building as a living organism, generated by the occupants’ day-to-day lives.

Koolhaas Houselife’s primary character, Guadalupe Acedo, is mischievously cast to paint the house portrait. Caretaker and housekeeper extraordinaire, she candidly exposes the wear and tear during her daily upkeep of this architectural icon. Strauss’ Acceleration Waltz accompanies her arrival and she gradually appears, head first, hand clamped on remote, from the base of the film frame. Mops, brooms, vacuum cleaner and buckets follow her apron-clad expanse as Koolhaas’ large and central concrete platform elevates towards the third floor. This is Guadalupe’s least favourite form of travel. An out of place book, on the bookcase that lines one side of the platform and runs the full height of the house, poses a serious threat - once even trapping her between floors.

Directors Ilia Bêka and Louise Lemoine subtly follow the technological flaws and never-ending maintenance of the house, dramatized by Guadalupe’s outmoded cleaning techniques. Twenty-four thematic film chapters each focus on specific elements or traits of the building that, combined, form the honest and playful interpretation of what constitutes a living space. Guadalupe drags a vacuum cleaner up the triangular precipices of the narrow, metal spiral staircase while window washers perform acrobatics on the large ceiling and wall windows. The huge metal door reflects the summer sun to burn the lawn and the ‘joystick’, an illuminated, slightly phallic lever designed to automate the front door, allows entry of its own accord. A troupe of handymen attempt to determine the source of the many leaks dripping throughout the house, but aiming a hose at the structure only encourages cascades of water to drench the living room walls. The technical systems of the house, originally designed to make the occupants’ lives easier, seem now to require a veritable team of professionals to keep them functioning.

Koolhaas Houselife exemplifies such difficulties of living in a constant show house in what constitutes a contemporary reprise of Jacques Tati’s Mon Oncle (1958). The building, exhilarating for its sheer modernist ambition and design, is breaking down at a dramatic rate. This is the first in a series of films, titled Living Architectures, to have
directly explored this tension and represented architecture, to perhaps many architects’ disapproval, as a living organism. Rem Koolhaas, although initially surprised, shares this interest - referring to it as post-occupancy - during the accompanying ten-minute interview between him and the filmmakers.

It is very seldom that the living, maintenance, preservation and decline of a building is documented or recorded. Modernism never strove to do so. Instead, as Owen Hatherley notes in his book Militant Modernism, the main ethos of ‘outrunning the old world before it has the chance to catch up with you’, encouraged slick glass and concrete structures unsuited to the buildup of human traces formed by day-to-day living. Guadalupe, although sometimes a little dramatic and traditional, highlights several of the responsibilities bestowed when living in, maintaining or conserving protected structures, which were never intended to last but rather to represent an avant-garde in permanent revolution. The late critic Martin Pawley blasted modernist conservationists as ‘quislings’, surrendering their futurist birthright for history. Similarly, the ever-growing empire of architectural heritage may mean more time conserving, and less developing. Koolhaas spoke at his and OMA’s recent exhibition in the New Museum, New York, and addressed the stagnation that ties itself to this current interest in architectural preservation: ‘A huge section of our world (about 12%) is now off-limits, submitted to regimes we don’t know, have not thought through, cannot influence.’ He continues to explain how the current fascination with the hypnotic lure of history has broadened the type of key items considered worthy of preservation. Additionally, the time span necessary to warrant official status as heritage has shortened, in some cases from centuries to just a few years. Koolhaas hypothesizes that eventually ‘we will preserve things before they are even finished.’ The once progressive cycle of design, construction, occupancy, demolition/decline has caved in and, to continue building, we may need to build space. Koolhaas Houselife does not suggest the answers. Instead, the thoughtful and playful narrative reminds us to question and re-examine many important architectural concerns, and that itself is definitely something worth holding on to.

Saskia Vermeulen is a filmmaker and art writer based in Dublin, where she co-directs a motion control, film and animation studio. Koolhaas Houselife featured at The Fourth Wall, I.F.I, 5 – 16 May 2011. Further information can be found at www.koolhaashouselife.com

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