

Commerce and Architecture in Late Hellenistic Italy: the Emergence of the Taberna Row

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One recent development in the study of Roman crafts and retail is that there seems to be a slight shift away from studying the actual work installations towards studying the architectural environments within which these were situated.¹ This development seems to offer a number of opportunities. One of these is that, while comparative approaches to actual work installations or retail practices are often highly complex if not impossible, the study of the architectural and spatial contexts in which they were situated makes it considerably more straightforward for scholars working in varying geographical and chronological contexts to actually confront each other's observations. Moreover, an increasing focus on the place of work in the built environment also makes it easier to engage in debates with scholars working on other topics: more than anything else it is architecture that connects the study of crafts and retail to broader debates about Roman urban communities. It needs no arguing that this is important: not only were there many people spending their working days in shops and workshops, in many places, these people also were, in a physical way, very central to the urban communities, in which they lived, and could be a defining part of the urban atmosphere – particularly in Roman Italy, but to some extent also elsewhere in the Roman world.

This article aims to push the role of architecture in debates about urban crafts and retail a little bit further, and brings up the issue of how these architectural contexts changed over time, and how this is to be understood economically. As Steven Ellis has recently argued, this requires a bit of caution: even if we want to think of the construction of shops and workshops as 'investment', we should be wary of uncritical 'economistic' interpretations of these processes as ancient realities may have been more complex.² Nevertheless, several developments in Roman architecture and urbanism seem to highlight the flipside of the coin, namely that we also should be wary of too easily dismissing profit as the leading motivation behind certain categories of building projects. Put more strongly: this article argues that one key development in the history of retail and manufacturing in the Roman world lies precisely in the emergence of several architectural forms that seem directly rooted in the desire to invest commercially for profit's sake. If it is true that, to some extent, we may still think of crafts and manufacturing as 'embedded' in social structures and cultural norms – one can for example think of the continuing scholarly emphasis on the role of freedmen in business apparent from the work of Mouritsen and Broekaert – it is precisely their gradual *dis*-embedding that is the historically unique development of the era.³ The emergence of commercial elements in architecture, and of truly commercial building types, illustrates how crafts and retail increasingly became a socio-cultural sphere of their own.

The Commercialization of Roman Architecture

In terms of evidence, this article focuses on the early history of one specific building type, which is here referred to as the 'taberna row', and which emerged in the Italian peninsula in the second century BC. The core argument will be particularly focusing on one urban context – Pompeii – but it makes sense to briefly sketch the broader architectural landscape of manufacturing and retail as far as Roman Italy is concerned. This cannot be done without acknowledging that a great deal of commerce was taking place in architectural contexts not primarily designed for this specific purpose: the evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum leaves little doubt that Roman architectural practice was flexible enough to accommodate the construction of workshops (and shops) in places that had been used otherwise earlier on, particularly inside houses.⁴ At the same time, there emerged, probably in the third century BC, a novel architectural form that was intrinsically commercial in nature – the taberna, which, defined by its wide opening, was designed to facilitate interaction between producer and retailer on the one hand and the outside public on the other. As they emerged, tabernae were typically constructed either in long rows around fora, or in small numbers around the entrance corridor of private houses.

This emergence of the taberna represented a major shift in the structure of Roman urban economies, and it marks the first step in the development of an unprecedentedly rich commercial architectural vocabulary, which, at least in Italy, from the second century BC onwards, began to include more complex architectural scenarios: tabernae began to be included in a much wider variety of building types, and were increasingly constructed in larger numbers. Additionally, a number of commercial building types began to emerge. In its fully developed form, the Roman commercial architectural vocabulary consisted of four building types; two of these are commonly recognized in scholarship; two have often been overlooked. Well known and (relatively) well studied are storage buildings (horrea) and market-buildings, particularly the macella.⁵ These two building types also emerged in the second and first century BC: not much earlier, and certainly not later. A third building type that came to play a (modest) role in Roman commercial architecture was the large, covered, purpose-built production hall. This was the closest that the Roman world came to something resembling a factory building. It seems to present a later and more modest development: a couple of examples of such 'production halls' can be found at Ostia; the earliest goes back to the first century AD.⁶ There may have been more examples at Rome, but elsewhere in Italy, these buildings remain mostly off the archaeological radar. Nevertheless, the production hall is relevant for its sheer existence.

The fourth commercial building type that emerged was the taberna row. As its name suggests, these buildings consisted, in their most basic form, of a simple row of tabernae. It could be longer or shorter in length and include a larger or a smaller number of tabernae, which could be smaller or larger in size and might include one or more back rooms, or none



Fig. 1: Plan of Pompeii indicating the location of the four taberna rows discussed in this article.

at all; occasionally, taberna rows also could include separate staircases to an upper floor level with one or more apartments, and the complex may or may not have been equipped with a porticus in front of it. However, as a matter of principle, the taberna row was an independent building simply consisting of tabernae and nothing else.

To some extent, many of these buildings looked remarkably like the rows of tabernae that were already being constructed alongside fora. This practice had begun in the third century, in cities like Pompeii and Paestum and had increased in the early second century BC, at least partially through initiatives of the Roman state.⁷ Still, the taberna row discussed in this article must be seen as a distinct phenomenon that, even if it may have been inspired by the rows of tabernae alongside fora, came from a different socio-economic background. One important distinction lies in the context, in which these taberna rows emerged: whereas it is clear that tabernae along fora were a public phenomenon – they were built by the authorities, and, as Vitruvius emphasizes, returned money to the authorities in the form of vectigalia – this is less obviously in the case of the taberna rows, which are not generally found in places strongly associated with public landownership.⁸

The taberna Rows of Pompeii

The earliest excavated taberna rows can be found at Pompeii. It makes sense to discuss some of these to a bit more detail to understand (a) what these buildings looked like, and (b) in which contexts they were constructed. Four examples will be discussed; their locations are highlighted on fig. 1. in the AD 79 situation. They include the so-called ‘Commercial



Fig. 2: Typical wall of opus incertum with lava and limestone (*taberna* VIII 5, 20).

Triangle’ at the south end of insula VI 1, situated along the Via Consolare between the Herculaneum gate and the forum, the northeast section of insula VII 12 alongside the Via degli Augustali, one of the central thoroughfares of the city, the building that included tabernae VIII 5, 19–23 along the Via dell’Abbondanza, between the forum and the Stabian Baths, and the commercial complex along the east side of insula VII 6, close to the forum, which included a row of tabernae along the Vicolo delle Terme.

The dating of these early taberna rows is mostly uncontroversial. Only one has been stratigraphically dated, but the chronological proximity of the others is suggested by the building materials and techniques used for their construction. All four complexes have an ornamental façade of tufa ashlar combined with walls in opus incertum of which the lower part consists of local gray lava, and the upper part of a local limestone (fig. 2). Quoins and posts were reinforced by large rectangular blocks of limestone. While there has been debate among Pompeian scholars about the date of façades with tufa ashlar, the opus incertum used is, throughout Pompeii, commonly associated with first-style wall-decoration and disappears around the period when the second style emerges.⁹ In other words: the four tabernae rows discussed here belong to Samnite Pompeii’s ‘golden century’ between 150 and 80 BC, and thus antedate the formal incorporation of Pompeii into the Roman Republic after the Civil War.

The best known of these four buildings is the so-called ‘Commercial Triangle’ in insula VI 1, which has been intensively studied in the context of the Anglo-American Pompeii



Fig. 3: Pompeii, tabernae VI 1, 13–18.

project (fig. 3).¹⁰ It occupies the triangular south end of an irregularly shaped city block and consists of four shops that seem to have been conceived according to a similar plan, with a main front room and a back area consisting of one or more rooms, and a connection to the back of the building, which initially may have been left uncovered. The rationale for this building, at first sight, seems straightforward: the location was unfit for the construction of houses, so it was used by someone to construct a row of shops. Reality, however, may have been a bit more complex: there were a number of similarly triangular plots in Pompeii, and none was used in this way.¹¹

The taberna row in insula VII 12 was a bit longer, but it falls in to several parts that do not need to have been contemporary; the longest section covers the five tabernae VII 12, 10–14 (fig. 4).¹² The design of these tabernae is remarkably similar to those of in insula VI 1: each had a large main room with behind it a secondary room and a corridor, which connected the main room to a back area, which initially seems to have been left open. Here, the choice to construct a taberna row was less obvious: the area easily could have been used for the construction of two or three medium-sized atrium houses with a backyard – as happened at the west end of the city block (house VII 12, 1–4).

The third complex, along the Via dell'Abbondanza, bears very close resemblance to the other two in its design (fig. 5). It included five tabernae (VIII 5, 19–23). Each had a main room and a back room and, it seems, initially a corridor with a connection to a small, possibly open, back area. Like in insula VII 12, these tabernae were constructed



Fig. 4: Pompeii, tabernae VII 12, 10–14.

on a location that could have been used for at least one big atrium house. This is clearly suggested by the surrounding buildings, which include some of the larger houses in the city; most also date to the same period, and use similar building materials and techniques. It should be noticed that the structures south of the tabernae all seem to postdate the construction of the building and seem organically grown rather than part of one consistent plan. Possibly, the people deciding about the use of this very centrally situated plot preferred to use it for commerce rather than for a house, and initially simply left the back half of the area unused.

Finally, the fourth complex (VII 6, 20–27) was situated close to the forum (fig. 6). Slightly more complex in its lay-out, it is thought to have consisted, initially, of seven tabernae along the Vicolo delle Terme, which connected the forum to the Via Consolare, and another three along the Vico dei Soprastanti, which was the westernmost prolongation of the Via degli Augustali that continued all the way to the eastern part of the city. The tabernae along the Vicolo delle Terme had their usual shape of a main room with behind it a second room and a corridor leading to a small back area; the other three tabernae consisted of simply one room. A recent study by Michael Anderson has argued that the building was constructed in the first decade of the first century BC and that it occupied the place of a series of small domestic buildings of which remains were preserved in the back area of the tabernae.¹³ Again, the choice for tabernae was not



Fig. 5: Pompeii, tabernae VIII 5, 19–23.

dictated by the shape of the plot: the total area covered by the building was as large as the neighbouring house VII 6, 28.

Discussion

These four buildings resemble each other rather closely in size, structure and design. With the exception of complex in insula VII 6, the number of tabernae also remained limited. The layout of the tabernae, with back rooms and possibly upper floors, suggests that they were designed to combine commercial and domestic functions, and thus served to accommodate households with a relatively large everyday independence. In terms of location, these four complexes were situated on clear commercial hotspots along the major thoroughfares between the city center and the gates or along key intra-urban connection roads. Interestingly, the complexes are also situated on similar plots, which through their location and their shape closely resemble private allotments rather than space reserved for public use and are mostly surrounded by houses.¹⁴ This suggests that these taberna rows belong to the private rather than the public realm. Possibly, these buildings were constructed by wealthy investors, who decided to spend some of their money on the urban property market



Fig. 6: Pompeii, tabernae VII 6, 20–27.

rather than on agricultural land; indeed, precisely this scenario is echoed by Cicero, who inherited a taberna building at Puteoli.¹⁵

Yet, what happened beyond second century BC Pompeii? Arguably, the taberna row was a success of some sort; several examples were constructed in the early imperial Pompeii, and it can also be encountered, in substantial numbers, in Rome and Ostia.¹⁶ It did not, however, become common throughout the Italian peninsula, let alone in the Roman world at large. Nevertheless, its emergence in itself is of great value for our understanding of the history of urban crafts and retail in the Roman world: it shows how, especially in the wealthiest parts of Roman Italy, urban commerce increasingly got an architectural place of its own, and began to be dis-embedded from the social contexts with which scholarship has associated it, such as, particularly, the atrium house. Moreover, the taberna row also highlights how commercial property in places like Pompeii, Rome and Ostia became an investment model for private individuals, and how this had direct consequences for the social context within which craftsmen and traders operated: an increasing number of craftsmen and traders worked in facilities owned by a landlord not living on the spot – he may actually have been rather far away, as was true for the tabernae at Puteoli inherited by Cicero.

Methodologically, these conclusions confirm the importance of architectural remains for the study of retail and manufacturing: architectural innovations like horrea, macella,

production halls and the *tabernae* rows highlight on the one hand, how the structure of urban economies in central Italy was transformed by Rome's new imperial hegemony, and, on the other hand, how this transformation of everyday economic life had an impact on the social level as well: even if we may struggle to understand the exact consequences of these new architectural models on the basis of their scarce remains, their layout and context show that, in any case, the everyday landscape, within which people were operating, was unprecedented—not only in Italy, but in the ancient world as such. Architecture, therefore, holds an important key in the study of urban craftsmen and retailers.

Notes

¹ See e.g. Monteix 2010; Holleran 2012; Flohr 2013; Holleran 2017.

² Ellis 2018.

³ Mouritsen 2011; Broekaert 2016.

⁴ Flohr 2007.

⁵ Rickman 1971; De Ruyt 1983.

⁶ Bakker 1999; Flohr 2013.

⁷ See e.g. Livy 41.26.

⁸ Vitr. 5.1.2.

⁹ On this debate see e.g. Carrington 1933, Mogetta 2016.

¹⁰ Jones and Robinson 2005

¹¹ E.g. the south end of *insula* VI 3, and the north end of *insula* VI 4.

¹² The complex is very briefly discussed in Pirson 1999, 159.

¹³ Anderson 2015. Pirson 1999, 159 thinks that the *tabernae* belonged to house VII 6, 28, but this is only at a very late stage.

¹⁴ I disagree with Pirson 1999, who argues that these complexes were situated in places that were unfit for the construction of houses.

¹⁵ Cic. *Att.* 14.9.1.

¹⁶ E.g. just outside Porta Ercolano. For Ostia see Flohr 2018.

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