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2 Domestic Architecture, Roman

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7 Introduction

8 The archaeological remains of Roman houses
9 constitute one of the world's most common
10 types of archaeological monument. Thousands
11 of cities, each full of houses, were drawn together
12 in a Mediterranean empire that stretched from
13 northern Britain to Mesopotamia. These towns
14 and their territories created a dense architectural
15 landscape of palaces, town-houses, shops, villas,
16 and farms. The remains of this architecture form
17 a rich archaeological resource that continues to
18 excite a wide public interest. As a consequence,
19 the excavation, research, and management of
20 Roman houses represent a major undertaking in
21 those parts of the world that fell within the orbit
22 of Rome (including much of Europe, North
23 Africa, and Western Asia).

24 Although most domestic buildings in the
25 Roman world were the modest homes of subsis-
26 tence farmers, built following local vernacular
27 traditions, elite residences were fashioned to
28 provide an impressive setting for the conduct of
29 familial, social, and commercial life. This
30 involved a lavish investment in architectural
31 magnificence: both in the scale of private

residences as well as in luxurious display through
32 features such as mosaics, wall paintings, 33
sculptures, fountains, private baths, and gardens. 34
There is considerable variety to this material, 35
since each dwelling place was an individual 36
artifact, built and rebuilt to serve the changing 37
needs of different generations of owners and 38
occupants. There are consequently many differ- 39
ent types of Roman house, just as there were 40
many different ways of being Roman. 41

Different regional identities and common 42
world-views were represented in the layout and 43
decoration of Roman houses. Elements of mean- 44
ingful design include the way in which space was 45
organized, encouraging the study of issues 46
such as household organization and changing 47
approaches to privacy and public life, as well as 48
the intentionally vocal elements of art and design 49
in both house and garden. The study of domestic 50
architecture also draws us into the study of the 51
building industry, both as an economic activity 52
and as part of the history of technology, including 53
specialist domains such as Roman carpentry 54
(Ulrich 2006), tile roofing (Wikander 1988), 55
earthen architecture (Lasfargues 1985), wall 56
painting (Leach 2004), and stonemasonry 57
(Adam 2003). 58

59 Definition

60 The Roman Atrium House

61 The study of the Roman house (Latin *domus*) has
62 long been dominated by the spectacular remains

63 of Pompeii and Herculaneum, interpreted
64 through the lens provided by the writings of
65 Roman authors, in particular Vitruvius. In its
66 archetypal form (illustrated by the House of
67 Pansa at Pompeii, Fig. 1) the Pompeiian house
68 was characterized by an emphasis on visual lines
69 of axial symmetry. The original focus of house-
70 hold activity was the central hall or atrium around
71 which other rooms were arranged. Although
72 Vitruvius describes a variety of arrangements,
73 the atrium was usually covered by a roof which
74 sloped down to a central opening (*compluvium*)
75 beneath which a rectangular basin (*impluvium*)
76 was placed to catch rainwater. The ideal atrium
77 was reached by a narrow entrance from the
78 street (*fauces*) facing a principal reception room
79 (*tablinum*), and flanked by wings (*alae*) and small
80 rooms (*cubicula*) (Vitruvius *de Architectura* 6;
81 Granger 1931-4). By the time of eruption of
82 Vesuvius in 79 CE, the main reception rooms of
83 larger Pompeiian houses had been transferred to
84 colonnaded gardens (peristyles) toward the rear
85 of the house, where the principal dining room
86 (*triclinium*) was located. These buildings offer
87 invaluable information in understanding how
88 Roman society functioned (Wallace-Hadrill
89 1994), but are not the whole story. The houses
90 buried at Pompeii were the product of the social
91 arrangements of a particular time and place, and
92 this architecture is not necessarily representative
93 of what was happening elsewhere in the
94 Roman world.

95 The Roman Courtyard House

96 Rome grew to power within a Mediterranean
97 world already dominated by complex urban
98 societies in which private houses played a key
99 role. Some of the most influential developments
100 in domestic architecture accompanied the political
101 changes of fifth century BCE Greece (Nevett
102 2010). Several local varieties of urban courtyard
103 house were evident at this time, following stan-
104 dardized plans suggestive of democratic equality.
105 Most houses included rooms intended for ritual-
106 ized dinner parties (*symposion*) where men came
107 together in wine-lubricated debate that helped
108 build political bonds. The design of these build-
109 ings drew on ideas of wider currency, inspired in

110 part by earlier architectural developments in
111 Syria and the Near East, and may have provided
112 a model for subsequent developments in Italian
113 domestic architecture. Recent excavations have
114 uncovered evidence of an early form of Pompei-
115 an house (“row-house”) built around open
116 central courtyards rather than the roofed atria
117 familiar from later periods (Wallace-Hadrill
118 1997). Similar buildings have been found in
119 colonies such as Cosa, where the earliest
120 examples also date to the third century BCE
121 (Sewell 2010). This early type of house appears
122 to have been modeled on the Greek courtyard
123 house, but also shows a clear affinity with atrium
124 houses. In other words, the distinction drawn
125 between Roman and Greek domestic architecture
126 has been exaggerated, following the interest
127 of authors such as Vitruvius in establishing
128 rhetorical contrasts to emphasize Roman virtues
129 (Hales 2003).

The Roman Peristyle House

130 The dialogue of architectural influence between
131 Greece and Rome has been given particular atten-
132 tion in studies of the use of peristyle courtyards in
133 Roman houses. In Roman Italy, the introduction
134 of the peristyle to the atrium house is generally
135 dated to the second century BCE, where these
136 colonnaded porticoes were initially associated
137 with gardens toward the rear of the house rather
138 than being surrounded by reception rooms. This
139 has occasioned the suggestion that they were
140 inspired by the public architecture of the
141 *gymnasia* (Dickmann 1997), although it is likely
142 that these borrowings from public architecture
143 first took place in Hellenistic palaces
144 (Nielson 1999).

145 While columned porches were a feature of
146 most types of courtyard house, the full peristyle –
147 involving columned galleries surrounding all
148 four sides of central inner courtyard – came to
149 prominence in the late fourth century BCE Mac-
150 edonian palace at Vergina. This building not only
151 inspired the elite residences of the Hellenistic
152 kingdoms, but influenced the design of early
153 Imperial palaces built on the Palatine hill in
154 Rome from the time of Nero’s Golden House
155 (*Domus Aurea*) onwards (Ball 2003). The design
156

157 of these buildings gave emphasis to audience
158 rooms and the public display of luxury, using
159 a wide range of references drawn from Hellenis-
160 tic art and architecture. It was this form of Helle-
161 nistic architecture, laid out around central
162 peristyle courtyards, which eventually character-
163 ized the domestic architecture of the Roman
164 provinces. This is strikingly evident in the
165 design and layout of the late first century CE
166 Roman villa at Fishbourne in Britain: this most
167 Roman of buildings drew clear inspiration from
168 Macedonian palatial architecture but lacked
169 many of the features of the Italian atrium house.
170 Even in Italy itself, the atrium house fell from
171 fashion, to be replaced by the central courtyard
172 peristyle house, in a process that started in the late
173 first century CE (Baldini Lippolis 2002).

174 **The Roman *Medianum* Apartment**

175 Another much-studied type of domestic architec-
176 ture is evidenced by the multistoried apartment
177 blocks of Rome and Ostia known as *insulae*
178 (Barton 1996: 3). This form of residential archi-
179 tecture was probably developed in response to
180 increased population densities in Rome in the
181 first century BCE, and given further impetus by
182 developments in concrete construction in the first
183 century CE. These apartments provided rented
184 accommodation to a range of tenants. A typical
185 layout involved three sides arranged around
186 a central rectangular room, known as the
187 *medianum* (DeLaine 2004). This space had large
188 windows opening toward a street or courtyard
189 providing the main source of light. The principal
190 rooms, sometimes with mosaics and painted
191 walls, were located at the ends of buildings.
192 Interior design suggests that the paintings came
193 with the building, and were not commissioned by
194 the individuals who took occupancy, suggesting
195 that those who rented such accommodation –
196 even if from an aristocratic background – did
197 not use interior design to draw attention to
198 individual achievement.

199 **The Roman Provincial House**

200 Although the establishment of the Roman
201 empire, and the adoption of common approaches
202 to elite architecture based on the peristyle house,

203 fuelled homogenizing tendencies in Mediterra-
204 nean architecture, it is important to stress the
205 abiding importance of different local traditions.
206 Social competition depended on a common
207 language of design, which provided universal
208 terms of reference for the conduct of polite social
209 behavior, but also encouraged a creative engage-
210 ment with that language. Architectural arguments
211 within the different corners of the Roman empire
212 referred to Rome, but were essentially local. It
213 is consequently the case that the houses of Roman
214 Silchester were visibly and recognizably
215 different to the houses of the neighboring
216 Verulamium – although both housed facilities
217 that were designed and arranged in ways that
218 were distinctly Roman (Perring 2002). For this
219 reason, the double-tower houses (*Oikia dipurgia*)
220 of Roman Egypt were very different from
221 the winged-corridor villas of the Roman north-
222 western provinces: although in both cases, the
223 defining feature of the building type was an
224 interest in establishing an impressive and sym-
225 metrical house façade. Archaeological classifica-
226 tions give us many dozens of different types of
227 buildings that can all be called Roman houses.
228 There is no space here to examine the full range
229 of types and influences, but in addition to the
230 themes already alluded to here, it is also impor-
231 tant to note the export of urban ideas to the
232 countryside represented by the Roman villa,
233 where the influences of late Hellenistic design
234 were particularly strong. The different circum-
235 stances of country living encouraged the devel-
236 opment of new forms of architecture, that in turn
237 contributed to how wealth and status came to be
238 displayed in town (as also evidenced by the archi-
239 tecture of Nero's Golden House). In frontier
240 provinces, the houses built within Roman forts
241 also provided an important model in regional
242 approaches to house design (Barton 1996).

243 **Historical Background**

244 Modern study of the architecture of Roman
245 houses builds on the scholarly rediscovery of
246 the writings of Vitruvius, published in the
247 fifteenth century, and explorations at Pompeii

248 from the mideighteenth century onward. Large-
249 scale investigations of other Roman towns and
250 villas became a feature of nineteenth century
251 antiquarianism, and generated a large body of
252 excavation reports that has grown substantially
253 with the results from more recent rescue excava-
254 tions. These reports have been supplemented by
255 specialist studies of decorations, in particular
256 mosaics and wall paintings, and most recently
257 by detailed typological studies of different
258 aspects of building fabric (e.g., ceramic building
259 materials, carpentry, etc.). The scale and range of
260 this body of material makes synthesis difficult
261 (although see de Albentis 1990; Ellis 2002;
262 Gros 2001). Most of the published material
263 describes the decoration and layout of excavated
264 Roman buildings, with a particular emphasis on
265 typological development.

266 Scholarship has developed apace since 1990,
267 encouraged in part by the quality of the new
268 descriptive detail available from excavation and
269 survey, by a greater willingness of both ancient
270 historians and archaeologists to critically explore
271 the relationship between text and material
272 culture, and – in particular – by an increasing
273 awareness of the value of spatial theory to the
274 study of social change. Roman domestic space
275 was designed to provide a setting for structured
276 social encounters, and thereby helped to produce
277 and reproduce social relationships. Recent work
278 has concentrated on connections between specific
279 spatial configurations, modes of behavior, and
280 their associated ideologies. Houses were built to
281 be carry messages, and it has become fashionable
282 to treat them as texts to be read. In this way,
283 contemporary study of Roman domestic architec-
284 ture contributes to research into the formations of
285 Roman power both within the household, in civic
286 life and in economic relations.

287 **Key Issues/Current Debates**

288 **Architecture, Text, and Material Culture**

289 It remains the case, however, that our reading of
290 the evidence is shaped by the expectations that
291 we bring to the exercise. For instance, it has
292 recently been shown that pioneering studies of

293 the architecture of late antiquity owed most to
294 assumptions about the increasingly hierarchical
295 nature of late antique society derived from
296 ancient sources, thereby failing to give adequate
297 attention to the evidence of peer competition
298 which showed continuity with the earlier
299 Roman period (Bowes 2010).

300 A principal concern of recent research is the
301 relationship between the architectural remains,
302 and the ancient texts that describe buildings and
303 the activities that they housed. Excavation reports
304 are littered with terms drawn from ancient
305 sources, used first to identify and then give
306 meaning to different types of feature, room, and
307 building type. This modern use of these ancient
308 terms is frequently confused, often anachronistic
309 and has occasionally encouraged an over-static
310 view of how ancient houses worked. Vitruvius
311 was not writing to help archaeologists understand
312 ancient houses, but to set out his own views on
313 how houses should be built and why. His views
314 were not necessarily those of the Pompeiian
315 aristocrats whose houses we can visit, or of
316 those who used these buildings and contributed
317 to their design. It has consequently been
318 suggested that we should renounce biased textual
319 evidence as a means to understanding how
320 Roman space functioned, relying instead on the
321 quantifiable attributes of finds distributions
322 supplemented by the evidence of fixtures and
323 fittings within the house (Allison 2004). These
324 data illustrate how the front halls of Pompeiian
325 houses, normally identified as atria, were put to
326 different and sometimes contradictory uses. It is
327 probable that such rooms had different uses at
328 different times, operating to different cycles and
329 involving different casts of players.

330 There are two problems to this approach. In
331 the first instance, finds distributions within
332 Roman houses are poor indicators of how such
333 buildings were used. Most of the rubbish deriving
334 from daily use would have been swept away in
335 routine household cleaning. The archaeological
336 finds made during the excavation of Roman
337 buildings usually derive from construction
338 deposits, where broken pottery from various
339 sources could be recycled as the foundation of
340 new floors. Destruction horizons are more likely

341 to include objects lost in situ, but the circum- 388
342 stances of abandonment and destruction are far 389
343 from typical. Secondly, the evidence of the 390
344 written sources offers unique insight into contem- 391
345 porary perceptions of the purpose and meaning of 392
346 domestic space. The study of domestic architec- 393
347 ture benefits from differently constituted primary 394
348 sources, all of which are valuable to research 395
349 (Stewart 2008). These include spatial analysis, 396
350 finds distributions, textual sources, and interior 397
351 design. Mosaic pavements, wall-paintings, and 398
352 sculptures help describe – at least allusively – 399
353 the cultural identity and cosmological views of 400
354 their patrons. Our reading of this evidence finds 401
355 added meaning in the narrative dialogue offered 402
356 by the sequencing, location, and intervisibility of 403
357 different images. Further social and economic 404
358 data – sometimes less consciously deployed 405
359 than other aspects of design – are embedded 406
360 in building fabric, as in the different traditions 407
361 in roof design and carpentry, and the use of 408
362 particular types of concrete construction (such 409
363 as *opus africanum* and *opus reticulatum*).

364 **The Construction Industry and Building** 365 **Technology**

366 The ancient world was transformed by changing 410
367 approaches to construction techniques. In most 411
368 traditional societies, houses are comparatively 412
369 short-lived structures, intended to serve the 413
370 needs of a single generation of use before being 414
371 replaced. There is consequently an emphasis on 415
372 timber and earthen constructions, based on low- 416
373 cost locally available materials that are easily 417
374 recycled. The use of property in the support of 418
375 political power, and as a basis for taxation and 419
376 rent, helped to change attitudes to property and 420
377 contributed to the commodification of domestic 421
378 buildings. The importance of managing buildings 422
379 as property, and of resolving conflicts over basic 423
380 resources such as water and light, is illustrated by 424
381 the attention given to these subjects in late 425
382 antique legislation – which forms an important 426
383 body of evidence for the study of Roman domes- 427
384 tic architecture (Saliou 1994). In the north-west 428
385 provinces, changes in the perceived value of 429
386 domestic property can be seen in the way in 430
387 which the ephemeral timber constructions that

characterized the earliest urban settlements 388
came to be replaced by more permanent houses 389
of brick and stone. Short-lived timber houses, 390
some involving sophisticated carpentry and 391
expensive interior decoration, required replace- 392
ment every decade or so. The architects of 393
these houses were perfectly capable of designing 394
more durable structures, but did not see the need 395
to do so. The subsequent decision to invest in 396
more durable materials and structures reflects on 397
the growing importance of real estate as a means 398
of accumulating wealth and representing power. 399
In the towns of Roman Britain, the pattern of 400
development involved a shift from timber archi- 401
tecture (involving timber framing), to earthen 402
architecture based on Gallo-Roman tradition, to 403
masonry and concrete constructions. 404

This investment in structural permanence per- 405
mitted and encouraged more elaborate spatial 406
designs. Developments in concrete construction 407
allowed for innovative and experimental 408
approaches, as pioneered in the imperial archi- 409
tecture of Rome, and reinforced the trend toward 410
more complex forms of building design – as in 411
the use of apsidal and curved spaces, and of vaults 412
and multistoried buildings. 413

414 **The Origins of the Atrium House**

415 Considerable attention has been given to the 416
417 subject of where and when the atrium house first 418
419 emerged (Wallace-Hadrill 1997). This is part of 420
421 the continuing debate over the relative impor- 422
423 tance of imported (Greek) and local (Italic) 424
425 contributions to Roman domestic design. Studies 426
427 have given undue significance to the presence of 428
429 the *compluviate* roofed court around which other 430
431 rooms were arranged. The key feature, from an 431
432 archaeological point of view, is the *impluvium* 432
433 (water basin) at the center of the room. This was 433
434 not simply a decorative feature but an important 434
part of water management. One of the benefits of 435
building houses around central courtyards is the 436
way in which the inwardly sloping roof arrange- 437
ments captured and funneled all of the available 438
rainfall, which could then be channeled toward 439
underground cisterns. Prior to the introduction of 440
aqueduct-fed water supply, rare in most cities 441
before the first and second centuries CE, this 442

435 was how households obtained their drinking
436 water. The *compluviate* roof managed water
437 supply in the same way but with even greater
438 efficiency, and also allowed for the central area
439 to be covered.

440 The standard evolutionary account, following
441 Roman authors such as Vitruvius and Varro, has
442 the *impluviate* central space as the original Italic
443 characteristic. Archaeologists have found
444 supporting evidence in the layout of houses in
445 the fifth century Etruscan colony at Marzabotto,
446 which had cruciform plans reminiscent of the
447 atrium-*tablinum-alae* design. It seems likely
448 that Roman houses were, indeed, influenced by
449 these earlier Etruscan houses. What is not so
450 certain is that this is where the *compluviate*
451 atrium was first elaborated. Wallace-Hadrill
452 (1997) draws our attention to three key features
453 within the available evidence: firstly, the
454 *impluvium* basin was a water-management
455 feature that could be as useful in an open court
456 as in a room with a *compluviate* roof; secondly,
457 the evidence of “row-houses” at Pompeii and
458 Cosa (summarized above) shows that many
459 houses previously thought to have had covered
460 central halls (known from Vitruvius as
461 *displuviate* atria) were actually courtyard houses;
462 and thirdly, changes to the drainage arrangements
463 show that some Pompeian atria started life as
464 open central courtyards before the addition of
465 *compluviate* roofs. The emerging model is one
466 in which the *compluviate* atrium seems likely to
467 have been an elaboration of the central courtyard
468 that gained prominence in the course of the
469 fourth/third century BCE as Rome and its allies
470 developed new styles of housing in the formation
471 of new models of Roman urbanization (Sewell
472 2010). This new architecture also found its place
473 in the countryside. Excavations at the Auditorium
474 site outside Rome have shown that the farm here
475 was completely rebuilt in the late third century as
476 an atrium villa. Here the introduction of the
477 atrium was not the product of gradual evolution,
478 but represented the imposition of an entirely
479 new concept.

The House and Social Life

480 We now turn our attention from the house as
481 artifact, subject to typological classification, to
482 the social meanings that can be read from archi-
483 tectural design. A recurring theme in recent
484 research has been the pivotal role of the private
485 house in public life (e.g., Wallace-Hadrill 1994;
486 Cooper 2007). Modern distinctions between
487 private and public do not easily transfer to the
488 ancient world, where public affairs were also
489 private matters. The main focus of recent
490 scholarship has been the role of the house as
491 a setting for the ritualized social encounters
492 from which political and economic life was
493 built. The development of more complicated
494 house-types was a product of the social complex-
495 ity that came with the foundation of cities and
496 formation of states. The Roman Empire
497 depended on cities as vehicles of taxation and
498 control, and as fora for the networks of patronage
499 and dependency that sustained authority. Power
500 in such places was mediated through individuals
501 and therefore centered on the *domus*, which was
502 designed to enhance the status and authority of
503 the head of the household.
504

505 Roman authors describe two particular social
506 events that routinely took place in the Roman
507 house: the morning *salutatio*, when clients
508 attended the head of the household, and the
509 evening banquet when friends and colleagues
510 were entertained in dining rooms. Domestic
511 architecture was fashioned around these recep-
512 tion activities. Audience rooms found nearer to
513 the entrance to the house – such as the atrium and
514 *tablinum* – were used as formal settings for the
515 morning *salutatio*. In contrast, dining rooms were
516 usually set toward the rear of the property where
517 they were arranged to best exploit available light,
518 sometimes commanding views over formal
519 gardens or the wider landscape. These dining
520 rooms were commonly found in relatively low-
521 status buildings, and were as much a feature of
522 the commercial premises (“strip buildings”) of
523 Roman London as of the atrium-peristyle houses
524 of Pompeii. Decorated porticoes and corridors
525 guided privileged guests toward these more inti-
526 mate parts of the house, in a processional
527 approach to space that became even more

528 pronounced in the houses of late antiquity.
529 Private bath houses were also a feature of the
530 reception space of later Roman houses, and espe-
531 cially of country villas. These facilities were
532 often placed on the opposite and more public
533 side of the house to the rooms most likely to
534 have housed the supper parties. Colonnades and
535 porticoes were used to link these opposed and
536 contrasting reception areas, in a form of spatial
537 dialectic. The importance of these different
538 reception facilities – audience halls, dining
539 rooms, porticoes and peristyles, and bath houses –
540 is illustrated by the disproportionate amount of
541 space that they took up within the house, by the
542 expense of their decoration, and by the fact that
543 these were the rooms most likely to be extended
544 and improved during the life of a property.

545 In all parts of the Roman world, and at a range
546 of different dates, one of the most common forms
547 of architectural alteration involved the addition
548 of a peristyle or portico: such features were added
549 to internal courtyards, to form new building
550 façades, or to create garden colonnades (Perring
551 2005). These colonnades drew inspiration from
552 the public architecture of the *gymnasia* and were
553 usually built in association with dining rooms.
554 The portico mediated between human and natural
555 domains: a metaphorical opening from the house
556 into the natural and therefore divine. The garden
557 was important symbolic space, with fountains
558 and ponds located to command the views that
559 obtained from the dining room. The design of
560 this part of the house was perhaps modeled
561 on the dialectical contrasts that could be drawn
562 between the rational debate of the *gymnasium*
563 (in the peristyle) and the irrational discourse of
564 the wine-fuelled supper party (in the dining
565 room). In many houses, a square room –
566 sometimes containing water features – was
567 placed opposite the dining room projecting into
568 the garden beyond. Although differently
569 designed, this was a feature of many different
570 provincial traditions (from North Africa to
571 Britain). Dickmann (1997) has identified the
572 Pompeian version of this space with the *exedra*:
573 a place for meetings, readings, debate, and study.
574 The spatial arrangement adds emphasis to the
575 relationship between dining room, colonnade,

and garden. The room identified as an *exedra* 576
allowed for a form of synthesis between the con- 577
trasts posed between rational space (colonnade) 578
and irrational space (dining room), and between 579
human and natural worlds (house and garden). 580
The presence of fountains and other water 581
features in some such rooms reinforces the 582
sense that this space straddled a conceptual 583
boundary between human and divine. 584

Above all else houses can be read as state- 585
ments of cultural affiliation. Different layers of 586
meaning can be obtained from the ideas made 587
explicit in the cultural references used in interior 588
design, and implied by uses of space that reflected 589
on particularities of family and household struc- 590
ture. While much recent research in Italy and the 591
eastern Mediterranean has been concerned with 592
the dialogue between Roman and Greek identi- 593
ties, work in the western provinces has been 594
dominated by a concern with the way in which 595
conquered provinces and provinces came to 596
adopt Roman fashion (see ► [Romanization](#)). 597
Roman aristocrats drew on a range of values 598
intended to reinforce their prestige among their 599
clients, friends, and peers. These values were 600
likely to include those of Roman imperial 601
authority, rooted in Roman history but influenced 602
by the Augustan interpretation of hellenistic 603
models, as well as those more directly derived 604
from Greek philosophy. These values were devel- 605
oped through local competition, and were conse- 606
quently expressed in local idiom. Roman identity 607
was negotiated, and part of a plurality of 608
coexisting identities (Hales 2003). 609

A core topic of recent research is the nature 610
and structure of the Roman household, where the 611
evidence of domestic architecture has been drawn 612
upon to reconstruct social arrangements (Rawson 613
2011). It is difficult, however, to recognize the 614
family as a social unit in the plans of Roman 615
domestic buildings. Indeed, it usually requires 616
a considerable degree of speculative reconstruc- 617
tion to find boundaries between properties and 618
households within the Roman housing block, 619
since the only intervention needed to create two 620
separately tenanted units from one former prop- 621
erty is a lock on a door. Archaeology cannot 622

623 usually tell us which thresholds were barriers and
624 which were portals.

625 The common pattern of urban living involved
626 a mixed distribution of the houses, apartments,
627 and shops. We know from inscriptions at Pompeii
628 that the owners of property could let out residen-
629 tial accommodation on upper floors, and in shops
630 along street frontages. In most cities, the rich
631 lived surrounded by their dependants: by slaves
632 and freedmen, clients, and tenants. This commu-
633 nity was the source of both social and economic
634 power. As patrons and investors, urban aristo-
635 crats were actively involved in most aspects of
636 the urban economy. This economy involved
637 a significant degree of workshop production,
638 and there was no clear distinction between
639 industrial and domestic premises.

640 Several groups could be placed under one roof
641 forming a “houseful” of potentially unrelated
642 individuals such as friends, lodgers, servants, or
643 slaves. Women and children are notoriously
644 difficult to find in the spatial data. Attempts
645 have been made to find the echo of gender
646 distinctions in Roman houses, represented in the
647 different pathways that might have helped limit
648 and control encounters between outsiders and
649 family members (Nevett 2010). These are not
650 entirely convincing, since different access
651 arrangements might equally have accommodated
652 the different needs of important guests gaining
653 honored entry through the front door, and those of
654 slaves and tradesmen making a less conspicuous
655 entry. Household slaves are equally difficult to
656 locate within the archaeology of the house. We
657 assume that these invisible communities made
658 use of attics and work-rooms, sleeping at the
659 foot of a master’s bed or in the kitchen.
660 The duplication of residential-suites in some
661 buildings, notably in the villas of the western
662 provinces, might illustrate the provision of sepa-
663 rate quarters of near equal status for both lord
664 (*dominus*) and lady (*domina*) of the household.

665 The End of the Roman House

666 The houses of late Antiquity have also become
667 the focus of recent research (Lavan et al. 2007;
668 Bowes 2010), with a particular focus on the intro-
669 duction and development of more lavish and

670 specialized reception facilities. The proliferation
671 of such houses in the fourth and fifth centuries
672 followed the expansion of imperial bureaucracy
673 in the economic and social reforms of Diocletian
674 and Constantine. This investment reflected on an
675 intense aristocratic competition, given impetus
676 by new avenues for advantage obtained through
677 imperial honors and service. The growing
678 importance of Christianity within the households
679 of the later Roman empire, and the consequent
680 emergence of Christian types of houses (includ-
681 ing Episcopal houses), is a related theme of
682 current academic interest. The early development
683 of Christian architecture drew on the architecture
684 of the private dining in the later Roman aristo-
685 cratic house, which is the likely source of inspi-
686 ration for the design of the apsidal-ended
687 Christian basilica.

688 In the western empire, Roman styles of
689 housing ceased to have social and political
690 relevance with the failure of Roman administra-
691 tions and the decline of Roman cities. In the
692 eastern Mediterranean, patterns of use were also
693 changing, and by the late sixth century, many
694 grand houses had been subdivided and
695 redesigned against a different form of occupancy.
696 Despite such changes, Byzantine and early
697 Islamic houses continued to be built in ways
698 that would have been familiar to Roman
699 aristocrats.

700 Future Directions

701 Academic research is well served by the large
702 body of excavated data already available, and
703 will continue to benefit from rescue excavations
704 in modern cities built over the sites of Roman
705 ones. This will allow for further refinements in
706 understanding chronologies of change, and
707 in defining particularly local features of design
708 that shed light on regional and civic identities.
709 There is most scope for such work in those areas
710 of the Roman world that were neither particularly
711 Italian nor Greek. We can anticipate wider interest
712 among students of Roman domestic architecture in
713 the contribution made by the provinces formed
714 within the former territories of the Achaemenid

715 empire, within the Phoenician states, and in Punic
716 North Africa. There is also a considerable scope
717 for more advanced study into the building industry
718 as a sector of the ancient economy, based on the
719 quantitative data that can be obtained from the
720 fabric of individual buildings.

721 The greatest challenges, however, are those
722 that attach to the conservation needs of Roman
723 buildings. The collapse of the house of the
724 Gladiators in Pompeii in 2010 drew worldwide
725 attention to the vulnerability of these buildings.
726 Conservation issues will absorb an ever-increasing
727 share of the available funding, and this will in turn
728 inspire new areas of research.

729 Cross-References

- 730 ▶ [Architecture, Roman](#)
- 731 ▶ [Baths and Bathing, Roman](#)
- 732 ▶ [Greek Domestic Architecture](#)
- 733 ▶ [Hellenization](#)
- 734 ▶ [Oikos in Classical Archaeology](#)
- 735 ▶ [Romanization](#)
- 736 ▶ [Symposium](#)
- 737 ▶ [Urban Planning in the Roman World](#)
- 738 ▶ [Vicus](#)
- 739 ▶ [Villas and Farms in the Mediterranean World](#)

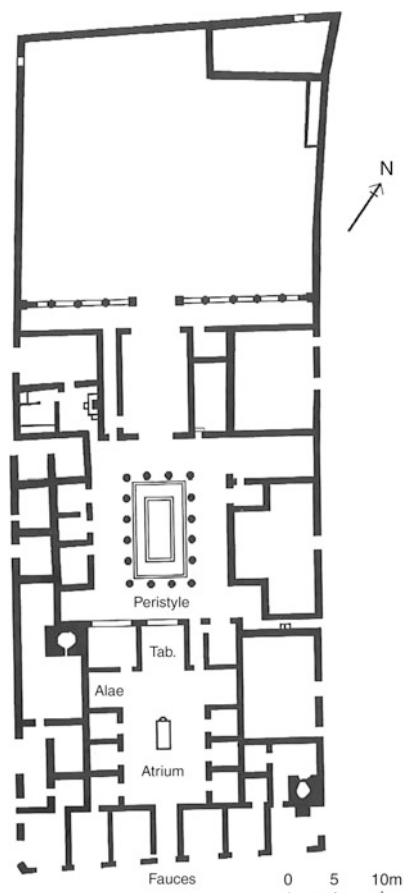
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Domestic Architecture, Roman, Fig. 1 Plan of the House of Pansa, Pompeii

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