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# The architecture of Pompeii

Roger Ling

L. RICHARDSON, JR., *POMPEII: AN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1988). Pp. xxviii + 445, 53 figs. ISBN 0-8018-3533-X. \$49.50.

Pompeii is perhaps the best known, and certainly one of the best preserved, of all Roman cities, but its architecture has never been the subject of a modern historical survey. Back in 1877, H. Nissen's *Pompeianische Studien zur Städtekunde des Altertums* looked at the buildings and architectural techniques in the light of the knowledge of his time, but totally without illustrations. In the present century, F. Noack and K. Lehmann-Hartleben (1936) studied the terraced houses in the southwest sector of the city, A. Maiuri (1942) published an analysis of building activities in the period after the earthquake of A.D. 62, and H. Eschebach (1970) presented a new interpretation of the development of the city-plan. Otherwise there have been monographs on individual buildings, notably Maiuri's lavish publications of the houses which he excavated, the Villa of the Mysteries (1931) and the House of the Menander (1933), the same writer's study of the city's fortifications (1929), and more recently Ohr's examination of the Basilica (1973) and Eschebach's of the Stabian Baths (1979); while the cemeteries of the Via dei Sepolcri and Via Nocera have been the subject of monographs by V. Kockel (1983) and by A. D'Ambrosio and S. De Caro (1983) respectively. For general accounts of the city's architecture we are still largely dependent upon the two excellent 19th-c. handbooks by J. Overbeck and A. Mau (last editions 1884 and 1908), which deal with all aspects of Pompeian archaeology and culture, and upon the more recent guidebooks — the longstanding official guide by Maiuri, and, more important, the archaeological guides by E. La Rocca and M. and A. De Vos (1976, 1982). None of these, however, concentrates specifically upon the evolving vocabulary and techniques of Pompeian architecture. Until now the best survey of this topic remains a short article written by A. Hoffmann (1979) for a collection of essays published on the occasion of the 1900th anniversary of Pompeii's destruction.<sup>1</sup>

There existed, therefore, a real gap waiting to be filled. Lawrence Richardson, the author of a monograph on the House of the Dioscuri and its painters (1955), and a student of Pompeii of some 35 years' standing, might have seemed eminently fitted to tackle the task. It is sad to have to report, therefore, that the book which he has now produced is not the answer to our needs.

In the first place, despite its subtitle, the author's approach is primarily descriptive, not historical. True, the text is divided into sections covering different architectural phases: the 'tufa period' (200-80 B.C.), the early Roman colony (80-30 B.C.), the period of Augustus and the Julio-Claudians (30 B.C.-A.D.62), and the period from the earthquake to the eruption (62-79). But within each phase the material is grouped by monuments, each of which is described in detail. This has the effect of obscuring rather than illuminating the historical evolution of Pompeian architecture. Most Pompeian buildings, especially the houses, are palimpsests of the usage of 150 years or more; they embody numerous changes of plan — enlargements, contractions, mergers, divisions, switches of orientation, insertions of upper storeys, creations and suppressions of doorways and windows. To try to sum up each of them (as Richardson almost invariably does) under one particular period is a recipe for confusion. The book ends up by falling between two stools: it is half history, half guidebook, and will satisfy neither the expert nor the general reader. Only in the 2 principal appendices (I, The stones and building techniques of Pompeii, and II, The development of the Pompeian house) does the author attempt to draw general conclusions about the materials and character of Pompeian architecture; and the discussions here are far too summary (as well as possessing a number of shortcomings: see below).

Secondly, the book is very heavy going. This is partly because of the fullness of the descriptions, which not only deal at length with plans, materials and techniques, but also include minutiae of

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<sup>1</sup> Further recent bibliography is summarized by Kockel 1986, 545-52.