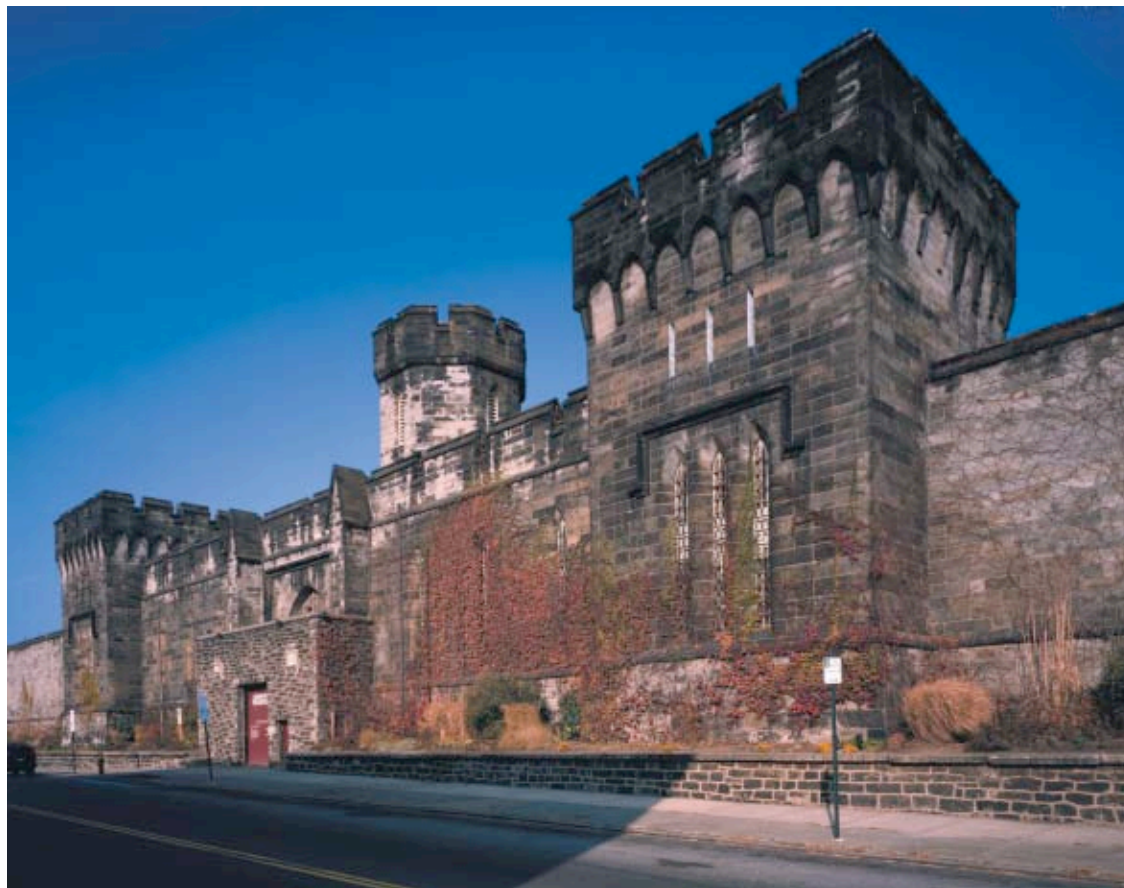


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Eastern State Penitentiary: *The Ruin Isn't What it Used to Be*

Sean Kelley, Program Director
Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site



People routinely say that Eastern State Penitentiary--an abandoned prison turned historic site in Philadelphia--is one of the most evocative places they have visited.

The building embodied a revolutionary idea: that prisoners could be reformed through strict isolation. It is the world's first true "Penitentiary," a prison designed to inspire penitence, or true regret, in the hearts of inmates. The building had running water and central heat before the White House, and more than three hundred prisons, on five continents, are modeled after Eastern State Penitentiary.

The prison remained in use for 142 years. When it finally closed, in 1971, it was already ancient. (At least by American standards.)

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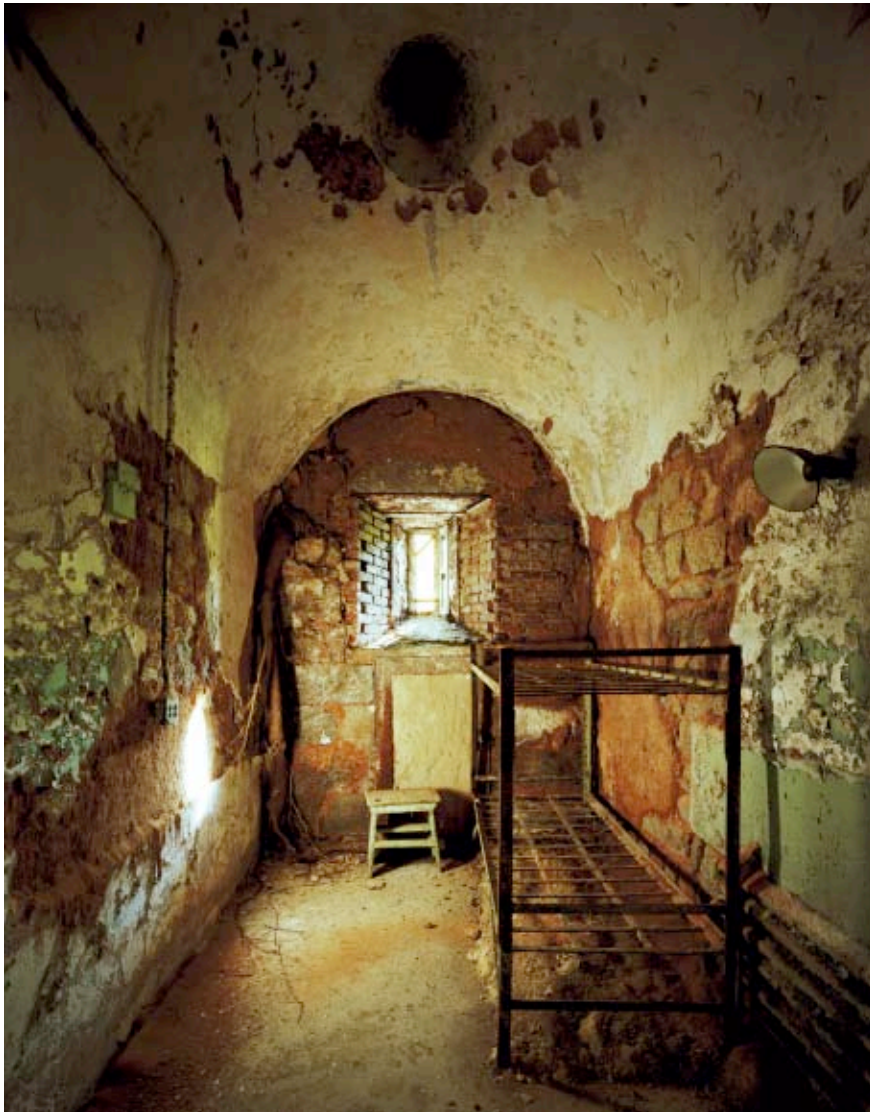


From 1971 until the early 1990s, the complex of buildings was almost totally abandoned. Vandals smashed toilets, roofs leaked, and skylights collapsed under their own weight.

We opened the building in for tours 1994. The site was in a profound state of architectural ruin. We chose to accept the ruinous state of the building. After all, even a fully restored prison would lack it's most defining characteristic: men and women held against their will. Are those stories easier or more difficult to evoke in a ruin? We believe that the site is more powerful, more evocative, in its current photogenic state of *stabilized ruin*.

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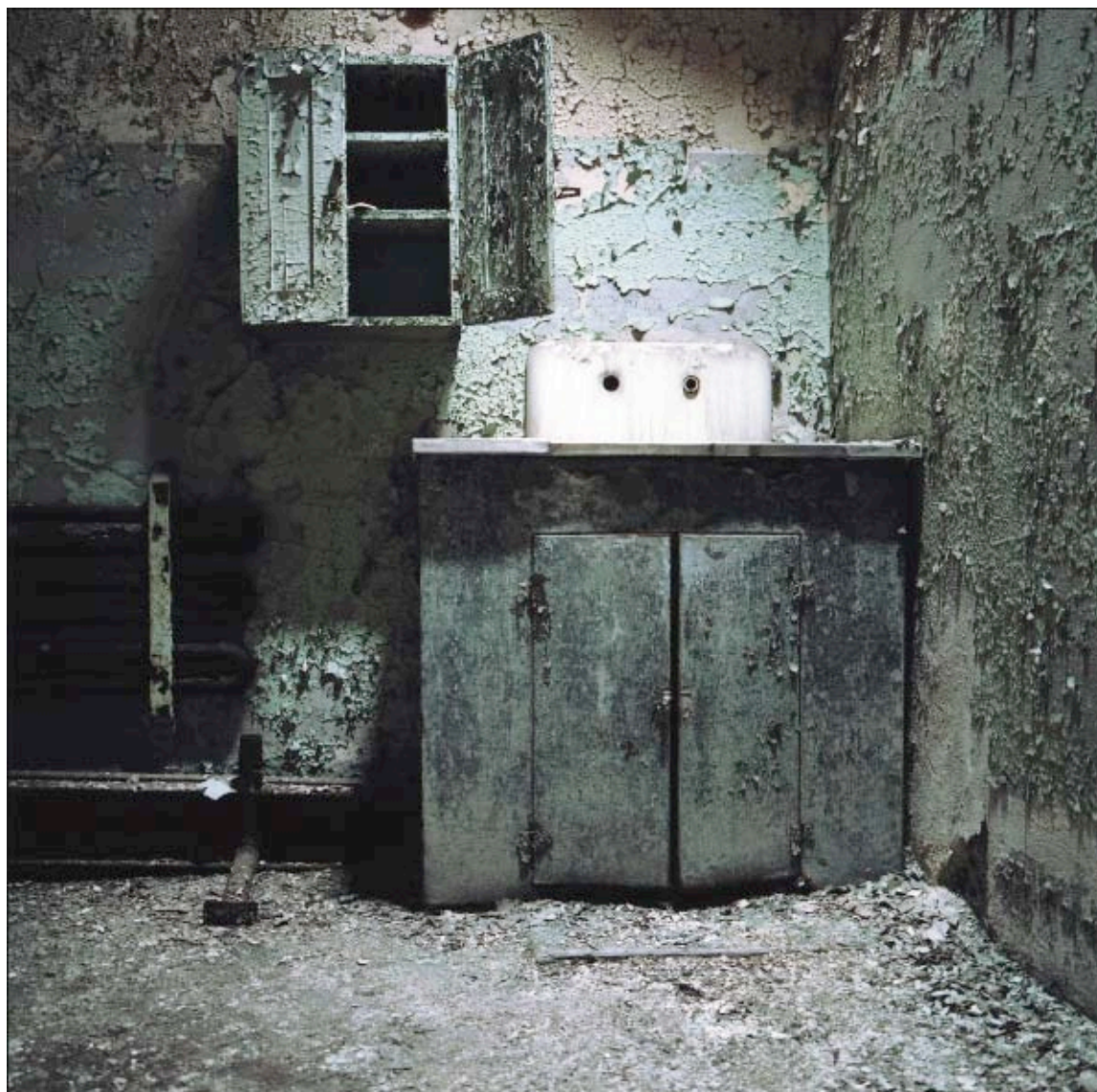


But this is where things get complicated. We say we want to keep the building in state of stabilized ruin, but do we really? Is it even possible? How do you bring 100,000 visitors through a ruin?

And what are visitors supposed to take away from their visits? What messages are implied by today's landscape of ruin, restoration, artifacts, signage and, let's face it, crude visitors amenities?

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Parts of the building are, indeed, still ruinous. We often leave debris, shattered furniture, and broken windows as they are. A quick Google image search will find hundreds of Eastern State photos, all taken in the last year or two, that make the building appear completely, totally abandoned.

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But we have to add things to the environment. We added this handicapped-accessible ramp in 2002. We modeled the look of the ramp after the stairs, doors and fencing added to Eastern State in it's last years. These latest additions were metal, bulky, and ugly. We chose not to coat the steel on our ramp, so it would rust over time. It now looks like it's been there for fifty years. We assume that visitors will understand that a wheelchair ramp is a modern addition.

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Here's a fence, added around the same time. Would you guess it's new? We hope so. Maybe the wheels would tip you off.

Everything we add can be removed without altering the building. There are exceptions, of course, but the rule generally holds. Almost everything is reversible.

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Last year we restored some benches, and purchased a few new free-standing benches as well. We looked for materials that wouldn't be jarring, with lines that imitated the lines of the original benches. They still look too new to us. We've discussed using sandpaper to dull their shine.

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Even our ticketing desk is designed to evoke the feeling of the place. The staff stands above the arriving visitor, looking down. Built out of plate steel and expanded metal, the designer called it ‘The Two-Ton Monster’ as he assembled it. Then one day he realized that it might actually weigh more. The lights mimic the desk lamps that officers had on their cellblock desks in the 1950s and 1960s.

Is this theater? Are we manipulating visitors’ emotions? Perhaps. We hope that the effect is subtle, and that visitors know, for the most part, what we’ve added and what’s original. Someone did once ask if the ticketing desk was a prison artifact. But I think that’s rare.

Yes, we make visitors sign waivers to enter.

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When we first opened the baseball diamond to public, we debated if we should even cut the grass. The Pro-Cut argument won out (I was an advocate), and today the grass is neatly trimmed several times a month. There are even a few picnic tables.

I argued that the unkempt grass would simply be an aesthetic choice. Although the uncut grass looked great against the crumbling building, it made it more difficult for visitors to imagine the prison when it was running. Tens of thousands of visitors a year cross that ball field. We were going to pretend the site is completely overgrown?

We cut the grass for the same two reasons we occasionally sweep the main corridors through which visitors walk: it's a simple way to help people imagine the active prison, and not doing so would, eventually, make a visit to the site pretty obnoxious.

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We face a whole new set of challenges when we stabilize or preserve the building's historic fabric. This set of corridors, where Cellblocks 2, 10 and 11 merge, had been altered extensively over the building's history. What remained was a roof that could no longer shed water, and was in immanent danger of collapse. This ceiling and roof of this entire area had to be removed and replaced, from scratch.

We debated what the ceiling should look like when we replaced it. We could easily have crackle-coated the surface (we run a huge haunted house, after all, but more on that later), and made it look old again.

But we thought that here, visitors had no real chance to understand that they were looking at a restored surface. We didn't want to cross over into creating a completely false environment. We believe that the prison's authenticity is one of its primary strengths. So we let the ceiling look new.

I think we made the right decision. I also hate this area now. It's just too new looking. It distracts visitors. At least the new skylight is leaking, damaging the new plaster. So there is hope....

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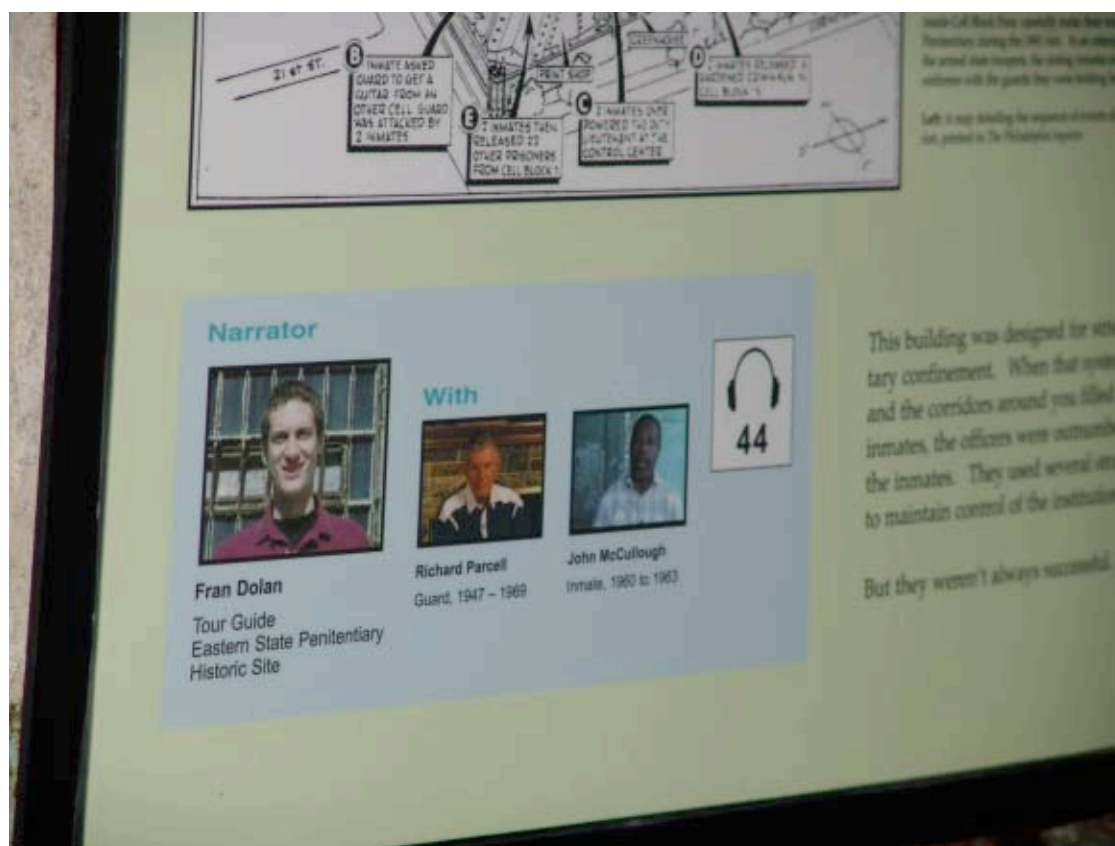


The Cellblock 2/10/11 roof repair led to another hard choice. Our old, rusting guard tower was staining the new metal roof below. The rust running off the tower was corrosive, and had to be kept off the new roof.

We had two choices: clear-coat the tower, inhibiting the rust while keeping the appearance of rust, or give it a fresh coat of paint. We chose, again, to be honest, and return the tower to its original (quite ugly) color.

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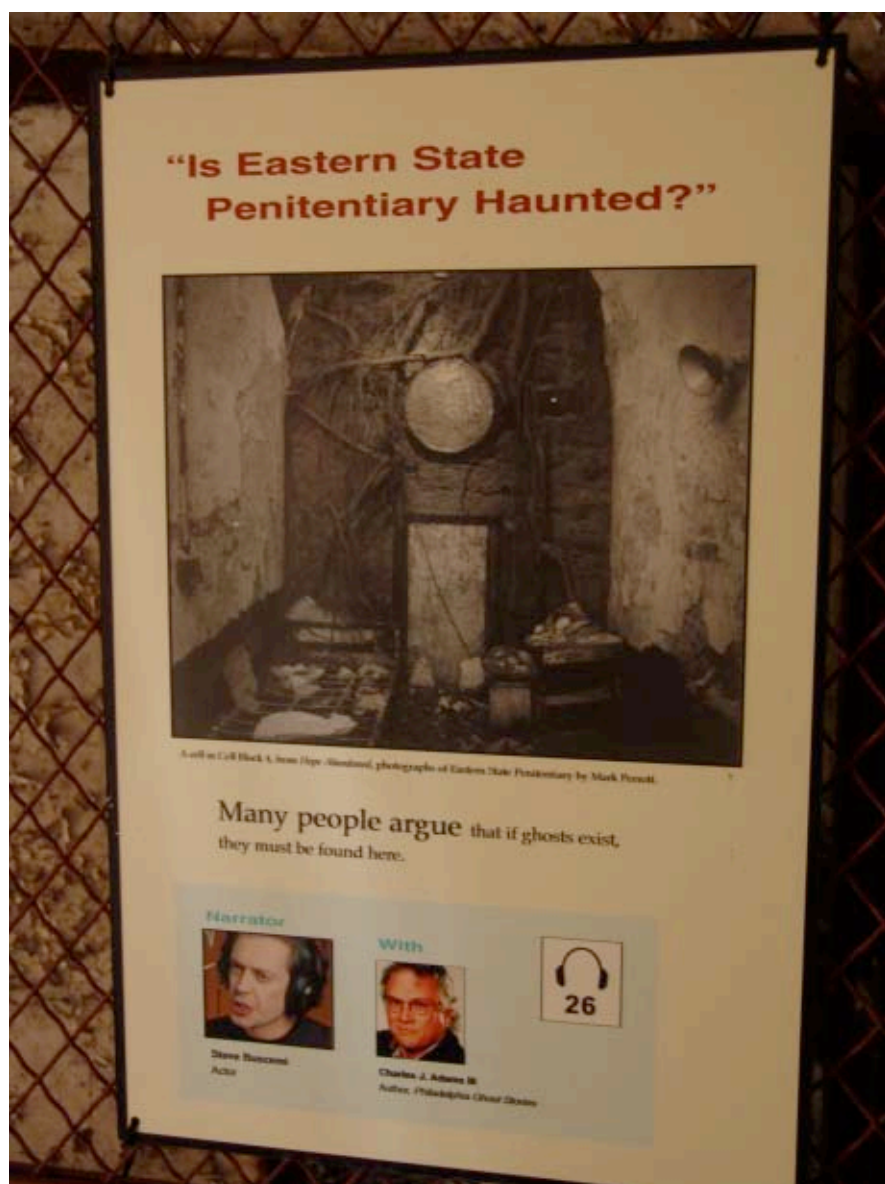
Visitors also encounter signage throughout the building. There are currently more than fifty signs, most showing historic photos and including a paragraph or two of text. Fifty signs may sound like a lot, but in a building this size it's surprising how few there are.

The audio tour is narrated by former officers and inmates, where possible. Sometimes it was not possible to get an "alumnus," as we sometimes call them, to narrate a stop. In these cases someone on our staff today narrates the stop. Every person whose voice appears on the audio tour is also pictured on the signage.

This leads to odd collections of photos on the signs, sometimes mixing young tour guides' faces with inmates who are long dead (but recorded years ago). I think Slought's Aaron Levy finds the little photos jarring. "I even saw one of *you!*" he said to me in the cellblocks one day.

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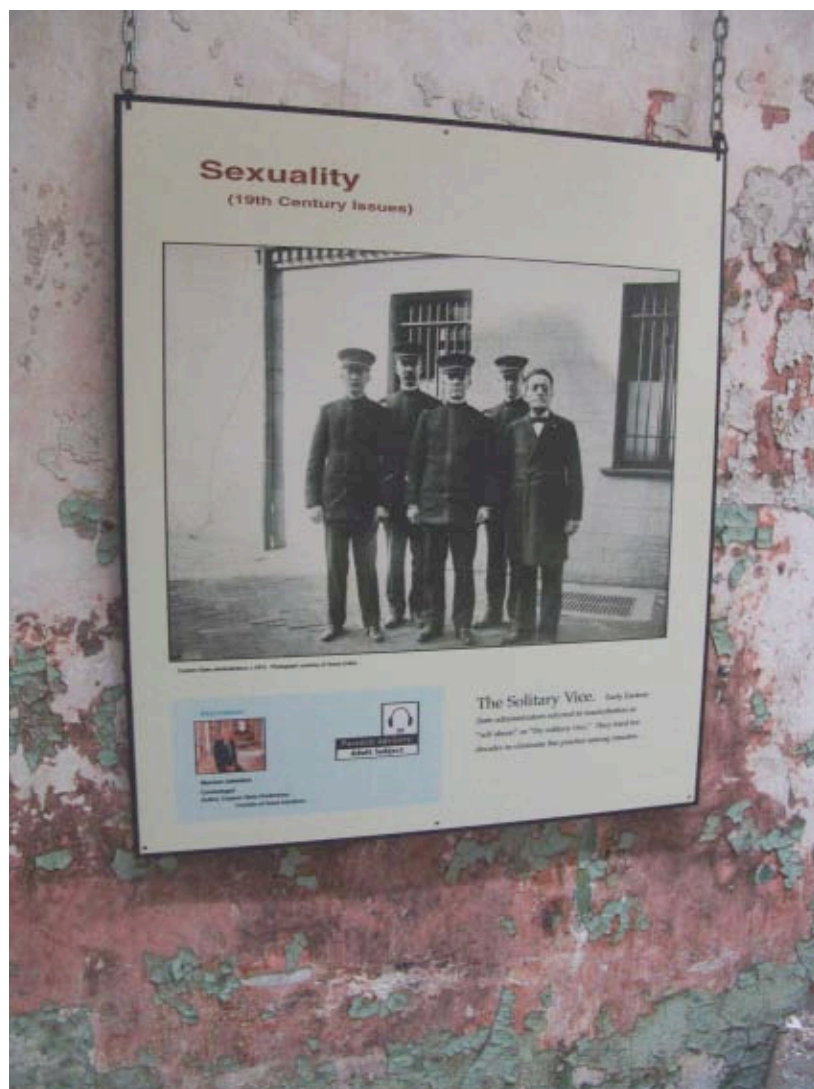


Many of our visitors want to hear about ghost sightings. So yes, we did include one sign, tucked away, that addresses peoples' interest. It makes no claim the prison is haunted. Not that this sign embarrasses me. I'm just saying.

There is also a sign that addresses movies filmed at Eastern State.

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But I think the majority of our programming is pretty substantial. We may have a sign about ghost sightings, but we have two signs about issues of sexuality within the prison (both 19th and 20th century issues, which were quite different). There are about thirty prison museums in the country, and, to my knowledge, we are the only to address this topic.

The signs are marked as "parental discussion advised," which is a sure way to get kids to seek them out.

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Our main audio tour is no joke. It addresses issues of race and segregation, and spends quite a bit of time addressing early 19th century prison reform movements and details of the architectural innovation that helped make Eastern State so noteworthy.

Being an audio tour, it's hard to illustrate here. I hope you'll experience it at the site.

This photo is staged, of course. (The sweet looking woman is my mother.) Real visitors taking the audio tour are usually pretty stone-faced, which turns out to be a good thing. Exit surveys tell us that they generally find the tour thought provoking and memorable.

We still haven't gotten quite used to meeting groups of visitors walking in absolute silence through the building. It can be a bit creepy.

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2001



2003

Visitors also find artists' installations around the site. This is Nick Cassway's *Portraits of Inmates in the Death Row Population Sentenced as Juveniles*. Cassway stenciled the portraits onto plate steel, and then let the steel rust over several four seasons. He coated each plate, halting the rusting process, as the states executed their inmates.

The U.S. Supreme Court declared the policy of execution for prisoners convicted of crimes committed while under eighteen unconstitutional in 2003.

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Here's one of Linda Brenner's *Ghost Cats*. The plaster cats memorialize a colony of strays that lived in the building during its period of abandonment in the 1970s, '80s and early 1990s. A volunteer named Dan McCloud fed the cats three times a week for 28 years.

We neutered the cats when we opened for historic tours, and the last cat died the same year that Dan did. The cats are plaster, and are designed to age. We lose a few each year. The prisoners, the cats, Dan, museum administrators; none of us will be here forever.

We print a brochure with the location of all 29 cats (there used to be 39). Kids love hunting for them.

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Artist William Cromar has recreated a Guantanamo Bay chain link cells inside one of Eastern State's heavy stone cells. The effect is like a ship in a bottle.

The two plastic buckets are for fresh water and human waste. There's even a Koran, suspended in a surgical mask, just like the cells in Cuba. The arrow on the concrete points to Mecca.

Our signs simply explain the contents of the cell.

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Ilan Sandler replaced the doors in Cellblock 10, using text from conversations he'd had with his parents. (The original cell doors were long ago stolen.) Recordings of his parents' heartbeats played throughout the cellblock. He made the recordings as his parents discussed the murder of Ilan's sister Simone, strangled in Toronto in 1995. The title, *Arrest*, refers both to his family's desire for relief from the experience, and Simone's unsolved murder.

We get very few artists' proposals expressing the need for prisons or the impact of violence and crime. I wish more artists found this an interesting subject, just to balance out the other work on the property. Ilan's piece surprised us with its lack of anger. It was mostly an expression of confusion and pain.

This piece was on exhibit from 2001 to 2004. It was one of our most powerful installations.

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All this is funded, largely, by a haunted house we run every fall called “Terror Behind the Walls.” It provides about 60% of our annual operating income.

We do try to keep some of our historic site mission in mind as we design the event each year (we’re probably the only haunted house in America without an execution scene), but in reality we do spend a lot of time turning our National Historic Landmark into a haunted house. In the fall, historic site visitors sometimes see innocuous Halloween stuff around, mostly gates and tents. We think it’s not that distracting.

Sometimes when I say I work at Eastern State, people say “Oh, that haunted house?” That happened for the first time a few years ago. I die a little inside each time I hear that....

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The building isn't a ruin. It's not abandoned. With nearly 150,000 visitors in 2006, we can hardly even say it's off the beaten track.

I used to worry about an outside force (the City, for instance, which owns the property) destroying the evocative, thought-provoking potential of Eastern State. The potential for a schlocky tourist attraction is just so great.

But I now worry more about selling the place out from the inside. You would think the success of the Halloween event would free us to make principled decisions during the rest of the year. And to a degree it does. But the lure of audience and revenue is strong. More people visit for the haunted house each season than for the historic tours, after all. All of us on the board and staff struggle with this. The decisions are somewhat arbitrary.

For now, I'm actually quite proud of our Substantial/Sensational balance. You'll have to judge for yourselves.