
What Influenced The Architecture And Design Of Roman Houses

It would be too simpleminded to say that “all” features of the Roman house served a purpose in propagating the credence of the paterfamilias. Not every stone was placed for this end, but every marble chiseled could’ve intended to raise the head of the house’s prestige outside of it. Any detail entailed at the behest of the Head was meant to showcase their individual fame and fortune (which would gauge their quality as a citizen to the republic/empire) all for the glory of Rome. However, the much-exasperated high school English student would argue that the owner’s red curtains did not symbolize their self-sacrifice in the name of the Eternal City, but rather that they were indeed, red for the sake of being red. The consensus cannot be reached without hard evince, and with Rome being a lost, ancient civilization, that is something that isn’t readily available. All that’s currently available is pieces to a painting — and whoever is in charge of putting them together can construct the landscape to however they see fit.

The start begins with the works of the (other) Vitruvian Man himself, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. His collection of writings, *De architectura*, detailed the intrinsic planning and execution of Roman architecture, and would inspire many intellectuals of the Renaissance (Leonardo da Vinci, for one). It also holds the distinction of being one of the only available sources of written history behind Rome’s buildings belonging to its heyday. In chapter V of Book VI, he outlines his reasoning on why the rooms of the house itself should be suited to satisfy the Head’s role in the City. His distinction between private and “common” rooms are fascinating, and particularly contradictory of modern-day customs. The private being self-realizing, with the common being “those which any of the people have a perfect right to enter, even without an invitation: that is, entrance courts, cavaedia, peristyles, and all intended for the like purpose”.

However, in the same breath he’s quick to mention that “men of everyday fortune do not need entrance courts, tablina, atriums built in grand style, because such men are more apt to discharge their social obligations by going round to others than to have others come to them.” These two statements flash some insight into this enigma. Vitruvius considers the varied professions that would diversify the job market, and correctly anticipates that a few choice trades would require some to become more transient than others. A well-to-do merchant sailor or house doctor for instance, wouldn’t require such commodities to pique interest for his business — for his business is outside of the house — but he’ll most likely have the funds necessary to entertain houseguests who arrive for pleasure rather than business. He’ll go on to explain that the house will naturally be specialized and custom-tailored for the individual’s occupation. A mason’s house would most definitely be different compared to that of one who practices animal husbandry, though the later should he find himself in good standing with his wallet may choose to splurge on some decorative jewel-studded reins for his prized horse with ribbons made of gold to put on display with hopes of attracting even more guests, instead of the usual leather straps. But there are those in Rome who already demand authority — house or no house. Having no need to legitimize their claim to be Patrician, they instead publicly strut about like peacocks, showing what it means to be a true Roman. Their housing is no different. However, even the most eloquent of philosophers indulge in quite explicit language in a rare breach of stoicism when describing how very un-Roman their living quarters are.

Seneca the Younger is one such individual, who launches into a tirade within a letter written to Gaius Lucilius, the highlight being “So picture to yourself the assortment of sounds, which are strong enough to make me hate my very powers of hearing!”. Young Seneca’s apartment was situated over a public bathhouse, which today would be the equivalent of the YMCA. Even the top minds of the generation couldn’t scrounge around the money necessary to appropriate a change in arrangements. It also needn’t be said that keep the company of himself intact, let alone others. The written testimony behind Roman housing is a stringent paper trail leading from instance to instance, never appearing to connect themselves. The physical evidence left behind has been lost to the test of time thanks to the Huns, Goths, and who knows what other barbarian tribes were cleaving their way across Europe during the final death throes of the Western Roman Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire actually persisted as the Byzantine Empire, though eventually met the same fate at the hands of the Ottomans, but that’s another story). The only pieces of the puzzle left intact were those already lost during the Roman times. Pompeii, for instance, was mostly preserved thanks to the pyroclastic clouds of Mount Vesuvius. But even that isn’t much: “Landscapes, both literal and figurative, have incredible power in structuring thought and interpretation in the humanities.”

The question of the Paterfamilia’s house being an extension of his Roman influence will never be fully answered, for that matter. But there can be certainly well-educated guesses, for there’s just as equally no argument for the contrary.

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