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**EXPLORERS
OF LIGHT**

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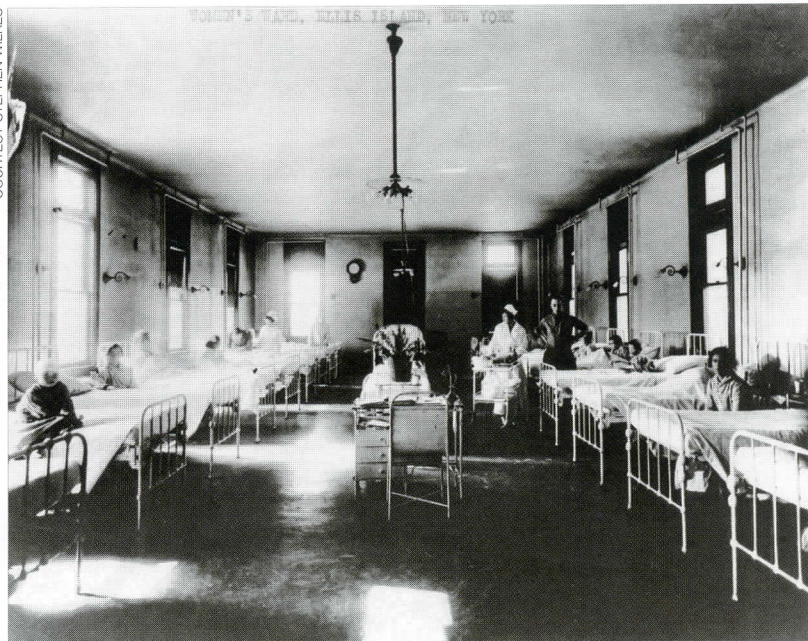
Stephen Wilkes couldn't sleep for weeks after his first visit to New York Harbor's Ellis Island. It wasn't the haunting grandeur of the island's newly restored Great Hall, a space through which 12 million would-be Americans passed in the years between 1892 and 1954, that had "perturbed" him, to use his word. It was the famous immigration center's abandoned south side, the erstwhile site of a huge hospital in which those who arrived with medical and mental problems were confined until they recuperated or died—if they weren't sent straight back to their native lands. "It was as if somebody had raised the Titanic and I got the first ticket to go through it," says Wilkes, who was so overwhelmed by the site's resonant decay that he couldn't take the pictures he'd been assigned to shoot that day. "It was literally this fifty-fifty entanglement of man and nature—a study in what a half century of weather and overgrowth can do to human architecture. It was one of the most extraordinary things I'd ever seen."

What started for Wilkes as a small task ("They'll probably only give you an hour there," his art director had told him) turned into a five-year

Stephen Wilkes's haunting views of Ellis Island's decaying hospital complex capture more than empty rooms, shedding new light on the immigrant experience. **By Russell Hart**

Ghosts of Freedom

COURTESY STEPHEN WILKES



A women's ward at the Ellis Island hospital as it looked in Wilkes's 1998 view (here) and in its prime in 1917 (right).





Ellis Island's
morgue (oppo-
site); the
hospital's
main corridor
(this page).



“It was like an archaeological dig,” says Wilkes. “I would methodically go through it room by room. I didn’t use artificial light or digital manipulation. The color was real.”

photographic exploration. On that first visit, the photographer encountered people wearing respirators and hazmat suits, apparently doing restoration work. “One guy took off his mask and we started talking,” Wilkes recalls. “He told me that he was working with the New York Landmarks Conservancy to raise support for stabilizing the site as a living ruin.” Wilkes immediately offered his help, and went on to shoot a film with which the conservancy convinced Congress to allocate resources for the site’s conversion into a safe, publicly accessible space. And Wilkes was granted unlimited access to the island. “I became obsessed with it,” he says. “I went out there basically every free moment I had. If I wasn’t doing my commercial work, I was shooting on Ellis Island. I got to study this place in a way that few other people could.”

Wilkes’s photographs of Ellis Island’s south side, which in its prime housed the world’s largest infectious disease hospital, reflect the pho-

tographer’s avowed love for “patina and texture.” And they are full of a palpable light that has much to do with how sun bounces off the surrounding water and terra cotta exteriors of the island’s buildings. Yet that visual richness is inseparable from the pervasive fact that over a million ailing immigrants occupied these wards as they waited, often hoping against hope, to be granted entry to the United States. “People really seem to be moved by these images of empty rooms, as if I’ve somehow captured their ancestors,” says Wilkes. “It’s fine to have beautiful light and nice color and great design and all the other elements that people are drawn to in a photograph, but they can’t ever replace the power of emotion.”

Both qualities inhabit Wilkes’s pictures, which are collected in the stunning *Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom* (W.W. Norton, \$75), Wilkes’s first book in almost 20 years. A blue suitcase sits on the floor of a



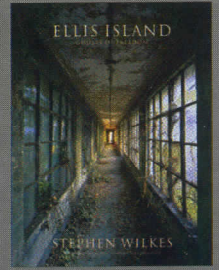
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room in the isolation ward, as if its owner never lived to unpack. A small mirror above the bathroom sink in a tuberculosis ward reflects the Statue of Liberty, as if the promised land turned out to be an illusion, while brilliant late-day light seems to ignite the furnace-like autoclave in which TB-tainted mattresses were once sterilized. Surrounded by debris, a bed in a psychiatric ward bears the sunken impression of countless patients. File cabinets lining the walls of a measles ward have their drawers open, as if ghosts were searching for medical records. In the wreckage of the psychiatric hospital brig only a toilet bowl survives, its seat intact. In the morgue, the doors of body slots swing open and askew, as if corpses had fled to safety on the mainland. "It was almost like an archaeological dig," says Wilkes. "I would methodically go through it room by room."

Using a 4x5 view camera for both perspective control and the all-seeing detail of large-format transparency film, Wilkes shot entirely by existing light, which required exposures as long as 15 minutes. "I never used any artificial light or digital manipulation," he says. "The color was real. I'd never seen color like the lead paint in that

BOOK GIVEAWAY

Stephen Wilkes's **Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom** is not only a testament to a national treasure but a tribute to the printer's art. Enter to win a copy by sending a postcard with your name, address, phone number, and school affiliation to *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, 43rd Floor, New York, NY 10019. Write "Wilkes book" on the card. Deadline is December 31.



place. As the paint began to disintegrate and peel, it took on this dual dimension of texture and saturation that was just fantastic. It's all in the original chromes."

Though Ellis Island's south side will soon be safe to visit without a respirator, the stabilization process has taken a toll. "The sad part is that it will never look like my photographs do," says Wilkes. "In stabilizing it, they had to get rid of some of the things that gave it its character—the peeling paint, the open windows, a lot of the debris. I feel blessed that I was able to capture it in time." ■



An office and patient's room in the psychiatric hospital (far left and here); nature lets itself in (right).

