The Roman House and Social Identity

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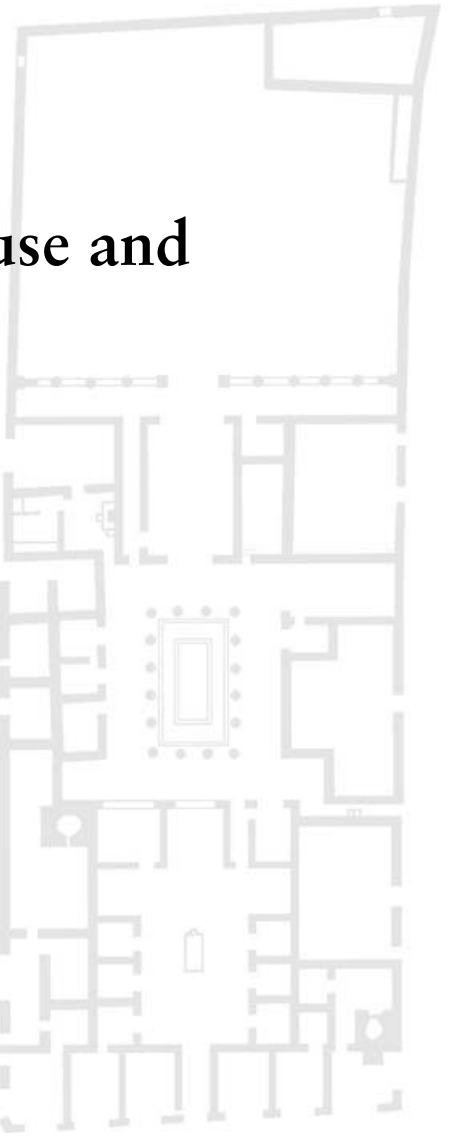

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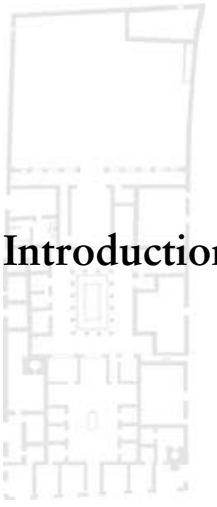


Introduction

Most people would not dispute that a house plays a part in building identity. The majority of homeowners would probably like to think that their choice of house and its decoration reflected their own tastes and personalities. The house is the private, unobserved space of the family unit over which they have control. However, the average, modern house is unlikely to be able to tell you overmuch about the public life of the owner, that is the life spent under observation by the community subject to socially constructed codes of behaviour. Although the degree of opulence might indicate wealth or class, it is unlikely to afford much insight into the careers of those who live there. Above all, the modern house, in the West at any rate, is a retreat from life in public. Although new technology is making it more possible for people to work from home, those who do so remain very much in the minority. Similarly, although entertaining at home is hardly unusual, the leisure industry provides a wealth of public places for relaxing and socialising. Most of us work away from home, and a large part of our free time is spent in bars, cinemas, or leisure centres.

However, the role of the Roman house or *domus* in building identity is more acute. The Roman's house, it might be said, was his *forum*.[1] This takes account of the fact that no Roman ever stood alone; he was constantly judged in the wider context of his family, *familia*, and the functions of his *domus* could not be divorced from that of his public roles. In other words, there was no formalised segregation between public and private life that we observe in the West today. The *familia* itself, which should perhaps better be translated as household rather than family, was an institution encompassing birthright (sons and daughters), economics (slaves), and even

politics (freedmen as clients), involving not only those bound to the *paterfamilias* by birth or marriage but also by law.[2] Similarly, the Roman *domus* was simultaneously home, place of entertainment, business office, and lobbying platform.[3] The *paterfamilias* received his *clientes* here in the morning for the daily *salutatio* to distribute gifts, delegate errands and tasks, and demand political favours. In the evening, the *paterfamilias* did not frequent the *tabernae*, the haunt of the morally and economically bankrupt, but instead entertained his *amici* (friends and associates) in his own *triclinium*.[4]

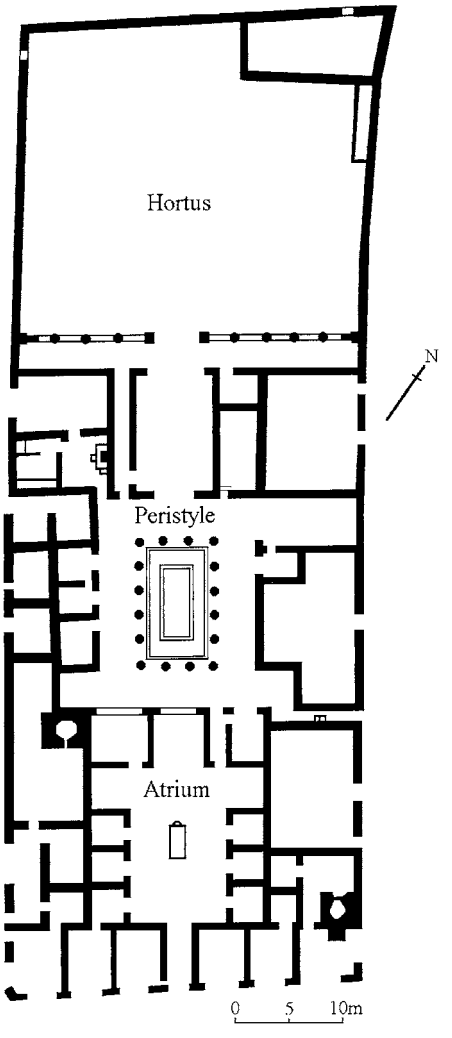
Although the elite lived very public lives as either Roman senators or provincial decurions, serving as patrons, magistrates, and priests, these public roles were amplifications of domestic duties, from managing clients to performing due sacrifice to the household gods. The house provided a setting for both domestic life and a public career. Birth, marriage, and death and their associated rituals all occurred largely within the house, shaping a Roman's very existence.[5] If, in modern anthropological terms, the house is understood as an exoskeleton through which the inhabitants encounter society, then this is even more so the case of the Roman *domus*, which was a visual, architectural construct of the *familia*'s identity and proof of participation in Roman society.[6]

When a Roman was born, an altar to Lucina, goddess of childbirth, was set up in the *atrium*, the foremost room of the house, and the threshold of the front door was decorated with flowers to announce the joyous occasion.[7] A passer-by would have no need to see the inhabitants of the house in order to appreciate the occasion; the house itself announced the event. Similarly, a marriage between two young members of the elite was literally a marriage between houses. A procession between the bride's family home and her new, marital house showed the private connection to the public. Again, the threshold advertised the news to the outsider; the bride decorated the door posts of the home with wool before she was carried over the threshold.[8] But perhaps the funeral best demonstrates the interaction of public and private in the domestic rituals of Rome. The deceased was laid out in state in the *atrium*. On the day of the funeral, the funerary procession, including actors wearing the ancestor masks of the family, made its way to the *forum* for the funerary oration before moving out beyond the city boundaries, the *pomerium*, to the tomb. This procession neatly traced the man's life, uniting his home with his public arena, the *forum*, and placing him within the context of his ancestry. The final part of the procession linked his life in Rome to his death without the city walls, the family tomb the equivalent of the *domus* for the deceased branch of the *familia*.[9]

These rituals, which took place within and around the *domus*, demonstrated to the household and the outside world that the family were living according to the traditions of Rome.[10] The performance of domestic rituals are a manifestation of the *familia*'s Roman identity. Their repetition across Rome over generations lent them an air of deliberate timelessness. The apparent constancy of these traditions is crucial in legitimising the present social structure by rooting it in the distant past.[11] Ritualised domestic activities involved the playing out of *mores*, traditional customs and values, bringing such constructs of Roman behaviour to life in order to justify one's identity as Roman.[12]

The decoration of the house in the course of such rituals and even the permanent arrangement of rooms in the houseplan to accommodate the occurrence of these rituals can be seen as a constant confirmation of the householder's Roman identity. Decor is not simply a reflection of personal taste – though Romans were certainly not unaware of perceptions of taste and style and were quick to mock the bad taste of others – it is a way of asserting yourself and your family's right to be a part of Rome.[13] It is not just a question of personal identity but rather one of political and social persona. The men you meet in your *atrium* at the morning *salutatio*, you meet in the *forum* in the course of canvassing for electoral support or making financial arrangements. The modern politician might return home, slip into something more comfortable, and indulge in his own personal tastes and nobody need be any the wiser (as long as the tabloid press does not intrude). However, the ancient magistrate should appear never to discard his *toga*; his house should appear to be open at all times. Vitruvius, the author of a surviving Roman architectural treatise, recommends just this. His plans for the elite *domus* revolve around the need for openness and the public nature of the elite household.[14]

To find the physical incarnation of the words of Vitruvius, studies of the Roman house have traditionally turned to Pompeii and the extensive domestic remains there. This might not be surprising – after all, Pompeii offers the largest body of evidence available to the historian attempting to recover domestic patterns – but it is not without problems. The marriage of Roman text and Campanian visual evidence takes no account of the degrees of separation that come between the two media. Consequently, the domestic architecture of the houses of Campania is still today understood in terms of the Roman, literary evidence. The Pompeian House of Pansa (VI.vi.1) (Figure 1) is used to provide an apparently canonical example of the Roman, Vitruvian plan with its *atrium*, peristyle, and *hortus* opening progressively around a central axis of symmetry.[15] At the same time, the various functions



1. Pompeii, House of Pansa, plan.

of the house known from the texts are given a physical context by simply applying Latin terminologies to each room on the Campanian plan. This provides the viewer with a neatly labelled plan that categorises each area of activity within the house. The *tablinum* is the master's study, the *triclinium* is the dining room, and the many *cubicula* serve as bedrooms.[16]

More recently, increasing attempts have been made to escape this simplistic and inflexible model. New work on the distribution of artefacts around the *domus* have done the most to expose the rooms of the *domus* as multifunctional.[17] The *atrium* in particular was home not only to the *salutatio* but also to the household cult and even storage and production. These results hint at a lack of exclusivity between activity and setting. Whilst the

architecture and decoration of the *atrium* might seem eminently suited to social activities, such as the *salutatio,* it was clearly the backdrop for more lacklustre domestic chores. It must be admitted, then, that the uses of the *atria* demonstrate the versatile nature of both the decoration and the role of the room. Although the grand appearance of the *atrium* might evoke its public role, that was not its only function.

This is not art as representation but art as impression, bolstering the patron family's desire to participate in Romanised public life and to impress their fitness to do so on those who visited them. The view shows an impression of *Romanitas* and not the reality of Pompeian daily life. The architecture has become indicative of the literary debate of what it is to be Roman. The house is a cultural symbol of *Romanitas*, a visual sign that, through the apparent embodiment of Roman culture in its art and architecture (made explicit through the practice of Roman ritual in the domestic sphere), would immediately spark recognition in the Roman viewer.[18] The house gives the impression that this Pompeian is a true Roman.

To our modern logic, this impression is surely contradictory. The Pompeian cannot be a Roman, and any impression given by art and architecture to that effect is easily refuted in reality. However, the Roman did not live in such a simple world of clear-cut definitions. The ancient world was a world where boundaries of centre and periphery, mortal and divine, real and mythical, even public and private were continually blurred. This was a world where Italians, as enfranchised citizens after the Social War, could become bona fide Romans. It was also a world where emperors became divine after death and where the entrance to the underworld had a precise geographical location near Cumae.[19] Town bled into country through the *suburbia*, and personal, bodily functions and care such as defecating and bathing were communal activities.[20]

The text of Vitruvius is an attempt to define boundaries – to brand houses as Roman and public when in fact these are not clear-cut distinctions. The text tries to overlook these difficulties, to impose individual, defined categories on what are actually ever-shifting sliding points along a scale. In other words, the text seeks to cover contradictions of existence that, in reality, cannot be resolved. The house can never be termed either precisely public or private, except in the artificial construction of literature. This rhetorical construction of the world is not confined to discussions of Roman houses; in fact, it applies to all discourse on what it is to be Roman. Such a discourse involves being seen to justify one's place within the complex, rhetorically constructed diversities between centre and periphery, town and country, public and private, and so on.[21]

Like the Vitruvian text, Pompeian houses themselves appear to set up clear distinctions between public and private space, which, in reality, simply cannot be disentangled. Like the text, the art and architecture attempt to build an impression of life within the house. This possibility has been largely overlooked in discussions of the Roman house. Indeed, in one of the most recent publications concerning domestic space, Laurence worries about the necessity to distinguish between "lived space" as it is found in the archaeological record and "perceived space," which survives in the textual descriptions.[22] The literature, he notes, tends to represent domestic situations in the terms of "the ideology of what it is to be Roman." Of course, we would retort that art and architecture do likewise. Although he does suggest that the spatial form of the Roman house is structured to construct and reinforce a dominant ideology, he does not apply his model to a discussion of the role of art and architecture within it.

The investigation of the houses of the empire, then, is an investigation also into the art of impression, the ability of art to produce an impression or fantasy at variance with, or beyond the possibility of, reality. As such, it deliberately flouts the ancient and modern conceptions of ancient art as a medium in pursuit of representation and naturalism. Instead it discusses the freedom of art to invent a reality for those for whom it was commissioned, to help them assume an identity and to create fantasies of status in order that they might participate successfully in the Roman world.

The investigation into impression has a further implication. The houses of Pompeii are not an imperial blueprint. Most of them were originally the homes of a local, Samnite elite. They can be used only to demonstrate one community's attempt at being Roman. However, the *domus* has never been studied as an imperial phenomenon. Although several works have reviewed the range of domestic architectural types found across the empire, no attempt has been made to discuss the function and nature of the house using empire-wide examples in the same way as the *villa* has been studied.[23] The most interpretative recent works of the function of the house have chosen very localised areas to mark their point. Of these, Thébert's work on the houses of North Africa has done the most to understand the Roman house in terms of an imperial rather than Italian phenomenon.[24] Most others, including Wallace-Hadrill's influential work on the social function of the *domus*, have stuck to Pompeii as their location.[25]

To some extent, the lack of a cohesive empire-wide survey of urban housing has been enforced by the varied nature of the evidence and traditional scholarly responses to it: the *domus* of Rome is known mostly to us through literary sources, the richly painted remains of Pompeii have been

the preserve of art historians, whilst the ruins of the provinces have fallen to the archaeologists. In trying to combine these areas in one study, it is also necessary to struggle with all these disciplines. The result is that each section of this book must adopt a different approach to deal most effectively with the available material. Throughout, every effort has been made to synthesise the material and to apply a consistently interdisciplinary approach to the evidence but the reader should be aware that, at times, certain disciplines will loom larger than others.

To investigate the art of impression in the domestic context of the Roman empire, this book will begin with a consideration of the literary conception of the role of the house in promoting a *familia*'s *Romanitas* in Rome. It will demonstrate how these conceptions were tested to their limits by the palaces of Rome's first *familia*, the imperial household. Second, these findings will be related to the archaeological evidence of Campania, and a close examination of how individual identity is constructed within the decorational programmes of the house itself. The third part is concerned with building a picture of how the houses of the provinces created impressions in their domestic art and architecture to ensure the local elite's participation in empire. Only by setting local evidence for Roman housing into the wider imperial context of Rome and her provinces is it possible to appreciate the dynamics of Romanisation. In doing so, we can see how elites all over the empire must assume their position within the Roman, rhetorically constructed poles between centre and periphery, town and country in order either to aspire to or rebel against the cultural expectations of *Romanitas*. By viewing all these examples together, it is possible to begin to appreciate the complexities of building a Roman identity and the power of the art of impression to overcome them. The temporal scope of this study will, therefore, primarily be the first century B.C. and the first two centuries A.D. At this time, the expanding empire was forcing redefinitions of what it was to be Roman in the face of the inclusion of more and more alien territories, races, and cults within the Roman world. During the second century, this process of Romanisation reached its apex when Hadrian ended the tradition of imperial expansion and offered a new definition of empire, which culminated in Caracalla's extension of the citizenship in 212, endowing everyone with an official, Roman identity. The final chapter, however, takes us to the end of Antiquity as it was experienced in Ephesus to ascertain the long-term developments of imperial, domestic space.

The wide range of this book means that much remains unaccomplished. Geographically, an investigation into the houses of the provinces has had to be selective. Whilst having noted the numerous rhetorical contradictions of

Romanitas, many of those have had to be passed over in favour of the main theme of centre and periphery. The relationship between town and country, in domestic terms between *domus* and *villa*, has received less attention than the complexities that even cursory attention demonstrated the topic might have deserved. It must be stressed that this book is specifically concerned with urban housing. Although the text acknowledges the role of the *villa* throughout, it follows Roman rhetoric in treating the country house as secondary to the *domus*. Literature was insistent on differentiating the *domus* as seat of a family's *Romanitas* from the *villa*, haven for un-Roman behaviour and deviance.[26] Most importantly, this book remains above all the preserve of the elite. More work must be done to consider the worth of the art of impression to those lower down the social scale whose artistic efforts are often dismissed as merely imitative of their superiors.[27] However, I hope that these omissions are not indicative of the paucity of the scope of this book but of the breadth of its conception and intention. The aim of this book is twofold: first, to assess the role of domestic art and architecture in building an impression of those who lived within the house and, second, to examine how these houses and the identities that they projected reflect the process of acculturation across the Roman empire. By looking beyond Rome both geographically and chronologically, we will be able to appreciate how the dynamics between Rome and her provinces were altered as the inhabitants of the empire set to work building an identity for themselves.