

Averlo formato perfettamente: *Borromini's first two years at the Roman Oratory*

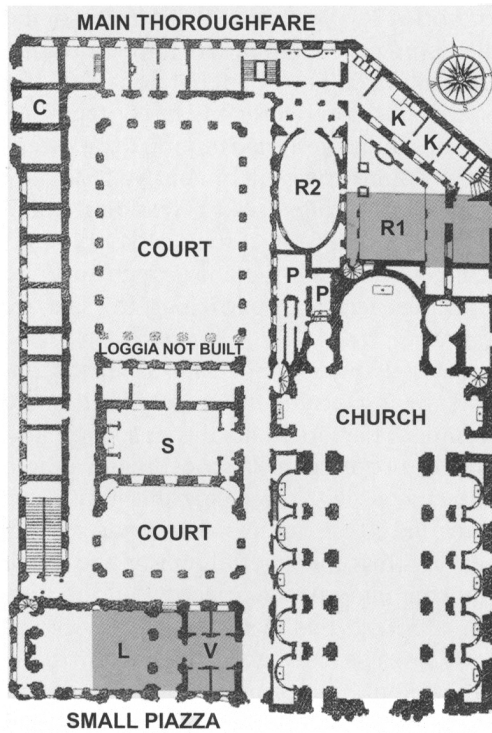
by KERRY DOWNES

St Philip Neri, founder of the Roman Oratory, died in 1595, just in time to see the completion, after twenty years, of the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella (known as the *Chiesa Nuova*) — except for the façade (finished c. 1607). Even before his canonization in 1622 the church was a place of pilgrimage. The community he founded inhabited a mass of miscellaneous buildings east of the church, decrepit, cramped, and acquired piecemeal over time when funds allowed. The musical 'oratories' — concerts with a sermon in the middle — also attracted many visitors, and the eponymous hall in which these events took place was inadequate. The community's rule allowed them to accept donations but not to beg or canvass for them. Nevertheless, by 1624 they were able to contemplate building a new sacristy on the west of the church and they were also buying up adjacent properties on that side. Initially most of the block was already built on, but by 1650 they owned practically all of it, and the shape of a new complex (Figs 1 and 2) was discernible from partly or wholly completed new structures. After a false start they had appointed Paolo Maruscelli (1596–1649), a competent architect, to draw up plans (which survive) for the whole project in general and a design for the sacristy in particular; the sacristy was begun in 1629 and in use by 1635 (see Fig. 14).¹

The impetus to begin work on a new Oratory House came from a substantial benefaction early in January 1637. Maruscelli had already located the oratory itself in the south-west corner of the plan, but by then a number of errors in his designs, large and small, had somehow come to the fore, and neither he nor anyone else consulted was able to correct them. Meanwhile Francesco Borromini (1599–1667), three years his junior and previously 'unknown to anyone',² was recommended to the Fathers, and made contact with Father Virgilio Spada (1596–1662), a priest of great managerial ability and some experience in architecture who was already advising his provost. Spada would in turn be elected provost from 1638 to 1644 and again later, and this would be crucial for the buildings and for Borromini. He would also write down in 1646–47, in Borromini's name and 'voice', an account of the building up to that point; this primary source, the 'Full Relation of the Building', survives in a scribe's copy with amendments in Spada's own



Fig. 1. (above) Rome, Oratory House (left) and Chiesa Nuova (Santa Maria in Vallicella)



- KEY:**
- C Clock tower
 - KK Kitchens
 - L Library above
 - PP Private chapels
 - R1 Refectory, first site
 - R2 Refectory, second site
 - S Sacristy
 - V Portaria and visitors

Fig. 2. General plan of the Oratory House and church (not accurate in detail)

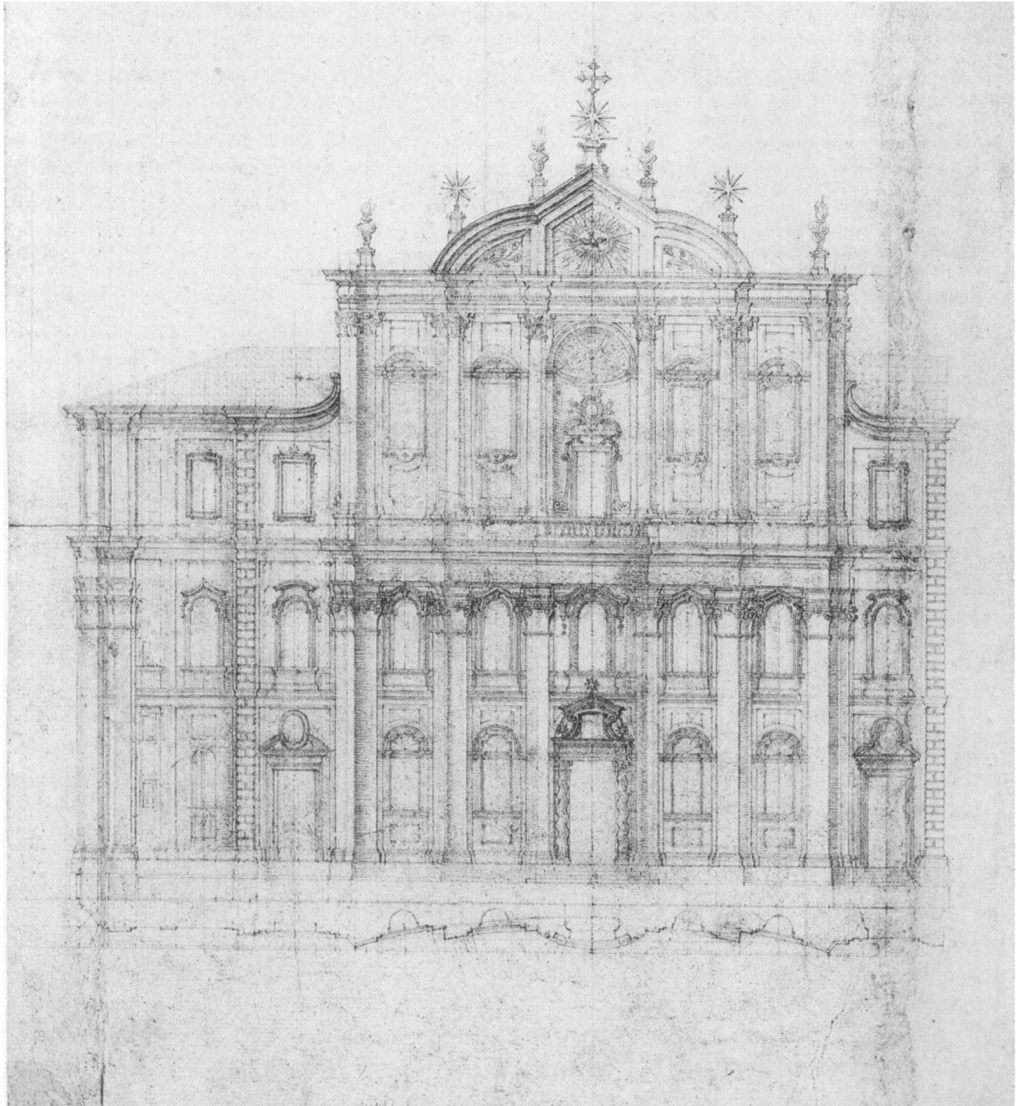


Fig. 3. Francesco Borromini, south elevation for the Oratory House with wall plan (Windsor, Royal Library, inv. 905594) (© HM the Queen)

hand. It was eventually published in 1725 under the title *Opus architectonicum* (The Architectural Work).³ Borromini was appointed second architect on 10 May 1637, but Maruscelli refused to work with him and resigned within a few weeks.⁴

Borromini had become involved with the building some time before his official appointment, but the timing of his arrival, the manner and extent of his transformation of Maruscelli's design, and his approach to the problems he inherited have been insufficiently studied. In the light of a new review of the written documents and

surviving drawings in relation to the fabric itself, this article takes fundamental issue with current and enduring *a priori* assumptions about Borromini's character, intentions and attitude to design, and exposes some distortions of written sources and derivation of the wrong evidence from the wrong documents. It then considers new evidence, from the detailed examination of a series of early drawings, to chart Borromini's development of an overall design, and finally corrects some misstatements about the architect's unique south elevation drawing in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle (Fig. 3), a drawing several times exhibited but seldom studied in the detail it warrants.

THREE NARRATIVES

We have altogether three contemporary narratives of the early design and building history of the Oratory House. The first is Borromini's own, the 'Relation'.⁵ Spada wrote on the surviving copy manuscript, 'This book was made by me in the name of Cavaliere Borromini.' Opinions vary of the meaning of this statement, and are sometimes based more on wishful thinking than on textual criticism.⁷ Authorship by proxy is as old as writing on tablets; but if Spada had said *scritto* (written) rather than *fatto* (made) we should be no wiser, and it would indeed have been negligent of the narrator to authorize a text unread and without comment. Spada probably devoted some time to the text after Borromini's resignation as architect in 1652, but his editorial emendations show no intention of altering the sense.

A second, much shorter, account, Spada's own *Dialogo*, which also survives as a manuscript, offers a useful comparison. It lacks the immediacy of the 'Relation', and reads as if composed from memory and in retrospect,⁸ and it tends to ramble and to dramatize. The 'Relation', on the other hand, covers the decade 1637–47 in a coherent manner: its syntax, paragraphing, phrasing and punctuation are quite different. It reads more like an uncut tape recording than, as Connors suggests, a compilation from hypothetical previous scripts — of which absolutely nothing is known. Yet it has none of the randomness of unedited tapes. It has indeed a structure, in the same sense that a complex building or a history painting does, already clear in the speaker's mind. It offers a guided tour of the whole building, and specifically through the eyes of an architect. Even critics in favour of Spada as its prime mover admit to detecting Borromini's 'voice' in the text.⁹

A third narrative can be compiled from the *Decreti*, those minutes of the community concerning building matters.¹⁰ Sometimes the three stories overlap or concur; in other instances they conflict, and it is important to bear in mind the different purposes for which they were made, at different times. Borromini's 'Relation' was intended for publication and is his own account of his work for the Oratory Fathers, the problems he met and the manner in which he solved them. There is no evidence that Spada intended to publish his own dialogue. The *Decreti*, on the other hand, are in a style that has changed little over subsequent centuries, and record in real time and short form the deliberations of the Fathers, be they the management committee of four deputies with the provost or, less frequently, the full Congregation of priests. The writer is often the provost (Spada from 1638 to 1644). Minuting is a selective and reductive process, but the records identify a few exceptional occasions: the reading of a paper written by Spada and endorsed by Borromini¹¹ as well as one or two meetings at which Borromini was present on site.¹²

Borromini's claim was precisely that, from the start of his involvement, he envisaged a scheme for the House as a whole rather than an assemblage of disparate parts, whereas Maruscelli never did. By contrast, the character presented by Connors in 1980 is of a rather crazy maverick, a rule-breaker, extravagant and temperamental, a heretic maybe, who perpetually changed his mind on major aspects or components of his design and then invented spurious reasons for doing so. Connors even went so far as to accuse the architect of misleading the Fathers with a 'rhetoric of justification',¹³ a point that will be discussed in more detail below. All this is consonant with the false image first promoted by his architectural rival, Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–80) in mid-century, perpetuated by the latter's first biographers, Filippo Baldinucci and Domenico Bernini, and repeated by most writers to the present day.¹⁴ The evidence, however, does not support this view and, as will become clear, it appears instead that Borromini went to great pains to ensure his own scheme was developed and implemented with remarkable consistency. Discrepancies in early plans, however, show that initially Borromini was ill-informed about the site and the mass of old buildings standing on it, and that his remedying of this imperfect view preceded, probably entirely, his official appointment as architect to the Fathers on 10 May 1637.

CALUMNY OR *LAPSUS CALAMI*?

According to Spada's *Dialogo*, Maruscelli 'had made many plans, but all with many falsities and solecisms of architecture, nor was a way found to escape from them.' When the provost of the time, Angelo Saluzzi, asked Spada's opinion, he saw 'a house with a plan begun with errors.'¹⁵ Borromini's own account explicitly states that Maruscelli *had* made a complete design but that it was not made properly (*perfettamente*) and its deficiencies caused a great deal of trouble. His evidence is, however, complicated and it may seem contradictory. In chapter three of the 'Relation' (on the sacristy of 1629–34) he says that Maruscelli designed it 'without at the same time establishing (*which I should know*) the rest of the design of the buildings.'¹⁶ Connors first paraphrases this statement ('tried to assert that his predecessor had never bothered') and then, a few pages later, translates it as 'without, *as far as I know*, establishing the design of the rest of the building at the same time.'¹⁷ The phrase 'as far as I know' is a common formula of evasion by disclaiming knowledge. Borromini, however, did not use it. His phrase (*ch'io sappia*) does not mean 'as far as I know' and has never done so, and what he admitted to knowing appears further down the page. This is subsequently confirmed by the publisher Giannini who, with an eye to foreign sales of the *Opus*, provided a parallel Latin translation, which renders the phrase correctly as *quod sciam*. In the next paragraph, however, on the general design of the building, Borromini says that he 'found an established design made by Signor Paolo Maruscelli, who in designing the new oratory had prudently also designed the rest of the fabric.'¹⁸ This seems categorical and unqualified, even if the word 'prudently' (*prudentermente*) is perhaps ironic: it shares a Latin root with *providere*, to act with foresight.

How, then, can these two statements be reconciled? Spada, as amanuensis and editor, apparently noticed no conflict. Both he in the *Dialogo* and Borromini in the 'Relation' pick out two major and pervasive errors, one of floor levels and the other of window alignment. These two problems will figure later in the discussion of Borromini's early

plans. However, in the general disorder of the site, they seem not to have been noticed during the building of the sacristy. Inexplicable this may be, but it was neither the first nor the last instance in the history of architecture of a big and costly mistake discovered too late. Borromini eventually found solutions for both errors, but it was not easy and it took him some time even to discover their extent and their implications. Later in the 'Relation', in chapter ten (on the first court) he repeated his original charge, attributing the 'disorder' of fenestration and arcading to his predecessor's 'not having initially formed a design for the whole fabric, or for not having formed it properly.'¹⁹ The problem extended to the far (north) side of the sacristy facing the second court, and in chapter thirteen he returned to it, as if he had not already made himself clear enough: 'May the reader kindly recognize how much it matters, beginning one part of the building without having first established the design of the whole.'²⁰

THE 'RHETORIC OF JUSTIFICATION' AND OTHER HARD WORDS

Connors writes of a 'special language' employed (he says) by Borromini and Spada to confuse the other Fathers and provide reasons, sometimes spurious, for every arbitrary change in the design. The problem here is one of chronology: the 'Relation', the only source of this supposed language, was composed after all the major changes had been made, authorized, and set in masonry, and there is no evidence that anyone apart from Spada read it before the 1720s. The evidence for Connors's argument comes simply from the wrong document, and the earlier *Decreti* provide a very different picture. Of thirty-seven decretal entries concerning the buildings in 1637–47, several merely record actions or decisions taken, but twenty-three give reasons.²¹ These comprise modesty, privacy and decency, more space (twice), convenience and circulation, acoustics, a better staircase, weather-proofing, security (twice), adequate daylight, economy (keeping the status quo), a *previously agreed* change of plan, the approval of 'many architects' or of consultants, loading on vaults (twice), public relations and health, the question of the elaborate fireplace in the recreation room (a discussion in which Borromini was not involved), and 'the desire of many'.

These justifications all seem quite reasonable. The last one introduced the sudden relocation in the summer of 1638, 'being the desire of many', of the library to the other end of the site. This also reveals that certain aspects of the project were in a continual state of flux, but this flux was not a consequence of the vagaries of the architect. It is characteristic of the meetings recorded in the *Decreti* that new building campaigns or changes of design are only put forward when they are imminent, never as distant projects. The major part of the south range had now reached the first cornice and, at this point, the question was raised of what was to be above it. In July 1638 the deputies had confirmed that rooms for the Fathers would be built on the south front above the oratory.²² The crucial minute is *Decreto* 115 (17 August 1638):

It being the desire of many²³ that the library should be made in the place that remains over the Oratory, and meeting many difficulties, especially with regard to the great height for which there will be a need to change the order of the outside wall that goes all round the House, the Father [Spada] thought that everything could be adjusted inasmuch as the walls of that façade can be raised as much as needed, being of a different order; and in this way,

besides being in proportion to the interior, there remains behind it amenity for many rooms necessary for the same library. The idea pleased [...] and it was resolved to promote it publicly.

An alteration related to the exterior height, and the reinstatement of Maruscelli's mezzanine, must have been made around the same time but without comment: it only comes to notice two years later (2 June 1640) in a discussion of room heights on all four storeys. The question by then, however, was not about the feasibility of reinstatement, but in what proportions the total height of the west and north ranges should be divided among the storeys.²⁴ This enlargement was already common knowledge, and must have been planned by Borromini, unremarked, by the time of *Decreto* 115, the only occasion on which height had been discussed. There was already an attic in Maruscelli's design, which Borromini raised to the level of the flanking bays (Fig. 1), and the front was heightened in 1665–67 when the library was extended to the west end of the block.²⁵

No direct input from the architect is mentioned in this *Decreto*; a similarly precipitate announcement in December 1639, rapidly embraced by the majority, was of the relocation and reshaping of the refectory block as the diggers were poised to begin work on the *original* site proposed by Maruscelli, behind the tribune of the church. Contrary to Connors's contention that Borromini had only then thought of moving the refectory, in his discussion of the early plans he lets slip a date of 1637 for the change, contradicting his own argument.²⁶ It is also notable that these changes did not raise serious objection, or even surprise. In *Decreto* 127 (12 January 1639), it had been

proposed to change the site of the new refectory to be built, from the old site in the design made some years ago behind the apse, to move it to the site attached to the anteroom of the little chapel of the Saint. [...] all were pleased by the argument for the change.²⁷

The vote was unanimous, and the meeting went on to discuss

the form of the same refectory, the Father proposing with the counsel of many to make it oval, to be more convenient for the Doubts [doctrinal debates after meals] to be heard by all; the thought generally pleased, but the vote was deferred as of a serious matter, especially on the advice of some who proposed again consulting other architects.

But on 26 January it was recorded that the 'form of the new refectory being discussed again, the oval form pleased, since it was approved of by many architects who were approached anew. All liked the idea' and the vote was again unanimous.²⁸

It is natural to assume a close relationship in time between the Fathers' discussion of the two major relocations (refectory and library) and changes made to Borromini's plans. Caution ought, however, to be exercised over a literal reading of the *Decreti*. Connors writes that in August 1638 'Borromini was told to put the library behind the upper storey of the Oratory façade.'²⁹ If, as might be, that statement is literally true, it means that the change, as 'the desire of many', came from the Congregation, not the architect, who simply carried out instructions. In that case, where is the headstrong capricious architect who wakes up one morning and decides to cajole or browbeat the unwilling community into something new? However, two pages earlier Connors writes, of the same event, that 'permission was granted to put the library over the oratory.' Permission from whom? A concession or a command? On the same page Connors writes that '*the expansion of the refectory led to the displacement of the library*'³⁰ and thence to the 'momentary' shifting of

the oratory eastwards in Borromini's plan (Vienna, Albertina no. 284),³¹ but that any 'approval for some of the other proposals [moving the refectory and making it oval] came only later.' This involves our accepting that Borromini intended to move the refectory at least several months before either it or the library relocation came to the Congregation's attention, and that he had already reached both decisions privately in 1637. The grounds for this are that Connors dates the second, creative, phase of the first general plan to that year, which tacitly includes a rectangular refectory already in its final orientation and near its final position.³² In this scenario of confusion between cause and effect, it is an open question which move came to mind first: however, intuitive decisions often come simultaneously rather than sequentially, even if supporting logic is later introduced. The simplest hypothesis is that Borromini, if nobody else, constantly had in mind 'the design of the whole',³³ and knew privately exactly what he was doing throughout these deliberations, including the consideration of more than one problem at a time.

This special 'rhetoric' is not, then, to be found in the records of the Congregation or the deputies but only in the 'Relation', where reasons — and equally sensible ones — are often given; so whom was it intended to convince? The preface is addressed to 'the gentle readers'³⁴ who would have been initially the artistic and cultural elite of Rome. Borromini was well aware by 1646 that his work evoked strong feelings of either like or dislike and, as has often been observed, sought to counter the charge of caprice and *bizzaria* by showing his inspiration to be in Nature (both organic and mathematical), Antiquity, and his hero Michelangelo.³⁵ Borromini's reasons throughout the 'Relation' are another component of his self-defence against critics. For he was constantly concerned to show not only his impeccable taste in prototypes but also his care for the Vitruvian tripos: not merely *commoditas* (comfort, convenience, privacy) but also *firmitas* (stability and structural integrity) and *venustas* (visual decorum, beauty and occasionally symbolic value). He refers in no fewer than forty-seven instances to the first,³⁶ ten to the second and twenty-seven to the last — an integration of principles that did not necessarily occur to Spada.³⁷ Looking at these figures it seems inescapable that he considered himself, as well as the thoroughly practical architect he was, a true Vitruvian.

Connors also makes unwarrantable capital out of two source statements by removing their context. First, commenting on Borromini's basically sensible procedure of setting up his drawings by overdrawing or tracing Maruscelli's,³⁸ he says that, although accustomed to copying drawings in Maderno's studio, he 'later spoke of the copyist's role with some disdain', citing the preface to the 'Relation'. What Borromini says there is 'I would certainly not have applied myself to this profession with the aim of being merely a copyist.' But in the previous sentence he paraphrases Vasari by quoting, 'Michelangelo the prince of architects [who] said: that he who follows others never goes before them.'³⁹ This is, therefore, about creative invention, not studio routines. Secondly, Connors invents an Oratorian principle 'not to innovate in anything at all' (11 May 1639).⁴⁰ This was not in the least a precept, and referred solely to a particular question about St Philip's private chapel brought from the old house on the east and reconstructed: whether it would be more convenient to move the altar across the room. The full text reads:

But in effect it seems that the majority inclined to leave it in the position where the Saint used it, it being too important, as far as one could, to keep everything as it was at that time; therefore, not to innovate anything.⁴¹

Connors is not the only modern scholar to misrepresent Borromini. In his inaugural paper at the 1967 Borromini *Convegno* in Rome, Rudolf Wittkower, misled by the spurious date of 10 May 1656 added gratuitously to the *Opus* by its publisher,⁴² claimed that Borromini engaged in a systematic campaign of self-promotion during the 1650s.⁴³ This is not to deny the architect's erratic personal behaviour in that period, his search for new clients, or his intention in the early 1660s of publishing a collection of prints from his own drawings, as recounted by his nephew;⁴⁴ but Wittkower set the stage by contrasting Bernini, a figure-sculptor's son, with Borromini, the son of 'a humble stone-mason'. Borromini's father Giovanni Domenico Castelli, however, is described by Borromini's nephew as an architect and he is documented as a hydraulic engineer and designer and maker of fountains;⁴⁵ Borromini himself arrived in Rome as a skilled carver who could also draw rather well, not as a cutter and setter of stone. Wittkower also accepted the story of the prior of S. Carlino (the church designed by Borromini) that the architect won the Oratory commission in a great competition, and ascribed the story to him as a 'poignant self-defence'.⁴⁶ There is no evidence of any competition and it can be ruled out by the silence of other sources, in particular Spada and the 'Relation'. The prior was a preacher, and this hyperbolic story is a little parable, a speciality of preachers. His narrative was intended privately for posterity and was quite unsuitable for publication. It is written in a heavily Hispanic kind of Italian as part of a huge commonplace-book containing other historical and documentary material.⁴⁷

Other less radical, but material, changes at the oratory were also effected without adverse comment, or even any remark. One such was the lengthening of the second court from seven to eight bays by omitting the loggia at its southern end. This had been decided in 1627, but did not appear in Maruscelli's plan or Borromini's derivations from it.⁴⁸ The giant corner niches at the back of the first court (see Fig. 21) were accepted on the approval of the architects Francesco Contini and Giovanni Battista Soria.⁴⁹ The stucco-framed blind windows on the sacristy south wall do not yet appear on the detailed plan now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, made shortly before work began, and also went unremarked.⁵⁰ For the adoption of a giant order for the first and second courts rather than Maruscelli's two superimposed orders, Borromini was more than once rebuked, according to the 'Relation',⁵¹ even though, as Connors points out, the result is actually less ornate than Maruscelli's superimposed orders.⁵²

Nevertheless, Connors taxes Borromini for a 'habit of introducing improvised and unforeseen changes into the design as each new wing was begun', adding elsewhere that 'few of the Filippini could cope with a design that unfolded only gradually'.⁵³ On the contrary, historically they were accustomed to such changes. What they really feared was ostentation and gratuitous ornament anywhere beyond the walls of their splendid new church, their *Chiesa Nuova*. The prime mover in all building enterprises had, for twenty years, been St Philip Neri, who had intervened between the drawing board and the staking-out by ordering the proposed nave to be substantially widened.⁵⁴ Later he had replaced the completed wooden nave ceiling with a vault. It is a commonplace among spiritual directors that God provides not a map for life but only guidance, one crossroads at a time: and that is how, as the Fathers knew, the holy man had lived and worked. And it was also well known and remembered that he had ordered the demolition in 1594 of eight of the ten side chapels, several already decorated, replacing

them with side aisles and building outside them larger chapels matching the two nearest the crossing (built in 1586–90).⁵⁵

Moreover, whereas Borromini saw changes of design as organic development rather than piecemeal accretion, the concept of a building design as immutable was relatively new, having first been formulated by Leon Battista Alberti in the mid-fifteenth century. Beauty, he wrote, is ‘that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away or altered, but for the worse.’⁵⁶ In Rome a century later, the new St Peter’s before Michelangelo’s appointment as architect in 1546 was the most glaring example of a mutable design; Michelangelo’s own monumental revision only survived so little altered because of the unprecedented moral support he wrested from successive popes, and even Maderno’s nave and façade, products of later Counter-Reformation optimism, are respectful additions in the context and the spirit of his vision.⁵⁷

FIRST DRAWINGS AND PREPARATIONS FOR BUILDING: THE CONSULTA

In the general congregation of 14 January 1637, before Borromini’s official involvement with the project, the necessary site demolitions for the oratory were voted in by a majority of twenty-two to five, and it was agreed that a *modello* was not needed.⁵⁸ The first delivery of lime was billed on 23 February, of travertine on 23 April and of *pozzolana* for waterproof concrete on 30 May.⁵⁹ Maruscelli had managed to align the north windows of the oratory proper with the arcade outside, but not with the sacristy windows across the court (Fig. 4). In addition, his plan shows the sacristy shorter east–west by six *palmi* than built. He placed the doors into the oratory asymmetrically one-third the distance from the east end, and one of the south window embrasures is seriously skewed. Disquiet

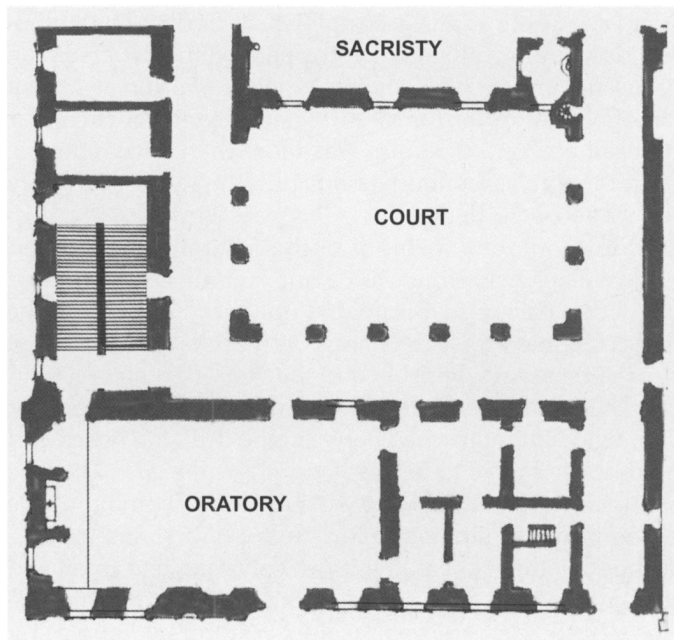


Fig. 4. Paolo Maruscelli, plan for the Oratory House (1627/29), south end (redrawn detail)

over this plan in general must have surfaced before the end of January, and so a *consulta* was held: a customary procedure of the time, when external architects were asked individually for opinions either verbal or graphical. If the client approved, the house architect was obliged to accept them.⁶⁰ Plans survive by Giovanni Battista Mola and also ones convincingly attributed to Girolamo Rainaldi,⁶¹ but the result was inconclusive; the problems of alignment inherent in Maruscelli's plan remained unsolved. There was no reason for the client (in the person of Spada) not to pass on ideas verbally to Borromini,⁶² although he was not yet officially involved, and it appears that he took several ideas from one of Rainaldi's two plans. These features — labelled **A**, **B**, **C**, **D** and **E** in Figure 5 — all anticipate Borromini's first known plan (Fig. 6), and are as follows:

A: re disposing the rhythm of the windows. This reconciles the fenestration to the rhythm of the loggia on the north, although in practice it would not be successful because Rainaldi, who must have been shown Maruscelli's plan, was evidently unaware of the error in the sacristy length; his court plan was consequently six *palmi* too short.

B: moving the street entrance to the east end, having it open into a vestibule on the axis of the court, beneath a loggia for distinguished guests, with a deeper gallery than Maruscelli's at the west end for musicians. The two hefty piers to the west would support this gallery, where Rainaldi provides a window instead of an altar or altarpiece. See also **D**.

C: positioning a pair of giant pilasters, more prominent than the projections on Maruscelli's plan (Fig. 4), to either side of the portal. These create a division of the elevation into a symmetrical western section of domestic appearance, a five-bay symmetrical elevation with a large and inviting entrance, and an eastern bay containing the house door controlled by a doorkeeper: this division would survive to the final design, but at this stage the visual effect of the elevation was scarcely under consideration.⁶³

D: inserting, as Borromini was later to do, a spiral stair in the north-west corner of the oratory, which was built and, until the completion of the great staircase, would be the sole means of visitor access not only to the west gallery but also to the upper loggias, the cardinals' gallery and suite and, on the second storey, to the library (Fig. 11).

E: establishing a second spiral stair in the south-east corner, an idea also taken over by Borromini, for the doorkeeper to reach his bedroom.

Finally, the oratory is fifty-five *palmi* wide (north–south) whereas in Maruscelli's plans it is only fifty. This widening compensated for the area lost to the vestibule, and pushed the loggia correspondingly to the north.

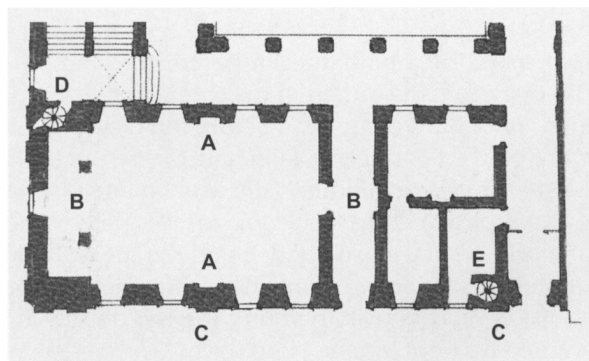


Fig. 5. Girolamo Rainaldi, plan for the Oratory House (1637; redrawn)

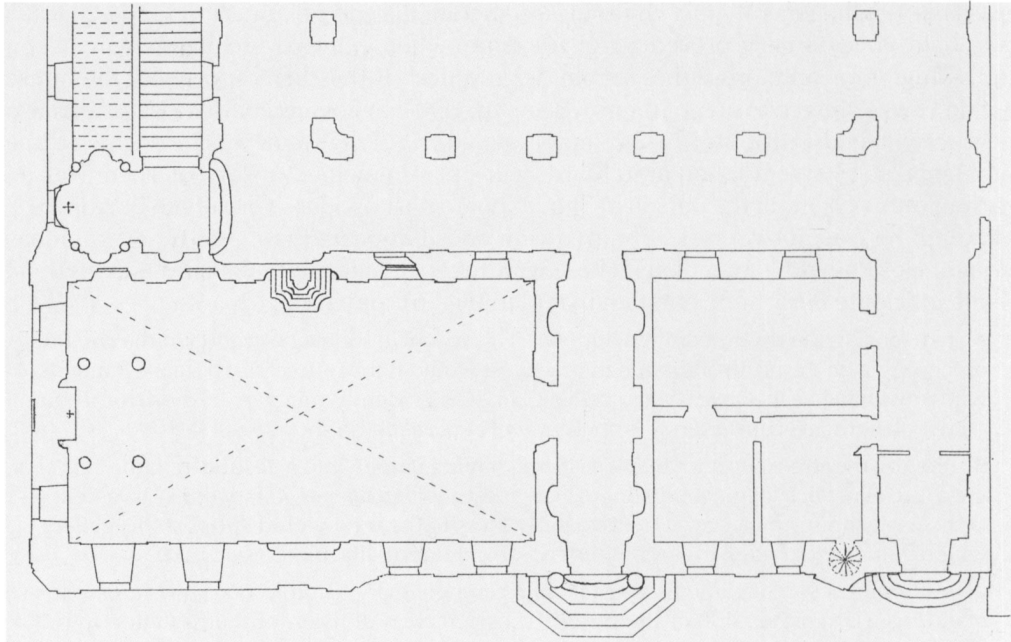


Fig. 6. Borromini's first plan (1637) for the Oratory (redrawn from Vienna, Albertina, no. 283)

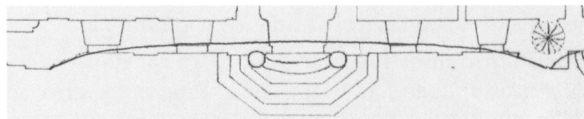


Fig. 7. Detail from the same plan showing Borromini's afterthought

One important question has seldom been asked: what access did Borromini have to the site, and how soon? The *consulta* must have taken place before the end of February, when foundations and the crypt were being excavated.⁶⁴ Borromini was officially no more than a visitor — a stranger to all but Spada, Brother Taddeo Landi (the clerk of works) and possibly Provost Saluzzi — until his appointment on 10 May. It is evident that, exploring both the cluttered site and Maruscelli's plans, he only gradually discovered all the pitfalls of the latter's imperfect design. Two payments are informative. First, on 2 May, eight days before the meeting that appointed him architect, 10½ *scudi* were paid to Landi on his behalf for *misure* (i.e. measurements) and designs for 'the Monte Giordano building', the usual name for the whole site west of the church.⁶⁵ This was a typical architect's fee for services paid at the conclusion of a stage in the progress of work. A *misura* usually denoted the measurement by a specialist of completed work for the calculation of payment due, but one was not called for at this point, and the plural is used. The fee was therefore for the design and drawing work that preceded and secured his appointment, and the measurements were for his own survey of the site and

the structures standing on it, which he found in several respects not to agree with the data used by Maruscelli. The second payment, on 24 December 1637, was of 25 *scudi* for 'the present year'.⁶⁶ The formula, never commented on, is crucial: his paid work began in January before he was 'our architect', and that allows us to date some of his drawings into this very active period of research, experiment and discovery.⁶⁷

Four of his early plans survive, one partial and three overall. The earliest (Albertina no. 283, Fig. 6) concerns only the problems that led to the *consulta* and must have been Borromini's response to Spada's account of that event since, as already stated, it has several features in common with Rainaldi's plan. From his care and precision in constructing this plan, he must already have surveyed this part of the site. He knew the real width of the sacristy and the proposed court, but was not yet aware of the proposal to widen the oratory north–south.

The other major problem left by Maruscelli — the floor levels of the House — was not noticed for some years, possibly not until Borromini began surveying: Maruscelli had taken his levels from the north-west corner of the site facing the main thoroughfare, regardless of the slight slope downwards to both the south-west and the north-east corners, which amounted to about four *palmi* (approaching a yard). Accordingly, he had built the sacristy and the portions of corridor east and west of it at the level of the north-west corner. When this turned out to be higher than the floor of the church it was too late, and steps had to be built in the transept to reach the corridor.⁶⁸ Maruscelli's ignorance is patent in his surviving elevation, the west one which, like his long section,⁶⁹ shows a level base outside and a continuous level floor inside. Had these levels been followed, his south elevation would have resembled Figure 8 with the portals three feet above those of the church.⁷⁰ That problem could have been solved by raising a podium

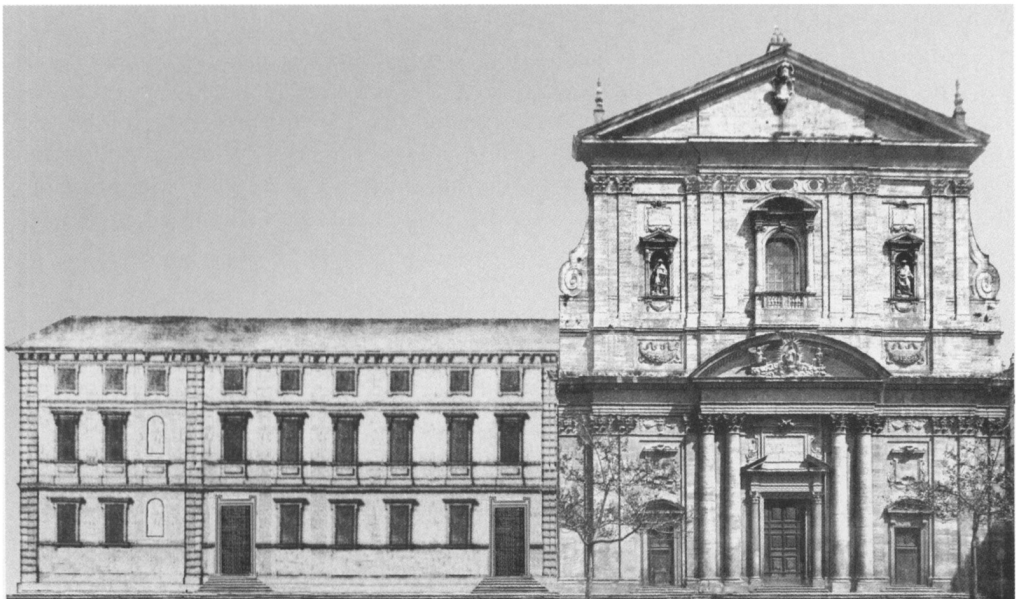


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of Maruscelli's south elevation of the Oratory House (1627)

in front of the House, or providing several additional steps, but at this point the crucial issue became decorum because, as well as the doors, the floor of the oratory complex would have been higher than that of the church.⁷¹ With what now begins to seem characteristic delay, this matter did not figure in the *Decreti* until 15 April 1638; the oratory floor had been laid at the lower level, and it was 'resolved' that the whole south range would be at the same level.⁷² Meanwhile, as he would explain in his chapter on the refectory, Borromini could take advantage of the decline to the north-east by putting the kitchens and refectory at a lower level and thus enabling the refectory to gain desirable height.⁷³

THE ORATORY PLAN

Because the *consulta* only concerned the oratory hall and the first court, it did not address the levels problem. Nor, for the same reason, did Borromini's first plan (Fig. 6).⁷⁴ This incorporated his own survey data, and is on the kind of large scale that he later used for working out designs in detail — almost twice the scale of Rainaldi's plan and three and a half times that of the three ensuing overall plans. The fine sharp graphite lines of Borromini's original drawing contrast with Maruscelli's and Rainaldi's coarser penwork.

Borromini retains Maruscelli's thickened south and west end walls and indeed emphasizes them with giant pilasters — combining visual advantages with structural abutment for the vault inside.⁷⁵ Characteristically, he goes a little beyond his brief, rounding off the internal corners of the court, and envisaging vertical strips and mouldings to break up the monotony of long expanses of walling. Faint diagonals indicate that the oratory hall is to be vaulted but the west gallery and spiral access stair which Rainaldi had proposed are not considered, and the four columns he shows inside must support an altar canopy, although this would be superfluous in a room where an altar was more symbolic than liturgical.⁷⁶ Borromini still did not know all the facts, and thus far he was not concerned with other parts of the complex. Yet here his mind already reached beyond problem-solving, suggesting some sort of shrine under the return flight of the main staircase (marked '+' in Fig. 6). On the south front he retained and refined Rainaldi's idea of five bays and a central portal, and thickened the eastern pier containing the spiral stair, to match the mass on the west. Finally, the plan shows no steps in the doorway from the vestibule to the loggia on the north, merely faint guidelines; there would need to be five steps as in subsequent plans.

In reforming the articulation of the oratory interior, he applied brute force with an extremely skewed north window opening; this followed from his discovery of the extra width of the court. If Borromini already knew about the levels dilemma, it was not relevant to the current problem,⁷⁷ and this confirms the priority in time of this drawing. Then, faintly and freehand, as an afterthought he traced a shallow curve across the five frontal bays (Fig. 7).⁷⁸ This is the germ of the final curved frontage. One other detail emerges in this plan and persists into the building's final design. The centre arch of the loggia is slightly (about one *palm* or 22 cm) wider than the others. This is probably related (although the logic cannot be reconstructed) to the disposition of the façade, where there is a similar excess, and to the geometry of the court plan between the extremities of the frontal building line, overlooking the *piazza*, and the sacristy. The discrepancy recurs in all subsequent plans



Fig. 9. *The Oratory House, middle arches of the south side of the first court*

and indeed in the fabric, where it is about 35 cm. It is only obvious, however, head-on from the other side of the court, from where the centre arch can be seen to be of a geometrically subtle shape, with its radius changing about a third of the way up (Fig. 9). The same adjustment applies to the corresponding arch at the far end of the north court.

A COMPLETE PLAN

As I had agreed to make some changes regarding the Oratory which had some relevance to the rest of the buildings, I was obliged also to turn my hand to the design of the whole in the belief that I could improve it in many respects.⁷⁹

From a hostile viewpoint this may seem to indicate ruthless ambition, but at face value and in the context of Maruscelli's 'prudently' designing the whole building, it surely expresses a quite proper desire to rectify his defective plan, *perfettamente*, as a whole, and produce a building worthy of the clients, their founder and, not least, the architect. Borromini went on to make 'many designs, always scrutinized by Father Spada, until I finally made one to his satisfaction,⁸⁰ in which all the remaining difficulties were overcome.' In context this refers only to the oratory hall, but it is legitimate to read it as a synecdoche: the *Dialogo* is similar, Spada stating that

He made one plan, but not without some faults; I did not approve it; he made the second and he had got it; when I saw it I said, 'Let's not look further: he's got it; there is no architectural error, and if an angel came from Heaven he could well make another design, but surely not one with fewer errors.'⁸¹

Of the three overall plans to survive — there may have been others — only the first (on internal evidence Albertina no. 285) is finished.⁸² Its primacy is established because it is drawn over Borromini's copy of Maruscelli's final ground-floor plan, much of which (including his room numbering) is still visible.⁸³ On a sheet initially measuring 46.7 × 37.9 cm this shows the whole block in detail, including the church.⁸⁴ It is highly finished in fine graphite, with all the solids diagonally hatched (the top half is redrawn in Fig. 10). Following Maruscelli but with altered dimensions, it retains the south loggia in the second court. But, as mentioned above, the kitchen and refectory blocks have been

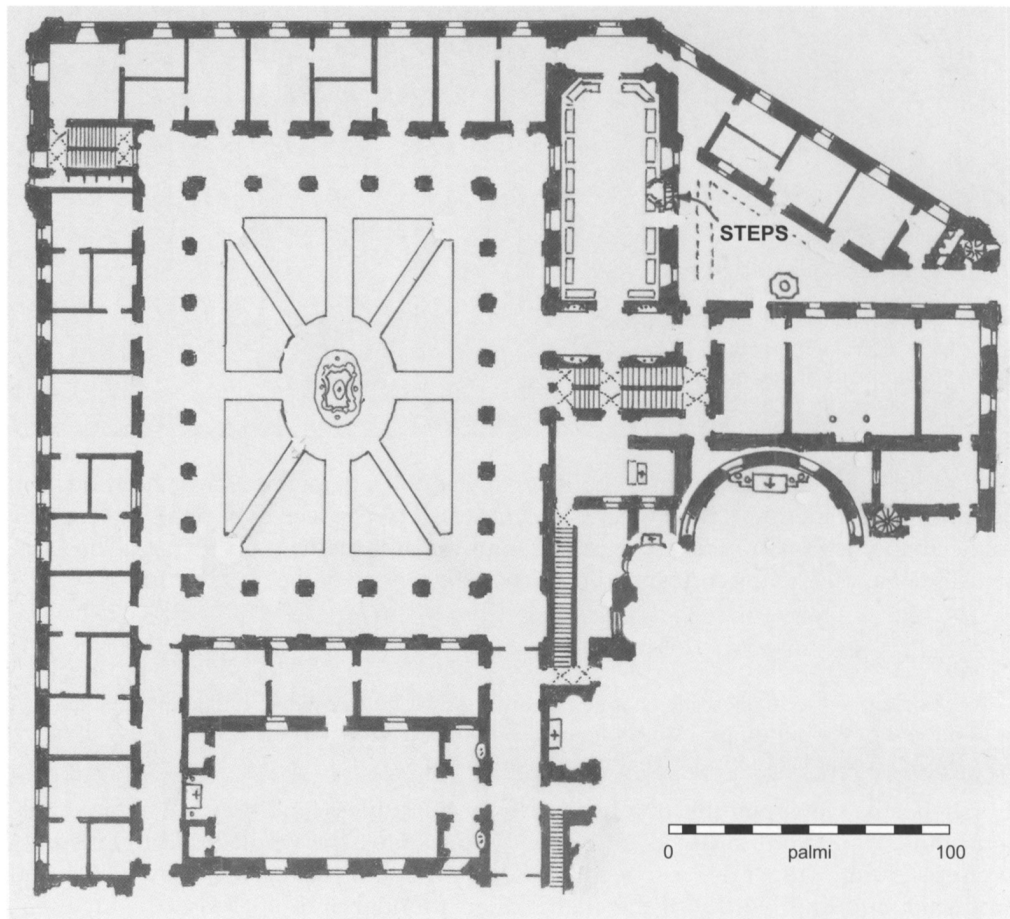


Fig. 10. Borromini's first complete plan, north half (Vienna, Albertina, no. 285; redrawn)

exchanged, the latter being in roughly its final position. There is no sign of this being a *pentimento*.⁸⁵ In the lower half of the sheet (detail, Fig. 11) the oratory now has a five-bay show-façade, fully developed from the tentative curve indicated in Figure 7, with six giant pilasters. The interior is five *palmi* wider north-south, as built, and the front wall stands about two *palmi* further south; these changes partly cancel out but still affect the depth of the first court. The *portaria* (lodge) and visitors' rooms east of the oratory are not yet as built. This plan was made in the full knowledge of the necessary change in levels: five steps are shown in the doorway from the oratory vestibule into the loggia.

For the first time the sacristy is shown as built, with Maruscelli's erroneous plan still discernible (Fig. 12) and a freehand indication of some of the interior fittings. Most significantly, the sacristy's southern windows are still aligned with the loggia across the court and not as built, and they are interspersed with pilasters that complete the articulation of the court. By implication these would carry relieving arches on two storeys (reconstructed in Fig. 13). However, none of this was feasible: not only had the Oratorians

Fig. 11. Borromini's first complete plan, detail of south block (from Vienna, Albertina, no. 285)

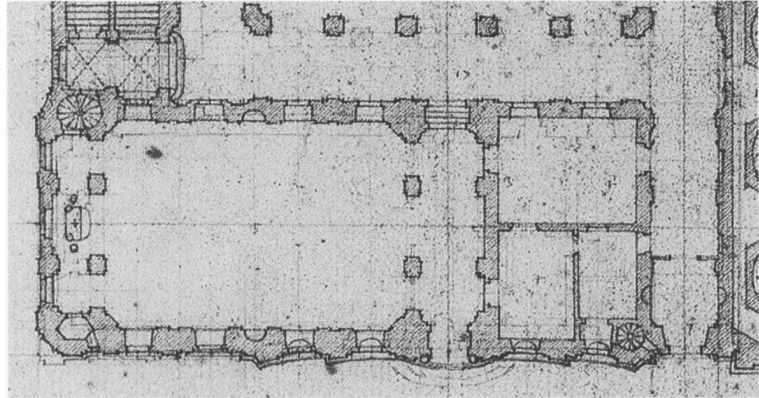


Fig. 12. Borromini's corrected plan of the sacristy drawn over a copy of Maruscelli's plan (from Vienna, Albertina, no. 285)

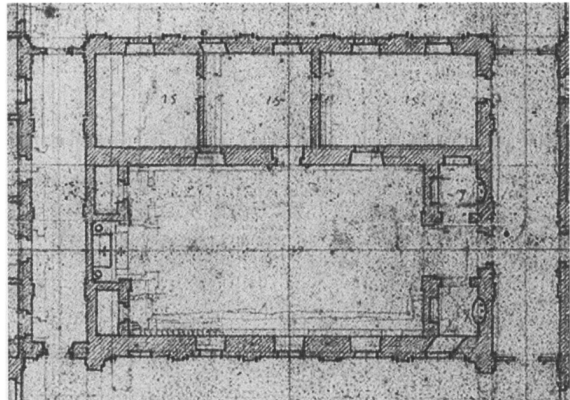


Fig. 13. Reconstruction of the sacristy south wall and court as implied in Borromini's first complete plan (Vienna, Albertina, no. 285)

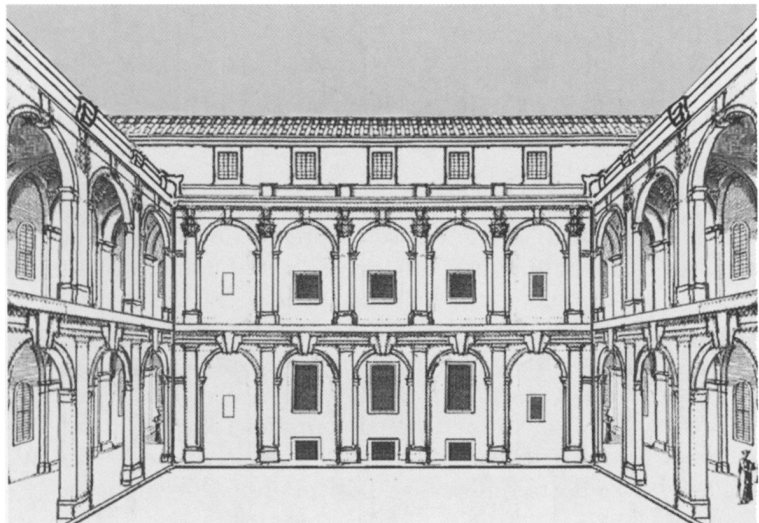




Fig. 14. *Maruscelli's sacristy* (1629–34), looking west

no money for the cosmetic relocation of large new windows, but the latter were fixed absolutely by the relation of the upper ones to the vault above (Fig. 14). Spada would promptly have made this clear, so this plan must have been superseded before 10 May 1637.⁸⁶

THE SECOND OVERALL PLAN

Albertina no. 284 (Figs 15 and 17) also began as a copy of no. 285,⁸⁷ but it became a different kind of drawing. The solids are not outlined and not hatched. Some details are drawn more fluidly, almost as symbols rather than profiles (e.g. the piers in the church, Fig. 16). The previous drawing may have been intended for presentation, but this one could not be. The north-east sector is almost blank — just faintly outlined rather than erased.⁸⁸ The sacristy accords with the previous plan, including the unrealized fenestration and pilasters. Connors is surely correct in seeing it as all drawn within hours rather than weeks,⁸⁹ but it contains four areas of experiment. Two are the courts, where piers are mixed with stretches both of a single column articulation and a paired one: at the last stroke Borromini was still considering three options.

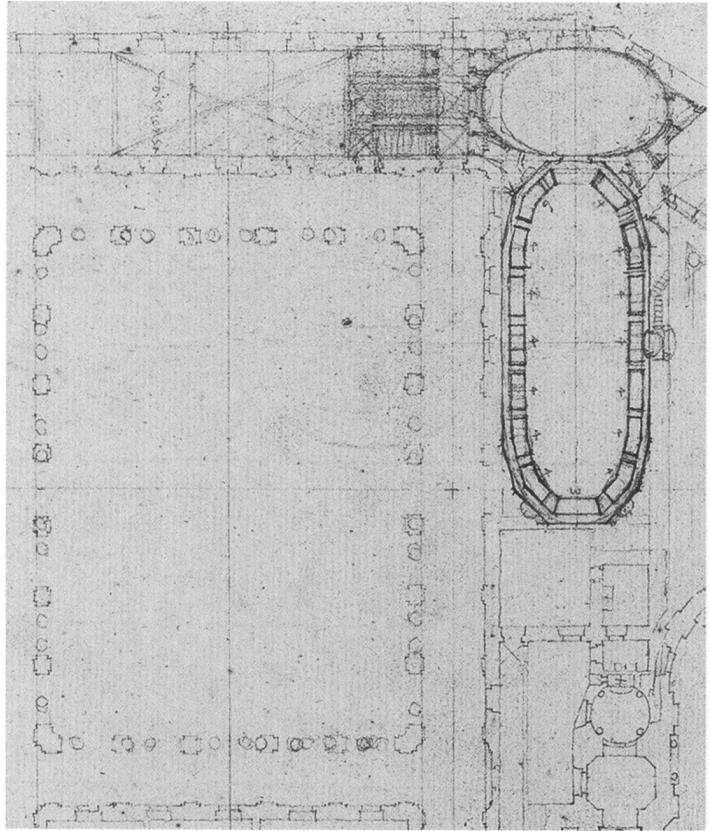
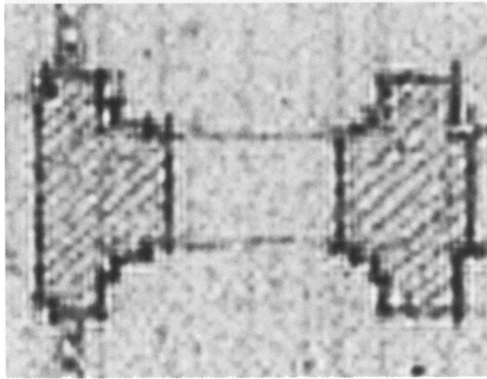


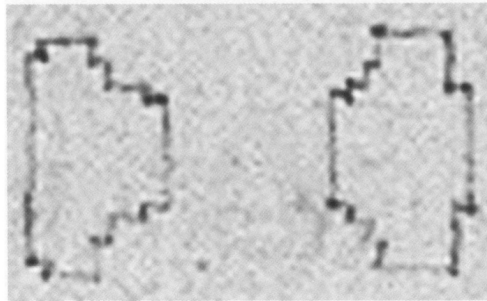
Fig. 15. Borromini's second plan, north court and refectory (detail of Vienna, *Albertina*, no. 284)

A further area of experiment was the refectory which, drawn with somewhat more pressure on the paper, has developed from a rectangle to a long polygon, on the way to becoming an oval. Borromini is also working on the circulation problems of, first, the Fathers coming downstairs from their rooms for meals and washing their hands, and, second, the carrying and serving of dishes from the kitchen (Fig. 15).

The fourth area of experiment is the oratory which, in approximately its definitive shape and size, is moved bodily eastwards to be on the axis of the courts and the curved show-façade (Fig. 17). This would have made excellent logic, although visitors entering through the central portal would still be surprised to find themselves on a cross-axis. It would have been easy to build a vaulted library directly over a vaulted oratory. The plan of course shows only the ground floor, but it is reasonable and logical to assume that the library was to stand directly above the oratory, avoiding structural problems of the kind that arose by the early 1660s and led to the demolition of the library's west wall (over the crown of the oratory vault) and its extension to the west end of the block.⁹⁰ However, even if foundations for the present building were not progressing daily by May, Spada would have asked why his architect had not understood his remarks on the inaccurately placed sacristy windows. This drawing thus must antedate 10 May.



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Fig. 16. Two nave piers of the church shown in Vienna, Albertina, nos 284 and 285; no. 284 is freely traced from no. 285 and some outlines are not rectilinear

In fact, as Connors points out,⁹¹ once displaced from its position north of the church, the library was very difficult to relocate, needing to be spaciouly large and having safety requirements such as protection from fire. Connors's first thought — but certainly not Borromini's — was on the floor above one of two vaulted rooms marked on the plan as the pantry and the dispensary. But there are very strong logical objections to both. First, the location is even deeper in the enclosed part of the House than the original site behind the church as proposed by Maruscelli. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the available space would be far too small, only about half the floor area of the original plan. The space over the oratory, on the contrary, is half as big again as the original site. Borromini's own verdict was that the space over the oratory would otherwise largely go to waste.⁹²

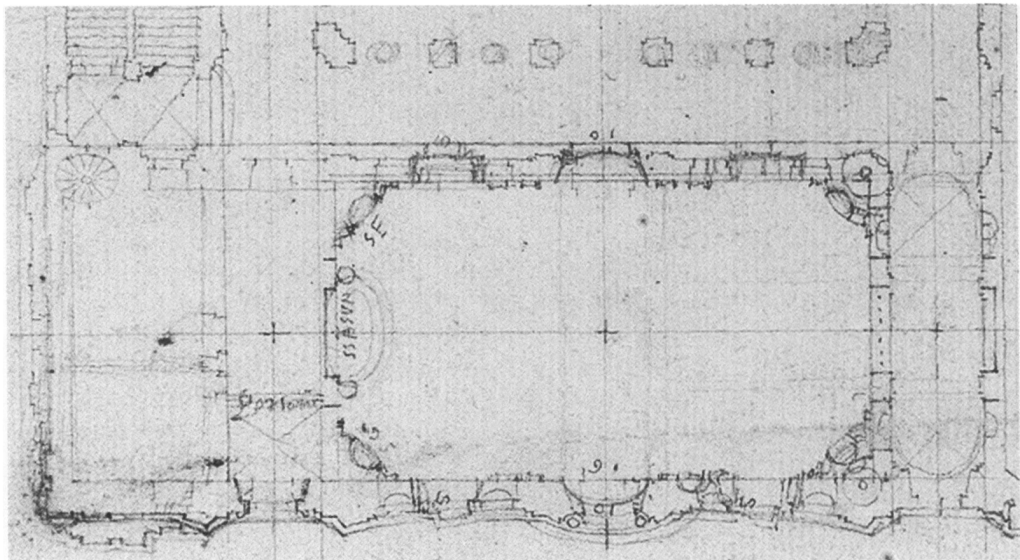


Fig. 17. Borromini's plan of the Oratory House displaced eastwards (detail of Vienna, Albertina, no. 284)

REACTIONS, AND A THIRD PLAN

Confirmation of the early date of the plans previously discussed comes from two unsolicited responses to Borromini's designs. Although the Oratorians were extremely reticent to strangers, they were used to asking advice from many experts, and some news of developments evidently leaked out. One of these responses is in the form of an anonymous overall plan which shows knowledge of the site and of previous plans, but also embodies changes that would become physically impossible before the end of 1637.⁹³ It shows a rectangular refectory similar in size and position to that in no. 285, with an external stair to the reader's pulpit (Fig. 18, and cf. Fig. 10).

The second response is in the form of a proposal for the south range, which came with a long script by a pietistic amateur. The proposal is quite impractical but evoked a furious and detailed rejoinder (to Spada) from Borromini. In particular, Borromini condemns the writer's proposal to place the vestibule on the southwest corner of the site so that the portal is at one end of the frontage and the house door at the other end, with none in the middle. Borromini had, of course, once envisaged placing a pendant to his house door on the west, as in no. 284,⁹⁴ but by this time he was uncompromising, writing that such an arrangement would confuse visitors as to where each door led — whether there were two houses or one — and moreover using the anthropomorphic argument that doors 'do not want' (*non vogliono*) to be at the ends of a building but in the middle.⁹⁵

Borromini's third plan (no. 286) was 'traced in outline' from no. 285; it, too, was abandoned and is in the same freer style. The oratory and sacristy are as built, and for the first time the sacristy windows are accurately placed. The second court is eight bays long as built, instead of seven with a southern loggia, but is only outlined: this is the first plan to acknowledge a plan change actually authorized in 1627.⁹⁶ The services area is blank; the refectory is oval but not yet fitted into the available space (Fig. 20). It is possible that Borromini made only one more general plan for Spada, before his appointment on 10 May 1637; thereafter he would produce drawings on larger scales as he carefully

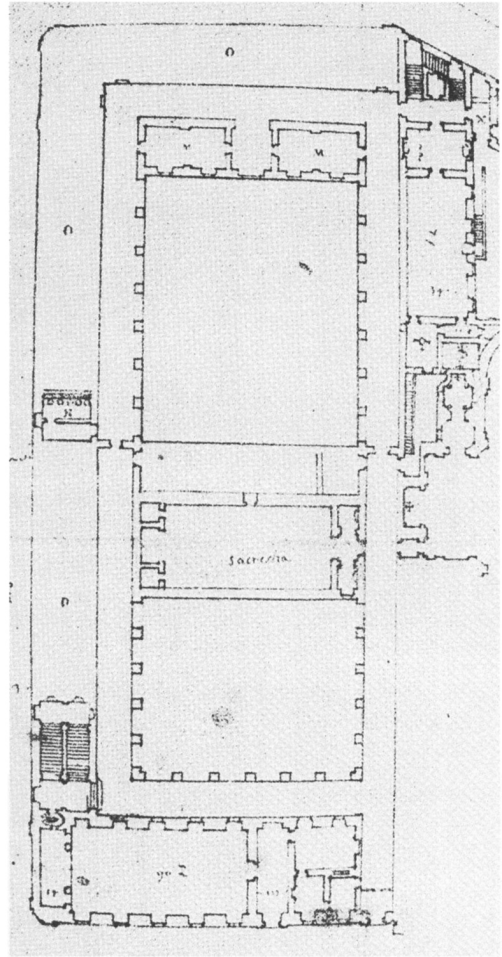


Fig. 18. Part of an anonymous counter-proposal, 1637 (Santa Maria in Vallicella, Archive)

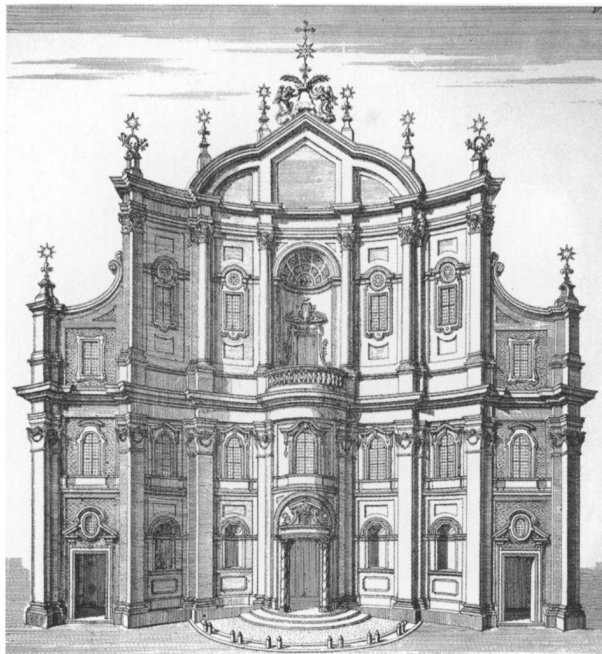


Fig. 19. Borromini's fantasy of the oratory façade (*Opus Architectonicum*, pl. V)

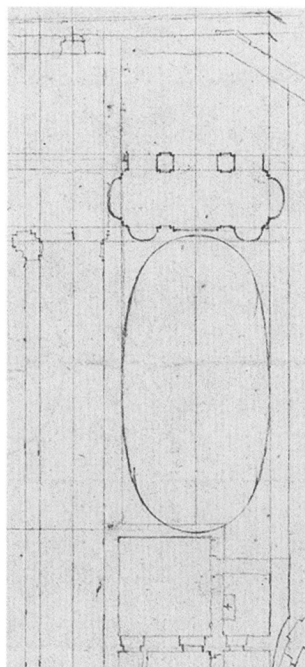


Fig. 20. The refectory taking shape in Borromini's third plan (Vienna, *Albertina*, no. 286)

worked out every detail: partial plans and elevations, windows and door cases, mouldings, dimensioned details for craftsmen. Sadly, few of these survive.⁹⁷

One abandoned working drawing which does survive is a plan connected with the big niches Borromini added to the first court in order at last to integrate Maruscelli's sacristy wall with the loggias (shown in Fig. 21). It is at the stage of considering alternatives and thus antedates the site meeting, which he presumably attended, with the Deputies and the architects Giovanni Battista Soria and Francesco Contini on 23 November 1641.⁹⁸ This plan confirms the accuracy of the fenestration in no. 286, but does not show the stucco string courses surrounding and linking the blind and real windows whose combination finally solved the alignment problem (Fig. 21).⁹⁹

By the autumn of 1640 Borromini had no more major surprises to spring on the Fathers — the clock tower, devised after the composition of the 'Relation', was accepted without objection even despite growing taller and richer. He acceded at last to requests for a large paper *modello* of the whole complex; paper was bought,¹⁰⁰ and the drawing was executed by the mathematician and scientific draughtsman Gaspare Berti. By the end of 1650,

however, Borromini had fallen out with the Fathers, now in the absence of Spada, absenting himself and working through his assistant Francesco Righi. On 28 August 1652 Camillo Arcucci was appointed architect in his stead.¹⁰¹ But he had done the essential work to ensure that his House would eventually reach completion broadly as he had conceived it.¹⁰²

Spada repeated the velvet-glove approach to his community when he offered to pay for a pair of three-dimensional Neri stars on the top of the clock-tower, as Borromini had intended. The design was presented and welcomed as a novelty in October/November 1660, but, unknown to the Fathers, it had been published in a print at least two years earlier. Made of plaster on iron armatures, they did not weather well and eventually disintegrated. They were replaced by metal replicas only in the twentieth century (Fig. 22).¹⁰³

CONCLUSION: THE WINDSOR ELEVATION AND THE ORATORY FAÇADE

The beautiful drawing in the Royal Library (Fig. 19) has been consistently misdescribed and misunderstood since its rediscovery about sixty years ago.¹⁰⁴ It has been described variously as a fair copy, a presentation drawing, copy for an engraver: it is not the first, and ceased to be the second or third when he began to make erasures and *pentimenti*.¹⁰⁵ He drew it in the knowledge of the levels problem, but before he understood the implications of that problem.¹⁰⁶ The wall plan at the bottom is linked directly to the elevation by a second plinth four *palmi* high, which would have resulted if he had adhered to the sacristy floor level, and he abandoned the sheet without finishing the steps necessary to scale this gap (cf. Fig. 8). The



Fig. 21. *The first court looking west (sacristy on the right)*



Fig. 22. *North-west corner of the Oratory House, with the clock tower built in 1647–50*

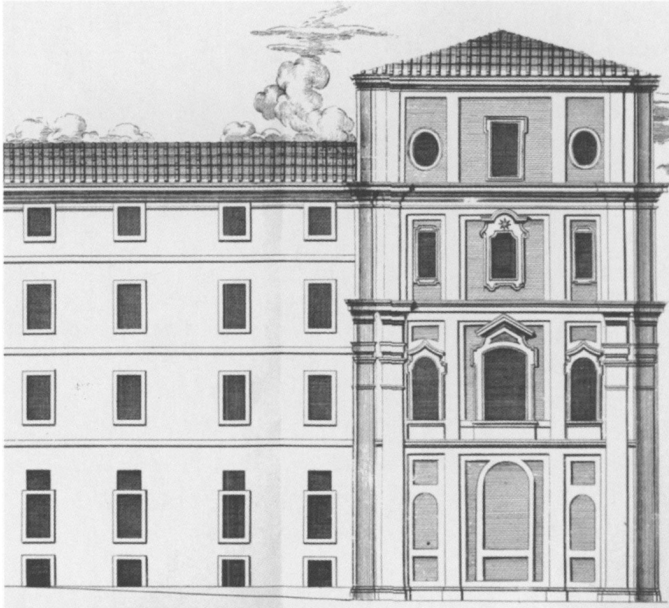


Fig. 23. West elevation of the Oratory House, detail of south end in 1725 showing street slope (*Opus Architectonicum*, pl. XXVII)

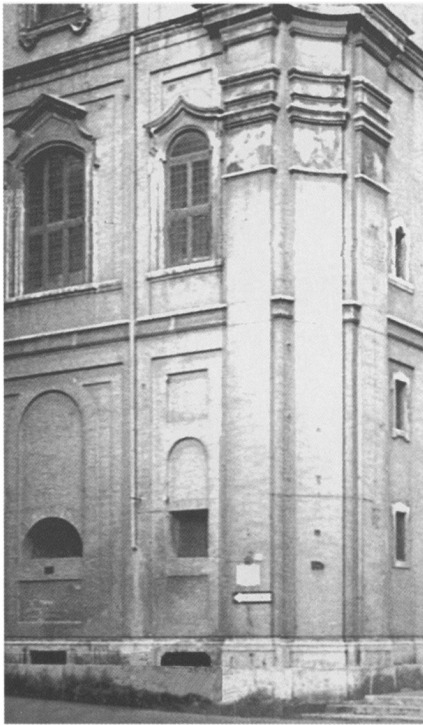


Fig. 24. South-west corner of the Oratory House; the extra plinth in Fig. 3 is absent

elevation shows a gratuitous door case near the left-hand end, and one half of the upper frieze is pulvinated, whereas the other is not.

There is an additional serious error. Further inspection reveals careful shading of the upper order, showing the three middle bays to be framed by half-columns instead of the uniform pilasters eventually built. On the right, the outermost half-column is flanked by a square pier (unshaded) which overlaps, as in the lower storey, an extra pilaster set further back. Borromini uses two distinct types of hatching: short strokes to indicate the rotundity of columns and longer ones for cast shadows to show recession. The distinction is quite clear on the right, and on the left this arrangement should be reversed, but it is not, so that the outside pilaster seems to be in front of the neighbouring column (Fig. 25). The sheet was indeed in no state to be handed to a printmaker, and it would in due course have been superseded by one or more revised drawings for the façade design that do not survive. However, its similarity to the actual building is

also obvious, and the following remarks apply equally to both.

On the assumption that Borromini was a habitual improviser, Connors proposed an evolutionary pre-history for the façade design, starting with a single giant order and an attic, and progressing to two orders in August 1638.¹⁰⁷ Borromini's own account is very different. In the course of the 'Relation' he makes five definitive statements about his concept, which are interlinked and must be considered together.

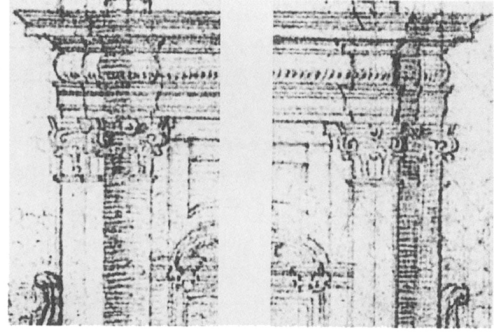


Fig. 25. *Incorrect (left) and correct (right) hatching in two details of Fig. 3*

- 1: He 'made' (strictly speaking, he adopted from Maruscelli) a plan of three courts. What he emphasizes is the particular way he 'made' them. The first or frontal court was where 'I located all the rooms and spaces in which visitors could have any business.'¹⁰⁸
- 2: Specifically for the library he 'chose a place apart, to which visitors could also go without disturbing the Fathers' part of the House, and [...] stay there all day without worrying the custodians of the library.'¹⁰⁹
- 3: The oratory show-front ought 'to be the most conspicuous of all, and to be visible to all, and consequently, by having its particular façade, to show everyone that this is the precious stone in the ring of the Congregation' — a construction worthy of their sainted founder, their Congregation, and their mission in the city. It should appeal to the eye, and 'I decided therefore to deceive the eye of the passer-by, and make the façade to the *piazza* as if the Oratory began there with the altar at the far end from the entrance [...] It would take up as much space on either side [of the doorway] as I thought proportionate to the height I had in mind for it.'¹¹⁰
- 4: He also devised a particular *concetto*: 'Because the Oratory is the son of the Church [...] it was thought a good idea that the Oratory façade should be like a daughter to the façade of the church, that is to say smaller, less ornate and of humbler materials.'¹¹¹ Alike they are, but also different.
- 5: He set out to capitalize on space ready-made and asking to be used: 'The whole height of the library is fronted by the façade of the Oratory, which if it were not part of the library would have remained useless above the roof, as has ensued with a good part of the church façade.'¹¹²

Borromini's concept embraced all these requirements, with a particular concern for both the visual and the emblematic character of the south elevation. The curved show-façade is even different from the rest of the exterior in the overall finer grain of its brick texture. But his design is also very carefully considered and, with a less sensitive aesthetic than his, one simple solution could have saved much trouble. He could have utilized the thicker walls of the west end and moved the five pilastered bays westwards. They would not have been on the court axis, but they would have fronted the actual oratory and the library directly above. But he did not, because he understood the role of proprioception

and empathy in the appreciation of architecture, and in the relationship of the oratory façade to that of the church. The maternal-filial bond is a delicate one — a daughter usually wants a little distance from her mother, but not too far. Separation by three bays would have suggested less than happy relations, and, moreover, to the eye the loose juxtaposition of masses would have appeared accidental. Finally, while in photographs the asymmetry of Borromini's elevation on its own looks out of balance, in reality those who look for longer will realize that it is part of a larger whole, that must include the church (Fig. 1). Thus there are *two* large masses, one in portrait format and the other nearer to landscape, but of roughly equal volume, and the eye is satisfied.

The case is here presented that Borromini knew from a very early stage that he could not only remedy his predecessor's errors but also produce a building worthy of its location, his clients and their founder, their reputation and fame, and his own artistic satisfaction. It has further been shown that, far from inconstantly changing his mind, he revealed his overall considered concept to his clients gradually as the work progressed. Only Father Spada, who supported him constantly and even tried to have him reinstated in 1657, was in his confidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is indebted to John Bold and Alan Windsor for their careful consideration of an earlier draft; to Simon Ditchfield for philological clarification; to Karin Wolfe for information; to John Kenyon for pacing out the loggia of the first court loggia and Clare Robertson for photographing it; and to Joseph Connors for re-examining the drawing Albertina no. 283.

NOTES

1 The pioneer history of the building is Joseph Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory, Style and Society* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1980).

2 See n. 67.

3 Published by Sebastiano Giannini as Francesco Borromini, *Opus architectonicum* (Rome, 1725; facsimile reprint Farnborough, 1964). See now the English version with commentary: Kerry Downes, tr. and ed., *Borromini's Book, the 'Full Relation of the Building' of the Roman Oratory* (Wetherby, 2009). For the manuscript text, see Francesco Borromini, *Opus architectonicum*, ed. Joseph Connors (Milan, 1998), where both Spada's manuscript amendments and Giannini's 1725 changes and lapses are shown. Images of the oratory complex are not easy to find, but Downes, *Borromini's Book* contains reductions of Giannini's 67 plates together with some 40 photographs of the building.

4 Virgilio Spada and his cardinal brother Bernardo continued to employ Maruscelli elsewhere, not without finding occasional faults both structural and aesthetic (Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 111).

5 As in n. 3.

6 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 52. *Questo libro fu fatto da me in nome del Cavre Borromino.*

7 Connors (Borromini, *Opus architectonicum*, ed. Connors, pp. xxiii, xxv–xxvii) sees in the text the mind of a trained theologian, believing that Borromini was not intellectual enough to compose it. We should remember, however, that he had a library of about a thousand books.

8 Giovanni Incisa della Rocchetta, 'Un dialogo del P. Virgilio Spada sulla fabbrica dei Filippini', in *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, 90 (1967), pp. 165–211, hereafter cited as *Dialogo*. The statement that he had his rooms under the clock tower in the past tense (*Io ebbi due stanze*, p. 201) suggests a date after his appointment to the Ospedale di S. Spirito in March 1661.

9 See Downes, *Borromini's Book*, pp. 505–09.

10 G. Incisa della Rocchetta and Joseph Connors, 'Documenti sul complesso borrominiano alla Vallicella (1617–1800)', in *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, 104 (1981), pp. 159–326, hereafter cited as *Decreti*. Some

other important documents between 1623 and 1644, including some accounts, were calendared in Oskar Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII. Kirchliche Bauten ... und Paläste* (Vienna, 1928), hereafter cited according to given register numbers.

11 Regarding the oval shape of the recreation room: 'The Provost had read out [...] the paper made by His Reverence and endorsed by the architect, as to why it proves impossible to make the room on a rectangular plan' (*Decreti*, 146: 13 January 1640). A good enough reason for the shape would be that the refectory beneath it — a year into construction — was also oval.

12 15 April 1638 concerning the oratory's lower floor level (*Decreti*, 108), and (probably) 23 November 1641 with outside consultants (*Decreti*, 174; see below at n. 98).

13 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, pp. 75, 77 and 48 (where the example is Spada's paper). Since this paper is lost, there is nothing to say about its content, structure or style.

14 Filippo Baldinucci, *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernini* (Florence, 1682); Domenico Bernini, *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernini* (Rome, 1713). For Borromini's subsequent critical fortune, see Anthony Blunt, *Borromini* (1979), pp. 218–22. For a comprehensive synthesis of the disagreements between Borromini and Bernini in the context of their lives and work, see Sabine Burbaum, *Die Rivalität zwischen Francesco Borromini und Gianlorenzo Bernini* (Oberhausen, 1999). A full account of the acrimonious affair of the St Peter's façade is given by Sarah McPhee, *Bernini and the Bell Towers, Architecture and Politics at the Vatican* (New Haven and London, 2002). For Bernini's early critical fortune, see Maarten Delbeke, Evonne Levy and Steven F. Ostrow, eds., *Bernini's Biographies; Critical Essays* (University Park, 2006) which contains seven references to Borromini. Previously unconsidered material about relations between the two architects is in Downes, *Borromini's Book*.

15 *Dialogo*, p. 181.

16 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 63; *Opus*, p. 7. Italics in text are mine.

17 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, pp. 20, 24 (italics mine); also p. 192 leading to a quite unnecessary date amendment.

18 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 63; *Opus*, p. 8.

19 *non averlo formato perfettamente* (*ibid.*, p. 83; *Opus*, p. 14).

20 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 93; *Opus*, p. 17. Maruscelli's plans for all floors were made in 1627, soon modified after a report by Spada, and finally adopted in 1629 (Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, pp. 185–92). The modifications included eliminating the south loggia of the second court (see Fig. 2) and reducing the height of the west and north ranges of living rooms from four floors to three by taking out the mezzanine. One reason for this was to make the courts lighter and more airy. Borromini managed to achieve the same improvement of light and air while reinstating the mezzanine, but how soon he did this is unrecorded. It was certainly earlier than 1640, the first time it is mentioned in the *Decreti* (see n. 24).

21 One minor design change was accepted and minuted, but never carried out: on 19 July 1638 the oratory portal to the street was to have helical Salomonic columns (*Decreti*, 113).

22 *Sopra la volta dell' oratorio nuovo si faccino stanze per Padri* (*Decreti*, 112: 17 July 1638).

23 *Essendo desiderio di molti*.

24 'After a paper was presented to determine the room heights of the new building, expressing the views of various parties, the last one was approved and the solution was approved by twenty-two votes to one' (*Decreti*, 152: 2 June 1640). Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, pp. 45–46, merely refers to 'the decision of the patron in 1640 to add an extra storey to the building.' But this decision is not the subject of *Decreto* 152.

25 See n. 20.

26 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 214, distinguishing the two phases of the sheet (1636–37, 1637) from a later one (see below at n. 32; see further in section 'A complete plan' and also n. 84).

27 *Decreti*, 127: 12 January 1639.

28 *Ibid.*; *Decreti*, 125: 29 December 1638; *Decreti*, 129: 26 January 1639. The impetus for this work came from the legacy of Father Saluzzi, who had died on 30 November 1638.

29 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 222.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 220. The italics are mine.

31 See n. 74; after n. 90, and Fig. 17.

32 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 218, cat. 40; pp. 214–16, cat. 39, suggesting (p. 216) that exchanging sites for refectory and kitchen areas was 'possibly out of a desire to provide the refectory with greater privacy and the library with adequate light.' Maybe, but he must have seen very early that neither was well sited. See also n. 26.

33 *al disegno del tutto* (Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 63; *Opus*, p. 8).

34 *Alli benigni Lettori* (Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 55).

- 35 For a detailed discussion of these three sources of inspiration and support, see Anthony Blunt, *Borromini* (London, 1979), pp. 27–51.
- 36 Quite often he does not name this triad, but his implication is clear. This number does not include every feature of the service block: many an eating establishment has foundered through bad planning behind the scenes, and the relevant chapters go into exhaustive detail.
- 37 It did occur, however, to Leo Steinberg — although likewise without naming Vitruvius — when writing of ‘Borromini’s implication of forms in multiple functions; his solutions tend to be points of convergence for many necessities. It is a constant theme of the *Opus architectonicum* — the recitation of several problems and the unique form by which all are simultaneously solved’ (Leo Steinberg, *Borromini’s S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* (New York and London, 1977), p. 363).
- 38 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 212.
- 39 *Opus*, p. 5.
- 40 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 28, quoting *Decreto* 134: *non si innovò cosa alcuna*.
- 41 *Decreto*, 134: 11 May 1639.
- 42 *Opus*, p. 5.
- 43 English version here quoted from Rudolf Wittkower, *Studies in the Italian Baroque* (London, 1975), pp. 153–76.
- 44 Downes, *Borromini’s Book*, p. 281.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 273, 284.
- 46 Wittkower, *Studies in the Italian Baroque*, p. 162.
- 47 Parts of the volume concerning San Carlino were printed in Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 225; for the prior’s account of the church, see now Juan María Montijano García, *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane di Francesco Borromini nella ‘Relatione della fabrica’ di fra Juan de San Buenaventura* (Milan, 1999). A more recent example of the miswriting of history is in Martin Raspe, ‘The Final Problem: Borromini’s Failed Publication Project and his Suicide’, in *Annali di architettura*, 13 (2001), pp. 121–36. Filling out his story with picturesque embroidery from the unreliable Lione Pascoli (*Vite de’ Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti* (Rome, 1730), 1, esp. pp. 202–03) Raspe writes (pp. 132–33) that on the last visit of Borromini’s nephew, Bernardo, they quarrelled and he turned the nephew away, misquoting Bernardo’s own account as ‘licenziò il detto nipote’ (he dismissed the said nephew) and then altered his will to prevent the latter from receiving a capital sum. But the source actually reads *si licenziò il detto nipote*, the verb is reflexive: the said nephew took his leave: no quarrel, no story. It was as prudent then as it is today to tie up capital left to a young person who nevertheless would benefit from the interest. Serious scholars have been advising caution in the use of Pascoli for the last 250 years.
- 48 See below, ‘Reactions and a third plan’.
- 49 23 November, 2 December 1641 (*Decreto*, 174, 175). See below at n. 98.
- 50 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 66. See again n. 98.
- 51 Chapter 19: Downes, *Borromini’s Book*, p. 105; *Opus*, p. 21.
- 52 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 46.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 77.
- 54 This story is told in all the early Neri sources as an instance of divine guidance.
- 55 Costanza Barbieri *et al.*, *Santa Maria in Vallicella* (Rome 1995), p. 24.
- 56 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, ed. and trans. Joseph Rykwert *et al.* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 156 (Book 6, chapter 2).
- 57 For the long tradition of progressive design over time, see Marvin Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time* (New Haven and London, 2010). This controversial book illuminates a subject often discussed but little studied. On post-Albertian architects’ (including Michelangelo’s) attempts to ensure the continuity of their designs see Howard Burns, ‘Building Against Time: Renaissance Strategies to Secure Large Churches Against Changes to their Design’, in Jean Guillaume, ed., *L’Église dans l’architecture de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1995), pp. 107–25.
- 58 *Decreto*, 102.
- 59 Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 1802, 1803, 1805.
- 60 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 16. For Maruscelli’s plan, see *ibid.*, cat. 21.
- 61 *Ibid.*, cat. 31–33. In the ‘Relation’ various designs were made ‘both by their own architect and by others’ (Downes, *Borromini’s Book*, p. 67; *Opus*, p. 9). Cf. Saluzzi who ‘treated with this and that architect, but in vain’ (*Dialogo*, p. 181).
- 62 This is just the kind of thing Spada would enjoy. A later example is Borromini’s visual metaphor of the curved five bays as the Church’s welcoming arms (Downes, *Borromini’s Book*, p. 75; *Opus*, p. 11). In a report to the *Fabbrica* of St Peter’s, Bernini attributes to Alexander VII the same imagery, applied in 1657 to the oval

colonnades flanking the basilica, as representing the welcome of 'Mother Church' to Catholics, heretics and unbelievers alike; he also made a quick sketch of the complex in the form of a human figure. Between August 1656 and May 1657, in connection with the colonnades, Alexander met Bernini several times and Spada three times — and on 4 February before a meeting with the architect. See Heinrich Brauer and Rudolf Wittkower, *Die Zeichnungen des Gianlorenzo Bernini* (Berlin, 1931), p. 70 and pl. 62b; Richard Krautheimer and R.B.S. Jones, 'The Diary of Alexander VII: Notes on Art, Artists and Buildings', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 15 (1975), pp. 199–233. Whether the idea was really the pope's or Bernini was flattering him with the ascription, Spada had known of it since at least 1647.

63 Why Maruscelli initially thickened the western bays, and also the south end of the west elevation, is a mystery, although it may have been for stability. What is beyond doubt is that, once established, these bays proved useful both structurally and visually.

64 See n. 59. There are two accounts for the removal of earth between 30 May and 20 June (Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 1805); the foundations were 'nearly finished' to ground level on 26 July (*Decreti*, 104).

65 A *Tad. Landi* sc. 10.50 al S. Franco Castelli per misure e disegni per la fabrica di Mte Giordano (Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 1787). Connors (*Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 38) identified one of Borromini's survey drawings, a measured plan of the south end of the site and church, dating it probably 1637.

66 Al S. Franco Castello Borromino nostro Architetto sc. 25. per la sua provisione dell'Anno presente 25.– (Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 1641). Subsequent half-yearly payments (*ibid.*, reg. 1642–56) confirm that he was paid not for eight months starting in May but for twelve starting in January.

67 A previous payment to Borromini, also of 10½ *scudi* on 15 December 1636, again through Landi, was for 'the chapel of St Philip in the sacristy' (*ibid.*, reg. 1699); the 'chapel' is the recess at the west end of the sacristy with a small altar and Algardi's statue of the Saint, not even complete at that date; see n. 76. Borromini made a couple of drawings for the cupboards and chests in the sacristy, probably no later than 1634 as they were not followed, and there is a design for a picture frame datable 1636 (Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cats 24(o), 24(p), 28). These imply earlier contact with Landi but with nobody else, but what is clear from the description is that these drawings had nothing to do with the Oratory hall or any larger project.

68 They are not shown on any plan of the church.

69 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cats 23c, 23a.

70 'Maruscelli ignored ground levels' (*ibid.*, p. 85); Connors's fig. 13 reconstructing Maruscelli's south elevation diverges substantially from the information in the plan.

71 See below, n. 106.

72 *Risoluto*, i.e. a question was asked and answered: *Decreti*, 108. The complexity of steps might be a virtue in a Frank Lloyd Wright private mansion, but never at the public interface of a conventual house.

73 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 109; *Opus*, p. 22.

74 Vienna, Albertina, Az. Rom. 283, 36.7 × 53.7 cm. References to Albertina drawings here (all in the same class) are simply by the Arabic number. Figs 4–6 and 10 here are traced for the sake of clarity in reproduction; some minor breaks in wall planes are omitted from Fig. 6. The large-scale details of other drawings were extracted from high-definition images.

75 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, pp. 69–71.

76 Larger sacristies usually have a small altar because sacred objects are handled there, not because mass is ever said there. Nor were masses normally said in the oratory hall. The stepped structure in the middle of the north side is neither a pulpit, as Connors identified it, nor the support for a chair, as he suggested in correspondence on the grounds that the Oratory preachers were seated. It is too small and steep, and the shaped top implies a pedestal for a standing (i.e. inanimate) figure: a statue of St Philip was eventually installed in the niche, with the pulpit opposite on the south wall.

77 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 207, detected five risers; the question whether they really exist is left open in Downes, *Borromini's Book*. In 2011, Professor Connors kindly re-examined the original and reported: 'It is the faintest part of the drawing. Looking closely, one can pretty clearly see two or three steps — at the entrance and at the exit into the loggia. Whether there are, or were, other steps is unclear even with close looking. Thus the drawing stands about halfway between being a witness for my reconstruction and yours.' Two or three steps would solve no problem — and see n. 72. As built, the east corridor has six steps. The faint lines are not evenly spaced, and the simplest reading is that they are construction lines for window jambs ruled through the whole length of the wall, not part of the design. This was common practice; for early examples in Borromini, see Heinrich Thelen, *Francesco Borromini, die Handzeichnungen* (Graz, 1967), cats 25, 29, 47 (detail), 62, 77 (bottom).

78 This is omitted from Fig. 6 to preserve the clarity of the initial concept.

79 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 63; *Opus*, p. 8.

80 *Fatti molti disegni censurati sempre dal P. Virgilio Spada ... finalmente ne feci uno a sodisfazione, di tutti col quale restorono superate tutte le difficoltà* (Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 67, *Opus*, p. 9). Or rather, 'to the satisfaction of all': *Opus* has a misleading comma after *sodisfazione* absent in the manuscript, and none after *tutti*.

81 *Dialogo*, p. 181.

82 Albertina, no. 285. Connors (*Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 39) was the first to date it rightly before no. 284, although the terms 'first' and 'second' are only part of the story.

83 No complete upper-floor plans by Borromini are known. His other careful copies are *ibid.*, cats 37b–f (Albertina nos 278, 282, 281, 900 and 901).

84 Connors identifies three phases in this drawing: (1) the straight underlying copy from Maruscelli's plan; (2) the rest of the initial sheet; (3) another sheet pasted on later with a short-lived proposal of 1644 for a Pamphili mausoleum east of the church. The present discussion concerns only phase 2. Connors (*Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 39) saw no reason to doubt that this phase was all drawn in one episode.

85 See above at n. 32.

86 Connors does, however, refer in passing (*ibid.*, p. 215) to the realignment of the sacristy windows in this drawing, but without remarking on its unfeasibility.

87 *Ibid.*, cat. 40.

88 In particular the ruled setting out of the same kitchen building as in no. 285.

89 Personal communication.

90 No conclusion can be drawn from this plan or the previous one as to Borromini's intention for the upper storey; see below. In support of his later dating, Professor Connors has argued (in correspondence, 2011) that Borromini made the freehand alterations to no. 284 in August 1638 to demonstrate to Spada that, if the latter wanted to move the library to the south range, it would have to be placed above the oratory hall, 'vault below and vault above', and that this was of course impossible since the vault below was already complete in an inappropriate location. Quite apart from this is the fact that by that date Spada had accepted that such a construction was unnecessary and told the Congregation that there were no serious problems — Borromini could point to a similar library with one wall built over the crown of a vault below which had recently been completed in the Palazzo Barberini — a graphical demonstration of statics which did not require him to identify the subjects of the altarpiece and the flanking statues in niches (St Philip and St Cecilia). See also n. 102.

91 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, p. 218.

92 See below at n. 112.

93 Rome, Vallicella archive, C. II. 8a, f. 12; not in Connors. The drawing was possibly produced by Maruscelli from memory after he had resigned in May/June 1637, but the early date matters more than the authorship; see Downes, *Borromini's Book*, pp. 415–17; and Vittorio Ceradini and Antonio Pugliano in *Architettura, Storia e Documenti*, 1986/2, pp. 87–98.

94 Also in the Windsor drawing; see below.

95 This plurality did survive as a pipe-dream, even being engraved by Domenico Barrière around 1660 as a commission, but that image is a fantasy, with a set of never-built steps, with all the rejected skyline ornaments, and standing like part of a film set in an open field. An original impression is the British Library (K.134 g. 11, f. 33; Borromini, *Opus architectonicum*, ed. Connors, fig. 38). Giannini used the plate, slightly reworked, as plate V of the *Opus* (Fig. 19).

96 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 59. See n. 20.

97 One that does shows three bays of the second court loggia with giant pilasters. Borromini must have made this change of scale by early 1639 because the east arcade gives abutment to the refectory behind it, begun in January (*ibid.*, cat. 57); the same change in the first court is implicit, for consistency. The left-hand pier and arch seem to descend four *palmi* lower; Connors read this as a 'drastic measure' inspired by Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori, lowering the loggia floor to oratory level. Not only drastic but the arches would be disproportionately tall — totally impractical, far from Michelangelesque and offensive to the eye. Moreover, having mounted six steps from the entrance one would have to descend again to the second court. Some elevations, like some plans, have an implied third dimension; but the piece of lowered floor is surely imagined *inside* the refectory, which really is at the lower level. In the middle and right-hand bays the bottom zone is occupied by plans of the giant order piers.

98 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 66 (*Decreti*, 174). Borromini recycled the unfinished recto, folding it three times to make the verso into what Heinrich Thelen dubbed a 'pocket sheet' (*Taschenblatt*) with memoranda on various parts of the works. One concerns an event on Friday 28 February, which must be 1642.

Whether he brought it to the site meeting is an open question. This drawing in London's Victoria & Albert Museum (cat. E510–1937 – VA/128/19/4) is illustrated in Connors's catalogue but the original is now enshrined (described as a preliminary design for working out the ground plan of the Chiesa Nuova!) in a high-tech plan chest, labelled *Developing*, in the museum's room 128. It cannot under any circumstances be removed for inspection, so a quarter of the recto and all of the verso are hidden.

99 See Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 83. The niches answer the arcades; the string courses continue the lines of mouldings on the arcades. Neither the plans in *Opus* nor that of Paul Letarouilly (*Édifices de Rome moderne*, 1 (Paris, 1840), pl. 109) place the windows accurately.

100 Payment, 2 November (Pollak, *Die Kunsttätigkeit unter Urban VIII*, reg. 1790).

101 *Decreti*, 313.

102 The principal exception was the failure of the library's wall over the oratory vault; it fell to Arcucci to remove it and extend the library to the west end, which he did with discretion and skill.

103 See Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 443.

104 Royal Collection, inv. 905594. For a detailed account of this drawing, see Downes, *Borromini's Book*, pp. 426, 431. Martin Raspe (see n. 47) sees the drawing as 'late' (after 1650) and made for engraving. He excludes it from 'the planning process' because it is not dimensioned, which is not unusual — and he entirely ignores the *pentimenti* which are indiscernible in his small illustration. He also finds the curve of the wall 'much stronger than in the executed version', an error that is not even original, but was made more than forty years ago (Paolo Portoghesi, *Disegni di Francesco Borromini*, exh. cat., Rome, Accademia Nazionale di S. Luca (1967), p. 16, cat. 39). The curve is identical with those seen in the Albertina drawings nos 284–86.

105 Connors (*Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, cat. 41), without mentioning the plinth, linked the drawing to the 'permission' of August 1638 to move the library, in the belief that until then the south front comprised only one giant order and an attic. In correspondence (2011) Professor Connors suggested that the bottom plinth was built but was buried in 1745 when the *piazza* was surfaced. However, it is not shown in the side elevation of 1725 (Borromini, *Opus*, pl. XXVII; Fig. 23 here) or in any of the images in his catalogue prior to that date, and careful study of prints, and photographs for over a century, shows no significant rise of the level between 1660 and the present (Fig. 24). Further, if it was to be buried Borromini would not have drawn it: it is a universal convention from the time of Raphael that an elevation starts at ground level, not below.

106 Connors (*ibid.*, p. 33) writes of the Oratory façade that 'It was not only smaller, but the fictive podium on which it stood was kept as low as the podium under the church, even at the cost of a general lowering of door thresholds and floor levels throughout the casa.' This is precisely not the case with the Windsor drawing; moreover, the lower floor levels were the result of Maruscelli's ignorance of the site levels and the need to compensate for it.

107 Connors, *Borromini and the Roman Oratory*, fig. 14. The compound façades of S. Susanna and S. Giacomo degli Incurabili offer very poor precedents.

108 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 63; *Opus*, p. 8.

109 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 127; *Opus*, p. 29.

110 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 75; *Opus*, p. 11.

111 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 77; *Opus*, p. 11.

112 Downes, *Borromini's Book*, p. 129; *Opus*, p. 29.