

CHAPTER TEN

URBAN PLANNING, ROADS, STREETS AND NEIGHBORHOODS



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Pompeii reveals to us how the Romans used their acute skills as architects and urban designers to serve their distinctive and clearly defined civic needs. In 89 BC the Romans took over an already flourishing Pompeii and spent 150 years rebuilding, refitting and reconstructing it. In AD 79 they were still not finished reshaping Pompeii, as any Roman city was always a work in progress. Described here is Pompeii's urban character based on what is visible today.¹

The city the Romans conquered was principally a commercial center, rich in great private luxury, but rather poor in public buildings, shrines and places of resort. Like their predecessors, the Romans spent lavishly on private pleasures, but their sense of civic duty also led them to spend liberally on religious and civic buildings and on public recreational facilities. The city they built within the Pompeii they inherited presents an impressive urban order in the service of the civil order.²

Pompeii exemplifies the urban legacy of Rome and presents an instructive example of a traditional town built to sustain and foster a life of civility. Population density was high by modern standards with the 167-acre city holding perhaps 10,000 to 12,000 residents,³ a number that swelled each day as people came from the countryside to enjoy the city's markets and diversions. The same general urban character pervaded the city's background buildings: atrium houses, row houses and other common types of residential party-wall construction, often with shops fronting the streets. The typical street cross-section had building walls rising directly from a sidewalk with curbs defining footpaths, although some streets lacked sidewalks on one or both sides, and some were narrower than others. The solidly built-up blocks were arrayed in an irregular grid pattern in which most streets change their alignment every few blocks, a condition the Romans exploited to great advantage as they imposed their urban order on the city.

The Romans defined four districts within the city (Figure 10.1): (1) a district for outdoor amusements centered at the amphitheater, (2) a genteel residential district in the area of the Central Baths, (3) a cultural district for theatrical entertainment, and (4) the district the forum dominates. Each district can be traversed in a walk of fifteen or so minutes; each possesses a distinctive character; all are connected one with another, and all form their most impressive linkages with the forum, the city's urban and civil center.



Figure 10.1 Pompeii's districts. The diameter of each district is approximately 500 m; the structures in black postdate the Roman takeover. Map compliments of H. Knickman; districts overlain by K. M. Hanna.

The district notable for offering outdoor amusements lay far to the east of the forum.⁴ Most prominent here is the amphitheater, one of the first structures the Romans built. The neighboring *palaestra* provides the city's largest outdoor open area. The amphitheater and *palaestra* lie just beyond the urban villas strung along via dell'Abbondanza where many of the buildings have rooms opening onto colonnades fronting graceful gardens, water features and orchards (Figure 23.1). In this district many of the *insulae* host agriculture including, most invitingly, viticulture (Figure 31.6). Here were pleasant places to take the air and a cup of wine in simple shelters nestled within spacious high-walled enclosures.

A great variety of large and small houses largely defines the district to the north located around the Central Baths, which were being built in AD 79 (Figure 15.6). These baths were so important that they occupied an entire *insula*, obliterating all traces of the *insula*'s previous use, and even intruded into the back street, rendering that street impassable to cart traffic.⁵

The baths stand at this district's center, at the intersection of the two major streets, strada Stabiana and via della Fortuna. Strada Stabiana probably began as a north–south country road passing outside Pompeii's putative original nucleus. The via di Nola–via della Fortuna route may also have lain outside that nucleus since it, like strada Stabiana, fails to run directly into the forum. Shops provide most of the frontage of both streets, as one would expect on well-traveled thoroughfares, and the new baths would have added more than a dozen shops. Both streets provide an entrance to the baths, but neither entrance would have rivaled the shops. When designing



Figure 10.2 Via Stabiana at its intersection with via della Fortuna–via di Nola, from southeast. Visible are a water tower, a small shrine, remains of a portico, a fountain and stepping stones.

Photo: J. J. Dobbins.



Figure 10.3 Via Stabiana at its intersection with via degli Augustali, from south. Visible are a water tower, a fountain, an arcade and stepping stones.

Photo: J. J. Dobbins.

this inward-looking building, it was more important to have shops along the streets than imposing façades for the baths.

Opposite the baths, and uniquely in Pompeii, one corner of the *strada Stabiana*—*via della Fortuna* intersection is notched out to form a small plaza (the southeast corner of VI.14).⁶ Here the Romans placed a portico fronting the shops (only traces remain), a water standpipe, a shrine, a fountain and the usual curb stones and related stepping stones across the roadway (Figure 10.2). Their placement seems consciously calculated to deflect the pedestrian toward the forum.

Similar inflections occur at the *via degli Augustali* and the *via dell'Abbondanza* intersections along *strada Stabiana*. The Romans enlivened the *via degli Augustali* intersection with a standpipe, a fountain and a feature encountered nowhere else in Pompeii, namely, an arched portico straddling the sidewalk and protecting a shop (Figure 10.3). These features invest the intersecting and unremarkable *via degli Augustali* with an importance worthy of its destination, the forum.

Farther south, *strada Stabiana* meets *via dell'Abbondanza*, the street connecting the amphitheater district to the forum. As *via dell'Abbondanza* approaches this intersection from the west it bends and widens to form the broad *largo Stabiana* stretching from the entrance to the Stabian Baths to the intersection itself (Figure 10.4). To the east the street narrows and jogs to the north thereby creating the impression for one approaching from the west that *via dell'Abbondanza* ends at *strada Stabiana*. The Romans exploited these conditions brilliantly. They placed a fountain

and standpipe on the east side of the intersection (Figure 16.4). In the opposite direction, they raised the pavement to make a forecourt for the expanded and rebuilt Stabian Baths and built a tetrapylon honoring the Holconius family (Figures 10.4 and 15.3). The visibility of the tetrapylon's southwest pier from the edge of the forum lying at some distance up the rising slope of *via dell'Abbondanza* connects this intersection with the city's center (Figure 10.5).

This intersection, appealing and richly equipped as it is, is less the center of a district than a linkage between the other four. It is, itself, linked most closely to the city's cultural district. In pre-Roman times this district centered around the Triangular Forum whose nucleus was a ruined temple, a theater and a small *palaestra* (VIII.7.29). The Romans reconditioned the temple ruin, edged much of the area it occupied with a Doric colonnade, expanded the theater (Figure 14.3), added a roofed theater, or odeion (Figure 14.1), outfitted a large peristyle that ultimately became a gladiators' barracks, and built (though cf. De Caro, Ch. 6) a temple to Jupiter Meilichios, and a sanctuary to Isis (Figure 13.3). A new entrance to the Triangular Forum, the Ionic Propylon, integrated this newly important area into the civil and architectural order of Pompeii.⁷ The propylon is visible frontally from *via dell'Abbondanza* at the western end of the *largo Stabiana*. This zone has been interpreted as an especially honorific and ceremonial passageway within the city.⁸ The Ionic Propylon is also visible obliquely from *strada Stabiana* (at its intersection with *via del Tempio di Iside*) where it constitutes the only conspicuous, beckoning urban element between the *largo Stabiana* and the *Porta di Stabia* at the city walls.

The forum, the focus of the Romans' most intense energies and grandest ambitions, is the center of the fourth and most important district. In pre-Roman Pompeii, the



Figure 10.4 Strada Stabiana (foreground) with largo Stabiana and *via dell'Abbondanza* ascending toward the forum, from east. Visible are the tetrapylon, the step to the level of the largo, and at the right, the corner of a fountain and a water tower. Photo: J. J. Dobbins.



Figure 10.5 View toward largo Stabiana from the upper end of via dell'Abbondanza near its intersection with the forum, from west. The southwest pier of the tetrapylon is visible in the distance. Photo: J. J. Dobbins.

forum was simply an open market area with porous edges that a person could enter from a number of streets (Figure 12.15). The Romans converted it into an urban center and focused attention on it from throughout the city (cf. Dobbins, Ch. 12). They collected the shops scattered around its edges into a *macellum* at the northeast corner, lined the forum's open area with colonnades, rebuilt the eastern side with four impressive new imperial buildings, modified the opposite side, apparently added public buildings at the south end, and at the north end probably rebuilt the Temple of Jupiter. The Romans also transformed the forum's physical relationship to the rest of the city. They eliminated some entrances thereby making the forum's presence within the city dependent on a few entrances, each of which connected the forum to the city's larger urban order.⁹

The least important entrance served the area south of the forum. The Romans blocked via delle Scuole with a fountain, curbstones and a Doric tufa column aligned with similar columns in the forum colonnade. Much more important is the pair of streets, via dell'Abbondanza and, almost in a direct line with it, via Marina to the west that together form the only route across the city passing through the forum (Figures 12.1 and 12.2).¹⁰ In both streets, preparation for entering the forum begins at some distance away where the usual façades one encounters on Pompeii's major streets give way to monumental walls. In via dell'Abbondanza these are the walls of the Eumachia Building on the north, and on the south, the enclosure traditionally identified as the *Comitium* (VIII. 3) with its entrance from this street set on a platform reached by three steps along the line of the sidewalk. At the forum's edge a person encounters bollards and a curb like those at the other forum entrances, excluding

cart traffic from the forum. Because the colonnade here was still under construction in AD 79, the intended form of this entrance remains obscure, but clearly the Romans had made the street's breaching of the colonnade conspicuous by orienting an obviously wider intercolumniation on the street's center.

The approach to the forum from the west is more monumental. In moving from the sea front, just beyond the Porta Marina, up the steep incline toward the forum, one encounters on the right the massive Roman precinct wall of the Sanctuary of Venus, which intrudes into the street and narrows it considerably. Above and to the left, at the higher sidewalk level onto which the neighboring houses front, one sees several columns (these are some of the twelve columns that form a colonnade in front of these houses, visible in Figure 10.6). Given that streetside colonnades are indicators of urban significance, the visitor is at once informed of the importance of this entrance to the city. Next, and also on the left, is the intersecting, narrow vicolo del Gigante. At this point one may continue to walk in the street or ascend three steps to a broad sidewalk that fronts several houses in *insula* VII.7. Immediately after this point the street widens as one passes the corner of the Sanctuary of Venus. On the right the high north wall of the Basilica stretches to the end of the street and is relieved only by a doorway located midway along its length. Midway along *insula* VII.7, opposite the north entrance to the Basilica just mentioned, begins the plain, stark wall enclosing the Temple of Apollo whose entrance lies half way between this point and the forum. At the street's head stood the two-story unfluted, limestone, Tuscan and Ionic colonnade, still under construction along the west side of the forum in AD 79. Its intercolumniation for the street is more generous here just as it is across the forum, suggesting that the two sides were understood to be parts of a pair (Figure 10.6).



Figure 10.6 Via Marina from within the forum, from east. Visible are the forum's Tuscan colonnade, the Basilica (left), the Sanctuary of Apollo (right), the entrance to the Sanctuary of Venus (marked by modern white signs) and part of the colonnade flanking via Marina. Photo: J. J. Dobbins.

The Romans exploited the lack of parallelism between the exterior walls of the Basilica and Sanctuary of Apollo to produce complementary forced perspectives. When one looks toward the forum, the street's diverging sides defeat perspective's tendency to narrow vistas and make objects seem farther away. The forum therefore appears large in the immediate distance. When one looks away from the forum and toward the Porta Marina (Figure 10.6), the convergence of the curbs and walls accentuates the perspective and appears to push everything farther away. In the distance two features catch one's eye. On the left, beyond the Basilica, the entrance to the precinct of the Temple of Venus is inviting and totally open. On the right and a little farther away is the first column of the *via Marina* colonnade. This prominent column announces the Porta Marina which the steep decline renders invisible from near the forum. A final touch invests this area with importance: from the forum to the precinct of the Temple of Venus the pavement is enriched with small white limestone pieces inserted in the corners of the dark lava pavers.¹¹

These entrances pale in comparison with the forum's northeast entrance. The connection between the forum and the rest of the city begins in the constricted area between the Macellum and the flank of the Temple of Jupiter (Figure 12.5). The Romans made this an important *largo*. They built a large arch (so-called "of Tiberius") at the back of the temple (visible in Figure 10.8); it either replaced or duplicated the one they had built and then destroyed near the front of the temple. They introduced an elegant Corinthian colonnade, and made the façade of the Macellum equally grand. Furthermore, they defined this area with a subtle telling detail. Around the entire forum ran a pair of steps. The lower tread formed an apron approximately 1.80 m deep; the upper tread was the stylobate for the forum colonnade. Within the Macellum *largo* the apron reduces its depth to that of a normal step, a detail that stressed the linkage between the forum and the area just beyond it while also making it distinct.

Beyond the Macellum *largo* and through the great arch is *via degli Augustali*, the street whose intersection with *strada Stabiana* we examined earlier. The extension of the Macellum *largo* northward is *via del Foro*, a street with an urban character unique in Pompeii.

Via del Foro's west side is faced with shops and the unpretentious men's entrance to the Forum Baths, one of the first Roman additions to the city. Shop fronts interspersed with house entrances originally lined the street's east side, but at an early date the Romans added a portico of thirteen brick and stucco Tuscan columns, beginning at *via della Fortuna* and running for most of the block's length (Figure 10.7). Later modifications at the portico's southern end produced an emphatic entrance (VII.4.10) to some rooms behind the shops. That entrance preserves two original columns, but all the other columns in the portico were transformed at some unknown date into compound piers except for the three columns nearest *via della Fortuna* which, either then or at some other time, were removed. The Temple of Fortuna Augusta occupies the space from which the three columns had been removed. Dedicated in AD 3/4 (the only dateable work here), the temple was paid for by M. Tullius whose name is traditionally given to the portico.

The temple's design and siting wring the greatest possible urbanistic advantage from the corner site. The temple's steps project into *via del Foro*, and its lower podium is deep enough to hold an altar visible from within the forum (Figures 10.7 and 10.8). A northward tilt of the building's principal axis brings the temple's front



Figure 10.7 Via del Foro. Overview from south, showing the Porticus Tulliana, the Temple of Fortuna Augusta with its altar on the lower terrace of the temple podium, the so-called Arch of Caligula with via del Mercurio beyond, and the sidewalk and facades of the street's western side.
Photo: J. J. Dobbins.

out into the intersection making it magnetic to those approaching from via delle Terme. Travelers on this street, which continues a route beginning at the important Porta Ercolano, were drawn here for their entrance to the forum rather than to the shorter back-alley route through the narrow vicolo delle Terme (Map 2).

The temple's design and siting make it visually important from the east as well. From the distant notched intersection at strada Stabiana, the bright marble temple flank beckoned people to take the brief ascent up via della Fortuna, a high-class street linked with big houses and subsidiary shops.

Also visible while making that ascent is the flank of the other important element at via del Foro, the so-called Arch of Caligula (seen in Figure 10.7). Serving as the entrance to via di Mercurio, its flank is conspicuous because the façade line in the last block on the north side of via della Fortuna before the arch (VI.10) was set back, possibly in conjunction with the temple's construction.¹²

The wide via di Mercurio lying beyond the arch is devoted to large houses with almost no shops. The other blocks north of via della Fortuna—via delle Terme—are similarly luxurious, although some lesser dwellings and shops are intermixed. This distinctly patrician district stands in contrast to the humble, utilitarian, character of the blocks with narrow, irregular streets which the new Roman buildings on the forum's east side cut off from the forum.

The intersection with its arch, temple, baths and portico collects the routes attracted here and then funnels them along via del Foro into the forum. Drawing people down the street's slight descent is the "Arch of Tiberius" opening into the largo in front of the Macellum; next is the high flank of the Temple of Jupiter, and beyond that lies the vast open area of the forum with its brilliant limestone pavement and bright limestone colonnades. Here a person has obviously reached Pompeii's center.



Figure 10.8 Forum. Overview from south. Towards the Temple of Jupiter, flanked by two arches and with Vesuvius behind. The photograph is taken near the intersection of major north–south and east–west urban axes. Visible through the arch at the right is the altar of the Temple of Fortuna Augusta (cf. Fig. 10.7 for a closer view of the altar). Photo: J. J. Dobbins.

From the forum a person can also be directed to all the districts in the city. In front of a large statue base centered near the forum's south end is a small area (perhaps 3 m²) that serves as the city's specially charged center of gravity (Figure 12.2).¹³ This area is both the focus of the elements of the urban ensemble and the area from which the linkages between the forum and the city's districts are especially clear.

Four axes intersect here to define that focus. One is the forum's long axis culminating in the Temple of Jupiter with Vesuvius looming behind it (Figure 10.8). The second is the prolongation of *via Marina* leading to the precinct of Venus and the sea just beyond the *Porta Marina*; the entrance to that precinct and the easternmost column of the colonnade draw a person's attention to what remains hidden farther along (Figure 10.6). The third is the prolongation of *via dell'Abbondanza*. It is connected indirectly through the Ionic Propylon to the Triangular Forum, while from the head of *via dell'Abbondanza* the visibility of the southwest pylon of the tetrapylon connects it directly to *strada Stabiana* (Figure 10.5). From that elaborate intersection people can be carried on into the farther arena district or up and down *strada Stabiana*. The final axis is northward, along a line of sight running through the *Macellum largo* and the so-called Arch of Tiberius along *via del Foro* to reach the quite distinctively visible altar on the podium of the Temple of Fortuna Augusta (Figure 10.8). From here one can easily continue up *via di Mercurio*, follow the bustling route toward the *Porta Ercolano*, or descend along the attractive *via della Fortuna* to reach the broad expanses of Pompeii's northeastern areas. The Romans made the forum both goal and beginning of all the important routes of sight and travel within the city. None could doubt that here was the center of their distinctive and impressive conjunction of civil and urban order.

NOTES

- 1 Most of what follows is based on observations made during two-week periods in June of 1995, 1996 and 1997 as a member of the Pompeii Forum Project directed by John J. Dobbins. Fundamental to this work was the on-site collaboration with team member Mark Schimmenti, Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Tennessee.
- 2 Using the term urban order here is meant to provide a parallel to the Roman civil term, *ordo* (the body of magistrates that within a municipal constitution form the city council), thereby suggesting the reciprocity between the urban and the architectural on the one hand and the political and civil on the other.
- 3 W. Jongman, *The Economy and Society of Pompeii*, Amsterdam, 1988, pp. 108–12.
- 4 Its center might be said to be at the intersection of via di Castricio and via di porta Nocera, although nothing distinctive marks that intersection. All street names are modern.
- 5 The bath's walls extend beyond the original curb line into vicolo di Tesmo (between *insulae* V.4 and V.5). A new, narrow sidewalk of large lava blocks set beyond the bath's walls intrudes far enough into the original, heavily rutted street to make it probably the narrowest street in Pompeii and quite impassable for carts. None of this is shown on the Eschbach plan; but see Map 3.
- 6 The notch in the building allotments seems to be as old as this area's platting according to the work of the University of Leiden group headed by Herman Geertman and communicated to me orally.
- 7 The Propylon and associated Doric colonnade, both built of tufa, have generally been thought to be Samnite structures with Augustan repairs and minor modifications; see for example L. Richardson, jr, *Pompeii: An Architectural History*, Baltimore, MD and London, 1988, pp. 67–73. However, excavations conducted in the summer of 1996 by the University of Rome "La Sapienza" point to a date between the earthquake of AD 62 and the eruption of 79, although the evidence is not without its ambiguities: A. Carandini, "Nuovi progetti, nuove domande, nuovi metodi," in P. G. Guzzo (ed.), *Pompei. Scienza e Società. 250° Anniversario degli Scavi di Pompei*. Convegno Internazionale, Naples, November 25–27, 1998, Milan, 2001, pp. 127–9. For a commentary on the previous article, see P. G. Guzzo and F. Pesando, "Sul colonnato nel foro triangolare di Pompei: indizi in un delitto perfetto," *Eutopia* II n.s., 2002, pp. 111–21.
- 8 A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Public honour and private shame: the urban texture of Pompeii," in T. J. Cornell and K. Lomas (eds), *Urban Society in Roman Italy*, London, 1995, pp. 39–62 (especially 47–50).
- 9 Three additional, older, inconspicuous surviving entrances remained unblocked or unimproved: vicolo di Championnet south of the Basilica, another between the western and central municipal buildings at the forum's south end, and the third through the pair of openings to the west of the Temple of Jupiter, an area apparently being altered in AD 79.
- 10 Via delle Scuole and via del Foro have a similar slight misalignment with one another, but the great distance between them and the intruding forum colonnades have not allowed them to be perceived as parts of a pair.
- 11 Richardson, *Pompeii*, p. 278, n. 14, postulates that this pavement treatment marks this section as a processional way associated with the Temple of Venus. This would correspond with a similar putative use for the unflecked via dell'Abbondanza postulated by Wallace-Hadrill, "Public honour and private shame: the urban texture of Pompeii," pp. 39–62. Similar flecking occurs in front of the Temple of Fortuna Augusta in via del Foro, discussed below.
- 12 In *insula* VI.10 the building alignment is parallel to the temple's flank and is skewed relative to the line formed by the north street face of *insulae* VI.12, 13 and 14. [The "Arch of Caligula" was also topped by a bronze equestrian statue, making it even more visible (cf. Welch, Ch. 36; Figure 36.2.—Eds)]
- 13 Recall that Roman perspective schemes vanished to an area and not a point as occurs in the perspective system invented in the early fifteenth century. For useful comments see L. Bek, *Towards Paradise on Earth (Analecta Romana, IX)*, Odense, 1980, esp. part III, 1. That an imperial equestrian statue sat atop the base is, sadly, mere conjecture.