to what Nathaniel Kahn did by rollerblading

in Salk Institute - measuring the space, testing it out, placing himself against the "other".

Koolhaas HouseLife echoes some of the notions set out by De Certeau in his dedication in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: Guadalupe Acedo is very much a common heroine. She represents the overlooked who are at the same time so numerous and instrumental in running households. Her position as an outsider is underscored by her identity as a foreigner in France and the fact that she is a live-in housekeeper further plays to the power relations as described by de Certeau. Her perspective is that of the back door, the maintenance side of things, the "making do". What directors Beka and Lemoine have in common with De Certeau is that they present the ordinary people as the producers of space and their practice as creative and interpretative.

In *Koolhaas HouseLife* the use of tactics as opposed to strategies is particularly apparent as we follow Guadalupe who invents different kinds of impromptu methods of dealing with manifold problems that arise in the house. The contrast between what we consider as a work of high architecture and the mundane daily activities involved in managing it on a day to day basis is stark and in many ways entertaining, especially as we learn about all the imperfections and quirks, which arose most probably due to experimental design and non-standard building methods. In the scene titled "leaks" Guadalupe inserts a scored and folded plastic cup into a hole in a concrete wall, to prevent the water from running down the wall and forming a funnel to allow it to dribble into a bucket. It is a tested method, she says, she has done it before and that the problems are "never ending". A male handyman adds from behind the camera: "do it properly". Guadalupe seems to be an indispensable person in the house, she knows it very well and knows all the issues in detail, yet when she is asked in the previous scene what her favorite part of the house is, she says: "I like it all, but I don't use it, I am just here to clean". Yet, in the movie, she is precisely the person who uses it the most and has the most intimate relationship with it. The everyday practices of Guadalupe Acedo are a manifestation of what De Certeau described as "victories of the <weak> over the ."¹⁸ It is the victory of tactic with strategy, of the improvised with the institutional, of a clever trick within an established system.

All three discussed movies show spaces transformed (written) by physical acts of bodies. All of these actions are particularly intimate and often they constitute unusual modes of using those spaces. The practices of everyday life (the walking, the making-do, the improvisation, the fleeting and the temporal) have the power to manipulate spaces and make new memories, whilst subverting the established narrative around them.

Spatial experience is rediscovered by the different authors in



Figure 4: Maison à Bordeaux by OMA. Image credit: Hans Werlemann / Copyright OMA.

their dealing with space and memory as something dynamic and sensual. Tapping into the body and the meanings which it can create through experiencing and interacting with space brings out a depth that is not otherwise accessible. The vagueness, softness and instability of the corporeal experience is a makeshift thing, dependent on circumstances and subject to transitions but it has a unique capacity to subvert the status quo, and to quote De Certeau again, "open up habitable spaces."¹⁹

Architecture, like memory, is temporal, but architecture also has the means to store a memory. The practices of everyday life can offer a form of resistance in manipulating spaces, writing meanings, making memories. In all discussed examples the practices are indispensable for understanding the space and as De Certeau puts it "one can measure the importance of these signifying practices (to tell oneself legends) as practices that invent spaces."²⁰ In line with De Certeau's theory that "Reading [...] introduces an "art" which is anything but passive,"²¹ the spaces presented in *My Architect*, *Exhibition* and *Koolhaas HouseLife* become activated and meaningful by the practices that are performed in or against them. The characters who use (read) the spaces inevitably also

manipulate (write) them. By using iconic architecture as a background, the movie directors emphasize the idiosyncrasy and informality of tactics which take place inside them, to present (write) those spaces anew.

What do Guadalupe Acedo, Nathaniel Kahn, and D and H bring to architecture? The intimate encounters of bodies and physical space as presented in moving image can help expand the question of what architecture is. The practices of everyday life, as viewed through the lens of strategy and tactics can lead to creation of spaces as richer, more potent, dynamic, fleeting, and meaningful.

ENDNOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 117.
2. Ibidem, 117.
3. Ibidem, 117.
4. Ibidem, xix.
5. Ibidem, xix.
6. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 14.
7. Francois Penz, *Cinematic Aided Design: An Everyday Life Approach to Architecture*, (London; New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group,



Figure 5: Guadalupe Acedo using the platform lift. Image credit: Koolhaas HouseLife, Bêka & Lemoine, 2008 (production: Bêka & Partners)

- 2018), 21.
8. Ibidem.
9. Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care", *Places Journal*, 20 November 2018, <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>.
10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 107.
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12. Deyan Sudjic, "Tell Me about My Father", *The Guardian*, 24 July 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/25/architecture>.
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14. Peter Bradshaw, "Exhibition review – Joanna Hogg creates a masterful cinematic enigma", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/apr/24/exhibition-review-joanna-hogg>.
15. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), xviii.
16. Ibidem, p.xxi.
17. Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care", *Places Journal*, 20 November 2018, <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>.
18. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: Univ. of

California Press, 1984), xix.

19. Ibidem, 106.

20. Ibidem, xxii.

21. Ibidem, xxii.