

Francesco Borromini

Church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, 1635-1641/1665-1667



Fig. 1, 2, 3 Francesco Borromini, Church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, 1635-1641. Rome. View of the interior hall (left), of the dome (right) and the plan (bottom).

The Patronage of a Minor Order

In 1634 the Order of the Spanish Secular Trinitarians commissioned Borromini to design *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane*. Between 1635 and 1641 the group of buildings – the cloister, refectory, dormitory and church – was constructed while the façade was only completed some thirty years later (1665-1667). Therefore the complex sums up all the stylistic experiences that Borromini was experimenting with over that long period, forming something like **a three dimensional anthology of Baroque vocabulary**.

After the architect's death his nephew Bernardo completed the upper story and the decoration.

The Design: the Cloister and the Inside of the Church

Borromini had to deal with the limits imposed by the available space which was confined and irregular; however he turned these conditions to his advantage by finding innovative and, in a certain sense, revolutionary solutions.

In **the cloister** he realised **a plastic conception of space**. a white colonnade on two levels whose paired columns form an octagonal courtyard with convex curves at the corners. This great dynamism is highlighted by a single extruding cornice that gives continuity to the undulating rhythm. The light falls perpendicularly into the narrow space thus filtering and becoming weaker at the ground level.

The interior of the church has an **elliptical plan** that results

from two equilateral triangles that share a common base, corresponding to a transversal axis.

As opposed to other similar plans, such as Bernini's *Saint Peter's Square* and *Sant'Andrea in Quirinale*, this church is laid out in **a longitudinal way**; this arrangement generates a sensation of compression along the diagonal directives. In fact the inside of the church is dominated by **a sense of accentuated spatial dynamism**; as the churchgoer moves towards the altar, the strong undulated rhythm of the walls suggests a feeling of the space's contraction and expansion. The predominance of white walls accentuates this effect.

The entire interior is faced in white **stucco**, interrupted only by slightly gilded grille-work in wrought iron, as well as by the red Trinitarian cross, the grey stone-paved floor and the altarpieces. Along the lower walls of the church's main body, the juxtaposition of convex and concave curves is cadenced by many columns, tall and thick with respect to the space. These jutting

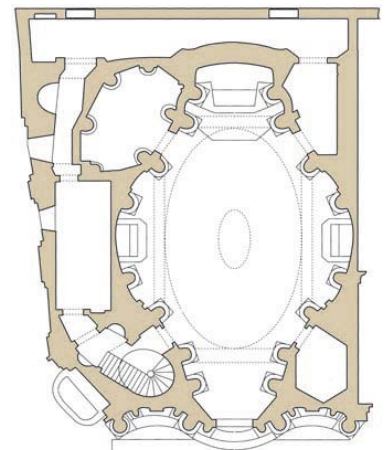
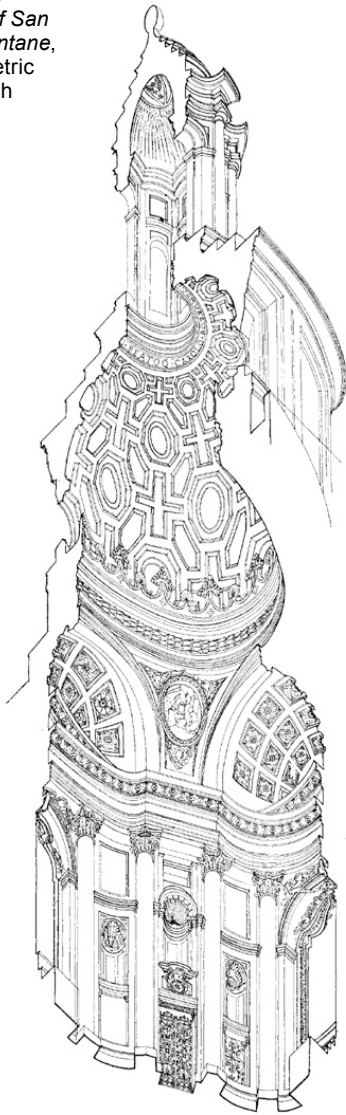


Fig. 4, 5 Francesco Borromini, *Church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane*, 1635-1641. Axionometric section and the church façade.



elements accentuate the effect of the forms' disquieting mutability.

The wavy movement is reinforced by the important presence of trabeation, which presents the same neutral colour as the columns and follows constantly along the line of the undulating walls. Above the horizontal cornice there is a transition space which is punctuated by very large niches supporting an oval-shaped and strongly flattened dome.

The remarkable feature here is **the church's dual layout**: below the cornice **the plan is cross-shaped** while, above it, the plan becomes **an elliptical dome**.

Space seems to expand suddenly; an intense light enters from both the lantern and half-hidden side windows, falling in a uniform way on the light-toned decorations of the dome. The latter is covered with large octagonal coffers inserted into the oval form with other geometrical shapes, like crosses and hexagons – all of them with gilded borders – in a complex arrangement.

The dome presents **an optical illusion**: as the geometrical coffering diminishes in size toward the apex it gives the impression of a much greater height that it really has. This feeling of elevation is further enhanced by the slanting light that penetrates from the lantern. In this way Borromini has created a contrast between the heavy and dynamic lower (human) space and the upper, light and luminous (divine) space.

The Church Façade

Although the church façade is independent of the interior, it shows itself to be similar in spirit and in several morphological elements especially in the **juxtaposition of convex and concave forms**; thus a dynamic relationship is established between the church indoors and its outdoor environment. A **strong plasticity** – generated by many vertical lines, undulating surfaces and jutting cornices – dominates the main façade. The changes in curvature occur between the lower part (concave-convex-concave) and the upper one (concave-concave-concave) but without marking any breakage and they create a complex system of centripetal and centrifugal forces. Equally complex is the **movement of full and empty spaces**, of light and shade: the three-part façade with the central doorway topped by the saint's niche and the double side niches are cadenced by giant columns flanked by smaller ones where, at the centre, the unusual feature of a door/window has been included.

The upper level's definition with higher and lower columns repeats what is seen in the lower part, a strange occurrence in Borromini's art since he tended to differentiate the registers in terms of typology and dimension. The façade is crowned with a trabeation and a balustrade interrupted by a frescoed medallion held up by flying angels and covered by a volute in a convex ogival shape that raises it vertically.