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Remains of ancient luxury villas open to visitors in Rome

By Marta Falconi

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ROME — The restored ruins of two opulent Roman villas and private thermal baths will open to the public Saturday, along with a 3-D reconstruction that offers a virtual tour of the luxurious residences discovered in downtown Rome.

The 19,375-square-foot complex, dating from the second to the fourth centuries, features well-preserved mosaic and marble floors, bathtubs and collapsed walls that archaeologists believe belonged to a *domus* — the richly decorated residences of Rome's wealthy and noble families.

"We found part of a residential high-class neighborhood, where probably senators and knights used to live," archaeologist Paola Valentini said.

Visitors will be able to walk on glass catwalks above the villas' underground remains, immersed in semidarkness just a few feet from the modern city.

A 3-D virtual reconstruction recreates the elaborate decorations of the ancient residences through colored lights and projections.

The two villas were likely inhabited by a senator, his family and servants, and included libraries, halls, gardens, kitchens and stables, archaeologists said.

One villa was abruptly abandoned during a fire in the fifth century, they said. Among the remains on display are parts of a basalt Roman road and a floor made of 500,000 multicolored mosaic tiles.

The site was excavated under Palazzo Valentini, a late 16th-century building housing the offices of the Lazio region, near the Roman Forum. Excavations began in 2005 and continue, archaeologists said.

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