

Bernini's S. Andrea al Quirinale and Early Modern Architectural Representation

My research project focuses on Gianlorenzo Bernini's S. Andrea al Quirinale (1658-71), Rome, church of the Jesuit novitiate and largely underwritten by Prince Camillo Pamphili. This is not, however, a monographic study. S. Andrea is a vehicle for assessing fundamental and influential themes in early modern architectural representation as well as challenging several longstanding assumptions in current methodological approaches.

The church is a milestone in any history of early modern architecture and a staple on most survey courses of western art. Over the last thirty years scholars have demonstrated that it was not built to an initial, unitary design but is instead the residue of protracted adaptation and revision (Connors, Frommel, Marder, Terhalle); elucidated the mechanisms of patronage; and explained its iconography (Cather, Careri, Levine). Yet, a full and coherent analysis of the intellectual priorities behind its formal choices, general and particular, is lacking. Indeed, as things stand, it is difficult to understand why Bernini himself considered S. Andrea his best work.

The basic understanding probably remains that of a pioneering apologist of Baroque architecture, Rudolf Wittkower. Wittkower essentially characterized S. Andrea as a centrifuge, powered by an "overflowing vitality" that would burst the church apart were it not gripped and anchored by strategic architectural components. Wittkower's larger point was that, in Bernini's hands, the religious interior had ceased to be the formerly neutral vessel for mediation between man and God, and that a quiet and centripetal Renaissance had been substituted by an expressive and centrifugal Baroque.

As this "dynamic" fallacy remains such a mental habit of virtually all analyses of early modern architecture, even at the level of simple metaphor, its conceptual genealogy deserves thorough historiographical investigation. For any such notion is completely absent from early modern thought and certainly any writings on architecture, whether treatise or anecdote. Dynamism, formal or spatial, is in fact a retrospective projection of modernist expectations onto early modern architecture. Ascribing motion to its undulating forms can be traced back to Jacob Burckhardt; equating this perceived motion with emotion, however, was the product of a late nineteenth-century aesthetic of empathy (influenced by the physiological theories of Johannes Volkeit and others) that matched the purported energy of the architecture with the supposed psychological state of the maker, as well as ascribing an animism to the buildings that haptically matched the (e)motions of the beholder. In architectural history this theory of design and response arose out of the influential writings of both Heinrich Wölfflin, with whom Wittkower briefly studied, and August Schmarsow. The former had instigated the idea of a formally "closed Renaissance" versus an "open Baroque"; while the latter contrived the idea of "space" as architectural engine – space through which one moves, and which itself moves – an idea that would become one of the foundations of modernist architectural discourse. What Wittkower says for Bernini at S. Andrea, Schmarsow already says for his rival Francesco Borromini at S. Ivo alla Sapienza, that his "thirst for motion" resulted in an "elastic expansion and contraction of an organic body, which we feel as we do the inhalation and exhalation of our lungs... until its last breath [the spiral lantern], the jubilant cry of climax." These

“psycho-motoric” readings were eventually entrenched in modern architectural analysis by Sigfried Giedion (Wittkower’s contemporary), who separated the concept of architectural motion from its origins in a psychology of perception and made it the object of categorical analysis, defining motion not as a subjective experience but, under the impetus of Einstein’s theory of relativity, as a physical property expressed as the quotient of time and space.

The perception of S. Andrea as energized and motile was partly triggered by the fact that the church is oval. The oval church has long been considered a distinctively seventeenth-century phenomenon, though it may be traced on paper back to Baldassare Peruzzi and Sebastiano Serlio. Its later popularity has either been regarded as prejudicially “Baroque” (that is, a compressed or distended circle); as a compromise between liturgical axiality and symbolic centrality; or by a Zeitgeist appeal to Kepler’s discovery of elliptical orbits (1619). Yet Serlio saw a continuity between the oval and circle (“the oval is the shape that most corresponds to the perfect circle,” he says), a continuity that exists in projection because the circle and the ellipse (which an oval approximates) are conic sections. This last fact is symbolically tantalizing because it coincides with an emanatistic view of Creation, of medieval origin, in which God is the apex from Whom all created things were descending radiations and concretions of light in various degrees. Descriptive geometry also ensured that architects were aware of the oval’s anamorphic potential: first optically as perspectival correction (for entrants a longitudinal oval appears more circular); second metaphorically, as a lens through which to glimpse heavenly perfection. Conversely, Andrea Pozzo’s later trompe l’oeil dome in S. Ignazio (1685) – a “dome” that is a knowingly miniaturized S. Andrea – only looks true from the nave, where, like any foreshortened circle, it transforms into a transverse oval.

S. Andrea, of course, is an actual built transverse oval, and because the schema is so rare and because Bernini, in contrast to his predecessors, favoured transverse over longitudinal ovals it requires further explanation. Current directions in my research are: firstly that the transverse oval room was a revival of the amphitheatre prototype as place of spectacle, best popularised in France thanks to the diffusion of Serlio’s treatise, and already experimented by Bernini at the Palazzo Barberini; secondly that, in a religious context, just like the Piazza di S. Pietro, it also evoked the image of a divine embrace. Both traditions are perhaps inherent in Sixtus V’s abortive plan (1587) to transform the Colosseum into a church. Indeed, Wittkower himself had recognized S. Andrea as an arena of sacred revelation, where the spectator walked “on stage” to become a fuller participant in the representation.

Wittkower made the protagonists of the drama painting and sculpture (in his own words, “sculpture serves to evoke conscious, subjective reactions in the contemplating mind, and so to ‘psychologize’ or dramatize the objective purport of the architecture”). But he assigned the architecture the subsidiary role of orienting or magnetically attracting the observer’s eye, itself conceived as cinematic, even though its primary role is to stage the paradigmatic moment of revelation. Such attempts to co-ordinate (pure and rational) structural and (contingent and aesthetic) visual orders, still the prevalent approach, again betray modernist preoccupations as their division must be assumed a priori for any reconciliation to be theorized. Hitherto, determinations of Bernini’s perceived “unity of the arts” normally default to the concept of the *Bel Composto* (“beautiful composite”), a term that originally

signified the unicity of skills within the author, *not* the multifariousness of his creations. Such analyses amount to a simple adjacency of art-forms, the only unity residing in the staged illusionism of the protagonists – i.e. it is a complete scene, not a painted angel regarding a carved saint.

This project instead argues that Bernini sought an *artistic unity* by exchanging the attributes of the arts (as defined and segregated in the ongoing *Paragone* debate) to enable each art to perform as though it were the other. Bernini had famously developed a “sculpted painting,” sculpture that achieved effects previously considered the privilege of painting alone (Preimesberger); through coloured marble, which must both be carved into architecture but was already considered a natural form of painting, he was moulded an inherently painted architecture too (Barry). For Bernini architecture was also sculptural both because the body was sculpture’s noblest subject and had long been the governing metaphor for architecture, and because – for him – architecture was *rilievo* (relief). Planar relief was also the most pictorial form of sculpture because it required illusionism to function: it created an image of things, he said, “as they appear” not “as they are” (Ostrow). The building internally coheres also through *concettismo* (the divine embrace, the scalloped dome as the shell of Andrew the fisherman) and synaesthesia: Andrew’s saltire cross is visible in the altarpiece but also audibly configured by quadrophonic choirs singing antiphonally across the volume.

Bernini’s architecture remains at a distance from “architecture as building seen” (Sedlmayr) and the ingenious tectonics, subdued figuratism, and relentless geometry of his rival Borromini, hence Bernini’s reputed conservatism. Bernini privileges the optical (“giudizio dell’occhio”) over the haptic, and even as sculptural an enterprise as the Piazza di S. Pietro is tempered by an *architettura obliqua* designed for fixed viewpoints. The unity of the vision surrenders to the pictorial, and architecture succeeds to the degree that it participates in and is subordinate to the total image; any competing tectonic complexity would catalyze a menacing autonomy. If we accept that Pozzo has reconfigured S. Andrea into an illusionist dome at S. Ignazio we also realize – upon investigation – that Bernini has translated a seventeenth-century dome painting, like Andrea Lanfranco’s at S. Andrea della Valle (1625-8), into the built form of S. Andrea. It will also, therefore, be necessary to trace two interrelated themes: the development of dome decoration (an erratically researched subject); and the preceding history of exchange between architecture and painting. In both cases, we are concerned less with painting as the laboratory of architectural invention and more with its means to perceiving architecture, one initially schooled by the hegemony of a perspectival view of the world.

As surprising as now seems, S. Andrea was the first church to be fully revetted with coloured marbles since the 6th century. Its ability to create a total visionary environment, wherein the arts were fused and their frontiers deregulated through the creation of a painted world, was of enormous importance for the execution of architecture from Zurich to Prague, and beyond. Their interiors synthesize Bernini’s example in an architecture swathed in pastes that imitate no recognizable marble but seamlessly dilate the pastel clouds and ever more Tiepolesque palettes of the altarpieces beyond their frames to fill the interior. The architectonic incidentals owe more to Borromini, via the examples of Guarini and Juvarra, but the tradition will eventually exhaust itself in a capitulation to pure scenography.

