

4. The villa maritima or suburbana

The Roman architect Vitruvius has a few items of advice to give in Book VI of his On Architecture to the builder designing a house for a man of rank. We may suppose the owners of the extensive suburban mansions like Pliny's house at Laurentum or the villa called Poppaea's at Torre Annunziata or the better-known Villa of Diomede and Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii were most certainly men of wealth and very likely men of high social standing too. This is what Vitruvius recommends: "lofty entrance courts in regal style, and most spacious atriums and peristyles, with plantations and walks of some extent in them ... libraries, picture galleries and basilicas... . In country seats peristyles come first (next to the entrance), and then atriums surrounded by paved colonnades opening upon palaestrae (exercise courts) and walks" (transl. M.H. Morgan, Bk. VI chap. V). We shall look at some aspects of these villas, the grandest and largest of all the types of Roman housing, in this article.

The villa suburbana (or maritima, if it lay by the sea, as many of them did) was a luxurious and extensive house which had some similarities to the city domus of the type we can see by the dozen at Pompeii and Herculaneum. But the differences are even more marked. First and foremost, these villas had extensively landscaped grounds around them; because of these, and the views over the surrounding country or the sea, the villas' windows were larger and their colonnades were often open to the views instead of boxed in around a small peristyle or courtyard. The whole aspect of the villa looked outwards from its living areas rather than turning protectively inward upon itself as the domus did, away from the streets or adjacent buildings. All the same, as Wilhelmina Jashemski has shown in her marvellous study The Gardens of Pompeii and Herculaneum, both domus and villa were almost sure to have one or more small enclosed peristyle garden-courts as well as the villa's landscaped outer gardens.

Some villas, as Jashemski suggests was the case with the Villa of the Mysteries, were no doubt developed a bit at a time from an original "simple country farmhouse with atrium and living rooms" into lavishly elaborate complexes covering several acres, with as many as a hundred rooms or more. Like the farmhouses (see Labyrinth 27, Sept. 1983), the villas normally had a bathsuite, unlike the domus whose owner usually used the public baths. But there the similarity to the villa rustica ended, for the villa suburbana was clearly dedicated to luxurious and leisured relaxation for the rich. Rich men, of course, needed many slaves to attend to their comforts. So the suburban villas had extensive slave quarters, in comparison with lesser residences. One thing that all these kinds of housing seem to have shared, however, is some attempt to accommodate the Romans' love of gardens and of food: paintings of fruit and flowers, peristyle-gardens planted with fruit trees, vines and vegetables as well as flowers, well laid out farmsteads with every thought given to harvesting and handling of the crops all show us how much closer most Romans must have felt to the land than a lot of 20th century city and suburban Canadians do.

The villa of Oplontis or Villa of Poppaea (see next page) is probably the largest and most luxurious of all the suburban or maritime villas which have been excavated in Italy. Its name is something of a mystery which I won't go into here, but it can be visited at Torre Annunziata, a small town on the Bay of Naples between Herculaneum and Pompeii (Ercolano and Pompei on the Circumvesuviana railway). The villa is huge, but still not completely excavated. Part lies under the modern street and so may never be studied. Visitors nowadays enter from what was the back, or at least the garden entrance, as the main front entrance seems to have been facing the sea. The buildings lie beneath more

than 6 metres of hard solidified mud, ashes and volcanic pebbles (lapilli) in clearly stratified layers. The plan shows how grand a house this must have been as far as size and layout are concerned, but the impression made upon a visitor by the architecture and decoration is something else again. No other Roman site around Vesuvius is quite as impressive, at least for the quality and number of frescoes and the extent to which this palatial villa has been preserved and restored.

The axial symmetry of the villa's layout is obvious at first glance. Whether the beautifully balanced landscaping was extended to the west we can't say, as the line of dots down the plan marks the line of the modern road. The southern frontage and entrance is also not completely excavated, and work is still progressing on the eastern side, where the plan lacks detail. (A large swimming pool is now known to occupy the area I've marked.) The main entrance was either from the seaward south side or from the north, that is, from the conventional atrium at C1 or the unconventional one, lofty and large but lacking the impluvium (central pool) and with unusually large openings to the outside, at A1. In either case, a small garden at B3 acts as a sort of peristyle with a tablinum of sorts at B2. The rooms which lie to the west of these central reception areas (numbered A2 through to H1) are presumed from their rich decoration to have been the family's own quarters, as well as H2, a beautifully painted triclinium and H3, a bedroom. The complex of rooms centred on what has been called a 'rustic' peristyle, L2, which lies to the east of the central atria, is generally interpreted from its much more utilitarian decoration as either the slaves' quarters or an area where dependents of the household may have carried on some kind of business activities. Each half of the house has its own set of bath rooms, with the decoration reflecting the social level of the users. However, the garden wing which overlooks the swimming pool, and contains no less than 4 garden rooms according to Jashemski, was clearly very much part of the family's 'space', as the paintings are as sumptuous as anywhere in the villa's main and west wings.

Many unusual or unique features have been excavated in Poppaea's villa: the long passage-way (P2) with rows of benches on either side, the tiny side atrium at E3 which contains a large round fountain-cum-flower planter in the centre of the impluvium (pots were still in the planter!), the latrines (Q2) which contain a smaller private privy for the women, rooms at R1 which had probably been damaged in the earthquake of the early 60's AD and instead of being repaired had been planted up as a small walled garden, a heated bath room with its floor still intact over the hot air hypocaust system underneath (F1), or the big kitchen with cooking facilities, water storage and table surfaces, but almost no natural light (C3). Wooden shutters, beams, tree limbs have survived - but turned by natural processes to calcium carbonate. The clasp, the hinges, the bolts can still be seen on the shutters of one room, pushed slightly apart by the pressure of the mud, but almost undamaged. Painted ceilings have been painstakingly put back together from hundreds of shattered pieces, and the colours of the pigments seem amazingly bright after so great a lapse of time.

Little or nothing in the way of furniture has been found, and we are sure the villa was empty in 79 AD, apparently for remodelling and redecorating to be completed. Whoever owned it at the time (Poppaea herself had died in 65, of a miscarriage reputedly caused by Nero's having kicked her) must have been looking forward to enjoying the newly refurbished mansion when the eruption spoiled his property for him. Vitruvius would certainly have approved his plans for his seaside mansion.