

# Taking Literally the title ‘Structures of Empire’

*Insulae: or Roman Tower Blocks*



# *Insulae*

- ◆ What was an *insula*?
  - ◆ Literally an 'island': the term is also used to refer to a city block.
  - ◆ The bottom floor might consist of a shop and a luxurious apartment.
  - ◆ The top floor had the reputation of being cramped, hot, dangerous and lacking in facilities.
  - ◆ Notorious for fires and collapse.
  - ◆ A significant feature of Roman domestic architecture, which spread to crowded cities throughout the empire, although little physical evidence for such structures remains outside Rome, Ostia and Herculaneum.



## *Insulae: sources*

Yet with the greatness of the city and the unlimited crowding of citizens, it is necessary to provide very numerous dwellings. Therefore, since a level site could not receive such a multitude to dwell in the city, circumstances themselves have compelled the resort to raising the height of buildings.

Vitruvius 2.3.17

...how far is it up to those towering floors from which a potsherd smashes your brains; how often leaky and broken fragments fall from the windows; and with what impact they strike the pavement, leaving it chipped and shattered. You may well be regarded as slack, and heedless of sudden disaster, if you fail to make your will before going out to dinner. There's a separate form of death that night in every window that watches you passing beneath it. So hope, and utter a piteous prayer, as you walk along that they may be willing to jettison only what's *in* their slop-pails.

Juvenal, *Satires* 3. 269-77





The houses themselves, which they have built upwards to such a degree that, although the homes have been designed for use and shelter, they are now a danger not a protection; so great is the height of the buildings and such the narrowness of the streets that they offer no protection against fire, nor is there a means of escape in any direction if they collapse.

Seneca, *Controversiae*, 2.1.11

The building of houses goes on unceasingly in consequence of the collapses and fires and repeated sales (these last, too, go on endlessly) ....

Strabo, *Geography*, 5.3.7

Here we live in a city which, to a large extent, is supported by rickety props; that's how the landlord's agent stops it falling. He covers a gap in the chinky old building, then "sleep easy!" he says, when the ruin is poised to collapse. One ought to live where fires don't happen, where alarms at night are unknown. Ucalegon's shouting "Fire!" and moving to safety his bits and pieces; your third floor is already smoking; you are oblivious. If the panic starts at the foot of the stairs, the last to burn is the man who is screened from the rain by nothing except the tiles ....

Juvenal, *Satires* 3. 193-203



# Did *insulae* deserve such criticism?



*Opus craticum*, used in *insulae* in Herculaneum

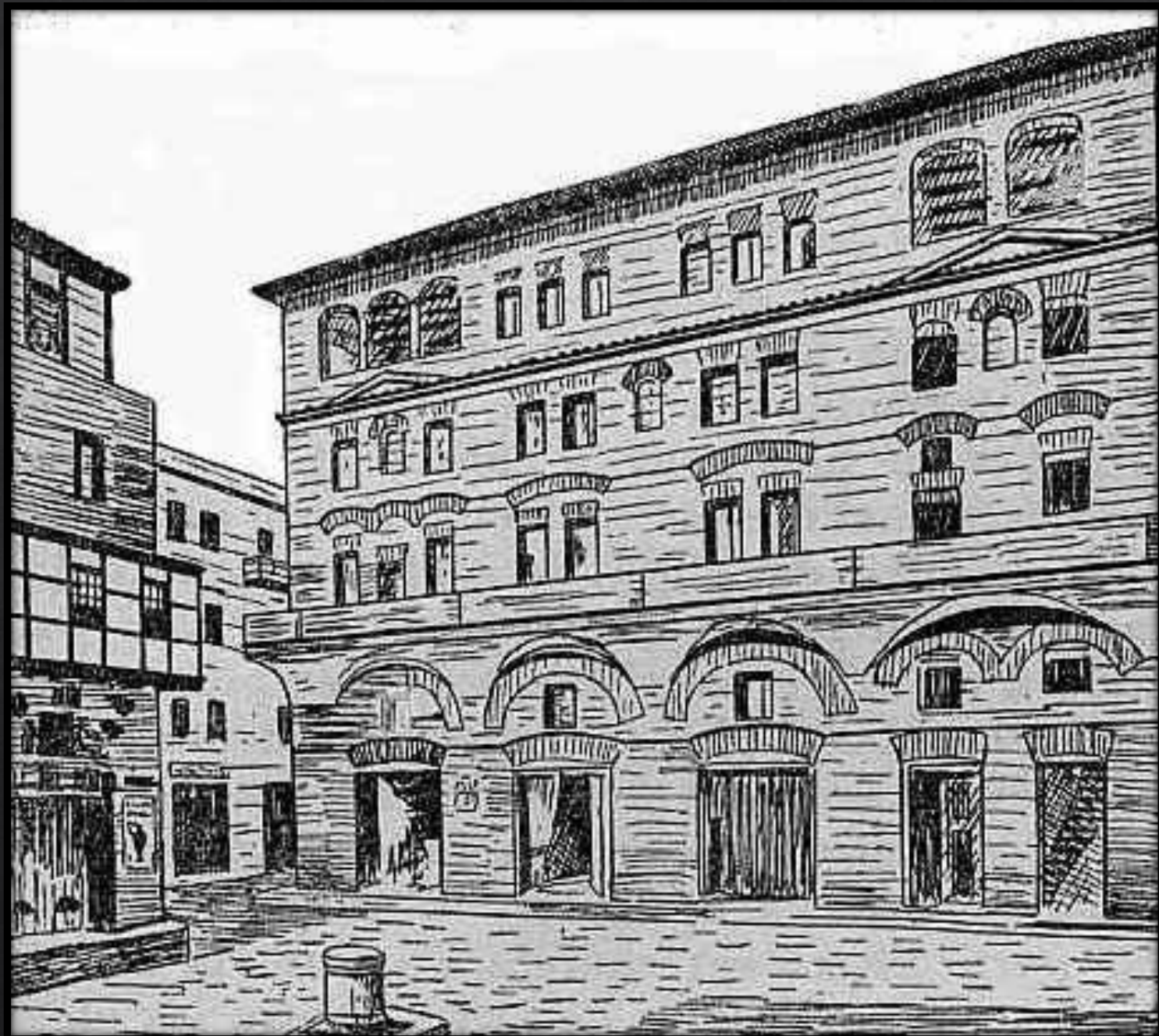


Brick-faced concrete, found at Ostia















Prof Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33962178>

**On *insulae*...**

- ◆ Certainly, we can see their ubiquitous footprints on the vast map of the city's streets that was incised on marble slabs under the emperor Septimius Severus. Though only fragments survive, it is truly impressive, the first known instance of a detailed map of the streets and buildings of any city.
- ◆ That fact underlines how important it was to the city authorities to know their city and its inhabitants in detail. It was Julius Caesar who as dictator first surveyed the city, district by district and property by property. It helped the government in many ways, not least to cut down on the list of citizens claiming free hand-outs of food. Owners of properties were responsible for reporting inhabitants to the city prefect.
- ◆ In these contexts, we meet the figure of the insularius, the caretaker responsible for an insula. He also had to ensure that his property was supplied with fire-fighting equipment, buckets and axes. He was thus the point of intersection between inhabitants and the forces of law and order, and under imperial rule, such forces multiplied.
- ◆ The military urban cohorts under the city prefect, and the fireguard, the "vigiles" under the fire prefect, had the power to enter premises and check all was in order.
- ◆ At 7,000-strong, the ancient fireguard outnumbered the modern vigili del fuoco, who see themselves as their descendants. And if they had no fire engines, at least they had force-pumps called "siphons", built to a design of Greek hydraulic engineering.
- ◆ Modern technologies may be different from those of ancient Rome, but in both cases, a vast population produced massive challenges, which the Romans addressed in ways scarcely less impressive than those today.

## So *insulae* were...

- ◆ an administrative unit
- ◆ a small-scale economy
- ◆ a point of interaction between civilians and official forces
- ◆ a marker of city life, and a microcosm of social levels
- ◆ a way of keeping track of the population
- ◆ the catalyst for a new form of public living
- ◆ the driving force behind important Roman social institutions, like corner bath-houses and thermopolia





# *Insulae* demonstrate...

- ◆ the administrative structures of the empire, manifested in census-taking, building regulations and safety monitoring.
- ◆ the very public nature of city life: people would go out to find cooking facilities, washing facilities, water etc.
- ◆ the absolute rejection of the traditional model of Roman villa living.
- ◆ the lack of economic segregation.
- ◆ the mix of residential and commercial properties.



# Useful Sources

- ◆ The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome, edited by Paul Erdkamp
- ◆ Ian M. Barton, *Roman Domestic Buildings*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996.
- ◆ <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/imperial-rome-and-ostia>

