Notes on the Biography of Doors. Ianualogy in Casa del Menandro, Pompeii

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In the present article, I probe into the biography of doors from an ancient Campanian large urban house, seen against the background of its neighborhood. More specifically, I selected as a case study the so-called Casa del Menandro (Pompeii I, 10, 4). I will attempt to recast doors as part of Roman architectural language pattern, engineered as an osmosis device servicing both the world inside and the world outside. What I termed "ianualogy analysis" will emphasize the role of doors and doorways in the visual articulation of space, the negotiation of privacy, and as ontological carriers of past. I take my cue from Christopher Alexander's classical adages that, when deciding the position of doors and windows, "it is possible to relax regularity without losing structural integrity" and that going – and, I would add, even taking a look – through the door is "a deliberate, thoughtful passage from one place to another."[1]

My arguments are underpinned by, on the one hand, the rather recent realization that there was no clear-cut dichotomy of private and public in Roman houses,[2] and that Pompeian houses could be seen as loci of social activity and display.[3] On the other hand, I indirectly used elements of boundaries theory, as it is indeed tempting to approach a whole *insula* in terms of Julienne Hanson's view of the house being not so much a system of spaces but a "system of boundaries."[4] The modern dwelling is after all, in any case in Peter Sloterdijk's view, a site of exclusion, an architectural expression of our "basic right to ignore the outside world."[5] Mark Grahame spearheaded this type of approach in 1997 (access analysis on Casa del Fauno, *insula* 12 of *regio* VI) by discussing for every room their "relative asymmetry" (number of rooms that must be crossed to reach a given room) and "control value" (how any given space controls access to adjacent spaces). More importantly, a study of boundaries was shown by M. Taylor Lauritsen to work for the Casa degli Amorini Dorati,[6] while Lucia Michelin has recently proposed a computational analysis of doors in Pompeii.[7]

1 Christopher W. Alexander, Murray Silverstein, and Sara Ishikawa, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1047 and 1057-1058.

2 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Public Honour and Private Shame: The Urban Texture of Pompeii," in *Urban Society in Roman Italy*, ed. Tim Cornell and Kathryn Lomas (London: Routledge, 1995), 39–62; Ray Laurence and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and beyond* (Portsmouth, RI: JRA, 1997); Andrew M. Riggsby, "'Public' and 'private' in Roman culture: the case of the *cubiculum*," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 10 (1997): 36–56; Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

3 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Social Structure of the Roman House," *Papers of the British School of Rome,* 56 (1988): 43–97.

4 Julienne Hanson, *Decoding Homes and Houses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

5 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Volume III: Foams – Plural Spherology*, transl. W. Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), 504.

6 M. Taylor Lauritsen, "Doors in Domestic Space at Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Preliminary Study," in *TRAC 2010: Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. D. Mladenović and B. Russell (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 59–75.

7 Lucia Michielin, *Fores et Fenestrae: A Computational Study of Doors and Windows in Roman Domestic Space* (Summertown: Archaeopress, 2021).

This *insula* of the Menander is eminently suited as backdrop for the present case study given its dimensions, degree of preservation, and thorough academic publication. In fact, it is now the first *insula* to have been fully published. A number of impressive monographs initiated back in 1997 dealt with its structures, decorations, finds, silver treasure, and – soon to come – inscriptions.[8] These studies now supersede older reports and represent the best available synthesis of the results of the excavation campaigns in the Casa del Menandro in 1926-1932 as well as in 1979, 1987, and 1994.

The *insula* of the Menander (I,10), between the Pompeian *Altstadt* and the walled city to the East, is a mini-cityscape in its own right, located only one block away from via Stabiana (Pompeii's *cardo maximus*) to the West and via dell'Abbondanza (one of the main *decumani*) to the North. Its boundaries are, to the W, the *vicolo Occidentale*, to the E, the *vicolo di Paquius Proculus*, and, to the N, the *vicolo del Menandro*.[9] The latter was the most important street front, in terms of traffic as well as number of doors (and graffiti), and also perhaps because the street fronts perpendicular to it sloped considerably (almost 2.5 m across the whole *insula*). The northern street front was dominated by the Casa del Menandro, for more than two centuries the largest property in the whole block.[10] (Fig. 1)

Our House and its dependencies take up just over half of the total surface of the *insula*. The core of the property is a catenation of prestigious architectural areas, *fauces – atrium – tablinum – peristylium*, offering an axial vista of some 44m from the main entrance to the rear wall with *exedrae*. Various other spaces for sleeping, dining, storage and so on articulated around the *atrium*, while from the peristyle radiated the other house wings (with rather more functional spaces including bath, kitchen, latrines, yard, stable) and a large commercial annex (with yard, stable, and living quarters, as well as its own secondary entrances from the western street front). Doors can, of course, be studied for the stableyard area as well, (Fig. 2) although in this article I will be focusing on the residential area. For the rest, the *insula* also included a couple of smaller houses, namely Casa del Fabbro (I 10, 7) at the NW and the Casa degli Amanti (I, 10,11) at the SW, and a few other minor properties, as well as three one-room apartments, possibly shops. They need not be discussed at length, but will be alluded to where relevant, as a *domus* cannot be meaningfully discussed if separated from its neighborhood context. The role of doors in the space syntax and in the evolution of the house can be productively debated only in such a context.

In 79 CE, the *insula* had countless interior doors and 18 street doorways, of which three belonged to the Menander (entrance number 4 as the main access; 14, the yard gate; and 15, a secondary access). The others offered access to dwelling houses (1, 3, 7, 8, 11, 16, and 18), shops (2, 9, 13), possible workshops (6, 10, and 17), and apartments (5 and 12).[11]

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8 Fundamental here are Roger Ling, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. Volume I: The Structures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Roger Ling and Lesley A. Ling, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. Volume II: The Decorations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Penelope M. Allison, *The Insula of The Menander at Pompeii. Volume III: The Finds, A Contextual Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) with Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, 2004). Also Amedeo Maiuri, *La Casa del Menandro e il suo tesoro di argenteria* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1932); Hendryk G. Beyen, *Die pompejanische Wanddekoration vom zweiten bis zum vierten Stil* (The Hague: Haag Nijhoff, vol. 2, 1960); Matteo Della Corte, "Pompei: Iscrizioni Dell'isola X Della Regione I," *Notizie degli Scavi di antichità* IX (1929): 277–331; Olga Elia, "Pompei: Relazione sullo scavo dell'Insula X della Regio I," *Notizie degli Scavi di antichità* (1934): 264–344.

9 Throughout the article I refer to "North," although on the city plan this should technically rather be "North-West." But since the *vicolo del Menandro* is parallel to the *decumanus*, which ought to have been running E-W, I will follow other academic publications in tacitly rectifying this.

10 The plan of the insula may also be consulted here:
https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/people/academics/allison/PA%20images/map.jpg/image_view_fullscreen

11 See the summary on thresholds and doorways by Lesley A. Ling in Ling, *Structures*, 336-341.

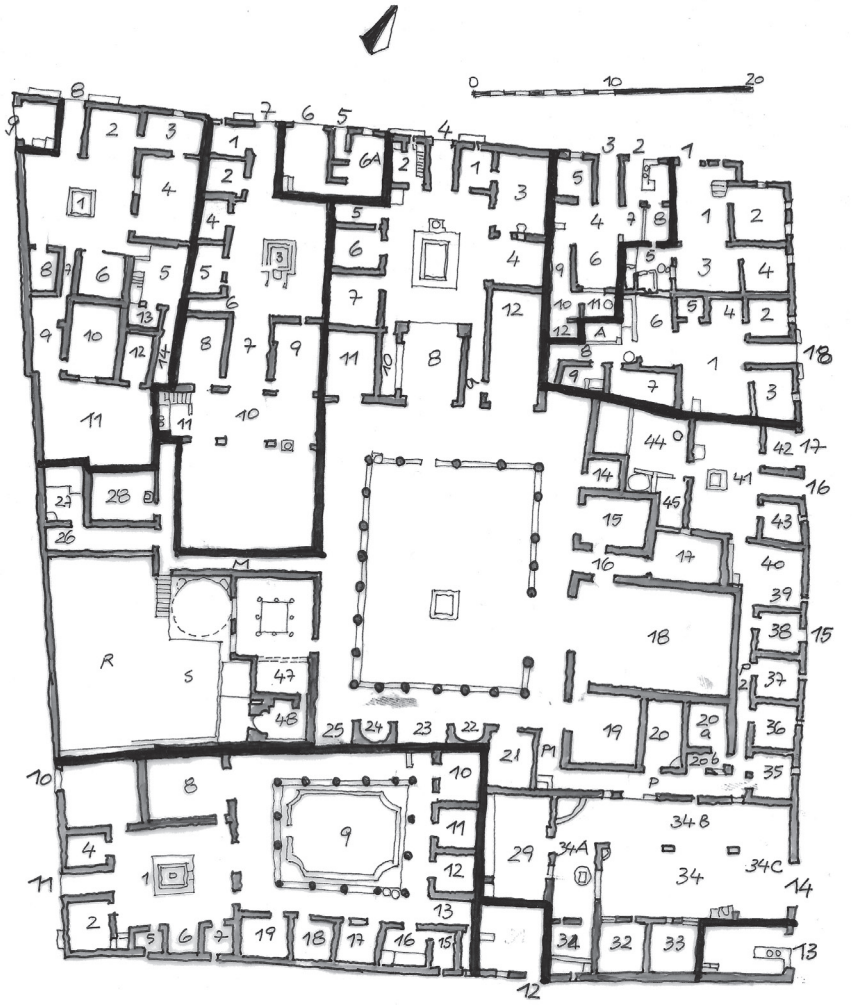


Fig. 1: Plan of the *Insula del Menandro.*

Fig. 2: *Casa del Menandro.* S wall of stableyard, door and window of room 33.



The Biography of Doors

Present-day urban dwellers take it for granted that ancient doorways were a given of the built space, when in fact they were often relocated. Many of them were indeed blocked up and new ones were created in the same or in different walls. The *insula* of the Menander witnessed countless such operations, whose explanations we generally pin, perhaps hastily, on changes in space use or property ownership. Walling up doorways can undoubtedly be the architectural expression of a deed of sale, and in these cases, blocked entrances are tell-tale signs that a space – necessarily located along the interface between two estates – changed owners. This was by no means a rare occurrence, to judge from how intricate house plans are in our *insula*, as opposed to each property taking up a geometrical slice of the block. Our Casa, for example, must have sold at some point its northwestern corner room to someone who also acquired the northeastern corner of the Fabbro and created a workshop (I, 10, 6) with entrances from the northern street front – obviously after blocking up and opening quite a few doorways, to match the new situation. By the same token, our Casa's E wing (sometimes formally called house 16) gradually acquired more functional independence, reflected in turn in a novel doorway pattern. The situation is paralleled elsewhere in the *insula*, where e.g. the corners of Fabbro and I, 10, 8 became for a while part of the same house, and then reverted to their respective owners; a couple rooms changed hands between the irregularly planned house 3 and house 18; and the kitchen yard of house 1 opened originally towards (and therefore belonged to) house 3.[12]

Rooms, then, can move over to different houses, although walls remain immutable, at least in comparison. Key to this paradox is to see the door as an abstract mobility device, effecting the alteration of property boundaries. In this they have the assistance of windows. Consider the property limit between Menandro and Fabbro, which had not always been what it had become by 79 CE: only at some point have all doorways that originally connected them been walled up, while at the same time the windows in the wall between the Menandro corridors M-M2 and the Fabbro garden were naturally blocked as well.[13] Similarly, our Casa and the property to the W (House 7) had been originally independent, and were brought under the same ownership at some point by new doors and windows that pierced the boundary wall – only to be later blocked up once again, presumably in the wake of further real estate transactions.[14] Of course, there may be more walled-up doors unknown to us, still hidden under well preserved plaster on some Pompeian walls, but that would only expand, and not disconfirm, what was stated above.

It should also be added that, much more commonly than doors do today, some Pompeian doors incorporate lattice-work windows immediately above them, in order to maximize levels of light in the notoriously dim ancient houses. A door was conceived, then, also as a source of light. Doors with fixed latticework above them, while not allowing an outside viewer to glimpse the people – and frescoes – inside, are a source of light even when closed. On the other hand, many ancient interior doors must be imagined open for the vast majority of time, as the need for light trumped the (essentially modern) need for privacy. A room may even be decorated, but still have no windows, and therefore no source of natural light other than its doorway. At the western extremity of the Menander, room 28 and adjacent corridors (as well as latrine 27) only admit natural light through the door. The same goes for I, 10, 1, room 4; 1 10 18, *cubiculum* 5; 1, 10, 8, room 14; Fabbro, room 8, and Amanti rooms 11 and 12.[15] A reminder of the fact that any door is also a glorified window is the blocked doorway in the east wall of I, 10, 8 room 10. Through that wall a window has been cut as an heir to the important lighting function of the former doorway.

12 Ling, *Structures*, 239.

13 A window between separate properties has however been found in the S wall of workshop I, 10, 6, opening onto the Fabbro *atrium*. It was interpreted as suggesting a patron-freedman, or close family relationship, between the respective owners throughout the time of its existence.

14 "Traces of these remain in the form of a blocked doorway visible in the W wall of Menandro room 6, two possible blocked windows in the E wall of the *atrium* of house 7, and two more blocked doorways in the E wall of house 7's garden," Ling, *Structures,* 227.

15 E.g. Ibid., 29, 202, 212.

It is trite to say that the opening and blocking of a doorway are the chronological beginning and end of their biography. Less obvious is that, in discussing the chronology of door changes, we ought to resist the temptation to reify Pompeii as the ultimate time capsule, in other words, as architecture frozen in time. In fact, the urban fabric of Pompeii was ever-shifting and would have continued to change past 79 CE, had it been allowed to. Taking a retrospective look at the maze of blocked doors and windows of our *insula*, today's scholars can be quick to cast a critical eye on the perceived inefficiency of Roman home planners. But in fact, such an impression of eclecticism, not to say chaos, is diagnostic of any architectural unit remodeled over decades, indeed centuries, and according to evolving social and individual needs. In Casa del Fabbro, for example, there is a blocked door in almost every room.

Now, before a door is eliminated, its threshold may be salvaged – in some cases, repeatedly. Thus, the lava threshold by entrance 16 to the Menander is a functional palimpsest, with numerous settings for door pivots, bolts and frames showing reuse in place or elsewhere.[16] The biography of thresholds is part and parcel of the biography of doors. The same goes for the jambs. In house I, 10, 8, room 8, the doorway has an *opus incertum* left jamb and the right one of large Sarno stone blocks. At the main entrance to 1, 10, 18, the left jamb of the doorway is in brickwork, the right one built of stone. To come to our very Menandro, in room 7 one jamb is constructed of large blocks of Sarno stone, the other nicely quoined in *opus listatum,* while on the southern street front, a doorway (eventually blocked) has one jamb of *opus vittatum* and the other cut through the *opus incertum.*[17] Could it be that some of these contrasts were maintained because they embedded something more personal? The owner of the Menandro could easily have afforded to have a door jamb redone so as to match the other, but chose not to. It is possible, then, that while certain repairs simply could not be any more than cheap patchwork, others, however, even where they clearly interfered with visual symmetry and homogeneity, were valued for the memories they preserved. One might venture to say that signs of use, reuse and repair were not necessarily hidden, as they incorporated past uses, and therefore the biography of the house. They were actually preserving traces of human ownership and authorship that ought not to be whitewashed. This attitude may hark back to what could be called an aesthetics of vestigiality. In certain cases, it appears that we can also witness human error. For example, the threshold in storeroom 5 in the Menandro was installed in such a way that the room could only be secured from the inside.[18]

I would also add here that we should not give in to the temptation of associating such repairs, or blocking of doors and other internal remodeling, with historical events, such as fear of an imminent sack of the city by Sulla (89 or, less likely, 82 BCE), or the earthquake of 62 CE. Most probably, the private biography of houses – as opposed to that of e.g. city walls – hardly ever reflected such events.[19]

In what wall matrix are doorways installed? What materials are on display in places where decorative masonry was intentionally left exposed, or in the doorways of the *insula* where plaster was allowed to fall into disrepair? The viewer's gaze will generally have been met by the porous Sarno stone, a yellowish white calcareous tufa, and by the small hard rubble of grey lava, of which occasionally also thresholds are made. More rarely, red or purple scoria was present in rubble wall-facings. Pompeians also resorted to brown or grey tuff to make ashlar blocks and brick-sized blocks, and as material in *opus reticulatum*, to yellow tuff in rubble walls or powdered in the yellow mortar used in many of the buildings of the 1st c. CE and, of course, to brick and tile for regular courses at the corners of doors and windows, and sometimes

16 Ibid., 337.

17 Ibid., 191, 218, 268, 125. Also see among other examples the remodeled entrance to I, 10, 3.

18 The threshold appears to be unworn, so it presumably was not reused. Ibid., 341.

19 On the way texts (still) set agenda for archaeological research, Cătălin Pavel, "Visual models in archaeology and the harmonization of archaeological and literary data," *Archaeology and Text* 1 (2017): 67–94. General, Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1998.

randomly (or in an algorithm best known to themselves) in the facing of rubble walls. The door-sills and the plates for door pivots are of a type of travertine-like limestone, while fancier door pivot plates are made of white or grey marble. Apart from all this, there must have also been a lot of wood to be seen here 2000 years ago, in doors, thresholds and jetties. However, wood remains (carbonized) were rarely found, e.g. in the S jamb of Menander room 18, the street entrance of the stableyard 1, 10, 14 (that is, the secondary main entrance to Menander), and in the N jamb of room 5 in the Casa del Fabbro; some stairway treads were also surfaced in wood. There is clearly a lot of tactility and visuality in this list of materials. The scoria is vesiculate lava, the Sarno stone bears imprints of leaves and shells, the yellow tuff develops a typically crumbly surface, not to mention the various textures of ubiquitous wood.[20]

Pottery is occasionally found in door jambs or in blocked doors, and deserves a separate word. It is all too easy to dismiss it as just an instance of workmen using as construction material the shards of some ceramic jar that had just happened to be broken and discarded. The way pottery is distributed in the walled-up doors or in the door jambs in the *insula* may occasionally be symbolic, regardless of whether or not such shards ended up covered in plaster and therefore not visible. In Menandro's room 6, a possible blocked doorway incorporates amphora sherds (2nd half of the 2nd c. BCE). In the S perimeter wall of the Amanti (I, 10, 11) there is an African amphora body sherd inserted immediately above a tile course and adjacent to a door jamb.[21] These may all seem accidental, but the association between pottery and openings can be substantiated e.g. in house I, 10, 1 where a hole intended to admit light in an understairs space was lined with an amphora. In the same house, a door-jamb behind the stairs included a piece of bluish-grey Hymettan (*bardiglio*) marble and the handle of a glass vessel (1st c. CE.) [22]

As to thresholds, most numerous (and earliest) are lava thresholds (44 of them on the interior of the Menander), while limestone ones are used somewhat later, and marble ones only in the city's last century or so. A few interior doors as well as two street entrances to the *insula* (1 and 3) had wooden thresholds (not preserved apart from their imprint). The most common stone thresholds (type A1) are those with a raised rim along the outer edge; type A2 has a check or depression at the middle; in type A3, only the inner edge is sunken; type B has no marginal check. Most of this would be difficult to take in for the casual viewer, perhaps with the exception of the shop doorway threshold (type C), described as having a long groove for holding upright shutters and a shallow depression at one end for the pivoting door.[23] Wooden thresholds must have been a majority, but were recorded in fewer than a dozen cases in the whole *insula*.[24] Finally, only seven doors in the Menandro boast marble decoration. More specifically, two or three sides of their jamb are lined with strips of marble (grey-streaked Hymettan; white; grey *bardiglio scuro*; and *pavonazzetto* marble).

Not much remains of the doors *per se*, since little metal went into their design. We are normally left with different types of bronze and iron hinges and pivots; door handles/rings; keys, latches, padlocks and tumbler locks; nails; bands of lamina for reinforcements; and modest ornaments. The so-called *guardispigoli* may have also come from (structural, as opposed to, say, cupboard) door or doorframe fittings.[25] The main decoration of doors consisted of large studs with bronze bosses and iron shafts.[26] The discovery of an array of such

20 For materials, see Lesley A. Ling in Ling, *Structures*, 336-341.

21 Two more blocked doorways, one in the same S perimeter wall, the other in the Fabbro (I 10, 7, room 11), include amphora fragments (in the first case, one from Spain – Dressel 20 –, in the second, African and "black-sand fabric" amphoras), according to Paul Arthur in Ling, *Structures*, 325-331. It will also be noted that all known examples come from the larger houses in the *insula*.

22 For the examples from I, 10, 1, Ling, *Structures*, 26 (amphora) and 36 (handle).

23 Yoshiki Hori, "Thresholds in Pompeii," *Opuscula pompeiana* 2 (1992): 74 and *passim*, Ling, *Structures*, 257.

24 Ling, *Structures*, 338.

25 Allison, *Finds*, 26.

26 Ibid., 37.




Fig. 3: *Casa del Menandro*. Pilasters of main street entrance.
Fig. 4: *Casa del Menandro*. Corinthian capital from main street entrance.

artefacts points to doors that were more solid or more decorated. For the Menander, this is mainly applicable to the ornate door between room 41 and courtyard 44,[27] and to those of the main entrance to the vast room 18, which left behind "door pivots, nine large bronze strap hinges, two other large hinges, that were probably strap hinges, and a reinforcement strip," which "belonged to the closing system" of "a number of multi-leaf folding doors across this entranceway."[28] These doors must have been closed at the moment of the eruption, as most hinges were found flat by the archaeologists.[29]

The landscape of doors does not consist only of the actual doors, their jambs and stone or wooden thresholds. First, most street front thresholds have sockets for vertical bolts, the floors yield prop-sockets, the jambs bear holes for transverse bars, while a few have a piece of marble as a backstop. All these are related to the proper functioning of doors. Secondly, doors exercise a force of gravity on their immediate surroundings. Indeed, on certain interior doorways, mosaic strips replace the physical existence of thresholds or, in some case, they constitute a mosaic door mat that heralds the threshold, both in Casa del Menandro (I 10, 4, rooms 13, 22, 23, 24, and 25) and in the rest of the *insula*, e.g. I, 10, 4, rooms 11, 46 and 47. Thirdly, some of this whole landscape of use is not man-made. Just as with any machine, the functioning of doors leaves behind traces. In the *fauces* of the Casa degli Amanti, the entrance doors have left clear score marks on the pavement, attesting to the swing of their leaves.[30] In the *fauces* of our Casa del Menandro, a metal box-lock nailed to the eastern leaf of the door left a substantial impression on the plaster of the wall of the *fauces*, unless this hole (11 x 8 x 15 cm) was made on purpose in order to accommodate it.[31] Fourthly, doors also occasionally form a visual package with counters, as in the case of shop doors in our *insula* (entrances 2 and 13), or in the case of other shops with planks, as in the case of the entrance to I, 10, 9, which has "a separate pivoted door and vertical planks set overlapping in a groove."[32]

A few more observations are in order. For people in the Casa del Menandro, and in Campanian houses in general, the paradigmatic mental image of doors must have been that of twin doors. Indeed, to judge from their pivot-settings and bolt-holes, most had two leaves. Although we imagine today such doors to be rather stately, in many ways, they may have been perceived in antiquity as more akin to furniture doors, which perhaps made them friendlier. If the opening was too large, the doors would actually be folding, and, in our Casa, on only one occasion

27 Ibid., 129.

28 Ibid., 307. A couple more examples from the *insula* will suffice for our purposes, namely the door between *atrium* and room 4 in House I, 10, 8 and the entrance door to the Fabbro (Ibid., 219 and 338).

29 Ling, *Structures*, 339.

30 Ibid., 337.

31 Ibid., 264-265.

32 Ibid., 171.

archaeologists found a single-leaf door, in room 2.[33] "Menandrians" would always open their doors inwards, whether by folding or swinging; but elsewhere in the *insula* (Casa degli Amanti) there are also rooms with doors opening outwards, although, of course, not in the case of street doors. Another point to emphasize is that for today's European urban dweller it may be surprising that certain doorways in the Casa del Menandro are actually closed off with screens or curtains, as is the case with the side (or sides) of the *tablinum* (8), or with the *ala* (4), whose main entrance featured a wooden screen or *transenna,* more than two meters high; Fabbro's room 9 had both fixed doors with a proper threshold and a curtain on an iron rod. In any case, much of what I put forward in this "ianualogy" argument applies at least in part to such architectural solutions.

Transparency of Doors. Mirror Doors

In the Roman elite house, a doorway represented much more than just a means to gain access to a space. It was also a vantage point, a way to articulate a more or less tantalizing view over that particular space, and in so doing, to articulate a social identity. I am interested here first in what I would call the transparency of doors. By this I suggest that, after recurring viewing experiences, an ancient observer will have become adept at visually overlapping the door surface and the view it revealed when the door *qua* obstacle was visually removed by the act of opening. The end result was that, for the subject viewer, the door surface became infused with what it concealed behind it – e.g., the frescoes, but not only them. Secondly, door surfaces are also embedded in their immediate environment, which radiate onto them to the effect that, when closed, doors are to some degrees mirroring their context and replicating what the viewer sees around. Doors-as-transparent-surfaces and doors-as-mirrors are possible because in Roman houses, much like today, the surfaces of doors were comparatively image-neutral, in other words, not semantics-laden. Planks and studs may have created certain pleasing geometric patterns, but, in most rooms, doors remained nevertheless areas with much lower concentrations of visual stimuli, and therefore prone to be colonized by the iconography of their surroundings (frescoes, furniture, room "content" of all kinds). In what follows, I will attempt to suggest how that colonization may have proceeded, by considering the immediate visual environment of doors in the Casa del Menandro.

The gauge against which to measure the impact of the inside of the house on the viewer is necessarily the street front. Someone arriving in front of the entrance to our House of the Menander, on the *vicolo del Menandro*, would see its doorway flanked by two pilasters with Corinthian capitals. (Fig. 3) These capitals make it the only decorated street entrance of the whole *insula*.[34] (Fig. 4) At the same time, visitors would take in the low masonry benches on either side (on one of which they may well have waited, together with other clients, for the morning *salutatio* of their *patronus*). While the Corinthian pilasters are unique among this *insula*'s facades, benches are not. They are, in fact, rather run-of-the-mill throughout Pompeii,[35] and in our *insula* four other houses (7, 8,11, and 18) apart from the Menandro have such benches, generally right by their entrance, for an *insula* total of eight benches. A different visual ingredient of the street, not planned by any architect, is the series of graffiti above and around these benches, amounting to more than half of the graffiti in the whole Casa del Menandro.[36]

33 Ibid., 339.

34 Entrance 16 on the *vicolo di Paquius Proculus* on the E side of the *insula*, while undecorated, is itself different from all others in that it is recessed by some 60cm behind the facade line, possibly because it opened onto the intersection of the *vicolo* with the *Via di Castricio*.

35 Jeremy Hartnett, "*Si Quis Hic Sederit*: Streetside Benches and Urban Society in Pompeii," *American Journal of Archaeology* 112, no. 1 (January 2008): 92, inventoried 100 benches in front of 69 properties, of which some belonged to less well-to-do house owners, so presumably without *clientes*.

36 Graffiti have also been found in the rear entrance vestibule of the Menandro, entered from the *Vicolo di Paquius Proculus*, among which one giving the address of the actress (and prostitute?) Novellia Primigenia from Nuceria (CIL IV, 8356), Varone, *Erotica*, 21. They are common by other house doorways in our *insula*,

Fig. 5: *Casa del Menandro*. Exedra 23, west wall, portrait of Menander.
Fig. 6: *Casa del Menandro*. View through the *tablinum* to the peristyle.

It is often overlooked that inscriptions must have been scratched on the wooden street doors also, but they are now lost.

The moment our observer would step through the doors, her gaze would be met with the first of the magnificent Fourth style frescoes in the House, whose polychromy would contrast with the rather austere facade.[37] On the inside of the *fauces* she would immediately notice on the right (on the W wall) tall irises with green leaves and various motifs in pink, red and purple – deer and a parrot, a bucranium and dolphins, mirrored on the left (E) wall, covered in plants, pink and purple swans and dolphins.[38] More graffiti would become apparent on the walls of this vestibule, including the record of the loan given by Quintus, then a pictorial graffiti of shoes, and yet another memorializing for the ages a price paid: 6 asses.[39] But our observer would only notice such scribblings out of the corner of her eye, and would be entirely confiscated by the axial vista of this House. The skillfully engendered sightline extended across the *atrium*, the *tablinum* (fresco of an almost naked Nereid riding side-saddle on a blue-grey sea-bull on the E wall, and at least one actual bed surmounted by tiny bronze statuettes of Heracles and geese heads by the west wall[40]) and the peristyle. In the latter, the vegetation must have been trimmed in such a way as to allow full view of exedra 23 (large seated portraits of Menander – Fig. 5 – and Euripides) flanked by the apsidal exedrae 22 and 24, themselves framed by pilasters and decorated with two unusual landscape compositions dedicated to Diana and Venus[41]. It changes nothing that the observer would not be able to perceive and identify each and every detail of the frescoes, depending, among others, on light levels and human activity around – the latter being a factor which would deserve separate exploration in terms of how people and doors become entangled by repeated use.[42]

It is also worth mentioning that this sightline did not work the same both ways. For example, the *tablinum* was flanked by three-quarter columns only on the northern side, (Fig. 6) but not on the southern side, and therefore it was designed to awe the viewers found in the *atrium*, and worrying less about the ones, already won for the cause, who had made their way to the S exedrae. Conversely, the *lararium* (Fig. 7) in the *atrium* would have been visible from the peristyle, but not from the *fauces*.

Once in the *atrium*, with its treasure of doors, (Fig. 8) our observer would perhaps see the door to room 3 opening. At this point, she would have already been aware that on the E wall of the atrium, around that door, was a mask of Jupiter Ammon with ram's horns, curly hair, beard and moustache. Through the door she would see on the wall to the right (room 3, S wall) an eagle perching on a globe, and frontally (E wall, room 3) floral borders with little green leaves and

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e.g. on the door-jambs of house I, 10, 3 (CIL IV, 8258-9) on the rivalry between Successus and Severus for the maid of the innkeeper, Antonio Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana. Love Inscriptions on the Walls of Pompeii* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002), 113, and outside the entrance to Fabbro, CIL IV, 8364: "Secundus greets his Prima wherever she is: I beg you, lady, love me"; Ibid., 39. The secondary entrances to houses 14, 15, 16, and 17 in I.10 feature six more electoral graffiti although they had no masonry benches on the exterior walls. Cătălin Pavel, *L'archéologie de l'amour*, transl. Jean-Louis Courriol (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2022), 215-238; Antonio Varone, et al., *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. Volume V: The Inscriptions* (forthcoming).

37 Maiuri, *Casa del Menandro*, Beyen, *Wanddekoration.*

38 Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 180.

39 Della Corte, *Iscrizioni.*

40 Allison, *Finds*, 64.

41 Most of the important pictural schemes in the Menandro are unusual or even unparalleled in Pompeii. Not that the other houses in its *insula* are only covered in unremarkable frescoes; in the Casa degli Amanti, the Egyptianizing room 7 with its crocodile and sphinx vignettes, is strangely exotic, Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 171. Overall, however, the last owner of the Menandro seems to have been a sophisticated person, and the doors to his rooms reveal the most remarkable frescoes in the *insula*.

42 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 88.









Fig. 7: *Casa del Menandro*. *Lararium* at NW corner of *atrium*.
Fig. 8: *Casa del Menandro*. *Atrium* seen from the *tablinum*.

yellow flowers. If she stepped inside room 3 and waited there while the door to the *ala* (room 4) was open, as it was most likely to be, or at least being in use, our observer would keep seeing frontally the S wall of room 4, whose fresco showed the death of Laocoon, and to her left the E wall, painted with the entry of the wooden horse into Troy, met by Cassandra with an axe, by a breach in the city walls, in front of a large crowd. The door would repeatedly open and close on this image. Once in the *ala*, and once the door to room 3 closed, she would see it against the background of the *ala*'s North wall, with two episodes from the fall of Troy: on the right, Ajax dragging Cassandra away from the Palladion, on the left, Menelaus seizing Helen by the hair. (Fig. 9) This door would certainly have been perceived as "the Trojan door," especially given how remarkable this decoration is.[43] Unfortunately no artefacts have been found (or recorded) by archaeologists in this room, except for a hinge and a coin,[44] and therefore we cannot know what else might have constituted the visual context of this door.

Let us now presume that our observer made her way to the peristyle – and that therefore she was presumably more than a simple client come to pay homage to her patron, for such a client would have had to stop in the *atrium*. Once in the peristyle, (Fig. 10) her gaze would linger on the greenery, the twenty-three stuccoed columns and, of course, the graffiti. This public area, best lit of the property, yielded almost one in five graffiti found in the Casa del Menandro: among them, the only mention of Cleopatra in Pompeian graffiti, and the story of the slaves Chloe and Eutychia.[45] This blend of visual information would constitute the background for glimpses through the doorways of rooms adjacent to the peristyle, of which it will suffice if I will only consider here rooms 11, 15, 18, and 19. Looking through the door of room 11 (a door actually narrowed to about half its original width before the walls were painted) our observer would see frontally the maenad and child on the N wall, then the satyr and Cupid on the E wall, the complex decoration on the W wall, with Perseus and Andromeda, as well as Centaurs and Lapiths (and by that same wall, a wooden box). She would also see an assortment of glass flasks and jars retrieved by archaeologists from that room,[46] and the pavement itself, which boasts, on a black and white mosaic, a central polychrome emblema with pygmies in boats and the threshold emphasized by a colored meander panel.[47]

After walking from the NW corner of the peristyle to its E side, our observer might find herself catching glimpses of the frescoes in room 15. Through the main doorway she would see frontally the E wall, with an unusual scene featuring again Perseus, first with Andromeda (with the hero looking, unusually, at the dead monster after having rescued her) and then at the court of Cepheus (with Cassiopeia in a central position and Urania as a flying muse). She might also see, to her right, on that room's S wall, Calliope as a flying muse and the Punishment of Dirce with the bull, Bacchic revelers, and dead soldiers.[48] If she were then to enter through the Perseus door, she would see in the distance, looking to the S through two doors and the corridor separating rooms 15 and 19, the S wall in room 18 with theatrical masks and Gorgoneion, while still perceiving the fuzzy image of the S wall of her very room (13), with Dirce.

43 To quote Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 171: "In the Menandro *ala* (4) not only is the use of three closely connected subjects a rarity, but the actual subjects chosen – the death of Laocoon, the wooden horse, and the sack of Troy – are individually unusual ones. The scene of the sack of Troy combines two subjects, the reclaiming of Helen by Menelaus and the seizing of Cassandra by Ajax, which are otherwise known only in independent compositions and may not have been put together within a single panel before."

44 Allison, *Finds*, 63.

45 CIL IV, 8321a, "Chloe greets Eutychia: Eutychia, you don't care about me. With a firm hope you love Ruf(us?)." Varone, *Erotica*, 201.

46 Artefacts in room 11, Allison, *Finds*, 74-75.

47 For the frescoes and mosaics in room 11, Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 201-207.

48 For the frescoes in room 15, Ibid., 216-221.



Fig. 9: *Casa del Menandro. Ala* (4): N wall, central fresco representing the Sack of Troy.

Fig. 10: *Casa del Menandro*. Detail of peristyle: E portico with the intercolumniation in front of room 18. (Window above is reconstructed.)



Proper views into to the enormous room 18 can be gleaned through three doors.[49] By the main (W) entrance, two bronze cylindrical door pivots were found in the threshold, by each of the door jambs, together with the upper hinges and bronze reinforcements of the W doors. Luxurious furniture would take pride of place in this room, although what was left of it were just the bone ornaments (feline feet, etc.) found on the floor.[50] In terms of frescoes, this is what could be revealed and obscured by doors: on the S wall – still-life with theatrical masks and Gorgoneion, on the E wall – Pan and winged head of Medusa, on the N wall – Pegasus and polychrome *aediculae*, W wall – head of Oceanus. Room 19, smaller, only had two doorways, one opening to the corner of the peristyle, the other to room 18. Both esoteric Dionysiac tableaux in room 19 are without parallels in Pompeii,[51] and indeed so were those in the Trojan cycle mentioned above. Just inside the entrance of room 19, archaeologists found three victims of the eruption, carrying with them tools identified as a pick and a drag-hoe. Ten more were found just outside, in the corridor.[52] It is of course tasteless to wonder what were the last things they saw in front of their eyes as they were groping for a doorway. But these bodies are a reminder that Pompeian houses have not been the deserted ancient ruins-*cum*-modern scientific lab they are now, and that their visual space was actually articulated by human beings.

This hopefully illustrates what is meant here by the transparency of doors, and how the image of doors proper can grow to blend, in the mind's eye, with the images revealed behind these doors, obscured – and then divulged – by them. Obviously, the moment a door is opened, the outside and the inside coexist, but once this happens a few times, the outside and the inside will coexist on any mental map, regardless of the physical barrier between them.

At the risk of overstating the case, and simply in order to do justice to other properties in our *insula*, the same algorithm can be applied to other houses, and not just the Menander. If our observer took twenty steps to the East from the street entrance to Menander, she would find herself at the entrance to I, 10, 1, where she would see the sheltering pent-roof above[53] and the bench by the door (which at some point in antiquity disappeared, when the facade was altered at the time of the installation of the fountain at the street corner). This would be mentally mirrored on the closed door. Once the door opened, our observer would be able to see all the way through the *atrium* and the *tablinum*, with their pavements in colored marble, catching a glimpse of polychrome Third Style wall-paintings to the sides (in the *atrium*, eagle in flight with palm branch in its claws, W wall; round, yellow and green fruits, E wall)[54] and spotting small still-life panels separated by painted candelabra on the *tablinum* S wall.[55] These images would become embedded in our "transparent" door once our Pompeian observer, familiar with the place, will have witnessed the opening and closing of this particular door a number of times. Once in the *tablinum*, looking back towards the street, she would watch two- and four-wheeled carts passing by, people waiting around, and (apart from the frescoes on the left and right walls), to the right of the door the *lararium* painting: a genius with a cornucopia, a Lar with a rhyton, under loops of a red festoon.[56] From the *tablinum*, our observer might also notice on the right-hand side the only full marble threshold in the whole insula, at the entrance to room

49 For the frescoes in room 18, Ibid., 223-228.

50 Artefacts in room 18, Allison, *Finds*, 79-81.

51 For the frescoes in room 19, Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 229-234.

52 Another adult and a child in room 43 of Menandro, two more in Casa del Fabbro (room 9), yet two more in Casa degli Amanti (room 8). Victims were found only in the large houses of the *insula*. Generally, Beard, Mary. *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* (London: Profile Books, 2008); Ray Laurence, *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society* (London: Routledge, 1994).

53 To quote Ling, *Structures*, 336: „At least four of the entrances (1, 9,10, and 11) were sheltered by individual pent- roofs; a fifth (15) may have taken advantage of a pre-existing pent-roof which ran along the entire flank of the staff quarters; another two (12 and 18) were protected respectively by a balcony and by a jetty at first-floor level."

54 For the frescoes in this *atrium*, Ling and Ling, *Decorations*, 176-177.

55 For the frescoes in this *tablinum*, Ibid., 177-178.

56 Ibid., 177.

4, and at the main entrance, a wooden threshold, one of only two found at the street doorways of the whole *insula* (the other being in the nearby entrance 3).[57]

As already alluded to, it is not only the frescoes that would slowly penetrate the fabric of doors in the eye of what here was called the observer, but was in fact the dweller or the visitor. We tend to focus on the frescoes because they are better preserved than certain categories of artefacts, because they could not be removed by Pompeians departing in a hurry and because, if left *in situ*, they are unaffected by the vagaries of archaeological recording in the romantic days of the excavation; in other words, we know their precise original location, which is rather rarely the case with Pompeian artefacts.[58] Besides frescoes, however, artefacts (I mentioned here in passing a bed, furniture, flasks, jars etc.) will certainly have become visual benchmarks of rooms in the Menander. The immediate surroundings of the already mentioned ornate door between 41 and courtyard 44 in the Casa del Menandro are better known. In room 44, by the N jamb of this particular doorway, a bronze bucket was found. On the other side of the doorway, in room 41, beside the S jamb, there were bronze jugs, a strigil, and a marble table.[59] It seems trivial to ask: how often was that bronze bucket there? Things are visually sticky, always perceived in clusters by the viewer, only isolated by modern photography; by definition, the gaze agglutinates, juxtaposes. A marble table, and perhaps for different reasons a bucket, too, may be the highlight of what stands out to a keen observer once a door is open. All of these contribute to the composite visual nature of doors. Once the table and the bronze bucket removed, the view changes – and therefore the door changes.

Conclusion

Insula del Menandro is outstanding today as perhaps the best published large *insula* of Pompeii, and therefore one of the best understood Roman residential landscapes and indeed synecdochic cityscapes. Academic publications of its houses can now be firmly based in the fully updated and cross-referenced archaeological evidence. The elite residence Casa del Menandro is certainly the most important of these houses from a scientific point of view – although a political interest in it is known since, at the latest, Mussolini, who lunched in room 18 of this House during an official visit to Pompeii (1940).

I attempted in this paper to map the biography of doors as a function and as a reflection of the biography of the house as a whole. Certain doors are a result of initial planning of the space syntax, others were opened in walls as an afterthought, while others were opened or blocked up according to changes in e.g. mentalities, demographics, use, or ownership – in the latter case, as architectural avatars of a deed of sale. Doors thus became abstract mobility devices which technically moved rooms over from one house to the other. Some doors are widened, narrowed or repaired, and on this occasion often old masonry is left in place rather than updated to recreate symmetry in what I suggested may be called an aesthetics of vestigiality. Sometimes repairs and reuses of their components, particularly thresholds, can yield functional palimpsests where previous uses and authorship may be intentionally preserved, which would make doors ontological carriers of the past. The result is a landscape of use which may appear chaotic, but is diagnostic of long-lived, and frequently altered, architectural units. I have further described doors as means of access, vantage points, fluid interfaces between private and public, and of course sources of light as glorified windows. This can be a prerequisite for understanding, ultimately, how doors helped to articulate social spaces and identities – although this question goes beyond the scope of the present article.

57 Ling, *Structures*, 337-338.

58 Allison, *Material Culture*.

59 Allison, *Finds*, 142 (bucket), 326 (table).

When considering the visual impact of doors on ancient viewers, I take into account the masonry of jambs (including a potentially symbolic role of pottery as construction material), their metal fittings, the artefacts around them, the frescoes they conceal and, in turn, reveal. I also proposed to discuss doors in terms of transparency and mirroring. I suggested that doors can be transparent in that they allow the observer to mentally overlap their surface with the view they reveal once open. I also argued that the environment in which they are embedded radiates onto doors to the effect that, when closed, doors are to some degree mirroring their context and replicating what the viewer sees around. This is made possible by the fact that doors are never decoration-heavy, and therefore relatively image-neutral, which makes them prone to be colonized by the iconography of their surroundings. I tried to show how this worked for a number of doors in the Casa del Menandro, where the *ala* door concealing and revealing Trojan scenes becomes a "Trojan door," and where the gaze constantly juxtaposes and blends graffiti, frescoes and door surfaces, leading to a visually and conceptually composite nature of doors.

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Fig. 1: Redrawing after Roger Ling, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. Volume I The Structures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 346 (Fig. 24).

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