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Ancient Roman villa and elaborate mosaics found beneath apartment block in Rome

The villa and its mosaics have now been turned into a subterranean museum

By Nick Squires ROME

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A concierge and a smart address are no longer enough for one apartment block in Rome – it can now boast its very own subterranean Roman villa.

Archeologists have unveiled the remains of a sumptuous Roman “domus” or villa, complete with elaborate mosaics, that had remained hidden for 2,000 years.

It was discovered when engineers carried out work to earthquake-proof the residential development, which was built in the 1950s.

Archeologists were called in and found a series of palatial rooms laid with mosaics featuring black and white geometric designs, made from tens of thousands of tiny cubes of stone.

A detail of one of the mosaics

The villa was found in the Aventine Hill area of the city, close to the Circus Maximus chariot racing arena.

It is one of the legendary seven hills of the city and then, as now, was a part of Rome

inhabited by the wealthy.

“You can see from the richness of the decorations and the mosaics that the villa belonged to a powerful person, probably linked to the imperial family,” said

Daniela Porro, a senior cultural heritage official for the city. “Rome never ceases to surprise us. It’s an archeological jewel.”

It was unearthed by chance in 2014 and after years of archeological work is now ready to be opened to the public as a subterranean museum.

One mosaic features a large vase rendered in blue and green

Visitors will enter the modern apartment building from the street, cross a courtyard and descend one flight of steps to an anonymous grey door next to a pair of lifts.

Inside are not the only the remains of the Roman villa, with mosaics and fragments of frescoes and Latin inscriptions, but earlier segments of a stone tower dating back to the 8th century BC, as well as a huge defensive wall that dates back to the Roman republic.

During the excavation, archeologists found a wide array of objects from everyday Roman life, including a hammer, a key, a water tap, a hairpin and oil-burning lamps.

They found *amphorae* which held *garum*, a noxious-smelling sauce made from fermented fish that the Romans loved to use to spice up their meals.

Archeologists clean one of the mosaics that was discovered

There were also fragments of lacquered bowls stamped with the images of Hercules and the goddess Athena.

Video projections on the walls of the underground space bring the villa alive, with a senator and his wife strolling amid marble busts, ornate tables and couches.

One mosaic has as its centrepiece an image of a bright green parrot with a splash of red in its plumage, while another depicts a grape vine growing from a large vase.

The archeologists found not just one layer of remains, but six different layers, one on

top of another, spanning a period of two centuries.

A total of nine mosaics was found in the remains of the Roman villa

The patterns of the mosaics, including one which features a repetitive figure 8, are unusual. “We’ve not seen it before,” said Roberto Narducci, an architect involved in the excavation.

The €3 million dig was funded by BNP Paribas Real Estate, the company which owns the apartment building.

“It’s quite a challenge to allow access to the site, while protecting the privacy of the condominium’s residents,” said the company’s Anselmo De Titta. “It will be open to the public at least two days every month and more if there is the demand.”

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