CHAPTER 2

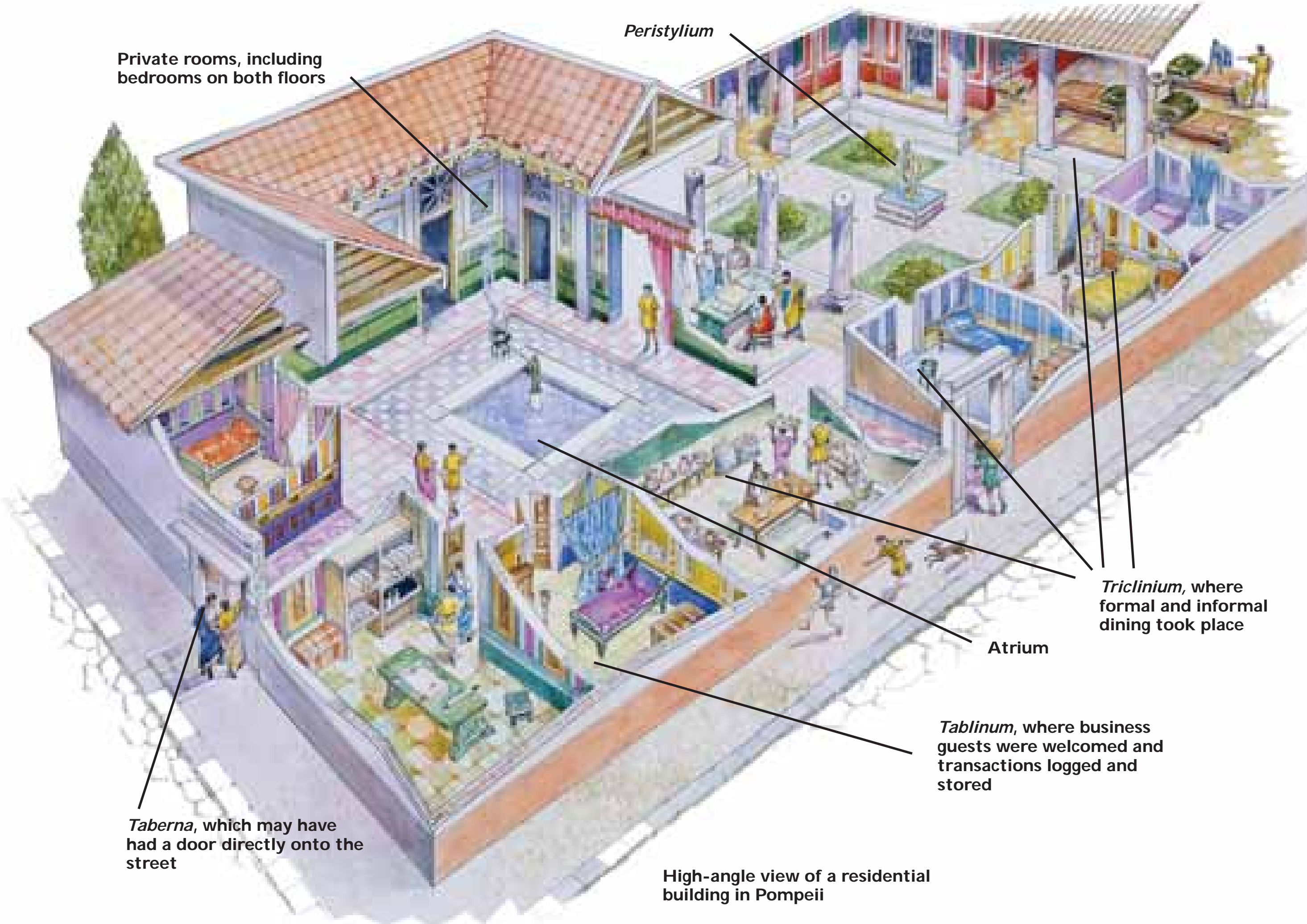
The Homes People Lived in

So, the early Christians lived in cities. But what kind of homes did they live in? This question is not only interesting – after all, you only have to turn on the television to see how fascinated we are by people's homes – it is also essential for understanding their world. This is because the places where the first Christians lived were also the places where they worked (for the most part) and met for worship and learning. So understanding their physical location is crucial for gaining insight into their daily lives and social relationships.

It used to be thought that the few rich in the Roman empire lived in large, spacious, well-appointed villas while the poor masses huddled together in overcrowded, badly constructed apartment blocks, often with a whole family in a single room. There is a good deal of truth in this. But this simple picture has not survived the detailed work of archaeologists investigating the remains of living spaces across the empire, especially in Pompeii and Ostia, Corinth and Ephesus.

It seems that architectural styles were pretty limited in the ancient world. The two dominant housing designs are generally referred to as the *domus* and the *insula.* The *domus* was a villa-style house, usually constructed over one or two storeys around a central courtyard. The *insula* was a block of apartments, usually with shop-fronts at street level and multi-room living spaces on the floors above, getting smaller and more basic as they went up.

We will examine these two housing styles in some detail before looking at what the physical remains from the cities that have been substantially excavated tell us about the precise nature of living arrangements in the empire. The results of these studies are both fascinating and surprising and throw shafts of light on the nature of the early Christian communities that gathered in these cities.



High-angle view of a residential building in Pompeii

A Roman's home was his castle

Visitors to Pompeii often gasp when they walk into the houses left by the eruption, partly because they are so well preserved – though the colours on the walls have faded somewhat – but also because they can imagine living in them: their layout is very similar to housing across the world today. But that familiarity masks radical differences in the way the houses of the better off were laid out and what amenities they could boast.

The basic design was reproduced right across the ancient world. There is a detailed cross-sectional picture of a Roman *domus* above, AD to which you should refer to while reading the following description.

A *domus* was accessed from the street by double doors set in a substantial brick wall. There were very few windows on the outside walls of properties for security and privacy reasons. In the absence of glass, which though available was not widely used even in the homes of the rich, such windows would have been just holes in the wall and would have let in any unwelcome

element – both the weather and undesirable passers-by. Often the doorway was between shop-fronts that were an integral part of the house.

Going through the doors led into a narrow corridor called the *vestibulum*. The front doors of such houses – especially those owned and occupied by a single elite family – were opened at dawn and shut at sunset. This meant that the *vestibulum* was accessible to anyone who wanted to enter. For this reason, there was usually a household slave stationed in a small booth to ensure that only people with legitimate business in the house gained entrance – but it needs to be remembered that merely coming to look at the decoration might have been legitimate business, since it would enhance the status of the householder to have his taste admired by lots of people.

Standing in the *vestibulum* the visitor would be able to look into the heart of the house. At the end of the corridor were the *fauces*, the main doors that led into the atrium, which was an open courtyard, often with a well or pool that captured rain water at the centre, and with the main ground-floor rooms leading off it.

A visitor to a large house would have seen that beyond the atrium there was another courtyard area, usually surrounded by columns. This was the *peristylium* (often referred to as the peristyle in English), a colonnaded garden area at the rear of the property. Sometimes this garden was purely ornamental, offering shade and a pleasant environment in which family members could sit and sometimes work. But more often than not it was a place where fruit, olives, and vegetables were grown by the householder.

This Roman cruet is an example of the kind of glassware available in the first century AD.

The *peristylium* was surrounded by rooms that were probably used as bedrooms, either for members of the family or for household slaves and retainers – depending on the numbers living in the home and whether there were rooms upstairs that the family could use. Such rooms, whether on the ground or first floor of the house, constituted the private part of the residence that was off-limits to all but family.

The internal walls of such a house would have been brightly decorated with bold murals of scenes from Greek and Roman mythology and wall-hangings and curtains of multicoloured fabric. Pottery and statues would also have adorned the spaces. All this would have been visible to the visitor standing in the *vestibulum* and was intended to impress them with the good taste and wealth of the householder who owned the property.

View of a vestibule with skylight, from the suburban baths of the Flavian era (AD 69–96), located in Herculaneum.

Welcome to dinner

In the rooms leading off the atrium the majority of day-time activities took place. In most homes there would have been a *triclinium*, a dining-room. The word literally means "three couches" and this indicates the traditional way in which triclinia were laid out. The formal dinners of well-to-do Romans took place with guests reclining on couches placed around three walls of the triclinium, three to a couch. This means that nine guests could eat comfortably, the food being served by household servants on small tables set at the centre of the room.

Of course, it is almost unthinkable that even in well-off homes every meal was taken in this way. Most meals were probably eaten in a variety of locations, sitting upright on a chair or a wall in the atrium or *peristylium*. Formal dinners, also known as symposia, were relatively rare events except in the homes of the very wealthy. But such meals might have been the model adopted by the early Christians for their worship services and celebration of the Lord's Supper (see chapter 4).

A depiction of diners reclining around a circular table at a wedding anniversary feast.

Remains of the house of the banker Lucius Caecilius Iucundus, Pompeii. Here, the view is of the *tablinum*, seen from the atrium. The house was partially destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.

Open for business

Opposite the triclinium, leading off the atrium in the other direction, was another substantial room known as the *tablinum.* This was the main reception room of the home. The room might have been separated from the atrium and *peristylium* only by curtains or foldable wooden screens, allowing the space to be opened up when needed – for a celebration banquet or large gathering, for instance.

In this room the master of the house would receive visitors, often clients or business partners of one sort or another. Possibly in this room the master and his household slaves might have done any paperwork associated with the business of the household. It is here that he would have conducted any political business he was involved in, welcomed city officials, and planned civic functions or the banquets of any guild or association of which he might have been a member.

If the shop-fronts attached to the house were managed by the family that occupied the home, the *tablinum* could have been the place where

orders were written up and records collated. Possibly in a substantial home there would have been another room where such records – on clay tablets or parchment rolls – would have been kept.

Behind the shop units was a room that was probably the kitchen. This would have been a small room with a hearth for a fire and an arrangement over it to allow pots and kettles to be put over the fire to heat. Meat, on the relatively rare occasions when it would be served, was almost certainly roasted on spits over braziers outside in the *peristylium*. The fact that kitchens were small meant that it was impossible to produce large banquets in them. But since the dining-room could only hold nine to a dozen people, the scale of catering was never anything but rudimentary except in the most prosperous homes of the elite.

Apartment living – Roman-style

Those who did not live in a *domus* – and were not living on the streets, in caves, among the tombs on the edge of town, or in makeshift shacks leaning against the sides of houses – lived in an apartment block or *insula*. These were less standard and so it is not possible to describe a typical flat.

Some were just rooms behind shop-fronts. Perhaps a shop or bar worker had a place to sleep and another place to prepare food behind the room where their business was conducted. Some shop and bar workers lived on mezzanine floors suspended above the shop, offering space for a sleeping mat but precious little else.

Other apartments were suites of rooms on the first or second floors above shops. Again there would have been rooms for the family to sleep in and a room in which to prepare and eat food and perhaps entertain guests. The better appointed *insulae* would have had a family lounge, off which all the other rooms led, where meals could be prepared and eaten. But often families – because of the difficulty of cooking in such an apartment – obtained their food at the corner *popina* and ate outside or back in their sleeping quarters. On the top floors of such blocks, the poorest families rented single rooms where they ate and slept in utterly basic conditions. They probably had no furniture to speak of, sleeping on mats, and obtaining food from street vendors, which they ate with their hands.

Floor space in the *insulae* was at a premium in the early years of the empire because laws limited the height of buildings to 50 feet – though the regulations were frequently flouted. It was also limited by the fact that *insulae* were usually built around a central courtyard. This was to ensure light got into most rooms and to allow access to the shared amenities – mainly water, probably in the form of a well or a fountain in the centre of the courtyard, and a latrine, where waste of all kind would be flushed into a cesspit. The better-built *insulae* had a latrine on each floor and chutes for waste disposal – but these were rare in the first century.

A typical street *popina*, where hot food was served to eat on the premises, or else could be taken back to one's room or *insula*.

While a *domus* owned and occupied by a rich family would have been attractively decorated, with mosaics on the floors, paintings on the walls, and highly coloured fabrics used to divide up living spaces, the *insulae* would have been very bare in comparison. They were built of brick or plastered stucco with mud or brick floors. Many blocks were made of wood and mud-brick, which made them insecure and prone to burn down. Building standards gradually improved during the first century but the poor still lived in substandard, overcrowded accommodation at the end of the first Christian century as they did at its beginning.

While many *domus*-style homes had heating in the form of fireplaces in some of the rooms and even underfloor heating such as was used in the bath-houses (see p. 49), the *insulae* lacked heating of any kind. There were no fireplaces and the absence of glass in the windows meant that in the winter they could be very cold indeed. For this reason, some residents lit braziers in the common areas of the blocks and they were used for cooking as well as heating. At night they would have been lit by oil lamps. All these naked flames added to the risk of fire, and *insulae* frequently burned down.

Indeed the poor quality of many *insulae* is highlighted by the satirist Juvenal, who mused:

> *who at cool Praeneste or at Volsinii amid its leafy hills, was ever afraid of his house tumbling down? But here we inhabit a city propped up for the most part by slats; for that is how the landlord patches up the crack in the old wall, bidding the inmates sleep at ease under the ruin that hangs above their heads.*

He was probably overstating the case, but there is evidence of frequent building collapses in Rome through the first century. And it is likely that other cities had similar stories to tell.

In Rome there were twenty-five apartment blocks for every single *domus*-style house. A fourth-century record informs us that the respective figures were 46,602 and 1,797. As other cities grew, the proportions were probably the same. The blocks were thrown up to meet the rising demand for accommodation as people flowed into the cities drawn by the promise of a better life than the one they were leading in the countryside.

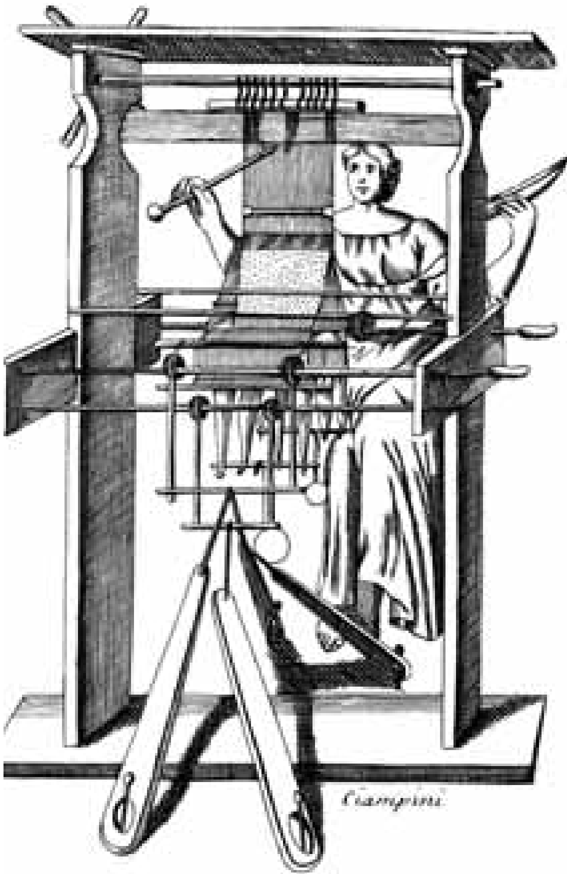
At street level, the *insulae* were continuous rows of small shops (*tabernae*). During the day these shops were open to the world; at night they would have been closed up with heavy wooden shutters. The shops would have been retail outlets, selling a wide variety of goods, and workshops where artisans and craft-workers made products to order and for sale. These would have been noisy, smelly places interspersed with *popinae* where food and drink were on sale all day.

When the shops shut for the night, the noise would not have died down, just changed. After dark, carts, banned from the streets during daylight hours because of congestion, were allowed to roam the city, delivering and collecting goods. And in most cities there was a vibrant and noisy night-life featuring the usual suspects – groups of young men out drinking, prostitutes looking for business, people going to and from dinner parties – as well as large numbers of *insula*-dwellers who had worked through the day and needed, once it was too dark to work, to get water, find food, and perhaps unwind after a day bent over a loom, anvil, or bench.

I work here as well

It is important to bear in mind when we think about housing that this was not only where people lived but also where most people worked. Obviously, household slaves worked where they lived, keeping the household running, serving as cooks, maids, porters, gardeners, etc. Equally obviously, if those who occupied a *domus* owned and managed the shops at the front of the house, members of the family and not just slaves would have worked out of them.

But it is also the case that many of the things that in the modern world are bought from third parties, in the ancient world were made at home. So in most homes, for example, families would have made their own clothes. In the villas of the better off, looms would have been set



up in the atria for weaving cloth for decorative purposes as well as making and mending clothes. But even in the homes of the poor, clothes would have been made or, more likely, mended and made to last another season by a member of the family.

And families whose income was based on making and selling a product would have undertaken all the manufacturing in their home. So, for instance, a baker would have milled his flour and moulded and baked his loaves in his home, housing the equipment needed for the purpose around his living space. A family that earned its living by making the everyday pots that people needed for cooking and eating would, similarly, have housed the potter's wheels and kilns needed for such a trade in their home and sold the goods they made through a *taberna* at the front of either the *domus* or *insula* in which they lived.

Families, which for all the poorest in society meant not just parents and children but also surviving grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, along with any slaves the family owned, would have lived and worked in the same space. For this reason, their homes would have been open to the public in the sense that customers and suppliers of raw materials would have been coming and going throughout the day and sometimes well into the evening.

Left: **An etching depicting a woman working at a Roman loom.**
Below: **Examples of Roman domestic pottery.**

Mixed-housing schemes

But even this does not tell the whole story about urban living in the first century. In the previous chapter we saw how careful examination of a single *insula* reveals that a variety of households would have lived in close proximity. This is important not only for understanding where and how people lived but also for how to make sense of what we read in the New Testament about the way early churches were organized.

So, for instance, in the "*insula* of the Menander" in Pompeii, archaeologists have discovered a number of individual homes of various sizes and types that shared common amenities, such as water and drainage. The site contains a really enormous *domus*, with

House of the Menander at Pompeii.

a stable yard and huge *peristylium*. But this is surrounded by dwellings of various shapes and styles.

A tiny house of one or possibly two rooms, which opens on the street, appears to have been occupied by a stonemason. Not far away, a much larger house was the home and workshop of a cabinet-maker. On one corner of the plot, there was a *popina*. On the site there was a bath-house which would have had a number of slaves working at it, whose poor single-room accommodation has also been identified.

Some scholars have sought to rate people's position on the social and economic ladder by assessing the floor area of their living accommodation. So the stonemason lived in a home of 40 square metres, whereas the cabinet-maker's home was some 310 square metres, and the substantial house at the centre of the property enjoyed 1,700 square metres. The suggestion is that the more space you occupied, the higher up the social scale you were likely to be.

But the issue is not just how much space people had but the fact that they lived so close to each other, almost to the point of having front doors next to each other off the same street.

The other factor that brought people into close proximity was that the upstairs rooms of a *domus* were often let out to other families. Just because someone lived in a *domus*, it did not mean that they were wealthy (if they owned it, they would almost certainly have been wealthy; perhaps they would even have been part of the social elite). Possibly for many people in cities, the only way they could balance the budget was to let out parts of the property they lived in to another family. Often these people would share the same front door as the owners of the house but there is evidence in a lot of sites of external stairs being added to allow tenants independent access.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that many wealthy people chose to buy or rent an apartment in a well-sited *insula* in the city because their main residence was in the country. Many elite families would have needed to have a base in Rome, or the commercial centre nearest to where their family farm and principal residence was located.

Meeting the neighbours

It was the close proximity of people in the cities that gave the early Christians a ready audience for their message. The two places where people were most likely to meet were at work or at a meal. Since these were often in the same place, it meant that people saw each other often.

Acts 18:7 tells us about the house of Titius Justus where Paul stayed. Scholars believe that this man is also known as Gaius and is the same as the Gaius referred to in Romans 16:23. As an early believer in the city he played a significant role in the development of the church – not least because he appears to have had a house large enough to accommodate a lot of people.

Chapter 3 will discuss how workplace encounters were the primary way in which the early Christians transmitted their message through the cities of the empire. But it does not

Examples of Roman houses at Tindari (Tyndaris), a Greek colony dating to 396 BC, destroyed in AD 836.

need much imagination to think of Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla at the end of the working day, getting food at the *popina* on the corner of the *insula* where their workshop was and engaging in conversation with others eating and drinking there. It is likely that orders for tents or other leather goods resulted in invitations to people's homes to deliver what had been made, and that conversations there led to dinner invitations and new churches forming in the homes of people drawn to the new faith.

Christians did not meet in special buildings called "churches" for at least 200 years. So the worship life of the early Christians happened in the homes where they lived. This meant that groups of believers might gather either in the *domus* belonging to – or rented by – one of the few wealthier Christians in Corinth or Ephesus or Rome, or in one of the *insulae* where the majority lived. It is possible to think of small huddles of people eating a shared meal in a workshop or courtyard, telling the stories of Jesus to one another and to any interested bystanders who happened to stop by, drawn as much by the food, no doubt, as by the laughter and intense conversation.