

Some Observations on Santa Maria in Campo Marzio

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In the 17th century Francesco Borromini (1599–1667) revolutionized architectural design. Among the most notable of his achievements were his unprecedented attitudes toward the plastic aspects of architectural form. These resulted not simply in hollow manipulations but established a new understanding of the definition of architecture. Of all the gifted architects of the Roman High Baroque, including Bernini, da Cortona, and Rainaldi, Borromini's sensitivities toward architecture's reciprocity with the city were the most acute. His masterpiece in this regard is San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (Figure 1).

For a period of years following Borromini's death, there continued in various forms a Borrominesque architectural tradition in Rome which in many cases was rather superficial in its understanding of his contributions. This resulted in more of a scenographic architecture, an architecture of dramatic incidents, instead of an architecture which plastically acknowledged the place of its occurrence. (Figure 2 shows Carlo Fontana's facade of San Marcello.) At least one of the architects practicing in Rome during this period, Giovanni Antonio De Rossi (1616–1695), seemed to have a clear understanding of Borromini's innovation and was able to apply that understanding to original ends in his own architecture.



1. San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.



2. Carlo Fontana's facade of San Marcello.



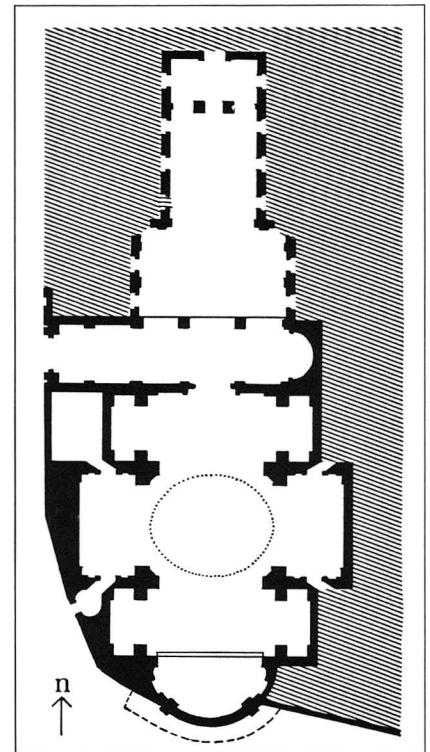
3. Santa Maria in Campo Marzio, from an engraving by Giovanni Francesco Venturini.

This article examines, in a very limited, formalistic way, De Rossi's intriguing little church and convent, Santa Maria in Campo Marzio, completed in 1685 for Benedictine nuns. (Figure 3 shows church and convent in a 1684 engraving by Giovanni Francesco Venturini.) These remarks will be confined to observations and speculations chiefly about the relevance of the church's plastic form to its urban situation. This building is noteworthy

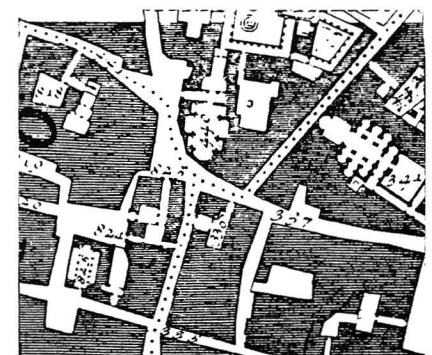
because of De Rossi's attempts to equalize the tension between the programmatic necessity for the church to assert itself as a formal integer, and the vicissitudes of the urban realm which demand its fragmentation. This tension is quite evident in the plan (Figure 4) where the church is seen as a Greek cross enfolded within the irregular *poché* of the convent. De Rossi was able to give formal testament to this circumstance not only in the

building's overall profile, but also in its articulation.

There are two major and three minor approaches to this building which sits in the small Piazza Campo Marzio, and none of these has changed appreciably since the late 17th century. (Figure 5 shows this area in the 1748 Nolli plan of Rome.) I shall be concerned here only with the major approaches: one from the south along



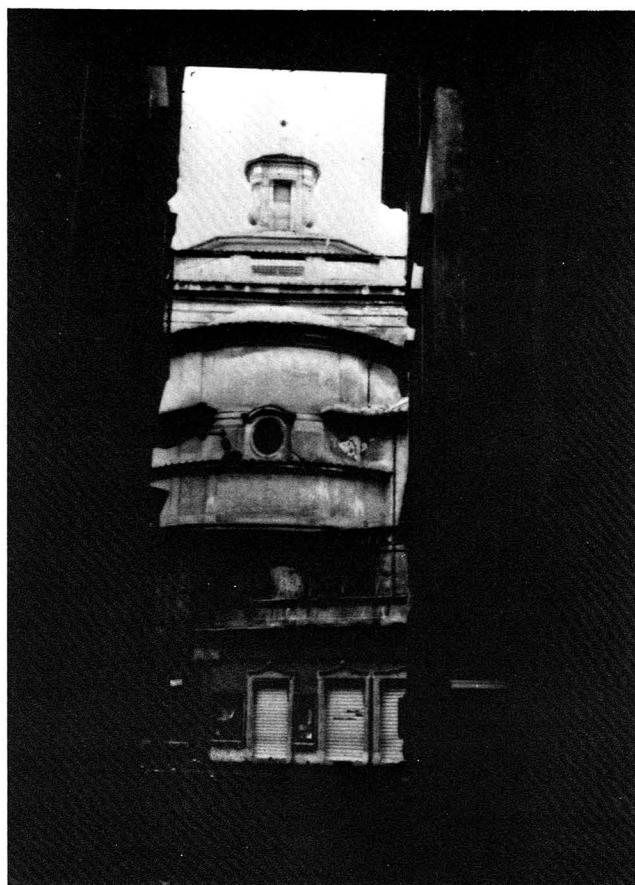
4. Santa Maria in Campo Marzio, plan.



5. Site area.

the via Maddalena, and the other from the west along the Via di Stelletta. De Rossi's attitudes toward the building as a prospect terminating these two approaches differ markedly, yet there are similarities which tie them together. In both cases the form of this complex works at street level to direct urban space around itself.

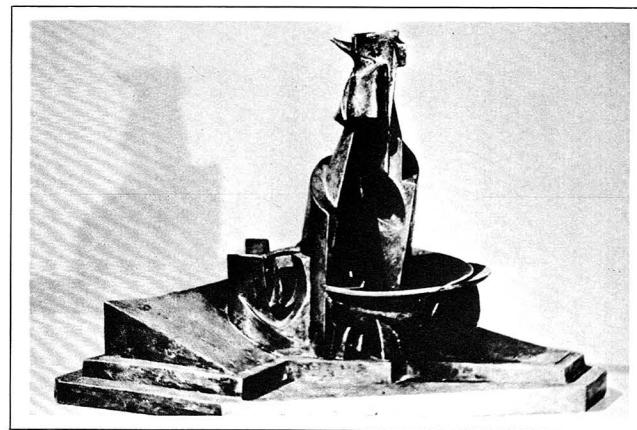
The approach from the Via Maddalena is inclined upward (Figure 6) almost on axis with the curved choir. Here the form of the church invokes a strong vertical. Because of its animation, this verticality reinforces both the pronounced verticality of the narrow space of the Via Maddalena and one's bodily sensation of moving up an incline. In the articulation of the mass there is another vertical gradient. This gradient moves upward from asymmetry and fragmentation at street level to symmetry and monumentality as the cylinder of the apse and its juxtaposition to the crystalline cubic forms which hold the interior dome become visible. The various string courses and bracketed projections around the apse at the lower levels suggest the invisible presence of the tangential streets, while the oval window inserted between the broken cornice strongly fixes the axis which the church shares with the Via Maddalena. To someone familiar with the art of the early 20th century there might seem to be similarities between this plastic development and the Futurist sculptor Umberto Boccioni's



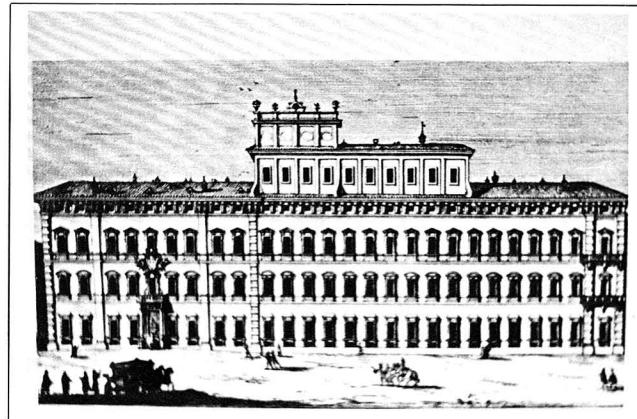
6. The approach from Via Maddalena.

"Development of a Bottle in Space" of 1912 (Figure 7).

I must admit, however, that from an historical standpoint my information is wholly inconclusive as to how much of this vertical gradation of form as seen today is attributable to De Rossi. It seems obvious that the piece at street level is an addition of a later date. The 3-story piece emerging just



7. Umberto Boccioni's "Development of a Bottle in Space."



8. Palazzo Altieri.

east of the apse is likewise probably a later addition, although it maintains continuity with the broken cornice attached to the apse. yet the Venturini engraving and the Nolli plan (Figures 3 and 5) suggest, albeit obscurely, the possibility that De Rossi may have been thinking on this order. This conscious tendency to relativistic formal manipulation is evident in De Rossi's earlier (1650-1660) Palazzo Altieri

(Figure 8). The plazzo's serial facade becomes more articulate, more symmetrical, and more monumental as the part of it which borders the narrow Via del Plebescito (the longer segment on the right side of the drawing) gives into the more spacious Piazza del Gesu!

What De Rossi did at the Piazza Altieri is similar to what he did at Santa Maria



9. The approach from Via di Stelletta.

in Campo Marzio, as seen from the Via di Stelletta approach. (Figures 3 and 9 show that approach today.) Both, while similar in attitude to what he accomplished on the Via Madalena approach, are different from it in basic intention. Like the Via Madalena approach, the Via di Stelletta approach focuses on a strong symmetrical element, the *portone*, or entry. Here, however, the symmetry is un-

compromised, and there is no vertical gradient. The visible facade is articulated with twin giant pilasters which flank the *portone* and a 3-window bay immediately to the right, which is terminated by a giant pilaster. This leads to the expectation of a similar situation to the left of the *portone*, which would imply a monumental palazzo. However, the rhythm of windows and giant pilasters continues beyond the

right-most giant pilaster of the palazzo front and ends indeterminately around the curve of the facade. The actual limits of the facade seem purposely blurred. We may understand this as a horizontal gradient (analogous to the vertical one discussed above) where the wall changes gradually from an amorphous articulation to a highly resolved one at the *portone*, and then decays again as it continues north up the Via Metastasio. There is no interaction between this urban wall which materializes pristinely above the cornice. This horizontal stratification emphasizes the lateral extension of the flat, oblong Piazza Campo Marzio.

Other issues merit noting but are beyond the scope of this brief examination. Some of these are the plan (including the *cortile*), the axis of which actually is bent slightly at the *loggia* (the plan of Figure 4 is drawn after Letarouilly, who in the French academic tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries regularized it), the church interior, and especially the dome, which pre-figures the daring domes and complex spatial orders of the 18th century Bohemian Baroque. In these cases, as well as those discussed above, we discover an architect who exploited the plastic potential of architecture to strengthen our perceptions of the quality of a particular place.