

Landmark Prison Reverses Decay with Dose of Own Philosophy

The sinister castle-like structure on the outskirts of Philadelphia would seem to have nothing in common with the inspiring landmarks for which the city is known. While Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell symbolize the great American experiment, Eastern State Penitentiary is a stark reminder that sometimes the experiment can go wrong. From petty horse thieves to crime boss Al Capone, its Gothic confines have housed every strain of criminal, in a place that charted new territory in the exploration of criminality.

But like Philadelphia's more familiar places, 142-year-old Eastern State has been honored with high status for its historic value. In 1965 it was designated a National Historic Landmark. In spite of that, it was, until recently, a spectacular vision of decay. Abandoned since 1971, water poured through its deteriorated roofs, coursed down the plaster walls, slowly dismantling the place and rendering parts of it dangerous. Annually it appeared on the National Park Service's endangered NHL list. Twice, it made a similar list kept by World Monuments Watch.

A \$500,000 grant from the National Park Service-administered Save America's Treasures program has been crucial to staving off ruin. The funds, part of a Federal program to preserve threatened sites,

and social reformers like Charles Dickens and Alex de Toqueville. Ultimately, solitary confinement, under criticism as inhumane, gave way to 20th-century ideas of equipping inmates for re-entering society.

The prison is so vast—17 buildings and nearly 1,000 cells over 10 acres—restoration is slated only for places important to the story: cells, exercise yards, mess halls, and death row.



Left: Al Capone, in on a brief hitch for firearms possession, dodged the rehab regime shown here in a cell with Oriental rugs, furniture, and a radio—plus cigars, champagne, and women. **Right:** Today's scene.

buildings, and artifacts, have helped meet a desperate need: new roofing on the prison's central rotunda and several other structures. The grant was matched dollar-for-dollar, primarily by the State.

Eastern, closed in 1970, spent the next 20 years in steady decline while State and city officials wondered what to do with it. With public and private backing, the site has made considerable strides. It has gone from an abandoned hulk to a popular cultural attraction offering exhibits, educational talks by scholars, and an audio tour of reconstructed cells narrated by actor Steve Buscemi. With support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the prison opened to the public in 1994 and 11,000 visitors walked its cavernous passageways. By 2002, the number had swelled to 64,000.

The grant "helped tremendously" to preserve the place, says Sara Jane Elk, the site's executive director. Tourists walk from the prison's central rotunda through a series of passageways, or "links," radiating out to cell blocks, like the spokes of a wheel. Thanks to the roofing, hardhats are no longer needed.

Built in 1829, Eastern State was a sensation almost upon its opening, the expression of a radical, Quaker-inspired theory of rehabilitation through reflection and spiritual change (hence solitary confinement). This departed from the traditional system, whose staples were corporal punishment and abuse. The prison was the model for 250 others worldwide, visited by foreign dignitaries, intellectuals,

Eastern State, an ironic presence at the edge of the City of Brotherly Love, has become an unparalleled venue for examining some of our most difficult social issues.

For more information on the penitentiary, go to www.EasternState.org or e-mail Sean M. Kelley at sk@EasternState.org. For more information on Save America's Treasures grants, go to www2.cr.nps.gov/treasures/.

