

Topics

Hounds of Spring, Scraps of Ornament

Gliding

The sight turned heads: a young man on silent roller skates being pulled down Broadway by a Doberman pinscher. "Did you see that?" people asked, as man and dog went gliding past under a mild evening sky full of stars. The man was poised like a statue; and neither he nor his cantering dog, its tongue flapping happily, looked left or right as they zipped by. 90th Street, 89th, 88th and out of sight. "Do you think they stop for red lights?" someone asked. There were smiles all around.

Because the evening seemed almost springlike, we decided the Doberman Roller — faster than a midtown taxi, airier than buses, more energy-efficient than any engine — must be a sign. There are ways, we thought, of beating the energy crisis. Human wit will triumph.

Resuming our walk, we had a second thought: Efficient? The dog probably cost a fortune, not to mention dog

food. Those silent skates were probably made of space-age alloys and petroleum-based plastics. Man and dog probably gave old people the frights, probably *didn't* stop for red lights, maybe even drew chase from police cars. For all we knew, the dog's devil-may-care master had forgotten his pooper scooper. Yet the sight still seemed a sign, a first flash of spring — unexpected and extravagant. Man and dog were, simply, gliding.

Gargoyles

When Pennsylvania Station was demolished 14 years ago, its shattered Doric columns were buried in the Secaucus Meadows. Today, the story would be different. They would be carted to a warehouse and listed in a catalog, along with selected remnants of the building's Roman grandeur, to be sold as instant architecture for pick-your-period decoration. Salvage is big business, as

dealers profitably recycle the past.

They keep stockpiles of gargoyles, keystones, columns, capitals, corbels, woodwork of all kinds. Do you dream of the grand salon of an old ocean liner? Do you crave a romantic terra cotta balcony or an octagonal stained-glass dome? They can be yours. A complete monastery was picked up recently and reassembled as a bird sanctuary. If you have wondered where old Atlantic City hotels go when they die, it is to storage, not to dust. One firm specializes in sales of "full ornamental rights" on buildings about to come down; for a price, the purchaser carts away anything he can use.

Not all old buildings can, or should, be saved. Some in the salvage and resale business contend they are preserving part of the country's heritage. But they miss the point. These samples, however stylish, are lifeless; decorative bits and pieces; out of context. It is still far better to save buildings than to extrapolate them. We need to know not only who we are, but where.