

## Edge of Humanity Magazine

### Documentary Photography – Ellis Island, The Forgotten Days

By Edge of Humanity Magazine, January 24, 2016



Corridor

This documentary photography essay was submitted to Edge of Humanity Magazine by Photographer Larry Racioppo.

From project “Ellis Island” by Larry Racioppo.



Measles Ward

Around the 1880's, a new wave of immigrants began coming to America. These groups originated from Southern Europe and were predominantly Italian. From 1880 to 1924, 4.5 million Italians, (almost one third of Italy's entire population) immigrated to the United States. Southern European immigrants were mostly uneducated peasants who practiced Catholicism. Their dark hair and skin color made them easily identifiable.

These Italian immigrants called Ellis Island "L' Isola delle Lacrime", the Island of Tears. This term was used to describe their treatment upon arrival to Ellis Island.

The National Origins Act of 1924 was mostly directed at Southern European immigrants and limited Italian immigration to approximately 5,500 people per year.

In 1954, the official closing of Ellis Island marked the end of legal mass immigration to the United States.

Source – *Proud To Live In America*



Autopsy Room



B&D Building

### **Artist Statement**

My grandparents were part of this migration, arriving in America between 1905 and 1910. They settled in South Brooklyn, where I was born in 1947.

Fifty years later, through a series of fortuitous events, I found myself wandering through the empty, slightly spooky buildings of the abandoned hospital complex on the South Side of Ellis Island. I first saw these buildings on a brief tour sponsored by the Roebling Chapter of the Society for Industrial Architecture. I had a visceral response to their decaying beauty and resolved to find a way back – with my cameras.



Kitchen



Autoclaves



Staff house



Dressers



Chairs



Furnace

In the Fall, 1997, I read about a trial stabilization project at one of hospital buildings being done by the New York Landmarks Conservancy. I took a leave from my job and volunteered to document the project. I could do this because I had just received a Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography. I returned many times and in addition to my 'official' assignment, began to photograph throughout the complex. The Conservancy's architect Roger Lang and I created a photography exhibit *Forgotten Gateway* that opened at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC in 1998 and travelled to five other venues, concluding its run at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 2002.

The National Park Service used this stabilization project as a model for future preservation efforts. The Conservancy's videotape appeal featured this project and spurred the U.S. Congress and the State of New Jersey to make a series of appropriations totaling over \$8 million that have funded stabilization of all south side structures.

The Conservancy helped found Save Ellis Island!, Inc., in 2001. The nonprofit has been dedicated to raising the funds necessary to see all thirty vacant buildings on Ellis Island restored and appropriately reused..

By June 2006, all 29 of the unrestored former hospital buildings on Ellis Island were stabilized — more than a decade after we embarked on this vigorous national campaign.

The recently opened Ferry Building has been thoughtfully restored. The renewed interiors will feature exhibits introducing visitors to the south side. The first, "Future in the Balance: Immigrants, Public Health and Ellis Island's Hospitals," is currently on view.