Private Spaces in Pompeii

Part I: An Introduction to Roman Domestic Architecture and Interior Design

Roman Domestic Architecture

- Romans living in Pompeii or other smaller Roman cities generally lived in moderately to very spacious homes, most with a very similar layout.
- These homes were designed according to what is called the atrium plan, as the domestic space was centered around an interior courtyard called an atrium.

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- These houses generally shared walls with the houses next to them, allowing no space between houses, much like row-houses in San Francisco, for instance.
- These row-houses formed blocks called insulae (Latin for "islands"). Though there were commonly multiple houses on a block, occasionally, there was one single house which occupied the entire block.

A typical atrium plan house
Each of the rooms in a Roman house had somewhat particular functions, some of which related to the private activities of the home, and some of which related to the more public functions.

The entrance to a Roman house was known as the fauces (Latin for “throat”) or the vestibulum (cf. English “vestibule”). This was generally a narrow passageway which led directly into the atrium.

The atrium was the central room of a Roman house, around which all of the other rooms are arranged and in which most of the action takes place. It is a large interior courtyard with a small pool called an impluvium in the center. This pool would catch rainwater which came in through a corresponding hole in the roof called the compluvium. The compluvium is also the main source of light for the atrium. The roof slopes down towards the hole and acts as a sort of funnel for the compluvium.

The atrium would have been largely unfurnished. At any point during the day, small, easily moveable chairs could be brought into the atrium if necessary.

The only permanent fixture in the atrium would have been the lararium, a small shrine to house statues of the lares and penates, minor gods that protected the household from harm and were often deceased relatives.
Roman Domestic Architecture
Photos of Roman atria taken from the fauces

Roman Domestic Architecture
Close-ups of a compluvium and an impluvium

Roman Domestic Architecture
A lararium in a Roman atrium

Roman Domestic Architecture
A typical atrium plan house
Roman Domestic Architecture

• All guests in a Roman house would have gained access through the atrium, making it a rather public area of the house.
• Surrounding the atrium were small rectangular rooms called cubicula (singular = cubiculum). These functioned largely as bedrooms, though extra cubicula could have been used for any number of other purposes. Smaller cubicula for slaves may have been on the second floors of these houses. There was also no real “master” bedroom in a Roman house; all bedrooms were generally equal in size.

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• Unlike the bedrooms in most homes today, these rooms were small, poorly lit, and not well ventilated. As a result, most Romans did not spend large amounts of time in their bedrooms.
• The poor lighting of cubicula is a result of the fact that these rooms generally did not have windows (remember that most houses shared walls with the neighboring houses). The only light would have been ambient light from the compluvium or artificial light from lamps.

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• Furnishings would have been fairly minimal, consisting of a small couch/bed, called a lectus, a bedside table of some sort, and an armoire to hold garments. This furniture is generally also somewhat portable, so as to be easily moved if necessary.
• A typical Roman house would have had at least one or two cubicula reserved for guests, as the Romans took hospitality quite seriously.
• During the daytime, bedroom doors would be tightly closed, making the atrium itself an entirely public space.

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A cubiculum from the villa of P. Fannius Synistor from Boscoreale, near Pompeii (in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
At the rear of the atrium was the tablinum, which upon first glance appears to be no more than a hallway which connects the atrium to the rear portion of the house. However, the tablinum was the office of a Roman house. The lack of a doorway at the front of the tablinum made it possible for clients or business associates to see easily whether the master of the house was in.

This relates to the Roman tradition of the patron-client relationship. A wealthy man (usually one seeking political office) would agree to be a patron giving large sums of money to clients who needed such funds, generally in exchange for votes. The clients in-turn could become lower level patrons on their own, using their patron’s money.

One major responsibility for a client was to visit his patron at his home, in the tablinum, each morning, a visit called a salutatio. During the visit, the client would wish his patron well and ask if there was anything he could do for his patron.

The tablinum could also double, if necessary, as an extra dining room if a large space was needed.

Furniture in the tablinum would have included a simple, moveable table, a chair, and a box which was chained to the floor, called an arca, which would have held important documents and money.

Spatially, the tablinum serves as a dividing line between the public area of the house (atrium) and the private space (peristylum). No one can get any further into the house without the invitation of the master.
• At the rear of the atrium, near the tablinum, were two smaller rooms, one on either side, called the alae. These narrow rooms with no doors served as waiting rooms for clients when the master of the house was otherwise occupied. Furnishings would have been minimal, though decoration was rather elaborate to impress guests.
• These rooms could also serve as storage areas for additional furniture (such as that used in the atrium during the day) when not in use.

Some views of the alae and their decoration
The triclinium, a room easily identified by its off-center door. The door in this room was placed off-center so as to accommodate the three couches which would have been placed along the walls. These couches were used by the Romans at dinner. Three people reclined on each couch, eating with the right hand and using the left to prop their heads.

Women and old men could sit in high-backed chairs. Women were not allowed to dine with men outside of the family unless chaperoned.

A small, moveable table was placed in the center of these couches to hold the multiple courses of a Roman meal. This was occasionally fixed in place.

This room, like the tablinum and the alae, would have been very well decorated as dinner parties are often the setting of important political and financial dealings amongst Pompeii’s most important families.

Many houses in Pompeii had more than 1 triclinium, sometimes situated with their doors in different directions to accommodate the changing seasons. Some houses even had triclinia outdoors.
A mosaic from the floor of a triclinium at Herculaneum showing table scraps

A typical atrium plan house

**Roman Domestic Architecture**

- On the opposite side of the tablinum was generally the kitchen, or *culina*. This area was generally only used by slaves, and as a result, it might also contain the house’s restroom, if the house even had one.
- Food was cooked on top of a brick stove, and pots were often hung from the ceiling or on walls. Other furnishings would include a table for preparation of food. Kitchens were often small and dark, though if there were a window anywhere in a Roman house, it was most often here.

**Decoration was also sparse in the culina, as the only people who would really spend any time there were slaves.**
- The slaves also generally ate their food in the culina, and only after serving the master, his family, and his guests in the triclinium.
- There was sometimes a passage between the culina and the tablinum to be used as a more private entrance to the peristyle at the rear of the house.
Some examples of culinae

Roman Domestic Architecture

A loaf of bread from Pompeii

Various foods found at Pompeii and Herculaneum

13 – onion bulbs
14 – garlic cloves
15, 16 – various figs
17, 18 - chestnuts

A typical atrium plan house

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• At the rear of the house was the peristylum, a large colonnaded garden which was contained entirely within the walls of the house. The central portion was completely open to the sky, and shade/protection from rain was offered by the covered walkway which ran around the outer edge. This large opening, coupled with the compluvium in the atrium, was capable of creating a cross-breeze which was essentially a Roman air conditioning system.
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• Access to the peristylum was somewhat limited. Only the family and invited guests could enter this portion of the house. There would have been some stone benches and the like in this garden for seating.

• Most of these gardens had extensive decoration on the walls of the colonnade, statuary in the center, and sometimes a fountain or fishpond.

• The peristylum replaced an earlier Roman domestic feature called a hortus, which was a small garden used to grow vegetables. The peristylum, in contrast, was designed with leisure in mind.

• There were often two rooms located at the front of the house which were not actually connected to the interior of the dwelling at all. These were the tabernae, which were shops that had direct access to the street. The owners of a house may have run businesses out of these shops, or the spaces may have been rented out as an extra source of income. The presence of shops at the front (or on the ground floor) of residences is still common in many urban areas.
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- These tabernae could also potentially be rented as single-room residences for the less wealthy residents of the city.
- Of course, it was also possible to combine these two possible functions. Setups have been found in which there was clearly a shop kept at ground level and a loft placed above to provide a small residential area for the shopkeeper.
- Among the most common shop types is the thermopolium, a cross between a bar and a fast-food restaurant.

Roman Interior Design

- All of these homes were decorated lavishly with wall paintings, done in fresco, which was the application of paint onto wet plaster.
- Pompeii provides archaeologists with their best evidence for Roman fresco as the paintings themselves have been protected from the elements due to their long-term burial.
- There are four distinct styles of Pompeian wall painting, spanning the time period from the early 2nd century B.C. until the time of the eruption in 79.

Some examples of tabernae, inside and out

- The so-called First Style of Pompeian wall painting, also known as the “Masonry Style” or “Encrustation Style” uses stucco and fresco to imitate masonry work on walls.
- The plaster itself would be molded to create architectural features such as pilasters, molding, cornices, and blocks and then painted brightly to resemble colored marbles. The effect was to create a noble and austere look which reflected the taste and simplicity of the home’s owners.
Roman Interior Design

• This style was popular in Pompeii from the time period from roughly 200 B.C. until the Sullan period beginning in around 80 B.C.
• The style most likely does not develop in Pompeii itself, but rather somewhere in the Hellenistic cities of Asia Minor.
• Note that the trend of importing artistic and architectural styles from Asia Minor is also reflected at the same time in the monumentalization of the Forum and the construction of the theatres.

• In Pompeii, excellent examples of 1st style paintings can be found in the House of the Faun and the House of Sallust. Each of these houses kept the 1st style decoration despite being actively inhabited up until the time of the eruption. This style, then, never truly went out of fashion, but rather continued to reflect good taste and a certain conservatism and longing for bygone days.

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• The so-called Second Style of wall painting, also known as the “architectural style,” used some of the same architectural features employed in the 1st style, but these were strictly painted onto the walls; they were not molded into the stucco. Further, these architectural features generally surrounded windows or doors of some kind, which looked out onto an imaginary outdoor landscape with other architectural elements in the background.
Roman Interior Design

- The architectural system of columns, podiums, pediments, and the like linked the entire wall together in a sort of scheme and generally involved the presence of 3 openings looking to exterior landscapes.
- This style makes great use of perspective in these outdoor landscapes; the view is never a direct one, but generally employs some sort of angle requiring the artist to employ the principle of perspective.
- This style is popular from the Sullan period, around 80 B.C., until around 25 B.C.

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- Many of these architectural elements present in the exterior landscape imagery include temples and other structures common to Roman life, perhaps in an effort to remind the homeowner of life in Rome. This makes sense because after all, after Sulla takes over the city in 80 B.C., the city is effectively Romanized, and many of its residents are Sullan veterans who used to live in Rome itself.
- Excellent examples may be found in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale, and the Villa of Augustus on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

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An example of 2nd Style painting from the House of Augustus in Rome

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Several close-ups from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale
Roman Interior Design

- The so-called Third Style, also known as the “ornamental style,” makes use of some of the architectural elements of the 2nd style, but in a less realistic way. While walls are still often divided into 3 parts by columns, these columns no longer appear to be the sort that could possibly bear any weight, but are rather slender and tenuous. Decoration, rather than being exterior scenes painted in perspective, became miniatures which looked like framed paintings of sorts, often depicting mythological themes.

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- The background wall colors were often bright and solid, usually red, white, or black.
- The central panel in the 3-part division of the wall generally involved a larger image which was framed by everything else around it, even the other smaller scene paintings.
- Along with having architectural elements which no longer appear to be structurally sound, there also appear seemingly useless items of architecture—small structures designed with no clear purpose, often on the upper levels near the ceiling.

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- This style is popular from roughly 25 B.C. until 35 A.D. and recalls the 2nd style, but with a modern twist. The fact that the architectural features seem superfluous can be connected to the wealth of the owner of the house, who can afford to be over the top, throwing functionality to the wind. The use of mythological scenes suggests an emphasis on presenting the homeowner as literate and generally well-educated.
- Excellent examples can be seen clearly in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto and in certain areas of the Villa of the Mysteries.

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An example of the 3rd style from the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto
Additional examples of 3rd style painting

• The last style of painting, the so-called Fourth Style, also known as the “illusionist style,” is a sort of combination of the 2nd and 3rd styles in some ways. The architectural elements become even less seemingly functional, with entire pieces of architecture held up by slender, candelabra type features and somewhat haphazard placement of scenes in between these features.
• Some of these scenes employ perspective and exterior views in the manner of the 2nd style, while others have figures randomly floating, unframed, on the wall.

• Like the 3rd style, the major background colors remain white, black, and red (which was not really the case with the 2nd style), and there is a large presence of garlands draped over the various features.
• The upper areas of the wall were generally the least logical, with completely unreal figures and seemingly useless architectural elements.
• In short, much of the 4th style resembles a sort of patchwork of the 2nd and 3rd styles.

• Though traces of the 4th style can be found as early as the 2nd quarter of the 1st century A.D., its popularity is only secured after the earthquake of 62 A.D. From this point, it becomes the dominant style until the time of the eruption.
• Part of the rationale behind the oddities of the 4th style is the fact that most of the houses were being repaired after the earthquake of 62, and residents wanted this done reasonably quickly.
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- The fact that so many homes were being redecorated after 62 also explains why this is the most commonly found Pompeian style.
- Excellent examples of the 4th style can be found in the House of Loreius Tiburtinus, the House of the Vettii, and the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii as well as in the Domus Aurea (Golden House) of Nero in Rome.
- There is no telling where Pompeian wall painting would have gone from this point as few examples of later paintings survive elsewhere.

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Examples of early (left) and late (right) 4th style paintings from the House of the Vettii, Pompeii

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An example of the 4th style from the Domus Aurea of Nero, Rome

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- All of the houses in Pompeii also boasted mosaic floors of varying complexity. Mosaics, simply put, are composed of small pieces of stone, colored glass, marble, or colored tile placed in wet cement to form at their most basic, geometric patterns and at their most complex, entire scenes.
- The individual pieces of tile used in mosaic are called tesserae. A single tessera could be smaller than a centimeter square, and literally millions could be used to make a single mosaic.