

Review Article

Contextualising *Liberté d'Usage*

Alberto Geuna and Claudia Mainardi

It seemed as if we only needed a big blue sky, a kind of transposition into another world, a dream.

Lacaton & Vassal, *Café Una*.¹

Liberté d'usage

One of the most characteristic elements in the practice of Lacaton & Vassal is the way they develop the architectural project through empathy with those who will live in the designed space.² The design is thus generated from the inside, narratively, prefiguring living practices. The architectural project is understood as a sequence of actions based on a careful reading of the various design requirements and proceeds through a series of gestures aimed at generating a type of comfort not determined a priori by standard performances, but which depends directly on how a space can be used, on its *liberté d'usage*.

One of the most controversial methodological positions proposed by the duo is the desire to build volumes that encourage an optimum *liberté d'usage*. To achieve this it is necessary to exploit the potential of economical building systems, carefully weighing the spatial qualities inherent in each and cross-referencing them with costs, speed of construction, and environmental advantages. This method allows for the generation of large buildings with tight budgets, allowing for redundant space that, according to the couple, has the capacity to unlock *liberté d'usage* if adequately designed. From this reasoning, a precise positioning concerning the discipline of architectural composition emerges. For Lacaton & Vassal, architecture plays a particular

role among other disciplines involved in construction. Architects must recognise this role and limit themselves to working in their sphere with dedication and humility, allowing other figures to express themselves too. In essence, the architectural project is seen as a series of design moves based on evaluating technical and economic aspects, the ultimate goal of which is to determine a built form in which the inhabitant can enjoy *liberté d'usage*.

This attitude, as well as the interest in standardised, industrial building technologies, is essentially modern; not so much in terms of praising technological advancement (Lacaton & Vassal's work is anything but high-tech), but in the belief that the appropriate use of technology can improve the living conditions of the inhabitants and lead to a higher degree of freedom and enjoyment. Similarly, this approach allows those who design to keep control of the budget during the project itself.

Most of the qualities proposed by the couple derive from their childhood and youth spent in large Mediterranean houses equipped with large terraces overlooking the sea. In Lacaton & Vassal's view, however, one cannot exclude the possibility of a space enriched with other meanings, as lived through the imagination of the occupants. For this reason, it is necessary to guarantee *liberté d'usage*, to leave the inhabitants free to express themselves in the places they inhabit. In this sense, the rationality and economy of the architectural proposal come together with a crucial imaginative component, focused on the possibility for the occupant to inhabit space freely.

In the first chapter of their seminal book *PLUS*, Frederic Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal include a text by their mentor Jacques Hondelatte entitled 'Apartments? Areas to Make Use Of'.³ The document, originally published in the journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in June 1985, is a declaration on the architect's particular position on a specific aspect of the open project: *liberté d'usage*.

I would like to live in the Taj Mahal, the Tower of Pisa, the Statue of Liberty, the gardens of Granada, Jean Nouvel's project in La Défense, the caves of Altamira, San Marco in Venice, and the arena in Seville: do we maybe inhabit better what is not made to be inhabited?⁴

In fact, it is to Hondelatte – mostly ignored since his death in 2002 – that Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal largely owe their stance regarding openness and *liberté d'usage*. Hondelatte's position in time (graduating in 1969 and initiating his professional work in the aftermath of May '68), in space (he was almost morbidly attached to his native Bordeaux), and regarding his influences (from the drawn architecture of Peter Cook to Hassan Fathy's vernacular and the countercultural experimentations from the Third Bay Tradition) renders him a figure of particular interest to us today.⁵ Operating, as he did, from Bordeaux rather than from Paris and given the unusual collection of influences that fuelled his work, Hondelatte was able to shape French architectural discourse not from the centre but from geographical and disciplinary peripheries.

The original French title of the aforementioned article is 'Exorcisme: pour la liberté d'usage,' and it proposes a way of designing domestic space inspired by the lofts of Manhattan. Exorcism here consists of removing a priori definitions of a space:

No rooms, no living rooms, no bathrooms, no predetermination of work spaces, sleeping spaces, eating spaces. Rather a catalogue of spaces of

complementary and contrasting qualities. The small dark room, cool by the basin, the quilted floor, the large sunny spaces of the swimming pool and the alcoves.⁶

Not by coincidence, one of Lacaton & Vassal's first projects was a collaboration with Hondelatte to renovate an apartment for the Cotlenko family, situated in a historic row house in the centre of Bordeaux. Architectural critic Didier Arnaudet describes it as a collage that preserves the heterogeneity of confrontations, tensions, and interrogations;⁷ a succession of styles dictated by the desire to preserve and to add, refusing any recuperation, any logical progression, and drawing a variety of colourful and visionary spaces, bringing together the traditional and the contemporary, the artificial and the natural, playing with its constraints and oppositions.

The quality of this apartment does not lie in functional efficiency but dimensional, visual, and emotional fluidity. It is an indefinite space dedicated to the enigma, imposing its obviousness, its poetry, without metaphorical recourse. ... A strange feeling of movement and light, of amazement too. The body gets lost in it. It is a space of breathing, intimate exercise of endless becoming, living on a gentle slope, or dreaming in vain.⁸

To describe such qualities in his projects, Hondelatte coined the term *mythogénèse*, meaning the capacity of objects to not define themselves only by their function but also by their plastic properties; by their amazing propensity to come and live in our dreams, and their ability to generate myths. In Druot's terms, 'even through insignificant details, Jacques Hondelattes invites the "marvellous" to become part of everyday life and arouse the inhabitants' imagination.'⁹

A dreamy, imaginative, atmospheric dimension of the project; an intimate and intense understanding of space which is almost spiritual: in these qualities lies the concept of openness and freedom of use that Hondelatte handed down to Lacaton & Vassal.

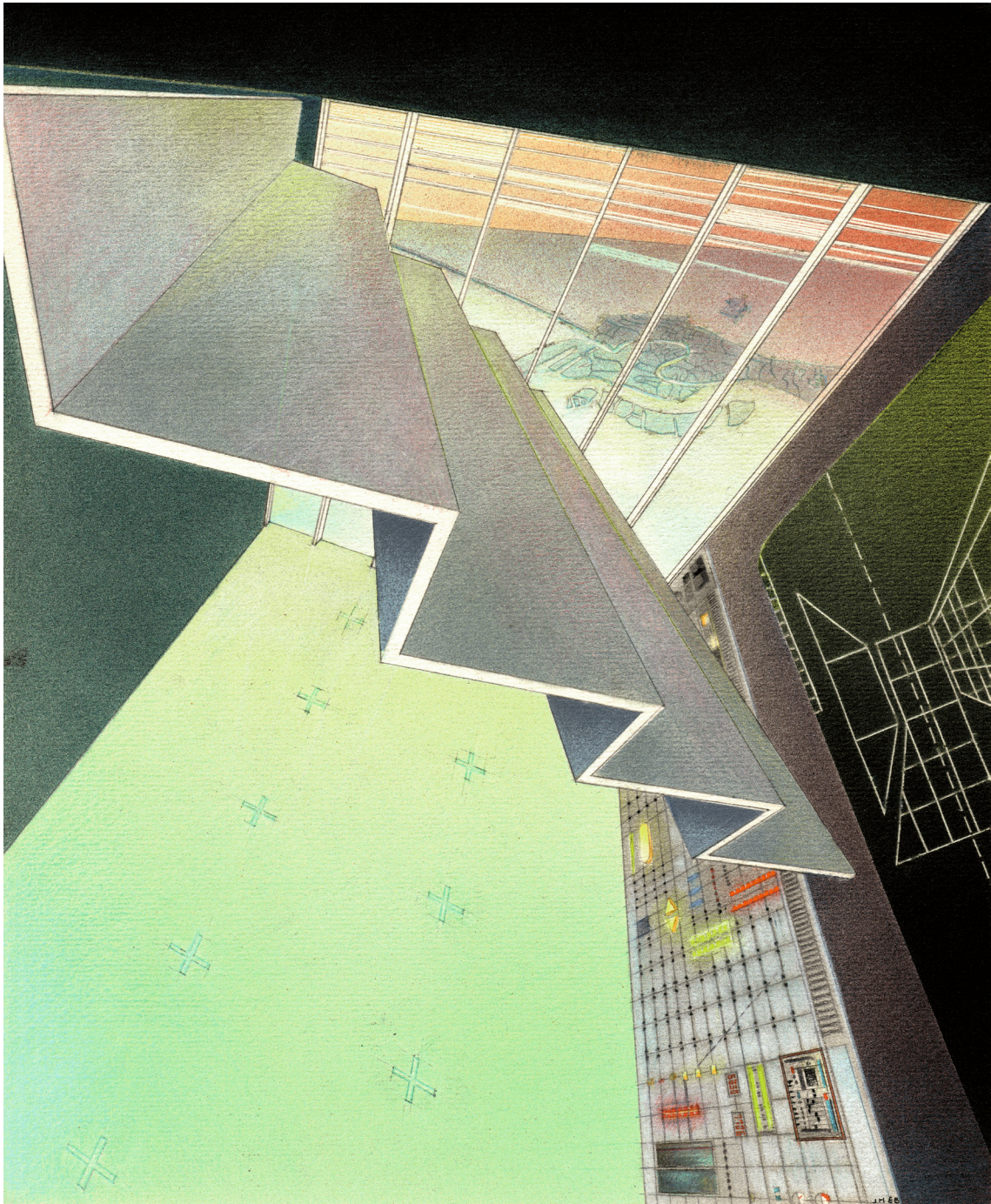


Fig. 1: Jacques Hondelatte / Epinard Bleu, *Réminiscences - Le mur des facilités: 'Venise ville contre nature'*, Chateaubriand, 1985, airbrush painting and pencil on paper, 25.7 x 21.2 cm. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.

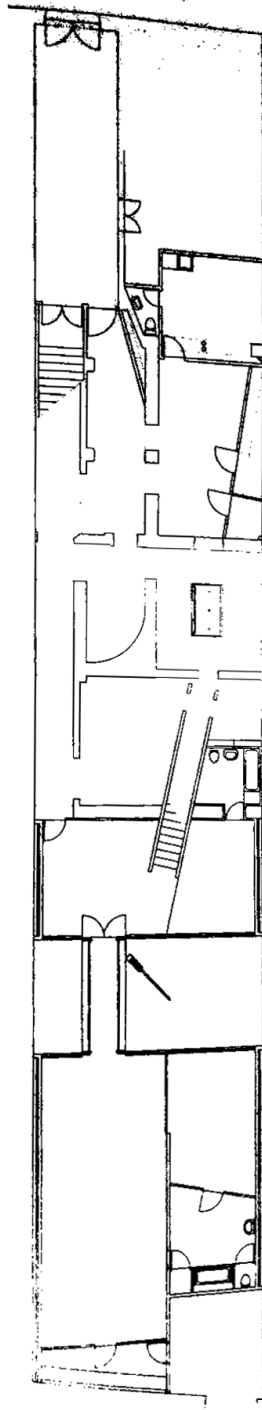


Fig. 2: Ground floor plan of the Cotenko Apartment. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.

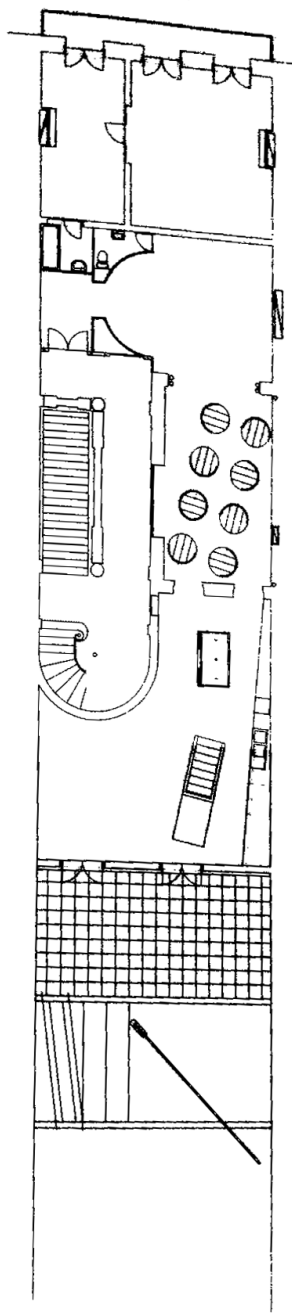


Fig. 3: First floor plan of the Cotlenko apartment in Bordeaux. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.



Fig. 4: Entrance of the Cotlenko apartment in Bordeaux. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.



Fig. 5: Ground floor patio of the Cotenko apartment in Bordeaux. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.

Liberté d'usage is not a mere form of functionalism based on the flexible construction of space. Instead, it consists of the profound understanding of a place's imaginative and atmospheric possibilities, as well as its inherent and dormant qualities. *Liberté d'usage* offers the possibility to subvert the domestic environments' rules and norms by adding a skylight, enlarging a balcony, tearing down a wall, planting an orange tree; leading to spaces 'soaked in fantasy and permeable to adventure', as Arnaudet puts it.¹⁰

Forms of freedom

In modern architecture, the use of 'freedom of use' as a distinct notion can be traced back to Le Corbusier's *plan libre* and his quest to liberate architecture from the rigid constraints of nineteenth-century construction via reinforced concrete. But freedom in the *plan libre* was more an aesthetic emancipation of the architect from the physical constraints imposed on him by masonry than an opportunity to enhance the freedom of the user:

Generated by the independent framework, the plan is free on each floor, independent from above and below. The reinforced concrete posts support the floors and allow distribution as needed. The framework itself can take on an aesthetic function. It is highlighted inside by the fillings covered with plaster which leave the structure legible.¹¹

Le Corbusier's *liberté* is thus freedom of design, not freedom of use. The free plan is drafted and tightly controlled by the architect, who for all intents and purposes neglects inhabitants' role in shaping architectural space.¹² Although more inhabitant-minded understandings of freedom in architecture were introduced by critics of Le Corbusier after the 1960s, the idea of attributing responsibility to users to make architectural space their own remained a source of deep anxiety for architects throughout the twentieth century. Rather, architects tend to allow for freedom of appropriation within specific

fixed schemes characterised by conservative views regarding social space, particularly when dealing with domestic space.

Rem Koolhaas is about ten years older than Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, and has long been identified with the attempt to break with architectural ideologies embodied in spatial programmes. He has also been lauded for his programmatic innovations, such as the production of fields of social encounter and new functional juxtapositions, but his idea of freedom in architecture does not question the order of social space. For Jeffrey Kipnis, for example, Koolhaas's version of freedom is not an overt resistance to authority but rather a form of programmatic sabotage in which the aim is to 'liquefy rigid programming into non-specific flows and events ... to weave together exterior, interior, vestigial and primary spaces into a frank differential matrix that rids the building of the hackneyed bourgeois niceties of cosmetic hierarchies.'¹³ According to Kipnis, Koolhaas wants to defy the 'social logic of space' in order to free up the programmatic imperatives that lock architecture into the service of a highly choreographed and ritualistic reproduction of social life.¹⁴

For Koolhaas, freedom – particularly in the domestic realm – is not about subverting social space but rather about demolishing and reconstructing it. An example is the *Maison Floirac* in Bordeaux, which can be seen as 'a reconstruction of the bourgeois house with its servant quarters and cellar dug into the hillside', as Kim Dovey and Scott Dickinson describe it.¹⁵ Despite being considered a radically innovative and imaginative piece of architecture, both formally and spatially, the house embodies forms of social control and gender divisions that 'are enhanced rather than challenged. In general, despite a brilliant programmatic innovation, Koolhaas misses an understanding of freedom as a form of practice: something people do rather than consume.'¹⁶

Herein lies the main difference between Hondelatte's *liberté d'usage* and other notions of



Fig. 6: First floor of the Cotlenko apartment in Bordeaux. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.

freedom in architecture. *Liberté d'usage* is a practice, it requires cooperation between inhabitant and architect. The empathy that underpins Lacaton & Vassal's projects (as it does Hondelatte's) aims to synthesise architect and client, and strives to cross cultural barriers between the two. This way it solves many of the contradictions that defined the architectural debates of the twentieth century.

Contextualising *liberté d'usage* today

So seen, *liberté d'usage* is essentially an ethical principle that regulates the relationship between architects, clients, and society. When compared to notions of freedom in the work of Rem Koolhaas, a contradiction emerges, which is rooted in different political stances regarding the counterculture.¹⁷ For all his radical thinking, Koolhaas's houses betray a conventional view of domestic space and familial hierarchy. This view is challenged by Lacaton & Vassal's approach to design, which can be linked to the May '68 slogan *imagination au pouvoir* (the imagination in control). While for Koolhaas the technocratic manipulation and recomposition of space are means towards architectural innovation, Lacaton & Vassal have a qualitative view of domesticity in which attention is directed towards the atmospheric qualities of specific spaces, and to the meaning those qualities might have for their inhabitants. Rather than complex three-dimensional models or abstract formal compositions, their designs are developed from the interior, through narrative iterations meant to prefigure the future living practices that will come to be after construction.

Each project by Lacaton & Vassal constitutes a series of gestures aimed at generating a distinct type of comfort not determined a priori by performance standards, but which depends directly on the relation between a space's form and its use. In this sense, comfort is approached qualitatively, as opposed to what is required by European building regulations. In essence, an operational aspect of the discipline of architecture is claimed, which is generally subservient to the satisfaction of

numerical and quantitative standards. According to Hondelatte, the transmission of an atmospheric sense of well-being and luxury is preferable to numerical standards. This atmosphere is not based on a wealth of materials or particular attention to finishing. Instead, it depends on access to light, air, and an articulate relationship between the interior and exterior.

In an article published in 2009, Frederic Druot – himself a student of Hondelatte's – notes how

functionality compromises the freedom of the way we use things ... Refusing de facto to recognise that the morphology and functionality of modern housing has evolved over the years is tantamount to refusing, at the same time, that the concept of the family has also changed.¹⁸

This is precisely one of the reasons why *liberté d'usage* as conceived by Hondelatte and as used by Lacaton & Vassal is relevant to the contemporary architectural debate. The different crises generated by the current COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that many homes are inadequate today, when the boundaries between work and private life are merging and family structures are being reshaped by new forms of living and demographic change.¹⁹ The study and understanding of *liberté d'usage*, seen as the design of adaptable spaces with a fluid identity, gives access to a valuable tool to deal with cultural and natural change. Most importantly, practising *liberté d'usage* allows architects to recognise the human beings who inhabit the buildings they produce in all their complexity and their idiosyncratic needs; not numbers in a programme, not digital bodies in a 3D model, but people inhabiting a place.



Fig. 7: Wintergarden in the Cotenko apartment in Bordeaux. Photo: Philippe Ruault. Courtesy the Estate of the Artist and Betts Project.

Notes

1. Extract from the description of Café Una renovation project at the Vienna Museumquartier; 'Café Una', Lacaton & Vassal Architectes, accessed September 6, 2021, <https://www.lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=13#>.
2. This position has been repeated by the architects on numerous occasions. As an example we include the following statement, regarding a project for a luxury hotel in Lugano, Switzerland: 'What is the best room? The one with the best views, so we reversed the usual proportions between meters of facade and depth'. Anne Lacaton interviewed by Patrice Goulet, Patrice Goulet, 'Conversación con Lacaton & Vassal', 2G, 21 (2002): 124. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French and Spanish are our own.
3. Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal and Frédéric Druot, 'Luxury and Ease', in Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, Frédéric Druot, *Plus: Large Scale Housing Developments – An Exceptional Case*, (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007).
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. The Third Bay Tradition (also Third Bay Area Tradition) is an architectural movement from the period of 1945 through the 1980s that was rooted in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, with its best known example being Sea Ranch. The tradition was codified by the design works of Donlyn Lyndon, Charles Moore, and William Turnbull.
6. Jacques Hondelatte, 'Exorcisme: pour la liberté d'usage', in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 239 (1985), 5; our translation.
7. Didier Arnaudet, 'Appartement Cottenko', in *Jacques Hondelatte: Des gratte-ciel dans la tête*, edited by P. Goulet (Paris: Édition Norma, 2002).
8. *Ibid.*, 99; translation by the authors.
9. Frédéric Druot, 'Not Tearing Down is a Strategy: Not to protect, freeze, mummify, but rather, so that life can continue, and because it forces us to be intelligent and prevents harmful generalizations', in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 374 (2009), 73.
10. Arnaudet, *Appartement Cottenko*, 99.
11. Eduard Sekler, *Le Corbusier at Work*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2.
12. This omission would be documented by numerous posthumous publications. Particularly, the role of Le Corbusier's clients in the design has been explored extensively in the journal *Rassegna* in its issue no. 8 (1980), titled *I Clienti di Le Corbusier* (Le Corbusier's clients).
13. Jeffrey Kipnis, 'Recent Koolhaas', in *El Croquis*, 79 (1998): 27.
14. *Ibid.*, 30.
15. Kim Dovey and Scott Dickson. 'Architecture and Freedom? Programmatic Innovation in the Work of Koolhaas/OMA', in *Journal of Architectural Education*, 56 (2002): 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. Both Koolhaas and Jacques Hondelatte lived through the 1968 uprising in their youth. As mentioned in numerous interviews, Rem Koolhaas was stationed as a journalist in Paris during the events of May.
18. Druot, 'Not Tearing Down', 67. Druot is the author of *PLUS* with Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, and was a member of Épinard Bleu, a collective of young architects formed by Hondelatte's students.
19. 'What, If Not the Family? Guests from Multidisciplinary Perspectives Discuss the Spatial Implications of Ongoing Shifts in Ideas of the Family', CCA. March, 2021. <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/29/a-social-reset/79885/what-if-not-the-family>.

Biography

Alberto Geuna is a PhD student in Architectural, Urban, and Interior Design at Politecnico di Milano. He holds a master's degree cum laude in architecture from Politecnico di Torino, and a post-master degree cum laude in architecture and urban design from the Berlage, TU Delft. He has worked in various architecture offices throughout Europe, including Sauerbruch Hutton, Lacaton & Vassal, BDR Bureau and Carlo Ratti Associati. His work with design-build collective Atelier Mobile was exhibited at the Triennale di Milano in 2018. His writings are featured in international conference proceedings and disciplinary journals like *Domus* and *San Rocco*.

Claudia Mainardi is an architect and doctoral student at the Politecnico di Milano, where she is part of the Marie-Curie EU Horizon 2020 project TACK coordinated by the ETH Zurich. Mainardi has worked for numerous offices including OMA/AMO, MVRDV, Stefano Boeri Architetti/MultiplicityLab, and Studio Folder, winning a special mention at the fourteenth Venice Architecture Biennale (2014). In 2019, Mainardi was the head curator of the exhibition and graphic design of UABB Shenzhen Biennale, and in 2017 she was assistant curator of the 25th Biennial of Design in Ljubljana. Since 2013, Mainardi is a partner in the architectural design and research collective Fosbury Architecture.

