

Maderno, Bernini, Borromini

Palazzo Barberini, 1626-1630

Palazzo Barberini constitutes a ‘meeting point’ in which four of the period’s greatest artists – **Maderno, Bernini, Borromini** and **Pietro da Cortona** – were brought together.

The Sforza palazzo was acquired by the Barberini family in 1625. For the complex Giulio della Rovere had already conceived an ambitious renovation project that was to include the whole city area between via delle Quattro Fontane and today’s via XX settembre.

In 1627 the project was commissioned of **Carlo Maderno** who developed several early proposals based on the more usual models for a closed Renaissance palazzo, although he probably already had in mind the enlargement of the building

in an **H-profile**. Such a rereading of the classic layout would have transformed the residence into a **palazzo-villa**. In fact here the architect took into consideration both the representational functions of the papal family home as well as the image of the suburban villa complete with garden.

The new arrangement meant defining a double entrance: the official one onto the via Barberini allowed the incorporation of the building acquired from the Sforza family. Instead the newly enlarged construction opened onto an inner courtyard with a monumental façade. The latter is characterised by a portico with three orders of receding spaces that lead into an exedra. From there an elliptical atrium points the way to a long outdoor staircase that accesses the garden which is set on a higher level than the entrance.

Upon Maderno’s death, **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** was charged with the direction of the works and he was the one to define the layout of the side wings. On the first floor he designed the extraordinary façade of glassed-in loggias sitting atop the deep portico which replaces the classic courtyard. On the same story he conceived a **longitudinal axis** running between the back garden (connected to the residence via a bridge) and the front façade, along which a great oval-shaped room and a double-volume hall are aligned. This axis creates a **movement into profound spatial depth**, an intuition that would become an important compositional feature of later Baroque architecture.

Another Baroque element is found in the way the building opens towards the outside via two extruding wings, a highly unusual element in an urban residence. Bernini’s Triton Fountain stands in front of the palazzo, conferring great decorative harmony on the overall exterior composition. Lastly, in terms of coordinating the indoor spaces and connecting the

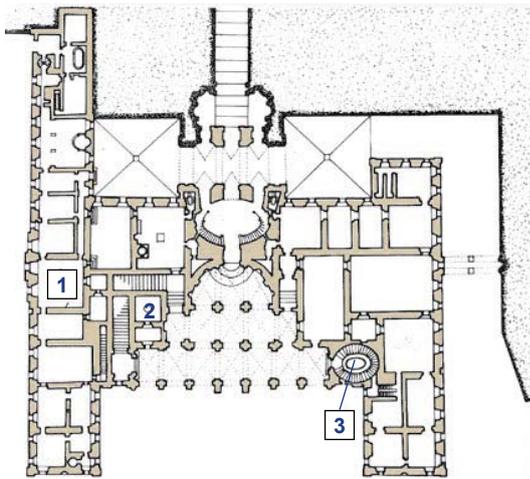


Fig. 1 Palazzo Barberini, plan of the ground floor.

1. Entrance from via Barberini
2. Main stairwell by G.L. Bernini
3. Helicoidal staircase by F. Borromini

Fig. 2 C. Maderno, G.L. Bernini, F. Borromini, Palazzo Barberini, 1626-1630. Façade facing via delle Quattro Fontane. Rome.



building's two monumental entrances, Bernini introduced the quadrangular staircase which provided access to the family's private floor.

In those years Maderno's assistant **Francesco Borromini** also contributed to the general layout of the construction. Taking Vignola's *Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola* as a model, he designed the helicoidal staircase that is found on the opposite side of the portico from Bernini's stairwell. His contribution has also been identified in the design of the windows on the floor devoted to the family apartments, in the central part of the building, as well as in several architectural details.

The great hall with its double volume has a large vaulted ceiling frescoed by **Pietro da Cortona** on the theme of the *Triumph of Divine Providence*, symbolising the spiritual and secular glory of the Barberini family. As an architect Cortona also contributed to the palazzo's final layout by designing the theatre which, unfortunately, was destroyed in 1932.

Today the palazzo is home to the prestigious National Gallery of Ancient Art which houses a great many works including paintings by Raphael, Caravaggio, Bronzino, Lotto, Reni, Guercino, and Lanfranco.



Fig. 3 Francesco Borromini, Palazzo Barberini, the Helicoidal Staircase, 1630. Rome.