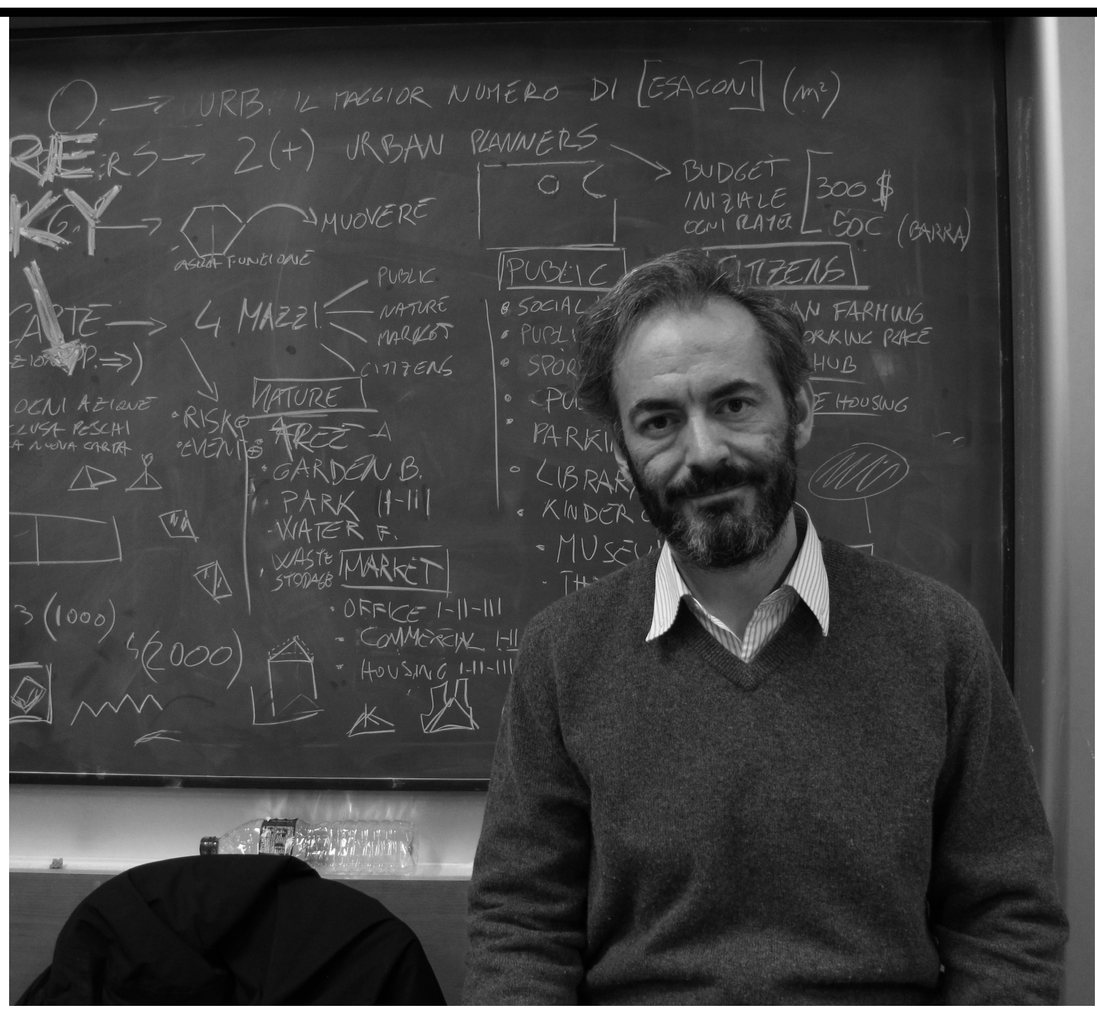

LUIS BASABE MONTALVO

Luis Basabe Montavo is one of the founders of Arenas Basabe Palacios Architects in Madrid. He is an architect graduated at TU Graz and works as a professor of Design Studio at ETSAM. He is also guest professor for Politecnico di Milano.

> “The limit of your architecture will always be the limit of your narrative.”

Elizaveta Sudravskaya: How did you decide to become an architect? Tell us about your university studies.

Luis Basabe Montalvo: I used to draw a lot as a child and my parent were afraid I would become an artist, so they told me I will become an architect. I never asked myself too much. But there was never really a critical reflection about what it means being an architect. My parents are not architects and there were no architects in close circle of friends, so I guess I became one by chance. Architecture came to me through drawing but when you start to study you loose many of those drawing skills... you start to draw like an architect, which is more or less like to write like a doctor.
Another important factor was that I learned German at school and then I went to study in a German speaking country. I first studied in Vienna and then I finished my studies in Graz, which was one of the most interesting places to study at that moment in Europe. But actually my idea to go there was by chance because I just wanted to study in German. In life things happen often by chance, but then you have to make the best out of them!

ES: In Politecnico you are well known for your game approach. What does the game mean to you and why did you choose this way to deal with the city?

LBM: It is not the first time I am using the game methodology but it always leaves me with open questions. I only use it in this kind of short workshops like MIAW, because in a long design studio you have much more tools to develop more complex approaches. Participating in the game you learn to develop your tools as an architect or a planner to work in a complex environment like Scalo Farini. It teaches you not to take all the responsibility of the project but to collaborate with other actors. I do not like the concept of designing the city. I think we shall create supports for designing the city. We want the students to model the process of negotiation on the city. A game like Monopoly, for instance, does not represent a final design, but the process of negotiation. That is precisely what we want to do here.

ES: How do you apply this process of negotiation in your architectural practice?

LBM: The question we always ask ourselves first is “Who makes the city?”. Of course, we also try to think a lot about who is the user of the city, and you can find a lot of different typologies looking at the users. But in order to escape from homogeneity in the city, we like to take one step back, and to try to understand furthermore who makes it.
You have different developers who want to maximize their benefit, improve their image or even project some ideological interest in a concrete site. Then you have public bodies, usually in form of municipalities. And of course you have the citizens, both as individuals and as society.
All these different actors are linked, for example, to very different scales of intervention. While public institutions can invest a lot at once, privates could be investing even a much bigger amount, but always little by little, in a comparatively small scale. That is why they are extremely important, and we often insist on including the small scale market as an important urban actor. Some of our games are including Nature as an urban actor, personalizing it, to give it a voice in the on-going negotiation. Just imagine, how would have the world been, if Nature had been sitting in the different parliaments?

ES: Do you think after your class the students will be ready to collaborate with the urban actors in their future practice?

LBM: One week workshop can only leave you with all these questions open, but that is a lot. What I actually expect from my students is that they leave the studio with many more questions that they had before coming. But of course I hope they will consider all the issues we raise in their future studies and practice. I hope to give them topics for their further reflections. Many of my students will be working for municipalities and other public bodies. I am sure out of my class we will have all the actors we are now representing with the game and I hope they all will think about other actors and use multiplayers schema for their approach .

ES: Is there the main skill you want to teach your students?

LBM: It is difficult to name one, because you have always look at things from many sides and have complex set of the skills. This is the main difference in the approach of architects and urban planners on one side and the engineers on the other. Engineers reduce reality in order to be more specific in the solution of problems. We do not do that. We develop the environments, we have to be inclusive and complex and put as many impulses as possible into discussion. You need many skills for that. I believe in collaboration and the good thing is that you can work in teams so you don’t have to posses all the skills yourself.

ES: Do you have a manifesto for your MIAW section?

LBM: This is a dangerous question because manifesto requires to establish your objectives in a very sharp way. I like to have changing objectives during the project. “Who makes the city?” is a question and it is the most important manifesto we could have. I do not trust so much people who have a right answer but the one who are able to formulate a right question. Our manifesto would not be an answer.

ES: How to get a job in your office?

LBM: You have to find the affinity with topics we are dealing with. It creates the attraction. If there is nothing in common I do not want to be cruel to accept this person in my office. We appreciate people who rise the same questions as we do. Then, it is fundamental to have high graphic and narrative skills. The limit of your architecture will always be the limit of your narrative. We do not place the bricks ourselves but we draw the information for other people to place these bricks. You definitely have to know how to represent your architecture.