

Francesco Borromini and His Architecture

Francesco Borromini was one of the most important architects working in Baroque Rome. His style diverges from that of his famous contemporary, Gianlorenzo Bernini, illustrating the breadth of Baroque architectural styles in Rome at that time. Borromini began his career as a sculptor, working with Bernini on various sculptural projects in Saint Peter's Basilica. He then became involved with important architectural projects around Rome, starting with the Palazzo Barberini under the supervision of Carlo Maderno. Although Bernini and Borromini were contemporaries in Rome and often worked side by side, their relationship was tense and fiercely rivalrous. Indeed, the two architects can be seen as representative of the two distinct sides of Baroque architecture in Rome: whereas Bernini embraced a Baroque classicism, Borromini's architecture adapted classical elements to a more innovative architecture that was defined by organically curving lines and a complicated interplay of geometrical forms. Although Borromini's style influenced architecture in certain regions of Europe, for the most part, the style of his rival, Bernini, had a greater formative impact on Baroque art in Europe on the whole.

The two buildings that best represent Borromini's style are the churches San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, built between 1634-48, and Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, built between 1642-70, which are described in detail below.

Two Works by Francesco Borromini

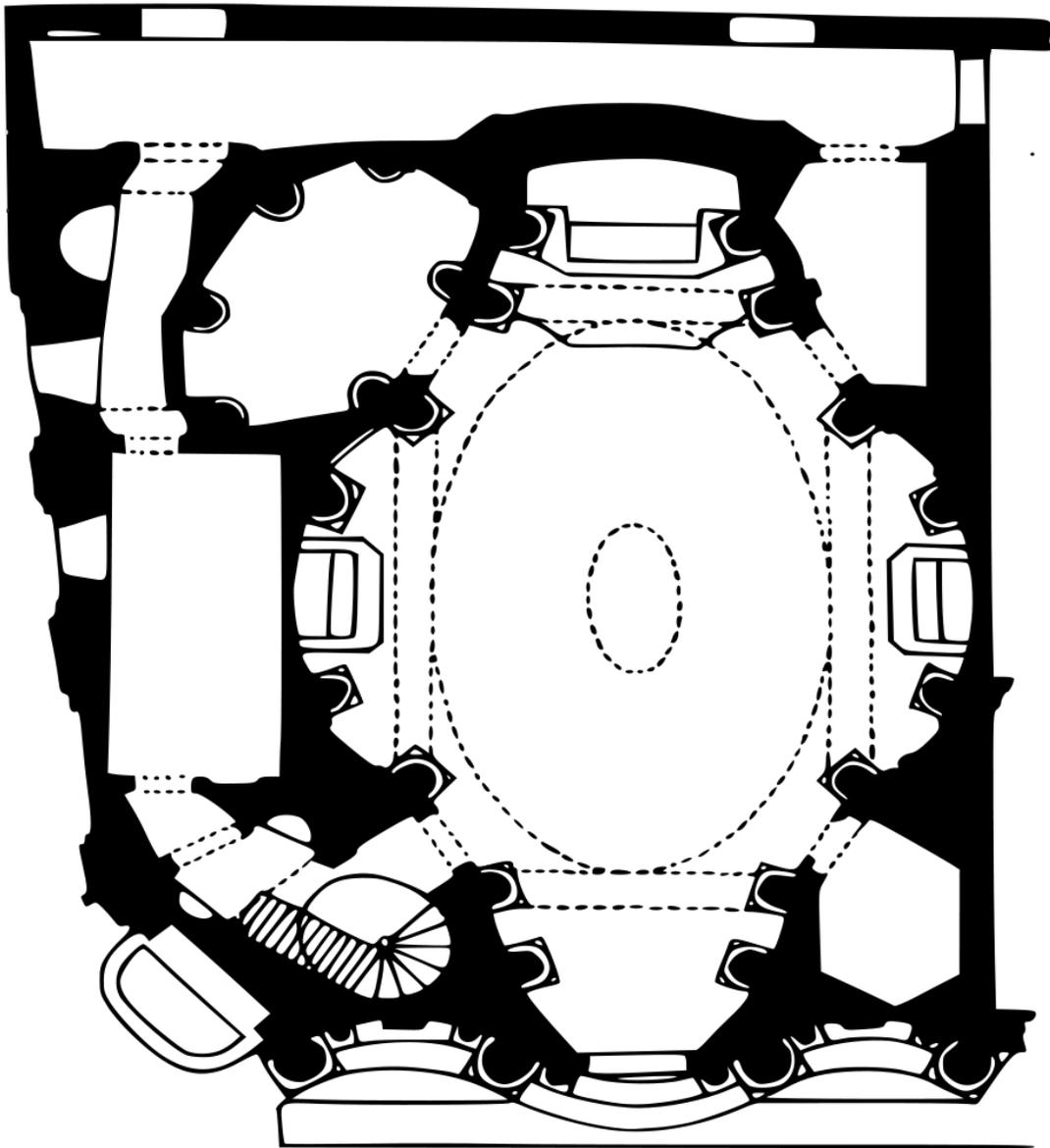
San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, 1634-38





Façade of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane
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Plan for San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane

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Dome of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane

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This church was Borromini's first independent commission, and it showcases both his innovation and his ability to adapt to challenges. The building sits in a small space on a corner lot, surrounded by other buildings belonging to the church. Because of these adjacent buildings, Borromini had to develop a rather inventive approach to make the best use of the limited available space. Borromini's plan took an unusual shape, somewhere between a rectangle, a cross, and an oval. Not only does this plan take advantage of the small lot on which the Church sits—it also manages to be cruciform, central-plan, and basilican all at once.

The interior is both traditional and innovative. Its walls, for example, are adorned with classical columns, but they curve around in a way that suggests movement, an effect that was fairly progressive in its time. Likewise, the façade includes elements of classical architecture and applies them in a new and innovative way. Much like Carlo Maderno's facades, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane is designed with two stories, each divided into bays. However, Borromini's is further enlivened with the use of alternating convex and concave curves that result in a rippling, wavelike façade. This unusual treatment of space and the wall surface defines Borromini architecture and sets it apart from the classicizing architecture of Bernini.



Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, 1642-70



General View of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza
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Façade of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza
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Interior of the Dome at Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza
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Exterior of the Dome of at Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza



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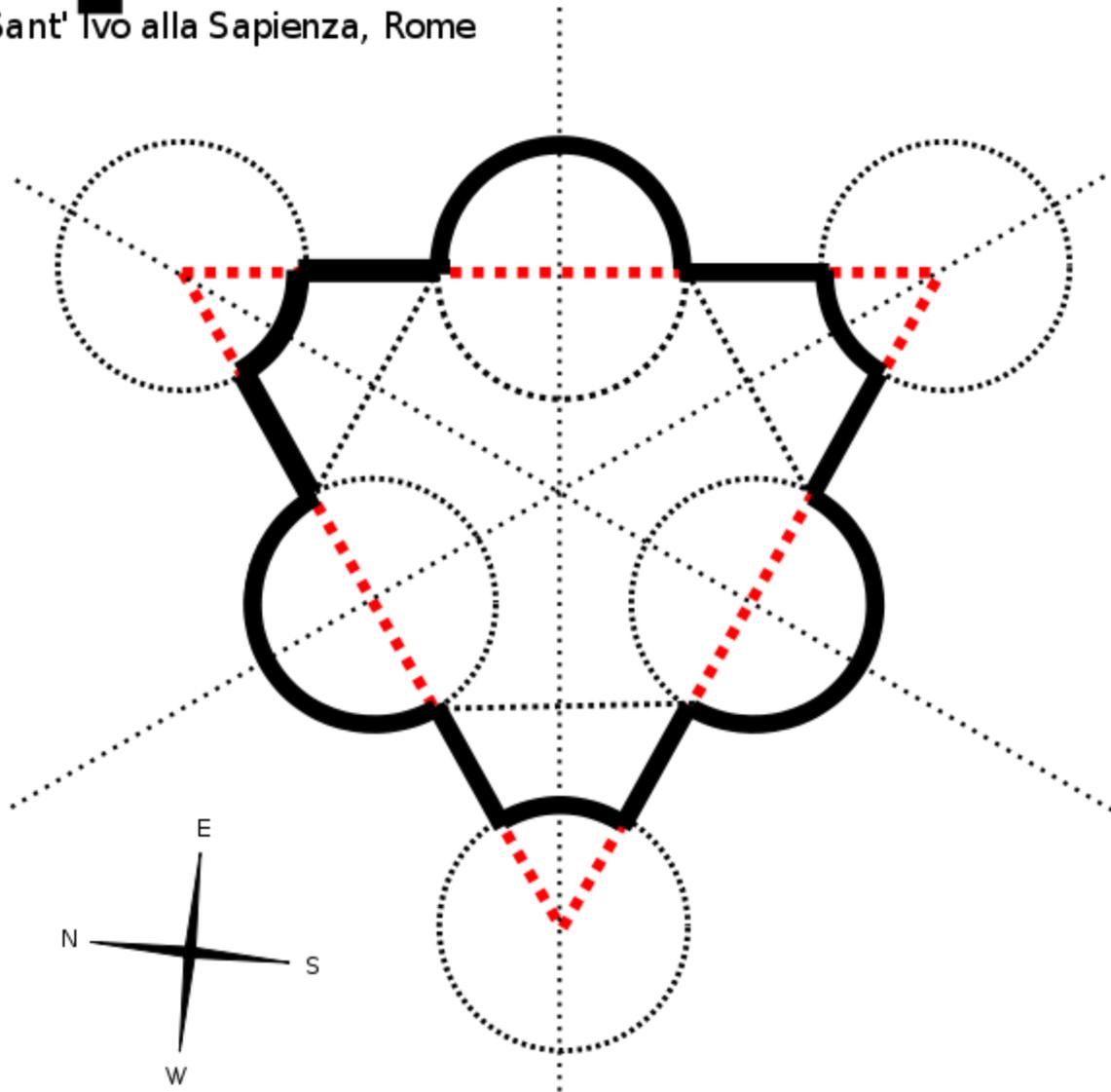


Lantern of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza

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Sant' Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome



Plan of Interior Space of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza

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Borromini is most famous for his design of this church, which served as the chapel for a Roman university. The church was to be built at the short end of a rectangular courtyard, meaning that, once again, Borromini was presented with the challenge of creating a building on a small plot of land.

Borromini's church is also remarkable for the way in which it is incorporated into the surrounding architectural environment through its façade, which replicates much of the ornamentation from the flanking arcades. The arcades of the courtyard are on two stories with a dividing entablature. Each story consists of a procession of rounded arches with a pilaster between the arches. This rhythm is continued into the façade of Sant'Ivo: instead of an open arcade, there is a series of windows with "blind arches" (arches that don't open onto anything, but are instead a part of a wall surface) and



pilasters in between. Similarly, the two stories are divided by an entablature that runs directly from the entablature in the arcades of the colonnade. In true Borromini style, the entire façade is concave, adding interest and movement to an otherwise straightforward façade. The concave façade is made all the more lively because of the contrasting convex portion of the building hovering above.

Borromini's unusual approach can also be seen in the interior of the building. The central-plan church takes the shape of two intersecting triangles that create a "star of David" pattern. Once again, the effect is dynamic: the walls of the star-shaped space "undulate," so to speak, in a rhythm of alternating convex and concave curves, much like in San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. Soaring up above the central space is a towering conical dome. The seeming movement of the interior space generates a sense of energy that culminates in the oculus at the peak of the building.

The exterior of the dome is also rather unusual for its time, with the exterior of the dome making up the majority of the upper portion of the church. At the top of the dome, there is a lantern adorned with a spiral, continuing the upward thrust of the rest of the building. "Sapienza" means "knowledge" or "wisdom" in Italian, an appropriate dedication for a church associated with an institution of higher learning; many have speculated that the upward momentum of the church links together wisdom and spiritual faith. Whatever Borromini's intention, the church is today considered Borromini's masterpiece.

