The Baroque architecture of Borromini departed from the staid and humanistic Renaissance through the concept of plastic continuity. San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane exemplifies this at three levels: the organism as unity, the order of structure that scales and defines space, and the membratures (the fusion of elements into lines of force). There is at once a simple and very complex geometry that forms the space of San Carlo - and it is the highly sculptural Classical elements, which at first may seem arbitrary and decorative, that serve to unify the whole. The ultimate goal of continuity for Borromini was to eliminate “dead space” and to redefine to role of the orders, leaving behind a coherent matrix of mass, volume, structure, and light.
Plan

The ground plan of San Carlo illustrates the building’s aggregation over time, as it is easy to identify various components of the program. There is a clear separation between the rectangular cloister (and its complementary everyday functional spaces) and the complex, if not flamboyant geometry of the church. Even the ancillary spaces of the church themselves appear to arbitrarily fill the space between the church and the monastery wing. The plan of the church itself begins with a series of equilateral triangles. The octagonal interior not only is used frequently by Borromini, but also better accommodates the narrow site. On an interesting side note, the area of San Carlo is small enough to be contained in a single pier that supports the dome of St. Peter’s.
As in the plan, the different parts of San Carlo are easily identifiable in section and elevation. The cloister and monastery wing have a relatively reductive and essential profile, while, the more public and sacred church employs all of Borromini’s Baroque methods. It should be noted that the cloister is open to the sky and sun, perhaps signifying its symbolic closeness to natural life. In the church however, light enters and is diffused through openings in the dome and lantern that cannot be seen from the floor, reflecting the church’s heavenly quality. In addition, the plan of the monastery is translated to its elevation, while the facade of the church, Borromini’s last major project, is literally plastered onto the front of San Carlo.
Light

Borromini’s treatment of light in the church of San Carlo is that of “guided light” - a language that aims to produce theatrical effects through illusion. Natural light showcases the complex structure of the church by increasing its perceptibility. Borromini employs five basic principles in manipulating light: the light chamber (a space to channel light and control its intensity), “grazing” illumination (that brings out the texture and detail of a surface), sfumato effects (the softening of lines through blending lines and tones), optical sighting (framed views), and the luminous line. In the church the only light source is from the lantern and the dome, where a sculpted ring of leaves conceals the openings and diffuses the light to illuminated the dome.
Within the church of San Carlo itself, the complexity of the elements and orders are united by something appropriate for the Trinitarians - the number three. Borromini’s use of “three and one together” (Portoghesi) extends to the equilateral triangles constructed in plan and section, as well the grouping of elements into triads - altars, niches, orders, levels. As for San Carlo as a whole, the complete contrast between church and monastery can be seen at many levels - the public/private domains, materiality (white stucco against red brick), simplicity/complexity of ornament, plasticity/regularity of form, direct/indirect light, and the treatment of elevations in relation to plans.
Diagrams

1. *Sequence of spaces.* The monastery, church, and main facade were designed and built separately.

2. *Public and private spaces.* The dynamic church contrasts the formal regularity of the monastery.

3. *Materiality.* The white stone facade clearly differentiates from the red brick of the monastery.

4. *Facades.* The rear functionally relates to plan, while the front is an exercise in Baroque sculpture.

5. *Circulation.* Secondary (private) circulation encompasses the main void of the church.

6. *Aggregation.* Each program was built adjacent to each other while modifying the shared walls.