

photo exhibit documents the derelict structures of Ellis Island

Moving pictures

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BY WILLIAM GORDON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

To view Larry Racioppo's remarkable photographs of once-stately buildings in ghostly ruins on Ellis Island's long-neglected south side is to realize how alarmingly close this portion of one of the nation's most sacred historic monuments had come to the brink of annihilation.

The cameraman's sensitive and brooding documentation of Ellis Island in extremis can be seen in the exhibition "Forgotten Gateway: The Abandoned Buildings of Ellis Island" at the New Jersey Historical Society, 52 Park Place, Newark.

The exhibition of 45 of Racioppo's large-format prints shares gallery space with historic views of the island that was the portal to America for 12 million immigrants from 1892 to 1954.

Organized by the National Building Museum in Washington, in cooperation with the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the display will continue through June 30.

In 1998, at the very time Racioppo was lugging his cameras around the jungle-like landscape, the National Park Service reported that many of the century-old structures "have reached an accelerating state of deterioration and will likely experience catastrophic failure within five to 10 years."

That forecast, dire as it was, seemed almost optimistic to members of former Gov. Christie Whitman's Advisory Committee on the Preservation and Use of Ellis Island after their own tour of the island. In December 1998, they found the buildings in an advanced state of decay and in danger of imminent collapse.

The committee informed Whitman that the 29 buildings on the south side of the island, and one on the north side, would be beyond saving unless emergency measures were taken. In May 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court had granted New Jersey sovereignty over the buildings on 22.5 of the island's 27.5 acres.

The committee's warning sparked a \$8.6 million emergency stabilization campaign. Prison labor cleared debris from the structures that once had been an imposing hospital complex and removed choking vines and other vegetation.

Other workers sealed windows and doors, and tarped holes in roofs.

So distressed was the roofless hospital laundry outbuilding that it became a candidate for immediate rehabilitation, skipping the stabilization stage, according to Judith McAlpin, president of Gladstone-based Save Ellis Island! Inc.

In a partnership agreement announced last week with the National Park Service, which owns and operates the island, SEI! will launch a nationwide campaign for public and private funding later this year. The drive will coincide with the release

of the park service's proposal for the reuse of the buildings, which will cost an estimated \$300 million to rehabilitate.

"There's a misconception among a lot of people across the country that Ellis Island has already been restored," said McAlpin. "That comes about from the big splash made in the early 1990s of the opening of the American Immigration Museum on the island's north side. Our goal is to make people aware that an important part of their heritage remains to be saved."

A traveling exhibition of Racioppo's photographs - depicting haunting images of abandoned immigration-era artifacts in weather-damaged buildings, strangling in vines and overgrown shrubs - will be a part of the SEI! campaign to raise the nation's consciousness.

In remarks at the exhibit's opening, Clement Price, professor of history at Rutgers University, questioned how "a country that prides itself as a nation of immigrants could allow the symbol of immigration go to seed."

"Immigration can be easily forgotten in today's jet age, when there is no longer one place for the newcomer to come through, sharing the experience with others," he said. "We need to be reminded of what immigration symbolized before and after Ellis Island."

The 53-year-old Racioppo said a Guggenheim Fellowship enabled him to document the deterioration of the island's buildings, giving him a year off his job as photographer for New York City's Department of Housing, Preservation and Development.

Racioppo, all four of whose grandparents came through Ellis Island from Italy, said he first toured the island's south side in 1997 with other members of the Society of Industrial Archaeology and was "overwhelmed."

"I do a lot of architectural photography, but there was nothing like this for emotional content," he said.

Racioppo prowled the island mostly alone, taking photos with a panoramic camera, as well as a traditional view camera, using exposures of as long as 45 minutes. The result is work of exceptional quality and detail.

He admired the French Renaissance-style architecture of the main hospital complex buildings and outlying infectious disease wards - red brick walls, granite base, limestone trim - occupied by as many as 500 staff and patients at their peak.

The photographer found the Baggage and Dormitory Building to be a beautiful structure, even in its decay.

"You step through the doorway and you're struck by the sounds in the air," he recalled. "You can hear the ocean. Water is dripping somewhere. Birds are flying. It's very sensory, very eerie. It's a haunting and emotional place to be in. You can feel the kind of place it was. I think my photo does justice to the mood. That's normally very hard to do."

Ten percent of the immigrants who came through Ellis Island were detained for medical reasons, commonly measles, diphtheria, chicken pox, tuberculosis and eye diseases like trachoma. Free treatment was given to immigrants too ill to enter the United States until they were cured. The U.S. Public Health Service

superseded the Marine Health Service in 1912.

About 3,500 immigrants died on Ellis Island, their remains prepared for burial in the Mortuary Building. None of the dead was cremated, out of respect for the cultures of the hospital's diverse population.

Cadavers were stored in tin-lined wooden refrigerator cases to await examination in the hospital's autopsy room, equipped with an amphitheater for viewing by doctors, nurses and Public Health officers.

Racioppo's poignant photo of the mortuary interior shows scabrous walls, a battered sink, shards of a collapsed ceiling heaped on the floor, and eight refrigerator cases, doors of four swung open.

President Benjamin Harrison designated Ellis Island as one of the first federal immigration stations in 1890. A building of Georgia pinewood opened on the three-acre island on Jan. 1, 1892. In June 1897, the station burned to the ground.

A new main immigration building opened Dec. 17, 1900. The south side hospital buildings were erected on landfill that expanded the island, eventually to its present 27.5 acres.

"Forgotten Gateway" is supported in part by Finn Caspersen, founder and chairman of Save Ellis Island! Inc., and his wife, Barbara Morris Caspersen.

SEI! Inc. is appealing to the public for help in restoring the "Gateway to America." Its address is 340 Main St., P.O. Box 571, Gladstone, N.J. 07934. Phone: (908) 781-9900. E-mail: info@saveellisland.org. Web site: (www.saveellisland.org).

"Forgotten Gateway: The Abandoned Buildings of Ellis Island"

Where: The New Jersey Historical Society, 52 Park Place, Newark

When: Through June 30; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday

How much: Free. Call (973) 596-8500.