

## *The Golden Door, Re-opened*

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### **Body**

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Yet their splendid work is not quite finished. For there is another part of the island, south of the main building and separated by a ferry slip, that the restorers haven't touched. It contains two dozen contagious disease wards, a morgue and many dark and forbidding rooms.

Only a small percentage of the 12 million immigrants went there, and, because the buildings are collapsing in a tangle of rust and vines, no visitors will be allowed. But this Ellis Island deserves better; it, too, is wondrously evocative.

The average immigrant spent three to five hours on the island. In far shorter time, visitors will be able to follow the path through the heart of the building the immigrants originally took: from the ferry slip to the vaulted registry room, where they were examined and interrogated by an army of doctors and inspectors. On any given day, 5,000 people would move through this room. Most received a joyous stamp of approval; a few - 2 percent of all cases - a crushing "no." The sick and lame wound up in the hospital and the wards at the south end of the island. It was this part of the island that caused the one nasty dispute during the restoration process.

Lee Iacocca, who was largely responsible for raising \$345 million to refurbish the Statue of Liberty and reclaim Ellis Island, wanted to build an immigration theme park that critics promptly labeled an "ethnic Disneyland." The National Park Service, which manages the island, decided instead to lease the buildings to a developer who would raze some of them and turn the hospital into a plush international conference center.

But while the developer continues to seek financing in an uncertain economic climate, the old buildings, and the history they contain, rot away. Dust swirls in the morgue, which holds a tiny amphitheater for autopsies, with eight holes in the wall where corpses were refrigerated. Weeds sprout through the concrete floor of a room containing a half-dozen autoclaves - huge containers where mattresses and bed linen were sterilized by superheated steam. One building holds a giant coal-fired boiler; another has a massive Dickensian contraption for pressing sheets.

A Park Service guide recently told a visitor that these abandoned structures held special meaning. "The Museum recaptures history," he said. "These buildings are history." He said he hoped enough public and private money could be found to "stabilize" them by preventing further rot until a permanent plan can be devised.

That's a modest idea and a good one. These poor, huddled structures speak of anxiety and hope - and tug us forcibly into the past.

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The Golden Door, Re-opened

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