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Decoration in Context. Decorative Programs in light of the Archaeology of Buildings from the insula V of Herculaneum

Alexandra Dardenay

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CONTEXT AND MEANING

PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWELFTH INTERNATIONAL
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Decoration in Context

Decorative Programs in Buildings from Insula V at Herculaneum

Alexandra Dardenay

Abstract

In spite of the many Roman remains discovered in Occident, our knowledge of how people of Antiquity “lived” their home and city are still very patchy. In this regard, the city of Herculaneum offers an exceptional analytical laboratory for a study of decors and a reading of the images in their architectural context. In this communication will be presented the methodology used for our research program, initiated in 2011, which envisages a study in context of all the wall-paintings of Herculaneum. These decors, currently in situ or detached from their original location, are listed in our database (Domus ©) allowing to operate their combined analysis. I will focus on the case of the insula V at Herculaneum, which reveals a very mixed habitat. The analysis of decors in context will be considered at several levels throughout the house, the room and the wall.

Studying conjointly the decoration and the archaeology of buildings can be both rewarding and revealing, even at the level of a single building. The advantage of Herculaneum is that it makes possible to conduct the study across a range of scales from a house to a whole residential area.¹ Therefore, it is possible to undertake a dynamic study of the construction and the decoration of a single building and see it as a part of the larger whole and, consequently, consider the ornamental evolution of the adjacent buildings. By analysing a building in its architectural model across a time continuum from its initial construction (ideally from the foundations upwards) it is possible to split the space up into isolated ‘time blocks’ and assess both the development of the building and its decoration. This permits the study of each significant change.² An overall and comprehensive study of the evolution of buildings and ornamental programmes from Herculaneum has been developed by two CNRS Teams (AOROC/ TRACES) in collaboration with the University of Bologna (A. Coralini) and the French School at Rome.³ The project is based partly on an ambitious scientific challenge; that is the analysis of the diachronic evolution of the urban infrastructure and the overall decorations of the buildings.

The study is currently focused on *insulae* IV and V of Herculaneum. Despite the work still continuing it is possible to already indicate the lines of investigation taken as well as initial results and assumptions. I will present, here, some examples taken from *insula* V. Our project can rely on sev-

eral successive studies when it comes to the study of the building itself. Despite the lack of recent archaeological excavations in this area some have been particularly productive and highlight the architectural evolution of the structure of *insula* V. Specifically the studies by W. Johannowsky, followed by Th. Ganschow, R. De Kind and much more recently by N. Monteix.⁴

Between the Samnite period and the eruption of Vesuvius the *insula* was subject to a series of important regroupings.⁵ From the results of the studies, it is possible to divide the *insula* into two parts: the northern part whose original plots were orientated on a N/S axis and the southern part orientated on an E/W axis.⁶ It is apparent that the house, known as Casa del Bicentenario has been subject of successive transformations with consequent repercussions on the organisation of the buildings of the northern part of the *insula*.⁷ The intention here is not to discuss any changes incurred due to the construction of this large house, but to explore examples that demonstrate the use of a diachronic approach that links the study of the construction with ornamental programmes.

Visitors to the Casa del Bel Cortile are initially surprised by its unusual layout and by the courtyard architecture with its large stone built staircase leading to the first floor and to which the house owes its name. To date, the house has not been mapped and any brief notes and references do not take into account the architectural features of the house that give it identity and explain



Fig. 1. Plan of insula V of Herculaneum, northern part, Augustan phase (from Monteix 2010, fig. 173).

superficially its unexpected layout. Indeed the analysis of the architecture and decoration of this house should not be limited to a purely synchronic reading of the remains as they were in AD 79. To obtain a good understanding of the whole it is necessary to undertake a diachronic study of the buildings and the decorations associated with it. Up to the mid 70s the Casa del Bel Cortile was part of the vast Casa del Bicentenario from which it was only separated after the second earthquake, that is to say between 70 and 75 (fig. 1).⁸

When it was initially constructed, the Casa del Bicentenario extended towards the west where there was a *posticum* which gave access to the *Cardo IV*.⁹ Originally, therefore, during the Augustan construction¹⁰ there was no staircase in the courtyard which formed an annex to the main house, around which revolved a *triclinium* (if this was the function of room 2), a beautiful *oecus* (room 4) and some utility rooms. This *oecus*, due

to its proportions, was probably at some time the largest and most prestigious room of the Casa del Bicentenario and opened up onto the peristyle of the house. Following the division of the house and the relocation of the *posticum*, the Casa del Bicentenario lost its most prestigious reception room, a loss that was partially offset by the construction - maybe some time prior - of a new *oecus* in the south wing of the peristyle.¹¹

Concerning *oecus* 4, only the last decorative state remains. The fourth style decoration was made just after 62 at a time when the room was still a luxurious reception room for the Casa del Bicentenario. The decoration is architectural in style organised around a central aedicule on walls E and W.

Clear indications of the detachment of this room from the main building of Casa del Bicentenario are evident. (fig. 2) The east door opening behind the peristyle had been blocked up, but the



Fig. 2. Plan of insula V of Herculaneum, final phase (79 AD)
 (infography by M.-L. Maraval after Wallace-Hadrill 2011).



Fig. 3. Casa del Bel Cortile, oecus 4. Oecus opening over the peristyle from Casa del Bicentenario until 70-75. During the second earthquake, part from the walls fall down: the doors opening on the peristyle, the uprights of the north door and the south facade are rebuilt. The fourth style painting (post 62) does not cover the blocked door (photo M.-L. Maraval).

planned decoration to disguise the fact had not been completed (fig. 3). The owner of the newly independent Casa del Bel Cortile had evidently decided to keep the old decoration of the largest room in his residence. The overall study of the decoration in context would indicate that this was not a choice made in isolation but that he actually preserved most of the decorations dating from the time when the building was still the *positicum* of the Casa del Bicentenario.

Consequently, many areas have traces of fairly old décor with a type of coating that is referred to as a 'schematic second style' corresponding in all probability to the first phase of construction and decoration of the building in the Augustan period. It can be noted that room 6 in particular has preserved the simple décor of repeating rows of isodome blocks painted in a staggered arrangement over orthostats (fig. 2, part 6). In rooms 5 and 2 this second style wall-painting was pitted and covered with a newer coating. If the painting in the entrance (room 5) was applied during the last years of the house, the painting in room 2, on the other hand, belonged to an intermediate phase. Room 2, the entrance of which is opposite that of *oecus* 4, is often described as a *triclinium*, although uncertainties remain about its use and function. The décor adorning the walls of this room at the time of the eruption is typically consistent with the paintings of third style from the Claudian era.¹²

Chronologically, it appears indubitable that the decors of these 3 rooms (2, 5 and 6) must be linked to the ornamental programme of the Casa del Bicentenario, probably in its early stages. It can be thus observed the similarity between the paintings of the 'schematic second style' of these 3 rooms and that of room 2 of the Casa del Bicentenario which has a very similar style of architectural décor underlined with red threads on a white background.¹³ Consequently this brief overview of the ground floor reveals that the new owner only partly redecorated the house. This part concerns the entrance (5), the courtyard (3) and the *tablinum* (1) that is to say the reception area of the house. If the owner had planned to redecorate the remaining rooms later we will never know. In any event the paint work in the courtyard was commenced but not completed which is indicated by the limits of the coating on the east wall. This rather grandiose architectural fourth style décor, was only commissioned by the new owner on some part of the ground floor.¹⁴ As mentioned above, during the years 70-75 the Casa del Bicentenario was partially split up and, in any event, closed off some of its rooms, which

then become independent housing units.¹⁵ Architectural study reveals that the Casa del Bel Cortile is not an isolated case. Another important transformation of this part of the *insula* is the creation of the shop V-17 and the rooms above (V-18) into two separate housing units¹⁶. Prior to this phase the shop V-17 had been accessible from the atrium of the Bicentenario.

With regard to the upstairs rooms, they could have initially been linked to a prestigious apartment deployed on the north façade of the house or could have been associated with the shop on the ground floor. During the transformation of the shop V-17 into an independent two roomed home, the door between the back room (20) and the east wall of the Bicentenario atrium is blocked up. The blocked doorway is disguised under painted plaster of the fourth style but is different from that painted on the rest of the atrium, further evidence that this transformation took place after the original decoration of the whole space. The apartment V-17, composed of two rooms, shows at the time of the eruption a prestigious fourth style décor, at least partially done subsequent to their separation from the Bicentenario. This can be deduced from the doubling of the west wall of room 21 and the south wall of room 20. Another clue is the décor completely covering the west wall of room 20, over the blocked doorway which is known to have been done after the second earthquake.¹⁷ The painted decoration of the two rooms is totally homogeneous. The problem of the original use of the rooms at the time of the wall paintings remains unsolved however. Did the decoration precede the transformation of these rooms into apartments?

Regarding Apartment V-18, located upstairs, it consists of a group of three rooms of a fairly modest area as it only occupies 38 msq. It was accessible from the street via the staircase built against the east wall of room 21.¹⁸ Contrary to what is suggested by the current state of conservation of this room, there was in 79 AD a partition wall that completely isolated the stairs from the room at the front of the apartment V-17.¹⁹ The apartment shows a high quality fourth style decoration enhanced by a pictorial work of great rarity. The question on how these rooms on the north face of Casa del Bicentenario were initially connected has not yet been settled. However studying several elements of the overall construction suggests that they always were. The architectural study reveals that the stairs leading to apartment V-18 was not in the initial stages directly accessible from the street but from room



Fig. 4. Herculaneum, V, 18. Location of the wooden frame (photo Th. Dietsch).

21.²⁰ This indicates that a functional relationship existed at least for an undefined period between the two rooms (20 and 21) on the ground floor as well as the rooms located immediately above. On the basis that this relationship existed up to the second earthquake a functional link via a doorway gave access to rooms 20 and 21 from the atrium of the Casa del Bicentenario between the Augustan period and the second earthquake.

Consequently taking into account the type of construction for the walls for apartment V-18 - in *opus reticulatum* B - that is to say the same architectural basis as the rooms of the northern apartment of the Casa del Bicentenario - a contemporary and maybe homogeneous building is suggested from the Augustan period. It is equally clear that the rooms at the front of the Casa del Bicentenario could, theoretically at least, be linked by the loggia. But when would the link between these parts have been broken? Can it be assumed that, at the time of the construction of the house, for example, the symmetric space of room 49 belonged to a spacious apartment overlooking the street via a balcony?

The architectural study of the north eastern part of the Casa del Bicentenario has not yet answered this question. Nevertheless study of the decorations on the first floors permits deeper understanding and allows a more precise hypothesis to be formulated. In his thesis on the floors of Herculaneum, James Andrews highlights the often privileged status of the apartments overlooking the streets compared to the apartments at the rear of the house.

The Casa del Bicentenario is no exception to this praxis, as has been indicated by the overall analysis of the decoration of the floors. J. Andrews questions that there would be striking contrast between apartments on the upper floor in the peristyle area and the apartments located on the front of the building. Whilst the rooms located in the rear apartments (rooms 28-38) show evidence of poorer quality wall paintings (white possibly enhanced in one or the other rooms with coloured bands) those located in the front (39-53) have decorations of the highest quality.²¹ So whatever the structural link between the large apartment in

the front of Casa del Bicentenario and the small apartment V-18, it is possible to observe that the decorations of rooms 51, 52, 53 should be read in the overall architectural environment within the scale of the entire building.

The high quality of the decoration of apartment V-18 is particularly evident in room 53, which is the room A Maiuri's team discovered the famous picture surrounded by a wooden frame.²² This exceptional piece is a unique example of intonaco in a wooden structure and embedded directly into the wall (fig. 4).²³ The painting shows Cupids decorating a tripod which is a very symbolic iconographic pattern, typical of Herculaneum painting. Was this scene in step with the decoration phase of the Casa del Bicentenario? A more detailed study of the construction and decoration of the wall painting *in situ* may allow for clarification. However the presence of such a decoration in these rooms confirms that this was a high quality apartment.

CONCLUSION

Taken at *insula* level, from a diachronic perspective, the accurate study of the construction and decoration gives an initial impression of the evolution of the dwellings both structurally and ornamentally. The decoration of the buildings should not, then, be considered only from a static perspective but also a dynamic one.

NOTES

- ¹ Some scholars did such attempts in Pompeii, for instance R. Ling at the *insula* of the Menander (Ling 2005). See also the researches on villa San Marco: Barbet/Blanc/Eristov 1995. I'm very grateful to the direction of the Parco Archeologico di Ercolano, which allowed such a study.
- ² About ancient Housing and Household: Nevett 2010 and Allison 2004.
- ³ Dardenay/Eristov 2013; Dardenay/Eristov/Maraval 2014.
- ⁴ Johannowsky 1982; Ganschow 1989; De Kind 1998, 2005; Monteix 2010, 312-332, figs 160-182. The plans of the *insula* V published in Monteix 2010 are very clear and useful for understanding the evolution of structures; I reproduce those plans here with the permission of the author. I also thank Nicolas Monteix for his remarks and clarifications.
- ⁵ Monteix 2010, 312.
- ⁶ According to Johannowsky 1982, 148-149.
- ⁷ Maiuri 1958, 223-224; Monteix 2010, 320-330.
- ⁸ Monteix 2010, 322, 329-330 and n. 61.
- ⁹ Monteix 2010, 323 and fig. 173.
- ¹⁰ For an Augustan date: Maiuri 1958, 223; Pagano 2000, 72-73. *Contra* (Julio-Claudian date) De Vos 1982, 288.
- ¹¹ One can remark the construction of this new *oecus* on plan fig.175 in Monteix 2010.

¹² Esposito 2014, 132-134.

¹³ Monteix 2010, n. 61.

¹⁴ Upstairs, the paintings of the two rooms above room 2 apparently date from the 62-70/75 phase from the décor (Monteix 2010, 325-326 and n. 65); concerning the rest of the first floor, it is possible that it extended only after 70/75, when the house became independent (Monteix 2010, n. 65 and Andrews 2006, vol. II, 206-210)

¹⁵ For N. Monteix, although the damage caused by the second earthquake in that part of the *insula* V were quite low, they have not prevented significant alterations. I wonder if we should actually see a cause and effect relationship between the earthquake of 70/75 and the dismemberment of the house. Indeed, some evidence suggest that these sessions were at least partly anticipated in the 62-70/75 phase between the two earthquakes i.e., in particular through the construction of a new *oecus* in the peristyle of the Casa del Bicentenario; I think that this could suggest that the owner already planned to divest himself of his reception room.

¹⁶ Monteix 2010, 330 and 83-85, fig. 30.

¹⁷ Andrews 2006, 243: 'On this basis, the fourth style painting in room 26, which cover the blocked doorway, must post-date the separation. For the doubling of the walls see Monteix 2010, fig.180.

¹⁸ See the isometric restitution of the two flats in Monteix 2010, fig. 30.

¹⁹ Andrews 2006, II, 230-231.

²⁰ Andrews 2006, II, 239.

²¹ Andrews 2006, see fig.50.

²² Maiuri 1938.

²³ Now detached: SAP 77872 (H. 96 cm; W. 89 cm)

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