

Farewell to Penn Station

Until the first blow fell no one was convinced that Penn Station really would be demolished or that New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism against one of the largest and finest landmarks of its age of Roman elegance. Somehow someone would surely find a way to prevent it at the last minute—not-so-little Nell rescued by the hero—even while the promoters displayed the flashy renderings of the new sports arena and somewhat less than imperial commercial buildings to take its place.

It's not easy to knock down nine acres of travertine and granite, 84 Doric columns, a vaulted concourse of extravagant, weighty grandeur, classical splendor modeled after royal Roman baths, rich detail in solid stone, architectural quality in precious materials that set the stamp of excellence on a city. But it can be done. It can be done if the motivation is great enough, and it has been demonstrated that the profit motivation in this instance was great enough.

Monumental problems almost as big as the building itself stood in the way of preservation; but it is the shame of New York, of its financial and cultural communities, its politicians, philanthropists and planners, and of the public as well, that no serious effort was made. A rich and powerful city, noted for its resources of brains, imagination and money, could not rise to the occasion. The final indictment is of the values of our society.

Any city gets what it admires, will pay for, and, ultimately, deserves. Even when we had Penn Station, we couldn't afford to keep it clean. We want and deserve tin-can architecture in a tin-horn culture. And we will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.