Letters for a Home.
The House of Camilo José Cela in Palma de Mallorca
Alberto Ruiz Colmenar
David García-Asenjo Llana

When studying a work of architecture it is important to take into account all aspects relating to its commission, design and construction. Furthermore, when both the architects and the client are major figures in the cultural scene of that period, as is the case here, analysis becomes increasingly important. Based on the original documentation of the project and the wealth of correspondence preserved in archives, this article aims to study not only the development of the project, but also the relationship between the architects and the client, as seen in the house which José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún designed for the writer Camilo José Cela in Palma de Mallorca.

"It was certainly not going to be just any old house. No pseudolocal styles, fictitious comforts or stupid luxuries. And definitely no Doric columns and marble in the entrance hallway; the house had to be a work tool".

In February 1954 Camilo José Cela decided to move to Mallorca, where he hoped to work without the distractions of social life seen in the literary circles in Madrid. From there, in 1958 he began to run the journal Papeles de Son Armadans—which aimed to emulate Ortega y Gasset’s Revista de Occidente—as well as the publishing house Alfaguara, which had been set up recently with funding from the Huarte construction company. Cela had been living in a series of houses in Mallorca, which he gradually outgrew given the large quantity of objects and books he was amassing. In addition, he was also missing a space suited to his work as writer and editor. He finally decided to build a house that would serve as this work tool, a quiet place where he could live, and above all, write.

(fig. 01) Through his friendship with Jesús Huarte he established contact with the architects who were to design the home, José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Huarte was to be in charge of the construction work and funding the operation. Ramón Vázquez Molezún and Jesús Huarte had met in Rome on a grant-funded stay at the Academia Española del Arquitecto, and their friendship had grown during shared holidays in Formentor. In...
summer, Cela, who lived on the island year-round, visited the Huarte family, and when the writer brought up the idea of building a house in Mallorca, Molezún and Corrales were suggested for the project.

The painstaking care with which Camilo José Cela archived his correspondence has made it possible to outline the process of creation of the house. The letters exchanged with the architects, consulted in Iria Flavia through the Fundación Cela, reflect the writer’s observations on the project, as well as the circumstances surrounding its construction. The programme proposed was complex. A single building had to accommodate the dwelling for Cela and his family —as well as servants’ quarters and space for the chauffeur—, offices and storage space for the journal *Papeles de Son Armadans*. It also had to accommodate the writer’s workspace, which was to house his formidable library. From these early communications it can be gathered that Cela was heavily involved in the decisions of the project (fig. 02).

The land, in the neighbourhood of La Bonanova, had the advantage of being located near the city, but was quiet enough to work in. The dwelling was to be located in a trapezoid-shaped plot and was accessed from the uppermost section. From this point, the land slopes steeply towards the sea in a southeast direction. The architects immediately came to their first decision: the house was to be organized in a series of staggered volumes with views of the coast. The 6-metre difference in altitude from the access to the lowest part of the plot resulted in these pieces becoming increasingly private as they descended, while preserving the views to the sea.

The architectural influences assimilated by Corrales and Molezún and their evolution over the years in which their career was consolidated after the success of their Pavilion for the Universal Expo in Brussels can be identified during the design process (fig. 03). Even in this early stage, early working documents revealed a very specific approach to the problem. A grid with equilateral triangles with 180 m sides was superimposed on the topographical plan of the plot, taking advantage of the angle formed by the street side and the west boundary. This grid, which established the order for the initial explorations for the layout of the dwelling, is clearly inspired by the order strategy used in the project for the Spanish Pavilion in Brussels. A talk given by the architects in the College of Architects of Madrid, has provided essential data on the evolution of the project and the different options suggested before the definitive solution was finally adopted. The correspondence between Cela and José Antonio Corrales, who was in charge of the dialogue between the architects and writer, starts with a letter informing him that the documentation applying for the building permit had been submitted. Molezún’s archive still conserves the notes added by Cela to the plans and later transcribed in the letters he sent with commentaries (fig. 04).

While we were pointing out the importance of being able to consult the correspondence between the writer and architects, being able to access the work documents through the Legado Molezún, archived in the College of Architects of Madrid, has provided essential data on the evolution of the project and the different options suggested before the definitive solution was finally adopted. The definitive version of the project, established in 1961, still underwent several modifications throughout the construction work. These changes were brought about by a series of factors, as can be seen in the communications between the architects and owners. Cela constantly introduced modifications, initially prompted by the functional needs of the dwelling and the offices of the journal. In the letters sent in the early stages it was seen that Cela had ordered the construction of the house due to the pressing lack of space caused by his book collection, which grew incessantly. He requested a cupboard in each room in order to guarantee storage. He understood the need for fluid communication between the different uses found in the house and wanted the stairs and connecting vestibules to be in the most suitable position in order to ensure their correct operation. Furthermore, he took an interest in the materials that were to be used in the construction of the dwelling, expressing concern for the humid climate in Mallorca and any risks entailed for the contents of his library. Once the correct layout of the dwelling had been decided, the letters went on to address issues which could appear more secondary, such as the design of the shelves or the heating system.

Obviously, the requirements for the project for Casa Cela were not the same. However, the need to adapt to a somewhat irregular plot with a steep slope explains the effort to implement the hexagonal grid which had provided such good results a few years earlier.

Early trials for the distribution of the dwelling showed that directly transposing this system was not a good choice. The rigid triangular grid in the small-scale project created oblique meeting points and long rooms which made it difficult to use and furnish the space. The initial distribution solutions for the house showed the organisational difficulties caused by the grid, which made it necessary to establish the entrance to the house via a triangular courtyard and to add a vertical communication through stairs which affected the equilibrium of the connections between private and public areas. The rest of the dwelling followed the isometric layout in a somewhat artificial manner, which in turn meant that the rooms were aligned facing away from the sea views. This complex modular distribution worked better on the lower level, with spacious living and dining areas open to the garden and the view of the sea which was not possible on the access level.

Its geometry thus became a constricted and corseted form which straddled the floorplan distribution for the project, sacrificing functional requirements and failing to achieve the sought-after flexibility which had been seen in Brussels. Although the solutions for an almost completely diaphanous Pavilion were clearly unlikely to be suited to resolving problems on a small domestic scale, this approach highlights how the desired elasticity was not so much dependent on the geometrical grid, but rather on its potential to adapt to specific needs. Successive proposals appearing in the documents for the project show that the architects considered this line of work a major challenge, one which was ultimately abandoned.

The following trial operations show how the rigid geometric scheme was progressively overcome. One of the proposals which, seemingly, made it no further than the architects’ desk, is clearly reminiscent of the floorplan drawn up for the Dubarry house in Sotogrande, designed by José Antonio Corrales alone in 1965. On this occasion, the plot was rectangular, and a diagonal was introduced to provide a south orientation, closing itself off from the access street and neighbouring buildings. In a project process which ran parallel to that followed in Casa Cela the final version of the dwelling took on this diagonal direction, while the floorplan became orthogonal.

This strategy, combining oblique direction and orthogonal organisation, eventually provided a solution for the project, as well as the elasticity sought. The diagonal direction in relation to the access street, aligned with the west boundary, was maintained, as was the organisation into platforms staggered in parallel to the natural irregular levels of the plot while most of the house is concentrated on the top floor.

The correspondence between Cela and José Antonio Corrales, who was in charge of the dialogue between the architects and writer, starts with a letter informing him that the documentation applying for the building permit had been submitted. Molezún’s archive still conserves the notes added by Cela to the plans and later transcribed in the letters he sent with commentaries (fig. 04).

While we were pointing out the importance of being able to consult the correspondence between the writer and architects, being able to access the work documents through the Legado Molezún, archived in the College of Architects of Madrid, has provided essential data on the evolution of the project and the different options suggested before the definitive solution was finally adopted. The definitive version of the project, established in 1961, still underwent several modifications throughout the construction work. These changes were brought about by a series of factors, as can be seen in the communications between the architects and owners. Cela constantly introduced modifications, initially prompted by the functional needs of the dwelling and the offices of the journal. In the letters sent in the early stages it was seen that Cela had ordered the construction of the house due to the pressing lack of space caused by his book collection, which grew incessantly. He requested a cupboard in each room in order to guarantee storage. He understood the need for fluid communication between the different uses found in the house and wanted the stairs and connecting vestibules to be in the most suitable position in order to ensure their correct operation. Furthermore, he took an interest in the materials that were to be used in the construction of the dwelling, expressing concern for the humid climate in Mallorca and any risks entailed for the contents of his library. Once the correct layout of the dwelling had been decided, the letters went on to address issues which could appear more secondary, such as the design of the shelves or the heating system.

On these topics there were several changes of opinion due to the operation costs of the different options proposed by the architects. Cela’s famous sarcastic tone appeared when criticising, with little fine irony, the cooling budget.
It is a compact volume, where the floorplan is defined by an orthogonal distribution aligned with the boundary, while the outdoor envelope is defined by the superimposition of horizontal layers. Thus, the house is divided into three blocks, one for each use, separated by communicating elements. The spaces to be used for the journal were located in the most public area, beside the garage, and on this occasion directly connected to the access entrance. The main office and centre of the complex communicated with both the area allocated to the journal and with the private rooms of the dwelling. The living spaces in turn opened out to the plot and its views over two floors, the lower one of which was beside the garden designated for more private spaces. The articulation of the different uses, dictated by the client's needs, was brilliantly resolved and linked to the horizontal stratification of the dwelling. One of the main characteristics in the architecture of Corrales and Molezún is the relation established between the main floorplan of the building and the land. This plan can be manipulated to adapt to the topography, but also to establish the best conditions for the relationship between the building and its surroundings.

One of the main elements articulating the dwelling is the staircase providing access to the living area. This element is placed transversal to the dwelling, but following the incline of the plot, which means that, as the path descends, the garden space and views of the Mediterranean are revealed through a window open at the springing. This lower floor, beside the service quarters, houses the public area of the house, with a large room open to the garden on two sides. One of the sides incorporates a covered porch, offering protection from the sun and rain.

We previously mentioned the concept of elasticity highlighted by the architects in their conference about the Spanish Pavilion in Brussels at the College of Architects. We once again see this concept in the analysis of the solution provided for the section. The need to adapt a typically rationalist architectural work of compact volumes to a rugged topography harks back to a specific example and prototype, Villa Tugendhat by Mies van der Rohe (fig. 07). On the one hand, by treating the pieces as independent functional elements—a technical characteristic derived from the use of the waffle slab system—the resulting section adapts to the terrain, while on the other hand, the pieces are able to shift slightly in relation to others within the section. The envelope is thus organised into horizontal bands alternating solid surfaces and openings, like a large continuous window. This envelope is not flat and there are various depths of bands depending on the requirements of the programme. They can project, offering protection to openings, or be used as terraces, prolonging the inside of a room and providing shade.

This way of working by section is reflected on the outer appearance of the building, establishing a correlation between several of the projects which the architects were working on at the time. The building for Laboratorios Profiden, the building for Selecciones de Reader's Digest and Casa Cela all share a common starting strategy: the open distribution leads to elasticity in their section and a façade solution incorporating large independent pieces articulated through slight horizontal movements. This form of composition for sections also allows the elevations of the dwelling to be hierarchised following privacy criteria. It is possible to once again reference the example of Villa Tugendhat, as Casa Cela features two façades which were designed in opposition (fig. 08). The main façade, seen only from inside the plot, has openings onto the best views. These south-facing openings are protected with projecting roofs. The terraces have high walls so that there is an increase in the visual prominence of the solid sections, which seem to float over the terrain.

The façade onto the street has a different presence, almost in opposition. It is concealed from the outside, barely showing openings other than the different entrances to the dwelling and horizontal window strips on the upper sections of rooms. Like the side façades, it is clad in Marés stone, typical of the region. Gres cladding is limited to the cornice, both in the dwelling and garage annex, conferring it a degree of horizontality which is further emphasised by elongated openings. The cubic volume on the roof is also clad in gres, counterbalancing the horizontal nature of the complex while linking it to the terrain.

Inverting the importance of the elevations—the main elevation is at the back while the secondary one is accessed from the street—forced the architects to find the way to make the entrance to the dwelling disappear. This is done in two ways. On the one hand, the layout of the triangular access courtyard, flanked by the garage and the guard's house, transforms it into an intermediate transition space and visually detracts from the entrance door. Furthermore, the access is not in a prominent space, and it is necessary to cross a shaded gallery leading visitors along the outside of the façade to a simple door. This idea is heightened by the decision not to draw this door on the elevations of the preliminary project, even adding a very rough drawing on the plans. In time, this way of accessing the dwelling became a device habitually used by Corrales and Molezún, who used it again in Casa Huarte.

Cela viewed the house as a work tool which would also be filled with books, works of art and objects that he collected. The same tiles which covered the façades were used as flooring. The concrete structure was left bare, with the coffers of the waffle slab system becoming a recognisable element in the appearance of the house. According to Pablo Olalquiaga, site supervision was the responsibility of Ramón Molezún, who was praised for his ability to use the materials best suited to each situation. Cela complimented the appearance that this bare structure gave the dwelling by this bare structure in an article for Arquitectura journal, despite having suggested that these coffers be covered in his private correspondence.

The truth is that in reality Casa Cela differed greatly from the idealised image which the writer himself had shown in public. His letters featured constant complaints about the scant attention he was receiving from the architects and their insufficient visits to the site (fig. 09). The tone of the communications changed once the construction work process began. In contrast with the optimism of the letters exchanged during the design phase, the difficulties in the construction stage showed Cela's desperation. The work suffered lengthy delays and Cela expressed concern on the issues which were hampering progress with the construction work. In his correspondence with Jesús Huarte he told the developer of the inconveniences caused by the Company in charge of carrying out the work, as well as its lack of foresight in guaranteeing the supply...
of materials and machinery. The main delay was due to lateness in procuring the system of ceiling structures selected by the architects, which allowed the articulation of volumes in the dwelling. As this system was patented by the company Hipercesa there was a wait before they were manufactured. Cela was under the impression that the architects were rather careless in the attention paid to the progress of the work, as recorded in his letters. The lack of control in the work meant that certain construction details were not finished with the necessary care. The problems observed in the waterproofing were particularly serious, as several very valuable books from the library were ruined. This cannot be considered a secondary issue, as the brief project report specifically identified this as a priority. Several letters showed that this had caused strain in the relationship between the architects and Cela, who felt —from the outset— that poor execution had caused inconvenience (fig. 10).

The constantly increasing number of books in the author's library outgrew the space planned in the project and as a result, what had originally been planned as a painting studio on the top floor was also transformed into a library. In addition, the installation of new shelves resulted in the calculated load for the structure being exceeded. This meant that the pillars required reinforcement, which also called for the addition of new supports. This provides us with a dual perspective of the act of architecture. The disciplinary perspective places the project within a project-based practice and an architectural culture while another focus, based on experience, stems from how the client, who has commissioned and funded the work, experiences the built result.

Casa Cela had an almost immediate positive welcome, with mentions in the Arquitectura journal and in Quaderns. The architects were viewed as efficient professionals who carried out major jobs for the bourgeoisie and the wealthy, as well as working on the construction of social housing. Although the jobs they carried out were increasing in prominence, they did not give up on the constant evolution of their architectural language. However, critics began to observe the toll taken on their project methodology. The projects were seen as becoming further removed from the more experimental and radical proposals of the discipline. The nature of their work, which did not focus on the written element, seemed to move away from a line of work typical of a time when the intellectual facet of the discipline was becoming increasingly important.

Once this house was completed, Huarte Corrales and Molezún made sure they avoided this type of commission, which had caused them endless grief. In the correspondence between Cela and Jesús Huarte the latter pointed out that the company's management board had forbidden the construction and funding of single-family dwellings, which were usually taken on as personal favours. It is not unusual for the direct experience of the client to contradict the principles on which the architectural narrative is based. This is the case of this project, where a rich epistolary archive between architects and owner was generated. Thanks to the public importance of the owner, who painstakingly archived his correspondence, these communications have been available for study. These documents, which are a direct reflection of the gaze of these protagonists, allow us to analyse the process without interference from indirect references. They show us how history told through architectural publications establishes a biased account of the work of these master architects. While it is common to study the process of the project and the images of the finished work, shown through the filter of photographs carefully curated by the architects, we often fail to study how the intentions of the project and the functional reality of the building are interconnected.

Casa Cela, as this building is known, is a magnificent project. However, the owner perceived his home very differently. The fragments of epistolary communication presented here show an uncomfortable, yet necessary, facet. It is easy to imagine this mundane version of the process for the project and construction of many of these works which live on —untouchable—in the imagery of architecture enthusiasts. This reality does not destroy our view of the projects, but it should help to put them into perspective. We also believe that the minor misfortunes which cannot be extricated from the work of the great architects of our history can help dispel myths about the study of their works, yet still enrich it. It is left to the criteria of the researchers analysing these architectural pieces to incorporate the inevitable personal context into their studies, although often this is not easy to find. In the complex process of architectural projects focusing on purely theoretical analysis can often be a tempting option. We should not need a "brutal, straightforward and headstrong" writer to remind us that houses must be "logical and habitable".
RA 25

Alberto Ruiz Colmenar
Lecturer. Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura. Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Architect and Ph. D. on “Architectural Heritage” (Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2018). His main research concerns architecture critique and non-especialised media —mainly newspapers— as a dissemination channel. He has published articles in international journals and taken part in many international conferences regarding Spanish and Latin American Architecture.
Affiliation: Profesor Ayudante Doctor. Departamento de Composición Arquitectónica. ETSAM, UPM
E-Mail: alberto.ruizc@upm.es
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4699-2722

David García-Asenjo Llana
Associate Professor. Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC) and University of Alcalá
Architect (ETSAM - 2002) and PhD in Advanced Architectural Projects (UPM - 2016). His academic research focuses on Spanish architecture in the second half of the 20th century, paying attention to the relationship between architecture and the economic and power structure of society. He is a contributor in the radio show “Julia en la Onda”. He has published the book *Manifiesto arquitectónico paso a paso. Un ensayo sobre arquitectura contemporánea a través de las iglesias. These two activities were finalists in the Publications category of the Research Exhibition of the 15th Spanish Architecture and Urbanism Biennial. He has collaborated as a disseminator and architecture critic in several digital media.
Affiliation: Profesor Asociado. Área de Composición. Universidad Rey Juan Carlos y Universidad de Alcalá
E-Mail: david.garciaasenjo@urjc.es
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3070-233X

Notes
06. Letter from Cela to José Antonio Corrales, dated 9th September 1961. Fundación Cela Archive.
07. Letter from Cela to José Antonio Corrales, dated 18th February 1963. Fundación Cela Archive.
08. CASTRO, C., “Los arquitectos critican su obra: entrevista a José Antonio Corrales y Ramón Vázquez Molezún”, Arquitectura, 1971, 145, p. 27.
10. CELA, C.J., “Breve noticia de mi casa de Palma de Mallorca”. In Arquitectura, 1966, 96, pp. 52-54.
11. “Neither Molezún nor Corrales had paid sufficient attention to my father’s warnings, as someone who completely took over empty spaces. Before having even spent a year in the house the designated space for books had been filled, with shelves continuing to metastasise (...).”
Images
01. (corresponds to the image that opens the article) Camilo José Cela and Rosa-Crio Conde in the house in La Bonanova neighbourhood in Mallorca (1966) Joana Biarnés (Photographic Social Vision).
02. Letter from Camilo José Cela to José Antonio Corrales. 22nd September 1961. Fundación Pública Galega Camilo José Cela.
03. Sketch of preliminary project. Fondo Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Fundación Arquitectura COAM.
04. First version of the execution project, with notes from Cela. Fondo Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Fundación Arquitectura COAM.
05. Notes from Cela on a letter to the architects dated 16th September 1961. Once typed up, they were sent by the writer on 21st September. Fundación Pública Galega Camilo José Cela.
06. Floorplans from the execution project. Fondo Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Fundación Arquitectura COAM.
08. Elevations of the execution project. Fondo Ramón Vázquez Molezún. Fundación Arquitectura COAM.
09. Letter from Cela to José Antonio Corrales (13th October 1962 and visit by Cela to the work on the dwelling (no known date). Fundación Pública Galega Camilo José Cela.
10. Letter from Camilo José Cela to the architects. 18th February 1967. Fundación Pública Galega Camilo José Cela.