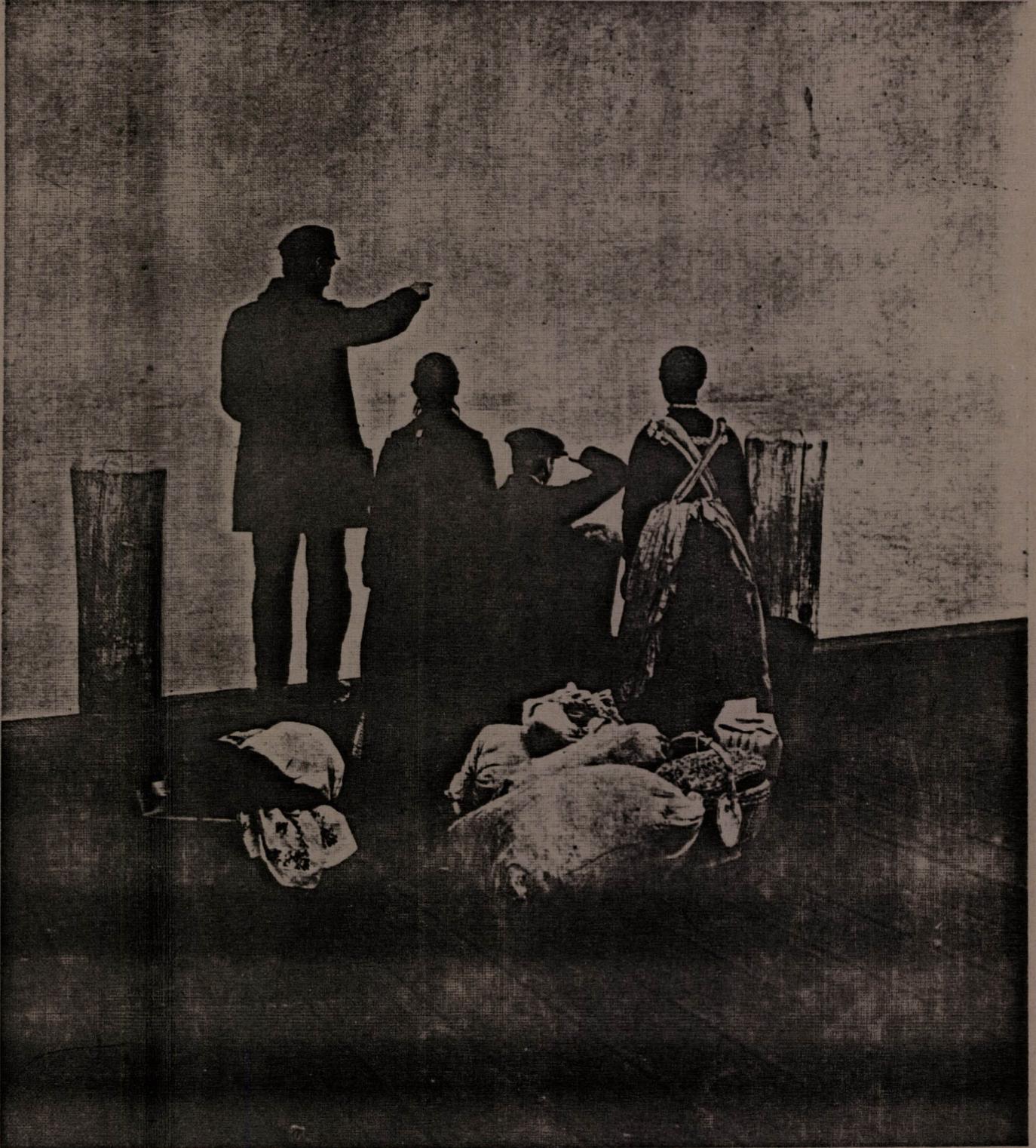


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ELLIS ISLAND



INTERPRETIVE CONCEPTS FOR ELLIS ISLAND
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
JANUARY 1983

INTRODUCTION



The story of Ellis Island is a profound human drama. It is the tale of ordinary men and women and the global forces that shaped their destinies. Those who have experienced Ellis Island in its many facets retain a lasting memory of the site. In a sense, these collective and often contradictory images are the essence of the interpretive message.

The story of Ellis Island is the story of people, and how their hopes and dreams fared against the realities that were imposed upon them.

For most immigrants, Ellis was a final, brief delay before starting a new life in America. It was the culmination of perhaps the most traumatic experience in the immigrant's life. It represented the break between the hardships of the Old World and the opportunities of the New.

There was a darker side too. Some remember Ellis as the Isle of Tears, a barrier to dreams, a place of corruption, detainment, and separation from family and friends.

Ellis Island is an extraordinary place, and its impact on America is staggering. It is estimated that over one hundred million people in this country today can trace their heritage through the former immigration station.

Even in its deteriorated state, the island's resources chronicle its past. The discarded pieces of furniture, the faded directional signs, the massive rooms, and the ornate architectural features offer mute testament to the events witnessed there.

The halls echo with the cries and laughter of children, the babble of foreign tongues, the cajolery of Coastguardsmen, and the lament of deportees--if only we stop and listen.

BACKGROUND

Interpretive Planning for Ellis Island has progressed hand in hand with General Management Planning. In recognizing the need to provide a basic level of interpretation as quickly as possible, an Interpretive Prospectus (IP) was prepared to develop proposals which could be implemented on an interim basis and to identify options for long term development. This document was approved by Regional Director Cables on June 8, 1982.

The proposals contained in the IP, while less comprehensive, are in basic accord with the General Management Plan (GMP). Because the Interpretive Prospectus was developed on an interim basis, it focused on elements of the story which could be implemented rapidly. The basic philosophy was to retain the visual character of the Main Building and to let the resource "speak for itself."

The planning environment has changed considerably since then. The GMP has been approved which calls for a preservation/interpretation zone to be managed by the NPS, and an adaptive use zone to be managed by an as yet unnamed leasee. The GMP outlines three contingency plans for the NPS managed preservation/interpretation zone. Each contingency reflects different assumptions on the use of space.

Furthermore, the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Centennial Commission has been appointed by Secretary Watt. We encourage the Commission to develop proposals in keeping with NPS objectives.

This paper is intended to summarize the National Park Service's interpretive objectives at Ellis Island, and to identify relevant development options.

OBJECTIVES

To convey the story of Ellis Island and the broader story of immigration to America.

To preserve the visual and architectural character of historically significant areas and to conform with preservation standards.

To complement other programs and activities that may take place at Ellis Island.

To create harmonious and complementary programs at Ellis and Liberty Islands.



INTERPRETIVE THEMES

THE ELLIS ISLAND STORY

- A. Immigrant processing
- B. Physical Development of the Island
 - 1. Military Fort
 - 2. Immigration Station
 - 3. Detention Center
 - 4. Coast Guard Facility

IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA

- A. Reasons for mass immigration
- B. Changing American immigration policy
- C. The Passage
- D. Immigrant Contribution to America

BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. The goal of interpretation is to instill in the visiting public an appreciation of the resources and symbolism of Ellis Island. This, along with preservation, is the primary responsibility of the National Park Service.

2. It is important to retain a certain sense of the building to convey the immigrant processing experience.

3. Certain key areas of the Main Building are of great historical and interpretive significance due to their intimate connection with the immigrant images from the past. These areas should be kept pristine, and the introduction of modern elements must be kept to an absolute minimum. Alteration should be limited to the repair and replacement of architectural features in kind, and the introduction of articles essential for visitor safety or to aid visitor understanding and appreciation of the resources.

4. Orientation activities are best suited to spaces on the ground floor.

5. The National Park Service will not conduct ethnic demonstrations or cultural events. These types of activities should be sponsored by The Centennial Commission or some other umbrella organization.

DEVELOPMENT HIERARCHY

A development hierarchy can be somewhat arbitrarily chosen on the basis of interpretive significance and potential for adaptive use. While all the spaces identified for interpretive use in the GMP convey certain elements of the Ellis Island story, some are better suited for adaptive use than others.

The Baggage Room, Railroad Ticket Office, and Dining Room, due to their location on the ground floor, are the most appropriate choices for adaptive use. The other five interpretive areas listed in the GMP should be managed under a philosophy of limited development.

LIMITED DEVELOPMENT:

- The Registry Room
- Original Dormitories
- Social Service Area
- Legal Inquiry Rooms
- Later detention/dormitories

ADAPTIVE USE:

- Railroad Ticket Office
- Baggage Room
- Dining Room

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The approved GMP calls for interpretation at Ellis Island to convey two basic stories--the story of Ellis Island and the broader theme of immigration to America. The method of presenting these stories needs to be determined.

The issue is complicated by several factors. On one hand, there is a desire to retain the emotional character and haunting presence of the Main Building and to conform with preservation requirements. On the other hand, there is a genuine concern to take advantage of the various media and technologies available to best communicate the story. A third concern is to ensure that NPS development is compatible with management policies and guidelines while at the same time complementary with the activities proposed by other groups on the Island. Furthermore, we would like to blend the programs at Ellis with the present activities at Liberty Island to avoid unnecessary duplication.

It appears that there are two basic approaches to interpreting Ellis Island. They are as follows:

I. AN EVOCATIVE EXPERIENCE

A minimal approach as proposed in the approved Interpretive Prospectus.

II. AN IN-DEPTH EXPERIENCE

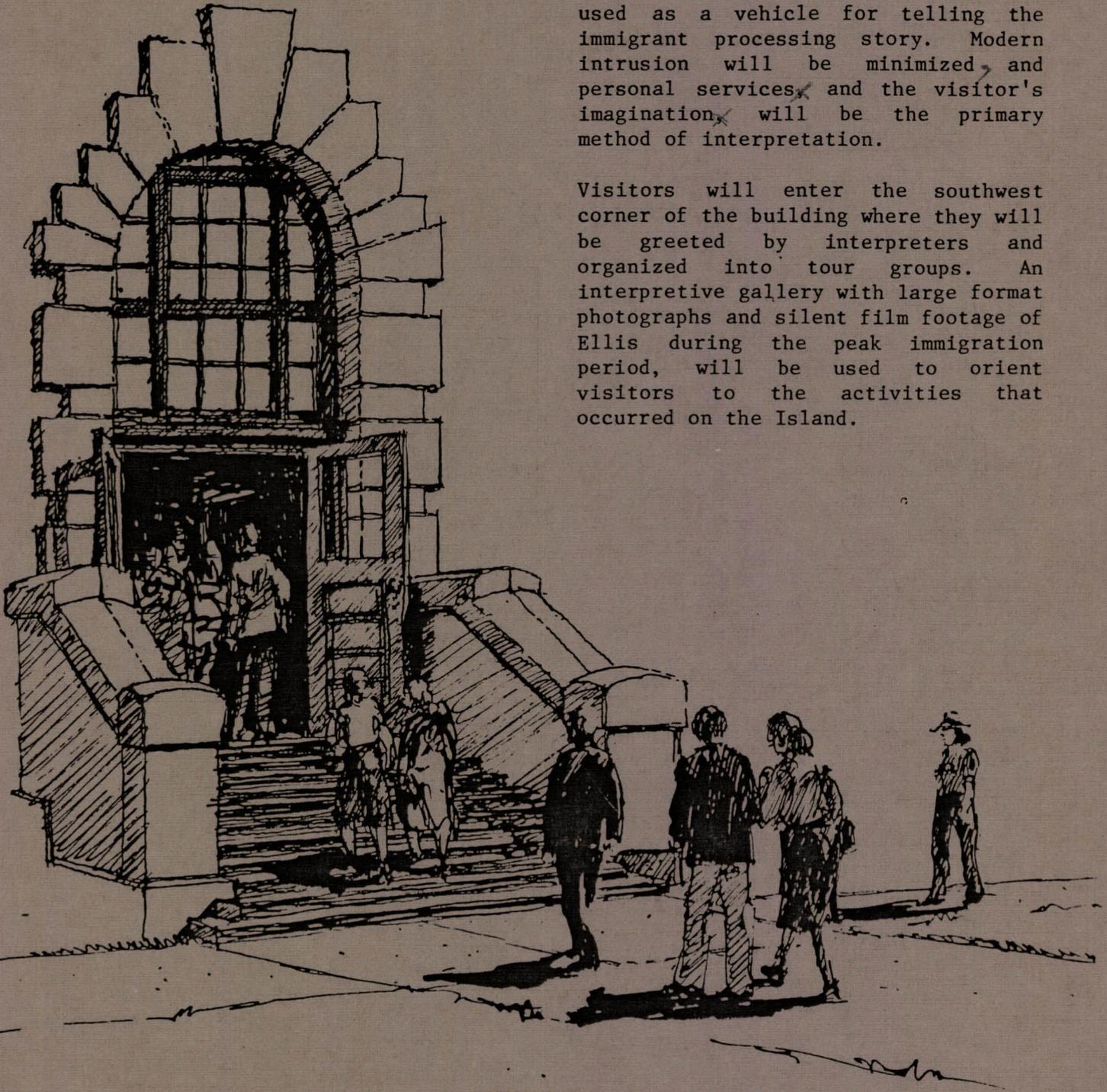
A moderate approach. Recommended by the Harpers Ferry Center as the appropriate level of development.

CONCEPT ONE

AN EVOCATIVE EXPERIENCE

This is the approach advocated in the Interpretive Prospectus approved in June of 1982. The guiding philosophy is to let the building "speak for itself." Existing resources will be used as a vehicle for telling the immigrant processing story. Modern intrusion will be minimized, and personal services, and the visitor's imagination, will be the primary method of interpretation.

Visitors will enter the southwest corner of the building where they will be greeted by interpreters and organized into tour groups. An interpretive gallery with large format photographs and silent film footage of Ellis during the peak immigration period, will be used to orient visitors to the activities that occurred on the Island.



Visitors will be conducted through the building, pausing at key areas. Here the interpreter will recount the specific activities that took place at Ellis, and weave into the tale, background information such as the reasons for massive immigration, the hardships of the transatlantic passage, and the changes in American policy and attitudes toward immigrants. The tours will be flexible to take advantage of opportunities--such as personal reminiscences, as they arise.

Freestanding exhibits containing historic photographs and explanatory text, will be designed as interpretive aids in the primary points of interest.

An oral history room will be designed to conduct interviews of visitors with personal reminiscences of Ellis Island.

DISCUSSION

This approach would best achieve the short term objectives of the National Park Service by providing a basic level of interpretation. It might be viewed as the first phase of interpretive development.

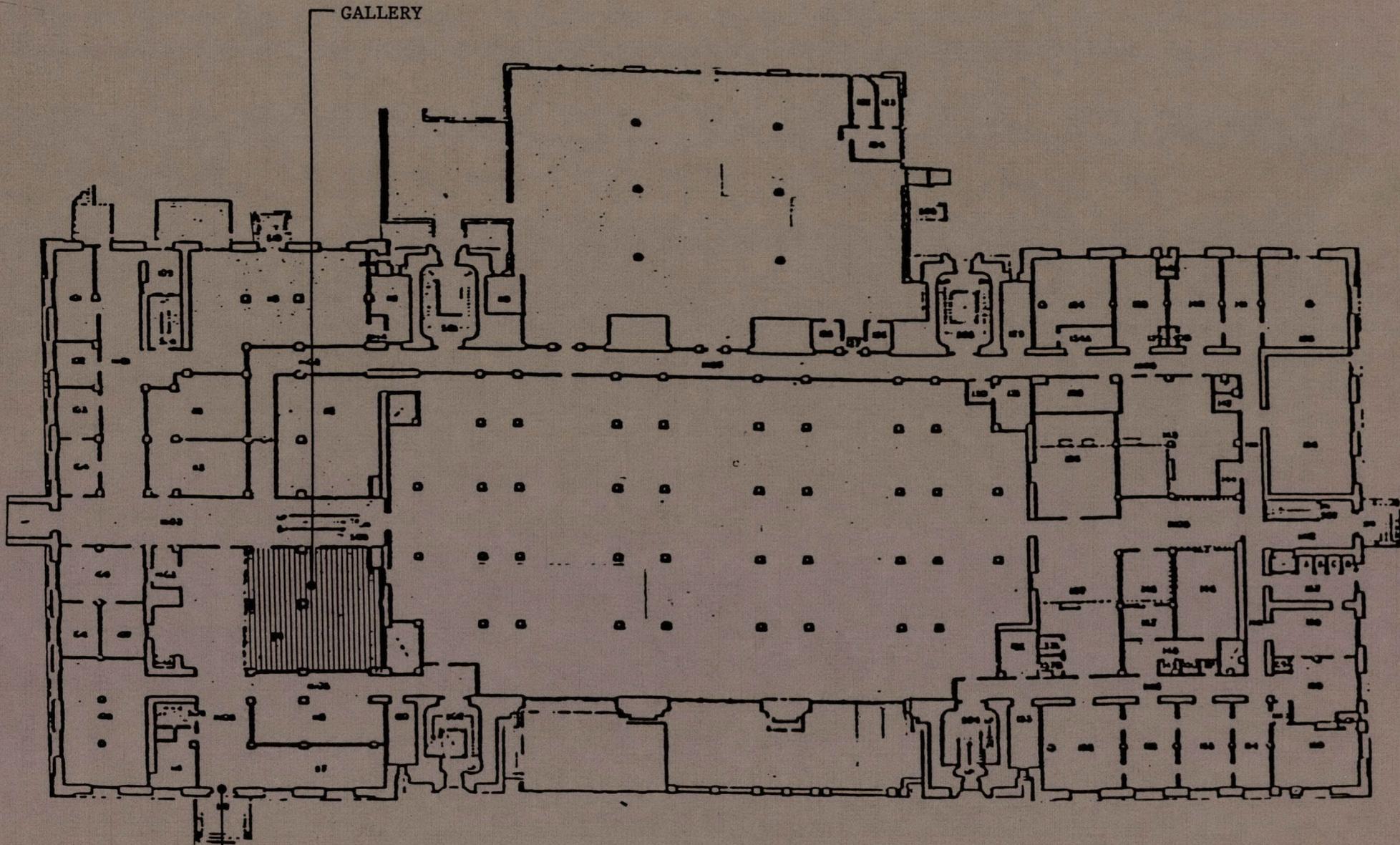
RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposals contained in the Interpretive Prospectus should be implemented as the initial phase of interpretive development.



DEVELOPED AREA

GALLERY



ENTRANCE

CONCEPT ONE

CONCEPT TWO

AN IN-DEPTH EXPERIENCE

Here we will present all the facets of immigration. The Main Building will be used as a stage to tell both the immigrant processing story and the broader story of immigration to America.

The goal of this approach is to introduce visitors to the history and significance of Ellis Island, and to offer them the opportunity to explore more deeply the story of immigration to America.

Visitors will enter through the southwest corner of the Main Building. At a nearby attended contact station, orientation materials and information on tours and other programs will be available. The area might also contain a sales area, a theater for showing orientation films, and a resting area where scrapbooks and other materials would be available for browsing.

Visitors will be encouraged to take a guided tour, or to explore the building on their own with the aid of a self-guided tour map. Interpretive markers, and possibly audio stations, will be designed to provide information and help direct visitors. Interpretive areas on the upper levels and in the baggage and dormitory building will be retained in a pristine condition to help capture the spirit of the immigrant processing experience.

The Baggage Room will be adaptively used for interpretive purposes. The huge room will showcase exhibits highlighting the full spectrum of the immigration story. The exhibits will focus on the reasons for immigration, the passage, the immigrant processing experience, and the physical development of Ellis Island.

It is difficult to project a design treatment at this early stage, but it is envisioned that the exhibits would be freestanding island displays that would incorporate artifacts, graphics, historic photographs, and possibly audiovisual elements to present the story. Every effort will be made to retain a sense of the historic use of the Baggage Room and to depict events that transpired there.

The possibility of incorporating into the design a ghost outline of the staircase that once led to the Registry Room will be considered.

Similarly, the Railroad Ticket Office will be available for adaptive use. An art gallery or changing exhibit hall might be considered as appropriate uses of the space.

A complete oral history recording and listening room will be designed to capture the reminiscences of Ellis Island and to provide visitors an opportunity to hear these tales.

A few rooms might be furnished to round out the program. Furnishing is predicated on the assumption that accurate documentation can be found to authenticate the effort and to comply with NPS policy. A few selective rooms might be chosen to illustrate the continuum of history that occurred on the island. Accordingly, furnishings might reflect immigrant processing, detention and deportation activities, and Coast Guard functions.

A modern auditorium will also be designed, in addition to the theater proposed for the orientation area, to show feature length motion pictures and other special programs.

A site folder will be prepared in the unigrid format to provide basic orientation. The folder will contain an ample number of historic photographs and would likely include an exploded drawing of the Main

Building. A promotional poster might be designed to help increase awareness that Ellis Island is open for visitation.

A computerized genealogical center could be an integral component of the interpretive program. Fortunately, private organizations are already underway computerizing the New York harbor immigration records. This could be an excellent opportunity to both enrich the interpretive program and add to our knowledge of immigration. Thought might be given to using the computerized system as a showpiece for highlighting the immigration station's centennial in 1992.

DISCUSSION:

The in-depth interpretive experience best meets the objectives of the National Park Service. It offers visitors a well-rounded program which preserves the character of significant areas of the building and will not hinder other proposals which might be developed on other parts of the island.

RECOMMENDATION:

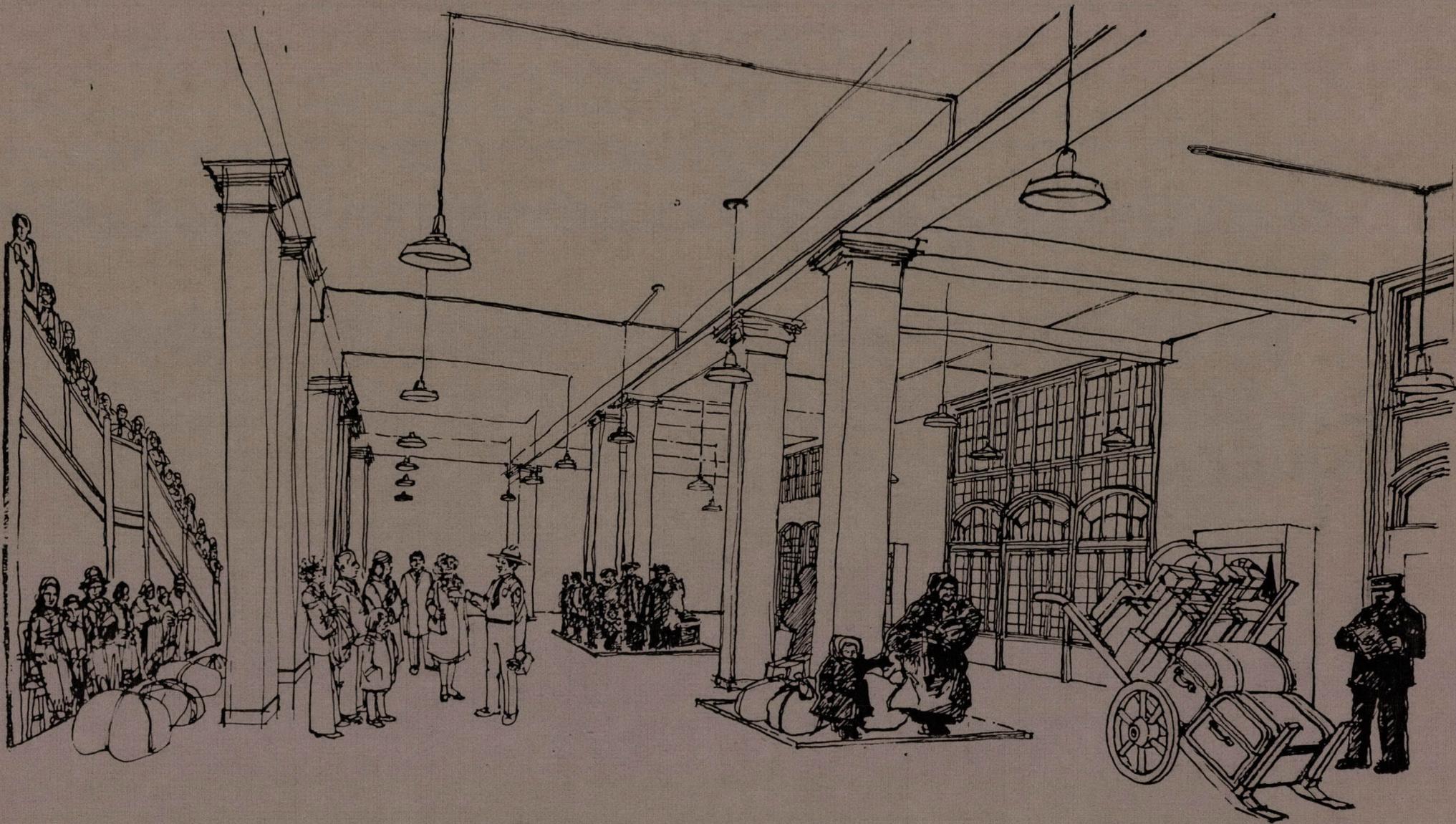
This concept should be used to guide interpretive development by the National Park Service on Ellis Island. A new Interpretive Prospectus will be prepared to refine these preliminary concepts in specific proposals.



Information

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service





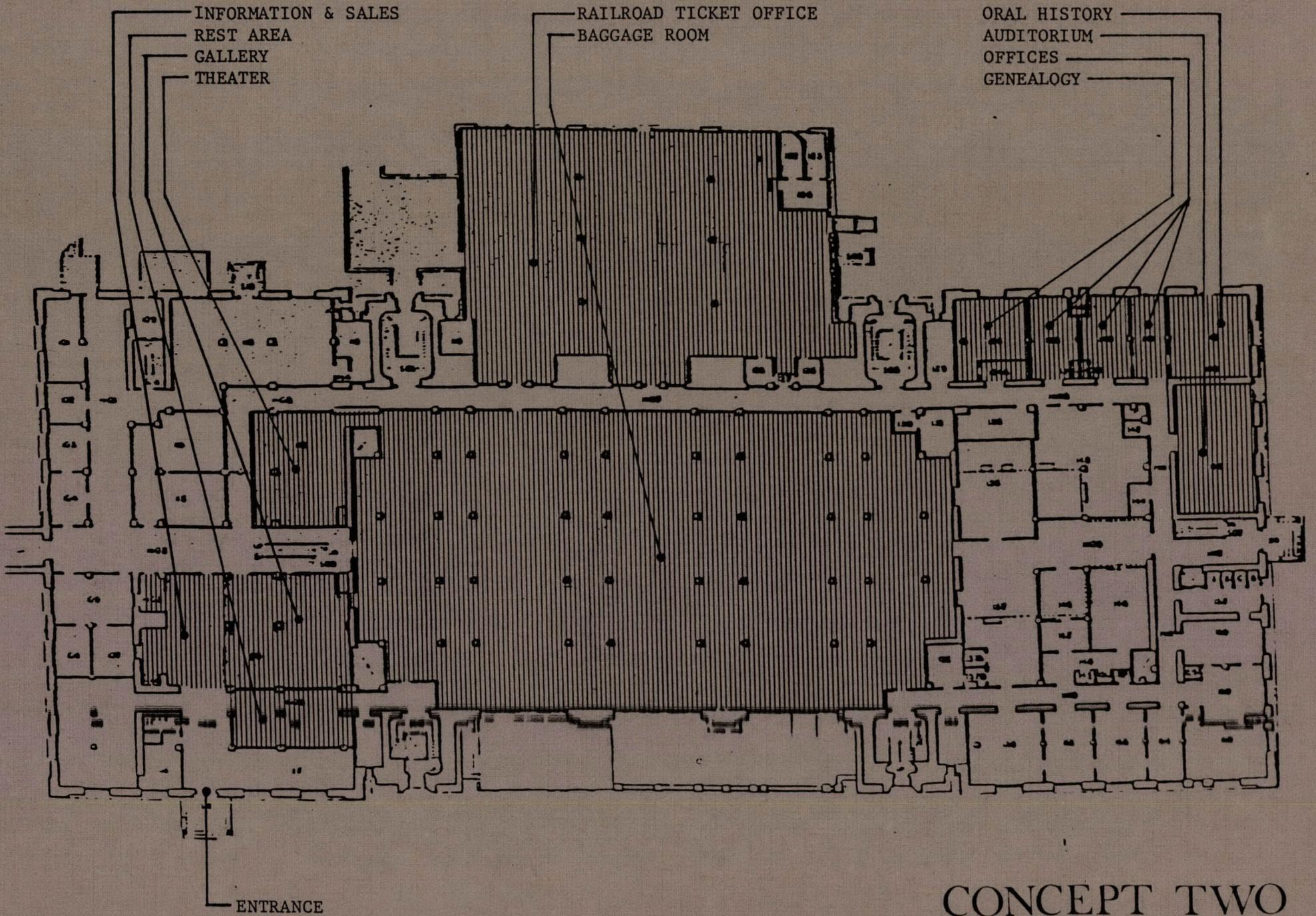
Baggage Room

DEVELOPED AREAS

INFORMATION & SALES
REST AREA
GALLERY
THEATER

RAILROAD TICKET OFFICE
BAGGAGE ROOM

ORAL HISTORY
AUDITORIUM
OFFICES
GENEALOGY



CONCEPT TWO

