

Ciudad de la Cultura: Modernity and Architecture in Santiago de Compostela

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Abstract

Santiago de Compostela has been a pilgrimage site for centuries. It was founded due to the discovery of the tomb of St. James (Santiago), whose remains are said to lie inside the city's famous cathedral. Compostela is, nonetheless, a modest city of around 100,000 inhabitants, with a small but consolidated historic centre, and is the cultural and political centre of Galicia. It is the capital of the autonomic community of northwest Spain.

With the objective of projecting Galicia as a centre of culture and knowledge on the world stage, the Xunta de Galicia (Council of Galicia) approved the construction of a monumental building complex over the top of Monte Gaiás, a hill that dominates Santiago and its surrounding topography. Construction began in 2001, supervised by architect Peter Eisenman, and the structure is still incomplete. The project has provoked a great deal of controversy, transcending all sectors of Gallegan and Spanish society. It has become an enormous expenditure for a Gallegan economy that is still one of the most traditional and modest in Spain. The controversy is especially sensitive given that Spain is already enduring a profound economic crisis. Critics say the project lacks clear purpose, without a sense of mission for the uses of the new buildings. This is especially so when contrasted to the historic centre of the city, a complete success in terms of public space habitability and economic solvency (due to tourism). One can only ask: Why, in front of such an exemplary model of small-scale, high-impact development, promoting long-term, 'small-dose' growth, is a complex built that opposes all the values of the community and city it represents? Haven't the Gallegans learnt from their millenary past and their strong cultural heritage? It is becoming more evident, with time, that the City of Culture (Ciudad de la Cultura), the new development, is an example of what should not be done in the fields of urban and social development, at least in the context into which it has been inserted.

Keywords: Santiago de Compostela, architecture, modernity, urban planning.

The lack of consideration towards the scale of the Ciudad de la Cultura project is evident in the design. The intention of the program was to create a new centre for Santiago, with a new focus of attention, constructed with a size similar, if not bigger, than that of the historic centre. The complex, which is 650,000 square meters large and is made up of 6 buildings, looks to cast Galicia as a 21st century community. According to Manuel Fraga, ex-president of the Xunta who promoted and approved the project, "Because if it was the Portico¹ during the middle ages and the Cathedral's façade during modern times, 'we had to do something for these



Figure 1: Model of the Project showing the relationship between the City of Culture and the historic center of Compostela.

times' to continue attracting visitors to Galicia."² Roberto Varela, current Commissioner for Culture at the Xunta, goes further by comparing the City of Culture with emblematic and equally controversial developments that have had a positive effect in their respective contexts, such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Lincoln Center in New York and Sydney's Opera House. What Fraga and Varela didn't take into account is that the City of Culture is located completely outside the urban and historic centre of Santiago (being accessible only through a national highway). Thus, it is unlikely to revitalize in a city which, is already vital in itself, contrary to the aforementioned mentioned project. Perhaps of equal, if not greater, importance is that the complex is conceived as one enormous monumental form (monumentality only achieved in size and at all costs), without consideration of its contents. It appears that the planners did not note that "from the idea to the plan a long and complicated path must be covered, but the trajectory from the plan to its execution is no less complex and the better way to deal with it with guaranties is through the exercise of consensus and dialogue between the administration and the citizens."³ Tellingly, Rosina Gómez-Baeza, director of an equivalent (albeit smaller) city of culture in Asturias (a community near Galicia) states that "architecture should respond to its contents. That's the ideal, reality is different."⁴



Figure 2: Santiago de Compostela, showing communion between modernity and tradition: the Gallegan Center for Performing Arts in the same perspective.



Figure 3: The mass of the City of Culture of Santiago appears always in the outline of the mountains surrounding Compostela, as a mountain constructed by men.



Figure 4: Rua da Raiña, Santiago de Compostela.

The City of Culture of Galicia is the perfect example of what Christopher Alexander calls “growth in big doses,” in which the “built environment is constructed massively. ‘Perfect’ and isolated buildings are built and abandoned to their luck.” This is in contradiction to his ideal of ‘organic order,’ where “planning and construction should be guided through a process that permits the gradual emergence of the whole from localized acts. The community chooses its own order, not through a map, but through a common language” within “a living organism (that) must constantly reformulate itself to survive, therefore maintaining its quality of being an equilibrated whole”, that bears attention to the “smallest details.”⁵ “It’s a growth that depends on a dynamic and continuous vision of the environment.” Contrastingly, in the City of Culture of Galicia, although its architectural and design concept (theoretical and far away from the reality of the experience of the project) aims to blend into the landscape through forms, it is really a forced redefinition of Mount Gaiás. It is an example of the complete ‘deification’ of “the concept” to the point it is no longer really feasible and it becomes an absurdity. Though true that it should have a strong physical presence, it will be very difficult for the sole physical presence to facilitate the mission of attracting the gigantic cultural activity that would be needed to fill its hundreds of thousands of square meters with life. This is especially so in town of only 100,000, and a region of no more than three and a half million. It’s a presence that in itself negates the teachings of the design of the historic Santiago de Compostela, a fine example of Alexander’s organic growth.



Figure 5: City of Culture of Galicia.

“The important thing in a building is not how it is seen from the air. It is the way it is lived in the human scale,”⁶ says Jan Gehl, responsible for much of modern Copenhagen where more than 37% of the population use bicycles as primary transport. The sloped roofs of the City of Culture are, without a doubt, imposing. Its facades catch the attention with a complex rhythm of apparently random geometrical shapes. As explained in the field of theory and concept, the weaving effect present in the project responds to a recreation of the medieval grid of the city of Santiago, which is superimposed over another grid inspired by the mountains – it transmits the ‘encrypted’ message of the project and links it with its site. However, what is the actual relation between this and the genuine experience of the project? Does the common visitor really experience, live and understand all this while walking among any of the five monumental lanes of the complex (in reference to the five main streets of downtown Compostela)? And at what price? ‘Aesthetic’ gestures, such as the 60° slope in some of the roofs, the unique character of the grand majority of the pieces that make up the complex (a single unique glass piece can cost up to 1000 euros), that make prefabrication and constructive efficiency almost impossible, or the vast unoccupied (and inaccessible) spaces left between the actual roof and the ceiling, inevitably imply that such a price is unsustainable. At the beginning of the project, the City of Culture had a budget of 100 million euros. Although immersed in controversy, it has grown into a massive 500 million ten years later, which is equivalent to more than 7% of the 2012 budget for the whole Autonomic Community of Galicia (also equivalent to four times the budget of the city of



Figure 6: Roofs in Santiago.

Compostela for the year 2007).⁷ One must seriously consider the viability and *raison d'être* of a project of such a magnitude. In addition to being built at the expense of contributions from the Gallegan people, it will surely carry huge maintenance costs that will only be calculated after the complex is finished.⁸

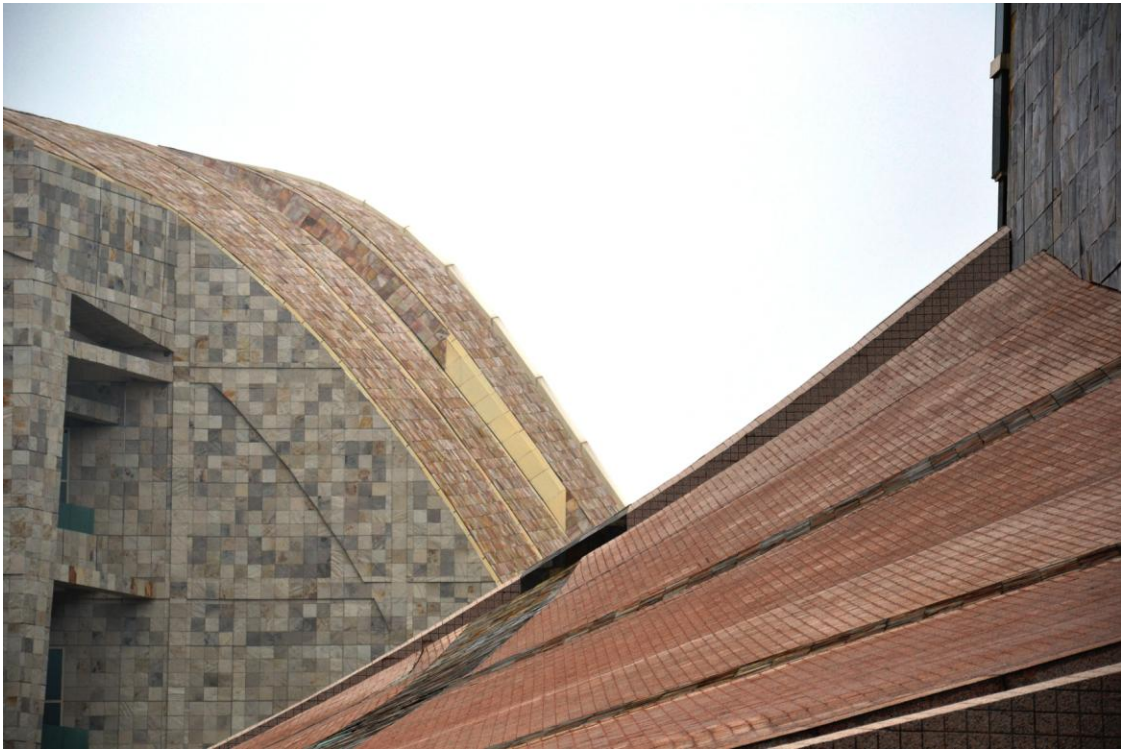


Figure 7: Roofs in the City of Culture: they appear transitable, but their inclination makes it impossible.

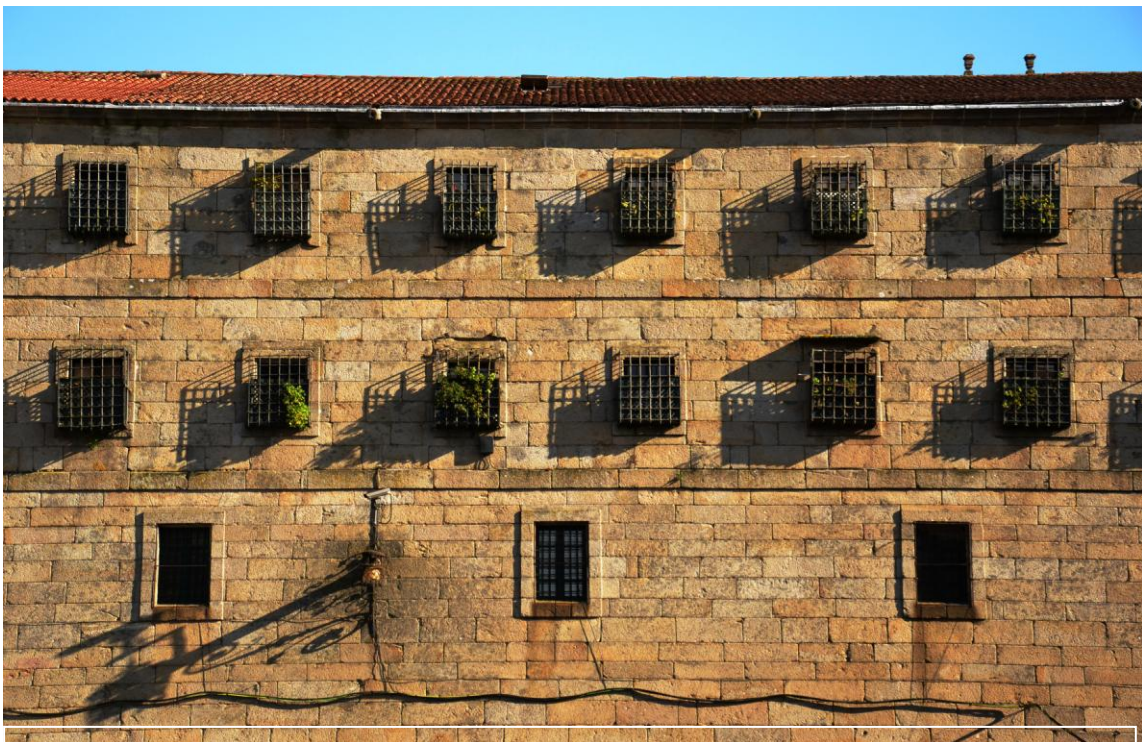


Figure 8: Monastery of San Paio de Antealtares.

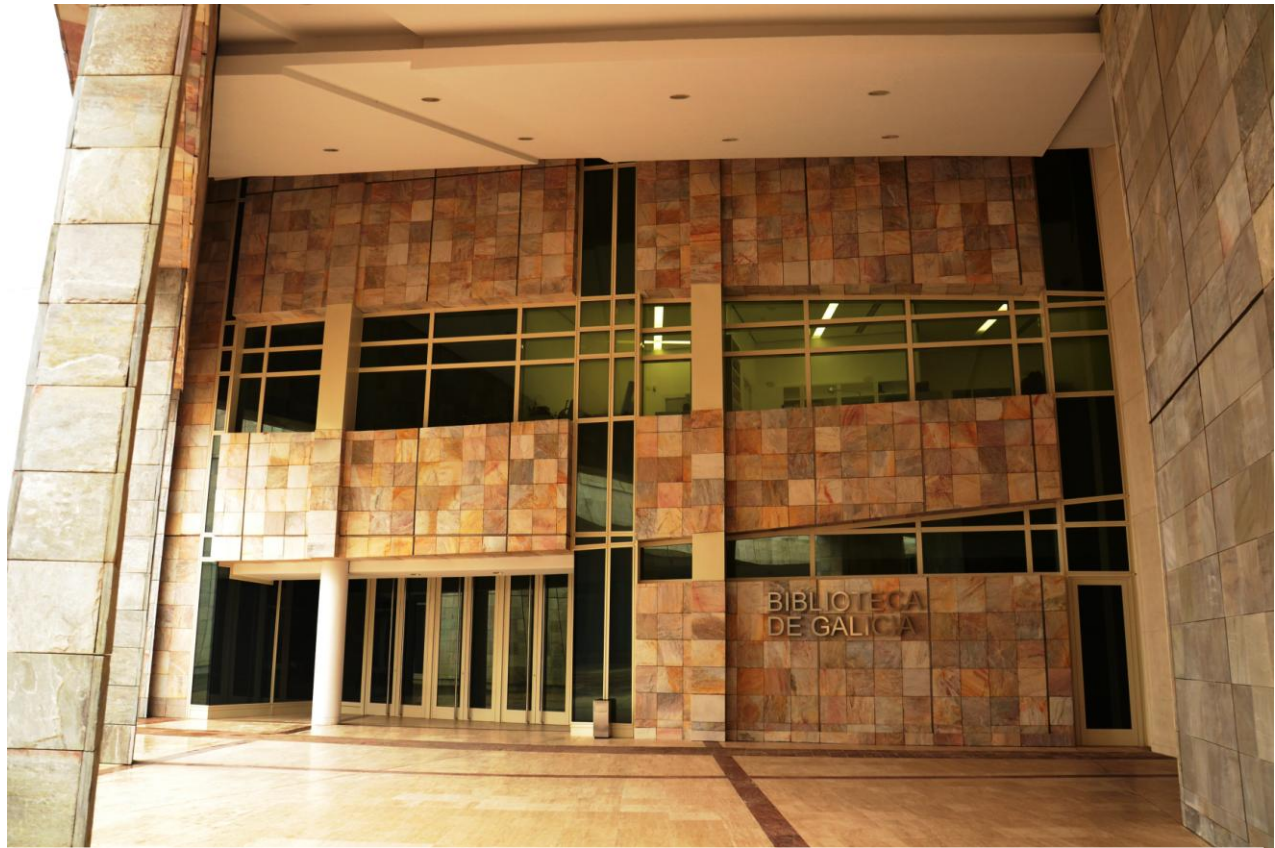


Figure 9: Façade of the new 'Biblioteca de Galicia'.

A lot has been said throughout the history of architecture and cities about the beauty of the ruin and antique constructions and about their historical and aesthetic value. We conserve and visit them since they constitute a vestige, sometimes living and in use, of a past, which, with the passage of time, has gained significance and symbolism. The Cathedral of Santiago is an archetypical example of this, and the imprints made by the public, such as the mark left by the pilgrims on the cathedral stone when they reached their destination, are examples of the aggregated value produced by time. Ruins are emotive, yearning spaces made for introspection and awe. Nonetheless, the passage of time does not always have the same effect on a building and its space. In the case of the City of Culture, which, before completion, is already beginning to wear in undesirable ways, deterioration, lack of maintenance and neglect ironically appear in front of the construction of the complex's biggest building currently under construction. The space here is alienating and disorienting, and its immensity is impossible to comprehend, not because of its complexity, but because it leaks in all directions under the grey sky of northern Spain's climate.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13: Time in the City of Culture: Completed and unfinished buildings.



Figure 14: Roofs of the buildings that are, so far, the biggest built.



Figure 15: Cathedral of Santiago: Entrance staircase.



Figure 16: Traditional street sign at Santiago.

One of the main ideas behind the project is to provide a space for the integration of Gallegan culture in a single place. According to Roberto Varela, “Gallegan culture is in need of a big library, of a big archive, of a meeting place for the artistic avant-gardes and of a centre for creation and investigation whose programs are capable of travelling further than our geography, and this cannot be accomplished with small and disperse facilities.”⁹

However, “The Galicia of the 21st century has its own multinationals and many individual talents (...) But Galicia is also that country where gasoline is charged with extra taxes as there are no funds for the *Sergas* (the regional health commission), overburdened by an aging population. Galicia is a country where its biggest cities, A Coruña and Vigo, drain its waters forcefully into the rivers because elementary drainage facilities have not been completed. Galicia is the curious place where the Alvedro airport hasn’t been connected with a highway that runs just 500 meters away, or where nobody thinks about building a single metro line, when Valencia, Seville and Malaga are already constructing, or where building a second bridge over the Vigo river seems a utopia, even if the Rande¹⁰ is nearing collapse. But the Xunta has other priorities. The Gallegan government will 54,9 million euros (almost 9.000 million of the old pesetas) this year in the City of Culture. (...) Santiago, for the satisfaction of all Gallegos, is the city with the best cultural equipment of Galicia in relation to its population. Apart from the treasures of its Cathedral and its University, it counts with Auditorium at Monte del Gozo (which is used less than a time a week), the Auditorium of Galicia (which rarely fills itself up) of the Multiusos



Figure 17: A pretentious aim: the Archive of Galicia already exists in A Coruña, economic capital of the Gallegan community.

del Sar (also underused as spectacle venue) and two theatres. The Xunta has also financed the construction of a first-class stadium (which is currently used by a fifth tier football club) and an avant-garde art museum with moderate affluence. As if these infrastructures were insufficient, all Gallegans are defraying a burdensome City of Culture, which will finally cost well over 25,000 million pesetas.”¹¹

It is clear from this point of view that the concept of ‘uniting’ Gallegan culture was misjudged in its location, idea and scale.



Figure 18: Rua do Vilar, Santiago.

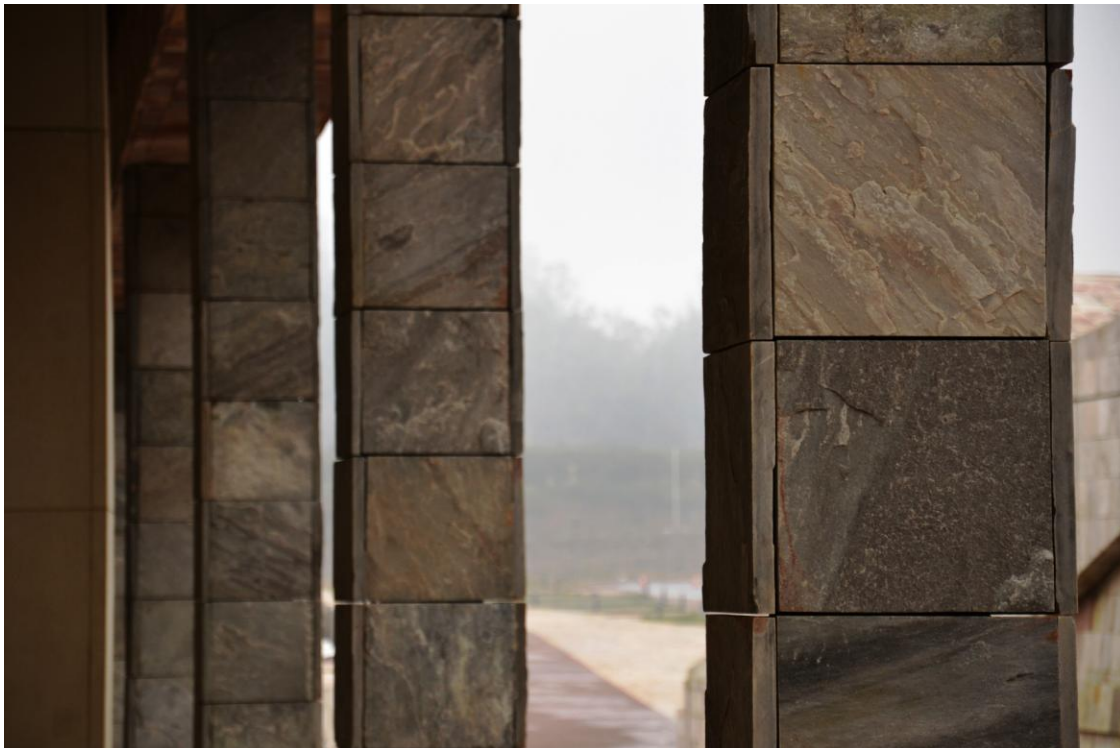


Figure 19: Although the construction attempts to rescue traditions of local masonry, what it achieves is a lack of constructive efficiency and high costs.

The objective of this essay is not to condemn the construction of monumental and paradigmatic works or the ideas of the project's architect. The article's aim is to question (as it has been done in a diffuse manner throughout the ten years of construction) the viability of this specific project. Its utility and integration with the landscape are problematic, given the economic and social context in which it is built, especially in comparison with the historic centre of Santiago de Compostela. It is a project where architecture and urbanism become lost in ideas and concepts. Furthermore, it does not manage to give a convincing or effective response to the problems reality presents. It is an unsustainable project. It is unsustainable because its concept, its place, its moment in time and the way it is carried out do not coincide. There is no harmony as the one sought by Christopher Alexander. It is simply the product of an impulse, an almost momentary political whim (that responds to the Spanish 'bubble' of the late nineties) in the wake of vast efforts by secondary communities to stand out economically and politically (even though not culturally, ironically) in comparison to cities such as Bilbao and Barcelona. Only time will reveal the effect of these massive projects in the experience of the cities, yet there are already murmurs of these being "white elephants" – giant projects lacking in purpose and vitality. In its present form, the City of Culture seems on course to become a primary example ambiguous use facilities, even before the conclusion of its construction. The City of Culture is perhaps a sign that maybe what we're look for is not what our time requires. Perhaps the idea of the monumental, today, is not building pharaonic masterpieces typical of the past. Maybe the magnificent in our days should be to manage our resources wisely, to consolidate and decant, to the benefit of our contemporary works as it has benefited the works of older days. Unsustainability isn't solely created by the mismanagement of specific resources; it's part of a much wider palette, in which planning is fundamental. This planning has to take the context into account, not only as a tool for design, but also as a way of understanding reality, which is much more complex than an architecture project.

Perhaps once the City of Culture is finished, its immense spaces will gradually fill up with cultural and artistic activities and the archives of northwestern Spain's history. The price paid, however, will have been too high and the ruin far from beautiful.

Endnotes

¹ Referring to the 'Portico de la Gloria' at the main entrance of Santiago's Cathedral.

² "CIUDAD DE LA CULTURA. Fraga defiende con calor el Gaiás y lo compara con el Pórtico de la Gloria" in *Voz de Galicia*, november 8th 2007.

³ ESTÉVEZ FERNÁNDEZ, Gerardo. 2001. "Santiago de Compostela, conservación y transformación". In *Arbor* CLXX, 671-672 (November - december 2001), 473-478pp.

⁴ «La arquitectura debería responder a los contenidos; la realidad es otra» in *Voz de Galicia*, January 23, 2009.

⁵ All from: ALEXANDER, Christopher. 1978. "Urbanismo y Participación". Barcelona. Gustavo Gili. English versión: "The Oregon Experiment"

⁶ "El Arquitecto de las personas". Story by Marcus Hurst in February's edition of *Yorokobu*. Consulted in <http://www.yorokobu.es/el-arquitecto-de-las-personas/> March 12, 2012.

⁷ "El PPdeG aprueba en solitario los presupuestos para 2012 con un total de 9.135 millones" in *Galicia en el Mundo*, December 26 2011.

<http://www.cronicasdelemigracion.com/articulo/galicia/2011-12-26/ppdeg-aprueba-solitario-presupuestos-total-135-millones/15089.html>, Consulted on 12 March 2012.

⁸ Roberto Varela: «La Ciudad de la Cultura no es un elefante blanco», in *La voz de Galicia*, April 30, 2010.

<http://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/galicia/2010/04/30/00031272635089566843104.htm> Consulted on 12 March 2012.

⁹ "Roberto Varela dice que la Ciudad de la Cultura es una inversión «imprescindible» para el conjunto de Galicia" in *La Voz de Galicia*, April 15, 2011.

<http://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/galicia/2011/04/15/00031302865807757401915.htm> Consulted on March 12, 2012.

¹⁰ Emblematic bridge over the Vigo river built in the late 1970s.

¹¹ "La Obra", opinion column in *La Voz de Galicia*, September 6, 2004.

http://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/hemeroteca/2004/09/06/2999940.shtml?utm_source=buscavoz&utm_medium=buscavoz Consulted on March 12, 2012.