

Another Architecture N°59 December 2015—January 2016

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‘Architecture itself is something human’

Filmmakers Ila Béka and Louise Lemoine show how buildings can have an impact on the way you live.

Text
Grant Gibson



Ila Béka and Louise Lemoine.
Photo: Héctor Lalanne-Castellano



Left The documentary *Koolhaas Houselife* (2008) follows cleaner Guadalupe Aceo while she's at work in the famous *Maison à Bordeaux*, designed by Rem Koolhaas. The house was commissioned by Louise Lemoine's father, who was paralysed in an accident.

Photo: Béka & Lemoine

Right For the film *Barbicanie* (2014), Béka and Lemoine spent a month in the Barbican Centre in London. They portrayed a wild variety of colourful characters that live or work in the highly fashionable, brutal complex.

Photo: Marco Mesa

The

manner in which architecture is portrayed in the media has been a source of debate for some considerable time. Back in 1998, for instance, critic Martin Pawley wrote: 'Unlike the reality of practice, the unreality of criticism teaches us that buildings should be something more than mere images erected around serviced floor space. Architects know the falsity of this proposition. They know that all buildings are bits of other people's ideas, the flotsam of plagiarism, the work of unsung assistants, the result of prejudice, bureaucracy, money, time and wayward subcontractors.' It's a sentiment that sprang to mind the first time I saw *Koolhaas Houselife*, a film by the husband-and-wife team of Ila Béka and Louise Lemoine. First released in 2008, the hour-long documentary follows the travails of a cleaner, Guadalupe Aceo, as she goes about her duties in *Maison à Bordeaux*, designed by Rem Koolhaas. Created for Lemoine's father, who was left wheelchair-bound after a car accident, the extraordinary house is most notable for the platform at its centre that could lift his office desk and chair past shelf after shelf of books and on to one of its three levels.

The sensation of having her family home paved by journalists and photographers illustrated to Lemoine the gap between the media's interpretation of the building and the reality of actually living inside it on a day-to-day basis and proved the inspiration for the film. 'I was on the private side but also looked at what was published,' she tells me over Skype. 'My concern was to reintroduce a certain reality into the presentation.' 'We wanted to show the human side of the architecture,' adds Béka, who studied architecture in his native Italy before moving to France. 'To show that there's not only the beautiful picture but there are people who are living inside, the architecture itself is something human.' Which is exactly what they did, filming water pouring through the ceiling and onto the television, a hole in the concrete wall and a string of other grumbles. The movie rapidly became a cult hit in architecture circles, with Koolhaas to his great credit able to see the lighter side (OMA has since collaborated with the filmmakers on a couple of occasions, most recently on the Fondazione Prada in Milan).



It subsequently spawned the *Living Architecture* series that attempted to do a similar trick with buildings by the likes of Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, Renzo Piano and Herzog & de Meuron – to critically diminishing returns, as the pair freely admits. 'We had a lot of difficulties making the films, because when you go to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, for instance, you face an army of public relations. All the institutions are invested in protecting their public image, this is a real problem for us. We had to be diplomatic, which is why the results don't always meet our own high expectations. Each time it's a sort of exercise for us to find the space and freedom in between the constraints and censorship,' confesses Lemoine, who does the lion's share of the talking.

Over the last 12 months, however, there has been a subtle shift in their output, with three films – *Barbicanie*, *The Infinite Happiness* and *24 Hours Sur Place* – that, while still driven by architecture and urbanism, concentrate rather more on people and personalities. 'We are still on the same path, looking more on the social side of architecture and urbanism,' confirms Lemoine. 'Humanity is definitely >

our subject and until now we've tried to link it very much with architecture – architecture was very much at the forefront. Now we're interested in dealing with how architecture and urbanism can have an impact on the way you live, dealing with people as our main subject.'

This new approach started with a commission from the Barbican Centre, the famously brutal development, replete with a world-class art centre, designed by Chamberlain, Powell and Bon in an effort to transform an area of East London devastated by the bombing in the Second World War.

Opened in 1982, it initially garnered a mixed reaction from the aesthetically conservative British public, but in more recent times it has become a hugely fashionable (and very expensive) place to live. Bêka and Lemoine spent a month on the estate, meeting a wild variety of people – from young professionals to elderly residents who have held on to their property as prices have spiralled – and listening to their stories. It gives the film some satisfying contrasts and more than a handful of colourful characters who are by turns comedic and, on occasion, genuinely melancholic.

The *Infinite Happiness* is an intriguing accompanying piece that investigates a more recent development, the 8 House by Bjarke Ingels on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Once again the pair spent a month getting to know the inhabitants and the estate itself. The two developments may differ in terms of scale and social mix – the 8 House is full of young families, the Barbican appears to be almost completely child-free – but it's impossible not to compare the contrasting social attitudes of the Danes and Brits, particularly their attitudes towards privacy. While front doors

are left open at the 8 House, several residents of the Barbican are at pains to point out where their territory begins and there are a handful of references to 'the magic key' that opens the main doors of the estate. As Lemoine explains: 'The Barbican is a world of much more individuality. In Denmark people are very much willing to create an experiment of a new community. It's a sort of ideal of creating a micro-society.' It is interesting that while the Danes are more liberal and infused with a pioneering spirit, there is also a homogeneity that can be seen clearly at the

end of the movie, which shows the interiors of the apartments one by one. Unlike the residents of the Barbican, where a gamut of styles and tastes can be found, the owners of the apartments in the 8 House complex all stick to a similar aesthetic palette of timber flooring, neutral colours and clean-lined Scandinavian-modernist furniture. It's eerily uniform and perfectly tasteful – yet deeply unadventurous.

While the direction of their films may have drifted ever-so-slightly, the pair have retained a wonderful eye for detail – whether it be a swirl of wind outside the Barbican's

music store strong enough to pick up bits of disused cardboard and hurl them into the air, or a cat hunting around the perimeter of Ingel's building – as well as a wonderful ear. The soundtrack, usually classical, sometimes discordant, plays a central role in all their films, as Bêka confirms: 'I'm very interested in music. Not as an accompaniment as an accompaniment – I don't like music as a background. I like to use it as a conversation with the image.'

Another important aspect is their ability to draw out characters rapidly. And nowhere is this better illustrated than in *24 Heures Sur Place*. Set over a day in Paris's recently redesigned Place de la République, the pair meet an array of occasionally extraordinary personalities who seem to reveal their most intimate secrets in moments. At one point Bêka is talking to a woman on one of the square's benches about her tattoos, she turns his camera to the man sitting next to her who reveals how his own body art was burned off with acid after he was jailed as a dissident in Iran, he rolls up his sleeve to reveal the evidence. It's a shocking sequence, which simply emphasizes the fact that you never know who you're sitting next to in a public place or the stories they might have to tell. It also shows Bêka's skill at interviewing. He's positively flirty when he needs to be, but also has the precious ability to remain silent and let his interviewee fill the space at other times. When I put this to them there's a hearty gale of laughter: 'We have to use anything that can be positive you know. We use all our opportunities. It was pretty difficult shooting. It was extremely intense and stressful. You have all these rushing people, extremely stressed, like you can in Paris. So we had to adapt ourselves to this speed,' says Lemoine. By the same token they aren't afraid to let the camera dwell on the square's minutiae. We watch a plastic bottle being kicked around for what feels like minutes before it's finally crushed under the wheels of a motorbike, for example. Passages like these – the duo often spend time on unexpected wildlife they find on or around the buildings, or film shadows and shafts of light – act as visual sorbets between the character-driven vignettes.

What these off-beat, quirky films all possess is immense charm. You empathize with the people – be it Guadalupe trying to clean Koolhaas's architecture, or the clearly depressed Odette talking about her difficult husband and living among bundles of old paper in her Barbican flat – you fall for the filmmakers themselves, in spite of the fact that you barely see them and, importantly, you learn more about architecture, the way we interact with buildings, live with their flaws and enjoy their peculiarities. By stripping back the polish of architectural photography and taking the time to understand their subject, the pair have created a new form of criticism. Were he alive today, Martin Pawley might well have approved. —

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'Bêka and Lemoine have created a new form

of criticism'

