

# Rehabilitation of Ellis Island as a Public Park and Museum

Susana Torre

## Background

Ellis Island was the principal point of entry for immigrants to the United States from 1892 to 1954. Through its gates passed 12 million people — all of them poor, many of them displaced by political and economic events in their homelands — to begin new lives in the New World. Today, the survivors and their descendants comprise nearly half the United States population — an estimated 100 million out of our 218.5 million — making Ellis Island one of the most widely shared historical experiences of the American People.

Ellis Island is located in New York Harbor, only 1000 yards away from the Statue of Liberty. Its area, roughly equivalent to five New York City blocks, is divided in two equal parts by a ferry slip. The main Immigration Station in the northwest half was designed by Boring and Tilton, winners of a competition called with the intention of improving the design quality of government buildings. The southwest side of the island contains the main hospital building, where immigrants were detained for medical or political reasons, and the contagious disease wards, formed by several separate pavilions connected by a covered corridor.

After its closing in 1954, Ellis Island was declared surplus Federal property and offered for public sale. Since then, proposals for Ellis Island's transformation have included: a women's prison, a drug rehabilita-

tion center, a home for the aged, a college, legalized gambling, Frank Lloyd Wright's City of Tomorrow, Philip Johnson's Wall of the 16 Million, and John F. Kennedy's Island of Racial Equality.

The island was declared a National Monument in 1965 and placed under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior, whose policies have oscillated between a 1968 proposal to demolish all buildings except the Immigration Station and to transform the island into a green park, and the current policy of conservation and selective reuse of existing structures. The future development of Ellis Island is of

great importance since, together with the Statue of Liberty, it will become the centerpiece of Liberty State Park's crescent. The park, now being built on the New Jersey shore, is expected to increase the already large number of visitors to the Statue and Ellis Island.

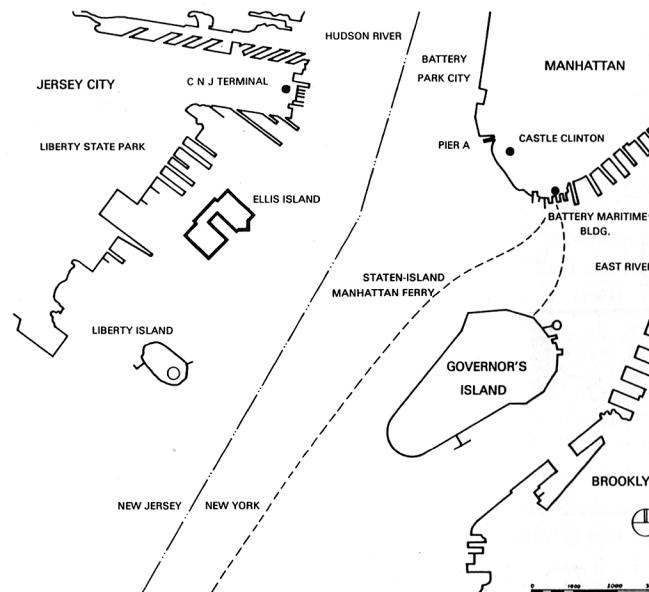
## Historical Developments

1898: Construction of the Immigration Station and Hospital based on a modified site plan. In the view of the contemporary press, the main building symbolized "lavish hospitality and world-wide welcome." The building's stone-trimmed arched windows have their precedent on both sides of the Atlantic: Paris' Gare Montparnasse

(1855) and Gare du Nord (1863), Boston's Union Station and New York's Penn Station by McKim, Mead and White. The building's imposing towers recall an earlier use of towers as gateways in nineteenth-century American train stations. The main building opened in 1900, followed by the adjacent Kitchen, Restaurant, Bath and Laundry Building and the Power House in 1901 and the Main Hospital in 1902.

1900-20: From the beginning of this period, the island became a perennial construction site. Additional structures were added more as a result of improvisation than long-term planning. Work began on a new island in 1905, and a group of detached pavilions used as contagious disease wards was completed in 1909. The design of the main building and hospital was altered with multiple renovations and additions. During the years before World War I, immigration rose to more than one million annually, spurred by the country's rapid growth and expansion of labor incentive industries. During the war, there was a sharp decline in immigration and the island was used to hold in custody the crews of German merchant ships and suspected enemy aliens, and as a treatment facility and way station for returning American soldiers.

1921-34: The quota laws of 1921 and 1924 ended mass immigration, changing the principal function of Ellis Island to that of deportation center. The landfill between Islands



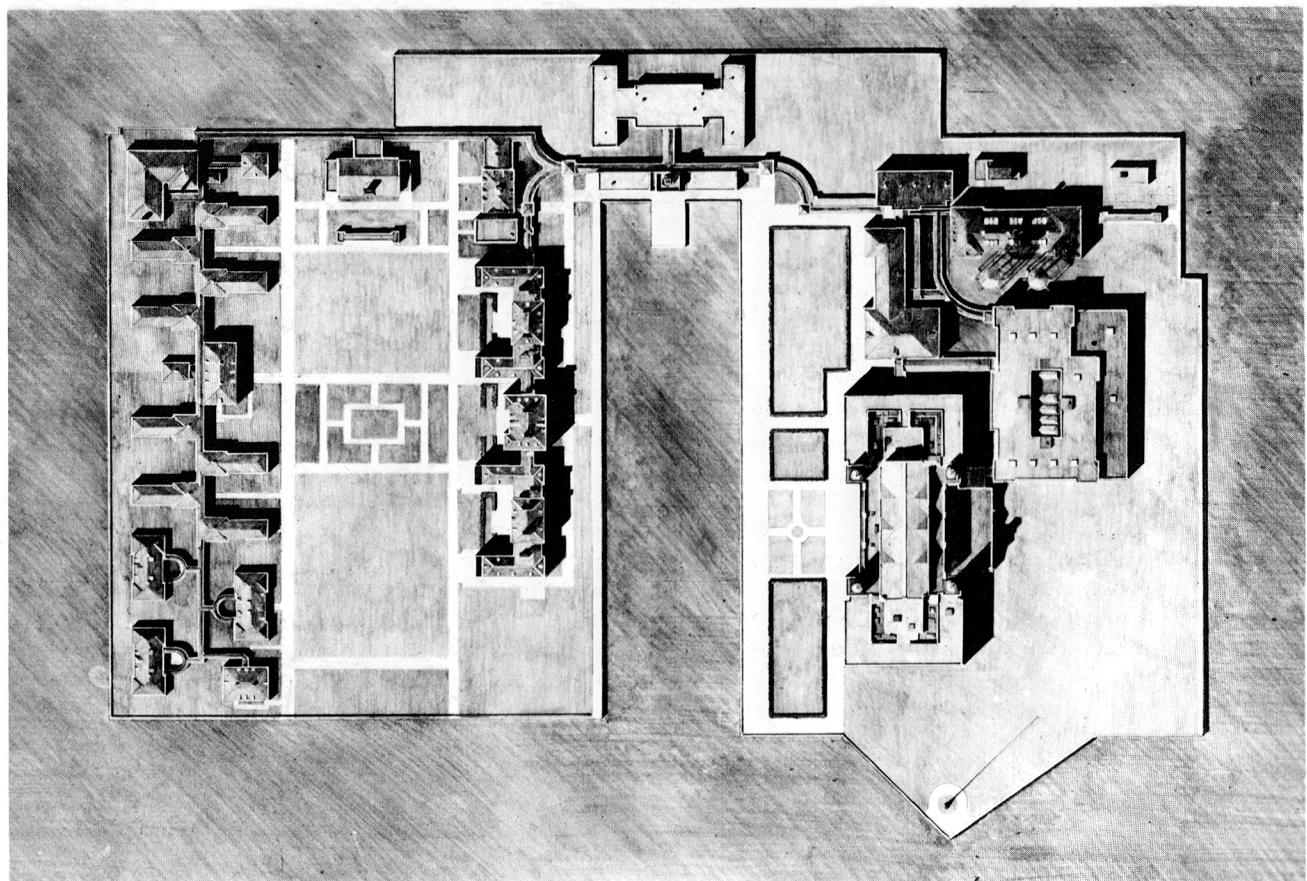
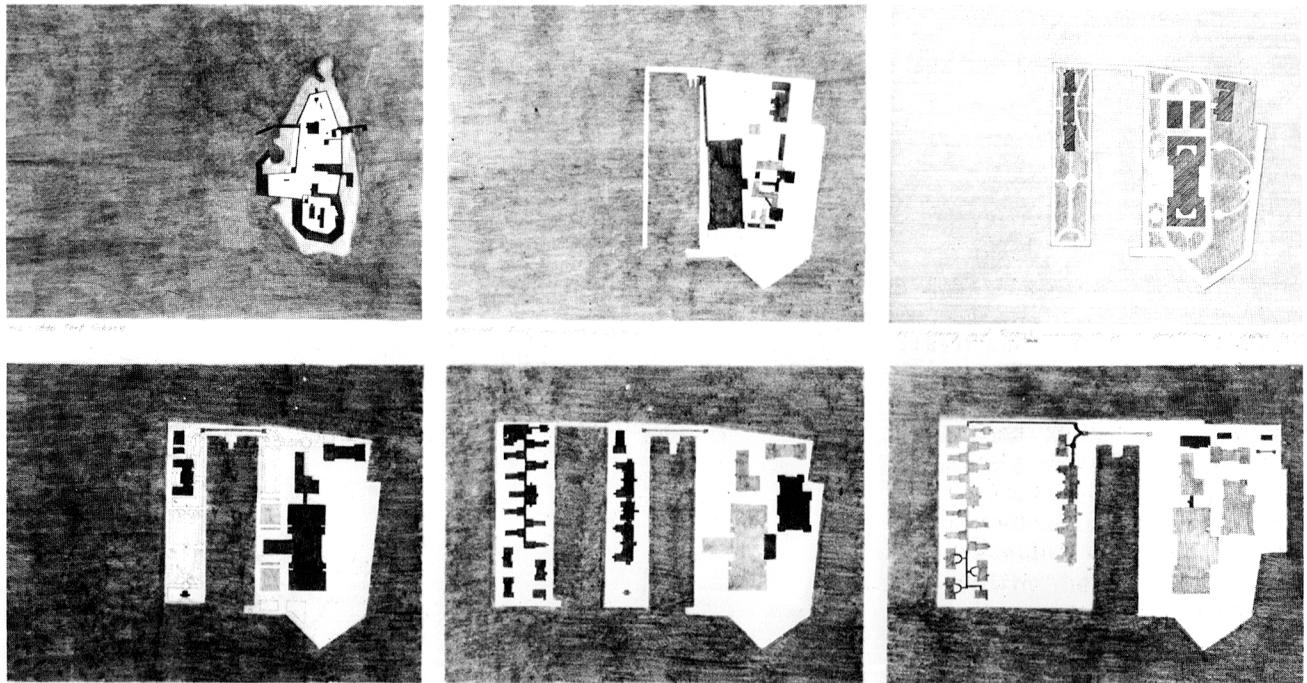
Location plan

View of Ellis Island proposal towards  
Manhattan



2 and 3 was completed at this time. Landscaping and playgrounds were added with Public Works Administration funds and WPA labor, together with building improvements recommended in an evaluation prepared by a committee of prominent citizens selected by Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor. A mural by Edward Laning depicting "The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America" was completed in 1938.

1935-present: Construction of a recreation building and shelter on the filled-in area between Islands 2 and 3, a new ferry house at the head of the boat slip, and an immigration building never used for this purpose behind the ferry house. The island's area is further increased and its shape rendered almost perfectly symmetrical. During World War II, the facilities were used as a Coast Guard Station, a hospital for returning wounded soldiers, and a detention center for suspected enemy aliens. The covered walkways were built at this time. The Public Health Service closed the main hospital in 1951. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 and a liberalized detention policy enacted two years later resulted in the official and definitive closing of Ellis Island in 1954.



1. 1812-1890 Fort Gibson
2. 1890-1897 First Immigration Station
3. 1897 Boring and Tilton's winning design for Second Station
4. 1898 Boring and Tilton's site plan
5. 1900-1920 Addition of Island 3, Contagious disease wards, Baggage and Dormitory Building, and enlargement of Main Hospital.
6. 1921-1934 Addition of landfill between Islands 2 and 3, and covered walkway. Ellis Island 1935 to present. Addition of Ferry House, completion of landscaping.
7. Present conditions

Ellis Island 1935 to present. Addition of Ferry House, completion of landscaping.

## Proposed Program

Once the main gateway to the New World, Ellis Island now holds decaying structures that are still charged with anguish and hopes of our grandparents. The proposed plan would transform the island into a place of public celebration and remembrance of the immigrants' experience and contributions.

The island itself — its historically evolving contours and elevations — is reinterpreted to evoke its history of human interventions and its structures are augmented or replaced to create spaces for public recreation and celebration of our policultural heritage. There will be sites for the various ethnic groups to place commemorative monuments to events or persons of special significance to them. Open areas and new facilities are to be provided for recreation, expanding the restricted options currently available to people in the New York metropolitan area and linking Ellis Island to the constellation of

park sites formed by Gateway National Park, Liberty Island, and Liberty State Park. Space is also provided for commercial uses, such as food concessions and souvenir shops, in a restricted area that can be easily contained and maintained. The commercial component has the potential of creating over 500 seasonal jobs and generating considerable revenues to offset the maintenance costs of the public grounds. The project's sponsors are specifically concerned with the creation of a place that would appeal to a diverse constituency and to private donors, who will be the main source of funding for this proposal. The proposal also takes into account the current National Park Service policy of selective restoration and preservation while introducing additional cultural, recreational, and commercial uses.

## The Proposal

One half of the island, including the Immigration Station, is retained as a museum. Upon exiting the building, the visitors find themselves at the edge of a reflecting pool that

follows the outline of Fort Gibson's wall, built in 1812. Beyond is a high wall with a walkway atop. This wall follows the outline that Ellis Island had during the peak years of immigration. The visitors may walk beyond this wall on the curved walkways, passing under the flag — a reenactment of the immigrants' rite of passage. Beyond is a grassy area with a wooden boardwalk on the site of loading docks where immigrants waited to be transported to the mainland. The walkway above the wall functions as a vantage point to view Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty.

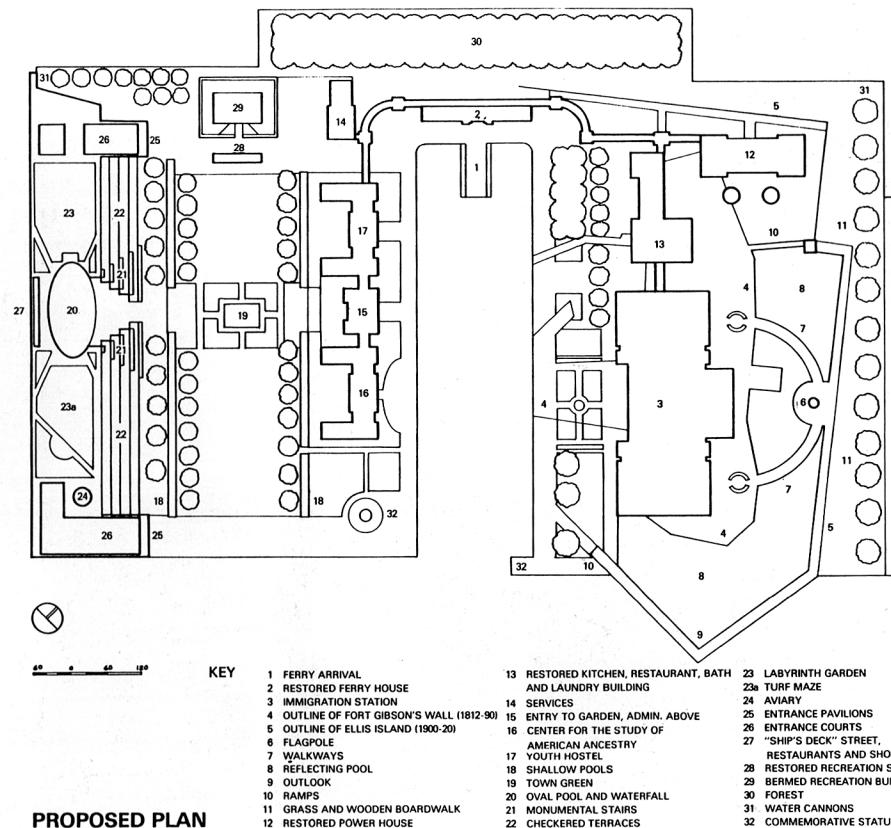
Only those buildings that were part of Boring and Tilton's site plan have been retained and restored on the northwest side of the island. On the southwest side the renovated Hospital building will house the Administration, the Center for the Study of American Ancestry, and a Hostel.

The central green space will be used for special events and celebrations of ethnic and cultural groups' parades,

pageants, concerts, festivals, games, and picnics. This place will be experienced both as the ceremonial foreground to a formal garden beyond and as the town green with a prominent building at its head.

The focus of the garden opposite the former hospital is an oval pool with a 24-foot high waterfall around its edge. The monumental stairs flanking the entrance to the pool lead to checkered terraces of paving and grass, forming a stadium to view the events in the central green, and to the upper terrace, also accessible by ramp. Here is a labyrinth garden, the archetypal form associated with the act and process of *dwelling*. It is formed by three patterns of wide and narrow paths leading to commemorative statues, fountains, and seating areas, including a small turf maze intended as a children's playground.

Below the labyrinth garden is a building accessible from either end of the terraces. The interior is a flexible space defined by a 24-foot structural module, housing temporary



PROPOSED PLAN

Proposed plan

and permanent exhibitions, display and seminar rooms of many ethnic, regional, national, and international organizations, including the American Museum of Immigration.

The edge of the island facing the Statue of Liberty is a promenade lined with small ethnic restaurants and shops. Here visitors may pause and enjoy an imaginary voyage while relaxing and eating in the deck's upper level. Water pumped from the sea to form the waterfall is recycled through a large circular opening in the seawall.

A visitors' center is in the restored Art Deco ferry house. The awesome wilderness that the immigrants came to transform is recalled in the forest facing New Jersey. The bermed building at the head of the central green, the ruin of a former recreation structure, will be used for informal performances and ceremonies. Its entrance is through an opening in the hearth: the skylight above fills the buried building with light.

