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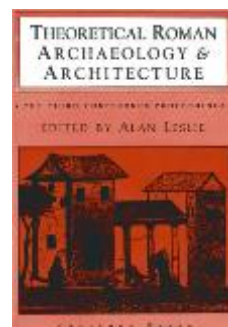
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Author: Mark Grahame

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# *Reading the Roman house: the social interpretation of spatial order*

Mark Grahame

*If we wish to study the Roman house*, how should we go about it? If we were to follow the tradition within which most of the literature on Roman houses has been produced, our concerns would be "painstaking recording and analysis of the minutiae" (Ling 1993, 331). The persistent aim of such art historically driven research has been to create ever more refined chronologies and typologies of the architecture of the house itself (e.g. Richardson 1988) and of the decoration and objects found within it. This has had the unfortunate effect of fragmenting the archaeological evidence, causing it to become divorced from both its physical and social contexts (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 48).

More recently, however, some have voiced criticisms. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1988, 1994) has perhaps been the most notable. He has argued that the quality and quantity of decoration within the Roman house was closely linked to social standing. The nature of aristocratic competition and the rôle of patronage in Roman political relations re-

quired members of the *élite* to differentiate space within the house. Social status was judged in relation to the head of the household, the *paterfamilias*, and this determined how far visitors were permitted to penetrate the house and where they were received. The more intimate the relationship the more intimate the setting for their reception. Clients were reputedly received in the *atria* of aristocratic houses, while "friends" were entertained at dinner in *triclinia* and *oeci*. Differently decorated space therefore acted as a sign system, linked to the political necessity for the Roman *élite* to signal their social status to different categories of visitor. Through analysis of the decorative schemes and their relations in space a means is thus provided for the interpretation of spatial order (see for example Clarke 1991; Gazda 1991; Thébert 1987; Wallace-Hadrill 1988 and 1990).

Although preferable to the art-historical tradition, this reorientation in approach may still be criticised as not being adequately grounded in theory. To consider the house as a "social unit" (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 48; 1994, 7) is one thing, but to understand how social life is constituted is another. This issue, which lies at the heart of contemporary social theory, has not been given due attention by ancient historians or classical archaeologists. In this respect Thébert's (1987, 408) remark about "our lack of knowledge concerning the way in which the social *élite* reproduced itself" is instructive. He appears to think the problem originates from a lack of the right sort of evidence: details of property ownership through time and family genealogies. However, even if Thébert did possess such information any understanding of the reproduction of the *élite* would founder unless it was grounded in an adequately developed theory of power. The *élite* only remains the *élite* while it can replicate the social relations of dominance and dependency which define them and the non-*élite* alike. We might then ask if the Roman house played any rôle in the reproduction of such unequal social relations? To answer this question we need a theory of the rôle material things play in the constitution and reproduction of society. The lack of theorising is perhaps the most serious omission from attempts to interpret the Roman house. Although some recent studies have used theory to provide a framework for interpretation, these are exceptional (e.g. Grahame 1998; Lawrence and Wallace-Hadrill 1997).

The lack of theory stems ultimately from the dependency upon the literary texts to provide an adequate basis for the interpretation of archaeological material. But the vision of social life documented by the literary evidence is not representative. Laurence (1995, 64) has already pointed

out that the ancient authors wrote predominantly about Rome. Rome was, in terms of population, size, and nature, very different from other Italian cities like Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia, which are our main sources of evidence for houses. Even more problematic, from a theoretical standpoint, is the view advocated by Wallace-Hadrill (1988, 48; 1994, 7) that through judicious use of the texts we can begin to understand how "the structures and artefacts we disinter spoke to the Roman user" and thereby gain an insight into how the Roman user responded to them (1988, 48). The assumption here is that literary evidence enables us to define the meanings which the physical remains had for their users in an unproblematic way. In other words, it opens a vista on to the past, allowing us to view the house as if through "Roman eyes".

To what extent can this be said to be the case? A text is a sign system and literary theorists from Saussure (1960) onwards have pointed out that the relationship between the components of the sign, the signifier, and the signified is arbitrary. Hence, there is a rôle for the reader in the interpretation of texts. Meanings are read *into* texts, they do not emerge *from* them. It follows that the meanings which historic texts have are thus created in the present. They are not the unique preservation of the past's own self-awareness. Hence, we cannot employ the literary evidence as a means of empathising with the past. Furthermore, contemporary archaeological theory advocates that material culture is itself a sign system, structured by, and structuring of, social practice (see e.g. Hodder 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1987; 1992). If this is so, then the ways in which Roman material culture "spoke" to the user and the ways in which the user responded to them will have been contingent upon the user's exact social position. We might suppose that Roman material culture may have held very different meanings for those individuals not part of the *élite* than those espoused in the ancient sources. It was certainly in the interests of the Roman *élite* to represent their viewpoint as universal and to "fix" the meanings that things had. This should not be taken to mean that *élite* meanings were not contestable, nor contested by others within Roman society. As a means of representing the social and cultural order literacy was primarily an *élite* activity (Harris 1989). However, as a sign system, Roman material culture was also a powerful means by which to represent the social world. The way society expresses itself goes beyond the verbal and therefore, by implication, the written. Texts and objects can be thought of as forming competing "discourses" which may not always have been in agreement. The consequence of this for the study of Roman material culture should be clear; the literary texts do not provide a

unique insight into the past which permits us to use them to interpret archaeological material.

### THE HOUSE AND SPACE<sup>1</sup>

If we are to study the Roman house with recourse to the texts, we must begin from first principles. We should think about what sort of a thing a house actually might be. A house can be many things. It is, after all, a complex object. At one level the house is very much a "container" for activities and objects, but do these alone define what a house is? The house is itself a physical object with a definite structure. It is a "building". A building may be defined simply as an object with a continuous architectural boundary that delimits a discrete region of space and is punctuated with one or more entrances. Such diverse architectural forms as Neolithic henges and Iron Age enclosures thus also qualify as "buildings". The purpose of a building is to create and order empty volumes of space (Hillier and Hanson 1984, 1). Space is not itself an empirical object. As a void, it cannot have any properties or possess causative powers (Werlen 1993, 1-8). We might therefore be tempted to think of space as simply a "stage" or "setting" for human action.

However, to reduce space to a mere physical setting is to take too pessimistic a view. Because of the routine nature of social life, all societies will habitually undertake certain activities in particular places. These "places" Giddens (1984) has termed locales. A locale is a physical region of space with definite boundaries. Although it provides a setting for interaction, the demarcation of the locale as a distinct region of space also helps to concentrate it in some way (*ibid.*, 375). As all human action is social action, the presence or absence of specific individuals is required in order to ensure that any particular activity is successful. The differentiation of locales from one another is fundamental in ensuring that the appropriate levels of "presence-availability" are maintained. Presence-availability is the degree to which social others are available for encounters (*ibid.*, 73). The boundary to a locale may be symbolic, but the use of architecture is more powerful in that it physically constrains movement. Architecturally divided space thus regulates the degree of presence-availability by constraining or enabling movement into different spaces.

### SPATIAL ORDER, PRINCIPLES, AND PRACTICE

The manner in which architecture orders space will not be arbitrary. In their seminal work on this subject, Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson (1984)

demonstrate that even apparently random agglomerations of structures are the consequence of "rules". This position receives further support from Fletcher (1977, 49-53), who points out that order in architecture has often been equated with conscious planning, causing the dismissal of anything which cannot be measured according to "standard units" or "harmonic series". This creates a false dichotomy between "planned" and "unplanned" buildings, with the latter often being associated with vernacular architecture.

Houses are built according to culturally specific principles about how space should be appropriately ordered. These principles may become represented in a particular theoretical discourse and this discourse may alter the practice of building. However, it does not transcend the practical knowledge upon which the discourse is based. Such practical knowledge is acquired during the processes of socialisation, through which individuals gain an intuitive understanding of how to "go on" in social life (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). Habitual practices instil dispositions into individuals, which lead to certain expectations. If something does not match these expectations, individuals may "know" that it is "wrong" without necessarily being able to, or having to, discursively formulate why. This non-discursive knowledge has been described by Giddens (1984, 41-45) as "practical consciousness". Individuals gain a practical, or intuitive, understanding of spatial order by moving into and through different locales during socialisation. This understanding forms the basis for future action and will structure both the location and internal arrangement of houses. The manner in which space is arranged within the house is thus the very physical embodiment and indeed the representation of spatial order. Because the house structures movement into and through different spaces, the principles upon which the ordering is based are re-installed into the next generation. In this way a particular spatial order is reproduced through time.

For this reason we must not think of the house as simply a given physical object, helping to generate certain patterns of social relations and not others. On the other hand we should not believe that the principles of spatial order are somehow mechanically reproduced. The building of a house literally means the reinvention of spatial order anew each time. This provides opportunities for the established ordering to be contested. Spatial order is not fixed, but is analogous to a "discourse", continually being reconstituted through practice. Even in cultures where the use of masonry architecture seems to fix the spatial order for long periods, there is usually evidence for doorways being blocked and opened and rooms

being added, demolished, or reshaped.

However, architecture does help conserve the principles of spatial order and provides a means for those principles to be retrieved and reproduced. Shanks and Tilley (1992, 133) have argued that because of material culture's "fixation of the practice embodied in it," it permits "a relative permanence and efficacy in the structuring of subsequent practice". From this standpoint architecture provides human societies with durability and persistence by permitting a stabilisation of social relations. The fixing of a certain order in space limits the possibilities of a transformation of social practices through redeployment in space. This adds a further interesting dimension to the ordering of space. To construct masonry architecture, especially if highly segmented, requires the mobilisation of both labour and material resources. Those individuals who have the means with which to construct such buildings have the power to "fix" in space an order which works largely to their benefit. This results in the replication of the structures of inequality upon which the powerful depend. Since the physical form of the house has a high degree of permanence it appears entirely "natural" and limits the likelihood that the existing spatial order will be contested. The house then provides a powerful means of perpetuating the existing social order.

The fixation of practice implies the fixation of meaning. If this is so, then it suggests that the relationship between the signifier and signified may not be as arbitrary as has been suggested by post-modernist literary theory. Indeed, post-modernism has been criticised by both Marxists and feminists (e.g. Harvey 1990; Wolff 1992) for a failure to take into consideration the real material conditions of existence within which individuals have to operate. Such conditions, although represented and mediated discursively, cannot be reduced to mere discourses. We might then postulate that the meanings which things have arise, in part, out of the context of their use. For example, we may formulate a meaning for a particular space as "public". However, if in reality this space is relatively inaccessible then its public meaning will simply dissolve. This, as Hillier and Hanson (1984) point out, is precisely what occurred in modern town planning. The meaning ascribed to spaces by planning theory were often contradicted by the actual pattern of movement generated by the spatial order. Spaces created to be public ended up being deserted. Support for this proposition might be found in Gibson's (1979) work on perception. Gibson argues that there is a universal basis for human perception. Because information is received by the brain already structured by the environment, it means that material objects permit, or "afford," certain

## UNDIFFERENTIATED SPACE

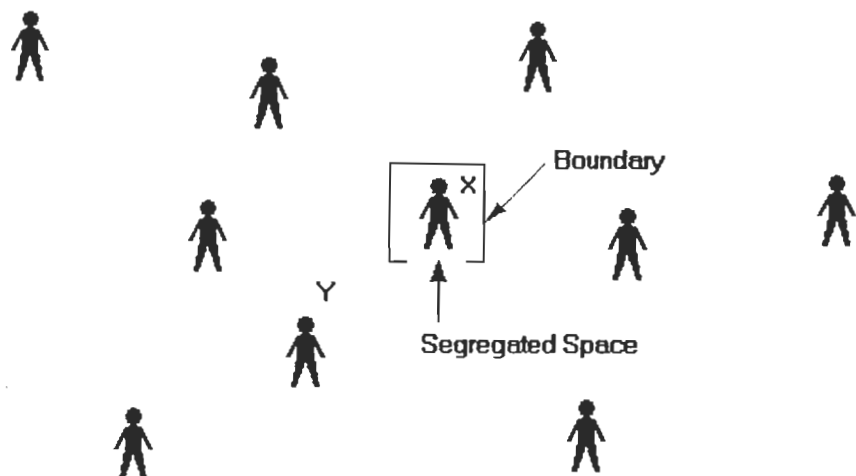


Figure 1. The effect of the boundary on the level of presence-availability. It will be reduced for the individual X, as compared to the individual Y, due to the relative reduction in the probability of an encounter caused by the boundary.

possibilities to the perceiver rather than others.

Following from this we might ask if there is anything about spatial order which might afford certain types of meaning. To provide an answer to this we need to return to give further consideration to the nature of the boundary.

### THE CONCEPT OF THE BOUNDARY

The concept of the boundary features prominently in Hillier and Hanson's social theory of space (1984, 73 ff.). The purpose of the boundary is to enclose a definite region of space and segregate it from what would otherwise be undifferentiated space. This segregation affects the level of presence-availability within the space, in that the probability that an encounter will occur by chance alone is significantly reduced (fig. 1). The boundary thus creates a "fundamental discontinuity" in the principles of spatial organisation (ibid., 144). However, as Hillier and Hanson point out, no space is ever totally enclosed. There is not much point in



creating a space which can never be entered! Although it might seem contradictory, to be effective a boundary must be permeable. The degree of presence-availability within a space will therefore depend upon the number and nature of the relations of permeability which it has with other spaces.

This means that building space obtains its meaning through its relational order. This order creates and reproduces a particular pattern of permeability characterised by the juxtaposing of spaces with different levels of presence-availability. What activity is undertaken in which space will depend upon how that activity is interpreted in terms of the necessary degree of presence-availability. For example, in most societies sex is restricted to the private zone, whereas the consumption of food can range from being a very intimate, private affair, to a very public and communal one. Hence, although the order which space assumes in any cultural context will be specific to that culture, each group will make different uses of the same logical properties of space. This then provides a basis for the analysis and interpretation of the spatial order preserved in archaeological remains.

### *Access analysis*

To grasp this order we require a means by which to represent it. The map or plan is, of course, the archetypal representation of spatial order. However, it is often difficult to grasp from a plan alone, particularly if we are considering a large number of cases. Hence, we need to move beyond the plan. Fortunately, Hillier and Hanson's *access (gamma) analysis* (1984, 82–175) provides us with the means to do precisely this. Because their theory and method have been deployed in a number of recent archaeological studies (Chapman 1990; Fairclough 1992; Foster 1989a and b; Grahame 1995, 1997; Laurence 1991, 1994; and various papers in Boast and Yiannouli 1986), only a brief outline need be given here. Analysis begins with the construction of an access map (fig. 2a-c). This is done by representing each unit of space within the building as a small circle and then linking these with lines when there is permeability between them. Transitional spaces such as passageways may be represented as a black dot, while the exterior space is usually denoted by a circle with a cross through it. The map may then be “justified” with respect to the exterior space. This is done by making the exterior the “root” of the system and then arranging all spaces at a similar depth from this root above it, while ensuring that the links of permeability are maintained.

The level of presence-availability in each space will depend upon its

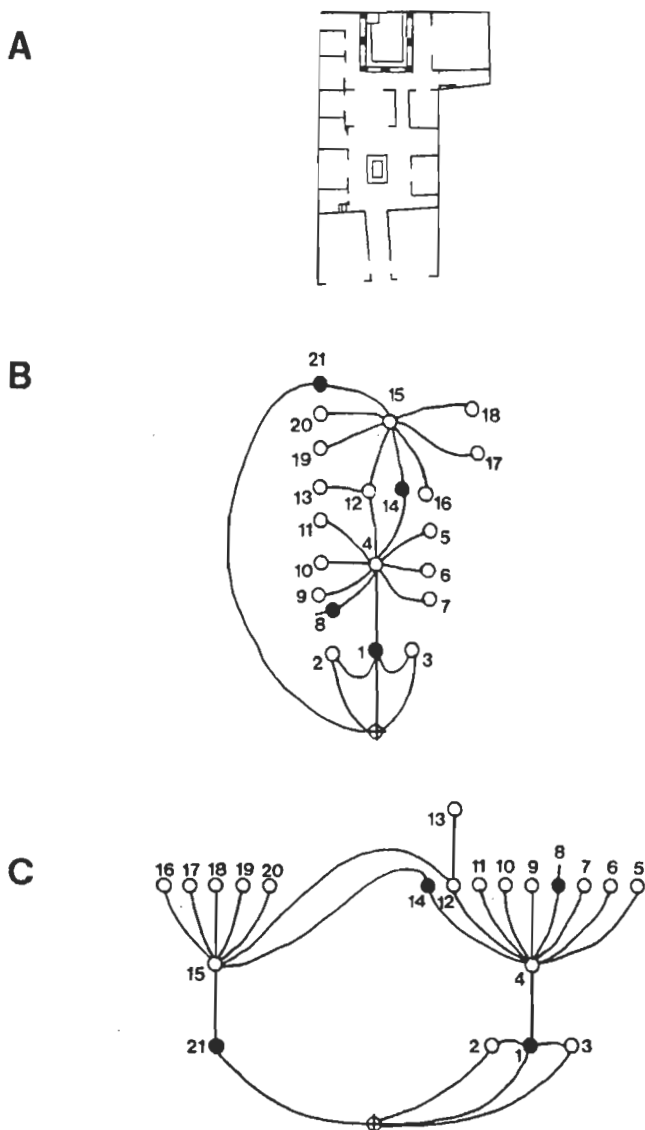


Figure 2. Diagram A shows the ground plan of a house from Regio VI, insula block viii, Pompeii. B shows the access map for the same house. C is the access map justified with respect to the exterior.

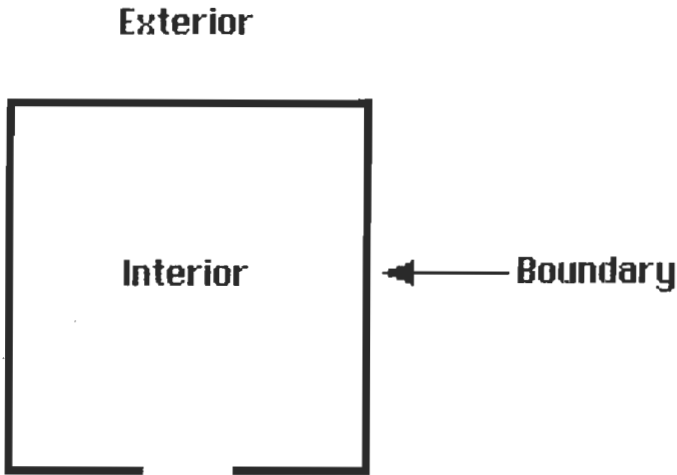


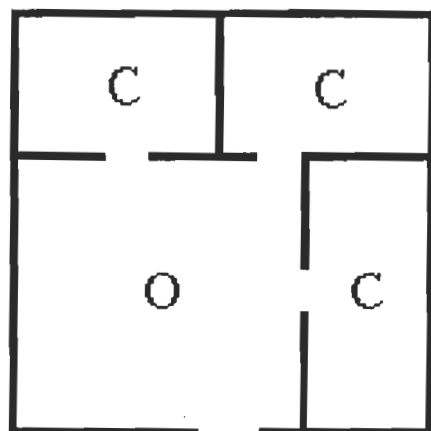
Figure 3. The simplest form of building consisting of a single cell with one entrance.

exact location with respect to all other spaces. Three aspects will define the space: the *global*, the *local*, and its *depth* from the exterior. The global aspect is the relationship a space has with all other spaces within the building. This aspect may be captured by considering how *accessible* that space is. The more accessible a space the fewer the number of boundaries that will have to be crossed in order to reach it. The local aspect may be understood by considering the number of immediate neighbours any space has. If it has a large number of neighbours then we can say that it *controls* access to those neighbours. The final aspect, depth from the exterior, will indicate how accessible any space is from the outside (table 1).<sup>2</sup>

However, "units of space" are not equivalent to "rooms". We must be aware of how space is actually constituted by the architecture. To understand this we need to examine the concept of the boundary in more detail. The simplest form of building consists of a cell, which delimits a region of space and is permeated by a single entrance (fig. 3). The boundary itself consists of an "interior" and an "exterior". It is the interior of the boundary which delimits the space within the cell. However, if we were to aggregate a number of cells together, or arrange them one within another, the exterior of boundaries would also delimit regions of space. In fact, it is useful to think of buildings as being composed of cells within cells. In other words, building space may be defined by both the interior and the exterior of boundaries. When considering the characteristics of a

*Table 1. The defining aspects of space within buildings.*

Aspect	Characteristic	Description
global	accessibility	average number of boundaries which have to be crossed in order to reach a space from any start point
local	control	number of immediate neighbours that a space has
exterior	depth	number of boundaries to be crossed in order to reach a space from the exterior



*Figure 4. A simple building which may be thought of as being of the three "closed" cells (C) and one "open" cell (O).*

particular space we need to consider whether it is being moulded by the interior or exterior of a boundary. We might therefore think of a building as consisting of combinations of two different types of cell: "closed" and "open". A closed cell contains a space delimited by the interior of a boundary, while an open cell is a region of space which is defined by the exterior of boundaries or a combination of both (fig. 4). In effect an open cell is that which is "left over" after distinct regions of space have been enclosed within closed cells. We should not, however, think of these open cells being less important to the ordering of space. As we shall see below open cells have properties which make them fundamental to the mediation of the level of presence-availability within buildings.

## INHABITANTS AND STRANGERS

Before we can assess the significance of spatial order we need to ask who exactly is involved in the "coming together" of co-presence? In the case of the Roman house, we might be tempted to turn to the literary evidence and overlay an idealised family or household structure onto the physical remains. However, we cannot be sure how representative this structure is. To avoid making simple empathetic assumptions we need to consider instead the social categories which are likely to be differentiated by space. Two categories are apparent in the separation of the space inside the building from that exterior to it *inhabitant* and *stranger*. "Inhabitants" have preferential rights to use the particular spatial domain defined by the architecture of the house whereas "strangers" do not. The identities of "inhabitant" and "stranger" are both constituted and reproduced through practices which routinely include some individuals while simultaneously excluding others. These habitually situated practices give inhabitants preferential knowledge and therefore control over certain spaces. Such social identities are implicated in practices and should not be thought as somehow existing externally to them. Furthermore, they are not absolute categorisations: individuals are "inhabitants" in certain situations and "strangers" in others.

The level of presence-availability varies according to whether relations between inhabitants or between inhabitants and strangers are involved. Spatial order may be thought of as being structured along two dimensions (table 2). The first is that which mediates relations between inhabitants. The position of a space along this dimension depends upon the degree of accessibility and control it exhibits. The second dimension, relating relations between inhabitants and strangers, depends primarily upon how accessible any space is from the exterior. These two are not independent of one another; they will overlap in all situations to some extent. The point is that we should not assume at the outset that the spaces furthest from the exterior are always the most segregated.

Table 2. *The dimensions structuring spatial order*

Dimension	Relevant characteristics
inhabitant-inhabitant	accessibility control
inhabitant-stranger	depth from the exterior

In terms of the first dimension (inhabitant-inhabitant meetings), if a space is accessible and has a high degree of control, it follows that the level of presence-availability is likely to be high. The conjunction of these two aspects results in a space which forms a "node" in the relational form of the spatial arrangement (for example spaces 4 and 15, fig. 2c, clearly form nodes). A node will tend to generate encounters, for routine movement through the building will be continuously directed towards it. In contrast, spaces which are highly segregated and have a low degree of control exhibit the reverse characteristics. They are likely to be cells with single entrances, removed from the routine flow of action (for example spaces 5-11 and 16-20, fig. 2). The level of presence-availability will tend to be low, since there will be a reduced probability that routine movement will require entry to that space.

Along the second dimension (inhabitant-stranger meetings), it is the exterior space which will be characterised by a probabilistic pattern of encounters and hence a high level of presence-availability. In relation to the exterior all interior spaces will have a much reduced level of presence-availability, and the further from the exterior any space is, the less likely it will be that a stranger will have access to it.

### FRONT AND BACK REGIONS AND DISCLOSURE AND ENCLOSURE

What are the social implications of these variations in spatial characteristics? Here I wish to introduce the concepts of "front" and "back" regions. These were originally identified by Goffman (1959) who employed a "dramaturgical model" in his interpretation of the nature of public life. Front regions are conceptualised as stages upon which individuals "act" out the rôles prescribed for them by society. In these regions the norms of society hold sway and the presence of others produces a powerful incentive to conform to the accepted modes of practice. Back regions, by contrast, are analogous to the "backstage". These allow an escape from the scrutiny of others and hence a relaxation of the demands to conform. A front region thus involves the *disclosure* of the body, which means literally making oneself visible to others. By contrast, back regions allow *enclosure* of the body, the hiding of oneself away. Front and back regions are not absolute categories but relative ones. A public space within a house, such as a passageway, may be a front region in comparison to the rest of the house but a back region in comparison to the exterior.

The aspects of a space which enforce disclosure are high accessibility and control. As we have seen, these aspects characterise nodes in the

spatial order. The high probability of an encounter occurring within these spaces constitutes them as front regions. These are spaces within which individuals "see" and are "seen" by others. In short, they possess the characteristics we associate with the "public" domain. The pressure to conform to accepted modes of practice make front regions primarily spaces of politics and negotiation. The presence of others enforces a degree of "tact" in interaction. This is a latent conceptual agreement between the participants in interaction of the requirement for the maintenance of mutual self-esteem (Giddens 1984, 75).

Spaces which are segregated and have low control are most likely to be back regions: places which provide the means of enclosure. Such spaces may be either places of escape or confinement. Escape from the scrutiny of others may be thought of as a form of "self" confinement. To be confined, or to confine oneself, requires spaces that are removed from the routine flow of action. In contrast to the politics and tact of front regions, back regions are more ideological in character. By this it is meant that they are more likely to be associated with particular individuals and practices. The privacy of enclosure permits selfishness, self-indulgence, and deviation from accepted norms of behaviour. If confinement is an habitual part of the daily routine, then we might expect there to be a proliferation of such back regions in contrast to frontal contexts.

Between these two extremes are spaces which may exhibit contradictory characteristics, such as high accessibility and low control. Whether these spaces are front or back regions will depend more upon their exact relations with other spaces and also upon whether relations between inhabitants or between inhabitants and strangers are involved.

In terms of relations with the exterior, the front-back divide corresponds neatly to "inside" and "outside", in that exterior space is after all the archetypal "front" region.

## THE SOCIAL INTERPRETATION OF SPATIAL ORDER

The above discussion has outlined how the location of a space within a building affects the level of presence-availability of that space. This characterises the space as more or less public, or private, depending upon the social categories involved. The formal analysis of spatial order thus provides a basis for its social interpretation. This is consistent with the argument above that meanings arise, in part, out of the real material contexts that individuals confront on a daily basis. Having established this, we can move the discussion on to consider the Roman house itself.

### *The primary arrangement*

The research for this study was based on the ground floor plans of 144 "architectural units" from Regio VI in Pompeii (Grahame 1995). The maps used to provide the basis for the analysis were the Corpus Topographicum Pompeianum maps (van der Poel 1984). The accuracy of these maps has been the subject of favourable comment (Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 155) and they have corrected some of the errors of the previous survey undertaken by Eschbach (1970). Each unit contained a minimum of five spaces or more. This minimum was imposed by the method and no further attempt was made to restrict the scope of the analysis. Although there is evidence, in the form of stair wells, for upper storeys, these are no longer present in Regio VI. However, from what we know of houses where an upper floor has survived, it seems that the ground floor was the main forum for domestic interaction and was almost certainly where interaction with strangers took place.

This research showed that one principle of spatial ordering was of particular significance in that it occurred repeatedly. This was a single, centrally located space that formed a node around which the other spaces tended to group. Relations with the exterior were mediated by a space which interceded between it and the node. We might think of this structuring of space as being the *primary arrangement*. In terms of the traditional labels applied to the Roman house, the most prominent node turned out consistently to be the *atrium*. Segregated from the exterior by the entrance passage of the *fauces*, this ordering of space is so apparent that the *atrium* house has become conceived of as being the typical Roman dwelling (fig. 5).<sup>3</sup>

By returning to the notion of the building as being composed of cells, we can begin to appreciate how the primary arrangement was formed. If we arrange a series of "closed" cells so that they form a courtyard, while still maintaining access to the space outside, the resulting structure is not too dissimilar from that of the *atrium* house (fig. 6). The courtyard is, in effect, a large "open" cell, formed by the exteriors of the surrounding "closed" cells. Because it is the "open" cell which forms the node in the arrangement we can conclude that "open" cells have the public properties of front regions, while "closed" cells have those of back regions.

In larger houses, the tendency was for this arrangement to be repeated, rather than be elaborated. For example, the *atrium* house with peristyle might be thought to contain two such primary arrangements, although three or more are not unknown from Regio VI (fig. 7). When multiple



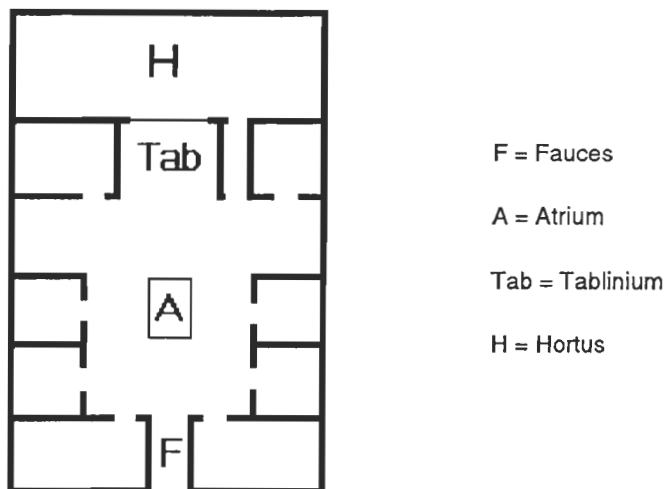


Figure 5. An idealised plan of the atrium house.

nodes were present, they were not all equal. Usually a hierarchy existed, with the *atrium* generally being the most integrating space and having the highest control overall. Only in the very largest houses, those with about forty spaces or over, do we apparently see any elaboration of this basic structure. Passageways which have rooms off them begin to appear, creating internal circulation routes mostly absent from smaller houses. In these, there is usually only one, or two, possible routes between primary arrangements. One route frequently passed through the space traditionally identified as the *tablinium*, but there was often also a separate passageway which by-passed it. Given that the *tablinium* is usually formed by the interior of a cell, while the passageway is shaped by its exterior, we might speculate that the passageway was the preferential means of moving between nodes (for example spaces 12 and 14, fig. 2). Both spaces are usually characterised by having a high degree of accessibility, but low control. They may be thought of as front areas, forming part of the "public" space of the house but as back regions in comparison to the nodes.

What then is the social meaning of the primary arrangement? It should be made clear that this arrangement does not exhaust the possibilities. The spatial order to be found in Roman houses is more subtle, especially in those houses that contain a large number of spaces. However, space here precludes any further analysis and the rest of this paper will concentrate instead upon interpreting the primary arrangement.

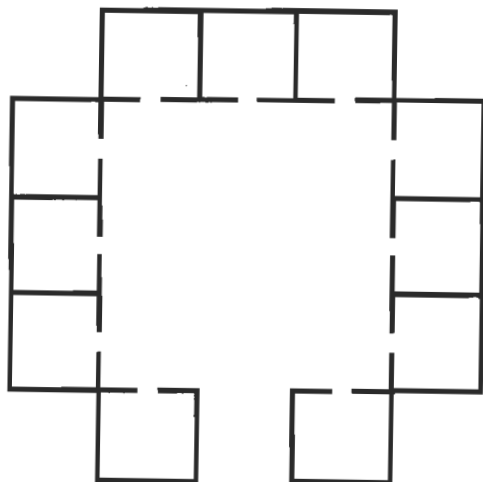


Figure 6. A hypothetical building formed by arranging single cells so as to form a courtyard (cf. fig. 5).

### *Relations between inhabitants: the disciplinary institution*

Firstly, let us consider the significance of this arrangement in terms of the relations between inhabitants. The inhabitants of the house formed the basic social unit by virtue of their collective rights to use the same spatial domain. Social relations can only be established and maintained through contact and frequent encounters between inhabitants would have served to reinforce them. Encounters would have been generated because the routine flow of action would have been constantly directed towards the node. This would have forced disclosure of the body and increased opportunities for interaction.

However, this explanation does not fully account for the existence of the primary arrangement, since we might wonder why, if "coming together" was so important, there were so many possibilities for segregation and confinement. To create a high level of presence-availability a single space would have been sufficient. There are certainly numerous examples from the ethnographic record of families sharing a single space. It is notable too that this juxtaposing of a front region providing, and therefore controlling, access to multiple back regions has been recognised in the prisons, schools, and hospitals of the modern period (Foucault 1979; Hillier and Hanson 1984). The common feature

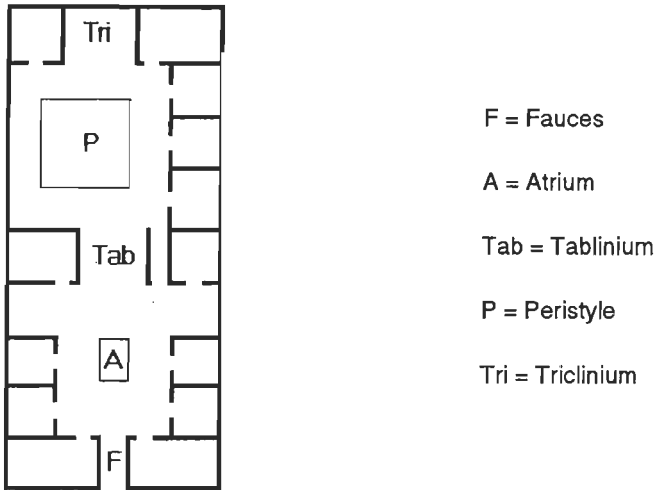


Figure 7. An idealised plan of the atrium house with peristyle (cf. fig. 2a).

which all these buildings share is that they are disciplinary institutions.

Much of Foucault's writings (e.g. 1977) have been concerned with the origins of disciplinary power. Enclosure of the body is the generalised basis for such power and, as Giddens notes in commenting upon Foucault, this can only be achieved by "partitioning", which ensures that individuals are in their "proper" place at any particular time (1984, 145–146). Indeed, as Samson (1992) has recently pointed out, architectural boundaries remove ambiguities; there can be no doubt if someone crosses into a space to which they do not have any entitlement to enter. If caught, any transgression cannot easily be explained away as accidental. The primary arrangement thus provided a means of exercising disciplinary power by promoting opportunities for surveillance. Because the node enforces disclosure it enables the collection and collation of knowledge about the movement of individuals and its deployment in their supervision. The relative lack of internal circulation routes within the Roman house would have helped reinforce this.

Architecture segmented in this manner can be interpreted as relating to the construction and maintenance of inequalities in power through control over the body and its location and movement. As Foucault (1983, 219) reminds us, power only exists when put into action and is only exerted by one to, over, or through another. This "reality" of power would have been particularly salient in pre-capitalist societies which

lacked developed institutionalised forms of dominance. As Bourdieu (1977, 190) has pointed out, in such societies the forms of domination are elementary, in that the exploitation of labour, goods, service, or homage can only proceed through the direct domination of one individual by another.

However, the "disciplinary institution" analogy must not be stretched too far. Unlike prisons and asylums, and to a lesser extent schools and hospitals, the spaces of disclosure within the Roman house were not always controlled by those in authority. This feature of modern institutions Hillier and Hanson (1984, 183–197) have termed the "reversal effect", in that the "inhabitants" of the building are the ones confined whereas the "strangers" are allowed to move about without supervision. The Roman house does not exhibit the reversal effect, which is tied to the development of administrative power in the modern period. Except under these circumstances, surveillance generally operates in both directions. In other words, there may be just as much necessity for individuals in authority to escape scrutiny by social inferiors in order to "relax" and participate in activities which might compromise that authority. The disclosure enforced by the primary arrangement may have provided opportunities for surveillance but it would also have prompted a familiarity which could have been detrimental to the maintenance of social distinctions. An alternative strategy would have been to assign social inferiors to particular spatial domains. Both these possibilities may be interpreted as ways of creating social distance through physical separation. Of course, it is usually in the interests of those in subordinate positions to escape surveillance if they can. Hence, the creation of social distance through physical distance may have held advantages for them. Power is constituted dialectically: it rarely operates in one direction only. However, if segmentation in architecture equates with control, we might suspect that on balance the spatial order within the Roman house operated to perpetuate, rather than ameliorate, inequalities.

### *Relations between inhabitants and strangers: the theatre*

The organisation of space with respect to the exterior is necessary in order to mediate relations with strangers. The integrity of any social unit can only be maintained by keeping such social "others" at a distance. However, it is not possible for any social unit to survive in total isolation and this inevitably means that the house will have to be penetrated by strangers.

An analogy of interest here is that of the *theatre*. A theatre depends on

the creation of a performance space, which is the domain of the inhabitant. This is opposed to a space zoned off from the normal flow of activities which is occupied by strangers. Theatre is the mimicking of social life but it is also its negation. The performance must be zoned as a back region phenomenon in order to avoid any possibility of confusion with actual social life. If we examine the justified map of a Roman house (fig. 2c), most of the spaces habitually group at a depth of three from the exterior, while the nodes are usually shallower at a depth of two. Assuming that action will always flow preferentially towards the most accessible spaces then, from the exterior, strangers would have been directed into the node but would not have been permitted to penetrate the house any further. The node, in most cases the *atrium*, is thus analogous to the auditorium of the theatre, both enclosing strangers from the outside world, while disclosing them to the inhabitants. The spaces at a depth of three or more would thus represent the "backstage", a domain away from the prying eyes of strangers. Encounters with strangers would have involved the movement of inhabitants from back to front. This movement would have consequently involved an act of disclosure on the part of inhabitants, signalling their special status in that they can "appear" from domains denied to strangers.

In many cases it is the *tablinium* which acts as the linking space between the node and the back regions "deeper" within the house. The *tablinium* also usually possesses the characteristic of being open to the *atrium*. The combination of these features makes this space of some interest. It is a space of disclosure but its juxtaposition with the *atrium* also makes it segregated and thus the domain of the inhabitant, when considered from the point of view of the exterior. This space therefore has the characteristic of a "stage", linked both to the domain of strangers in front and to the "backstage" region behind. Disclosure within this space would have provided a powerful means of emphasising the distinction between inhabitant and stranger, while simultaneously allowing contact between the two. The inhabitant would have had the option either to maintain a distance or to move into the *atrium*. These options provided the means by which relations between individuals of differing social statuses could be replicated by representing social distance as physical distance. Hence, the arrangement of space with respect to the exterior was also intimately intertwined with relations of power and control.

This ordering of space suggests that encounters between inhabitants and strangers were ritualised. By this it is meant that certain forms of talk, actions, and objects were deemed appropriate to the encounter. The

metaphor of the theatre thus corresponds to the requirement to "act out" the rôles demanded by the ritual. The assumption here is that as the relative social distance increases between individuals, encounters become more formalised. With a space intervening between the node and the street it seems unlikely that interaction was casual; it suggests a certain formality and sense of occasion.

Strangers are always social "others" and as such represent a potential threat. However, in a society where power lacked developed institutionalised forms, the reproduction of status depended upon the contradictory requirement to extend the network of social relations far beyond the immediate household group. The consistency with which the primary arrangement occurs suggests a certain predictability from the point of view of the stranger. Beyond the reception area the degree of variation in spatial order increases. These backstage areas, by contrast, would have been places of mystery to strangers, just as the backstage is a mystery to the audience in the auditorium of a theatre. The predictability of the primary arrangement would have encouraged strangers to penetrate the house by reducing the mystery of what lies beyond the entrance. However, the separation of the reception area from the street would have also clearly signalled the distinction between them and the inhabitants. This ordering of space would have permitted the reproduction of relations on the terms of the inhabitant. Hence, relations between inhabitant and stranger were probably antagonistic. Ritualised encounters provided a context for the amelioration of possible tensions between individuals who were not of the same basic social unit but were locked into a system upon which both depended.

In houses which contain two or more nodes there is usually a distinction between the two, with the secondary node often being the space within which the peristyle is located. The consequence of this is that the peristyle space is usually less integrating and has less control than the *atrium*. In houses with only one entrance the peristyle forms part of the backstage but even when a second entrance is present its greater degree of segregation suggests that it was still more of a back region from the point of view of strangers. We might speculate that different categories of "stranger" may have entered the house by different entrances, or possibly one entrance may have been reserved for the inhabitants only. If so, then we might be able to extend the theatre metaphor by considering secondary entrances to be analogous to "stage doors".

## THE HOUSE AND SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS

The analysis of spatial order undertaken here does not reveal details of the activities undertaken in any particular space, nor does it reveal the identities or statuses of those involved in the activities. As Bourdieu reminds us, practices can not be deduced from objective conditions (1977, 78). However, it does provide us with an indication of how power relations were constructed and maintained in space. As Giddens has noted, power cannot be considered a "second order" consideration in the study of social relations (1984, 283). We should acknowledge that power is intimately involved in all human relations, regardless of whether there is actually an intention to exert dominance or not.

From the ordering of space within the house we can conclude that Roman society was constituted on the basis of a number of contradictions. A strong household identity may be inferred from the generation of encounters implicit within the existence of nodes towards which action within the house was continually directed. By contrast, the segmentation of architecture suggests inequalities in power within the household group. This ordering of space is a recurring theme in human societies. For example, the primary structural feature of the Konkomba settlement, studied by Fletcher (1977), is a courtyard delimited by huts and walls linking those huts. Although the group occupying the settlement are related by kin ties there are inequalities between its members. It may be seen therefore as an attempt to reconcile in spatial order the contradictory requirements to "come together" to reinforce collective identities and to create social distance through surveillance and separation.

The Konkomba settlement, however, is physically removed from other similar settlements, whereas the Roman house is located within an urban context. This positioning suggests that the mediation of relations with strangers was of considerable importance. Urban environments generate high levels of presence-availability. Such levels are required to support institutions and services which exist beyond the household. The social networks which these presuppose could not be sustained if the ordering of space did not permit at least a modest flow of activity between street and house. The mediation of only a single space between the house and the exterior is in marked contrast to the medieval castle at Edlingham, studied by Fairclough (1992), or the broch at Gurness analysed by Foster (1989a). In these the stranger had to pass through multiple spaces before reaching a domain within which to interact with the inhabitants. By comparison the Roman house was relatively "tied in" to the wider network of

the street system. This may then be interpreted as an attempt to balance the imperative to maintain household integrity with the necessity to participate in broader social networks.

All human societies face these contradictions to some extent. What distinguished Roman society was the particular manner in which the resolution of these contradictions was attempted. The spatial order preserved within the Roman house was the consequence of an intersection of the requirement to mediate two distinct set of relations. The result, it is suggested, is a structuring of space which exhibits a high degree of flexibility. The key rôle of the *atrium* in both inhabitant-inhabitant and inhabitant-stranger relations testifies to this. By way of a contrast, the Ashanti "palace" (Hillier and Hanson 1984, 167-175) contains different domains for interaction between inhabitants and between inhabitants and strangers. The flexibility of the Roman house would have enabled it to accommodate a range of practices and permit a reasonable change in such practices through time without necessitating extensive rebuilding. The presence of multiple spaces which have identical sets of relations indicate what Hillier and Hanson have described as "interchangeability" (*ibid.*, 214 ff.). This may be compared to the Swahili house (Donley-Reid 1990), which essentially consists of a linear sequence of spaces. The high degree of non-interchangeability exhibited here suggests that any transformation of practices would quickly come into contradiction with the overall spatial order. This conclusion would seem to support Dwyer's (1991) case that, in contrast to the established view, the *atrium* house was showing considerable vitality and was not a redundant architectural form by the first century AD.

However, in stressing the flexibility of the Roman house we must not lose sight of the fact that it "fixed" a particular spatial order. The high degree to which household space was segregated, it has been suggested, indicates the existence of inequalities in power. Such asymmetries are threatened by practices which are too probabilistic in nature. They cannot be established and maintained by casual contact and loose associations. Bourdieu (1977, 190-191) reminds us that in pre-capitalist societies differences in power can only be maintained at the cost of repeated social practices. To be repeated implies the habitual presence of particular individuals at a specified place and time. Segmentation in architecture makes encounters more predictable and this would have helped ensure the continuance of the practices necessary for the perpetuation of social life.



## CONCLUSIONS

In summary then, this paper has argued that the house is primarily a building and the purpose of a building is to order space. As an object of material culture the house therefore "speaks" of the necessary intersection of presence and absence required for the reproduction of social life. Presence and absence implies space which encloses and discloses the body. These may in turn be zoned into front and back regions. Hence, although space has no power to cause action, its relational order is significant. It is a form of structuration (Giddens 1984), that is, a means by which practices are reproduced diachronically. The house has been interpreted as a means of resolving the contradictory demands of Roman social life in order to perpetuate it. These meanings were drawn out of the structuring of space by employing the metaphors of the disciplinary institution and theatre and by the application of social theory. This study represents a departure from the traditional practice, discussed above, of bringing the ancient sources to bear on the archaeological remains. The historical vision of Roman society does not represent the "truth" in light of which material culture should be understood. Material culture is not a "passive" reflection of the social order. Objects are the products of social practices and hence embody within their very forms social meanings that contributed to the replication of practice. Such meanings may not have been the subject of comment in ancient texts. The material culture of the Roman period has its own story to tell and we should therefore develop theories and methods that allow us to interpret it. We should not subordinate it to a historical discourse.

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## NOTES

1. For a full exposition of the theoretical framework outlined in this and the subsequent sections see Grahame 1995, 1-61.
2. Hillier and Hanson (1984) provide numerous indices that quantify these aspects of space. There is not the space to discuss them here. For further details, in addition to the above references, see Grahame 1995, 62-78; 1997.

3. Because this paper was written prior to the completion of my thesis, the conclusions presented here are only initial findings. For a full statement of results and their meaning, see Grahame 1995.

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