

Some Types of Roman Housing:

5. The Pompeian domus (private house)

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To complete the series on Roman housing let's take a look now at some houses of the sort which you probably expected us to have begun with! These are the private houses which are well known from Pompeii and Herculaneum, the domus. Presumably the owners of these comfortable town homes were socially well above most of the residents of the insulae (Labyrinth 26) or tabernae (Labyrinth 29), but distinctly below the affluent owners of the great luxury villas like the one at Oplontis (Labyrinth 30). Perhaps the families who lived in the less pretentious domūs were rather more like the owners of the farmstead villas we call villae rusticae (Labyrinth 27), for the living quarters of these were rather similar in some ways to the smaller domūs.

These private houses lining the streets of the Campanian towns at the foot of Vesuvius vary among themselves considerably, however. Some are quite small, some have features which they share with farmhouses or even suburban villas, some were remodelled for business uses or different residential needs not long before their destruction in A.D. 79. Let's look at the layout of several to see these variations.

First, here is one that seems quite "ordinary". (It's more or less the sort whose plan has been reproduced dozens of times in Latin or Roman history textbooks). Figure 1 shows the House of the Tragic Poet at Pompeii. Notice the axial symmetry, just a little off kilter because of the row of small rooms extending down one side. All the same, the visitor standing in the long dark entrance hall inside the front door would have a pleasant view through the indirectly lighted atrium, through the central room of the house, the tablinum, to the peristylum or garden courtyard at the back of the building. It is this combination of atrium or reception hall and peristyle which makes the Roman domus so distinctive and so different in concept from our own. This house looks inward, towards its own centre, so to speak. It is cut off from the street by a pair of shoprooms which must have been managed by the house-owners, as there is a small doorway from the entrancehall into each. Light enters the atrium only from the compluvium, the rectangular hole in the roof above the impluvium, a shallow tank or pool in the centre of the mosaic floor. The small rooms around the atrium are very dark, as no windows bring light in from outside. Any windows in the outer walls of these houses are small and mostly in the upper storey, partly for security and partly because in many cases the side walls of the building are common with the neighbouring house walls.

A house in which axial symmetry has been sharply switched is the House of the Mosaic Atrium at Herculaneum (figure 2). This is a rich man's house, built immediately above the marina or seafront at Herculaneum, with a terrace overlooking the sea. The street runs down beside the length of the house, which makes it a necessity for the entrances to be in the long side wall. Consequently, the peristyle has had to be constructed beside, not beyond, the atrium and tablinum (or triclinium,

perhaps): the central axis has been bent at a right angle. The pleasant sun-terrace with shady rooms for resting during the heat of the day at each end, and the glassed-in loggia between the terrace and the summer dining-room are features whose concern for the residents' comfort and enjoyment of the spectacular view across the Bay of Naples remind us of the great maritime villas.

Back to Pompeii again to look at an example of a private house converted into business premises. A fuller installed the basins and treading vats of his trade -- cloth-cleaning -- in the peristyle of what was once a typical private house. (We can see from figure 3 that the house had made the best use it could of a rather awkwardly pinched-in lot.) The front shop (taberna) contained a fuller's press, the equivalent of the modern irons and pressing machines in a cleaner's premises today.

Another much larger and grander mansion is the House of Menander, built and expanded piecemeal over three or four hundred years. It was owned by the Poppaei, the same family that owned, most likely, the great villa at Oplontis. In figure 4, look carefully at the original atrium and tablinum, which acquired around them over the years a large peristyle and triclinium with salons on either side, on land which may originally have been part of the neighbour's lot. Opposite the triclinium, across the peristyle, are a set of bathrooms (rather unusual in the centre of the town, and a feature

which this domus shares with both farmhouses and villas) and a small garden, again on what ought to be the adjacent lot. At the back of the property, beyond the triclinium, is situated a courtyard, stable and the barns or pens needed for a farm-business. This was certainly run by the overseer (vilicus) who was given a small set of rooms and a separate entrance of his own. His responsibility would have included the supervision of the slaves who did all the work, no doubt including keeping them entirely away from the single hallway which connects the working quarters from the elegant and comfortable main house. This approach to combining commercial premises with living quarters differs sharply from the fuller's shop in figure 3.

Lastly, let's return to Herculaneum, to another house which seems to have been most ingenious in its use of space (figure 5). One street over from the House of the Mosaic Atrium is located the House of the Gem, "irregular in form and compressed almost as tightly as living quarters on a ship."¹ The view over the bay was again a feature of the southern side of this house, whose terrace ran along the sea wall above the Suburban Baths on the level below. There seem to have been two open courtyards as well, although both lack the true portico or peristylar form. A famous inscription in the latrine, scribed there by no less a man than Dr. Apollinaris, Physician to the Emperor Titus (or by one of the slaves?), suggests at the same time both the rich and powerful owner and his visitor from the imperial court and the earthy quality of Roman humour: "Dr. Apollinaris had a first-rate visit here!"

1. J.J. Deiss, Herculaneum: Italy's Buried Treasure (Harper and Row 1985) 54. This is the most extensive recent account of Herculaneum.

Of the hundreds of domūs, large, small, "modern" (that is, 1st century A.D.), "old" (2nd or 3rd centuries B.C.), remodelled up into mansions or down into shops, businesses and taverns, we have seen that almost any small group of half a dozen can be chosen to illustrate the variety of the floor plans and the ingenuity of the Roman architects and builders who laid them out.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT THE ANCIENT WORLD

Did you know:

- that ancient Athenians carried their spare change in their mouths?
- that no one in antiquity managed to invent a wheelbarrow?
- that the title of Rome's highest priest, pontifex maximus, means "Lord High Bridgemaker"?
- that the ancients rarely drank cow's milk, and were often constitutionally unable to do so?

(P.S. We remind our readers that our storehouse of recondite oddities, the Minotaur, is still in business to answer your queries. We also welcome any requests for articles on particular topics.)