

insulae: How the masses lived

The House of Diana

The House of Diana in Ostia is a famously well-preserved three storey apartment building. Looking more closely at its floor plan and its decoration shows how hard it can be to interpret how these buildings might have been used.



House of Diana (left) and reconstruction by Gismondi (right, from different angle).



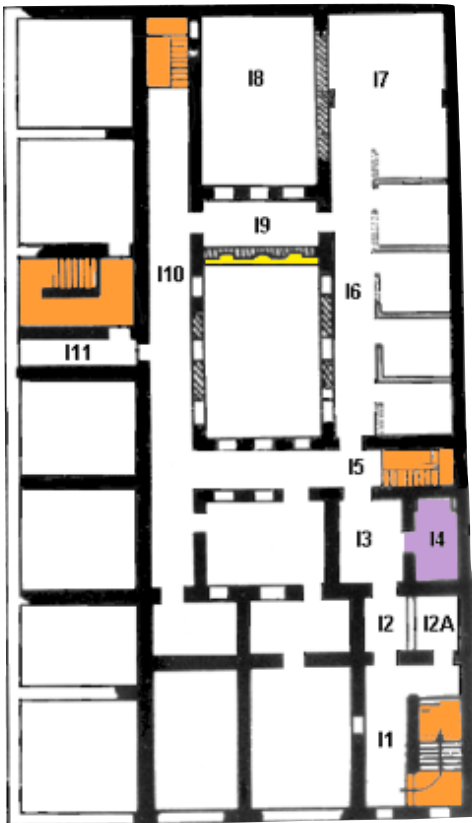
Plan of the ground floor

- shop fronts (all with mezzanines, 4 & 6 have backrooms)
- latrines
- Mithraeum
- triclinium? (based on decoration on floor)
- courtyard with fountain / water reservoir
- staircase to upper level




Mosaics and wallpaintings were found in rooms 2

What kind of people do you think would have run the shops? What might their mezzanine levels and the backrooms have been used for?

A not unusual layout for *insulae* would be for grander rooms or apartments to be situated on the ground floor, while the upper floors held more austere rooms.



Plan of the first floor

-  niches for 1m high statues
-  latrine or kitchen, based on drain going down into the latrine below
-  staircase to lower level



*Fresco from
first floor
(exact
provenance
not known)*

Which features of the upper level might lead you to conclude poorer people might have inhabited this floor?

Which features would seem to contradict this?



One interpretation is that the parts of the ground floor in yellow could be a *medianum*-style apartment (a sort of *domus* surrounded by an apartment block).

There are some problems with this interpretation however:

1. external entrances into the internal space at 5, 7 and 12.
2. large latrines at 17 seem inappropriate
3. the slab showing the huntress Diana is similar to those found on shop fronts and public buildings - it would be a very unusual decoration for the central courtyard of a *medianum* apartment
4. the decoration of the rooms on the top floor is quite elaborate, suggesting they might have been important. Perhaps the entire building is not an apartment block at all?

Some have the block could have been a hotel, or the seat of a guild, or a meeting place for religious officials.

Which interpretation do you think is the most likely?

Further information: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio1/3/3-3.htm>