

DAMN!

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A Conversation on
Happiness

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LIVING LIFE IN BRICKS

WORDS BY MARK SMITH



Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine

Slick and over-produced, architecture marketing bears little relation to the happiness homeowners find in their dwellings. The work of Bêka and Lemoine, foremost architectural artists and filmmakers, captures a more nuanced and human relationship, the story that's rarely told in relation to our built environment.

Seen from the dubious vantage point of 2020, the titular subject of 2017 documentary *Moriyama-San* may just have it all worked out. From his acrobatic reading habits to his penchant for atonal noise music, 79-year-old Tokyo resident Yasuo Moriyama knows exactly how to amuse himself for long stretches alone inside his home – a building designed by the Pritzker-prize winning architect Ryue Nishizawa, no less – without ever resorting to baking banana bread or arranging books according to the colours of the rainbow.

“He lives in a sort of island of voluntary isolation, in a microcosm that looks like him – architecture has created a happy environment which is a protective extension of himself,” says Louise Lemoine who, along with her husband, Ila Bêka, makes films exploring the human side of so-called iconic architecture, buildings which derive their status, she says, from “impressive media exposure, the unusual qualities of the building itself or the notoriety of the architect.”

Things aren't always quite this cosy. Bêka and Lemoine began their unusual practice with 2008's *Koolhaas Houselife*, a film that trails middle-aged Spanish housekeeper Guadalupe Acedo as she negotiates her way around the Maison à Bordeaux, a modernist country residence designed by Rem Koolhaas of OMA for Lemoine's late father Jean François, a newspaper publisher who was paralysed in a traffic accident. One of the few high-end residences created with disability front of mind, the house is a sort of architectural pin-up, its integrity protected by the *Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques*. Yet the film dares to scrutinize its real-world defects – its fragility, its technological shortcomings and its copious leaks – through the eyes of a woman tasked with its arduous daily upkeep.





Koolhaas Housewife, 2008



PROJECTS & PERSONALITIES

The Infinite Happiness, 2015

While the building remains an object of wonder and fascination, its presentation in *Koolhaas Houselife* is largely at odds with the reverential register applied to buildings dreamed up by so-called starchitects, with Guadalupe daring to crack a joke about Koolhaas' outsized ears.

"Even so, when she speaks of architecture, Guadalupe knows she's not using the 'right' language and so she apologizes," says Bêka. "We are totally frustrated by the power of the experts and it's a big desire of ours, to open up this conversation."

The hyperreal renderings and heroic photography of real-estate marketing are another absent counterpoint in Bêka & Lemoine's cinematic "living diaries", says Lemoine.

"The idea of happiness that we are sold is a very pale concept with no depth of emotion," she says. "It's just shopping. We started making films about architecture to try to balance out or contradict the lack of diversity in the way contemporary architecture is represented. We wanted to make films that are much closer to reality, that show what it is to live in

those spaces on a daily basis and also the emotions they provoke in the lives of anonymous people – not only for the architect or the rich owners."

In *The Infinite Happiness*, their 2015 film observing life at the giant 8 House complex built by Bjarke Ingels in the suburbs of Copenhagen, smiling residents are seen embracing the spirit of communal living in which the project was conceived – dining together, pottering in workshops and riding unicycles between the apartments, which are accessible without recourse to elevators or stairs.

"You notice a certain degree of collective happiness based on the fact that the building has gathered people looking for a similar kind of life and values – the idea of community and a sense of well-being," notes Lemoine.

In one memorable scene, Lemoine is seen scooping up one of the many dazed birds that quiver on the ground adjacent to the mammoth building, having flown into its glass façade. This, presumably, is not the kind of proximity to nature that Ingels et al had in mind.

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In their work as teachers (they run a film-based unit at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London), Bêka and Lemoine say they try to encourage their students to “uncover the political and economic forces of the city, and reveal the poetic richness of the ordinary.”

All the while, however, the duo are careful to maintain compassion for the plight of the architect operating in late capitalism. “To be an architect is so complicated,” says Bêka. “You have to study for a long period of your life, then struggle to find clients who have the money and will allow you to make your incredible building.”

Furthermore, Lemoine acknowledges the “painful detachment from one’s own work” that must inevitably result from an architect handing over his or her creation to its inhabitants. She cites the example of Le Corbusier –who lived to see his meticulously designed workers’ dwellings given decidedly unmodernist guises, including that of an Alpine-style chalet –and compares this ceding control to the experience of having children.

“They don’t necessarily grow up as you wish, because in the end you have created something autonomous.”

The pair describe themselves as nomadic, working from whichever city currently has their focus as filmmakers. After 2019’s touching *ButoHouse* – documenting a chance encounter with choreographer Keisuke Oka who spent 15 years building an “improvised” concrete tower only to learn that it contravenes Tokyo’s building regulations – the last of their Japanese films is *Tokyo Ride*, accompanying the aforementioned Ryue Nishizawa as he drives around town in a vintage Alfa Romeo.

“He is fully Japanese but totally amazed and fascinated by the brutality of occidental culture, and he has the style of an occidental rock star in the film,” says Lemoine.

These days they rent an apartment in Venice. Bêka says the world’s only pedestrian city is “a kind of paradise” for their two young children. “Living here underlines all the reasons we need to stay apart from cars – the danger they create, the noise, the aggression.”

Our interview happens just two days after the first successful realization of Venice’s long-delayed flood barrier, the Mose project, which for now at least seems to have saved the city from the deluges Bêka & Lemoine have documented as part of their itinerant *Homo Urbanus* project.

So, I wonder, do they consider themselves happy, here in the city that Truman Capote once compared to eating an entire box of chocolate liqueurs in one go?

“We have two very happy kids with two very tired parents,” says Bêka. /

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