

# BERNINI'S STAGE FOR A SACRED OPERA

Charles Scribner

In 1655, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's old friend Fabio Cardinal Chigi ascended the throne of Peter as Pope Alexander VII and changed the face of Rome forever. His punning epithet "*papa di grande edificazione*" (the pope of great edification/edifices) was apt, for he gave Bernini full rein to fulfill his edification of Rome as the Baroque capital of the world.

"Princes must build grandly, or not at all," Bernini said during a later trip to France. The new pope embraced wholeheartedly Bernini's architectural credo that "buildings are the mirrors of princes." The grandest of all his projects was the colonnade and piazza of Saint Peter's, vast open-air sacred architecture under the dome of heaven.

While construction was underway Bernini undertook a smaller, but no less magnificent, commission: to design and build the Jesuit novitiate church of Sant'Andrea (1658-70) opposite the papal palace on the Quirinale Hill. Here Bernini exercised his full powers as architectural impresario, coordinating the structure, the painted and sculptural adornment, and its iconography in a soaring synthesis.

## A Flawless Jewel

During the preceding pontificate, the Jesuit fathers had sought to erect a novitiate church designed by Bernini's rival Borromini, but Pope Innocent X had vetoed it, preferring an unspoiled view from his windows.

When Innocent's nephew Prince Camillo Pamphilj later offered to pay for its construction, Pope Alexander, realizing that the church might simultaneously serve as a chapel for his household, nodded approval; then, as his diary reveals, he began his collaboration with Bernini on the design.

The source of funds guaranteed a sumptuousness that the Jesuits' vow of poverty could not otherwise have justified. The result was to be the flawless jewel in Rome's Baroque crown.

Following the Renaissance theorists Alberti, Serlio, and Palladio, Bernini believed that the most perfect forms for churches were domed structures—



*The interior of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale*

squares, octagons, ovals, and the like.

Since the Jesuits required five functioning altars, he proposed alternative designs based on a pentagon and a transverse oval, with the long axis running parallel to the street.

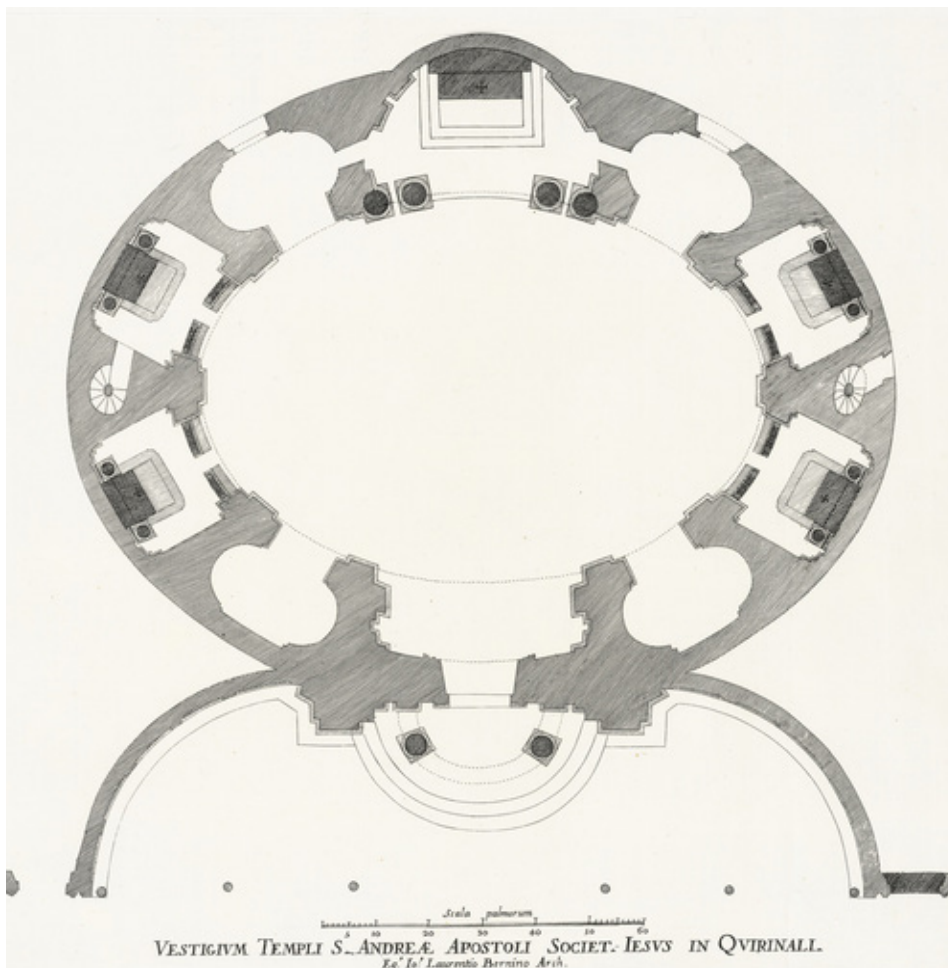
Exploiting the shallow building lot, the latter plan not only took care of practical requirements as at the piazza for Saint Peter's, but set the stage for Bernini's dynamic solution to the perennial conflict between form and function in centrally-planned churches: how to reconcile the balanced domed space with the thrust of the axis from entrance to altar, or how to coordinate the geometric symbolism with the liturgical requirements of celebrat-

ing the Mass.

According to the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, the oval was the distinctive Baroque shape. Bernini exploited its tense proportional relationships through a range of applications from portrait medallions to the Piazza San Pietro. In the 1630s he had introduced a transverse oval in his chapel of the Three Magi for the Propaganda Fide, where the longer axis extended into side chapels as though a domed Greek-cross plan (like Michelangelo's for Saint Peter's) had been stretched into an oval. At Sant'Andrea Bernini terminated that axis with a pilaster at each end, thereby reinforcing the sense of domed enclosure.



The dome of Sant'Andrea



Plan of Sant'Andrea drawn by Giovanni Giacomo de Rossi

The earthly and heavenly zones are distinguished by the color contrast of the inlaid marble pavement that mirrors the ribs superimposed over the golden, light-suffused dome.

The continuous architrave that outlines the oval space separates the zones while it forms a divider between the fluted pilasters and the ribs of the dome, which, separated by bright windows at the base, converge at the lantern. (Bernini's typically overlapping of ribs and hexagonal coffers was his classicizing variation on a motif of Pietro da Cortona's.)

### A Stage

As the plans evolved from his "first thoughts" of 1658 to their amplification through the 1660s, Bernini transformed the classical interior into a stage for sacred opera. An enlargement of his famous Cornaro Chapel with its stunning staged ecstasy of Saint Teresa, this new *bel composto* of architecture, sculpture, and painting now filled an entire church. The interior integration of spaces was united by the *concetto* of the death and apotheosis of Andrew, the patron saint. Passing through the portal into a small vestibule, the worshipper immediately confronts a luminous space spiritually charged by Bernini's narrative program.

Directly opposite the entrance, pairs of massive, rose-colored Corinthian columns serve as a Palladian screen for the sanctuary. This "frontispiece" – as it was called in contemporary accounts – provides a frame for the miracle displayed above the altar (at the same time Bernini was exploiting his earlier baldacchino as a frame for the *Cathedra Petri* in the apse of Saint Peter's).

The triumphal threshold between the sanctuary, reserved for the clergy celebrating the Mass, and the main body of the church symbolizes, as in Teresa's columned tabernacle in the Cornaro Chapel, the open portal of heaven. As the art historian Rudolf Wittkower aptly observed, Sant'Andrea has "two spiritual centers," each with its own source of light.

### Andrew's Martyrdom

In the sanctuary, where the sacrifice on Calvary is renewed in the Mass, Ber-

Photo: flickr.com/Giancarlo De Leo

Image: Insignium Romae Templorum Prospectus



*The martyrdom of Saint Andrew by Guglielmo Cortese*

nini's altarpiece—executed by his assistant Guglielmo Cortese—shows the apostle and martyr Andrew at the moment before death. He looks up from his cross to the outstretched arms of God the Father, frescoed in the lantern above. Gilded bronze shafts and stucco angels, as in the contemporaneous Gloria at the far end of Saint Peter's, sacralize natural light.

According to the *Golden Legend*, Andrew had survived for two full days preaching from his cross when Aegeus, the Roman proconsul who had originally condemned him, relented and returned to take the saint down. Refusing to descend alive ("Already I

see my King awaiting me in heaven"), Andrew prayed for death and his final reunion with Christ, whereupon "a dazzling light from heaven enveloped him. ... When it finally vanished he breathed forth his soul."

Bernini's rendering of the mediaeval legend breaks out of the picture plane and into the viewer's realm. Through a passage scooped out of the classical pediment, Andrew's white cloud-borne soul—executed in stucco by Antonio Raggi from Bernini's model—ascends toward the dove of the holy spirit in a second oval lantern, ringed with stucco cherubs and crowning the main dome.

On the windows below, eight reclining fishermen (Andrew had been enjoined by Jesus to be "a fisher of men") provide a background chorus for the solo saint soaring toward the center of heaven.

As in his Pantheon-revival church at Ariccia for Pope Alexander, where Bernini's *concetto* of the Virgin's Assumption integrates the dark sanctuary and the luminous dome of the circular church, this bi-focal drama encourages the worshipper to participate in the saint's spiritual consummation.

Its narrative force, matching that of Saint Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, was aimed at the Jesuit novices for whom



*Reclining fishermen above the windows*



*The façade of Sant'Andrea*

the elevated Andrew was the model preacher and martyr.

### **Bernini's Reconciliation**

By subordinating the classical forms to a distinctly unclassical fusion of spaces and media, Bernini reconciled the Renaissance ideal of the centralized, curvilinear church with its liturgical function. This interior integration is prefaced in the façade by an inviting interplay of convex and concave forms.

Just as the dominant aedicula of giant pilasters corresponds to the triumphal gateway of the sanctuary, so the concave flanking walls preface the oval church within. At the top of the steps (originally only three before the street was lowered) a semicircular, columned porch derived from Pietro da Cortona's Santa Maria della Pace provides a monumental base for the donor's escutcheon.

The normally frugal Prince Pamphilj wanted the small church "to rival the most magnificent buildings in Rome." Confronted with soaring expenses, he told the workers: "You must do whatever Cavaliere Bernini orders, even if all my substance goes in the process."

For himself, Bernini refused payment. It was a labor of faith—and he was uniquely rewarded. Years later he explained to his son and future biographer Domenico, who had been surprised to discover his father alone in the church, "this is the only piece of architecture for which I feel special satisfaction from the depth of my heart; often when I need rest from my troubles I come here to find consolation in my work."

His own severest critic, Bernini's satisfaction may be appreciated by every visitor today with open eyes—and heart.



*Charles Scribner III is the author of Bernini, Impresario of the Baroque and The Triumph of the Eucharist, on Rubens' tapestries, among other books. His lecture, "The Real Bernini," given at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, can be found on his website, [www.charlesscribner.com](http://www.charlesscribner.com).*