



Museum Visitor Studies, Evaluation & Audience Research

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Exhibition Evaluation

Front-end Evaluation: Interpretative Planning of Ellis Island's Hospital and Medical Facilities

*Prepared for
Save Ellis Island*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | ii |
| Summary of Principal Findings..... | ii |
| DISCUSSION | iv |
| Recommendations | vi |
| References..... | vii |
| INTRODUCTION | i |
| Methodology..... | 1 |
| Data Analysis and Reporting Method..... | 2 |
| PRINCIPAL FINDINGS | 3 |
| Visitor Demographics | 3 |
| Current Visitor Experiences..... | 4 |
| Overall Understanding of Ellis Island’s Hospital and Medical Facilities..... | 7 |
| Responses to Planned Interpretation..... | 9 |
| Perceptions of Period Restoration and Arrested Decay | 15 |
| APPENDICES | 17 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a front-end evaluation conducted by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A), for Save Ellis Island (SEI). RK&A designed the study to examine Ellis Island visitors' overall responses to the exhibit concepts, themes, and interpretive approaches being developed for SEI's planned interpretation of Ellis Island's hospital and other medical facilities located on Islands two and three.

**Selected highlights of the study are included in this summary.
Please consult the body of the report for a detailed account of the findings.**

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- ◆ RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with current visitors to Ellis Island in June 2007. Among 37 visitor groups, comprised of 57 individuals, RK&A conducted front-end interviews with 22 groups on the ground floor of the Immigration Museum and with 15 groups following their participation in the Ferry Building tour.

VISITOR DEMOGRAPHICS

- ◆ Female interviewees (80 percent) outnumbered male interviewees (20 percent).
- ◆ The median age of interviewees was 46.
- ◆ Most interviewees (75 percent) identified themselves as United States residents, representing a total of 15 states.

CURRENT VISITOR EXPERIENCES

- ◆ About one-third of interviewees said they visited Ellis Island because they had always wanted to experience its history firsthand or were returning to share in the experience with family or friends.
- ◆ Most of the one-half of interviewees who visited much of the Immigration Museum prior to the interview frequently mentioned enjoying using visually appealing and/or interactive exhibits.
- ◆ Interviewees gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about their Ferry Building tour experiences, describing their tour guide as knowledgeable and engaging.

OVERALL UNDERSTANDING OF ELLIS ISLAND'S HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL FACILITIES

- ◆ Nearly all interviewees said they were unaware of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities prior to participating in the Ferry Building tour and/or viewing the new planned interpretation materials.
- ◆ Nearly all interviewees said Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities challenged their negative preconceptions of historical medical practices and facilities. More than one-half said the modernity and extent of the facilities exceeded their expectations. More than one-half expressed surprise about the humane and often lengthy treatment of immigrants who arrived on Ellis Island needing care.

RESPONSES TO PLANNED INTERPRETATION

- ◆ Nearly all interviewees understood the main message of the new interpretive plan from one of two different perspectives: the humane treatment of immigrants in need of medical attention and the advanced medical knowledge, technologies, and/or practices of staff at Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities.

- ◆ Interviewees expressed a high level of enthusiasm for the opportunity to experience firsthand Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities. They said visitors would be surprised and interested to learn about the medical issues and daily work and activities of patients, staff, and behind-the-scenes workers.
- ◆ More than one-half of interviewees said the Contagious Disease Wards interested them most. Some explained they would enjoy learning about patients’ daily lives and medical care. Some others said this story was most compelling because it indicates the magnitude of immigrant medical care.
- ◆ Nearly one-half of interviewees said the Operating Room interested them. Some explained that they wanted to see the surgical practices and related technology of the past compared to modern operating facilities.
- ◆ About one-third of interviewees also expressed interest in the Autopsy Room, including several who said they were surprised to learn of its existence on Ellis Island and/or the use of Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities for medical research and teaching.
- ◆ About one-third of interviewees expressed interest in the Powerhouse. These interviewees primarily discussed their interest in the immersive experience rather than the content.
- ◆ Less than one-third of interviewees said the Laundry/Hospital Outbuilding interested them. Some said they wanted to see the “mangle” machinery because it was unique and to learn more about the sanitary challenges hospital staff faced.
- ◆ Additionally, about one-quarter of interviewees expressed interest in the Linen Rooms, including some who explained they wanted to learn about the historic preservation of these rooms and to compare the decayed rooms with the restored ones.
- ◆ When RK&A asked interviewees to identify the least compelling exhibit area, nearly one-half identified the Linen Rooms. Interviewees explained that this exhibit area had the least engaging human interest story and, whether in a state of arrested decay or period restoration, they had difficulty imagining these rooms in use.
- ◆ Some interviewees said the Powerhouse and/or Laundry Room interested them least because of their general lack of interest in learning about the behind-the-scenes operations of the hospital and medical facilities.
- ◆ About one-half of interviewees said they had unanswered questions after reviewing the planned interpretation for Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities. Nearly all of these were recruited in the Immigration Museum and had not participated in the Ferry Building tour. Most of their questions were about the people who worked onsite, whether as medical staff or support staff. Some interviewees asked for more stories of patients as well as statistical records to better understand daily life in the hospital.

PERCEPTIONS OF PERIOD RESTORATION AND ARRESTED DECAY

- ◆ About three-quarters of interviewees expressed interest in seeing at least one room left in a state of arrested decay. The majority of them said doing so would convey the importance of historic preservation by showcasing the physical consequences of neglect. Some others said the juxtaposition of two rooms (one in arrested decay, the other restored) would help them appreciate the restoration process. A few others said that seeing any room left in arrested decay would interest them because of its “raw” and “authentic” qualities.
- ◆ The remaining one-quarter expressed little, if any, interest in seeing a room left in a state of arrested decay. These interviewees said they did not understand the value of showing visitors a deteriorated, empty room because they were more interested in seeing how it was used.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that potential audiences have the capacity to understand and personally connect to key interpretive themes. As Save Ellis Island (SEI) continues to plan, the challenge is to build upon this initial success and ensure that the planned interpretation will create meaningful visitor experiences unified by a primary message and contextualized by pertinent background information.

The immigrant experience in the hospital and medical facilities of Ellis Island is an intriguing story, as evidenced by conversations with visitors to the Ferry Building and Immigration Museum. Despite interviewees' prior lack of awareness and some misconceptions about the subject, SEI's planned interpretation generated enthusiasm and interest. Interviewees easily found a way to connect with the content of the new interpretation, focusing on its authentic nature—the real-life human interest stories and opportunities for experiencing the buildings and artifacts of the past. Many interviewees anticipated returning to Ellis Island for the immersive, unique visitor experience that would await them inside the buildings once they are restored.

This discussion highlights issues for SEI to consider as it further develops the hospital and medical facilities' exhibition content and concludes with recommendations.

USING AUTHENTICITY TO PERSONALLY CONNECT VISITORS

History museums and sites across the country are investing heavily in the development of large-scale multimedia and interactive exhibitions to attract, entertain, and hopefully educate visitors. And yet, as an article published in *The New York Times* in September 2007 pointed out, at the heart of every history museum is a powerful story; high tech bells and whistles are just one way to communicate it. Museum researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that visitors primarily go to history museums to experience “real stuff” firsthand and to find personal relevance in exhibition content, as the article also noted.

The multimedia and interactive elements of SEI's planned interpretation elicited few comments from visitors, whereas opportunities to experience the buildings and learn about the stories that happened inside them captured visitors' imaginations. Visitors responded strongly to the authenticity of the place and its stories. For example, the Contagious Disease Wards emerged as interviewees' favorite exhibit area because it would provide immersive opportunities for visitors to learn about and experience the personal stories about patients' daily lives and medical care. In contrast, the Linen Rooms generated the least enthusiasm because interviewees had difficulty imagining this area in use and—in comparison to the other exhibit areas—it lacked human interest and opportunities for experiencing personal stories firsthand. Although interviewees responded positively to the interpretive strategy of leaving Linen Room #2 in a state of arrested decay juxtaposed with the fully restored Linen Room #1, they also wanted to learn the behind-the-scenes story of the room's restoration rather than merely see the “before” and “after” examples.

As another case in point, a recent Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A), study for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum concluded that the experience inside the tenement building surprised and awed visitors because of the authenticity of place and the stories of “real people” who lived there. Through opportunities to physically and emotionally connect to the site, visitors personally experienced its history and left the Museum with a deeper appreciation for and better understanding of historical immigrant

experiences. In other words, there is no substitute for a unique historical site experience, only opportunities for enhancing it.

COMMUNICATING A UNIFYING MESSAGE

Unquestionably, visitors reacted positively to the proposed exhibition content. They enjoyed the idea of learning about the lesser-known medical aspect of the immigrant experience on Ellis Island; however, no cohesive main message emerged from visitors' responses. Instead, most visitors articulated the main message from one of two *different* perspectives: the humane treatment of immigrants in need of medical attention *or* the advanced medical knowledge, technologies, and/or practices of staff at Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities.

It is not surprising that a main message was not clearly articulated since the interpretive overview presented to visitors specifically identified four key themes: 1) the immigrant health inspection process; 2) the story of the United States Public Health Service; 3) patient care; and, 4) state-of-the-art medical facility construction in the early 20th Century. The differing interpretations of the primary message among visitors and presentation of multiple key themes indicate a lack of focus within the exhibition content. This lack of focus translates into a need for an overarching idea. It is better to explore one idea in-depth and through different means than to superficially address numerous complex ideas, as audience research continues to show that less becomes more for visitors (RK&A, 1992) (Serrell, 1991). Serrell suggests developing a well-defined primary message, or "big idea" to create a symbiotic relationship between exhibition staff and visitors. This relationship will enable exhibition staff to select and communicate information, which in turn, will make it easier for visitors to prioritize, organize, and process the exhibition's content. Serrell further explains, "A powerful exhibition idea will clarify, limit, and focus the nature and scope of an exhibition and provide a well-defined goal against which to rate its success" (Serrell, 1996). While the big idea seems to serve evaluation, it is also a guidepost for decision-making about exhibition content.

Given the complexity of the visitor experience—multiple buildings spanning multiple decades—SEI will need to clarify and reiterate *one* idea from among the many ideas presented as the main message to help visitors create meaning from the Ellis Island experience. According to Beverly Serrell's criteria, an exhibition's big idea clearly states an exhibition's scope and purpose, preferably in one non-compound sentence. While it is tempting to provide visitors with an abundance of information, the exhibition team must carefully use the big idea as a barometer for selecting content (text, objects, and labels) and interpretative methods that will support the primary message for visitors.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE EXPERIENCE

Nearly all visitors demonstrated little, if any, understanding of general medical history. In fact, SEI's planned interpretation challenged their negative preconceptions of past medical practices and facilities. As learners, we process ideas through our memories of experiences, emotions, and knowledge; therefore, if new and unfamiliar ideas are difficult to grasp, our ability to create meaning is impeded. Thus, visitors' lack of knowledge about medical history complicates SEI's ability to deliver its message. Visitors will need contextual information—geography, history timelines, comparisons of medical care in urban and rural areas during the same time period—as an introduction to the restored hospital and medical facilities and throughout to understand their greater historical significance. For example,

visitors may not recognize that these buildings were state-of-the-art for the early 20th Century if they only have knowledge of medical facilities today for comparison.

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings from in-depth interviews indicate that SEI's planned interpretation of the hospital and medical facilities on Islands two and three will provide Ellis Island visitors with memorable opportunities to experience these buildings firsthand and learn the stories of the patients, medical staff, and behind-the-scenes workers who once occupied them. Interviewees collectively voiced a desire to increase or expand their understanding of the overall immigration experience on Ellis Island by connecting physically and emotionally to this lesser-known history. If SEI continues to develop planned interpretation by focusing on the authenticity of place and also clarifies the primary message and provides more contextual information, these interpretive plans will translate into a meaningful and memorable visitor experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Identify one big idea (i.e., one primary message that weaves together the exhibition's themes and content) and support it throughout the visitor experience. Selecting one idea and excluding others requires enormous discipline and focus, but the visitor experience will be richer and deeper if the exhibition invites and encourages visitors to stay on task. Selecting one idea may require the planning team to decide which ideas to forfeit.
- ◆ To address visitors' potential lack of awareness and knowledge of not only Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities but also medical history in general, embed contextual information (i.e., geography, history timelines, comparisons to medical care in urban and rural areas during the same time period and in different countries today) into appropriate exhibits and especially in the introductory area. Additionally, consider ways to help visitors identify and place each exhibit area's time period within the history timeline of Ellis Island whenever possible.
- ◆ To help visitors connect personally to the history of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities, continue focusing on the authenticity of the site through opportunities to experience the buildings and real-life stories of patients, medical staff, and behind-the-scenes workers. In particular, feature firsthand accounts, including the emotional side of experiences (e.g., how a patient felt when leaving the hospital), whenever possible.
- ◆ Consider re-examining interpretation of the Powerhouse, Laundry/Hospital Outbuilding, and Linen Rooms to more effectively communicate the usage of this area and the personal stories of behind-the-scenes workers. For example, in addition to telling the stories of hospital workers via graphic panels, explore options with a greater amount of interactivity to help visitors visualize workers in action.
- ◆ Continue developing the juxtaposition of Linen Room #2 in a state of arrested decay and Linen Room #1 fully restored; however, consider showcasing the restoration story (e.g., a series of photographs) to help visitors understand the necessity and importance of historic preservation and to address the misconception that period restoration lacks authenticity.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from a front-end evaluation conducted by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A), for Save Ellis Island (SEI). RK&A designed the study to examine Ellis Island visitors' overall responses to the exhibit concepts, themes, and interpretive approaches being developed for SEI's planned interpretation of Ellis Island's hospital and other medical facilities located on Islands two and three.

RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with current visitors to Ellis Island at two onsite locations, the Ferry Building and the Immigration Museum. The evaluation objectives were to:

- ◆ Identify potential connections between experiences in the Ferry Building/Immigration Museum and the new interpretive plans for Islands two and three;
- ◆ Gauge visitors' general associations, knowledge, and misconceptions of the immigrant experience in the hospitals and medical facilities of Ellis Island;
- ◆ Identify potential hooks and touchstones to connect visitors to the content of the new interpretation;
- ◆ Identify the themes, stories, and ideas that best help visitors understand and appreciate the holistic approach to the health, well-being, and social support provided to immigrants entering the United States through Ellis Island; and,
- ◆ Gauge whether visitors understand the differences in period restoration and arrested decay and how it affects their experience of the interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

RK&A conducted in-depth interviews onsite in June 2007 with 37 visitor groups comprised of 57 individuals. More than one-half of the visitor groups (22 groups) were recruited and interviewed in the Immigration Museum; the remainder (15 groups) were recruited and interviewed following group tours of the Ferry Building.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

RK&A selected in-depth interviews to produce data rich in information. In-depth interviews encourage and motivate visitors to describe their experiences, express their opinions and feelings, and share with the interviewer the meaning they constructed from an experience.

The interview guide was open-ended to allow individuals to express what was meaningful to them about their current visitor experiences and their perceptions of the new interpretive plans (see Appendix A for the interview guide). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHOD

The interviews were qualitative, meaning that results are descriptive. In analyzing qualitative data, the evaluator studies the data for meaningful patterns and trends, and, as patterns and trends emerge, groups similar responses. Quotations in this report, used to give the reader the flavor of visitor's experiences, illustrate interviewees' thoughts and ideas as fully as possible. Information identifying each interviewee's site location (Ferry Building or Immigration Museum) is included in brackets after each quotation.

Trends and themes in the interview data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with visitors to Ellis Island onsite in June 2007. Among 37 visitor groups comprised of 57 individuals, RK&A conducted front-end interviews with 22 groups on the ground floor of the Immigration Museum and with 15 groups following their participation in the Ferry Building tour.

VISITOR DEMOGRAPHICS

As shown in Table One, female interviewees (80 percent) outnumbered male interviewees (20 percent). Twenty-five percent of interviewees came from the 45-54 age group, followed by those 16 to 24 and those 55 to 64 (21 percent each). The median age of interviewees was 46. Most interviewees (75 percent) were first-time visitors to the Museum. Nearly three-quarters of visitor groups (73 percent) consisted of adults only (age 18 and older), whereas less than one-quarter (22 percent) were comprised of adults and children (under age 18). The remaining visitor groups (5 percent) were adults visiting alone.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC DEMOGRAPHICS: INTERVIEWEES

| Characteristic | TOTAL % |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Gender (n =57) | |
| Female | 80 |
| Male | 20 |
| Age (n =57) | |
| 16-24 | 21 |
| 25-34 | 14 |
| 35-44 | 12 |
| 45-54 | 25 |
| 55-64 | 21 |
| 65+ | 7 |
| Visitation (n =57) | |
| First-Time Visitor | 75 |
| Repeat Visitor | 25 |
| Group Composition (n =37) | |
| Adults only | 73 |
| Adults and children | 22 |
| Individual | 5 |

As shown in Table Two, most interviewees (43 interviewees or 75 percent) identified themselves as current United States residents, representing a total of 15 states. The remaining 14 interviewees (25 percent) currently reside in countries other than the United States.

TABLE 2
CURRENT RESIDENCES: INTERVIEWEES

| COUNTRY / STATE OF CURRENT RESIDENCE | INTERVIEWEES (n=57) |
|---|--------------------------------|
| United States | 43 |
| California | 8 |
| New Jersey | 6 |
| New York | 6 |
| Washington | 4 |
| Michigan | 3 |
| Arizona | 2 |
| Florida | 2 |
| Louisiana | 2 |
| Minnesota | 2 |
| Missouri | 2 |
| Oregon | 2 |
| Connecticut | 1 |
| Maryland | 1 |
| North Carolina | 1 |
| Pennsylvania | 1 |
| Outside the United States | 14 |
| England | 4 |
| Switzerland | 3 |
| New Zealand | 2 |
| Scotland | 2 |
| Ecuador | 1 |
| Philippines | 1 |
| Wales | 1 |

CURRENT VISITOR EXPERIENCES

MOTIVATION FOR VISITING ELLIS ISLAND

When asked what made them visit Ellis Island, interviewees responded in one of several ways, regardless of whether RK&A recruited them inside the Immigration Museum or while participating in the Ferry Building tour. About one-third said they visited because they had always wanted to experience Ellis

Island's history firsthand or were returning to share in this experience with family or friends (see the quotations below).

I came because I really find the whole immigration process really interesting. I am also very interested in history that really belongs to New York.... I want to know and experience what Ellis Island was like back then. [Ferry Building, female, 28]

My grandchildren are visiting us, so we decided to bring them to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. I was here for the first time last year . . . and I really liked it. It was something unique and I really spent a lot of time here. So when the opportunity came to go again, I said to the kids, 'Let's go and do it.' [Immigration Museum, female, 68]

Similarly, more than one-quarter of all interviewees said they visited because their relatives or ancestors had come to the United States originally via Ellis Island and they wanted to learn about their immigration experiences (see the quotation below).

I came with my mother today who is in her 70s and we wanted to see as much as we could because our ancestors came through Ellis Island. We were really interested in seeing what the conditions were like and stuff. [Ferry Building, male, 56]

Among the remaining interviewees, most said they were visiting Ellis Island because it is one of New York City's major tourist destinations, whether visiting as part of an organized tour group or on their own (see the first quotation below). Several others said their primary destination was the Statue of Liberty and they decided to visit Ellis Island only after learning both places were accessible via the same ferry boat ride (see the second quotation).

This is our first time in New York City. We are from Seattle and so this is our trip to come out here and see everything. We just wanted to get in all of the sights. [Immigration Museum, female, 53]

(What made you decide to visit Ellis Island?) Mainly we wanted to see the Statue of Liberty. But Ellis Island was on the way back so we decided to stop. [Ferry Building, female, 20]

IMMIGRATION MUSEUM

FAVORITE ASPECTS

About one-half of all interviewees did not comment on their Immigration Museum experiences because RK&A interviewed them before they visited this area. The remaining one-half commented positively on the Immigration Museum, although a few said they had only visited the ground floor at the time of the interview. Overall, these interviewees most frequently said they enjoyed the visually appealing and/or interactive exhibits, such as the graphic representations of immigration trends and kiosks with searchable immigration records (see the quotation below).

I liked the visual diagrams they have that illustrate information about immigration. I also like the fact that if you did have an immigrant past, you can do some research by typing in a name, which is very interesting. [Immigration Museum, male, 22]

Some interviewees said they enjoyed participating in supplemental programs or activities, specifically the park rangers' second floor guided tour, the audio tour, and the theater (see the first quotation below).

Some others described experiencing the immigration process in general or walking in the footsteps of their ancestors as their favorite aspect of their Immigration Museum experience (see the second quotation).

We went on the other tour, the one given by the ranger of the second floor. It was just so good; [the ranger] was very knowledgeable and up-to-date on all of the materials and everything. A lot of the things [on the tour] you would miss if you were on your own. [Ferry Building, male, 55]

I really liked walking around the second floor; seeing the step-by-step [immigration] process was interesting. Just to experience how the immigrants were processed when they came in, pretty much like a herd of cows. But it was interesting to learn how they were actually processed and to walk through that with them; [the exhibits] talk to you about that. That is why I liked doing that best. [Immigration Museum, female, 25]

A few interviewees said they most enjoyed viewing the displayed artifacts and objects belonging to immigrants and reading the accompanying text about their stories—these activities helped interviewees personally connect to the immigrant experience (see the quotation below).

[I enjoyed] the displays of clothes and things everybody brought with them. There was writing on the back of one of the displays about a woman from Sweden and she said that the only thing she remembers her mother brought from the old country was a beautiful linen sheet . . . that was only used when each of her mother's children was born here in America because [the mother] wanted the doctor to see—because it was beautifully embroidered—what kind of family she came from. . . . I was thinking how few things [immigrants] had with them to show their worth and I started to cry because our identity is everything. [Immigration Museum, female, 59]

FERRY BUILDING

MOTIVATION FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE TOUR

Interviewees among the fifteen visitor groups who toured the Ferry Building provided idiosyncratic reasons for their tour participation. A few said they had read or heard in the news about the Ferry Building's restoration prior to their visit, which piqued their interest in visiting Ellis Island, whereas a few others said they saw signs advertising the Ferry Building tour when they walked in and decided on the spot to participate. A few others explained that they came on the tour out of curiosity and excitement about having access to a building not yet open to the general public. A couple described their interest in learning about Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities (see the quotations below).

I was very excited when I read about it in the paper that [SEI] were restoring this building. I know that one of my grandmothers definitely came through Ellis Island from Lithuania. I was very excited when the [tour guide] showed us where [immigrants] left from. That is where my grandmother walked through and came to the United States. [Ferry Building, female, 60]

(What made you decide to come on the tour of the Ferry Building today?) Because we wanted to see what happened to people who came and were ill. I wanted to see how it was handled because it was decades ago, and I wondered how humane it was. So I wanted to see what this [Ferry Building] looked like and how they handled that [unhealthy immigrants]. [Ferry Building, male, 55]

FAVORITE ASPECTS

Interviewees offered overwhelmingly positive feedback about their Ferry Building tour experiences. When asked to describe their tour experiences, nearly one-half voluntarily expressed a preference for the guided tour experience versus exploring the Ferry Building exhibit space on their own. They described their tour guides as friendly, knowledgeable, and engaging (see the first quotation below). About one-quarter of interviewees who toured the Ferry Building said they enjoyed seeing the artifacts—specifically medical equipment and instruments—on display (see the second quotation). Additionally, nearly one-quarter said they enjoyed just being in the building—many of these expressed a preference for the hallways and areas that were not fully restored because they said, these spaces felt authentic (see the third quotation). One member of this group expressed disappointment that the Ferry Building had been fully restored rather than left “like it was found.”

I really enjoyed the tour. I learned a lot and the guide was really good. She gave useful information and made us interact a lot, which makes [the tour] interesting.
[Ferry Building, female, 20]

I liked seeing the surgery equipment from back then. (Why?) It was just amazing to see how [medical staff] were able to do operations. [Ferry Building, female, 43]

I love this building. I just love the feel of it. (What do you mean?) Because you know that people came here before you. I know parts of [the building] are finished, but parts of it are not and then you know it could have been an ancestor who touched the wall that you just walked by. I like that feeling. [Ferry Building, female, 49]

OVERALL UNDERSTANDING OF ELLIS ISLAND’S HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL FACILITIES

To better grasp visitors’ overall understanding of Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities, RK&A questioned interviewees about their general associations, prior knowledge, and misconceptions of the immigrant experience in the hospital and medical facilities of Ellis Island.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Nearly all interviewees indicated that they were not aware of Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities prior to participating in the Ferry Building tour and/or viewing the new planned interpretation materials (see the first quotation below). Some also said they did not know Ellis Island is comprised of more than one island (see the second quotation). A few interviewees said they had read or heard stories about immigrants to Ellis Island being examined or perhaps detained temporarily for medical reasons but they did not know immigrants received long-term care in a hospital and medical facilities onsite (see the third quotation).

I did not even know this whole side [of Ellis Island] was here. You never hear about [Islands two and three]. When I think of Ellis Island, I just think of the [Immigration Museum] building. I never knew these buildings were all here. I never knew there was a hospital.
[Ferry Building, female, 71]

When it comes to the history of Ellis Island, I was not even aware that there was more than one island.... This was all new information for me today. [Immigration Museum, female, 29]

I did not know [about Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities]. All that my grandfather told me is [Ellis Island immigration officials] checked him, and I think he received a shot. But I did not know [Ellis Island] had anything like this hospital or even beds where [immigrants] could stay that long. [Immigration Museum, male, 51]

One interviewee, a nurse, said she knew prior to her visit that Ellis Island had a hospital; however, she was surprised to learn of the scope of its operations and its larger significance in medical history (see the quotation below).

Before this [visit], I never realized what a big complex the hospital was; it was really a full working hospital almost like we have today with different departments. I am going to say it was the beginning of modern hospitals or to me it seems like that. In the early 1900s, a lot of hospitals were just little houses. [Ferry Building, female, 49]

GENERAL ASSOCIATIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

During conversations about the new interpretive plans, nearly all interviewees indicated that Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities challenged their negative preconceptions of medical knowledge, practices, and facilities of the past in general. More than one-half said the overall cleanliness, modernity, and extent of the facilities far exceeded their expectations (see the first quotation below), including a few who compared these conditions to the unsanitary, unsophisticated medical care associated with the United States Civil War or large public hospitals in urban areas at the end of the nineteenth century (see the second quotation). In particular, some interviewees said they were surprised to learn that Ellis Island's medical staff understood how germs spread and applied this knowledge to immigrant processing and patient care (see the third quotation).

It is amazing how sophisticated [Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities] were.... (Can you give me an example?) If you look at the instruments [medical staff] used to examine immigrants, I do not know that even people in New York City were getting that kind of care . . . [Ellis Island] had state-of-the-art equipment. So it looks medieval to us now but it was very sophisticated for its time; I cannot imagine anybody else was getting physicals back then. [Ferry Building, male, 55]

I have studied the medical conditions during the [United States] Civil War and how horrible they were, and I was thinking that was going to be more of what I was going to see here [about Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities]. You know, a little bit more primitive, not cleanliness and so on. So that has been a big surprise to me. [Ferry Building, female, 57]

I think [Ellis Island medical staff] were ahead of their time, especially considering the amount of people who came through here. I mean, I do not know if they always had time to sterilize things but they were aware of it and that is going back a long time ago, like the beginning of the 1900s. So that impressed me that [medical staff] were aware of germs and stuff like that. [Immigration Museum, female, 28]

More than one-half of interviewees expressed surprise about the humane, high-quality, and often lengthy treatment of immigrants who arrived on Ellis Island in need of medical attention (see the first quotation below). Many interviewees said prior to learning about Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities, they assumed all unhealthy immigrants were immediately sent back to their countries of origin (see the second quotation). Some also described learning new information that dispelled

misconceptions that Ellis Island immigration officials, including medical staff, neglected or poorly treated immigrants under their medical care (see the third quotation).

I did not know how much [Ellis Island medical staff] helped people, that they really treated them well.... I would have thought that they treated just the people who were really contagious and not necessarily help people with diseases or illnesses that were not. [Ferry Building, female, 20]

I had an expectation that when immigrants were not healthy, they were just shipped back home or put someplace until they died or just treated poorly. Looking at this [new interpretive plans], it looks like [Ellis Island medical staff] made efforts to keep things clean, to treat immigrants, to help them.... There was an effort to take care of their medical needs. [Immigration Museum, female, 43]

In books you read about all the horrible things, like [immigrants] were separated, like the kids who were here [in the hospital] 12 months because of this scalp disease, you feel bad [for them]. But now that I understand the intent better, I understand [these children] were well-cared-for as best as [medical staff] could when they were away from their moms and dads. [Ferry Building, female, 51]

RESPONSES TO PLANNED INTERPRETATION

RK&A asked interviewees to share their reactions to the overview of the planned interpretation of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities, as well as to each of six major exhibit areas: Contagious Disease Wards, Linen Rooms, Autopsy Room, Powerhouse, Laundry/Hospital Outbuilding, and Operating Room/Hospital Extension. RK&A provided interviewees with graphic images and a written description, including main messages and the visitor experience, for each major exhibit area and the overview.

OVERALL THEME

Nearly all interviewees said they understood that the new interpretive plans communicate the existence of a hospital and medical facilities located on Ellis Island along with the medical aspect of the immigrant experience (see the quotations below); however, they focused on two different facets of this overall message or theme: the humane treatment of immigrants in need of medical attention and the advanced medical knowledge, technologies, and/or practices of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities. These two facets are detailed in the following paragraphs.

[The overall message] is addressing the health care aspect of [the immigrant experience].... [SEI] are really trying to show visitors that there was more to Ellis Island: there were hospital facilities and so forth. I do not know what other visitors' responses are but I bet it is a lot of surprise. [Immigration Museum, female, 66]

First of all, that there was a hospital on Ellis Island, and again the story about all of the medical care, all the people passing through and people getting healed. [Immigration Museum, male, 29]

Many interviewees focused on Ellis Island's humane treatment of immigrants in need of medical attention and/or the medical necessity behind some of the seemingly less benevolent practices, such as

separating children from parents (see the first and second quotations below). Some further described this compassionate treatment of unhealthy immigrants as indicative of the overall welcome and respect given to Ellis Island immigrants, which a few interviewees described as being different from the United States' current conduct toward modern immigrants (see the third quotation).

For me, [the overall theme] was that [Ellis Island] did not just get people in and out of here: send them home if they are sick or let them through if they are okay. But that there was an effort to really help [immigrants] if they were sick or if there was a need for an operation. Obviously a lot of effort and a lot of caring went into helping these immigrants. It was not just, 'fend for yourself.' [Immigration Museum, female, 45]

I think [the overall theme] is trying to communicate that the treatment was more humane than one might expect, that [medical staff] did provide a more caring type of feel in the hospital. I mean you get the herd of cattle viewpoint but if you understand the reasons for the things they were doing, like fear of epidemics, you understand [medical staff] had the best interests of people in mind, both here and those living in the country. [Ferry Building, male, 56]

[The overall theme is] to know that [Ellis Island] treated sick immigrants with respect, in a hospital. [Ellis Island] helped to make them well and helped to get them onto American soil. It is just amazing what [Ellis Island] did that was not expected of [the United States government] to do. I think it is more than what immigrants get now. [Immigration Museum, female, 35]

Many interviewees focused on the overall theme's communication of the advanced medical knowledge, technologies, and/or practices of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities (see the first quotation below). Some further discussed the significance of Ellis Island's modern hospital and medical facilities within the larger context of medical history, although none specifically identified the story of the United States Public Health Service (see the second quotation).

There is what the immigrants went through in the hospital but there is also a lot about the technology and understanding of germ theory, like in the operating room the way it was all tiles so they could easily wash it off; this idea that [Ellis Island] had good technology for that time. [Ferry Building, female, 20]

I think [the overall message] is that [Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities] were among the very first extremely large medical facilities, modern for that time, where [medical staff] were trying to follow modern procedures. And it was probably a great place for a doctor to be able to work because at that time, a lot of them were small town doctors. [Ferry Building, female, 60]

A few remaining interviewees indicated difficulty identifying an overall theme of the new interpretive plans. They broadly described an increased awareness of the hardships and processes experienced by immigrants of the past instead of discussing a specific idea or concept related to Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities (see the quotation below).

(Overall, what would you say is the main idea of these new interpretive plans?) It is something I will not forget. I think it will stay in my mind what it was really like to be an immigrant all those years ago. [Immigration Museum, male, 38]

ALTERED PERCEPTIONS

When RK&A asked interviewees in what ways, if any, the planned interpretation altered their understanding of the immigrant experience, about two-thirds identified the same general ideas they discussed as main messages. Many said the overall interpretive plans completely changed their perceptions, or called the plans “eye-opening” (see the first quotation below). Interviewees most frequently said they learned that Ellis Island medically cared onsite for immigrants, whereas before they only knew about the health inspection process and/or assumed unhealthy immigrants were sent back to their countries of origin. Once again, interviewees said they learned new information about the existence and extent of Ellis Island’s medical facilities and the humaneness and quality of the medical care the staff provided, all of which greatly surprised them (see the second and third quotations).

(In what ways, if any, do these new interpretive plans alter what you know about the immigrant experience?) Incredible clarification—really eye-opening. I had my preconceived notions; I have taught about [the immigrant experience] for years . . . but it changes a tremendous amount for me.... [Ferry Building, female, 57]

I think my perspective changed in that I actually thought [immigrants] would just be checked and, if healthy, going to the United States and if not, going back. I did not know they were also actually treated. So [the immigration experience] was more humane than I thought . . . and I think [it is] also interesting how [medical staff] dealt with all the diseases and the enormous amount of people. [Immigration Museum, female, 28]

[The new interpretive plans] add more knowledge; I just did not have enough information.... In my mind, the immigrants were treated like cattle, sitting in one place. I never knew about the hospital, never knew they even sanitized the laundry and so forth back in those days. I just did not know and it is very good information. [Immigration Museum, female, 57]

On the other hand, a few interviewees incorrectly said that that medical staff on Ellis Island developed germ theory.

OVERALL VISITOR EXPERIENCE

After reviewing all the exhibit panels, interviewees expressed a high level of enthusiasm for the opportunity to experience firsthand Ellis Island’s hospital and medical facilities (see the first quotation below). In general, they said visitors would be surprised and interested to learn about the medical issues and daily work and activities of patients, staff, and behind-the-scenes workers who lived and worked within the large complex (see the second quotation). Overall, interviewees most frequently discussed their interest in experiencing human aspects of the visitor experience (e.g., walking through rooms where patients stayed) followed by the “authentic” historical elements (e.g., seeing artifacts on display) and unique or immersive opportunities (e.g., feeling the heat of the Boiler Room).

I was very interested in the entire hospital how [SEI] showed it being like it was in the 1930s. It is just amazing. I would love to go in there. I would just absolutely love it. [Immigration Museum, female, 50]

I wish [the hospital] was already open. It all looks very interesting and I think medical things always have kind of a macabre draw and people tend to be quite interested in it. That is just human nature but this is all quite cleverly done. [Immigration Museum, female, 23]

MOST COMPELLING

Overall, interviewees expressed enthusiasm for the ideas and visitor experiences presented in all six major exhibit areas; however, the Contagious Disease Wards and the Operating Room unquestionably generated the most excitement. More than one-half of interviewees expressed interest in the Contagious Disease Wards. Although many did not identify a specific idea or story of interest, some explained that they would enjoy learning about and experiencing the personal nature of the stories in this area about patients' daily lives and medical care (see the first quotation below). Some others said the story of treating immigrants with contagious diseases was most compelling to them because these stories indicate the high quality and magnitude of care that immigrants needed and Ellis Island staff delivered (see the second quotation).

(Which of these themes or stories do you find most compelling?) I think the Contagious Disease Wards because [the panel] said once restored visitors will be able to engage in the personal experiences of the patients, their families, and the nurses and doctors that worked with them. I would assume it would look like [it did] in the pictures of it with the beds set up . . . that would make [the experience] more personal and more powerful, a bigger impact. Because it is hard for me to imagine; I have never lived that way. I have not a clue what it would be like to go to a foreign place you know nothing about and have all these great hopes and then here you are and you are sick. [Ferry Building, female, 51]

The Contagious Disease Wards because they give the idea of the big picture: how many contagious diseases were brought by immigrants. And someone was really trying to solve the problem to help these people coming from somewhere else. What is surprising about that is that [Ellis Island] tried curing people rather than sending them back. That is the message. [Immigration Museum, female, 29]

Likewise, nearly one-half of interviews said the Operating Room interested them. While most expressed only general interest in seeing where operations were performed, some explained that they wanted to see the surgical practices and related technology of the past and to compare them with those of modern operating facilities (see the quotations below).

I like the idea of the Operating Room where you could see the technologies [medical staff] had, what kind of instruments they used, and what the similarities are to operations now and what was different. [Ferry Building, female, 20]

The Operating Room [interests me] because it shows what real people did back then and how they did it with the simplest things. It is more than just walking into a space because you can walk into a space and see it and it just does not instill the same feeling as when you see people doing the job in that space or pictures of what was happening in that space showing how they did something. [Immigration Museum, female, 37]

About one-third of interviewees also expressed interest in the Autopsy Room, including several who said they were surprised to learn of its existence on Ellis Island and/or the use of Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities for medical research and teaching (see the quotations below).

What I really liked was the Autopsy Room because I never even realized autopsies were done here [on Ellis Island]. It never even occurred to me. I would want to see that [exhibit area]. [Immigration Museum, female, 60]

The [exhibit area] I found to be most interesting was the Autopsy Room, how they actually used it as a research and teaching institution for the study of disease, which included autopsies. I think that is really quite interesting because it gives me the impression that [medical staff] were focused on getting to the root of the problem. [Ferry Building, male, 50]

Nearly the same number of interviewees expressed interest in the Powerhouse. Although these interviewees primarily discussed their interest in the immersive experience rather than the content (see the first quotation below), a couple said they wanted to learn about the behind-the-scenes workers and what they had to do to heat such a large complex (see the second quotation). One interviewee, who spoke English as a second language, expressed confusion about the term, “Powerhouse,” because she did not understand what it referenced.

I would be interested in the Powerhouse. (Why?) Just to see how [workers] powered those facilities; to me that is just amazing they could heat all those buildings back then. What did it take to do that? Now it would be nothing . . . but back then running this massive boiler and stuff just to heat a space was something. [Immigration Museum, female, 62]

I like this Powerhouse [exhibit area] because [visitors] will see a 3-D movement of people and screens. I thought that was really good, so that if people are visual or they like to hear things, it has everything where you can see things, hear things, touch things. [Immigration Museum, female, 18]

Less than one-third of interviewees said the Laundry/Hospital Outbuilding interested them. Among these, some said they wanted to see the “mangle” machinery because of its uniqueness and to learn more about the sanitary challenges of maintaining such a large-scale laundry operation (see the first quotation below). A few others expressed curiosity about workers’ daily routines and working conditions (see the second quotation).

The Laundry Room [is most compelling to me] because I thought back then [workers] would have to wash and then iron the old-fashioned way and then they hung [the laundry] up. But apparently there was a device, a machine, which I did not know about. [Immigration Museum, female, 68]

I like the Laundry Room because of that aspect it shows. I just love seeing day-to-day processes like the Mangle.... Just the logistics of doing laundry and knowing that [workers] pressed the linens and I guess that was for sterilization. I wonder if in those days they had [clothes] dryers? I would be curious to see how they dried laundry, and then I was thinking they probably did not have air conditioning and it would be so stuffy in awful weather like this. [Immigration Museum, female, 56]

Additionally, about one-quarter of interviewees expressed interest in the Linen Rooms, including some who explained they wanted to learn about the historic preservation of these rooms and to compare the decayed and restored rooms (see the first quotation below). A few others explained that, similar to the Laundry Room, the Linen Rooms interested them as examples of the day-to-day operations of such a large-scale complex (see the second quotation).

Having the rooms juxtaposed one next to the other to me is a great idea with the Linen Rooms—seeing what it was like in the state of arrested decay and then seeing what it is now that it has been restored fully. I find that really thrilling. [Ferry Building, female, 58]

The Linen Rooms, like the Laundry Room, strike me as interesting because, whew! If [Ellis Island's hospital] had that many people here, imagine the amount of work that would have to be done to have things clean and sterile. I think that whole laundry-linen aspect is very interesting. [Immigration Museum, female, 47]

LEAST COMPELLING

When RK&A asked interviewees to identify the least compelling exhibit area, nearly all said initially that everything interested them; however, when probed further, nearly one-half identified the Linen Rooms as least compelling. Interviewees explained that of all the exhibit areas, the Linen Rooms had the least engaging human interest story and, whether in a state of arrested decay or period restoration, they had difficulty imagining these rooms in use (see the first quotation below). A few suggested peopling the rooms through holograms of workers, live docents, or visual images (see the second quotation).

I think definitely the least interesting would be the Linen Rooms. (Why?) Because when looking at it unrestored, it is just a bleak room with peeling paint. Even restored, from what I understand, it was just where the linens were kept without a lot of human interactions going on. It is like a big storage facility and just would not be very engaging to me. [Immigration Museum, female, 43]

You need a hologram worker in [the Linen Rooms] or something, some movement to draw some more interest into the room. A person needs to be in there doing something or explaining something. Or even pictures of the restoration process would help.... But I do like the raw aspect of [Linen Room #2]; to leave it as it was found just leaves a piece of history untouched. [Immigration Museum, female, 53]

Some interviewees said the Powerhouse and/or Laundry Room interested them least because they were not interested in learning about the behind-the-scenes operations of the hospital and medical facilities (see the first quotation below). A few others identified the Autopsy Room as least compelling because its subject did not appeal to them (see the second quotation), while another said this exhibit area seemed to be “too modernized” because it connects to an audiovisual presentation space.

The Powerhouse and the Laundry Room, those are not as interesting to me because I am not all that interested in that kind of back-room stuff. It is not directly linked to what [medical staff] were doing in the hospital. [Ferry Building, female, 20]

If you are a doctor or nurse, maybe the Autopsy Room would be interesting. But unless you like autopsies and gore, I personally would not find that interesting or relevant within the context of this building. [Immigration Museum, female, 49]

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

About one-half of interviewees said they had unanswered questions after reviewing the planned interpretation for Ellis Island's hospital and medical facilities, and nearly all of them were interviewees recruited in the Immigration Museum who had not participated in the Ferry Building tour. Most of their questions focused on details about the individuals who worked onsite, whether as medical staff or support staff, including where they lived, how they commuted, and what were their backgrounds (see the first quotation below). Some interviewees asked for more stories of patients as well as statistical records to better understand the diseases, birth rates, and interactions between cultures that made up

daily life in the hospital (see the second quotation). A few interviewees asked for more explicit site plans and aerial view images to orient them to Islands two and three and the hospital and medical facilities located on them as well as a timeline for Ellis Island, including the medical aspect (see the third quotation). A couple others said they wanted to see step-by-step visual images demonstrating how the buildings and interior spaces were restored.

Did the nurses and everybody [who worked in the hospital] actually live on the premises? Or did they commute back and forth everyday? I got the impression they commuted and I was wondering about their shifts—how long they worked. I want to understand what it was like to be [in the hospital] day-to-day. [Immigration Museum, female, 60]

It would be interesting to see statistics about the different groups of people who were here [in the hospital] that were male versus female or how many Chinese versus whatever. I would like that breakdown of diseases by nationality . . . along with real pictures and personal stories of particular people or doctors. [Immigration Museum, female, 47]

The aerial view is labeled 2005. I think it would be a good idea if there is one to show an aerial view of how Ellis Island looked when it first opened to be able to compare and contrast. And I am not sure what everything is, like is that a road or a bridge that you can actually drive? Does it go to New Jersey? Are these islands natural or were they built? And whose idea was [Ellis Island]? I would like the history of the island and the hospital from the very beginning. [Immigration Museum, female, 50]

PERCEPTIONS OF PERIOD RESTORATION AND ARRESTED DECAY

About three-quarters of interviewees said they wanted at least one room to be left in a state of arrested decay rather than being restored according to the period that Ellis Island was active. The majority of these interviewees said that refraining from restoring a room would show visitors the importance of historic preservation by showcasing the consequences of neglect (see the first quotation below). Some others expressed interest in seeing Linen Room #2 in arrested decay juxtaposed with Linen Room #1 restored to the time period to help visitors understand and appreciate the work that went into the restoration of the room (see the second quotation). A few others said that seeing any room left in arrested decay would be interesting to them because of its “raw” and “authentic” qualities and the chance to experience a room “untouched” (see the third quotation).

I think [leaving a room in arrested decay] is good. It makes people have to account for themselves. If you are not willing to help preserve these historic places—and it is happening all over the United States—this is what you are going to have left. . . . I think showing people what [the building] looked like and what happened to it because of the loss of care . . . is going to affect a lot of people. [Immigration Museum, female, 35]

So [SEI] are going to leave part of [the building] to show how they did the restoration, and I always think that is really interesting because restoration is really difficult and time-consuming. And it is interesting to see how far something can decay. . . . If you only look at what has been restored, you do not realize what it took to restore it. You just know it cost money; you have no idea what it actually meant and how long it took. People can tell you but that does not make it

real... [Arrested decay] makes the historic preservation story stand out. [Ferry Building, female, 38]

Authenticity—I like that. I would like to see that [room in arrested decay] because what we have seen so far is restored and cleaned but I kind of like seeing this. You really feel the passage of time. [Immigration Museum, female, 45]

In contrast, the remaining one-quarter of interviewees expressed little, if any, interest in seeing a room left in a state of arrested decay except for a few who said they were confused about the difference between arrested decay and period restoration. These interviewees said they did not understand the value of showing visitors a deteriorated, empty room because they were more interested in seeing how it was used (see the first quotation below). However, a few also said they would be interested in seeing a room more important than the Linen Room in arrested decay (see the second quotation).

I understand [arrested] decay but I would have no desire to see a whole room decayed, maybe a few pictures of it. I would rather see what [a room] really looked like and how it was used years ago in its prime—its spiffy, sterilized self. [Immigration Museum, female, 56]

If [SEI] are restoring everything else, why are they leaving this room the way it was found? Because to me, I cannot picture what it looked like or who worked here. Maybe if [SEI] were going to leave any other room than this [Linen Room] I would know what it might have looked like. (For example, the autopsy room?) Right, if that room was left empty I could picture what it could have looked like. Here, I have no idea. [Immigration Museum, male, 51]

A few interviewees said they preferred arrested decay to period restoration because the former would enable them to experience a room “exactly the way it looked” when immigrants came through Ellis Island, indicating their confusion about the difference between the two interpretive strategies.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

FRONT-END INTERVIEW GUIDE