

Information on Housing in Constantinople

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare to create a monument and accompanying plaque commemorating housing in Constantinople. To prepare to create these, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

By the fourth century, Constantinople was a crowded city containing over 4,000 houses. Most neighborhoods housed a wide mix of people from all classes and professions. Certain groups of people, however, were segregated (forced to live separately) from the majority. Government officials lived in parts of the emperor's palace, and monks lived in monasteries. Segregated groups included Armenians, Jews, and Muslims. Each of these groups lived in a ghetto neighborhood centered around either a church (the Armenians), a synagogue (the Jews), or a mosque (the Muslims). Orthodox Christianity considered people who believed in any other religion to be heretics. The term heretic refers to a person who holds controversial opinions, especially opinions that are different from those held by the official church. Newcomers, foreigners, and people of different races and classes were accepted into society as long as they spoke Greek and belonged to the Orthodox Christian Church.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- What does segregated mean? Which groups were segregated in Constantinople?
- Why were Armenians, Jews, and Muslims forced to live in areas of the city apart from Christians?
- What did newcomers and foreigners have to do to be accepted in Constantinople?

In Constantinople, as in large cities today, different types of homes existed for people of different social and economic classes. Only the rich lived in single-family homes; most citizens resided in apartments. The poor lived in tenements, multi-story apartments built high and narrow to conserve land and money. Most homes and apartments in the city were constructed of stone, brick, or wood. Glass was not used for windows: the poor used wooden shutters and the rich had windows of marble or alabaster. The homes for the upper classes were usually built of brick and included two stories. Walls were lined with marble, and tall pillars upheld fancy gilded ceilings. These homes were designed in the style of the Romans: a blank wall faced the street, and inside rooms opened up into a courtyard with a fountain, garden, and trees for decoration.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Did all citizens in Constantinople live in similar dwellings?
- Where did the poor live?
- Describe the structure of homes owned by the wealthy.

Busy main streets were built extra-wide to accommodate traffic in Constantinople. In contrast, smaller neighborhood roads wound around in a maze-like pattern and provided residents with a feeling of privacy. Houses built for the rich were often located on these side streets. The homes included sunrooms or balconies for use as resting and gathering places for women. Wives would sit and watch the people and events taking place in the street, satisfying their curiosity concerning their neighbors' activities. The size of these sunrooms, which were also called bow windows, was restricted by the city administration.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Describe the two kinds of roads built in Constantinople.
- Where were the houses for the rich located?
- What were sunrooms and balconies used for?

Vast differences in wealth were apparent in housing. During the summer, some poor foreigners and migrant workers lived in the streets when they could not afford housing. At the same time, some members of the upper classes owned two homes, a townhouse inside the city walls and a country home in the suburbs. These large country houses were usually built on the beautiful beaches of the Bosphorus or on the hills nearby. However, because the suburbs outside the city walls were vulnerable to foreign attack, most people lived close to the center of Constantinople.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- Where did some poor foreigners and migrant workers live during the summer?
- Where were the country homes owned by the rich built?
- Why did most people want to live inside the city?