The *Domus*

More is known about Roman domestic architecture than about the domestic architecture of any other ancient civilization. Our extraordinarily wide scope of knowledge of the subject is due to a unique confluence of factors and events. Roman military might created a 400-year reign of peace throughout western Europe, Asia Minor, North Africa and the Middle East. This peace, called the *Pax Romana*, allowed cities and individuals to acquire and retain wealth which was used to build not only monumental architecture but a rich collection of houses as well. The *Pax Romana* allowed, encouraged, and sometimes forced the movement of durable building materials, craftsmen and ideas throughout the Roman hegemony. Finally Roman culture valued and encouraged education leading to the establishment of a large literary elite that studied and wrote about art, architecture, and society. Some of these writings still exist, offering valuable insight into the art and aesthetics of the time.

Second, the Roman culture's spread across such a large area, coupled with a fairly quick decline in population after about 400 CE, means that much Roman architecture was simply abandoned, rather than built over. Although vandals would cart away much of the above ground stone and time and the elements would destroy the rest, the foundations of cities, towns, and individual villas and farms still exist and are being studied today.

Finally, a great part of our knowledge of Roman domestic architecture arises from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE that sealed off the remains of the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum until modern times. The instant destruction of these two towns as well as numerous villas and farms, captured a snapshot of Roman domestic life that is unprecedented in studying ancient cultures.[1]

Our *domus* is a model of an upper middle class urban Pompeian home. It represents the ubiquitous house of Pompeii and Herculaneum and is similar to the less well-preserved remains of Roman urban dwellings found from Britain to the Middle East.

The *domus*, which in Latin means "residence" is the basic Roman house. But, it is not the only Roman house type. Villas were country houses. Villas were usually owned by the wealthy and were most often vacation homes. *Insulae*, meaning "island", were urban apartment buildings. [2] These buildings were called "islands" because they were surrounded by streets just as an island is surrounded by water. The word *insulae* is also used to mean "city block." Thus a group of *domūs*

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[1] Akrotiri is the Bronze Age Greek equivalent of Pompeii. Acrotiri was a Minoan settlement destroyed by a massive volcanic eruption about 1600 BCE. The lack of precious objects and bodies suggests that unlike Pompeii, the city was entirely abandoned just prior to its destruction. Because Acrotiri did not begin to be excavated until 1967, and ancient literary sources about its culture are non-existent, it's importance as an insight into the domestic life of its people is not nearly as great as that of Pompeii and Herculaneum are to Roman life.

[2] *See* Francis Hallinen's paper titled Urban Architecture in Ancient Rome for additional information on insulae.

surrounded by streets would also be referred to as an *insulae*. This dual use of the word *insulae* has led to confusion in understanding the literary sources. *Insulae* might be up to 7 stories tall and might house poor or wealthy residents. Many were dangerous, especially in the earthquake prone Mediterranean. The archaeological evidence of *insulae* is restricted to Rome and the port of Ostia. So far, no *insulae* have been positively identified in Pompeii or Herculaneum or in the rest of the Roman world. Outside of Rome, poorer people lived in simple farms, above or behind their shops, or in rooms rented out by *domus* owners. Doubtless, the very poor inhabited the tombs that lined the roads leading into cities. Unfortunately, because the housing of the poor would not as likely be made from durable materials and because such housing would not have been as distinctive as the *domus*, the villa, and the *insulae*, much less is known about the housing of the poor than about the housing of the middle to upper classes.

The *domus* was not just a house. It was also usually the family's place of business and because Rome was an extremely hierarchical society, the *domus* served as one of the ways that Romans asserted their place in society. Therefore, the *domus* has a strict arrangement of public and private spaces that move from the front of the house to the back of the house. The *porta* (door) was always open during the day so passersby could look through it, past the atrium, through the *tablinum* (head of house's office) to the back of the garden. Owners would sometimes try to use architectural details to create the illusion that the house was deeper than it actually was so that passersby would think the owner was wealthier than he actually was.

The atrium was the center of the Roman house. In the center was the *impluvium*, a water basin that was situated to collect water from the roof and store it in an underground cistern. Often an *impluvium* was decorated with a statue and expensive tiles. The *impluvium* was less than a foot deep and was not used for swimming. Because the atrium was the public room, it may house the family's *lararium*, or household shrine. The *lararium* might also be housed in the garden.

A wealthy Roman male citizen would have clients. These clients offered their patron political support and would accompany him around town. The more clients a patron was seen with, the more power he seemed to have. In turn, the patron would find positions, give loans, and do favors for his clients. Clients were expected to call upon their patron each morning. Clients waited either on the street, in the *fauces* (literally jaws, entrance hallway) or in the atrium to see the patron who would be doing business in the *tablinum*. Only a close personal friend or a person of superior rank would be allowed past the *tablinum*. The *tablinum* would hold a desk as well as a locked cabinet to store money and other valuables that the owner might need in his business.

Most *domus* residences would have a *culina* (kitchen) and a tiny adjoining closet with a toilet. Having a *culina* with a cook was a sign of wealth. Poorer people ate in taverns or ordered food from vendors. A *culina* is usually identified by its

built in countertop heated with a small wood fire underneath. Only the wealthy had the ability to cook at home. In Pompeii most larger houses had access to the public water supply. But this water supply was different from our water supply. It was more like a river in that it ran all of the time. Therefore, water might be piped into and out of the sink and the toilet but water would not be located anywhere else in the house. A few larger *domūs* had bathrooms with water heated onsite with a wood fire. Most people, including the wealthy, used a public bath. One reason that bathrooms and kitchens were limited was the scarcity of wood available for heating as well as the risk of fire. Pompeii residences did not have fireplaces but only small braziers that could be moved around as necessary to heat the immediate area. Oil lamps and natural light from the atrium were used for lighting.

Each *domus* had one or two *triclinia* (dining rooms). The word *triclinium* means three (*tri*) couches (*clinium*). A *triclinium* would have three couches arranged in an L shape. Diners would recline on their left sides to eat and would be served appetizer style food by slaves. Depending on the era and the family, women may or may not recline to eat. They may have instead have had chairs brought in. A *domus* might have two *triclinia*: one opening to the garden for summer and one inside for winter. *Triclinia*, like kitchens, are easily located because often the couches and sometimes the center tables were built in. In other rooms, the wall painting subject matter and style might indicate that a room was a *triclinium*.

A *domus* also had other rooms. These rooms can either be classified as *alae* or *cubiculi*. *Alae* are narrow hallways that dead-end. They may be up to 12 feet deep. The purpose of *alaes* are still debated. Some *alae* may have been used to store the wax busts of family ancestors. *Cubiculi* were probably bedrooms, sitting rooms, and work- rooms but it is rare for enough evidence to have survived to give a specific purpose to a room.

A large part of a *domus* consisted of a walled garden surrounded by a row of columns, or peristyle. These gardens developed from an earlier house style that had a walled vegetable garden/animal pen in the rear of the house. By the time of Pompeii's eruption, peristyle gardens had become mostly ornamental. The purpose of the peristyle, besides holding up the roof was to allow the occupants to perambulate the garden.

A *domus* had several security features. First, the door, especially when open, would have been guarded by a trusted slave. A *domus* did not usually have ground floor windows that faced the street. Archaeological evidence suggests that some windows would have had metal bars inserted for security and glass window panes have been excavated although it is not known whether most windows had glass. Romans had guard dogs and at least seven "*Cavis Canem*" beware of dog mosaics and paintings, such as the one depicted in the *fauces* of our domus, have been excavated in Pompeii. Finally, doors were made of heavy wood and numerous examples of large, iron locks, keys, and other door hardware have been found in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Pompeian houses, and often shops, were richly decorated with floor mosaics and *fresco secco* wall paintings. These decorations changed over time and location. For example, the art historian August Mau has identified four distinct styles of wall paintings in Pompeii that varied in popularity over time. And, while Pompeian tiled floors were both multihued and black and white, only black and white tiles have been found at nearby Herculaneum.

The city of Pompeii was not segregated by wealth or purpose and street frontage was premium property. From the street, houses only showed the door. The rest of the house was tucked behind shops that were either ran by the owner of the house or rented out to merchants. Exterior walls of houses and shops were also used for painted advertisements and graffiti. Our *domus* displays two types of graffiti, both of which were copied from actual graffiti found in Pompeii. One graffito is a political endorsement that reads "I ask you to elect Lucius Caius Secundus aedile--Phaeus elects him" and another is a scribbling of a long nosed man titled "This is Rufus." Our *domus* also shows a corner water fountain and a paved street, both common in Pompeii.

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