The Uses of the Past: Design for Park Shrine on Ellis Island Utilizes Ruins to Evoke U.S. History
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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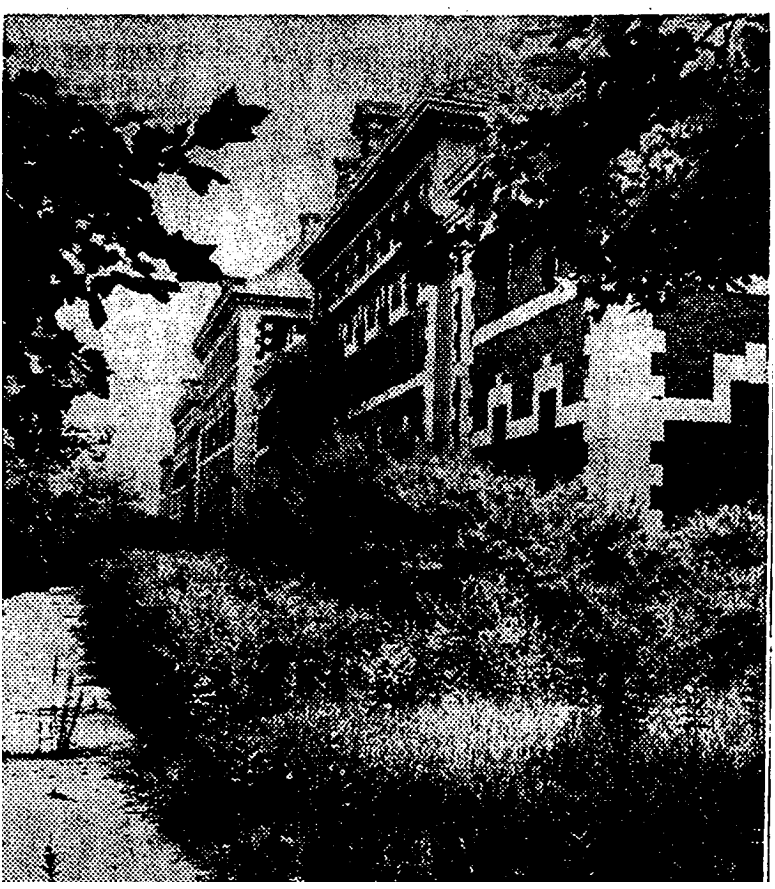

Adam Ritchie

TO STAND AS MONUMENT: This is one of the buildings at Ellis Island that will be gutted and left as a reminder of what the famous island was like. The structure will be an integral part of the island's design as a national shrine.

The Uses of the Past

Design for Park Shrine on Ellis Island Utilizes Ruins to Evoke U.S. History

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The design unveiled yesterday for Ellis Island by the Department of the Interior is a creative, imaginative response to the problem of making a national landmark and shrine out of 27.5 weedy acres that have neither grace nor grandeur, but were the point of entry to a new world for 16 million immigrants.

An Appraisal

How to turn a large, conglomerate group of ugly-to-utilitarian buildings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries into a symbol of a free world is an architectural challenge with overtones of nightmare.

Deserted and decaying, already partly covered by the creeping green that mellows and buries the past, the desolate buildings evoke an overpowering nostalgia.

This nostalgia set the theme for architect Philip Johnson's solution: Ellis Island as a romantic ruin.

There are excellent precedents for the idea—the war-damaged churches carefully preserved as half-ruins at the heart of rebuilt German cities; the shell of historic Canterbury Cathedral maintained as a forecourt to the new church. The romantic ruin can evoke a more immediate and emotional sense of the past than the most accurate reconstruction.

But more than romanticism determined the design theme. The most charitable judgment of Ellis Island's buildings must rate their historical implications higher than their architectural quality. The prohibitive cost of extensive restoration of the sprawling complex would not be justified by what would be, at best, dubious esthetics.

A Strong Symbolic Impact

For more positive, Johnsonian esthetics, and for a strong symbolic impact, a monument has been added. Although the 130-foot height is calculated to be about 20 feet below the top of the pedestal of the neighboring Statue of Liberty, its 300-foot diameter bulk is calculated to be clearly visible from the water and surrounding land.

This is, then, a two-part scheme. About three-quarters of the island will consist of the nostalgic, historically evocative grouping of structural shells, or selective architectural semi-ruins set among landscaped pedestrian walks and picnic groves.

At the edge of the bosky ruins, past a sharp cut-off line, is the second part of the scheme, the mammoth memorial, which will stand on a cleared section of land as bare and green as a billiard table.

Questions can be raised about this schizoid split and the drastic change in character and scale between the two parts of the plan. But there is no question about the superior design quality of the solution, or its particular historical sensitivity. It is light-years ahead of the routine reconstructions and predictably pedestrian memorials usually tendered by government agencies.

Essentially, Ellis Island is a problem in park design. It is a dual purpose, recreational memorial. It could even be called parkitecture. In terms of use, this is a plan for pedestrians. Its scale, continuity and basic premises of function and movement are for strollers.

There is the promise of a pleasant experience in the raised walks around the buildings and the connecting groves for sitting and picnicking. The idea continues with a monument for pedestrians, encircled with ramps, but the vast, bald plain on which it is set, meant for ceremonial uses, and an amphitheatre-like, truncated cone of overwhelming scale break that continuity physically and psychologically with brutal abruptness.

The architect intends the monument to have this kind f impact, and it may well achieve it. Monumentality is predicated on awe, not intimacy. But a small turnout on a cold day in a sharp harbor wind could be more depressing than inspirational unless the structural beauty, impossible to judge in this early small model, is of a high enough order to bridge the gap.

As a park Ellis Island raises further questions. Its location makes its nature and function unlike those of any other National, unless the structural tional Park Service operation. The urban recreational requirements for these special conditions have yet to be fully explored. The solution is handsomely static right now; a fully realized design, if not a fully realized program.

Another possibility to explore is whether the city's Parks Department might not take over on a contract basis from the Interior Department, as being closest to the city's needs.

As the budget stands, the existing buildings will be dealt with first and the monument built in a second stage. The theatrical, educational device called son et lumière, or the use of sound and light to retell history through the setting of the buildings, is also proposed for the second stage.

For the success of the scheme, this is essential to the initial part of the plan. The problem of the additional financing might be solved through a grant from one of the funds, or one of the family fortunes that Ellis Island made possible. The romantic ruins, brought to meaningful life by sound and light, might prove to be memorial enough. If the more striking monument is necessary, it will then be convincingly clear.