



# The Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes

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**Abstract.** The proposed paper represents one of the most iconic formal examples of centralized floor plan of the 18th century Galician Baroque style: The chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes (Our Lady of the Large Eyes) in the Cathedral of Lugo. The paper is structured as it follows: a historical and developmental introduction of the centralized floor plan; the formal graphic description of the chapel; and the final conclusions as a consequence of its symbolism and its masters' influences that are explained in this building work. The precise and detailed studies, which were necessary for the graphic description, have been realized by the author of this paper.

**Keywords:** Planta centralizada · Barroco · Casas Novoa · Lugo · Galicia

## 1 Introduction: The Architecture of Centralized Floor Plan

Throughout history, the typology of the centralized floor plan has fascinated researchers and architects, both in the theoretical and practical dimension. Perhaps, this attraction has been due to the fact that in this central plan the range of the shapes is heightened to the point where the architectural space is converted into a simple container that is used by the artist to create the most ambitious formal and decorative experimentations.

The pattern development comes from the Greek and Roman Antiquity and reaches its climax with an outstanding architectural prominence during the 18th century, both in the last Baroque echoes and in the whole Neoclassical experience. The use of this centralized typology has been mainly religious, which constitutes one of its most particular features. Without any doubt, this is because of the great symbolic significance of this compositional scheme. Nevertheless, and because of the own functional demands of the Christian worship spaces, these centralized floor plans find its orientation affected due to the axial feature of the Catholic temples. Likewise, it is possible to relate the varieties of this type with its assigned function and with the aesthetic development of the moment. Furthermore, the centralized floor plans have had validity throughout the History of art and architecture as accessory buildings such as baptisteries, memorial chapels, votive chapels, family chapels, mausoleums or funeral monuments.

Another feature of the centralized typology is its capacity to transmit certain distinctive symbolic meanings. However, its explanation must not be superficial as several

authors correctly point out that the simple symbolism of the circle as a geometric shape would not explain the outstanding role that is played by the centralized scheme in the framework of the Renaissance religious architecture. To this fact another aspect should be added, which is the external perception as a monumental way, as well as the detailed analysis of the different philosophical and sources of the subject (Lotz 1985). Concerning the centralized temples in the Humanistic period, they are usually independent buildings and they seem to be identical when they are observed from different external points. Furthermore, they have been designed in such a way that the highest part is placed in the center of the building floor plan. Naturally, these features would be shared by the pointed out and exemplary buildings of the Italian Cinquecento as Santa Maria della Consolazione in Todi, Perugia, or Madonna di San Biagio in Montepulciano, in Siena. In these churches both the outside and inside design have been equally taken into account.

One of the authors that reappraised the symbolic meaning of the Renaissance architecture was Rudolf Wittkower (1995). According to him, Humanistic artists would have followed the Pythagorean concept that everything can be expressed by numbers, developed by Plato, the Neoplatonists and St. Augustine among others, according to which the Universe had a mathematical and harmonic structure. Thus, all the existing shapes, from the celestial spheres to the people's souls, would be governed by the harmonious numbers' laws. Alberti believed that the perception of this harmony was innate while Pacioli stated that the Divine Offices in a temple would barely have any value if this was not built following the rightful proportion.

These artistic theories were aligned with the philosophical theories. Nicolás de Cusa transformed the vision of the traditional cosmos with a series of spheres that were related to a center that would represent the Earth, in a uniform Universe with lack of a physical center but full of infinite compressible relations throughout Mathematics. The same God could be imagined by means of the most perfect mathematics symbol: the circle. These ideas, widespread with the Platonism and the Neoplatonism of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, were without any doubt known by the Renaissance architects. The centralized floor plan was considered to be the most suitable expression of the divine. The artists "considered the architecture as a mathematical science based in spatial units, in parts of that universal space which scientific interpretation key had been found in the law of perspective (translation form the original in Spanish by Wittkower, 1995)".

The assumed humanists of the correlation between the microcosms and the macrocosms, of the harmonic structure of the Universe and of the understanding of God through the symbols such as the circle and the sphere, found their materialization in the Renacentist temple. For these artists, the shapes that were created by humans in the physical World would be a visible reflection of the intelligible mathematics symbols: the harmonic and balanced architecture, defined as strict geometry and formal serenity, with centralized floor plans and, above all, monumental domes, express the "perfection, the omnipotence, the truth and the goodness of God (translation form the original in Spanish by Wittkower 1995, 52).

The central schemes inherited from the Classical Antiquity through the experimental transformation of its typology which had been developed over the course of the centuries, have become one of the most capable options when setting a sacred space. The attraction for this ancient culture shown towards the end of the Middle Ages

aroused a new interest in the West regarding the possibilities of a formal and typological guideline. Although the centralized architectures have been developed throughout history in a distant era from the Western Renaissance, not only geographically but also at a spiritual and cultural level, soon became part of the motifs that could represent their humanistic ideals.

According to Gombrich (1996, 288) “none of the spheres had such a notable change as the one in architecture (translation from the original in Spanish)”. The centralized typology returned again to the forefront of the artistic debate. The constructive and experimental activity was fervent and was regularized in many performances.

## 2 The Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes

The chapel devoted to the patron saint of the city of Lugo was built between 1726 and 1736 according to the plans by Casas Novoa, in the middle of the Cathedral’s ambulatory, behind the main chapel (Vazquez Saco 1954; García Iglesias 1993, 109–120).

Thanks to the manuscripts by Portabaleses Nogueira kept in the Archive of the Lugo Cathedral, almost all details of the building process of this Marian chapel have been described in there (Vila Jato 1989, 37 ss.). According to him, before 1449 there was already a chapel devoted to the Virgen de los Ojos Grandes, which occupied the setting of the current chapel of San Miguel.

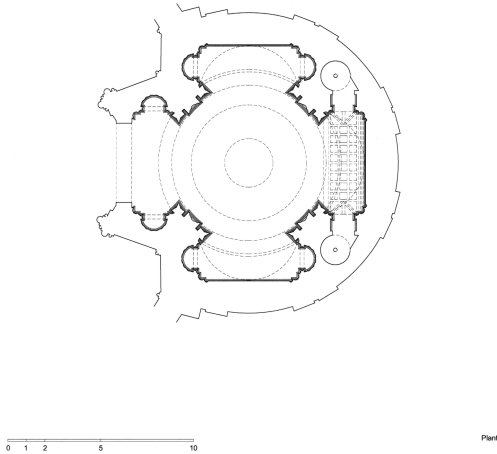
In the mid-17th century, the Cathedral chapter showed its interest to build a new and bigger chapel for the Virgin. In 1725 the prestigious Fernando de Casas was contacted to take charge of the new sacristy and to transform the current one in a new chapel devoted to the Virgin of Ojos Grandes. It is interesting to note that the idea from the beginning was to create a cabin structure with several altars for the Marian space. However, the sacristy of Andrade was not finally used for the reconstruction of the chapel, probably after following Casas Novoa’s advises. In November 1725 the floor plan by the architect was accepted, by signing the contract with the Dean. At that moment, the negotiations to achieve the necessary space behind the high altar begun both with Sir Mendoza, owner of the St. Michael chapel, placed in the center of the apsidal chapels, and with Mr Álvaro Quiroga, owner of the house and the garden placed behind this chapel, due to the fact that the space was insufficient to hold the new structure. On August 17th, 1726 the master had just arrived to Lugo and some days after the plan was accepted, and also the proposal of building a tabernacle with the two altars in the center of the chapel (Vila Jato 1989, 39).

Data from the Culture and Tourism Council of the Galician Government has been used for the preparation of the floor plans, due to the Agreement with the University of A Coruña to execute the inventory and the planimetric survey of the Cathedrals of Galicia (Franco Taboada 2012).

The before named data, the copies of the floor plans by Francisco Pons Sorolla and the Cartography from the Council of Lugo, served as a basis for the preparation of the

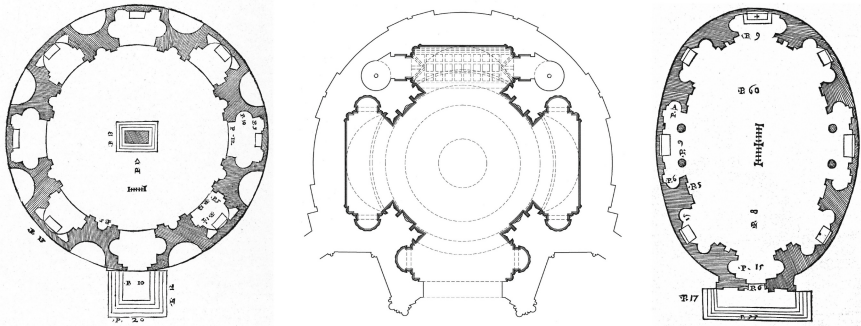
presented survey. To achieve the optimal detailed level it has been done a in situ sketch and measuring. The computerized drawings give a perfect graphic description of the Chapel at different scales, allow its architectonic analysis, and highlight the national heritage.

The Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes is placed in the center of the Cathedral chancel and for its planimetry Casas selected an innovative model in the 18th century Galician architectonic scene: a Greek cross floor plan covered with a large central dome with lobed semi-domes in the four arms of the cross (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Drawing: Luis Hermida González. Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes, Lugo. Greek cross floor plan of the chapel. Possible combination of the plan of “templo tondo” with the “templo ovale”.

The link between this centralized typology and its symbolism seems to be clear and resulting from the devotion to the Virgin. In the Antiquity the round temples were associated to virgin Goddess, assimilation that continued in Christian times. From the Renaissance, the centralized architectures were considered perfect and even though its building in the 17th century was limited, except for minor chapels and oratories of religious communities, during the 18th century its spreading was much higher. Both Folgar de la Calle and Vila Jato related this fact to the several engravings from the *Quinto Libro d’Architettura nel quale si tratta de diverse forma di Tempii sacri de Serlio*, that had Fernando Casas in his private library (Folgar de la Calle 1982, 542; Vila Jato 1989, 40). The plan of “templo tondo” combined with the “templo ovale” could be in the basis of the project by Casas Novoa (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Plans from the “templo tondo” and the “templo ovale” from Libro Quinto de Serlio, *Tutte l’opere d’architettura e prospettiva* di Sebastiano Serlio, 1600. Origin: Edición facsimil, 1986, Oviedo; and Luis Hermida González.

The use of a centralized floor plan for the chapel, covered by a large dome supported by four piers and lightened with a zenithal light that enters from the highest point of the building through a lantern, answers to the specific intention of referring to the Virgin as the center and axis of the Universe. This idea is reinforced by the several emblems and symbols that decorate the inside space. The Chapel was painted with white lead and although it looks like it is coated, the decorative details are carved in stone. All the space structure and hierarchy relates with the setting of a theological complex of Marian exaltation (Vila Jato 1989, 361–368).

As it has been mentioned, the chapel follows a Greek cross floor plan, covered by a dome in the center and with lobed semi-domes connecting with the arms. Each pier that supports the dome is composed of three pilasters of composite order: the two exterior ones support the thrusts of the transverse ribs and the central one is placed by the plinth up to the point where it reaches the entablature and the dome begins. The entablature where the dome is supported is composed by an architrave with multiple and sophisticated moldings with cracked segments, Frustum-shaped frieze corbels decorated with eggs and acanthus leaves, and corbel cut cornice. Twelve ribs decorated with botanical elements divide the inner hemisphere of the dome, ornamented with caissons and Flower-shaped pieces. Finally, four large windows are placed in the four axis of the chapel.

All the collection presents an excess of decoration that does nothing but emphasizing the whole theoretical program of exaltation of Virgin Mary: in the pilasters, fruit strings and intertwined leaves, broken mouldings in the central plinths, fallen leaves in the keystones of the arches that give access to minor chapels and inscriptions in the verge of the dome, in the semi-domes and in the ovals of all the chapel. All realized with delicacy, sensitivity and refinement (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Photo: Luis Hermida González. Inside of Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes. Upside part of the Baldachin retablo, dome and lantern.

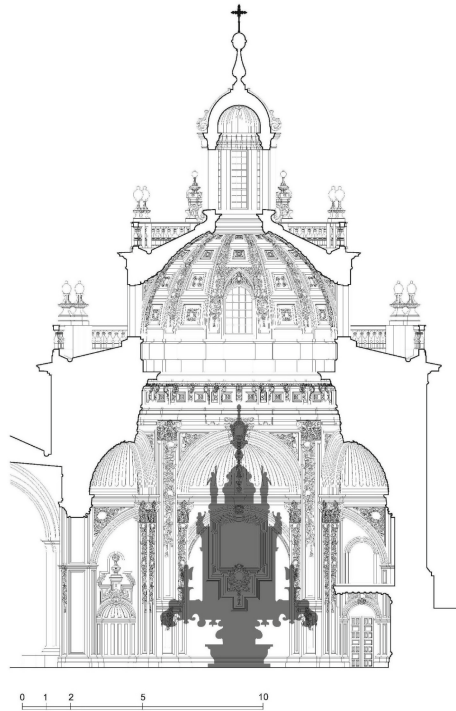
The three levels that structure the interior space appear reflected on the outside. This structure also resembles Vila Jato the exterior designs by Serlio in his Libro V for the “Tempii rotondi” (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Photo: Luis Hermida González. The Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes seen from the outside.

In the center of the chapel, isolated by the dome, it was placed a Baldachin retablo designed by Casas Novoa and realized by Miguel de Romay (Checa y Morán 1986, 258 ss.). At that time, both masters were working together on the construction of the major retablo of San Martín Pinario. The tabernacle, which had been already requested with at the beginning of the building work, shelters the image of the Virgin and it is linked to the stone architecture of the chapel by four large wooden volutes. This isolated Baldachin is another iconographic key that provides sense to the program of the

chapel and it is formally close to the Triunfo built in commemoration of the canonization of San Fernando in Seville, that appeared in the book of Fernando de la Torre Farfán, that had been already inspired in the work in the chapel of Pilar in the Santiago Cathedral (Fig. 5).



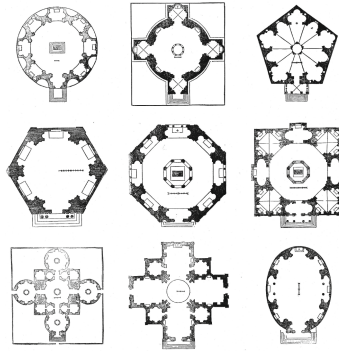
**Fig. 5.** Drawing: Luis Hermida González. Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes, Lugo. Longitudinal Section with the figure of the Baldachin retable in the center of the chapel.

### 3 The Possible Sources of Inspiration of Casas y Novoa: Masters and Treatise Writers

Considering the possible sources of inspiration of Casas Novoa for the execution of this centralized plan there are several hypothesis; some difficult to maintain as the possible relation with the French and Andalusian architecture (Vila Jato 1989, 40–42). However, in all likelihood, apart from the knowledge acquired by his masters Brother Gabriel de Casas and Domingo de Andrade, his models would be extracted from architecture works and treatises that he had in his private library. For that matter, we must mention the possible influence of Serlio. His books were the first to be published where the images prevail over the words as the main information and spreading provider both in the ancient designs and and the modern ones. And his images' attraction



between European architects was enormous. His work, that appeared from 1537 on, analyses the most appropriate floor plans for temples. Suggests twelve basic forms, nine of which are developed from the circle and the square (Wittkower 1995, 34–37) (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** Sebastiano Serlio, 1547. Plans from his *Quinto Libro de Arquitectura*. Source: *Los fundamentos de la arquitectura en la edad del humanismo*, Rudolf Wittkower, Madrid, 1995.

It seems like the only influences that can be proved are linked with the Renaissance tradition in Italy, due to the fact that this field of centralized designs applied to religious architecture was especially developed in this area. From the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo by Brunelleschi, to the several centralized plan churches designed by Leonardo da Vinci, or the Cinquecento churches with central plan devoted to the Virgin Mary as Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato, by Giuliano da Sangallo, Santa Maria della Consolazione in Todi, by Cola da Caprarola, and the Madonna di San Biagio in Montepulciano, by Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, that followed the steele that begun at the beginning of the century with Bramante with Tempietto de San Pietro in Montorio (Heydenreich y Lotz, 1996), were drawn and spread in multiple occasions and would become directly related to the classicist complexity of the central plan of Casas Novoa. In addition, we could not forget the presence of Roman books in 18th century Galician libraries that the architect could access to, such as the libraries of the Santiago Cathedral or the Monastery of San Martín Pinario, in addition to the two books of ancient and modern buildings of Rome that he had in his private library (Folgar de la Calle 1982, 540).

## 4 Conclusions

The Chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Ojos Grandes, that is located at the chancel of the major axis of the Cathedral, represents a clear example of the centralized floor plan typology in the Baroque period of the Galician Architecture. This centralized plan, due



to its composition scheme, is formally suitable to express the symbolism that is transmitted by the Marian exaltation program that is proposed.

This typology will be reinforced by the contrast with Gothic apsidal chapels that flank the Baroque inside structure. From the outside, this contrast is also perceived with the three cylindrical bodies that are linked to the ascendant structural levels of the calvary, the dome and the lantern. This three cylindrical volumes have a balustrade on top of them with decorative designs that barely reveal the intense Baroque work that is developed inside the chapel. Casas Novoa pours in his chapel all his ornamental fantasy that we have previously described. Although all vibrates with his interplay of natural shadows and lights and a dazzling plastic art, underlies a rational and contained modulation in its architectonic structure. As it is mentioned in several occasions “we cannot describe our authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as anti-classicists, but we can describe them as Baroque for their fascinating originality in the renovation of their formal repertoire that unites the magnificence of all the predecessors work (translation from the original in Spanish by Chamoso Lamas 1955)”.

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