



Review Article

Excavating experience: methodological shifts in the study of Pompeii's urban fabric

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STEVEN J.R. ELLIS, ALLISON L.C. EMMERSON & KEVIN D. DICUS. 2023. *The Porta Stabia neighborhood at Pompeii. Volume I: structure, stratigraphy, and space*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-286694-3 hardback £152.50.

Since 2018, Pompeii has witnessed a resurgence of archaeological activity, supported by substantial investment and renewed institutional direction, constituting the most extensive programme of excavation since the mid-twentieth century. These campaigns, in the one-third of the city still unexcavated, have brought to light properties that expand our understanding of Pompeii's urban development and social fabric, most especially in Regio V. Under the directorship of Gabriel Zuchtriegel (appointed February 2021) these initiatives have been expanded further, most notably in Regio IX, Insula 10, with the introduction of large-scale excavation areas accessible to the public via purpose-built viewing platforms and accompanied by the deployment of advanced digital-recording technologies.

This phase of revitalisation follows the *Grande Progetto Pompei*, which was an ambitious conservation scheme launched in 2012 in response to decades of structural neglect and the ongoing degradation of the site. Whereas the *Grande Progetto* was principally concerned with stabilisation, the more recent interventions have been distinguished by an explicit commitment to documenting the material culture of everyday life, particularly the belongings of non-elite and enslaved inhabitants. These groups were marginalised in earlier excavations, where artefacts of quotidian use were frequently discarded or recorded in a less-than-thorough fashion.

This new emphasis on everyday material culture intersects with broader intellectual trends within Roman studies, most notably the succession of so-called Spatial, Movement, and Sensory 'turns', which from the 1990s onwards have reframed the study of ancient urbanism and domesticity. Studies informed by the 'Spatial Turn', in particular, have reassessed processes of urbanisation and their social impact, emphasising space

as socially produced rather than a passive backdrop. Building on the theories of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Michel Foucault (1986), Roman scholarship has increasingly approached the city as a network of intermediary spaces (e.g. streets, corridors and thresholds) through which social interaction and power relations were negotiated. At the domestic scale, houses have similarly been read as reflections of identity and as extensions of the self, signalling social and genealogical status to the wider community. In the past two decades, this area has greatly benefitted from the application of digital technologies to the analysis of space.

In line with these perspectives, the so-called ‘Movement Turn’ of the 2000s, influenced by the spatial syntax methodologies of Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson (1984), sought to quantify these patterns of circulation and visibility, whether within the domestic sphere (Grahame 1997; von Stackelberg 2009) or across the wider urban fabric (Laurence 1994; Poehler 2017). This focus on circulation and visibility demonstrated how architectural configurations channelled patterns of interaction and thereby structured social life. The ‘Sensory Turn’ of the 2010s has since extended this trajectory by foregrounding the embodied experience of ancient environments, integrating visual, tactile and olfactory dimensions into reconstructions of urban life to better capture the ‘lived experiences’ of ancient peoples (Betts 2019; Platts 2020; Baker 2022; Nissin 2022).

Within Pompeian studies, the impact of these shifts has been most keenly felt in the reassessment of domestic space. Earlier scholarship, most notably Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1994), remained preoccupied with atrium houses and their decorative programmes, an elite-focused paradigm in which non-elites appeared, if at all, as marginal figures. Wallace-Hadrill’s conclusions regarding the correlation between social status and domestic layout or decoration remain the dominant hypothesis against which later studies have been measured. Yet, little sustained attention was paid to artefactual assemblages or to the long-term development of properties prior to AD 79.

This information gap was addressed in Penelope Allison’s *Pompeian households* (2004), which systematically mapped artefact distributions on a room-by-room basis. Allison demonstrated not only that Vitruvian attributions of room function bore little relation to the finds, but also that Latin literary terminology had long served as a substitute for empirical analysis, obscuring the inherently fluid nature of domestic activity. Her study decisively challenged earlier assumptions, but the extent of subsequent development has remained limited. The persistent reliance upon Allison, even in the most recent scholarship, underscores both the durability of her conclusions and the absence of further sustained investigations into material assemblages. As a result, questions of domesticity, gender and class remain under-examined, not only within the Roman house but across shops, workshops and mixed-use neighbourhoods.

More recent work has begun to bridge these divides, combining the insights of spatial and sensory methodologies with artefact-based and stratigraphic analysis (for example, Platts’s 2022 chapter which proposed supplementing analyses of sightlines, movement and access with new theoretical frameworks, such as soundscapes and smellscapes, for studying Roman domestic space). It is within this evolving intellectual framework that the two volumes under review position themselves, exemplifying distinct but

complementary directions in the study of Pompeii's urban and domestic spaces. Michael Anderson's *Space, movement, and visibility in Pompeian houses* aims to advance the analysis of domestic architecture through the application of spatial syntax and related methodologies by foregrounding circulation and visual connectivity as central to the lived experience in the Roman house. His approach emphasises the actors and activities that animated these spaces, the ways inhabitants experienced the domestic landscape, and how their priorities and motivations are reflected in the form and variety of household architecture.

In contrast, Steven Ellis, Allison Emmerson and Kevin Dicus's *The Porta Stabia neighborhood at Pompeii* directs attention to a largely non-domestic area of Pompeii's urban landscape, summarising more than a decade of fieldwork in the area and reconstructing its spatial, social and economic fabric from this. Although a couple of years have passed since the publication of these volumes, their assessment remains topical: the pace of new excavations and discoveries at Pompeii renders it essential to evaluate their contributions and to reaffirm the continuing need for studies of this kind.

Anderson and the spatial analysis of the Pompeian *domus*

Anderson represents one of the most ambitious recent attempts to move beyond the long-standing reliance on schematic house-plans and Vitruvian typologies, instead approaching Pompeian domestic space as a dynamic environment that both structured, and was structured by, daily activity. Anderson employs a methodological programme that integrates computerised spatial and visual analysis with GIS-based extensions of space syntax (eMD). The results are then cross-referenced with artefact distributions, evidence of post-earthquake rebuilding (Chapter 6) and decorative programmes (Chapter 7). By treating the interior of the house as a "micro-topological landscape" (p.67), Anderson's analysis is expressly phenomenological, emphasising the sensory and experiential dimensions of space rather than relying upon static architectural labels.

The strength of Anderson's approach lies in its interdisciplinarity and in its determination to move away from the traditional privileging of *atria*, peristyles and other 'public' zones of the *domus*. His focus on corridors, storage rooms and kitchens foregrounds the complexity of domestic habits and the multiple, overlapping activities that unfolded in each space. The result is a nuanced reconstruction of daily life, attentive to the practical requirements of households as much as to the demands of elite display. Particularly commendable is the attempt to align spatial-visual heatmaps with literary evidence for daily routines, building on Ray Laurence's 1994 summary of activities by the hour in a comprehensive grid. Anderson is thus able to populate the architectural shell of the *domus* with a shifting cast of actors (household members, slaves, clients and guests) whose experiences were conditioned by light, sightlines, artwork and patterns of accessibility. He also demonstrates an inherent understanding that these spaces also communicated their correct use to the user according to their position in the home, their accessibility and their decoration and/or contents. By integrating quantitative models with artefactual and decorative contexts, Anderson highlights the often-overlooked interplay between function, movement and visibility.

For all these strengths, some limitations remain. Anderson applies spatial syntax, GIS and visibility analysis extensively across a sample of 68 houses, drawing on both new datasets and material published elsewhere. Thirty of these overlap with Allison's artefact study, which remains a key point of reference throughout and while this integration is valuable, it also imports the depositional and post-eruption challenges that Allison herself emphasised. Furthermore, his invocation of 'elite' perspectives is problematic: by assuming that each of the houses in his sample routinely hosted the *salutatio*, the formal morning ritual held between patrons and clients to maintain social and political ties, his analysis introduces a bias that treats all householders as patrons, thereby overlooking the heterogeneity of household composition, the variability of wealth and status, and the nuances of non-elite domestic practice. Similarly, some assumptions about social display, for instance, interpreting building materials concealed from street view as a deliberate strategy to preserve prestige, risk being overly deterministic. More prosaic explanations, such as preventing theft, maintaining a neat appearance, or minimising disruption during building works, may be equally plausible and need not be tied exclusively to elite strategies of display.

A related issue arises in considering differentiated audiences, where there was, at times, a tendency to generalise. This arises from the evidence itself: large, wealthy houses are more numerous and more complex, while smaller dwellings, with their limited range of rooms, do not often warrant the same analytical attention. Whether because of evidentiary limits or the scope of his analysis, Anderson does not consistently extend visibility studies to the perspectives of women, children, enslaved persons or strangers, groups whose experience of the house would have differed in important ways. Given that the experience of male elites is already relatively well understood, incorporating such perspectives would have added further depth to his analysis. Spatial syntax and visibility mapping are, in principle, well suited to testing how access and sightlines varied for different household members, and their fuller application would have underscored the value of these methods in recovering less visible forms of domestic life.

Likewise, Anderson's broader conclusions concerning the supposed 'downgrading' of domestic life after AD 62, and an elite exodus from Pompeii in Chapter 6, echo Amedeo Maiuri's 1942 much-contested narrative rather than engaging with recent evidence for continuity of occupation, civic investment, and the persistence of established families in the epigraphic and graffiti record (the study of Ellis, Emmerson and Dicus being one such example).

Despite these caveats, Anderson's study makes a positive contribution to the field. His opening analyses, especially the careful reconstruction of daily habits and activities by hour across different social strata and occupations, are particularly effective in grounding the later discussion in lived experience. More broadly, the volume's greatest achievement lies in reconceptualising the Pompeian house as an active participant in the social and sensory life of its occupants, rather than as a neutral container or a static plan to be labelled. The integration of spatial syntax, GIS and visibility analysis with material and decorative evidence opens new avenues for assessing the intersection of habitus and architecture, and provides a methodological template that future studies, particularly those addressing sub-elite and non-domestic contexts, would do well to adopt and

refine. If at times the interpretive framework remains constrained by older room or space-class categories or by the uneven quality of past excavation records, the latter being an issue beyond Anderson's control, the book nonetheless signals a decisive step towards a more holistic, experiential and materially grounded understanding of Roman domestic space.

Ellis, Emmerson and Dicus: excavating six centuries of sub-elite life at Pompeii

If Anderson reassesses our understanding of the *domus*, Ellis and colleagues extend this approach to the neighbourhood and its long-term development. By situating modest, commercially oriented properties within the wider urban topography, the project shifts the scale of analysis and foregrounds sub-elite residents, retail activity and workshops, embedding them within a stratigraphic sequence reconstructed over seven centuries. Ellis, Emmerson and Dicus's multi-contributor volume, *The Porta Stabia neighborhood at Pompeii. Volume I: structure, stratigraphy, and space*, constitutes a monumental and methodologically rigorous contribution to Pompeian archaeology. The volume's most significant achievement lies in its reconceptualisation of urban space as a palimpsest of sociocultural activity, where the material remains of sub-elite residents, economic life and infrastructural change are allowed to inform rather than be overshadowed.

Covering the period from the sixth century BC to AD 79, more than 1350 stratigraphic units (out of nearly 6000 recorded) and approximately 250 distinct construction activities, or Wall Construction Units (WCUs), are documented. The volume is supplemented with 342 images, plans and charts. This meticulous recording provides not only a secure chronology of architectural change but also an interpretive framework for assessing how modest retail, hospitality and workshop spaces in one neighbourhood may have contributed to Pompeii's urban economy.

The study crucially moves beyond the analysis of individual elite buildings or *insulae* and encompasses 10 structurally independent properties across two *insulae*, VIII.7 and I.1, to trace the social and structural development of an entire sub-elite neighbourhood. In doing so, the authors reconstruct the livelihoods of the Pompeian sub-elite over generations and reveal the evolving structural and social relationships between neighbours of differing economic portfolios. They also seek to situate these developments within broader city-wide and Mediterranean historical, political and economic contexts, which allows their investigation to advance our understanding of the interplay between urban infrastructure and the construction of cities.

The authors' commitment to data accessibility marks a major advance in Pompeian archaeology and sets a new publication standard for excavation reports at the Vesuvian sites. The excavation team presents the results with remarkable clarity, phased narratives, robust methodological descriptions, topographic context and interpretive overviews, all of which are complemented by extensive appendices and a GIS-ready catalogue of contexts and Harris matrices. Although the planned interactive database has yet to be fully realised, the printed volume already serves as an invaluable resource for future reanalysis,

comparanda and digital modelling. Overall, the work responds directly to long-standing criticisms of Pompeian publication as slow, fragmentary and elitist.

The volume also excels in its orientation towards social diversity. By focusing on two *insulae* characterised by the absence of atrium houses, the authors foreground spaces inhabited by non-elites, such as craftsmen, shopkeepers, innkeepers and enslaved or freed-persons whose lives have rarely been the subject of sustained archaeological attention. The analysis of spatial layout, functional zoning and architectural features such as counters, vats and thresholds reveals a vivid sense of how social and economic practices shaped, and were shaped by, built forms in space and over time. Furthermore, the layered narrative of structural changes, from early road surfaces to fish-salting vats, retail interventions and post-earthquake rebuilding, underscores the role of ordinary people in urban development over multiple generations and helps to better place Pompeii within the wider context of the Vesuvian region and, more broadly, the Roman Empire.

If the volume has limitations, they lie less in its implementation rather than in its necessarily preliminary engagement with the social identity of Pompeii's non-elite residents. The authors are explicit that Volume I is concerned above all with structure, stratigraphy and space, providing the physical and chronological framework upon which later volumes will build—focusing on artefacts, ecofacts and special thematic studies. As a result, while the publication makes a major contribution to documenting the long-term development of two non-monumental *insulae*, it stops short of fully exploring the lived experiences of those who occupied and animated these spaces. Questions of identity, agency and social differentiation among shopkeepers, workshop owners, labourers and enslaved individuals are acknowledged in passing but not pursued. This is not a shortcoming of method but rather a reflection of the project's staged publication strategy, and there is every reason to expect that subsequent volumes will enrich the interpretive picture. At this stage, however, the contribution remains more securely grounded in architectural and stratigraphic analysis than in the reconstruction of sub-elite life worlds.

In addition, the interactive database remains unrealised, and future volumes will need to incorporate ecofacts, ceramics and bioarchaeological data, all of which have traditionally been an afterthought in archaeology. This resource will allow the authors, and external researchers, to flesh out questions of gender, labour and household composition in this neighbourhood. Until then, this first volume establishes the 'what' and 'when' of neighbourhood change in remarkable detail; the next stages need to illuminate the 'who' and 'how' with equal precision. Nevertheless, the volume successfully shifts the focus from the monumental to the everyday, thereby reshaping our understanding of Pompeii's peripheral urban fabric, and setting a compelling methodological benchmark for neighbourhood study across the Roman world.

Conclusion

Taken together, the volumes by Anderson and Ellis and colleagues exemplify two complementary directions in the study of Pompeian domestic and urban space. Anderson presents the Roman house as an active participant in sensory and social life, emphasising

the interplay of architecture, habitus and experience. By contrast, Ellis, Emerson and Dicus's *Porta Stabia* volume anchors analysis in the fine-grained stratigraphic and architectural record of a working neighbourhood, foregrounding the economic and social dynamics of non-elite and mixed-use spaces. Where Anderson highlights the interpretive potential of integrating GIS, spatial syntax and visibility studies with material assemblages, the *Porta Stabia* team models best practice in excavation publication by balancing exhaustive documentation with narrative synthesis and appendices designed for re-use by future scholars.

In light of the often inconsistent and fragmentary history of excavation and publication at Pompeii, the methodological rigour and commitment to open data represented by the *Porta Stabia* project mark a decisive shift in Roman archaeology. Anderson demonstrates the interpretive potential of spatial methodologies when applied to existing datasets, while the *Porta Stabia* volume and its accompanying database provide the kind of systematically recorded material that can both support and extend such analyses. Equally, the *Porta Stabia* dataset will in the planned three volumes to come, benefit from the application of the granular spatial and sensory approaches exemplified in Anderson's study. Together, the two volumes illustrate the complementary strengths of data-rich excavation and methodologically innovative analyses and point towards a more integrated future for the study of Pompeii's domestic and urban spaces.

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