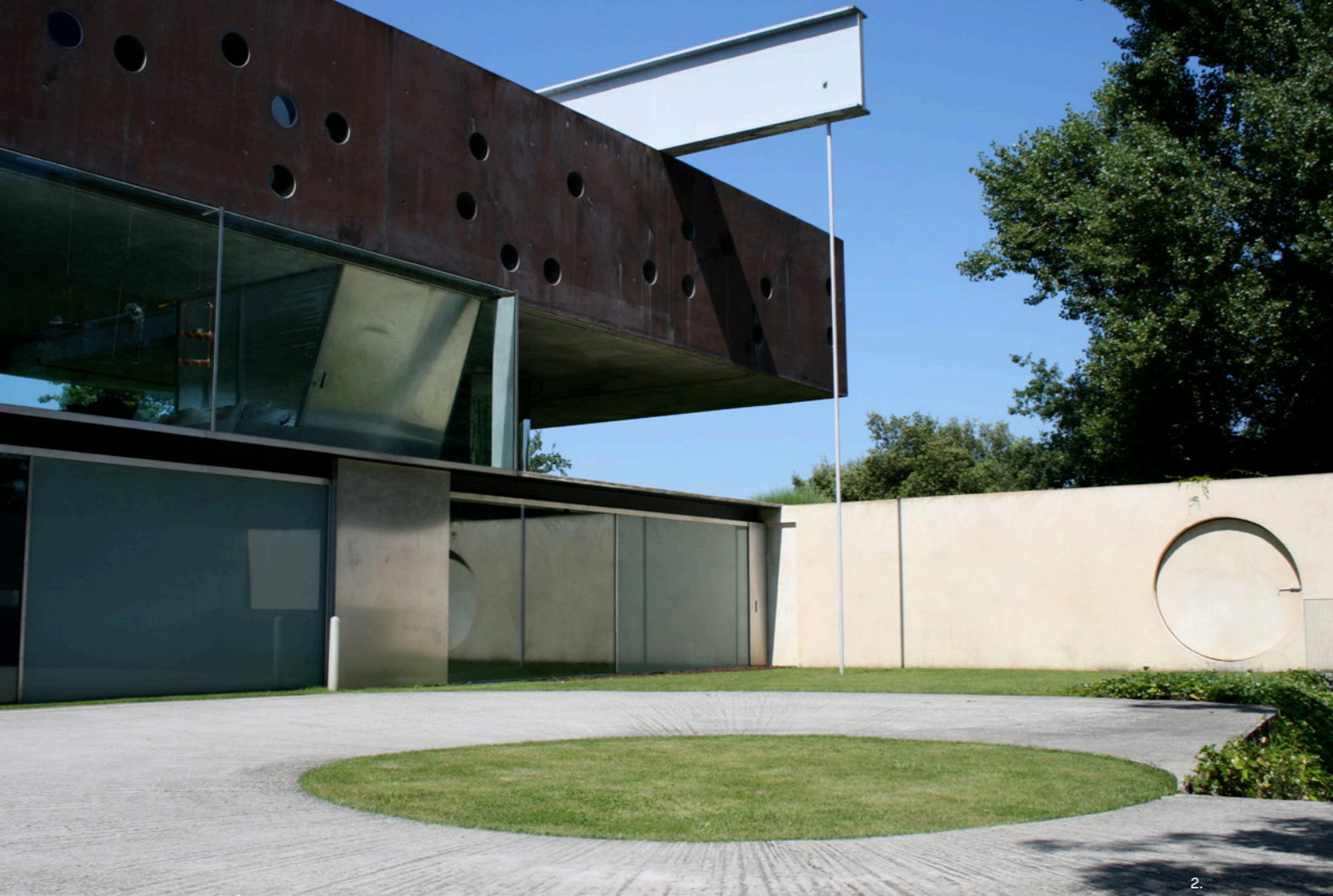


Maison à Bordeaux

**A Conversation Between Chris Dercon
and H el ene, Louise & Alice Lemoine**





- 1 — Previous page: Exterior view of the Maison à Bordeaux, designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA. Courtesy of Béka & Lemoine
 2 — Exterior view of the Maison à Bordeaux, designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA. Courtesy of Béka & Lemoine
 3 — View over the interior courtyard. Courtesy of Béka & Lemoine
 4 — Following pages: Exterior view of the Maison à Bordeaux, designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA. Courtesy of Béka & Lemoine

“Anyone entering on the study of architecture must understand that even though a plan may have abstract beauty on paper, the four façades may seem well balanced and the total volume well proportioned, the building itself may turn out to be poor architecture. Internal space, that space which cannot be completely represented in any form, which can be grasped and felt only through direct experience, is the protagonist of architecture. To grasp space, to know how to see it, is the key to the understanding of building.”

— Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura* (“How to Look at Architecture”), 1948

Hélène Lemoine is the widow of Jean-François Lemoine and the owner of the Maison à Bordeaux (Floirac). Her daughter Louise is a founder and partner of Béka & Lemoine, and Alice is a partner in Paulin, Paulin, Paulin.

Chris Dercon: I'd like to start with you, Hélène. When you built the house, did you immediately think about the interior with Rem Koolhaas and Petra Blaisse? Or was it first about the exterior?

Hélène Lemoine: We asked Rem to build a house that would be functional for a disabled man to live in, but also for a family with three children, and also to accommodate guests and friends who would frequently visit the house. All these elements were fundamental in the design that was developed. The requirements

were more important than the exterior or interior, if I may say so.

Alice Lemoine: The main constraint was circulation, as it was a response to the issue in our previous house, where our father was confined to his room because the elevator did not allow him to enter on his own and so he always needed assistance. The idea was to provide him with autonomy, so the interior was designed to eliminate any obstacles. I remember that the doors had to be easily opened so that a disabled person could move through

them without much effort. There were a lot of swinging doors, and there were very few carpets and minimal furniture, because the priority was to ensure that a wheelchair could easily move around.

H.L.: The location of the house, which Rem appreciated immediately with its panoramic views of the city, led naturally to having expansive views from the interior. The references were perhaps to glass houses or buildings by Mies van der Rohe with glass walls. So, yes, the relationship with the exterior was important.







5 — Pierre Paulin's intervention in the interior of the house at night. Courtesy of Paulin, Paulin, Paulin

C.D.: Hélène, you worked with Pierre Paulin, one of the greatest designers. Were the materials [inside the house] chosen for their tactile qualities? Was that important for you? And the colours?

H.L.: Of course. I have a great fondness for playing with colours, and I felt that Rem also had this desire to experiment with materials and colours. I had seen this in the Villa dall'Ava (c.1984-1991), in Paris, where Rem used materials that were relatively new to me, such as certain plastics or resins mixed with traditional materials like wood or concrete. There was a game, an openness with different materials that complemented or contrasted with each other, and textiles also played a significant role in the curtains chosen for the central living space.

C.D.: Soon after you moved in, Beatriz Colomina wrote an article in Domus, published in January 1999, about the house. Do you remember? Did you recognise the house in her article?

H.L.: Beatriz Colomina came right at the beginning, and the house was not finished.

The yard was like a battlefield, a no man's land where the ground was not yet laid with grass, but was covered in mud. It was as if she was arriving at a battlefield.

A.L.: We were indeed living in a battlefield for a long time.

H.L.: I think she was more emotionally struck by our unusual way of life than by the house itself. Maybe Rem was there that day; I don't remember. Later, she produced a more intellectual analysis of the architecture. But her first surprise was seeing us live in something unfinished, with a fragile character like my husband, where things were not yet fully functional. She came with a friend, driving from Spain. She was warmly welcomed by the family; I think we served her tea or a meal during her visit.

C.D.: It was a very emotional article, I remember.

H.L.: Yes, I think she was very moved and surprised by what she discovered.

C.D.: And then there was the film *Koolhaas Houselife*?

Louise Lemoine: We shot that film in 2005, but we had some production issues and didn't officially present it until the Biennale in 2008. The starting point of this film was partly about an awareness of a disparity between the reality of daily life in the house and its public life. OMA received the Pritzker Prize the year we moved in, and thus the house immediately became a monument. This ambivalence—between a family home and a monument—was something we experienced very intensely. For us, the house wasn't really a living space but more of a passage. It quickly became a site of public interest and was added to the list of historical monuments. This created an uncertainty [for us] regarding the definition of what a home is. For most people, a home is associated with intimacy, a private, hidden space, not open to the public, and this house challenged that definition from the start.

A.L.: When it was declared a monument and celebrated as such, the house wasn't yet finished...

L.L.: And the family reality became that we had to hide our lives inside the closets to



6 — Pierre Paulin's intervention in the interior of the house. Courtesy of Paulin, Paulin, Paulin

allow for public visits. *Koolhaas Houselife* starts with a scene of a group of people visiting the house on Heritage Day. People arrive to the house on a bus, take their shoes off because it is raining, and start wandering around; and then the film suddenly switches to a completely different point of view, adopting the perspective of the housekeeper in the intimacy of the house's daily life. What interested me with this film, and what sparked 20 years of research with my partner Ila Bêka, was the way architecture is usually represented and staged by the media. I was very interested, Chris, by your proposal to take part in this issue about "the ideal home", because everything we have undertaken with Ila over the past 20 years is precisely about deconstructing the idealism associated with the representation of the house and the architecture in general. If you look at the history of architecture, it is usually written as a heroic tale of success, as a masterpiece or genius; a grand mythology that both fascinates and intimidates architecture students because it speaks of 'masters' and wondrous spaces that

are more ideas and concepts than real structures. Talking about the 'ideal home' is a kind of contradiction, for me. The idea stems from this conceptual approach of architecture, which tends to detach the object of the home from its very nature as a space to be lived in. The 'ideal home' would in fact be a home without inhabitants, without the natural disorder of life.

C.D.: I think what you just said, along with what Hélène said about emotion, is a good illustration, if not proof, of what Emanuele Coccia said in his book, *Philosophy of the Home*, that a home is primarily a moral reality and only secondarily an architectural one. The home is more a philosophy than an architectural object.

L.L.: Exactly. Coccia approaches this from the perspective of both a philosopher and a storyteller. That's what makes his book interesting; he talks about his personal experiences of moving and his physical and emotional relationship with space. In architecture, there is a tendency to disembodiment and idealise space. You look at how architecture is represented;

it's all about pure lines and perfect forms. There's a process of tidying up the space before a photo shoot, which speaks volumes about how architecture wants to present itself, not as a lived space. It's an approach that denies an aspect of life, envisioning architecture without its inhabitants. When we made this film, reactions at first were very mixed. We received many enthusiastic comments, but also very negative ones, from which you could tell how we were touching a taboo subject; talking about the imperfections, aging, and wear over time, and the daily battle of a housekeeper against the disfunction of the space and its mechanical issues...

A.L.: I once tried to clean the main door and I was so irritated that stains were not going away that I used décap'four, which made a huge mark in the middle of the door that never left.

L.L.: *Koolhaas Houselife* was inspired by Jacques Tati's films, in particular *Mon Oncle*, as it addressed these subjects with humour and not in a brutal way. In *Mon Oncle*, Tati contrasts Mr. Hulot with the Arpel family, and Mr. Hulot humorously





7 — Previous pages: Exterior view of the Maison à Bordeaux, designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine

8 — Detail of the exterior façade. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine

9 — Detail of the exterior façade. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine

comments on the absurdities of modernity entering the home. Guadalupe [the housekeeper] is like Mr. Hulot in this situation; The film installs a cultural contrast between Guadalupe's very grounded, traditional approach to what a house should be and the very sophisticated and conceptual approach developed in this house. When we showed the film to Rem for the first time, he had an immediate reaction saying that Guadalupe may not have well understood how the house should be cleaned. It was quite amusing.

C.D.: After *Koolhaas Houselife*, there was another artistic intervention, with [the artist] David Claerbout, in 2004?

H.L.: David came at my request. I had met him in Brussels and loved his work. I told him I'd be delighted if he could do something at our house. He initially said he didn't work on commission and refused, but he said he would come anyway. He came in the winter, and changed his mind, agreeing to do something about the light in the house. The architecture of the house did not interest David Claerbout. What interested him was the sunlight from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. during the summer solstice.

A.L.: Yes, but at the same time, the house was designed with that in mind. I remember

there was specific work with the architects to understand how light entered the house. **H.L.:** Rem had involved students or teachers from a university, I believe in Delft, who worked specifically on how to position the house in relation to sunlight. They reached a position that wasn't quite north-south, integrating morning light onto the parent's bedroom, evening light on the children's side of the house and a north that wasn't entirely north. So, we managed to have a bit of sunlight on all four façades.

A.L.: And it was supposed to be the ideal light: in summer, the sun stops at the living room entrance, while in winter, it grazes and enters the living room.

C.D.: And another intervention that struck me was the intervention by Rem and Alice, along with Benjamin Paulin, that transformed the interior space of the house?

A.L.: At the time of the original discussions around the house, I was excited about interacting with the architects, but I was only 10-years old and, as you can imagine, I was not invited to the table. So, when I contacted Rem in 2019, it was almost for a personal revenge. I was happily surprised that Rem took an interest in this project to fully reshape the house with Pierre Paulin's modular design.

C.D.: Everything you've just said with the four examples—Pierre Paulin, David Claerbout, *Koolhaas Houselife*, and Beatriz's article—reminds me of the famous Japanese architect, Kazuo Shinohara, who wrote in the 1960s, "Residence is an art..., residence should be outside of what is believed as architecture, it should rather be considered as a form of art like painting or sculpture." Your house is not a painting nor a sculpture, but it is not an 'ideal home' either?

H.L.: Of course. It's funny. Everyone who come to see the house is amazed by its spectacular nature, but I think most of them wouldn't want to live there.

C.D.: So, it is not an ideal home. This term started in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, but we have lost what it means to be an ideal home.

A.L.: I was intrigued by a talk given by Barry Bergdoll in Palm Springs last February about modernist architecture. He showed us an image of a kitchen from the Bauhaus movement that could define their idea of the ideal home. The space was conceived in a way that the housewife could be busy in the kitchen and could at the same time keep an eye on her kids playing in the adjacent room.

L.L.: But I think the “ideal home” is a fabrication, a kind of great hoax constructed by the media—a sort of advertising invention to sell dreams.

A.L.: In a way this idea of productivity must have been very efficient to sell all the modules that should compose the interiors of the “ideal home”.

L.L.: It's a marketing trap, in a way. Earlier, I was re-reading the marvellous short text by Álvaro Siza, “In a House”, which is for me probably the best definition of what a house is—without the artifice of an advertising campaign. Like he says, a house is ultimately about leaky faucets, warping floors, squeaky doors, screws that need tightening, grass that needs trimming, and doors that need repainting. Looking after a house is a full-time job. It's a daily battle against wear and tear, ageing and the irresistible march of time. As Siza so rightly says, looking after a house is ‘a heroic act’. We are all heroes taking care of the place we live in. You are constantly engaged in this process of upkeep and repair to make things last. That's interesting. And it's far from an idealised vision. There is a certain modesty in living together with a space to make it your own, for there to be harmony between you and the space in which you live, and this necessarily involves a continuous relationship of care with the space.

C.D.: And so...

L.L.: That explains why, in the film, we emphasised representing people who take care of the house and maintain it. We were interested in highlighting the invisible world, the ‘behind the scenes’. A house embodies all these invisible aspects of care and maintenance that the architecture demands.

H.L.: It is like a relationship. The more you invest in the maintenance of your house, no matter what type, the closer you feel to it, the more you love it, the more you recognise it when you return—the smells, the creaks, the sounds, the imperfections.

C.D.: The home is also, as Tony Judt wrote in *The Memory Chalet*, a theatre of memory, isn't it? That's where the interior and the objects we use, even the colours, become increasingly important. I think we often forget to talk about the home—even an ideal home—as a theatre of memory.

L.L.: In the world of architecture, there is no more psychological terrain than the

home. Among all the typologies of buildings, the home is the place where we build the strongest psychological projections because obviously, it's the place of intimacy, family, of the couple. It is a projection of oneself, an extension of your own body and emotions. That's why I find the home to be an infinite subject to dissect. The home is simultaneously a physical reality, as well as a psychological and social reality.

A.L.: The ideal home is like the end of the rainbow; it is a personal quest. When I was a child I needed to constantly move all the furniture in my room because I felt that thinking about one's intimate space allows one to find oneself.

C.D.: And what did Pierre Paulin say on this subject?

A.L.: When Paulin built his own home, he had the very instinctive architectural vision of a troglodyte house, he started from an emotion, the very primitive need of security, to see without being seen. His perfect house was shaped by the apocalyptic vision he had of a post WWII in France and his childhood traumas linked to this violence. First trained as an artist, then he went into decorative art and used this as a refuge from adversity. It is only logical that his ideal house is a functional one, where the primary need is to feel comforted. For me, it was like speaking two languages: when we lived in Floirac, if a handle or a coat rack didn't fulfil its function of holding clothes, it didn't matter as long as it looked good in with architecture. Whereas, in Pierre's house, something I found a bit ugly had to be understood to fulfil its primary function of holding a coat or opening a door.

C.D.: H  l  ne, do you agree with what your daughter is saying?

H.L.: Alice is somewhat right because many things that Rem designed were far from being conceived for actual use; Fortunately, if you will, the requirements for Jean-Fran  ois were followed by one of Rem's partners, who worked extensively on the accessibility that Jean-Fran  ois needed for certain things, like the bathrooms, the kitchen, etc. It was well thought out for him. But it is fair to say that things did not go as far in terms of comfort for the rest of the family.

A.L.: I seem to remember that there is a somewhat amusing scene in Louise's film

in which Guadeloupe tries to get the vacuum cleaner up the spiral staircase.

H.L.: But after Jean-Fran  ois was no longer with us, we reviewed things with Rem, and suddenly, a huge rug arrived in the main room—a very thick red carpet on which the children could play. In fact, Rem and Petra Blaisse were here last week, and I asked them to work again on a notion of comfort in the living room. They completely agreed, and what is important to know about this house, is that we can continue to develop and improve it. The classification of it as an historic monument does not currently lock the interior of the house as long as Rem is alive. In other words, as long as he is here, we can work on the interiors. The day he is no longer here, we will no longer be able to do anything.

A.L.: And that's where I liked playing with Pierre Paulin's modular program in this house because it allowed me to reconfigure the spaces and allowed us all to see the house differently. The furniture in modules is a bit like a cat that spins around on its cushion a lot before finding the perfect shape of cushion to sit on. But comfort is like the idea of an ideal home—a very personal concept.

L.L.: Yes, but comfort is also a very cultural definition. I mean, we don't envision comfort the same way in Holland, France, Morocco, or Japan.

H.L.: It's also a question of generation because a younger generation has no problem sitting on the floor, rolling around on carpets, etc. At my age, 77, I no longer want to sit on the floor; I want to sit on a comfortable sofa. It's also an issue of age, your needs, your need for a warm house, a house without a draft, a house that is...

A.L.: But, Mom, you are talking about comfort in terms of use. I was thinking more in terms of when I was surprised with Paulin's work, questioning if it was good, because there were many situations where I had to understand that a good designer seeks first to fulfil functionality, that it is useful. For example, the staircase behind you. Is having a hole in the middle of the floor useful? No, but it's beautiful. But, it doesn't meet the function of a staircase that should first and foremost protect you, help you... His approach was not the same as someone who approaches from the angle of the client's constraints. Rem looked at it first from his own point of view.



10.



11.

10 — View of the living room, with the elevated platform in the background. Courtesy of B  ka & Lemoine

11 — Like everything in the house, the bathroom was designed to be wheelchair accessible. Courtesy of B  ka & Lemoine

12 — Following pages: View of the moving platform designed to access other floors in the house. Courtesy of B  ka & Lemoine





13 — Film still, "Koolhaas/House-Life" by Bêka & Lemoine. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine
 14 — Circular cement door between interior and exterior. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine
 15 — Following pages: Back stairway. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine

H.L.: Maybe in the near future I will have to ask Rem to have a handrail on the staircase to go down without being afraid of falling. I think he will address the issue. Because I have noticed that the more we make the program complex for Rem, the better he responds to it.

C.D.: Louise, hearing what we are talking about, I am wondering if you ever think about revisiting the house with Bêka again for another film?

L.L.: Maybe! What is interesting is that there are many angles to work from. Since then, we have made many other films that explore the question of the home elsewhere and in other ways. For instance, we made a film with an extraordinary man in Japan who lives in the Moriyama house, a very experimental house designed by Ryue Nishizawa of Saana. What interested us in this case was the extent to which the owner, Mr. Moriyama, developed a fusion-like dialogue with the space in which he lives. That is to say, he is someone whose every action in his life is determined by a perfect "tuning" between what he does and the space. For instance, in one room, he will read poetry because the quality of the light in the morning at 9:30 is absolutely perfect for reading haikus, or the basement of his house is suited for listening to noise music. He even changed the type of music he listens to since living in this house because he felt that this architecture inclined him to listen to noise music rather something else. So, what interests us is working on these subtle harmonies between a space and its inhabitants.

A.L.: What Louise saying is that you need a good client to help make the ideal home.

L.L.: I think that in some way, even if we are perhaps too close to the subject, every house, even if Rem had a lot of freedom, is necessarily a dialogue or a rough portrait of the client.

A.L.: No, but it is the resident who must adapt to their living space.

L.L.: Sometimes the architect will really listen, and in other cases, on the contrary, they impose a lot, and the resident will have to adapt or even endure the space for their entire life. And these are all the things Ila and I like to explore in our films.

C.D.: Speaking of Japan, I am thinking of the architecture of Su Fujimoto and Junya Ishigami. There is a new approach that is not about designing large houses, but houses are becoming smaller and smaller. I have seen it in Berlin, in Rotterdam, and also in London. What is the awareness in





16.

16-17 — David Claerbout, Bordeaux Piece, 2004, Single channel video projection, colour, stereo audio, dual mono over headphones and speakers, 13 hrs 43 min. Courtesy Studio David Claerbout
18 — Cinematic detail. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine



17.





19 — Exterior back-facing view of the Maison à Bordeaux, designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA. Courtesy of Bêka & Lemoine

terms of designing a house, the scale of a house, as the spaces become increasingly smaller?

L.L.: I think Japan is truly a pioneer in working with micro-spaces. And precisely, there are many redefinitions of what a house is, asking, in the end, what are the essential functions we must keep private, and which can, on the contrary, be shared. There are many interesting recent experiments of houses in Japan where certain services are common, like bathrooms or kitchens, in order to find smart solutions and save quality spaces for the private rooms, despite the pressure of reducing the spaces to their strict minimum.

A.L.: For me, the Japanese house remains a good example of an ideal home, in the sense that the Japanese are leaders in the alliance of poetry and functionality. That is to say, they have always succeeded in creating objects that combine a sense of efficiency and that of contemplation.

L.L.: But I think that the constraint of space not only slightly redefines what a house is and the essential functions that we must maintain, rather than having spaces for representation or social life, which are a bit extra. But also, it brings incredible attention to ergonomics for architects. When you have a house with a room that is 3 square metres, which was something absolutely fascinating that I observed in the Moriyama house, which is a house with absolutely microscopic spaces. And for

us, as Westerners, we felt like elephants in a glass cage. We didn't have the body language adapted to the size of the spaces. Every time we moved, we felt like we were going to knock something over, break an object, or fall down the stairs whereas the Japanese have more bodily discipline related to limited spaces.

A.L.: It's quite amusing because on the opposite spectrum, many people who live in gigantic houses sometimes ask us to help bring back the sense of a space and the function of a room, turning their 'ideal house' back into a home.

L.L.: The ideal house is a mirage; it doesn't exist. The ideal house is sold to you, presented in magazines, the ideal house is precisely the one you don't have.

C.D.: If ever you had to move, is there a house that you would like to move into?

L.L.: For me, this has changed recently, because for the last several years, we have had a rather nomadic life, living in several cities and different countries, and each time, we lived in apartments of people who were gone for a short or long period. So, we were living in other people's lives, which I find very interesting because a home is a space where life stories are rooted. And it's also true that when you live in a place, you don't necessarily try and find out about the history of who lived there previously. I find it very interesting because we are always passing through.

Spaces tell us this; they speak of stories that build upon each other. I think I am more interested in telling or immersing myself in the stories of places rather than necessarily looking for an ideal space.

H.L.: Chris, if I had to ask myself the question, which I don't, I would try to answer that it would not be to go live in a house made by someone else.

C.D.: Okay, yes, that's a great answer.

A.L.: I like the idea of being able to develop my own living space, so I often have the feeling of moving into my own house!

C.D.: Alice and Louise, would you ever want, at some point, to return to your parents' house?

L.L.: Doesn't growing up mean a one-way journey? Always move forward? (laughs)

H.L.: Of course, it's a topic we address, but I believe they should not come back, they should make it their own; meaning it shouldn't be their parents' house; it should be their own house, their future, their project. ✧

www.bekalemoine.com
@bekalemoine

www.paulinpaulinpaulin.com/en
@paulinpaulinpaulin

www.oma.com
@oma.eu

Spazio Nobile & TF Urban *Pedestal Collection*

In classical architecture, a pedestal is a support or a base for a column, a statue or a vase. *Pedestal Collection* includes square, octagonal, or circular plinths.

These folded and curved thermolacquered steel plinths are available on request from the gallery and can be made to measure in various sizes and an infinite range of colours.



Bela Silva, *Jardim botânico*, glazed ceramic sculptures which were part of the artist's major solo exhibition, *Caminho Tropical*, MAC Niterói, Contemporary Art Museum, Spring 2024, at hôtel de Maisons's garden, Design Miami Paris, Autumn 2024

All indoor/outdoor pedestals are produced by TF Urban for Spazio Nobile.

SPAZIO
NOBILE

Contemporary Applied Arts, Design & Photography

www.spazionobile.com
@spazionobilegallery

