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## *Martial VII.61* by Martial

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George Held  
*Martial, VII. 61*

Marcus Valerius Martialis  
*VII. 61*

Aggressive merchants had taken over  
the whole city; no shop stayed within its bounds.

You, Germanicus, outlawed expansion  
into narrow streets, and mere paths became roads.

Now no pillar is girded by chained flagons  
nor must the praetor walk in the midst of mud.

Nor is the barber's razor's brandished blindly  
in crowded streets, nor does the dingy diner

dominate the whole block. Barber, butcher,  
barkeep, and cook serve within their bounds.

This now is Rome; before, it was Macy's.

## Commentary

To thank (and flatter) the emperor Domitian (Germanicus, line 3, a name earned by his sanguine feats in battle against the Germans), Martial wrote this paean to the ruler's edict forbidding shops from expanding into the thoroughfares of Rome. A similar grab for space can be seen today in the streets of New York, where some restaurants have built sidewalk cafes leaving beside the curb only a narrow passageway for pedestrians. Other merchants display goods along their storefronts, giving the city the air of a bazaar. That was apparently the condition of Rome before Domitian's edict, and Martial notes the improvements in the aftermath, clinched in the last sentence of the poem, a "stinger" like those in his typically shorter epigrams: before the edict, Rome was just one big store.

In this poem, Martial assumes the role of a city historian or preservationist, a Jane Jacobs of imperial Rome. The narrator offers, in the first sentence, a view of the city before Domitian's edict and then, having given him credit for banning the expansion of shops streetward, in the second sentence, lists some of the improvements that have accrued for pedestrians. For example, no longer do wine merchants chain flagons to sidewalk pillars, and the inspector of local commerce, perhaps satirized by Martial as "the praetor" (one of two high-ranking magistrates) on an inspection tour of the once-sprawling stalls can now avoid the muddy pathway by walking on the uncluttered sidewalk. The list, by the way, is one of Martial's favorite ploys in his writing, as is the summary in the penultimate sentence.

Instead of Martial's elegiac couplets, I use blank-verse couplets here, and take an extra line, eleven, compared to the poem's original ten. His lines, however, alternate dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter, or sixteen and thirteen syllables; my couplets have an average of ten: 145 to 120 syllables all told. Thus, Martial's poem has slightly greater duration when read aloud.

Source text:

Martial. *Epigrams*. Ed. and trans. by D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Vol. II. (Loeb Classical Library), Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 126–127.