The Architecture of the Forum of Pompeii

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This thesis investigates the architectural and urban design of the precinct of the Forum of Pompeii. It demonstrates the falsity of the assumption made by many scholars that there are innate spatial cues which throughout history have guided both architects in their designs and the general population in their response to the resultant buildings. Such an assumption has allowed these scholars to believe that they can reconstruct ancient people’s experience of architecture and the motivation of the architects by careful analysis of their own responses to ancient buildings. This thesis shows that this assumption is contestable given its basis in unproven and untested late nineteenth century theories of perception. This thesis further demonstrates that the supposition, made on the basis of the assumed universality of architectural aesthetics, that the architects of the Forum of Pompeii were primarily concerned with uniformly enclosed space, axial symmetry, and orthogonality is wrong. The supposed primacy of these concerns is contradicted by the actual form of the buildings and spaces that make up the Forum of Pompeii.

This thesis proposes a method for the reconstruction of the system of aesthetics which motivated the architects of ancient Pompeii, and guided the general population in their experience of the buildings around the Forum. This method is based on an extrapolation of what is known, of domestic architectural design in Pompeii, coupled with an investigation into the way architecture was depicted in Pompeian wall paintings. It is noted that in the last phase of ancient Pompeii many houses were designed around visual axes, which created composed views from key viewing points. It is further noted that these composed views closely resembled numerous architectural scenes in Pompeian wall paintings. It is proposed that, given the constant exposure of ancient Pompeians to these composed
architectural views, both built and painted, the forms of such views would have guided the way that they perceived architecture through a process of enculturation. Thus this indicates a way to examine Pompeian buildings which is consistent with first century AD Pompeian visual taste. In this method buildings around the Forum of Pompeii are looked at from similar viewpoints to those created for viewing composed views and architectural scenes in wall paintings. It is clear that the same pictorial effects appear in the resulting views of the buildings around the Forum as appear in domestic composed views and in painted scenes. These pictorial effects are often contradictory to the spatial intuitions of modern scholars. Asymmetry, multilayering, and openings to more distant vistas are common features in contrast to the supposed predominance of symmetry, orthogonality and spatial enclosure.

Initial research points to the existence of compositions and pictorial effects similar to those found at Pompeii in depictions of architecture in Hellenistic art from the fourth century BC onward, and to the emergence of a congruence between painting and architecture in the early Hellenistic period. Examination of structures at other sites shows that the traditional interpretations of Roman architecture based on the spatial intuitions of modern scholars are in conflict with the actual form of the buildings concerned. Comparison between views of these structures and scenes in wall paintings and wall mosaics again shows the appearance of various pictorial effects common to both the real architecture and to the architectural depictions. This suggests that a close relationship between painting and architecture was not confined solely to Pompeii. Rather it had its origins in Hellenistic art and architecture, and was thus part of a wider Roman architectural culture. Depictions of architecture could thus be used as a guide to the
examination of a great deal of the architecture and urban design of the Roman world.