

**PRESS RELEASE**

**EXHIBITION: "CÉSAR PORTELA, ARCHITECT"**

**Monographic exhibition** on the work of the Galician architect César Portela (Pontevedra, 1937)

**DATES:** 10 October 2003 – 11 January 2004

**VENUE:** exhibition rooms on the first floor of the MARCO

**OPENING TIMES:** Tuesday to Sunday (public holidays included), from 11 am to 9 pm.

**CURATOR:** Susana Cendán

**PRODUCED BY:** MARCO de Vigo

**COORDINATED BY:** Marta García Viña

This exhibition has been possible thanks to the invaluable sponsoring of:

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**NUMBER OF ITEMS IN THE EXHIBITION:** 26 + 112 photographs

Models	17	Documentaries (videos)	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maritime Museum of Galicia, Vigo</li> <li>Verbum - Casa das Palabras, Vigo (2)</li> <li>Cemetery of Finisterre</li> <li>Bus Station, Cordova</li> <li>Spanish Pavilion Expo 92, Seville</li> <li>House of Vicente Romo, Cesantes, Redondela</li> <li>Project Auditorium – Convention Center of Beiramar, Vigo (2)</li> <li>All-Purpose Building of Vilalba, Lugo</li> <li>Island of San Simón and San Antonio, Redondela, Pontevedra.</li> <li>Old People's Home in Barreiro, Vigo</li> <li>Domus - Casa del Hombre, A Coruña</li> <li>Convention Centre, A Coruña</li> <li>Metro of Seville (2)</li> <li>Telecommunications School, Vigo</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"César Portela: la arquitectura solidaria"</li> <li>"Gitanos sin romancero"</li> </ul>	
		Sculptures	2
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eduardo Chillida (1)</li> <li>Jorge Oteiza (1)</li> </ul>	
		Sculpture installation	1
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agustín Ibarrola</li> </ul>	
		Audiovisuals (slides)	1
		Murals	3
		Reconstruction of interiors: architect's studio and documental room	

**CATALOGUE:**

To accompany the exhibition, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Vigo has brought out a trilingual catalogue (Galician, Spanish, and English) which includes: institutional texts, a text written by the curator, and texts written on César Portela's career by: Damián Álvarez Sala, Yago Bonet Correa, Luis Fernández-Galiano, Carlos Martí Arís, Luís Rei Núñez and Farruco Sesto. It also contains reproductions of works displayed in this exhibition as well as other projects, both executed and not executed, and a biographical review of the architect.

**ABOUT THE CURATOR:**

Susana Cendán is a doctor in the History of Modern and Contemporary Art from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. She worked as a co-ordinator of the Department of Education of the Galician Centre of Contemporary Art (Santiago de Compostela), and has developed a career as an art critic and curator of exhibitions. She is currently a teacher of Art History and Theory in the School of Fine Arts in Pontevedra.

*"In my work I have always tried to avoid the commonplace, the meaningless, unsuitable materials, and fussy detail; to ignore false sirensong, resist many temptations, reject the superfluous, detach myself from the non-essential, and retain only the essence; to seek the mystery of silence through language. A silence achieved by the wish to lose my own, individual voice in the vast, anonymous territory of Architecture.*

*This is the kind of architecture I like, and with which I identify totally. An architecture that is ever more bare, simple, meaningful, increasingly personal but at the same time more anonymous; bound by unseen links to history and place that seek out the merging of Culture and life, beyond the time and the place in which it is made".*

**César Portela**

### **Biographical Information**

Born in Pontevedra in April 1937, César Portela has received over twenty prizes, notably:

- 1981 National Award for Urban Planning for the "Special Plan of Intervention in the Pazo de Oca and Surrounding Area", Pontevedra
- 1985 Award of The Architectural Institute of Japan for the "Azuma Bridge" over the River Uchikawa, Japan
- 1997 International Prize for Stone Architecture for the building "Domus" in A Coruña
- 1998-99 National Prize of Spanish Architecture for the "Bus Station in Cordova"
- 2001 Award for the Arts and Sciences
- 2002 European Prize *Philippe Rotthier* for the "Cemetery of Finisterre"
- 2003 Shortlisted for the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture Mies Van Der Rohe Award for the "Cemetery of Finisterre"

## SYNTHESIS OF THE EXHIBITION PROJECT

In the MARCO's line of activities, "César Portela, architect" signifies an important turning point as for the first time a monographic exhibition is included in its temporary exhibitions, which are generally group shows and thematic in nature.

There is a good reason for this novelty, as one of the MARCO's goals is the plurality of disciplines, the need to include in its programme disciplines that have been key to contemporary aesthetics such as architecture, design, film, the audiovisuals and so many other forms of expression. As is well known, group or thematic exhibitions on architecture are almost non-existent.

Hence the reason why we chose this project, and designed it in such a way as to bring the professional and artistic persona of César Portela closer to the public, as his career is one of the most interesting and international of the last few decades in Spain.

The exhibition offers a tour of his entire work, from his earliest projects – such as the paradigmatic gypsy houses in Pontevedra – to Azuma Bridge in Japan, the Project for the 14<sup>th</sup> Block of the Seafront in Havana and the Bus Station in Cordova, right up to his most recent projects in Galicia, such as the Verbum–Casa de las Palabras in Vigo, the Maritime Museum in Vigo, whose first version was co-designed with Aldo Rossi and completed by Portela–, the Cemetery of Finisterre in A Coruña and the project for the future Convention Centre of Vigo.

The installation of the show converts the rooms of the first floor into a tour of the life and work of the architect, structured into the following thematic/chronological/geographical areas:

1. Reconstruction of interiors: the architect's studio
2. Works in Vigo
3. Reconstruction of interiors: a display of the materials used in his works
4. Works in Galicia
5. Semi-detached houses
6. Slide show of images taken from his personal album
7. Works outside Galicia

César Portela's buildings are characterised by their search for the essence, by a kind of wish to return to the origins, a neo-minimalism ornamented with fragments of slate like decorative frescos or tattooed skin covering the buildings, and at the same time, by the need to create an order inside the natural environment.

Aware that the protagonist of the exhibition has little to prove, the show is openly educational and communicative, and learning about architecture by viewing it is more important than any other criterion. With this in mind the layout follows criteria of chronology and situation, and includes models and photographic reproductions of the buildings that make up series of five images each in different formats, as well as large-scale reproductions of each one of his most emblematic buildings. The photographic series are complemented by a space devoted to video-projections and a documental room in which the visitor can obtain more information about the architect's work.

What is especially novel is the recreation of the architect's studio for the viewers to get to know first hand the aesthetic, literary, musical, cinematographic and philosophical influences behind the work of César Portela over all these years, and even his collection of masks and Mexican votive offerings. Both voyeurs and the curious are drawn to his creative place, which reveal the most private environment of the architect as the "creator of worlds", with all the responsibility that this implies.

## **CURATOR'S TEXT:**

### **On the meaning and design of the exhibition**

This exhibition, entitled "**César Portela, architect**", was born from a two-fold need that is self-complementary: on the one hand we wanted to validate the figure of the architect in a context as abused urbanistically as the Galician, where in the last decades the nature of building has been defined by spontaneous criteria based on pure necessity, the conscious or unconscious whim of any tom, dick or harry with no regard to urban dictates of soundness and respect towards the environment, often spoiling our environment to the point of non-recovery; and on the other, we wanted to bring to the public the work of one of Galicia's most established architects: César Portela. Other countries with a more stable historical baggage have shown us that one can build a better future only from awareness. This is the rationale behind the extreme care with which we have conceived this exhibition. We have rejected an excessively technical or pretentious approach in favour of a warmer, more agreeable and educational one, which helps the viewer to understand architecture as those of us who have worked on this project do; that is to say, to understand architecture as a perception of life.

With this in mind, we have divided the top floor of the MARCO into a series of independent geographical areas – Vigo, Galicia and the rest of the world – to render the viewer's tour of César Portela's particular imagination more comfortable, as we are certain that like this the viewer will not only get to know his buildings dotted around the world, but with genuine fragments of life intimately connected with certain cultures, experiences, passions and sounds. We have endeavoured to make the public perceive architecture in a familiar and frank way, inviting them to touch the materials used, differentiate the colours, and appreciate the marvellous humility and beauty of, say, a simple fragment of stucco; to open the architect's peculiar cosmos to the public, for which we have reproduced a small fragment of his dense and complex world in the Museum.

### **About the artist**

In the course of an interview, César Portela was asked if he believed in the existence of a Galician architecture, or rather, in an architecture made in Galicia. To our surprise, the architect said, "There is no Galician architecture; there is an architect that builds in Galicia, Andalusia, in Japan or in Venezuela. In each place you have to drink in the problems and try to find an answer, you have to know the materials, the building practices... to understand that architecture, apart from providing a solution for its users, has to give an anthropological answer, to get to the root. That's where the key is..."

Now that we are freed from the architecture of the rationalist dogma and that the reality of living in an increasingly globalized and dispersed world is evident, to pose the question of whether there is such a thing as a Galician art or a specifically Galician architecture is pointless. Good art and architecture should be universal, and Portela's architecture is this. Quite another thing is that the idiosyncrasy of the place it is produced in allows it to exist more comfortably within a set of specific reference points, whereby it absorbs some and rejects others, but never loses from sight the general aspect, the international context and the dictates of the great masters, whether these be architects, painters, writers, musicians or philosophers.

Since his earliest building projects, the **semi-detached houses** and the highly original **Houses for Gypsies** in Pontevedra, the creator has developed his own style which is characterised by a refinement of forms, the pressing need to shed unnecessary detail. I am thinking now of the sublime **Cemetery of Finisterre**, full of Romantic references, of the incommensurate **Maritime Museum** in Vigo, co-designed with the Italian master Aldo Rossi, the **Bus Station of Cordova**, in the recently opened **Casa de las Palabras**, also in Vigo, and those buildings yet to be opened: the **Convention Centres** of Vigo and A Coruña... In all these works one can appreciate the complexity concealed behind their apparent simplicity. Portela's ability to combine the local and the universal, his modesty, his knowing when to leave a tree standing, give way to the sea or a rock; his commitment to our region, whose landscape has been despised and ignored in so many years of constructional vandalism... all this makes him part of the tradition of illustrious artists who have realised that a closed approach to their trade is synonymous of creative and intellectual miserliness. Here is an architect who is extremely meticulous with both general aspects and with the smaller details that form part of our individual and secret sensitivity- we may imagine a snow-capped mountain from a sugar cube- and these details are, despite the opinion of many, what make an artist truly great.

We are not sufficiently aware of the importance that architecture has in our lives, of how an arbitrary and egocentric understanding of it can embitter our lives, or indeed of the opposite: of the infinite pleasure architecture can give us, as the many examples in history have proven. And this is, as I have mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal of the present exhibition: to inject into the public the need, almost the obligation, to be more ambitious, to resist conforming with the speculators that move with impunity around us; to demand that another city, another world, is possible, and that in the shaping of this new space, of this new Galicia, architecture and architects have to play a vital role.

César Portela's creations are characterised by a search for the essential which dialogues intensely with a complex cultural and anthropological context: simple and geometrical forms ornamented with fragments of slate which, like tattooed skin, cover the buildings and give them back a historical and plural reality which aims to retain the timeless values of function in order to put order into the disorder of the natural order. It looks like a tongue-twister, but it is not: behind it there lies the enormous responsibility of the architect as the creator of worlds. In a spiral in which the real historical subject is the people, and architecture is often reduced to pure spectacle, César Portela's work does not renounce the character of collective utopia that architecture had in its beginnings, when architects were heroes, demiurges capable of creating singular works, whose significance went far beyond mere individuality. But this is a privilege reserved to a few, to those who, like César Portela, know that much of the greatest architecture has come from within, from introspection.

## REQUEST FOR GRAPHIC MATERIAL

### GRAPHIC MATERIAL AVAILABLE TO THE PRESS:

CD including texts and photographs of the exhibition in different formats.

**IF YOU WISH TO RECEIVE DOCUMENTATION, PLEASE COMPLETE THIS FORM AND SEND IT BY E-MAIL, FAX OR MAIL POST TO:**

### MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo

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