

Roman Street and Urban Economy

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Since the beginning of town planning at the start of the 20th century, the urban thoroughfares of western cities were designed for wheeled traffic to the detriment of street life.¹ Raymond Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice* already claimed in 1909 that "roads are primarily highways for traffic",² and the "Athens Charter", which basically took up Le Corbusier's ideas about urbanism, enhanced that conception of streets. Before the development of urban planning, however, the situation was absolutely different as some historical studies have shown.³ These enquiries are based primarily on textual evidence, because the archaeologists who oversaw the earlier excavations seldom made careful consideration of the street remains.

Spinazzola's systematic investigations carried out in Pompeii along the "via dell'Abbondanza" between 1910 and 1923 shed new light on the space of the Roman street.⁴ For the first time, an archaeologist took a concerned interest in investigating the connections between a thoroughfare and the adjacent frontages.⁵ However, investigations into the Pompeian streetscape did not attract significant scholarly attention again until the end of the 20th century.

In the 1990's, B. Gesemann performed new investigations on the frontages of the major Pompeian streets, and R. Helg has recently pursued this matter further.⁶ Other scholars have investigated in detail various features of Pompeian streets, such as S. Tsujimura and E. Poehler who focused their enquiries on the traffic systems by scrutinizing roadways, stepping stones, or kerbstones.⁷ Unfortunately, such in-depth investigations are scarce in the other western Roman cities due to their poor state of conservation and the limited excavations.

A few archaeological studies have also paid attention to the economy of movement across the street network of select Roman cities.⁸ These enquiries applied new approaches, such as space syntax analysis, to highlight the most integrated thoroughfares in urban contexts and explain the distribution of urban activities across the city.⁹

The conference held in 2006 by the University of Poitiers was a significant methodological step forward for the study of ancient streets. For the first time, the ancient street was conceived of as a space that was constructed and designed to meet the needs of the inhabitants.¹⁰ As the proceedings of this conference demonstrate, a street is not a simple thoroughfare for wheeled and pedestrian traffic, but a very complex urban structure bringing together every elementary components of the urban fabric, such as the road system, the urban plots, the buildings, and the voids between them.¹¹

The road system is closely connected to the urban plots and both are often planned at the same time. Their layout directly affects the building typology and, consequently, the form of the frontages (fig. 1). The facades situated alongside the urban thoroughfares play an important role in how the space of different streets are

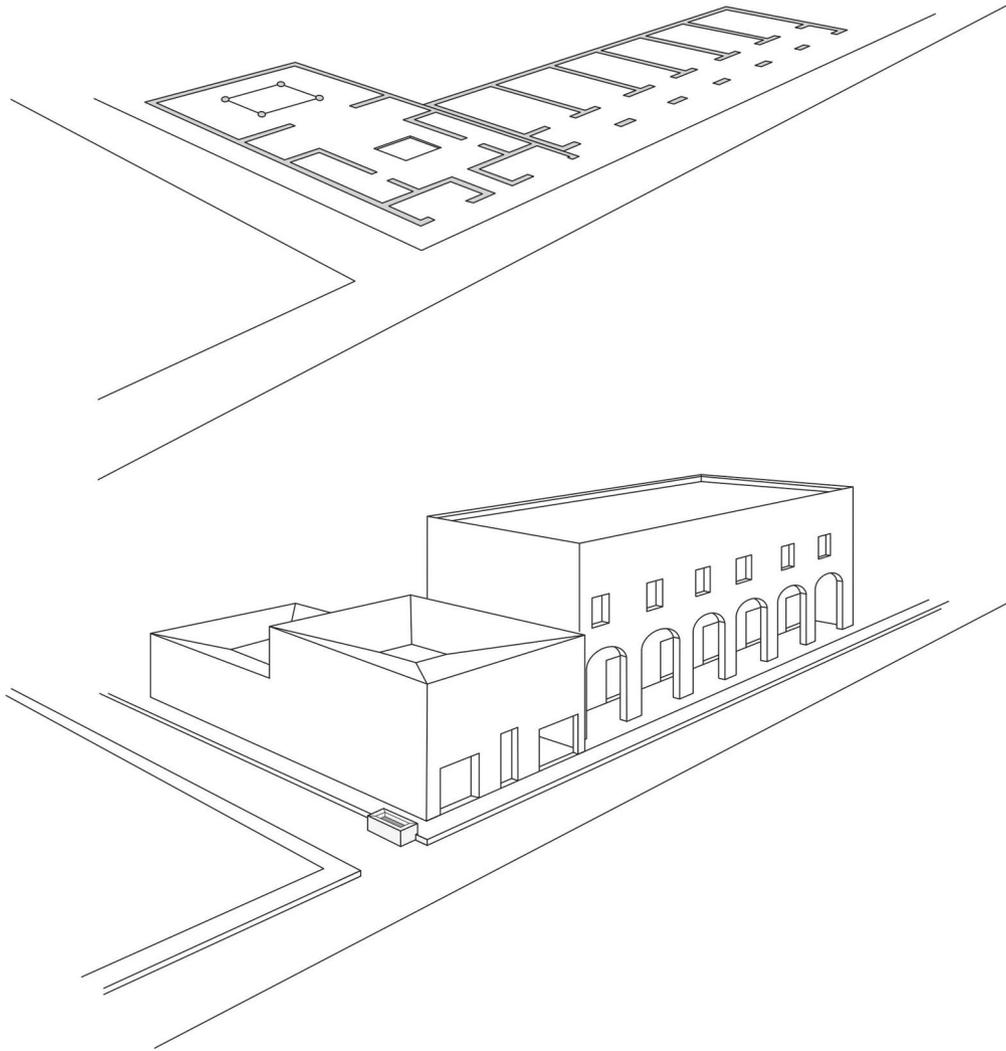


Fig. 1: Building typology plays a key role in shaping the streetscape.

experienced and used, as well as their permeability (fig. 2b). The number of doors and windows opening into this space have a significant influence on street life: the more doors in the façade, the higher social and economic interactions between the “in” and the “out”.¹² For instance, the activities occurring in a street flanked by *atrium* houses without *tabernae* are quite different from those taking place in a street fringed by multi-storey buildings fitted with numerous *tabernae* and a portico in the ground floor. The street furniture, such as fountains, altars, or statues, enhance the importance of this space in urban life (fig. 2c).

But this is not the whole story. Under the roadway, the sewer system as well as the water supply system helped to embed the street in the whole urban fabric (fig. 2d) and determined to some extent the architectural layout of the adjacent buildings. All

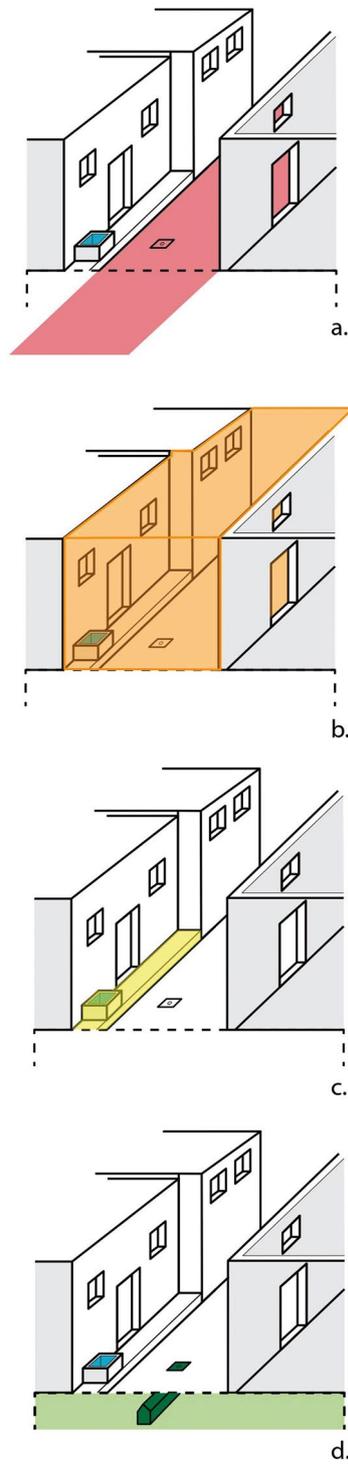


Fig. 2: The basic components of a street: a. the layout of the street; b. frontages constituting a volume; c. street furniture (fountains, pavements, etc.); d. sewer and water facilities.

these features (road network, frontages, street furniture, sewers and water supplies) form the “architecture of the street”¹³ that is built over time. In a nutshell, the street is a long-term construction providing numerous facilities for urban activities, such as economic ones.

Economic issues have interested classical scholars for a long time and, since the publication in 1973 of Finley’s famous book *The Ancient Economy*, the debate has been centred to some degree on the role played by the towns.¹⁴ Archaeological evidence played a key role in this discourse and some scholars have recently carried out investigations into this significant topic, especially in Pompeii and Herculaneum.¹⁵ These archaeological studies have shed new light on urban craftsmanship and trade by scrutinizing the topography of shops and workshops across the urban fabric,¹⁶ the operational processes,¹⁷ the architecture of the economic premises,¹⁸ and so on.

However, they have not discussed in detail the close connections between economic activities and the space of the street as we have just defined it, even though some of them emphasized that such significant links existed in antiquity.¹⁹ The panel “Roman Street and Urban Economy” held in Bonn during the 19th International Congress of Classical Archaeology provided an ideal opportunity to undertake an enquiry to bridge this gap and to further our understanding of this important question connecting ancient urbanism and economy.

The first contribution presents an in-depth discussion using a case study from Athens. In this paper, Laura Ficuciello tries to highlight the evolution of the economic streetscape of the agora of the “Kerameikos” and the adjacent streets from the Archaic to the Roman period by comparing textual, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence. She shows that two kinds of buildings flanked the streets of this area and the open square of the agora from the 4th century BC onwards: the *stoai* and the *kykloi*. The former is similar to a row of shops opening onto the streets, whereas the latter are buildings having an internal courtyard where economic activities occurred, but had few connections with urban thoroughfares.

The next papers investigate the connections between the space of the street and the economic facilities in some western Roman cities. Grégory Mainet, focuses on the evolution of the streetscape in central Italy, especially in Norba, Fregellae, Alba Fucens, and Ostia, from the 2nd century BC to the start of the 3rd century AD. This brief enquiry considers the frontages of the buildings as a proxy to further our understanding of the impact of economic facilities on the streetscape. In contrast, Riccardo Helg puts forward an in-depth investigation of the “via di Nola” in Pompeii, which was mostly unearthed during the 19th century. The new reading of the archival record proposed by the scholar highlights the frontage decoration of some economic premises and the impact of the increasingly expanding *tabernae* on the shape of that street. Then, Riccardo Di Cesare and Daniela Liberatore propose a reflection on the streets of Alba Fucens, in Abruzzo. In this paper, they seek to underline the key role

of the road system in shaping the layout of the street system during the republican period and, consequently, the location of the shops along the streets of this town.

Marine L  p  e concludes this panel with a paper on the streetscape of Lugdunum/Lyon in Gaul from the Augustan period onwards. This study is based on substantial archaeological evidence provided to a great extent by rescue archaeology. In contrast with the other contributions, this one scrutinizes the architectural remains of the *tabernae*, their topographical context, as well as the small finds. Such a holistic approach²⁰ gives the opportunity to further our understanding of the connection between the space of the street and the different kinds of economic activities that flanked it.

Obviously, the proceedings of this panel present the preliminary results of this discussion and these short contributions make no pretense of being exhaustive. Additional research should be carried out in the near future with the participation of other specialists in ancient urbanism and economy in order to sharpen our understanding of the connections between streets and economy in ancient cities.

Notes

¹Jacobs 1961, *passim*.

²Unwin 1909, 235.

³For a general overview of street life before the 20th century, see Lem  norel 1997. About street life in ancient time specifically, see Holleran 2011 and Hartnett 2017.

⁴Spinazzola 1953.

⁵Dessales 2008, 45 f.

⁶Gesemann 1996; Helg 2018.

⁷Tsujimura 1991; Poehler 2017.

⁸Kaiser 2011, 106–139; St  ger 2011, 197–227; Poehler 2017b.

⁹For the distribution of economic activities in Pompeii, see for example van Nes 2011, 105 f. 115 and Poehler 2017b.

¹⁰Ballet et al. 2008, 9–13.

¹¹On the complexity and the significance of the streets across the urban fabric, see Gourdon 2001, *passim*.

¹²Laurence 2007, 88–96; van Nes 2011, 105–106. 115.

¹³By “architecture of the street”, I mean the overall constituent of the space of the street (roadway, pavements, crossing steps, frontages, fountains, etc.) and not the only space between the kerbstones, as E. Poehler did. See Poehler 2017a, 77–100.

¹⁴Flohr – Wilson 2016.

¹⁵Monteix 2010; Flohr 2013; Flohr – Wilson 2017. The research in craftsmanship carried out by the «Centre Jean B  rard» for instance greatly illustrates such an interest in urban economy.

¹⁶Among others, see Laurence 2007, 51–69; Monteix 2017.

¹⁷For instance, the operational processes of the Pompeian bakeries is analysed in Monteix 2016.

¹⁸Monteix 2010, 41–87.

¹⁹ See for instance Monteix 2013, 170. We must point out the enquiry on the tabernae excavated in Ostia recently published by J. Schoevaert, who devotes an entire chapter to the connections between such premises and the space of the street. See Schoevaert 2018, 209–269.

²⁰ See Monteix 2010 for a similar approach carried out in Herculaneum in such a systematic way.

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