

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ROMAN ARCHITECTURE

Overview While drawing its models from the best of Greek architecture, Roman architecture, as it was distributed throughout the Empire, took the direction of the massive and forceful. and incorporated itself in public event or memorial. This is the trademark of the major structures of Roman civilization, from the second century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. This large scale structural power, of course, is not the whole story of the Roman architectural achievement. We are also familiar, for instance, with the Roman genius for city planning, facilities for water and sanitation delivery, for excellence in road construction, for hypocausts to heat houses in the chilly autumn, and public latrines to relieve bladders in the center of the city. All these civic architectural achievements are complemented by--on an elite domestic level--the Roman skill at what we would call interior decoration, and splendid examples of which we gaze among the ruins of Pompei and Herculaneum. interior domestic design. Above all, as we survey these many and various achievements of the Roman constructional mind, we remind ourselves of the astonishing advances in material and construction culture, on which the Romans relied for their achievements in architecture.

Grandeur and materials It was the Emperor Augustus who claimed, at the end of his regime, that he had found Rome brick and left it marble. Be the details as they may, the point holds that the masters of the Roman city and Empire invariably wished to pride themselves on their achievements at beautifying their capital city. The details of how they did it are of course what matters. The keyword is cement, at the creation of which Roman engineers and architects became proficient in the later Republic. On the strong foundation of cement, which provided an escape from the antique round of bricks and stone, Roman engineers made themselves masters of such powerful architectural devices as the dome, the arch, the aqueduct, the sewage pipe system, the palisaded or colonnaded Town Hall, Imperial Palace, or Military Headquarters.

The master achievements To recall the range and ambition of Roman master construction, we need only think of the Coliseum, the vast *fora* which replicated in every major city of the Empire, such protective walls as Hadrian's in Northern England, the extensive system of truly functional roads, the two story arched aqueducts transporting water supplies into major cities, the extensive and substantial sewer systems built under major cities, the memorial arches and vertical columns memorializing the power deeds of Emperors, the giant villas which dotted the city of Rome: so many landmarks in the establishing of a potent material Roman footprint wherever the culture moved. That footprint is strong, visible, and public—in the sense of *there to be seen, used, and handled in public*. If for clarity we need any contrast, from other cultures, we might think of the most massive structures of mediaeval Europe (Gothic Cathedrals), Imperial China (multi-story pagodas), or India (private palaces, temple complexes) to recall how *inward looking* the major structures of many cultures remain. Roman architecture is rarely inward. *I am here, exactly what I am*, declares Roman architecture. The vigor with which this statement emerges fits somehow with the power of an achievement for which concrete is the drive.

Roads and Transportation Separate mention seems relevant, for the road transportation system which the Romans constructed from Hadrian's Wall in the north of England to the borders of the Hindu Kush mountains in India. The durability of this network bewilders the tourist today, who follows a roughish but quite drivable road north to the Scottish border, where Hadrian's Wall crosses his path. The engineer of today, studying the structural pattern of this Roman Road to the extreme north of Empire, wonders at the fine fit of the stone flooring, the careful grading of the margins, and the planned in vistas of sea and mountains.

The Roman House. The Roman house (*domus*)—and here we speak of the world of the middle class, not at all of the elite with their sumptuous villas or the urban (or rural) poor who had either makeshift or

tiny crowded houses—enjoyed the advantages of the Mediterranean climate. The typical single family house was made of cement or stone, and laid out as a rectangle with a peristyle of columns running around the outside of it. The central room (*atrium*) was a rectangle in the midst of which spread a small pool, the *impluvium*, and immediately above which the roof was open. The presence of air and light was treasured, and formed the setting of family life. Around the margins of the *atrium* were the *cubicula*, the sleeping rooms (or sitting rooms or rooms for doing business.) At the back of the *atrium*, leading out into the peristyle, was the *tablinum*, or office of the man of the family; the place where business was transacted and accounts kept. If the family was solidly middle class there would be extensive gardens behind the house, further highlighting the flow of the house into and through nature.

The rooms of the house. The women's and children's rooms were kept strictly private, except to well known invitees or relatives, but the *atrium*, and indeed the entrance way to the 'typical' house, was easy of access. Front doors were regularly left open, certainly during the day, for there was normally a lot of going and coming from outside into the interior of the house, where the master (the *paterfamilias*) was accustomed to doing business. (The business in question was normally of a patron-client nature, the visitor entering the house to propose or discuss ongoing business plans, or to make introductions, rather as politics is carried on in an African culture.) Nor was the house itself typically segregated from the goings and comings of the community in which it was set. We mentioned the open front door. On all sides of the house, in the streets surrounding it, were shops, carts, wagons, produce vendors, hustlers, people on their way to or from their own houses. In other words the 'typical' Roman house was in some ways far more open to the public than are houses in our (American, European) environments.

Pompeii and Herculaneum. By a disastrous accident of fate, we know a lot about a certain group of houses, which were smothered in ash and pumice by a devastating volcanic eruption from Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. (The result of that smothering was this: for fifteen hundred years, while they were still undiscovered, the people and house objects of many sites in both Pompeii and Herculaneum were preserved in exactly the same stance, position, activity as they had been when the eruption occurred.) From the preserved rubble of some of those houses we have been able to see, and judiciously reconstruct, the wall decorations with which these (upper middle, at least) citizens surrounded themselves. We have of course also been able to assess the durability of the houses themselves, which survived sufficiently intact, to bring us the story of the life that went on in them.

Readings

Boethius, Axel, *Etruscan and Early Roman Architecture*, New Haven, 1994.

Hopkins, John North, *The Genesis of Roman Art*, New Haven, 2016.

Discussion questions

How does the well to do Roman private house fit its environment? What kinds of architectural skill are displayed in this adjustment of living situation to environment?

What would you consider the major contributions of Greek to Roman architecture? In what ways did the Romans advance beyond the Greeks?

What was the secret of the Romans, that they mastered the art of cement construction for massive works of architecture? Did the Greeks have some notion of the use of cement?