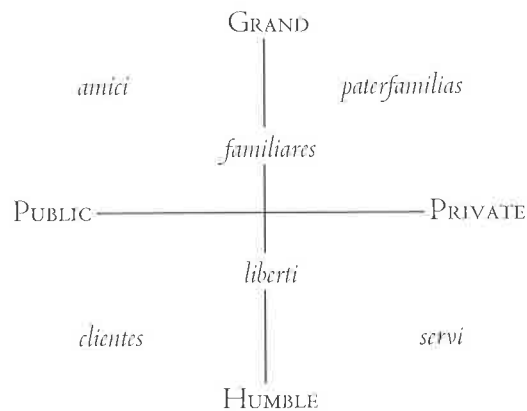




THE ARTICULATION OF THE HOUSE

ONCE WE LEARN to read the social coding of architectural form and decoration, we should be able to come closer to understanding how the social space of the Roman house was articulated. What is at issue here is not so much identification of the physical function of an area (for eating, sleeping, cooking, washing, defecating, etc.), on which traditional room-labeling procedures focus. Rather we need to see how form and decoration guide the social flow of activity round the house, raising or dropping social barriers in the way of the actors concerned.

Three main groups made use of a Roman house: the owner's family, servants, and friends. The two axes of differentiation proposed earlier, of public/private and grand/humble, serve to distinguish these categories. The public/private axis distinguishes between the outsiders and the insiders; both slaves and family are insiders, though in social rank (grand/humble) they differ greatly. Friends are outsiders, if to varying degrees (a Roman called his closest friends his *familiares*), while their variation in social rank is reflected in the linguistic distinction of *amici* and *clientes*. Architecture and decoration served to channel the flow of these categories around the house, simultaneously distinguishing outsiders from intimates and grand from humble. The richer, more powerful, and more ambitious for social recognition the owner, the wider the social range of those



he would need to distinguish, having simultaneously more grand friends and humble slaves than would a mid-range houseowner.

One dominant imperative in a slave-owning society was to contrast adequately the servile and seignorial areas of the house.¹ It should be borne in mind that this is not simply a distinction of areas in which slaves were absent or present. Slaves were omnipresent in the rich household: *cubicularii*, *pedisequi*, and *ancillae* in the master's and mistress's bedroom—and presumably on call day and night, sleeping on mattresses at the bedroom door or in an antechamber; servers, cooks, tasters, carvers, and entertainers in the dining room; nurses, *paedagogi*, tutors, even grammarians and philosophers, round the children; and secretaries, clerks, and *dispensatores* round the master at work. Slaves indeed were as important as architecture in ensuring the proper social flow around the house, presenting living barriers to access to the master, from the *ostiarius* at the door to the *cubicularii* and *nomenclatores* (name callers) guarding the more intimate areas (Trimalchio's visitors were brought up short in their attempt to enter the triclinium by a slave's reproof).² The servile areas were those of exclusively menial or low-status activity—cooking, washing, working, and the private living and sleeping quarters of the slaves. But even among slaves there were sharply felt social hierarchies, chains of command from the *praepositus* (head of section) down to the *vicarius* (substitute), from the head cook (whose skills commanded inflated prices) down to his servers and oven-stokers, and there were positions of influence and power like that of the *dispensator* who controlled access to funds or the *cellarius* who controlled access to food supplies. As Ulpian comments, "It makes a great difference what sort of a slave he is, reliable, an *ordinarius* or *dispensator* or a common one or an oddjobber or any old one."³ And even this "great difference" we find expressed in decoration, though whether financed out of the master's pocket or the slave's own *peculium* we cannot tell.

It is only in the richest houses that the slave/master distinction could and needed to be fully expressed. An important architectural feature of the houses is the way in which service areas are marginalized, thrust out to the edge of the imposing and often studiedly symmetrical master's quarters. The Casa del Menandro at Pompeii (Figs. 3.1–2) so successfully marginalizes its extensive servile areas that they are only accessible down long narrow corridors. The Casa dei Vettii (Figs. 3.3–4), of a comparable degree of opulence, similarly succeeds in separating the service area, though it is directly accessible from the atrium. Here a secondary courtyard, dominated by a painting of the lares (hearth spirits), leads to the kitchen and a series of dark, ill-decorated bedrooms and storerooms. However, it is in cases where the architecture does not or cannot fully succeed in marginalizing service areas that the role of decoration becomes especially important. A striking recent example is the villa at Torre Annunziata ("Oplontis"), where the extensive service quarters lie at the center of the excavated half of the villa. What patently sets them apart is their decoration, with crude diagonal black and white stripes (Figs. 3.5–6), in a style which elsewhere too is regularly associated with low-status areas such as corridors and lavatories.⁴ A more subtle example of differentials in a relatively modest house is offered by the Casa degli Amanti at Pompeii (Figs. 3.7–8). Here the kitchen, lavatory, and

diffs. in
slave
status

Figure 3.1 Plan, Casa del Menandro, Pompeii. A highly organized sightline runs from the entrance through tablinum and peristyle to the center of a symmetrical system of exedrae. A secondary sightline runs from the largest reception room through the fountain basin, placed off-center in the peristyle. Service areas (shaded) are only accessible down long corridors.

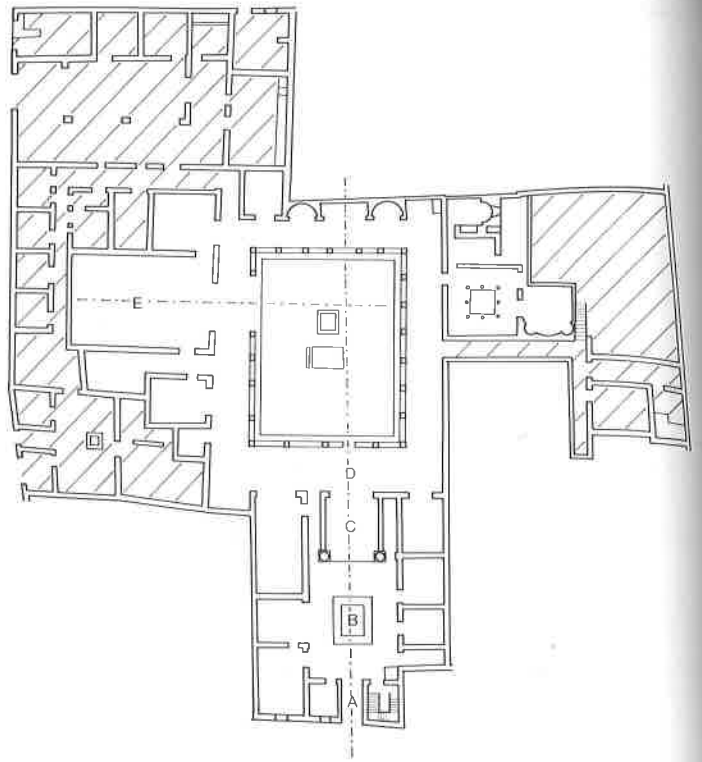


Figure 3.2 Casa del Menandro, Pompeii, corridor to service quarters. This is only reached via a dogleg in the far corner of the peristyle (see Fig. 3.1); the narrowness of the corridor further signals that this is not a reception area.

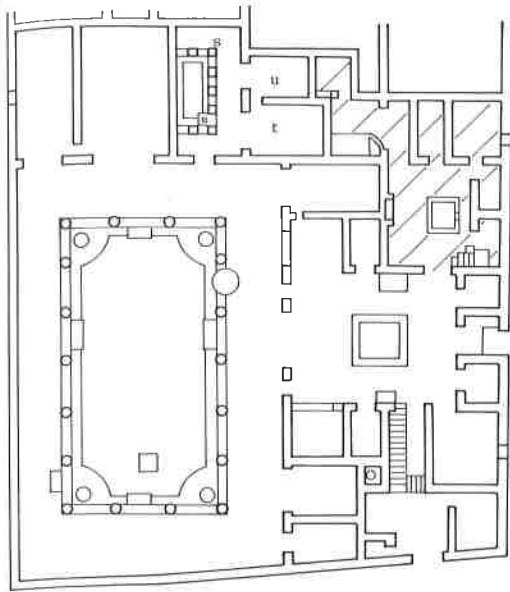


Figure 3.3 Plan, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii. The service area (shaded) has its own atrium. Note also the separate suite s/t/u (see Fig. 3.25).



Figure 3.4 Casa dei Vettii, service court. A lararium to the left overlooks the impluvium. In the corner a door leads to the kitchen. The only decoration in this area of the (otherwise lavishly decorated) house is the pornographic decoration in the cubiculum beyond the kitchen.

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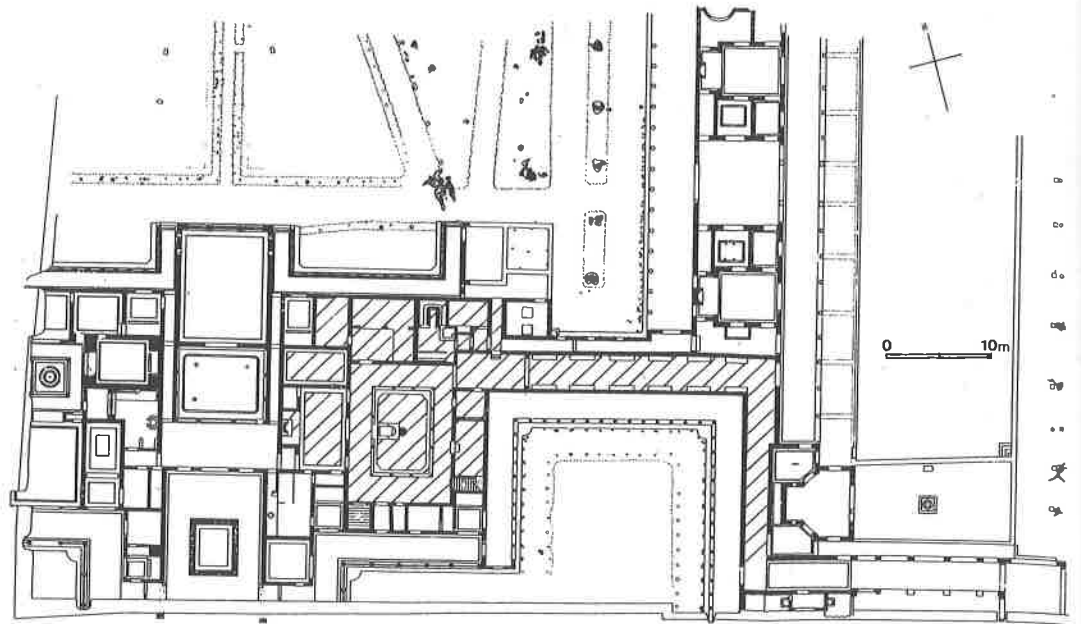


Figure 3.5 Plan, Oplontis villa (after Jashemski). The shaded area is presumably a service area, though it also seems to be used by visitors to the palaestra and swimming pool.



Figure 3.6 Oplontis villa, service-area peristyle. The crude zebra stripes extend through most of the shaded area on the plan and form a harsh contrast with the rich decoration elsewhere.

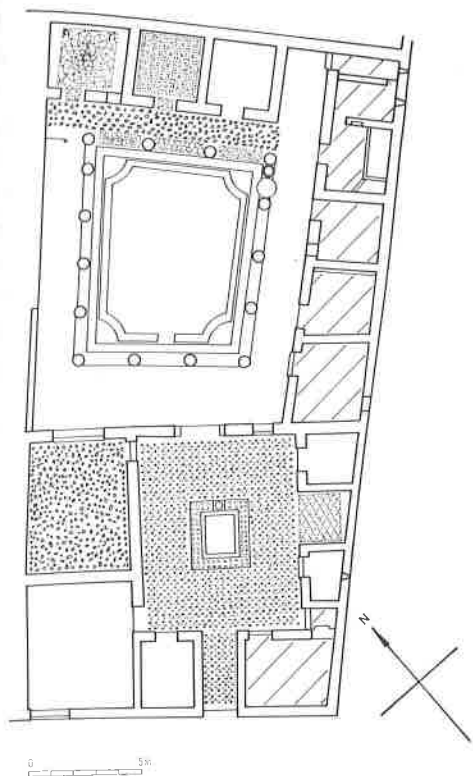


Figure 3.7 Plan, Casa degli Amanti, Pompeii (after Elia). Service areas (shaded) are to the right of the entrance, and the right-hand (north-facing) wing of the peristyle. Note that floor patterns mark the more elegant reception areas.



Figure 3.8 Casa degli Amanti, Pompeii, south wing of peristyle, viewed toward atrium, with service rooms to left. In the foreground is the well, close to the kitchen door.

associated service rooms occupy the south wing of the peristyle, the other wings of which contain the most prestigious rooms of the house. The decoration of the peristyle carefully differentiates the grand areas to the left as one enters, with their attractive white-ground paneling and duck motifs, from the crudely painted service wing to the right. The same contrast was, apparently, repeated on the upper floor.⁵

The aim of such marginalization, architectural and decorative, was to render the low-status areas "invisible" to the visitor. We may compare Pliny's descriptions of his own villas in which his minute account of "every corner" passes wholly over the service areas, except to remark the general position of rooms for slaves and freedmen in the Laurentine villa, and to comment (interestingly) that some of them were decent enough for putting up visitors.⁶ This invisibility is also apparent in the modern publications, which rarely give more than passing notice to these relatively drab areas.

The contrast between the highly visible and the invisible areas is easy enough to read in the smarter houses. What is more elusive is the articulation of servile and free in more modest houses, where slaves might, for instance, be tucked away in now invisible upper stories. Nor is it easy in such houses to distinguish modestly but neatly decorated rooms which might equally (as Pliny envisages) be used for senior and trusted slaves and freedmen or for visitors. There is still much to be learned on this front.⁷

The Roman concern to differentiate slave and free is closely linked to the desire to articulate the house suitably for visitors. Here what is to a modern observer most striking about the richer houses is the low priority given to privacy. It is a misreading of Vitruvius if we take him to mean that there was a division between public rooms for the entertainment of visitors and private rooms for the family. This is to transport to antiquity the values of contemporary society, with its heavy emphasis on the privacy of the family unit. Vitruvius's contrast is not between public and private in our terms but between degrees of access to outsiders. Considering that the bedroom of the paterfamilias was a place for the reception of friends and the conducting of business, and remembering too the constant circulation of slaves, it must have been astonishingly difficult for an upper-class Roman to achieve real privacy. Nor did they apparently want to achieve privacy in several areas that we regard as intensely private, such as bathing and defecation, both regularly performed in public and communal establishments.⁸ Indeed, the incompatibility of public life with privacy is something on which the Romans themselves commented. Augustus, we are told, when he wanted to conduct intimate business left his own house for that of a freedman, or for a refuge he called his "Syracuse." The archaeological evidence can and should be read in the light of such comments.⁹

One vivid sign of this lack of privacy is the visual transparency of the Roman house. The visitor standing in the fauces of the standard Vesuvian house is immediately presented with a vista that leads through the heart of the residence.¹⁰ The emphatic importance of this vista is revealed by its elaborate symmetrical framing, by means of doorways and columns round the sides, and focal objects along the central axis—the impluvium basin, a marble table, and a statue or shrine at the end (Fig. 3.9). That this vista may not be geometrically symmetrical but only optically symmetrical—that is, symmetrical from the viewpoint of the observer in a given position—shows that the symmetry is not merely



Figure 3.9 Casa del Menandro, Pompeii, view of atrium toward fauces.

an architect's convenience but something designed to make an impression on the visitor.¹¹ This vista normally passes directly through the central point of the tablinum, and given its function as a morning reception area, one must visually reconstruct the owner sitting at the focus of the vista (or for that matter his wife, who "goes about in the middle of the house").¹² But the vista does not terminate with the tablinum: it passes through it, into the garden world of the peristyle or into an imaginary, painted garden,¹³ and even past that to the mountain peaks of the real natural world (Fig. 3.10).¹⁴ Beyond the visible owner lies (apparently) not the enclosed world of private space, nor indeed his neighbors crowding round, but the countryside and nature, even if suitably tamed. Comparison with Greek houses confirms the peculiarity of this phenomenon. There is no attempt at symmetrical framing of the vista from the entrance, whether in the fourth-century houses of Olynthos (Fig. 1.1), or in the grand peristyle houses and palaces of Hellenistic Pergamum (Fig. 3.11). The standard position for the andron, though close to the front door (and thus excluding the visiting male from the intimate and female-inhabited interior), is never opposite the entrance but rather to one side. Only in late Hellenistic Delos can anything similar be detected, when the andron is placed on the entrance axis and so on display to the world, and here we may infer Italian influence (Fig. 3.12).¹⁵ The Greek house is concerned with creating a world of privacy, of excluding the inquisitive passerby; the Roman house invites him in and puts its occupants on conspicuous show.

Vitruvius's contrast is not between space for visitors and space for family but between space for uninvited and for invited visitors. Much closer in our terms is the contrast



Figure 3.10 Casa del Menandro, Pompeii,
view from atrium toward peristyle.

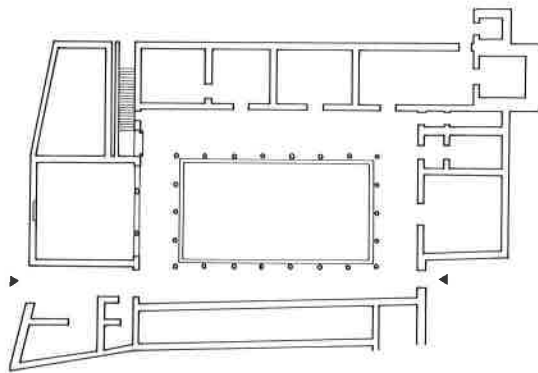


Figure 3.11 Plan, palace of Attalus, Pergamum.
Although there is an axis across the peristyle,
it is interrupted rather than framed by the
positioning of the columns. Neither entrance
leads to a significant vista.

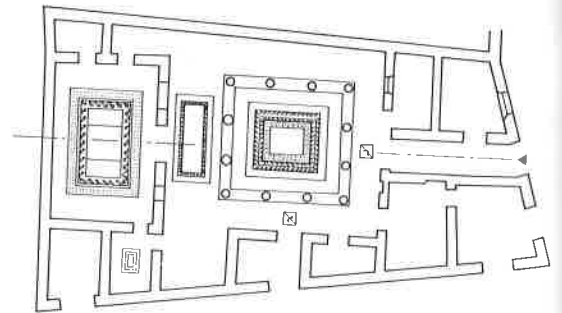


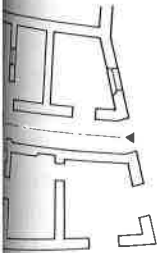
Figure 3.12 Plan, maison du Trident, Delos.
Note the strong axial view from the main entrance,
underlined by the positioning of mosaics.

between work and leisure. The Romans, as we have seen, lacked our distinctions of place of work (office, factory, etc.) from place of leisure (home). Business was regularly conducted at home, whether by an emperor receiving the reports of his secretaries and procurators, by a republican noble giving his legal advice, or by a merchant, craftsman, or shopkeeper operating from the *officina* (workshop) or *taberna* (shop) that were part of his house. To judge by the reports of daily routine, particularly those given by the younger Pliny, the *negotium/otium* (work/leisure) distinction of activity within the house corresponds broadly to a distinction of time, between morning and afternoon.¹⁶

The differentiation extends to space, and one can broadly distinguish the areas of public activity or business, which cluster round the main entrance—the atrium and tablinum and perhaps the cubicula and smaller rooms opening on the atrium—from the areas of private entertainment, which can only be reached by passing through further barriers—corridors and slaves posted at thresholds—and characteristically cluster round the peristyle. Of course one may find the best triclinium opening directly on the atrium, but where this does occur it suggests an inability to differentiate.¹⁷ Thus the standard atrium-peristyle matrix of the Pompeian house, which is normally accounted for in terms of historical background (in the addition of the Hellenistic peristyle to the Italic atrium) has a structural significance in differentiating the accessible public areas of *negotium* from the less accessible private areas of hospitality.¹⁸ Even in houses that lack a true peristyle (the majority) it is extremely common to find a secondary area differentiated from the front-door area and illuminated by an independent light-well (Fig. 3.13), and the frequency of this division points to the importance of the underlying social pattern.¹⁹

Decoration also helps to underline this differentiation. The decoration of atria is too varied to allow any useful generalizations (there is no single atrium style), but what is here relevant is the way in which contrasts are set up between the atrium and its associated areas and the peristyle (or peristyle substitute) and its surrounds.

An excellent and now readily accessible example in a house of relatively modest pretensions is offered by the Casa del Principe di Napoli at Pompeii (Figs. 3.14–17, Pl. 5).²⁰ In plan, the house falls neatly into two halves: rooms opening onto the atrium and rooms opening onto the porticoed garden. The decoration, which is all of a single phase, helps to set up a clear hierarchy. The appearance of the atrium is austere; the dominant impression—of the red bands that divide the white plaster into rectangles—is reminiscent of the masonry blocks of the first style, though below there are red panels with bird motifs. The atrium falls into two parts: the gloomy area to the right on entry, with no light source other than the impluvium, is where the service quarters are successfully marginalized: a porter's room (a) to the right of the entrance, without decoration, controlling stairs up to slaves' rooms above (Fig. 3.15), and opposite, the undecorated kitchen/lavatory (g) with a dark unplastered room beyond it (h) suitable for storage and perhaps slaves' eating space. The left-hand side of the atrium draws additional light from windows to the garden and is instantly more attractive (Fig. 3.16). Decoration supports this impression: the well-lit room corresponding broadly in position (and presumably function) to the traditional tablinum (e) is distinguished by elegant but simple



ident, Delos.
the main entrance,
of mosaics.

slave

master
room



Figure 3.13 Casa del Mobilio Carbonizzato, Herculaneum. The axial view from the fauces, framed by the openings of the tablinum, is focused on the shrine on the end wall of the garden. The garden has no colonnade, but achieves a comparable effect to a peristyle.

Figure 3.14 Plan, Casa del Principe di Napoli, Pompeii (after Strocka). Service areas, to the right of the door, are shaded. Stairs up are located in the cella ostiaria (a) and kitchen (g). External stairs (p) lead to a separate apartment above. The main reception room (k), with its associated exedra (m), overlooks the garden (n), as does the tablinum (e) and the cubiculum at (f).

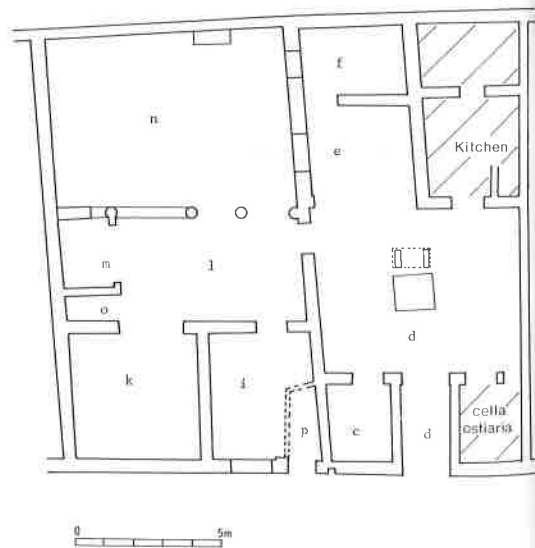


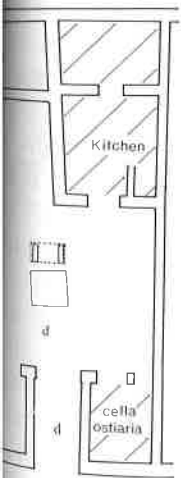


Figure 3.15 Casa del Principe di Napoli, Pompeii, view of atrium from tablinum toward entrance. In the far corner is a cella (a), with stairs to upper rooms.



Figure 3.16 Casa del Principe di Napoli, Pompeii, view of atrium from entrance. To the right is the kitchen, to the left the peristyle.

...nizzato,
...the fauces, framed
...focused on the
...The garden has
...able effect



light

dark



Figure 3.17 Casa del Principe di Napoli, Pompeii, portico. Small still-life panels are the focus of the decoration. The large entrance to the right is to room (i).

architectural articulation and simple still-life panels; beyond it a bedroom (f), also lit from the garden, has similar decoration. These two linked rooms, together with the atrium, might reasonably be assigned the function of “business” reception area.

The garden area establishes a clear contrast: an elegant portico leads (past a white-plastered room [i] of utilitarian function, Fig. 3.17) to the lavishly decorated triclinium (k) (i.e., major entertainment room) with its linked exedra or cubiculum (m) (i.e., private entertainment room), both distinguished by the rich fantasy architectural framework of the fourth style, with ambitious mythological paintings in the larger room, and figures of deities in the smaller (Pl. 5). Decoration and architecture cooperate to enhance the impression of luxury and privilege in the area most secluded from the front door and its general public traffic and the slaves’ quarters. Private bedrooms for the family have been posited above the tablinum and kitchen,²¹ but it is not clear that it is necessary or appropriate to imagine anyone other than children or slaves ascending the narrow wooden staircase that rises within the kitchen. The bedroom off the tablinum is surely the correct location for the private as well as the business life of the master.²²

This house is valuable evidence because its decoration is all of a single style and period, and the contrasts set up by it must be assumed to be deliberate. Yet more often than not the decoration of surviving Roman houses is a hotchpotch of different styles and periods. It is easy to fall into the trap of supposing that we are looking at a house not of one moment (24 August A.D. 79) but of many successive moments, or of imagining all contrasts as accidental, due to chance redecoration. But for the living inhabitants of a house, the juxtaposition of old and new itself must have generated contrasts; and there are

several cases in which we can see that the old was quite deliberately retained alongside the new.²³

The Casa di Sallustio illustrates well how the retention of the old could create new effects. The first-style marble-incrustation decoration of its magnificent and spacious atrium area was carefully preserved over perhaps as long as two centuries, while alongside it the peristyle was richly and charmingly decorated in the "modern" taste of the early imperial period.²⁴ Why should we not accept that such contrasts could be both desired and effective? This is not to say that the contrasts always follow the same pattern; it is certainly possible to point to examples of houses where rich decoration concentrates on the atrium area, while areas beyond were left in a state of neglect.²⁵ But in all cases we ought to ask what the effects of such contrasts were, and how they related to the social life of the household.

The atrium-peristyle matrix was a heritage of the late Republic that left its characteristic stamp on the Vesuvian houses of A.D. 79. Yet there are slight but distinct signs of a shift in emphasis developing, which tends to a new pattern in the houses of the second century and is later exemplified at Ostia (e.g., the Casa della Fortuna Annonaria) and in the provinces. In the new pattern, the duality of atrium-peristyle is abandoned and is replaced by a single, columned court around which all reception rooms are grouped.²⁶ It is natural to ask whether this represents a new social pattern and abandonment of the contrast between public and private areas. Since the traditional atrium-alae-tablinum pattern in some sense embodies the patronus-cliens relationship of the republican nobility, it might be tempting to see in the shift of emphasis from the atrium the abandonment of patronage and the withdrawal of the rich from public life.

This interpretation is not supported by our other evidence. The literary sources give no comfort to the idea of the abandonment of patronage under the early Empire; on the contrary, this is the period when patronal rituals are most abundantly attested.²⁷ And what archaeological evidence shows is not a retreat from public life but a continued penetration of public life into the house. In the republican house, the most important and striking vista, as we have seen, was that from the front door to the tablinum, and beyond it to the garden. From the start of the Empire there are signs that this image of self-presentation to the world outside lost in significance.²⁸ New vistas, within the peristyle, became more striking; the atrium vista dwindled in importance. So in the Casa dei Vettii (Fig. 3.3), the vista from the front door leads directly through to the peristyle; there is no tablinum in which the master can be found. More instructive is the Casa dei Cervi at Herculaneum (Fig. 3.18). Here, in contrast to the neighboring Casa dell'Atrio a mosaico, where the front door vista leads to the basilica-like structure discussed above, the atrium is dingy and unimposing. It has no axial center, only a glimpse through a door into a magnificent suite beyond. The whole visual drama of this house lies in the opposite axis that runs from the central black room with its fastigium through the peristyle to the sea view beyond, set in an architectural frame (Pl. 1). It is on this axis that the master of the house would present himself to the public.

What, then, we appear to be witnessing is the development of magnificent "audience rooms" that supplant the tablinum and focus on the peristyle rather than the atrium,

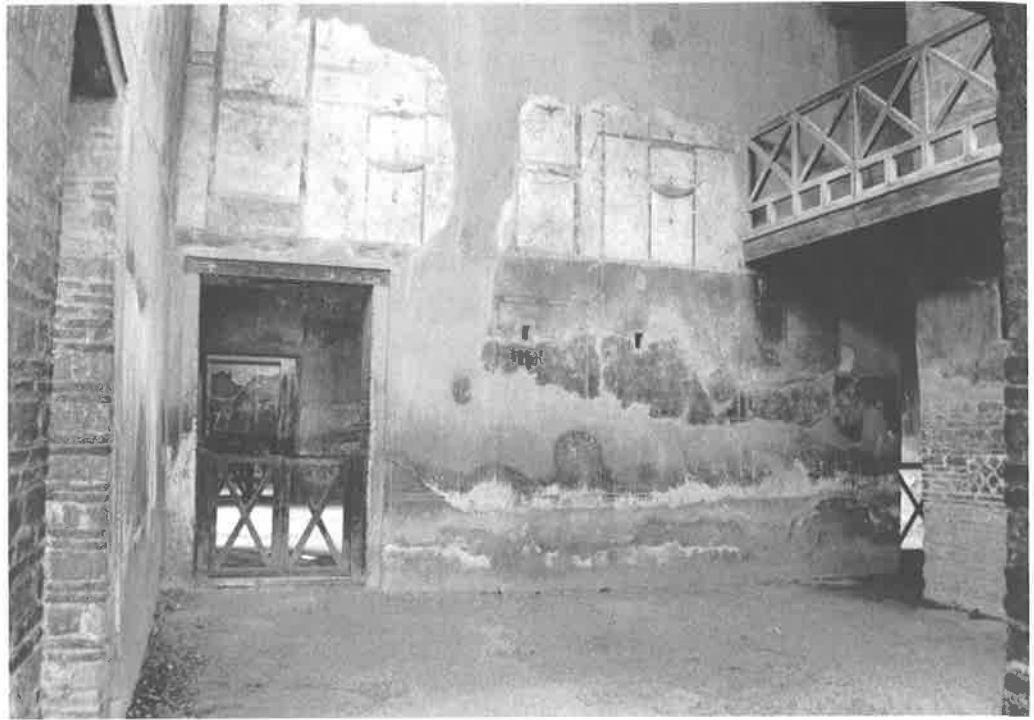


Figure 3.18 Casa dei Cervi, Herculaneum. The view from the entrance through the atrium passes along a suite of rooms (see Fig. 2.3).

allowing for the eventual abandonment of the atrium as an architectural feature. This is not a “bourgeois” pattern moving up from below; Domitian’s new Palatine building equally abandons the atrium. As did the shift in decorative styles brought in by the Empire, this trend surely represents a shift away from the patterns of self-presentation that typify the Republic—but rather than a stepping away from public life, it suggests an attempt to impose greater control on the exposure of the master to the public. The luxurious “private” life of the rich and powerful of the imperial period is precisely their public facade, and access to it is a privilege carefully guarded.²⁹

By the imperial period, a house which offered richly decorated reception in only the atrium area was presumably operating under restraints of space and resources. One of the most striking features of the richer surviving houses of A.D. 79 is the sheer proliferation of space for entertainment. Trimalchio’s boast of four *cenationes* (*Sat.* 77) is by no means immodest to judge from the Campanian remains. The Vitruvian prescription of four seasonally oriented dining rooms is not an adequate clue to this proliferation; for though some degree of contrast in orientation is apparent and an approximate summer/winter rhythm can be detected, houses like the Villa dei Misteri (Fig. 3.19) or that at Settefinestre (Fig. 3.20), where disposition allowed orientation in four different directions, do not in fact exploit this possibility. Nor is it easy to explain multiplicity in terms of variation of

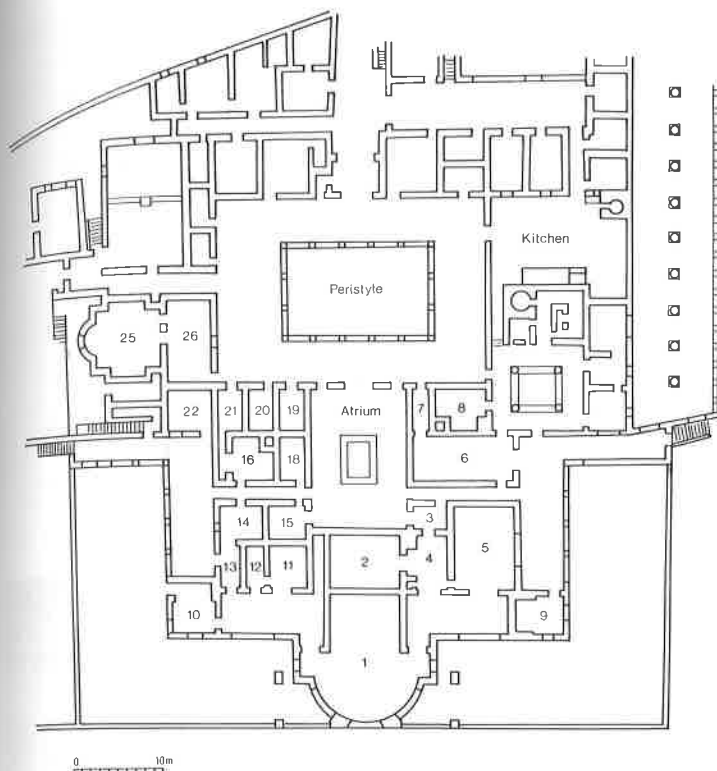


Figure 3.19 Plan, villa dei Misteri, Pompeii. Note double-alcove cubacula at 4, 8, and 16, and cubiculum/triclinium suites at 4/5, 8/6, and 11/12-14 (originally a single room).

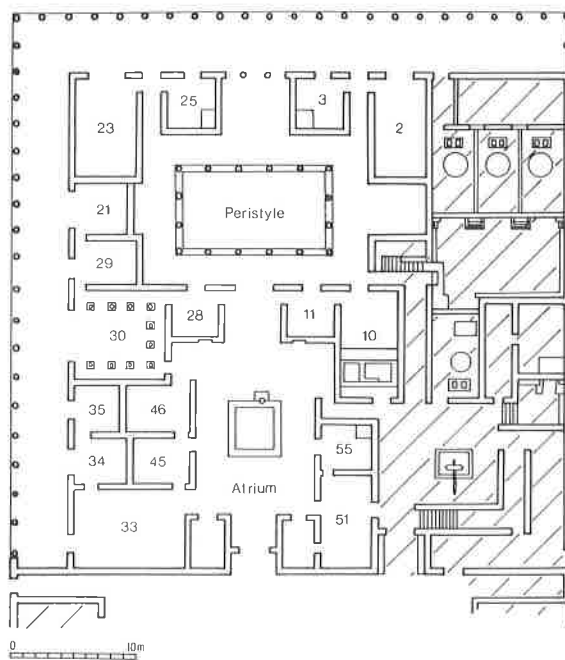


Figure 3.20 Plan, villa of Settefinestre, corpo padronale (after Carandini). Note double-alcove bedrooms at 3, 25, and 55; connected suites at 2/3, 23/25, 10/11, 51/55, 33/34/35/45/46; and the key suite at 28/30/29/21, with the oecus Corinthius (30) (see Fig. 2.9) at its heart. Service areas (wine and oil presses) are shaded. Slaves quarters are elsewhere.

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function: to label some rooms *triclinia* and others *occi* is at best to categorize their architectural form; inferences about social function are not possible.³⁰

➤ Rather the important factor seems to be the fact of multiplicity and choice itself. The Casa del Menandro (Fig. 3.1), outstanding at Pompeii in this as in other respects, has five major reception rooms of various size distributed around its peristyle. The largest of these, as we saw earlier, in its form and vast proportions points to a more public function than the normal private entertainment (Fig. 2.4); at the same time it is now clear that, situated at a point remote from the front door on a wing of the peristyle, it cannot have been a room of open public access. It does not stand alone but forms the climax of a suite of rooms running along the peristyle, linked to each other by connecting doors (Fig. 3.21). These lesser rooms have the proportions of a standard reception room and are carefully differentiated by color, red/black/yellow. Between the red and black rooms runs an intersecting corridor, leading to a smaller, more private room, presumably a cubiculum. To this suite, two further reception rooms on the north end of the peristyle, closer to the atrium, form a supplement (decoratively distinguished, the one as green, the other as red



Figure 3.21 Casa del Menandro, Pompeii, suite of interconnected rooms overlooking peristyle to left (see Fig. 3.1).

and yellow). It would be vain to attempt to attribute precise function to any of these rooms, not only because we lack the necessary evidence but also because there is no sign that Roman social life was so precisely and rigidly differentiated by social occasion as might be, say, a Victorian country house, with its drawing room, boudoir, parlor, study, smoking room, billiard room, and so forth.³¹

◀ The essence of the Roman suite is that it provides an ample context for a crowded social life, allows guests to pass in astonishment from one fine room to another, and enables the master to hold court wherever the whim of the season or moment takes him. ▶ Cicero and Pompey, we are told, once tried to outwit Lucullus by inviting themselves to dinner that very evening and forbidding him to confer with the cooks about the menu. Lucullus, however, had the last laugh: he simply told his servant that he would dine that evening in "the Apollo," for each of his dining rooms had a fixed allowance for the dinner served there, and "the Apollo" was one of the most lavish.³²

This otiose choice of which of a series of rooms to use for a particular function (dining) mirrors the upper-class pattern of multiplication of luxury villas up and down Italy, to be visited briefly according to the caprice of the moment. The social potency of such building derives from the manifest waste of space and money. The pattern of the Menander suite is easily paralleled in other very rich Vesuvian houses. One key suite in the Casa di Fabio Rufo (Fig. 3.22), built over the western city walls of Pompeii, has a lofty and richly decorated black room at its center (D), which is flanked by a red and a further black room (E, C).³³ The Casa dei Cervi at Herculaneum has a large black room leading to one (originally two) smaller but richly decorated reception room.³⁴ Its neighbor the Casa dell' Atrio a mosaico has an elegant suite overlooking the garden (Fig. 3.23,

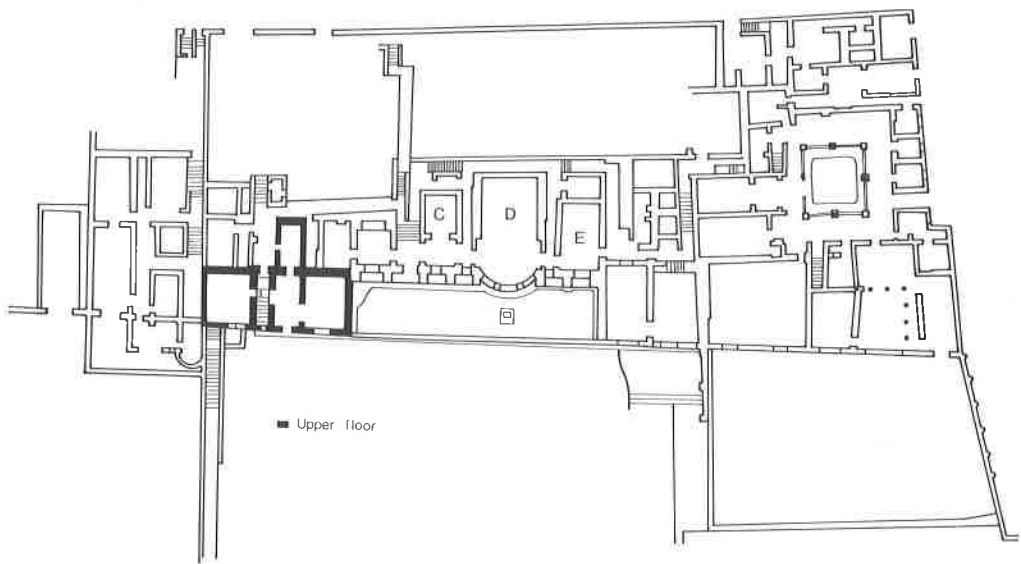


Figure 3.22 Plan, Casa di Fabio Rufo, Pompeii (after Barbet). The principal suite at C/D/E looks over a terrace and across the town wall toward the sea.

Figure 3.23 Casa dell'Atrio a mosaico, Herculaneum, view of suite of rooms facing west over garden (see Fig. 2.1).

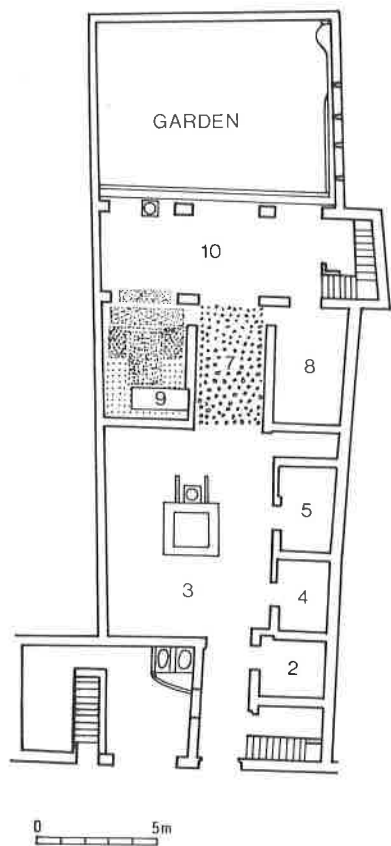


Figure 3.24 Plan, Casa del Fabbro, Pompeii (after Elia). Three cubicula (2-4) flank the atrium. Rooms 8 and 9, of the same size, look through the portico (10) over the garden. Both appear to be triclinia; 9 indicates spaces for three dining couches in its floor pattern, though only one smaller bed was found in position. Note stairs in 1 and 10.

Pl. 8). If such "waste of space" is not to be wondered at in the houses of the rich, its social potency comes across more clearly when it is mimicked in the houses of the humble. The very modest Casa del Fabbro (Fig. 3.24), next door to the Casa del Menandro, has two main reception rooms of almost the same size, equally fine decoration, and identical orientation toward the garden on either side of the passage from the entrance court.³⁵ No apparent functional contrast presents itself. It mattered to be able to say, "I have two cenationes."

For the same reason, it is virtually impossible to be specific in assigning the various bedrooms of the ground quarters to one or other member of the household. When Trimalchio boasts that his house has twenty bedrooms, he seemingly leaves those of his slaves, even apparently of his *hospites*, out of the count.³⁶ It is with evident surprise that Suetonius describes how Augustus used the same bedroom, in both summer and winter, for most of his life.³⁷ The younger Pliny seems to be closer to the upper-class norm in the casual way he describes the cubicula dotted around his villas: he has his favorites, but he makes clear that no single one is the master's bedroom.³⁸ The same deliberate wasteful consumption of space that affects the reception rooms surely applies to bedrooms, and it is rash to attempt to infer from the numbers of smartly decorated bedrooms in a particular house the size of the owner's family.³⁹

What is worth observing is the way that the "master" bedrooms relate to other rooms in the house. There is a persistent pattern whereby a large reception room is juxtaposed to, and frequently by means of a connecting door physically linked to, a smaller room of suitable proportions for a bedroom. In the grandest houses, like the Casa del Labirinto, there may even be a cluster of such small rooms flanking a central reception room. That they served as bedrooms is confirmed by the typical presence of a bed niche, marked either architecturally or by contrasts in the decoration of walls and floor (though this has not deterred some from seeing in them women's dining rooms, segregated from men's dining rooms in accordance with an imaginary social ritual).⁴⁰ The coherence of such reception-room/bedroom units becomes especially clear where they are duplicated, notably in the pattern of fourfold repetition seen in the late republican structures of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum, the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii (Fig. 3.19), and the Settefinestre villa (Fig. 3.20).⁴¹ Here we find the further use of a bedroom alcove with vaulted ceiling, creating a notable hierarchy of intimacy that progresses from the reception room to the bedroom to the bed recess itself.

In such cases of duplication, a range of choice lies open to the master, though indeed the decoration of the rooms may privilege one set over the others, as was particularly the case with the "mysteries" suite in the Villa dei Misteri.⁴² But we frequently find the same principle of linked reception/bedroom suites in much more modest houses where space allowed no duplication. The key rooms may interconnect, as do the black triclinium and the black cubiculum of the Casa del Frutteto; they may even be split by a corridor, as in the "private quarters" of the baker in the Casa del Forno (I 12.1) at Pompeii, or by a stairwell, as in the Casa del Sacerdos Amandus (I.7.7). In all these cases it is the close association of two rooms that distinguish themselves from the rest of the house by their decoration that points to the creation of a master suite. ➤

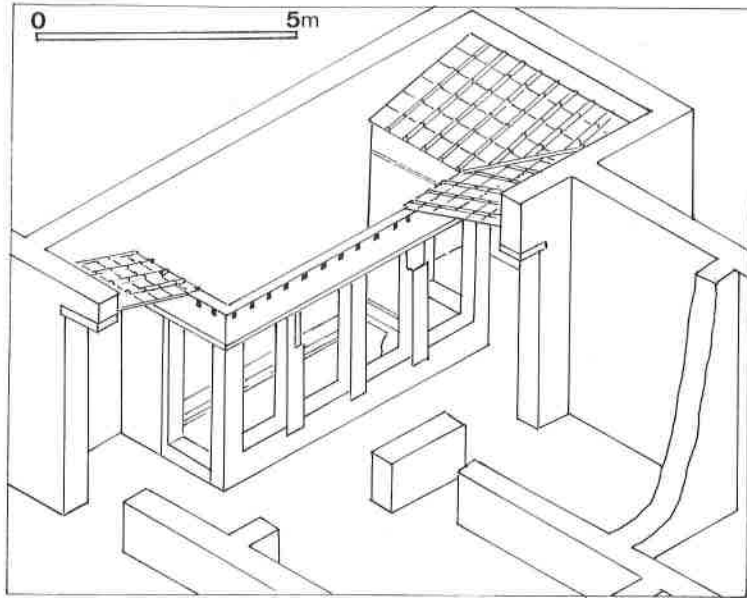


Figure 3.25 Casa dei Vettii, section of so-called gynaeceum (after Maiuri). A linked suite of cubiculum/triclinium overlooks a secluded courtyard (rooms s/t/u; see Fig. 3.3).

The recognition of such patterns has a certain value in helping to read the structure of individual houses. The peristyle of the Casa dei Vettii (Fig. 3.3), to take a familiar example, is surrounded by three reception rooms, one large (that of the cupids) and two medium in size. It has also a sort of annex alongside the largest reception room consisting of two interconnected rooms, the smaller clearly a cubiculum, approachable only through a miniature courtyard that illuminates them (Fig. 3.25). Traditionally this annex has been explained as a gynaeceum;⁴³ this, however, is only the product of the assumption that so secluded an area must be for women. That it is relatively secluded is clear—the visitor must pass many thresholds to reach it: from the front door, to the entrance to the peristyle, to the entrance to the cortile, to the entrance to the reception room, and thence (probably) to the cubiculum itself. But why assume that such seclusion was designed for the mistress as opposed to the master? There is no other cubicle on the peristyle, and the occurrence of the pair of interconnected rooms points to their importance. The arrangement is well designed to give a sense of increasing privilege in approaching the most intimate spot in the house.

But the real interest of this pattern lies in the implications for social life encapsulated within it. The triclinium is a place of reception, but so is the cubiculum, if on a more intimate scale (it is worth recalling that Tacitus sets his whole *Dialogue* on oratory in the cubiculum of the poet Maternus). The juxtaposition of the two rooms is the consequence of the desire to use the cubiculum for reception. Thus equipped, the Roman could carefully grade the degree of intimacy to which he admitted his amici—whether he received them promiscuously in the atrium, or entertained them in a large group in his grandest room, in a small group in his triclinium, or in ones and twos in his cubiculum.

Such a pattern would have been instantly comprehensible in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century England or France, where the *appartement* of *antechambre/chambre/cabinet*, or withdrawing room/chamber/closet, represented a hierarchy of intimacy, progressing from waiting room to reception room—for eating and sleeping as well as reception—to the inner sanctum of power. The similarities of layout are striking between the great republican villas and a house like Ragley Hall (Fig. 3.26). Again and again we need to strip away the assumptions that came with the industrial revolution concerning the use of the house. The boundaries between the public and the private have been transformed. For us the place of work is essentially separate from the home; social status is sought, confirmed, or lost, at work, not home, and if the home provides a context where success can be displayed, and the envy of the neighbors aroused, such display is idle, mere conspicuous consumption, since it is not in itself productive of success. The domestic world, though a place of entertainment, is one in which the family is cocooned from many of the pressures of social competition, rarely exposed to the inspection of either social superiors or inferiors. Being primarily the space of the family, priority is given in the home to the distinctions within the family, notably of parent and child. Further distinctions are primarily ones of function, and only secondarily of status: cooking, eating, relaxing, sleeping can no longer be easily arranged in a hierarchy.

The seventeenth-century house, like the Roman house, was one in which distinctions of rank and etiquette were dominant. The house did not merely reflect but generated status. Social success depended partly on the skill and understanding one displayed in playing a game of contact with others of widely varying social rank; on treating the distinguished with distinction and the obscure with sufficient distance. In a world oiled by patronage, social success could be heavily dependent on this domestic game. Conse-

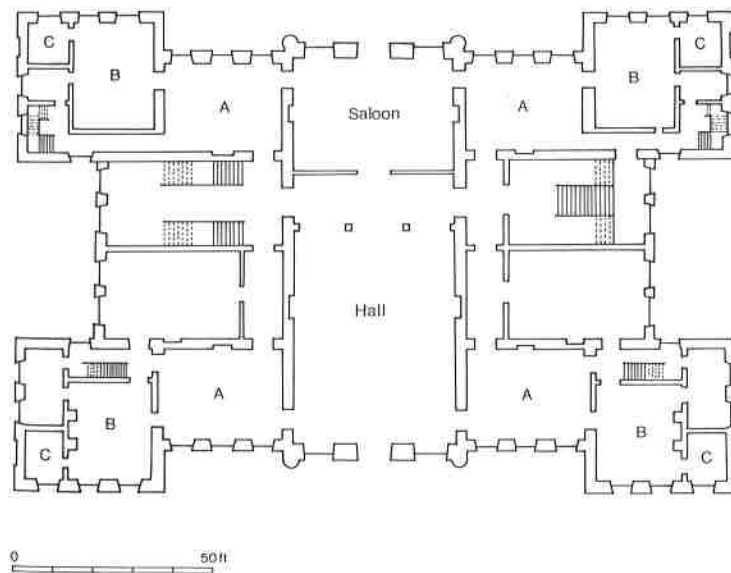


Figure 3.26 Plan, Ragley Hall, Warwickshire (c. 1678) (after Girouard). Four symmetrical suites open off the public area of hall/saloon, each with the progression antechamber (A)-chamber (B)-closet (C).

quently, the formal house of the period, like the grand Roman house, was arranged in terms of suites and apartments, with a succession of rooms differing more in hierarchic value than function. Here *privacy* takes on a different meaning: it involves separation from the vulgar crowd, but not from the battles of the social world outside.⁴⁴

MY CONCERN has been to understand the social patterns that dictated the structure and decoration of the Roman house in the later Republic and early Empire. To do so, we must treat the house as a coherent structural whole, as a stage deliberately designed for the performance of social rituals, and not as a museum of artifacts. Realities in particular cases, the sceptic might object, are not so simple. It is the privilege of the spendthrift to conform his surroundings precisely to his needs and desired self-image. The majority, even of the rich, must live with compromise, houses designed by many hands, by a succession of architects half-following, half-steering the requirements of a succession of owners.⁴⁵ Many must have felt constrained by the inadequacies of what they had inherited, frustrated by their own inability to preserve it from decay and disintegration. Too often the house must have proved an insufficient shell for the life within it, unable to respond to the ever-moving life cycle of its inhabitants, the gradual or sudden rises and falls in prosperity or status.⁴⁶ On the other hand, even the most lavishly financed building may be poor evidence of the life of its inhabitants. The tallest atria may be empty and echoing; perhaps architecture expresses ideology or aspirations better than realities. But while all these points should be remembered in considering any individual house, what is here at issue is the recurrent pattern, the ideal type rather than the individual specimen.

The argument I put forward is that marked patterns distinguish the Roman house of the period from the houses of other societies (notably Greek) and other times, and that the dominant factor in determining these patterns is the interpenetration of the public and private life of the Roman ruling class. I have tried to illustrate how the basic structures are determined by the (to us) astonishingly public nature of domestic life, and how little weight contemporary Western preoccupations with privacy and family life carry. Implicit in the architectural forms and decoration of the Roman house is a language or social code that draws constantly on allusions to public and nondomestic forms.

A corollary of the argument is that the language of form and decoration even at a very modest social and economic level is dictated by the needs of the dominant social class. Particularly in the case of wall decoration, we see a development from the direct imitation of public structures by the republican nobility to the evolution of a complex and subtle language of allusion, socially widespread in its employment. This question of social diffusion deserves a fuller examination, to which I turn in the second part of this book.

But it is worth offering a preliminary reflection on the social significance of this phenomenon. It is possible, and among ancient historians even traditional, to view culture as something superficial that at best enriches the life of the elite, at worst merely serves as fuel for snobbery. If so, we may laugh at the Trimalchios of the Roman world as

imitating the cultural language of the nobility for its snob value. But such an approach to culture seems to me both too cynical and too limited. Social anthropology points to a deeper reading of cultural languages, as serving to define the structures of integration within society, to articulate the social hierarchy, to include and exclude, communicate and excommunicate. Instead of laughing at Trimalchio's buffoonery, we might look at him as the insecure product of a highly mobile society fighting to establish his membership in that society. Because a Roman's house played a vital part in establishing his social position, we have, in the abundant houses that (more or less) survive, a particularly valuable document. For they not only constitute a reflection of other social realities now invisible but are in themselves one of the means by which the Romans constructed their social world.