

# John Alexander's new book on Carlo Borromeo's (1538 - 1584) architectural patronage

Dr. John Alexander has authored *From Renaissance to Counter-Reformation: The Architectural Patronage of Carlo Borromeo during the Reign of Pius IV* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2007). The book was published with generous support from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and the Collegio Borromeo (Pavia, Italy), and was presented at the Dies Academicus 2007, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, in Milan.



Below is the transcript of Dr. Alexander's answers to questions by the newsletter.

NL: *How long did it take you to complete this book?*

JA: The book resulted from a problem that I identified while researching my dissertation. I was studying one commission from early in Borromeo's life (the Collegio Borromeo), and realized that it dated from a crucial period that no one had adequately studied. Yet it was of fundamental importance because within those few years Borromeo started to commission buildings, changed his conception about his vocation, and -- as a result -- began to form the architectural program that guided his mature patronage. So I expanded my research to all of the buildings that he commissioned during that period. I worked in a focused manner on the book between 2003 and 2007, but my dissertation research (and thus one important part of the book) dates back to 1994.

NL: *What was your first motivation to research on Carlo Borromeo and his work?*

JA: I was interested in Borromeo because his patronage touched upon some complicated issues. In the early 1990s, when I began my doctoral research, scholars were just beginning to reevaluate

the Counter-Reformation. Borromeo was one of the most important figures for that period, and by studying one of his buildings I could hope to add something to the discussion. Most of his commissions were in or around Milan, which is a complicated context because it's an area with a strong regional tradition,

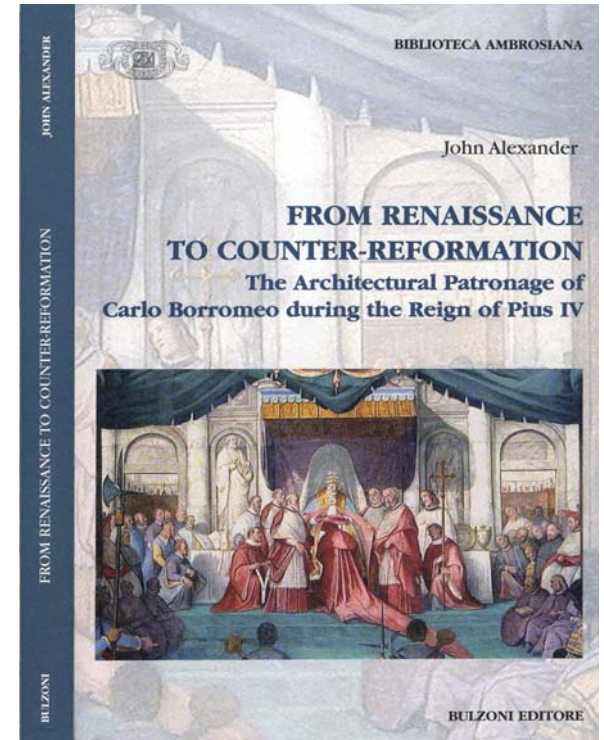
yet is open to forms, methods, and ideas from both north of the Alps and central Italy. Consequently, some unique architecture results in that cultural cross-roads.

NL: *What was the most exciting moment of experience through your research for this book?*

JA: Without a doubt the most exciting moments came when I would open a box of documents, or turn the page in a bound collection of letters, and find something that added significantly to our understanding, but that no other scholar had seen before (or if they had seen it, didn't pay attention to it before). Although there were difficulties initially (such as reading 16th century handwriting, or understanding technical terms in the local dialect) I soon began to enjoy archival research, and most of the exciting moments resulted from new discoveries.

NL: *How would you describe the most interesting aspect of Borromeo's work in a couple of sentences?*

JA: Borromeo transformed religious life in northern Italy because he pursued clear goals for reform that were inspired by a recently concluded Church council (the Council of Trent) and the example of other reforming bishops. It's interesting how his architec-



tural commissions participated in that transformation, supporting his endeavors and providing combinations of spaces and furnishings that became recognized as "sacred space" for centuries.

NL: *What would you tell architecture and design students the most important aspect in studying architectural history is?*

JA: Each historical architect was doing exactly what our students are doing in their design studios: trying to design a good building. If you look at architectural history as an investigation into the design methods of a great architect, and how great buildings resulted, then you have a subject that is not only interesting, but also one that can be important for their own work in the studios.