

Managing Sites of Human Atrocity

Natural disasters, large scale industrial accidents, and acts of human atrocity initiate a strong emotional response in the community immediately affected by the events. In the current age dominated by extensive media coverage of all “spectacular” events, the localised impact is quickly one of regional, national, and even international proportions. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon illustrate this all too well.

The immediate response of those affected may be to remove all traces of the event, but heritage managers need to consider preserving the physical remains of at least some of the sites as evidence of the events that occurred. We will address this issue by discussing the management of sites of human atrocity.

The management of an atrocity site raises a number of complex questions for cultural heritage managers. Can and should the site be preserved? Who should be consulted about decisions on the site? Who has responsibility for decisions about the site? Should events at the site be interpreted?

The management of atrocity sites is not a new topic. There are the cemeteries in Europe marking the sites of the atrocities of the Great War. Historic churches bombed out during World War II are conserved in their state as ruins in many German communities as reminders of the atrocities of war. In both instances the majority of decision makers decided on community memorials.

The remains of the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau are reminders of the destruction wrought on the Jews in Europe in World War II. However these areas were not managed as heritage sites until some time after the atrocities had occurred. With more recent atrocities, decisions about the management and conservation of these sites had to be made while the survivors and the families of the victims were still coming to terms with the tragedies that had occurred.

The 21st century opened with terrorist attacks on New York City and Arlington, Virginia, where three civilian airliners were

crashed into occupied buildings, resulting in a death toll exceeding 5,000 people. In view of the sheer magnitude of these events, previous occurrences, which are the focus of this paper, almost pale in significance.

At the end of the 20th century there were three massacres at three different sites on three different continents. In Oklahoma City in April 1995, 168 people were killed by an explosion from a homemade bomb in the Murrah Office Building; in Dunblane, Scotland, 16 children and their teacher were killed by a single gunman in March 1996; and in April 1996, at Port Arthur Historic Site in Australia, 35 people were killed by a single gunman. How have these sites been managed—as sites of atrocities and because of these atrocities—sites that are now part of our heritage?

In both Oklahoma and Port Arthur there was public consultation about the future of the sites. The issue of consultation raises the question about who has the responsibility for decisions about the site. Is it the actual owners of the site, the survivors and families of the victims, the local community, or the broader national or international community? The immediate response to all three massacres indicated a huge community concern about the atrocities. The areas became sites of collective mourning. Consultation with survivors, families of victims, and the broader community—those who feel some ownership of the site—is an important part of the healing process.

At Port Arthur, 20 of the victims had been killed at a café at the historic site. The immediate response of the staff at the site (some of whom were related to or had worked with some of the victims) was that the building should be demolished. The building was left standing until the trial of the gunman. After the trial, some of the building was demolished. However, following concerns by members of the community and heritage professionals, the Australian Government’s Heritage Commission intervened and the walls were left intact while a conservation study of the site was undertaken.

In Oklahoma City, over 300 buildings were damaged by the explosion. Many buildings were

structurally damaged and, along with the Federal Office Building where the explosion occurred, were demolished. As happened at Port Arthur, there was debate about clearing away the evidence of the atrocity that occurred as part of the rebuilding and healing process. A façade of a building which faced the Federal Office Building has been left intact as evidence of the effect of the bombing on the wall. The massacre at Dunblane occurred in the gymnasium in the primary school. The gymnasium was demolished shortly after the event, and the school continues to operate in the surrounding buildings.

The management of an atrocity site will impact not only the survivors and their families, but also on the public memory of the event. The significance of these sites to the community may change over time as healing about the events progresses. The passage of time has seen the sites of concentration camps and atomic bomb explosions take on international significance and be declared World Heritage areas.

Preservation of the sites can be important not only for maintaining the physical evidence at the site, but also for interpretation of the atrocities. One of the most evocative reminders of the atrocities of World War II is the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in France, where 642 people were killed by German troops in June 1944. The survivors chose to leave the village as it was on the day that the massacre occurred; burned out buildings were left standing, abandoned cars and personal effects left where they were. These remains tell the story far more effectively than any signs or displays could.

The memorials established on site are not only part of the healing process, but can be part of the interpretation of the site. At all three sites memorial gardens have been established to provide peaceful areas where dreadful atrocities occurred, and areas where survivors and families can go and reflect on the events. In Oklahoma, the survivors' names are inscribed on a low wall; a more poignant reminder are nine rows of 168 stone and glass chairs, with 19 child-size chairs for the children who were killed. At Port Arthur, the remains of the café where 20 of the 35 were killed have been incorporated in a garden which includes a reflective pool.

Heritage managers at all sites of major atrocities have a responsibility to ensure that the site is conserved and presented appropriately not only for the survivors and their families but also for future generations. Just as we are now consciously managing the heritage of atrocity sites, we should consider managing the heritage of disasters. After all, heritage sites are the physical rem(a)inders of a shared collective experience and remembrance of past events.

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This article was written well before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and has been adjusted to make reference to these events.



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