

The Ostian and Vitruvian domus

Differences and similarities



Denise Goossens

3757633

OS3, dr. S. Stevens

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“Our chief sources of information regarding the domestic architecture of ancient Italy are two, - the treatise of Vitruvius, and the remains found in Pompeii.”

August Mau 1899

Until recently, little was known about ancient Roman houses. Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, Pompeii was the sole source of information but gradually more and more remains were excavated and our knowledge grew. We have come a long way in our knowledge of the ancient Roman *domus* since the discovery of Pompeii and, although the findings in Pompeii are still the most researched, more attention has started to be paid to other part of the Roman empire. One example of a city that has been given more and more attention during the past decades is Ostia which, despite being inferior to Pompeii in terms of general architecture, is just as interesting and almost as well preserved. On top of that, most attention is given to the *insulae* in Ostia rather than to the Ostian *domus*.¹ In this paper I want to direct attention to three *domus* found in Ostia: the house of the Porch, the house of the Columns and the house of Fortuna Annonaria. I chose Ostia for this paper because of how well the city is preserved. It can therefore be studied very well. It is also in close proximity to Rome and has been very important in the history of this city and therefore of the Roman empire. Furthermore, it can be seen as a representative city of other parts of the empire. The three houses I have selected were chosen for being well preserved, for the fact that they are fully excavated and also the amount of information that can be found on them. Boersma wrote for example a very useful book in which he describes in detail the house of Fortuna Annonaria and the house of the Porch. Because this book is able to provide details on subjects such as thresholds, heights of walls and both wall- and floor decoration among other things, without a direct interpretation of the findings, it is very useful as an objective resource.

By taking these houses as a starting point, I want to compare them to the literary sources (Vitruvius' Ten Books on Architecture) and not the other way around as Vitruvius' book is not the standard for every Roman *domus* and should not be seen that way. In essence I shall study the archaeological remains and test these findings against Vitruvius.² On top of that I shall apply part of the theory of Hillier and Hanson on spaces to the Ostian *domus*. I am doing so because I think it is important to use elements of other disciplines in historical research as it can give surprising and interesting insights. Considering the limited length of this paper, I shall focus on the theory of spatial analysis within the house; this theory is based on a general idea of spaces within a house and can be applied to houses both from the past and the present. The way it works is that each room is represented by a circle and when a room is connected to other rooms by a doorway, a line can be drawn between the two, this will lead to a diagram from which different rooms and their relation to each other can be read.³ This combination of disciplines was already used by Stöger in her research and by using both spatial analysis and thorough archeological assessment, the study is moved to a higher level. It is not merely a description, the research offers new insights into the spatial organization of the *domus* in Ostia.⁴ Unlike a lot of historians, I will not discuss nomenclature in this paper. This is the discussion on

¹ Read for example McKay (1975).

² This different perspective is also suggested by Allison (2001).

³ Like Hillier and Hanson (1984) show in chapter 6 of their book.

⁴ Stöger (2011) 51.

naming rooms and attaching function and importance to these names; there is for example a discussion on naming the *atrium* and the *peristylum* and their functions. Although it can be fruitful to think about the names that are given to spaces using the books of Vitruvius as a starting point and the errors that may occur due to using this one theory on every house, I do not believe it adds anything to my paper.

To sum up, the main point of this paper is to compare the *domus* from late antiquity found in Ostia to the Vitruvian *domus* deduced from his Ten Books on Architecture. I am aware that Vitruvius wrote his books about 300 years before the *domus* at Ostia were built but, considering that my goal is to compare this early description to a later realization of a house, this is not a problem. Furthermore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate to what extent the descriptions made by Vitruvius still comply with the younger Ostian houses. Vitruvius is one of the only literary sources on architecture we have and most historians use it by applying its contents to all the archaeological remains. This is of course not the right way to use this source. For the archaeological sources I shall use excavation reports and books that give a detailed description of the houses from later investigations of the remains. I do not choose to produce a general plan for the Roman *domus* in the whole of the Roman Empire, nor even for the whole city of Ostia and I am fully aware that I cannot incorporate every part of the house into my description and that some things will be left aside due to the limited amount of words. Nevertheless, this paper shall be a good beginning to a further research.

The Vitruvian *domus*

Vitruvius wrote his book on architecture in the first century B.C. and proudly presented it as the first handbook on everything concerning architecture. In it, he wrote about a whole range of building activities, from decorations to machine building to the design of a whole city. My focus will be on book VI on private buildings (in particular on parts two, three and four). At the beginning of this chapter, Vitruvius explained that he wrote this book as a guide and this chapter was especially for private buildings. An example of the Vitruvian plan is attached in attachment 4. Note that we have no plans drawn by Vitruvius himself and that this plan is an interpretation of the book of Vitruvius by a modern translator.

Vitruvius started with the *atrium* and gave detailed information on the length, width and height of this main hall. Upon entering a Vitruvian house, one came directly into the *atrium*. According to Varro, the *atrium* was the 'reception hall' of the house and was named from the Etruscan word *atria*. He does not give a translation of this word, he only says the model of the *atrium* was derived from the Etruskans. This means the location and function of the *atrium* within a Roman house was similar to the *atrium* in the Etruskan house. 'The *cavum aedium* "inner court" is said of the roofed part which is left open within the house-walls, for common use by all.'⁵ A closer look at the Vitruvian plan shows the room called *atrium* had the same function as Varro stated. Vitruvius said that the *atrium* is a room which could be entered without a special invitation from the house owner, making it a relatively public room.⁶

⁵ Varro, De Lingua Latina V, 161 (trans. R.G. Kent).

⁶ Vitr. 6.5.

The width of the *alae*, which are the wings attached to the *atrium* (this can be seen on the plan in attachment 4), depended on the length of the *atrium*. The *tablinium* also depended on the *atrium*. Vitruvius stated that all of these rooms needed a specific height in accordance to their function. The *peristylum* should lie athwart on the *atrium* and had to be a third longer than it was deep. Vitruvius further mentioned *triclinia* as oblong. *Pinakothekai* (picture galleries) were also oblong, but bigger due to the presence of columns in this room. The calculations Vitruvius gave for these rooms were rather complicated and I doubt they were always followed by the readers of his books. Vitruvius said that one, whenever possible, should use these calculations, but when the terrain made this impossible, the architect could and should be creative and alter the proportions.

In part four of his chapter on private houses, Vitruvius gave a description of the orientation of the rooms in a house based on the position of the sun in different times of the year. The things mentioned here are rather logical and useful, but one might not always use them due to shortage of space within a house for example. According to Vitruvius, one should have as much as three *triclinia*, for which he used the sun for orientation. He stated winter-*triclinia* (and bathrooms) should face south because they needed the light and warmth of the sun in the evening. *Triclinia* used in spring and autumn had to face east, so the sun would not directly face them in the evening. They would however be warmed throughout the day by the sun and would have been of a comfortable temperature whenever they needed to be used in the evening. For summer they had to face north, so the room would stay cool. Same goes for *pinakothekai* and ateliers, because they needed to receive the same amount of light throughout the day. *Cubicula* and libraries should face east, because they needed light in the morning.

Based on these descriptions, a lot of standardized plans can be designed. These are based on a couple of rules Vitruvius gives. There had to be an *atrium* with a *compluvium* inside a house. Connected to this *atrium* were two *alae*. Furthermore there had to be a *tablinium*, three oblong *triclinia*, some *cubicula* and a bathroom. Vitruvius gives exact measurements for some of these rooms, others are only mentioned as to be present in a *domus*. This leaves a lot to the imagination of the drawer of the plan. It is therefore not possible to draw an exact map of 'the house of Vitruvius' with only his directions in mind.

Source criticism

Many books are written about Vitruvius, so I shall not criticize him too elaborately. I do believe though that some things have to be mentioned about both Vitruvius and the many interpretations of his books. First it is important to realize that not everything ascribed to Vitruvius was actually written by him. Where some claim that the *peristylum* was the private place of the Roman house, Vitruvius actually said that it was part of the public part of the house. Disregarding the fact that we can never read the original version of Vitruvius book, only later copies, the best way to get as close to the original text as possible is to look at the (copied) Ten Books on Architecture itself.

The text by Vitruvius is a bit confusing at times, he is not always consistent in his argumentation. At the beginning of his chapter on domestic architecture, he stressed the importance of measuring the right ratio of the rooms within a house. Not very much further along the text though, he said that man should 'not hesitate to vary'. Vitruvius said that he gave the rules for building a house correctly,

but that one could depart from them if you wanted to. Vitruvius gave guidelines in his book to show how houses should be built. Using his rules would result into an, to Vitruvius standards, ideal house. This means that a lot of houses are different from his descriptions, because of personal interpretation, shortage of building space or already existing parts of the house.

The *domus* in Ostia

Although it is generally accepted that Vitruvius can be taken as an example (to a certain extent) for Pompeian houses, to what extent does his description comply with the *domus* in Ostia? In Ostia, there are no houses with a recognizable *atrium-peristylum* style to be found. The *domus* in Ostia are centered around a courtyard and main hall which can be seen as the central point of the house. This hall is surrounded by other rooms in the house. Although this hall can be seen as an *atrium* in function, being the hall into which one enters the house and a *peristylum* in appearance due to the decorations and the columns, from now on I shall refer to this room as the main hall to prevent confusion. This main hall can be seen in the plans in the attachments. I have combined the different parts of the hallway with the courtyard because this is more clear in the diagram. The different parts of the hall are attached to one another, without any doors between them. This means it is an open space and seen as a single open space in the diagram. I will discuss the different parts of the *domus* in Ostia and analyze the basic plan, their decoration and accessibility to one another, the main hall and the street. For this purpose, I will use the plan of each *domus* attached to this paper as a guideline for the size and the structure of the house.

Access from the street

Next to the actual entrance of the house, other rooms within the same building could be reached from the street. These rooms were part of the building, but not of the premises; there were different premises under a single roof.⁷ These rooms were either stairs to (independent) apartments on the second floor of the building or shops. For the identification of the shops, several elements were used. Firstly, they are situated at an important and busy road in Ostia, meaning a high number of possible customers passing by and they were also easily accessible from the road due to the relatively wide doorway compared to the small size of the rooms. Among others, room 2 in the house of the Porch can also be recognized as a shop by the typical threshold.⁸ Most shops consist of a single room with only an entrance from the street like the rooms 1 to 3 at the house of the Columns, and some have a backroom connected.⁹ Renting parts of the building as shops or apartments was common in Ostia. The rooms located at the side of the road on the ground floor of the building were often rented as shops, because shops were more profitable than apartments.¹⁰ For the second floor and upwards individual apartments were rented out and could be reached by external stairs without having to enter the house itself.

⁷ Hillier and Hanson (1984) 147.

⁸ Boersma (1985) 77.

⁹ For more information on shops connected to houses, read chapter 6 on houses and trade in Wallace-Hadrill (1994).

¹⁰ Meiggs (1973) 242.

Access to the *domus* itself could be obtained by entering the vestibule, a room that is very recognizable in the house of the Porch by the large porch (after which, surprisingly, the house is named) situated at the street. This porch consists of two marble columns and a marble pediment, which once was engraved, and is in total about 4.6 meters high.¹¹ Of the porch from the house of Fortuna Annonaria two columns remain, which were presumably part of a porch similar to the one of the house of the Porch.¹² Of the house of the Columns only the marble steps to the doorway are left, and no columns were found, but in the vestibule of this house the remains of a bench were found.¹³ This bench could indicate that the *domus* was occupied by an important man who was visited by his



1. Porch of the house of the Porch.

clients and these clients could take place on the benches awaiting their patron to greet him.¹⁴ The vestibule of the house of the Columns was decorated with marble on the walls.¹⁵ In the house of Fortuna Annonaria traces of red and yellow paint are found on the walls.¹⁶ Other decoration of these rooms was not found and nothing can be found on decoration in the vestibule of the house of the Porch. From the vestibule, one could also look into the main hall, seeing the beautiful decorations there. This would hopefully impress the visitor and show the grandeur of the owner. In the house of the Columns there was a second entrance from the street; room R could also be entered from the street and gave access to the house. The room was probably only a secondary entrance to the house, maybe a servants' entrance, because it gave access to room Q and from there to the side of room 4. Also, one could not see directly into the house when using this entrance. Instead, one entered the house via a small hallway, which is not as impressive as vestibule A. The vestibule was the threshold between the street and the *domus* and functioned as a dividing space between the two. Entering it transformed strangers from the street into visitors of the house.¹⁷ These houses were open because the owners were 'engaged in civic business'.¹⁸ This means the owner had a profession in which he had to be in contact with a lot of other people every day, which all visited his house for appointments. This openness does not mean however that anyone could walk into the house, in the vestibule a certain kind of selection was made and the door keeper would keep unwanted people outside.¹⁹ It is likely that the rich owner of the house had a servant placed at the door as a door keeper to keep an eye on who was entering the house. Hales gives an example of the tasks of the doorkeeper from a letter from Fronto.²⁰ The people that were accepted inside, were also selected. Clients greeting their patron in the morning were probably not allowed

¹¹ Boersma (1985) 74.

¹² Ibid. 139.

¹³ www.ostia-antica.org.

¹⁴ Hales (2003) 18.

¹⁵ www.ostia-antica.org.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hillier and Hanson (1984) 19.

¹⁸ Hales (2003) 28.

¹⁹ Ibid. 36.

²⁰ Fronto, Ep. Graec. 5.1. In Hales (2003) 36.

any further into the house than the vestibule in which they could wait on the benches. Friends and other people invited, could enter the other rooms of the house.²¹

The main hall

All the Ostian houses have a central hall, which connects most of the rooms in the *domus*. In the theory of spatial analysis, this room is the connecting room that is between the vestibule connected to the street and the rest of the *domus*. The central function can be clearly deduced from the amount of lines coming from this room in the diagrams (attachments 5-8). The function of this room will be explained further on in this paper. In all three *domus* under investigation this room consist of a hallway around a central courtyard.²² The hallway around the courtyard and the courtyard itself are different parts of the main hall as a whole. From the hallway, one could look into the courtyard of the *domus* and enter it without having to open any doors. To keep the spatial analysis simple, I have taken the courtyard and the hallway together in my analysis.

In the house of Fortuna Annonaria the hallway and the courtyard are very openly connected. There are no walls found between the columns that line the courtyard, meaning it could be accessed from all sides. It contained an oblong basin which is only known from description. Behind the basin was a niche which contained a statue and a decorated marble well-head was located next to the basin. The surrounding columns are of travertine stone.²³ The floor of the hallway was covered with mosaic, but no floor was found in the courtyard, which possibly means this may have been a garden.²⁴ The courtyard and the surrounding hallway cover almost one-third of the area, indicating its importance within the *domus*.²⁵ The house of the Columns also has a hallway around a courtyard. Unlike the courtyard in the house of Fortuna Annonaria, low brick walls are built between the columns with entrances at only two points. But because the walls were low, one could look over them into the courtyard which consisted of a nymphaeum with two niches back-to-back, two columns and a basin, all made from marble.²⁶ The hallway around the courtyard in the house of the Porch is very similar to the other two houses, but has one important difference. Between the corridors 29 and 30 and the corridors 24 and 26 was a door that could be closed. This would create two separate parts inside the house.²⁷ The part of corridors 24 and 30 would be open to the vestibule and indirectly to the street. The rest (this is the bigger part) of the house would get a more private character whenever the doors would be closed.

²¹ Hales (2003) 19-20.

²² For the house of the Columns and of the Porch this means a hallway on all four sides of the courtyard. At the house of Fortuna Annonaria the courtyard is only on three sides flanked by a hallway.

²³ Boersma (1985) 140-143.

²⁴ www.ostia-antica.org.

²⁵ Boersma (1985) 140-143.

²⁶ www.ostia-antica.org.

²⁷ Boersma (1985) 82.

Representative rooms

Each of the three houses has an important room which can be seen as the most representative and formal part of the house. This room is elaborately decorated and easily accessible through the wide doorways. It is easily identified on the plan and it is the biggest room of the house with a larger doorway than the other rooms. In the house of the Porch, it is room 13. This room is even bigger than the courtyard, making it the main room of the house. In the doorway stood two large granite columns. The walls were covered with marble and the floor with *opus sectile*.²⁸ The room is more decorated than any other part of the house and therefore it can be named the most formal room of the house, ideal for receiving guests. The house of the Columns has two rooms with columns in the doorway (both rooms E and I). Room I was bigger than room E (which was decorated with paintings on the walls), and has multiple doors, mosaic on the floor and a heating system.²⁹ Just like in the house of the Porch, this main room lies on the opposite of the vestibule, meaning one was to cross the entire courtyard-area before being able to enter this room. This was to fully impress the visitor with the size and awe of the house. Being forced to cross the entire length of the house, the visitor was not only impressed by the sheer size of the house, it also provided time to take in all the beautiful decorations. The house of Fortuna Annonaria is a bit different from the other two houses as one did not enter on the opposite of the main reception room, but in between two important rooms. Rooms 9 and 10 were a couple and were both decorated with marble on the walls and mosaic on the floor. Room 9 even had a heating system (being the only room in this house) and was only accessibly



2. Room 15 of the house of Fortuna Annonaria.

from room 10 through a narrow doorway. In room 10, the remains of a bench were found. On the opposite side of the house, room 15 is situated. This was a very impressive room with a lot of decoration. In the doorway of the room there were two columns. Upon entering, one directly saw the curved wall that gave the room an impressive appearance and the statue that stood in the niche on the opposite side of the entrance. On the left hand side are four niches behind a basin. The room also had marble-covered walls and *opus sectile* on the floor. The niches with the statues and the basin must have been constructed to impress the visitor.³⁰

All of these rooms in the three houses can be seen as the representative and most formal part of the house. No other room was as big or as decorated as these rooms. In function, these rooms were used to welcome visitors into the house. The easy accessibility, both by being directly accessible through the hall around the courtyard and the open character of the room shows their central function in the house.

²⁸ Boersma (1985) 89.

²⁹ Heres (1986) 142-3.

³⁰ Boersma (1985) 148-9.

Other rooms

The other rooms of each house can be sorted into two groups: the simpler and the more elaborate rooms. The simple rooms had no decoration on the walls, the more elaborate rooms did have some kind of paint on the walls and sometimes decorated floors. I have no information on the decoration of most of the rooms in the house of the Columns, so it is difficult to say something about the rooms in this house. It is known however that rooms G, H and M had heating-pipes, making them more elaborate than the other rooms. The simpler rooms are easily defined: to this group belong under-stair rooms which were mostly used for storage or latrines -this is room 16 in the house of Fortuna Annonaria, rooms 6, 8 and 19 (which is a latrine) in the house of the Porch and room C in the house of the Columns. To this class of room, the smaller rooms without decorating can be added. For the house of Fortuna Annonaria, the simpler rooms were rooms 17 and 20, considering the plaster wall covering. At the north part of the house, an interesting part is located. The rooms 5 to 8 were probably the service quarters entered from the street by room 6. Room 6 could have been the place where the owners carriage was stored, considering the wide doorway.³¹ Room 5 only had plaster on the walls. In room 8 was the stokehold for the heating system in room 9.³² Most of the walls in the house of the Porch were covered with yellow paint and a decoration of red stripes and a black-and-white mosaic on the floor. Rooms 7, 8 and 9 and rooms 16 and 17 were decorated in this way. Room 20 is bigger, but not decorated.³³

It is not always easy to draw a line between simple and elaborate rooms. I shall therefore compare some rooms within the houses. For the house of the Porch, rooms 11 and 12 were very richly decorated with marble and mosaic and were closed off from the hall by a double door. Rooms 14 and 15 mirror these two, but were less decorated. They had no marble on the walls, only the decoration of yellow and red lines that is already mentioned. This means these two rooms were decorated similar to almost all of the other rooms of the house. Therefore, they were probably not part of the formal part of the house. In the house of Fortuna Annonaria, rooms 2 and 3 were decorated with imitation-marble and room 3 had a small niche in the wall. Room 22 was relatively big and had the same floor as the vestibule. The room was decorated with a design of lines and panels. Room E in the house of the Columns was decorated with paintings and had a marble threshold with two columns next to the door. Room F also had marble thresholds for its two doors. There is little information on windows in the Ostian houses, but we know room F in the house of the Columns had two windows, room 14 in the house of the Porch also had a window. This means these rooms had daylight coming in from two sides, opposed to the other rooms in the houses, which only received light from the doorway connecting them to the main hall. Because I only have accounts on two rooms with windows in all three houses, I cannot compare these records. It can be said that the rooms with the windows were more elaborate, because who would put an expensive window in a storage room? But important to note here is the window in the house of the Porch. I have just mentioned that rooms 11 and 12 are more elaborate due to the decoration of these rooms. Rooms 14 and 15 are rather simply painted in a way that is used for all the parts of the house. But not room 11 or 12, but room 14 has a window. This shows that a window is not only used for elaborately decorated spaces. It is therefore hard to say anything about the usage of windows in these particular houses.

³¹ Boersma (1985) 146-7.

³² Ibid. 147.

³³ Ibid. 81-85.

Spatial analysis

The main hall

Comparing the diagrams with regard to the spatial analysis from the three houses at Ostia with the standardized house from Vitruvius gives some insights into the planning of each house. I will focus most on the privacy of the rooms within the houses. Privacy means in this context used less often by people other than the residents of the house. I shall combine the spatial analysis with the amount of decoration in each of the rooms to find out whether the rooms were used formally for receiving visitors (rooms with more elaborate decoration to impress) or only by the residents (the less decorated rooms). Within this last group, a distinction can be made between important rooms which were used by the family of the house owner and rooms used by slaves, which are for example storage rooms.

From the street, one could enter different rooms, most of them shops. Therefore the choice as to which part of the building one wanted to reach had to be made already outside the building.³⁴ The shops mostly had only one room located on the side of the street, only two shops in the house of the Porch had a backroom. These rooms are the most public with a wide doorframe and direct access from the street. To enter the *domus* itself, one had to go through the most decorated door at street level. These doors had marble steps and an entrance with columns and a pediment above the door as can be seen at the house of the Porch and the house of Fortuna Annonaria. This door led to the vestibule which was decorated and often had benches standing against the walls. This room was the first level of the house, directly connected to the street. The roman house was very open, meaning one could see right through it from the street whenever the front door was open. This would mean everyone could see the grandeur of the owner of the house but the vestibule had an important function as it was the threshold into the house. The room made sure the house could be safely closed off from the street to keep unwanted visitors outside. It is also the room in which clients could wait to greet their patron. Although it is the most public of the rooms, it was nevertheless controlled by the owner of the house. It could be closed off from the street if needed and was guarded by a doorkeeper. It was public, but not open for use by all.

In each of the three houses in Ostia and the Vitruvian *domus*, a central room can be found. This is the room in the diagram that is connected to the vestibule of the house and most of the other rooms, previously referred to as the main hall. This room is both in the plan and in the diagram the most central space. It is often called the control room in the theory of spatial analysis. Behind this is a formula which gives a room a higher amount of control when it gives access to more rooms. Because the formula would make this paper unnecessarily more complicated, I am not applying it to the different houses. The essence of this idea is that the more rooms a room opens on to, the higher amount of control it has within the house. As can be clearly seen from the diagram, each of the Ostian *domus* have one of these control rooms. This is the main hall of each house. The definition of control in this case is not controlling when people enter or leave the house, this was done in the vestibule. The main hall is the room that controls access to the other rooms. To get to almost every other room in the house, this control room had to be crossed. It controls movement within the house. Because of this high amount of movement in this room, it was very busy and probably mostly used

³⁴ Stöger (2011) 174.

just for moving around. It was not a quiet place where a good conversation or meal could take place, considering every person moving within the house had to cross this room. It was used by inhabitants, servants and visitors of the household and therefore a very public room.

An interesting element in each of the houses is that the main room consists of a four-sided hallway and a courtyard within. In the house of the Porch and the house of the Columns entrance to this courtyard was blocked on most sides by a wall. This made the courtyard itself a bit more private, because people moving from one room to another within the house had to pass around the courtyard. Nevertheless was the courtyard still very open due to the walls being low enough to look over them. This gave the main hall as a whole an open character, because it was visually still very open. The courtyard blocked on the other hand movement in straight lines from one room to another. One therefore had to take a route around the courtyard, resulting in a longer way from one room to another. The rooms that were used most must therefore often have been located on one side of the house. This can be seen in the house of the Porch where two sides of the hallway could be closed off from the rest by two doors. The possibility of closing off a part of the hallway from the rest implies this closed off part must still have given access to the most used parts of the house. This does not exclude the possibility of putting up movable screens to close off a part of a hallway as, by putting up a screen in the hallway in the house of the Columns at the height of room U for example, rooms T and S would have had a more private character. One was to cross three parts of the hallway to reach these rooms, making the part of the hallway onto which the rooms open less busy. The house of Fortuna Annonaria is different in that way that the representative rooms are located on two sides of the courtyard across from each other. The longest way possible was to be crossed whenever one wanted to go from room 15 to room 10 or the other way around.

Because the main hall was the control room of the house, it was used very often. This means it logically was decorated to make it visually appealing. It was also the first part of the house visitors would enter after the vestibule. The room was decorated to impress the visitor from the moment of entrance. In each of the three Ostian houses, a niche and a basin can be found in the courtyard. Especially the niche was very visible from the doorway and probably even from the outside. In the niche a bust was placed, which could be a representation of an ancestor or a god that was important to the family.

Adjoining rooms

Each room opening onto the main hall is in the third level of the diagram. Only two or three rooms are in the fourth level of the diagram, indicating they could only be reached from the main hall through another room. A clear difference can be seen here from the house of Vitruvius. This house has two main halls with rooms connected to them. Movement through five spaces was necessary to get to five chambers of the house. These rooms are often seen as the most private part of the house. But, one should not say the *atrium* was public and the *peristylum* was private when looking to the Vitruvian *domus*. First to show that not even Vitruvius said the second main hall (the *peristylum*) was private I cite a line from his book: "The private rooms are those into which nobody has the right to enter without an invitation, such as bedrooms, dining-rooms, bathrooms, and all others used for the like purposes. The common are those which any of the people have a perfect right to enter, even without an invitation: that is, entrance courts, cavaedia, peristyles, and all intended for the like

purpose.”³⁵ Saying the part of the house which is situated around the *peristylum* was private and was not entered according to Vitruvius is not true, considering the fact Vitruvius states *peristylia* were for common use by all. The Ostian house therefore had a single main hall, where the Vitruvian *domus* had two for the same purpose. I think this is the most important element in the Roman *domus*. It can already be seen in early Roman housing that the house was built around a main hall.³⁶ The Vitruvian variant of the *domus* was in basic just the same, only this single main hall was now split up into two, the reasons for this can be numerous such as it provided more light to more rooms in the house and it could be used as a second space to impress visitors. But it is, in my opinion, not more convenient for the inhabitants of the house. It meant a longer route to other rooms and the street and did not provide more privacy for the owners of the house. It can be said that the house of the Porch is an interesting case, because we know half of the main hall could be closed off from the rest of the house by doors. This indicated that there were certain parts of the house the owner could give a more private character when he wanted to. Most of the rooms are located on the side that could be closed off from the rest of the house, leaving rooms 16 to 19 in the more public space of the house. It is interesting that the reception room of the house was in the closed off part whenever the doors were shut. This means it was not a space open to public at all times, but only open at wish of the owner. This further backs up the statement that every part of the house was either private or public by decision of the owner. This can also be concluded if you look at the other rooms connected to the main hall. Less important rooms like storage rooms and latrines were on the same level of the diagram as the more important rooms and the reception room. For the latrines, this is explainable, because the owner would want a latrine to be easily accessible by his visitors without them having to cross other part of the house. But any Roman house owner would not want his guests to walk into a messy storage room by accident. This could be prevented by having closed doors in a literal or figurative sense of the word. The ‘public’ spaces were indicated clearly by the owner, to prevent people from accidentally walking into a wrong room. Private and public have nothing to do with location within a house and everything with the owners decisions.

In the houses in Ostia are only a couple of rooms in the fourth level of the diagram. Just like with the house of Vitruvius, this does not mean these rooms were more important and provided privacy for the owner and his family. Room 8 for example in the house of Fortuna Annonaria is in the highest level of the diagram and therefore furthest away from the street. This does not mean however it is one of the most private rooms for the owners family as it was probably used as a storage room and the stokehold for room 9 has been found in this room. I would argue that not the highest rooms, but the rooms directly accessed from the main hall without other rooms above them provided the most privacy for the family. Being closely connected to the main hall meant that you could move easier from one room to another. If you were to sit in room 9 in the house of Fortuna Annonaria for example, you had to move through room 10 to get to any other part of the house. Whenever room 10 was used, this would mean an even more noticeable move from one room to another than when only the main hall was used. It is therefore also clear that rooms on the third level of the diagram which were connected to a room on the fourth level, were less private.

Apart from the private character of the rooms, convenience must also be taken into account. Being able to move from one room to another easily is also important for the usefulness of a room. It can

³⁵ Vitr. 6.5.1 (trans. Morgan).

³⁶ McKay (1977) chapter 1.

therefore be said that the rooms that could be reached easier, were used more. I would state that rooms 2 and 3 in the house of Fortuna Annonaria were more private than rooms 9 and 10 together. The first two rooms could be reached from the main hall, meaning easy access and exit. They were also connected to each other by a door, so they could be entered from the other room without crossing the main hall. This means a high amount of choice when moving around in the house. Going from room 9 in the house of Fortuna Annonaria meant you had to cross room 10 without being able to choose a different route.

Privacy for rooms connected to the main hall was guaranteed by doors which could close off the rooms from the main hall. By closing the doors, it was prevented people would enter the rooms without an invitation. They could be used by the family without being interrupted. This was also the way in which less important rooms were hidden. If you had an important guest over, you would not want him to accidentally walk into one of these rooms, which do not look representative. Rooms that could be used or seen by everyone probably had an opened door. For the representative rooms in the houses this is clear. These rooms have a very wide entrance and were therefore very open and visible. One could see right into them without much trouble.

Sight is one of the most important elements in the houses. This can be seen from the maps where the vestibule is located on the opposite side of the most elaborately decorated room. This is very clear in the house of the Columns where, upon entering the house, one saw directly through the whole house into room I. In this line of sight was the courtyard, but because of the low walls, one could see right through it and across the niche placed in the middle of the courtyard. From the entrance, the basin could not be seen. One could immediately tell how many rooms, whether with opened or closed doors, the house had when they stood in the vestibule. Direct attention goes to room E with the two columns in the doorway. This room was very close to the vestibule and stood right out when one stepped into the house. The niche in the courtyard could not be missed. Although we do not know precisely what kind of statue was placed in this niche, it probably was a bust from a god or goddess important to the household. Furthest away from the vestibule was room I, which was most decorated and the representative room of the house. The visitor of the house could go directly into this room by just following his eyes. This is important, because one had to know where to go in a house directly upon entering it. Room I might have also been placed on the opposite side of the vestibule, so that the visitor had something to see when entering the house as seeing a blank wall is not as inviting or impressing as seeing a beautifully decorated room on the other side of the house.

In the house of Fortuna Annonaria, the gaze goes from left to right. From the vestibule, a niche behind a basin is seen upon first sight. To the left one could see room 10 through the columns with the wide doorway and part of the decoration could be seen. Room 15 on the other hand was more spectacular. The entrance to this room was lined with columns and part of the wall with the niches and the basin could be seen from the vestibule. Rooms 2 and 3 on the one side and 22 on the other were less visible from the vestibule. In this house too, one could see where to go when one entered the house.

The house of the Porch had an interesting visual line from the vestibule. First of all, the hall into which one entered was very long and directed the gaze to the big niche in the courtyard. This niche was a real eye catcher and it blocked most of the view of the rest of the house. The decorated room 13 could therefore probably not be seen from the vestibule. This is interesting and it gives the house

a more closed off character. This was also seen in the hallway, of which a part could be closed off by two doors. Room 13 could be seen from every part of the hallway and with its wide doorway, looking into the room was very easy. Other than the other two houses, this was not possible from the entrance. One could nevertheless see the grandeur of the house from the entrance because of the big niche. This must have been impressive at the time, being filled with statues of important gods.

In the house of Vitruvius, the same line of sight can be noted. From the vestibule, one looked through the *atrium* into the decorated room 7. In the back wall of this room was probably a big window, allowing a glance of the *peristylum* lying behind this room. Like in the house of the Porch, the line of sight was blocked and one could not directly look all the way through the house. This gives the *peristylum* a more closed off character than the *atrium*. It was possible though to see the *peristylum* with the columns.

Vitruvius attaches great importance to the symmetry of the house. Notable is that all of these houses have elements that are not symmetric. This is mostly due to the building of the house alongside preexisting roads and buildings. The house of the Columns was even built around a hall which already existed and was used for different purposes.³⁷ But this does not explain why the house that was built around the hall is not symmetrical at all. Vestibule A is not centered in accordance to the main hall as is room I. The house of Fortuna Annonaria contains a courtyard with two straight sides, one slightly oblique side and a side that is just clearly crooked. The house of the Porch is built to fit within the space available, resulting in the not straight shape of the house. Nevertheless does the entrance more or less align with the courtyard and room 13 behind that. But room 1, the vestibule, is oddly shaped, mostly due to room 23 which also has a strange shape. This shows that although symmetry was of some importance to the Romans, they did not really mind an oddly shaped room or two.

Conclusion

In this paper, I hope I have proven that a lot of thought went into building a Roman *domus* and that there are different kinds of *domus*. Using Vitruvius to find out what function a room had within a house is not helpful at all. First of all is the description given by Vitruvius short without details of the specific room which makes labeling rooms, as is sometimes done, therefore not an option. Next to the basic plan of the house, spatial analysis and visual lines within a house are important to shed light on the usage of the rooms. Decoration of rooms gives insight into the formal use of the room. The most formal and representational room of a house was the most elaborately decorated. The other rooms are more difficult to analyze. A combination of decoration in each room, the location of the room within the diagrams of spatial analysis and the visibility can give some insight into the way rooms were used. In this way rooms that are more important to the family of the house owner can be identified. It is nevertheless important to always remember that certain aspects that are important to one room, also apply to another. A room that the family used to isolate themselves from the visitors had to be kept private and closed off just as well as the messy storage room. I hope I have also proven that in Ostia (and also in the *atrium-peristylum* style houses for that matter) it was not the location of the rooms within a house that gave them a private or a public character, but that it was all dependent on the decisions of the owner of the house. Even though the house may have been very visually open, it was a very controlled space.

³⁷ Heres (1986) 140.

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- Information for the site www.ostia-antica.org.
- Maps:*
- Attachments 1 -3: www.ostia-antica.org.
- Attachment 4: Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* (trans. T. Peters).

Illustrations:

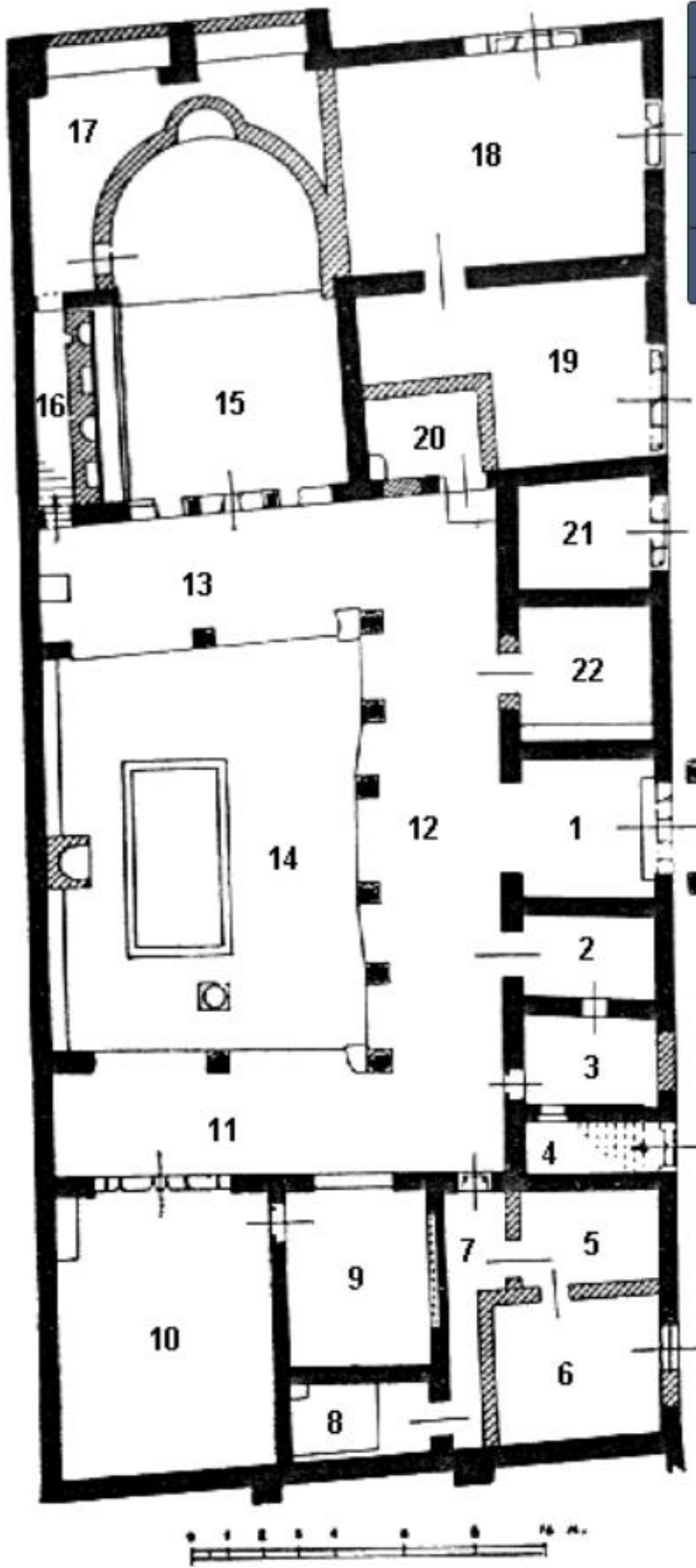
Front page: The house of the Columns, entrance seen from the street. Photo author.

1.: Porch from the house of the Porch, entrance seen from the street. Photo Florian Plasschaert.

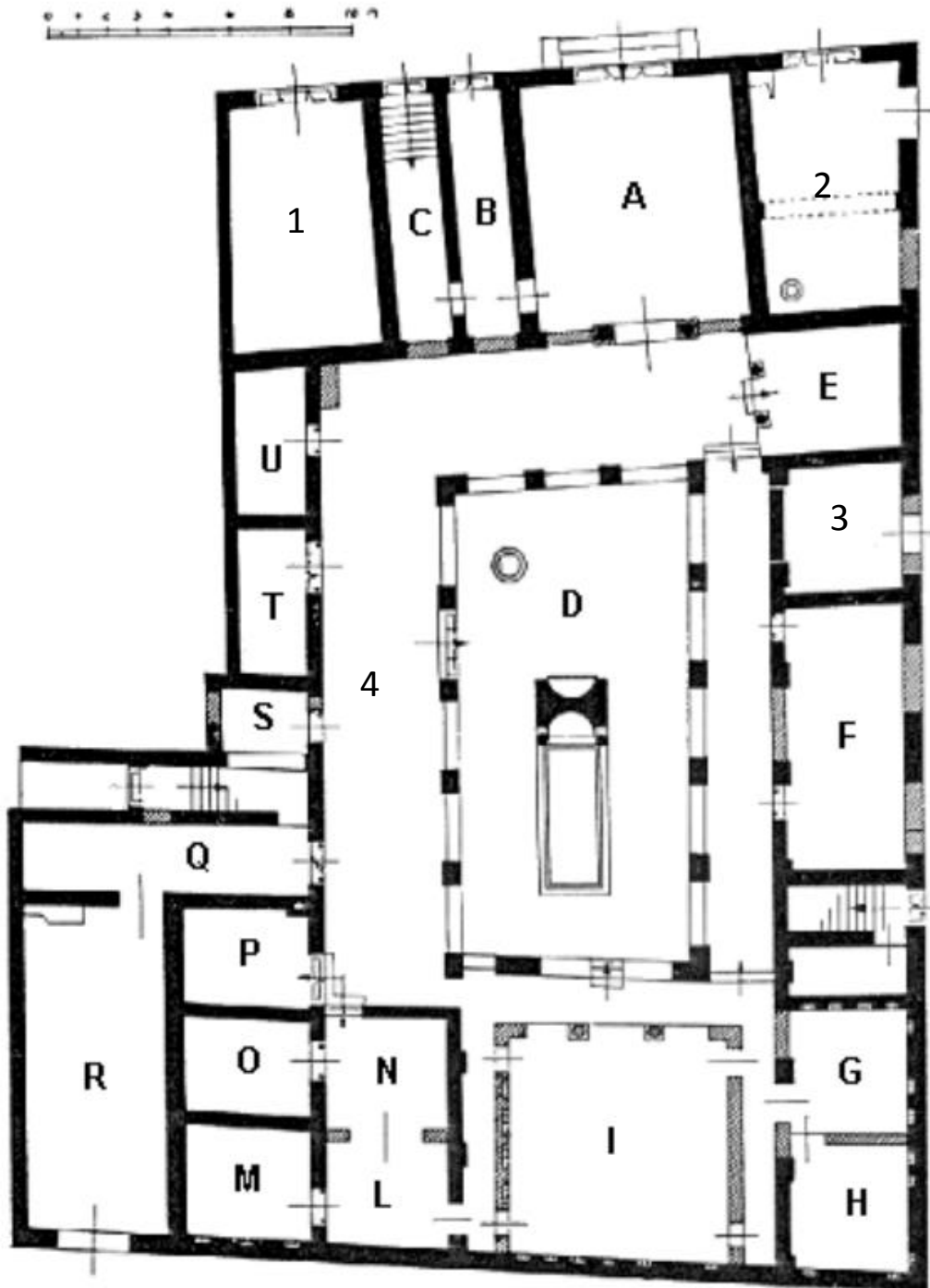
2.: View of rom 15 in the house of Fortuna Annonaria, seen from the main hall. Photo author.

Attachments

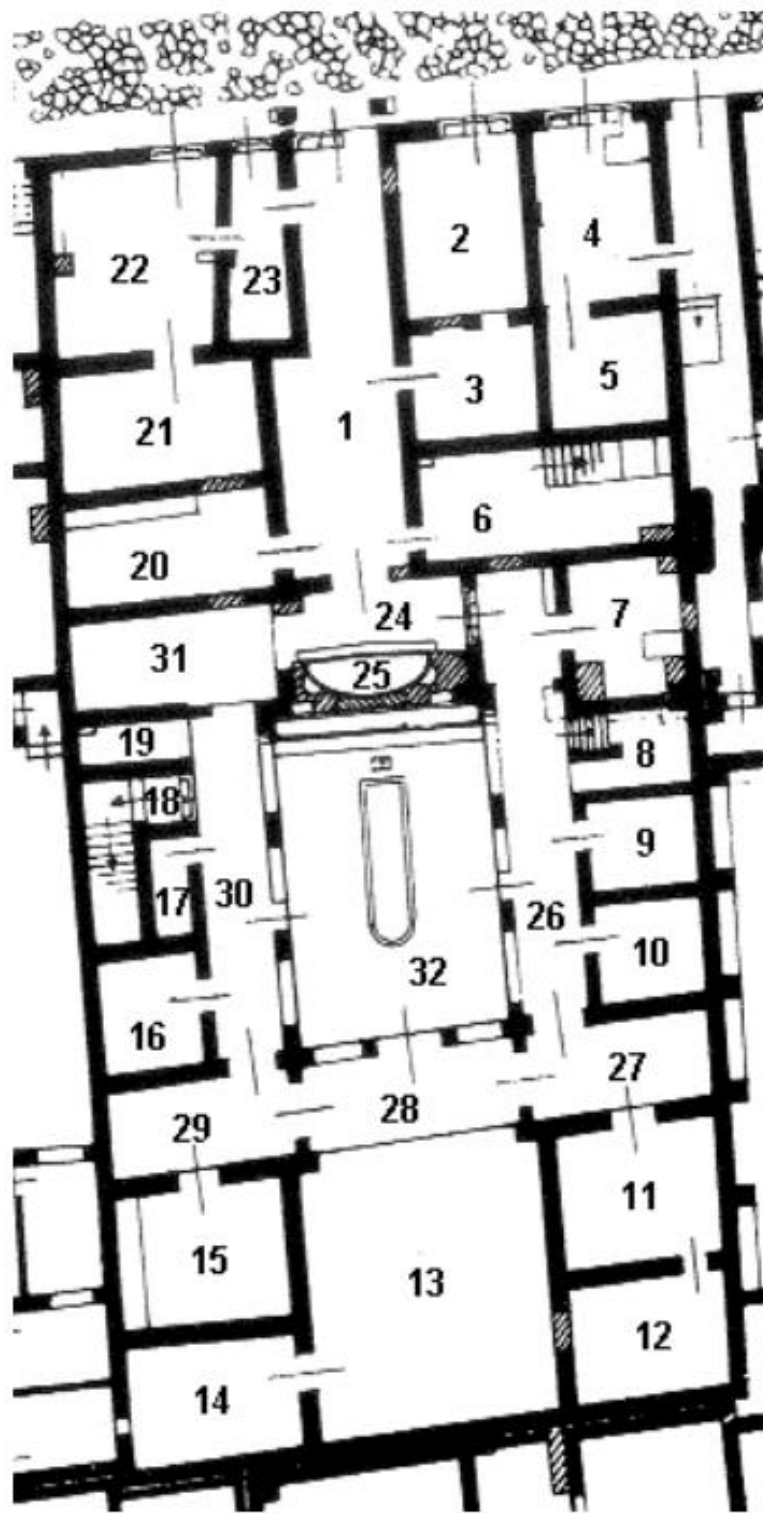
Attachment 1: plan of the house of Fortuna Annonaria



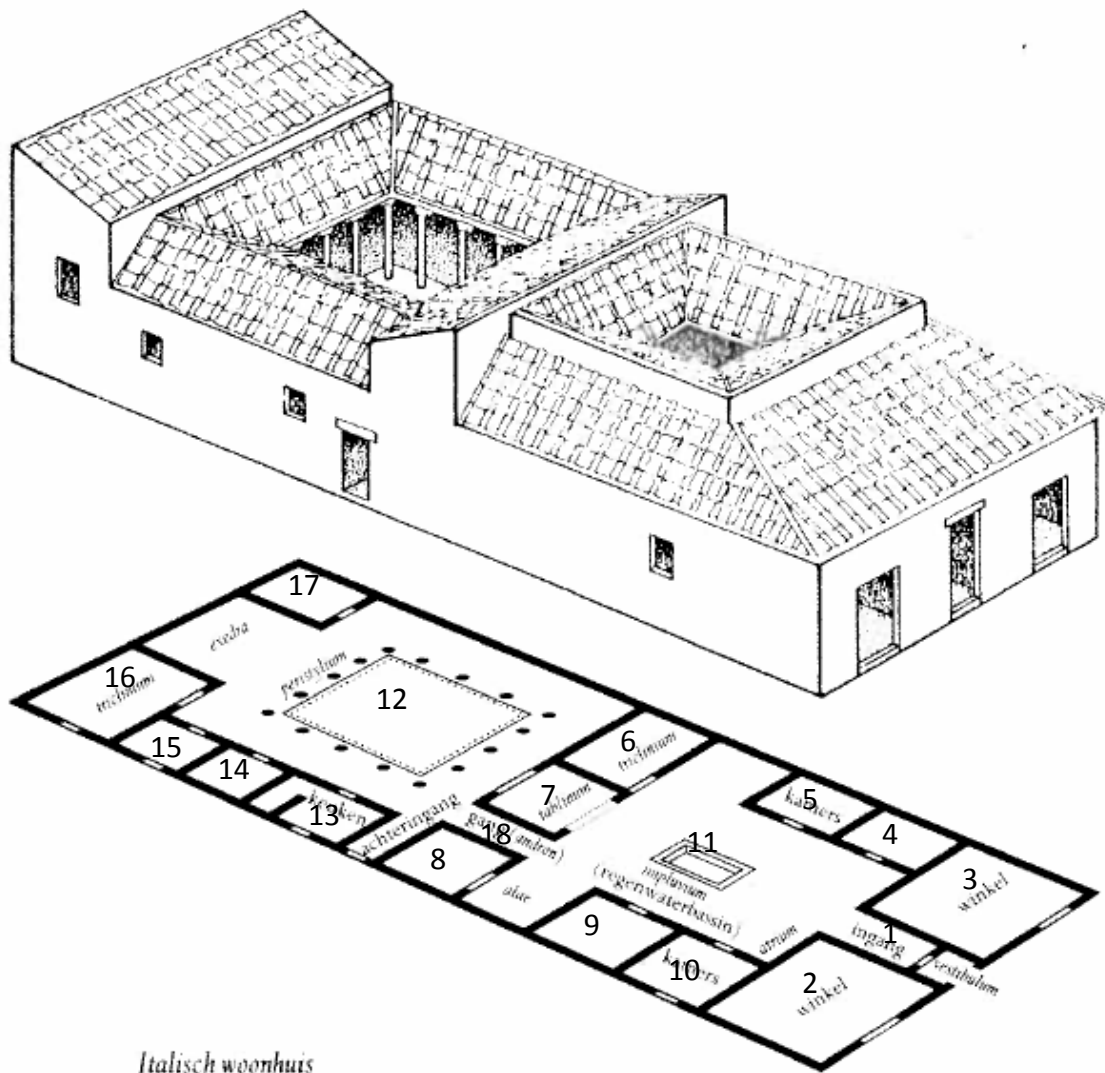
Attachment 2: plan of the House of the Columns



Attachment 3: plan of the house of the Porch

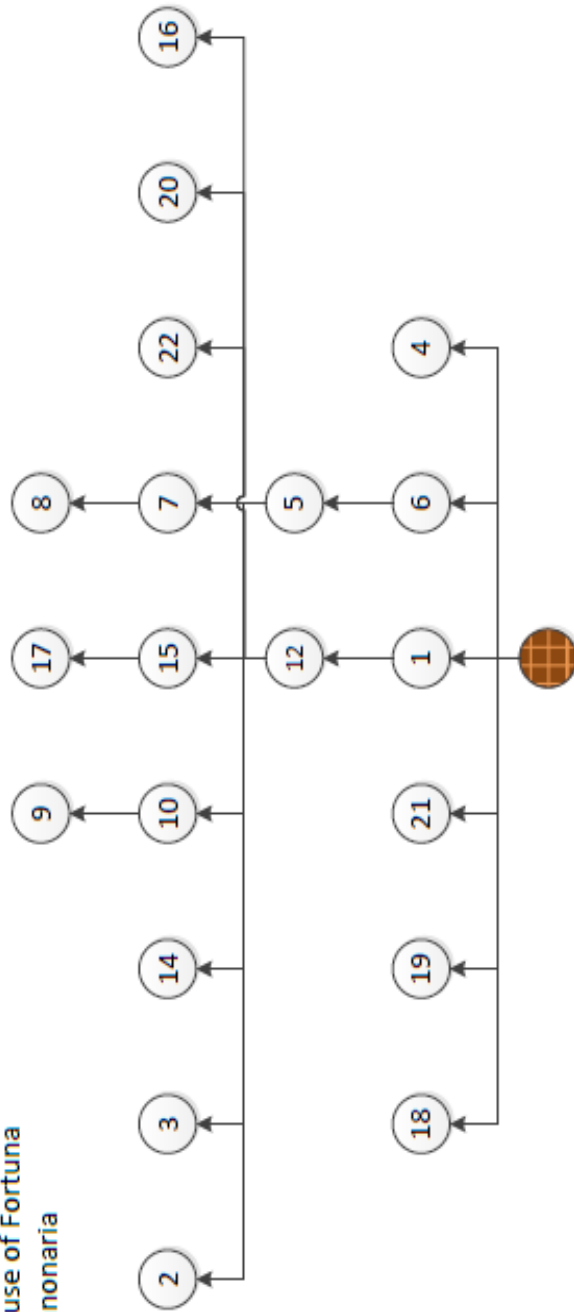


Attachment 4: Plan of the house of Vitruvius



Italisch woonhuis

Attachment 5: diagram
of the house of Fortuna
Annonaria



Room



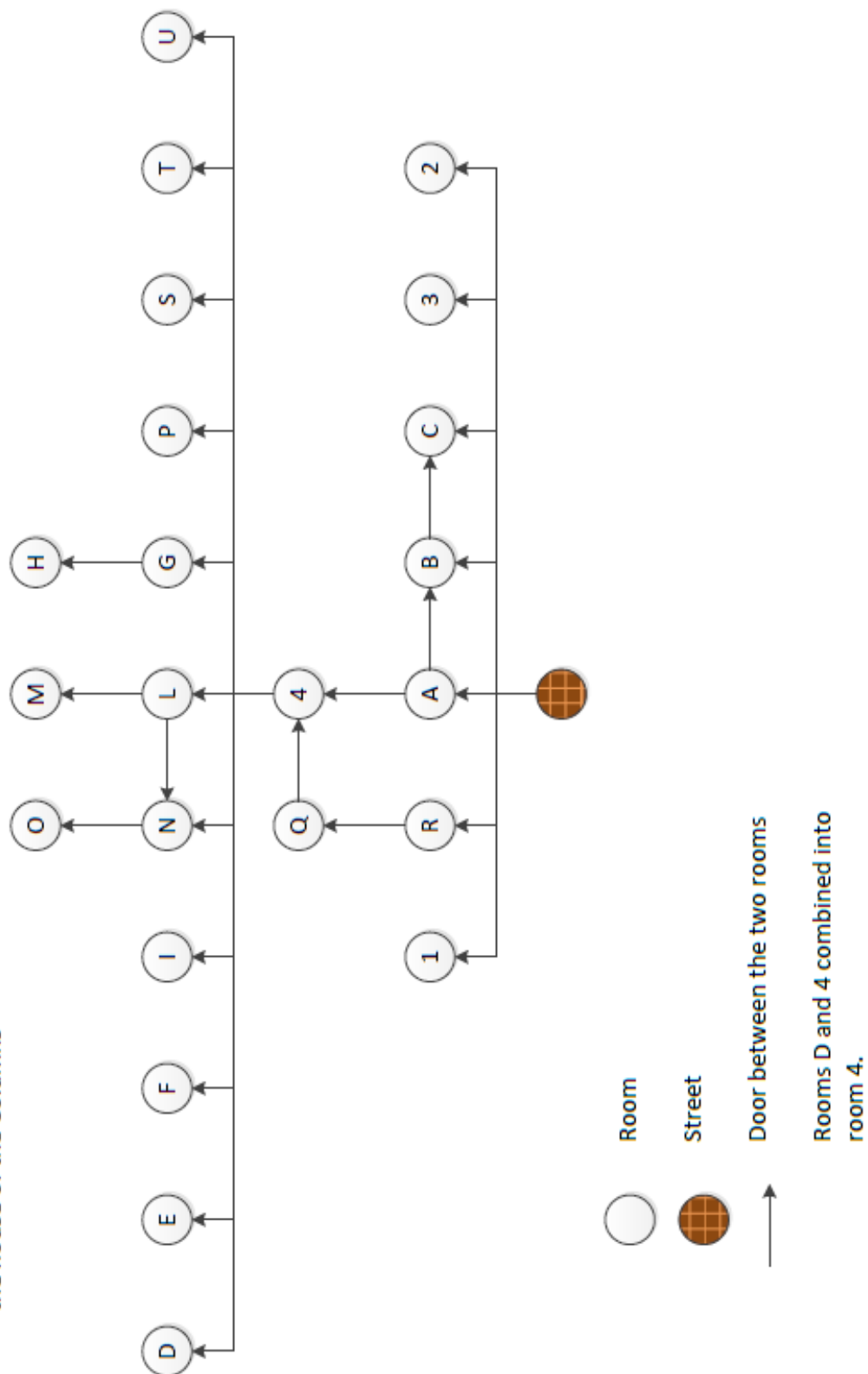
Street



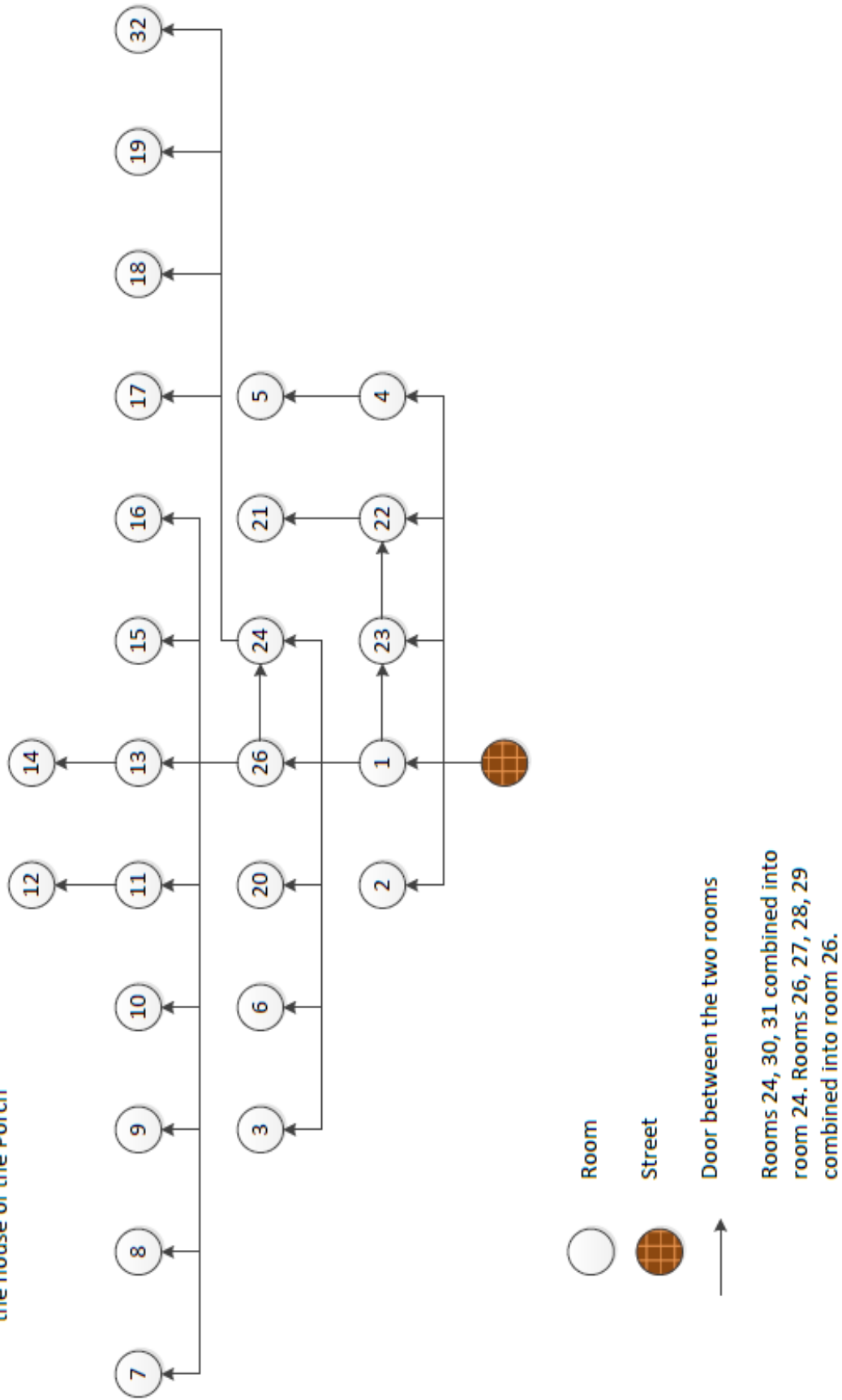
Door between the two rooms

Rooms 11, 12, 13 combined into
room 12.

Attachment 6: diagram of the house of the Columns



Attachment 7: diagram of the house of the Porch



Attachment 8: diagram of the house of Vitruvius

