



Sacred Architecture in the Neapolitan Baroque Era. Space, Decorations, and Allegories

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Abstract

In Naples (Italy), the passage from Renaissance to Baroque architectonic language could be identified between 1580 and 1612. During this era, one of the most significant topics of the architectonic research on the sacred space was the right compromise among the Counter-Reformation patterns, the central space and the oval plan. Giovanni Antonio Dosio and Dionisio di Bartolomeo were the most representative architects of this passage. They provide the access to new experimental varieties. So, when the architect Cosimo Fanzago arrived in Naples in 1612, the city was almost ready to use the emblematic ellipse plan of the Baroque, such as the churches Santa Maria della Sanita` and San Giovanni dei Fiorentini by Fra' Nuvolo prove. Fanzago's architectonic research was followed by the studies by Bartolomeo and Francesco Antonio Picchiatti, father and son, up to Domenico Antonio Vaccaro that was the most representative director of the Baroque sacred space scene. Moving from the analysis and comparison of the most representative churches of Neapolitans Baroque era, the paper proposes an unedited studio about the evolution of sacred space's idea related to decoration, symbology and allegory, with a focus on Domenico Antonio Vaccaro's works, such as the churches of Santa Maria della Concezione in Montecalvario neighbourhood, San Michele Arcangelo in Naples' Piazza Dante, San Michele in Anacapri (on Capri Island), the Palazzo Abbaziale di Loreto and Saviour Church in San Guglielmo al Goletto Monastery, both near Avellino.

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Keywords

Baroque Neapolitan sacred architecture; Cosimo Fanzago; Domenico Antonio Vaccaro; Baroque polycentric spaces; metaphysical space; Bel Composto

1. Introduction

Historiography usually refers to the period between 1582 – the arrival of architect Giuseppe Valeriano – and 1623, that is when Cosimo Fanzago started working at the Certosa di San Martino (Charterhouse of St. Martin), as a transition era from the Neapolitan Counter-Reformation religious architecture to the Baroque (Cantone, 1984b), (Festa, 1997), (Electa Napoli, 2009). These were years in which the official culture was managed by Religious Orders and, above all, by the Society of Jesus. However, the Oziosi Academy and the Natural History Museum were starting to have a significant influence. Later, in fact, their studies on botanical and natural science even influenced the orientation of taste and artistic language.

Precisely, this transition period could be split in two further phases: the first one approximately up to 1612, when the Neapolitan architectural scene was dominated by Giuseppe Valeriano (1542-1596), the author of the Gesu` Nuovo church, and by Giuseppe Battista Cavagna (1545-1613), who renovated the church of San Paolo Maggiore (1589-1591), worked on the choir of Monteoliveto's church and designed Monte di Pietà's Chapel (1601-1604). Spatial

and linguistic elements of Counter- Reformation persisted in many important sacred buildings, such as the single nave covered by a barrel vault. The influence of Roman Classicism was therefore still evident but, at the same time, influences of Florentine tradition and, even more so, of the Brunelleschian language remained. All of this is clearly shown by the interior of the church of Girolamini, that was designed by Dionisio di Bartolomeo (1559-1638) and carried on Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1533-1609), and by Dosio's transformation of the Certosa di San Martino from 1589 to 1609. However, whilst Dionisio di Bartolomeo and Dosio were the most representative architects of all that, they provided access to new experimental varieties.



Figure 1. Naples, The Basilica of Santa Maria della Sanità` by Fra' Nuvoletto. The staircase

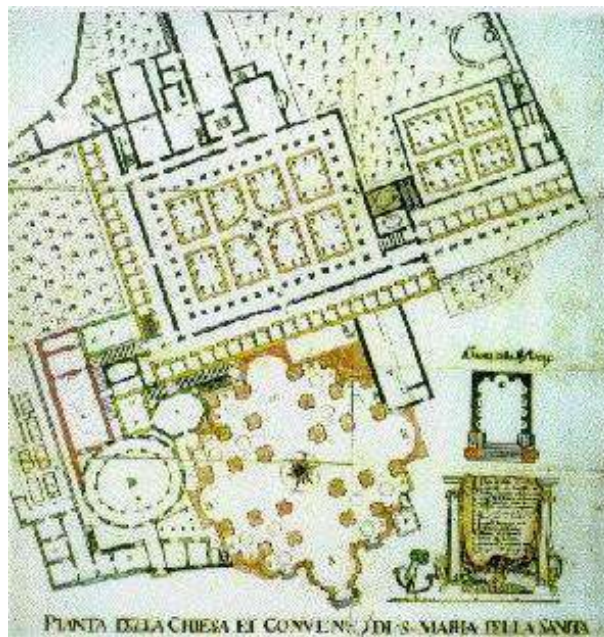


Figure 2. Naples, The Basilica of Santa Maria della Sanità` by Fra' Nuvoletto. The staircase

In the ten years following the arrival of Cosimo Fanzago in Naples — that was around 1612 — architects Francesco Grimaldi (1543-1613), Giuseppe Donzelli (known as Fra' Nuvoletto, 1570-1643) and Giovanni Giacomo Conforto (1569-1630) contributed to smooth out the transition of sacred architecture from the Post-Tridentine schemes to the Seventeenth century's new artistic forms. Suffice it to mention the influence of Vignola on Francesco Grimaldi, above all in the churches of S. Maria Degli Angeli a Pizzofalcone and Santissimi Apostoli, although many historians still doubt whether to ascribe these works to the latter.

However, the most significant example of this transition period is San Gennaro's Treasure Chapel, one of the most important works by Grimaldi, because, when the architect designed the plant he borrowed Bramante's planimetric pattern of St. Peter's in Vatican City but defining it in an octagonal pattern. Thereby, he started the Neapolitan architectonic research on sacred space towards one of the recurring themes of the Baroque and, that is, the "dynamic"

development of the central plan, which derives from the exploration of the right compromise among the Counter-Reformation patterns, the central space, and oval plan, as shown in the Basilica of Santa Maria Della Sanita' by Fra' Nuvolo.

Regarding this, it was precisely noticed that plan of this church proves as Fra' Nuvolo has fully understood the space's multi-centrality designed by Donato Bramante for San Pietro, because «the geometric matrix is given by rhombuses and squares and by their intersection. The largest square encompasses the entire plan and the largest rhombus generates the centres of the apses and the relationship between the three domes of each sector. The smaller square corresponds to the central basin with the main dome and the corresponding rhombus determines the alignment of the domes» (Cantone, 1984a, (I), p.62). Nevertheless, even in this work - and more precisely, in the side vaults - he systematically uses the elliptical plan according to the Counter-Reformation meaning, as he did in the churches of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (long gone), San Sebastiano and San Carlo all'Arena.

So, when the architect Cosimo Fanzago arrived in Naples in 1612, the city was almost ready to use the Baroque's emblematic ellipse plan and the polycentric space (Manzo, 2004 pp.59-63; 284-286).

Nevertheless, in the following years the Cosimo Fanzago's masterpieces were the best Neapolitan examples of "Unity of Visual Arts", which was the "new and revolutionary" attitude of the Baroque «to unify architecture with sculpture and painting so as to make of them all a beautiful whole», as Lavin wrote speaking about Gian Lorenzo Bernini or, more precisely, the "Bel Composto", as Filippo Baldinucci had just defined that (Lavin, 1980, p.198); about "Bel Composto", Lavin wrote paraphrasing Baldinucci. So see also (Baldinucci, 1682). In fact, we can find a good use of this theme in Fanzago's works, among them the Certosa di San Martino and the church of Santa Maria Egiziaca in Pizzofalcone neighbourhood (Brauen, 1973), (D'Agostino, 2011). However, in each of his works the decisive role was mainly played by the ornament, according with the theme of Rhetoric, which is one of the Baroque's subjects (Griseri, 1967), (Guglielminetti, 1999), (Anceschi, 1984). Specifically, he has often used the Allegory, the Metaphor and the Hyperbole, such as the sculptural decoration of Sant' Ignazio, San Bruno's Chappel, Santa Maria Della Anime Del Purgatorio ad Arco, which was designed by Giovanni Cola Di Franco and Giovan Giacomo Conforto, and, above all, of the Certosa di San Martino.

Thought, Fanzago's spatial patterns were still bound to traditional models, and they did not have the strength to expand beyond the bounds of Cartesian space. Therefore, the research on facade was one of his most important contributions to Baroque Neapolitan sacred architecture because he reinterpreted late Neapolitan Mannerism's facade with arcaded portico, introducing the *Serliana* and transforming it into a dynamic diaphragm between inside space and outside space by games of concavity and convexity (Cantone, 1984).



Figure 3. Naples, the dome of Santa Maria della Santissima Concezione in Montecalvario (Ph. Mimmo Ramires)