



Crime Scenes: Razing the Memories

Massacre Sites Are Often Demolished, Renovated to Help Survivors Cope

By **EMILY FRIEDMAN**

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One year ago today, Dr. William Petit became the sole survivor of a horrific home invasion that took his wife of 22 years, the couple's two daughters, and left their upscale Connecticut neighborhood reeling in shock.

While Petit can't erase the memories from the day that changed his life forever, he did do something that many other victims of tragedy do to cope with loss: He demolished the site where the killings occurred.

Last month, Petit razed the home in which his wife, Jennifer Hawke-Petit, and daughters Hayley, 17, and Michaela, 11, had lived. The three were senselessly murdered when two perpetrators allegedly doused their bodies in gasoline and lit the house on fire after robbing them.

"[Petit] didn't want to continue to have the house as a reminder of what had happened," Richard Hawke, Petit's father-in-law, told ABCNews.com. "It was torn down a month ago !! leveled off and now it's just a mound."

"There's grass growing," added Hawke of the once happy family's home. "There are no plans to rebuild."

Petit, who managed to escape after being brutally beaten by the perpetrators, now lives with his parents in a nearby Connecticut town.

While he chose to demolish his family's home, Petit kept the landscaping that had surrounded his home and transported several trees and bushes to his parents' home in part to memorialize his family.

"[Petit's daughters] were probably pretty little when they were planted," said Hawke. "Petit was going to re-plant them [at his parent's] in a way that would represent a memorial for the girls."

The site of tragedy is often too hard for survivors and community members to bear, as was the case in the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, the Amish School shooting in 2006, and the massacre at Virginia Tech University in April 2007 !! all of which were either demolished or drastically altered after the killings occurred.

And at Northern Illinois University, administrators are still struggling to renovate Cole Hall, the lecture hall where five students died and 18 were injured when a shooter opened fire last February.

Changing Appearances While Preserving Memories

After Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colo., killing

12 students and one teacher and wounding another 23 people, school officials and community members initially petitioned to have the entire building torn down.

But Karen Jones, a school secretary whose two children were there the day of the shooting, told ABCNews.com that the community eventually decided against demolition, an idea she referred to as a "knee-jerk reaction."

Instead, the community agreed to give Columbine's interior an extensive facelift.

"They made a lot of changes !! tiles replaced the carpet and there are new light fixtures," said Jones.

The school library was eventually turned into an atrium and a new library was built elsewhere, said Jones, who told ABCNews.com that nobody wanted to "re-enter that place."

"The reconstruction helps with closure and the horror," said Jones. "It was good to have as few reminders as possible."

Jones added that even the most minute details made a difference to those who had to return to the school after the shootings.

Her own children noticed the new light fixtures, said Jones, who said her sons had stared up at the lights while they ducked underneath tables to hide from killers Harris and Klebold.

In Lancaster, Pa., the Amish community where five girls, ages 6 to 13, were shot and killed during a school shooting decided to raze the entire building soon after the murders.

"The community demolished West Nickel Mines School within a few weeks of the tragedy," said Herman Bontrager, who acted as the spokesman for the Amish community at the time of the shootings.

The previous site of the school is now a pasture where Bontrager says passersby can see horses and cows grazing; a new and nearly identical one-room schoolhouse !! with a newly installed security fence !! called the New Hope School was built nearby.

"It was very clear very quickly that the school would have really horrendous memories for people who were present [during the shootings]," said Bontrager. "[The community] felt they needed to get away from it and they saw its [demolition] as a way to protect their children from being confronted with that horrible scene every day."

The Virginia Tech community faced a similar situation when they were forced to decide the fate of Norris Hall, the campus building where shooter Seung-Hui Cho opened fire, killing 32 students and then himself in the nation's deadliest shooting rampage to date.

"The first decision about Norris Hall was made in the first several weeks following the attack when we established that we would never hold general-purpose classes there again," said Mark Owczarski, the director of news and information for Virginia Tech.

A task force eventually decided that the permanently installed laboratory equipment in the building was too valuable to demolish. The area where the shooting occurred took up only 5,000 of the building's 100,000 square feet.

So while many of the engineering classrooms remain untouched, the affected area of Norris Hall will soon resemble little of the lecture hall where so many students perished.

"There was a debate over whether to knock the building down or stand resolved and move forward with the building," said Owczarski, who added that the renovations would be completed in the next six months.

"Do you allow that building and that space to symbolize something horrible and tragic, or do you continue to move forward with the educational mission of what Virginia Tech is all about?"

For Survivors, Transforming Tragedy Sites Helps With Grieving

Feeling compelled to change the site where a tragedy occurred !! whether by removing the building completely or changing a particular area beyond recognition !! is a common and healthy way of grieving, several psychologists told ABCNews.com.

"It does seem that when there is a vicious human act, people have that much more need to transform the place and not use it for the same purpose," said Richard Small, a psychologist in Reading, Pa., and director of Spring Psychological Associates.

"It is part of healthy grieving," Small added.

Transforming the tragedy site so that specific details of the décor do not bring back troubling memories is helpful to those trying to grieve a loss, said Kenneth Manges, a forensic and clinical psychologist in Cincinnati who specializes in grief counseling.

"When a person can gain some distance from the tragedy, it's helpful to coping," said Manges.

"It may require destruction of the property or a more intensive rehabilitation like at Columbine, where they went through the re-plastering and reconfiguring and re-coloring of the building," he added.

"Details such as light fixtures or a tile pattern can certainly be permanently imprinted in a person's memory when it's associated with such a life-threatening tragedy," said Manges.

At Northern Illinois University, where the most recent school shooting took place just a few months ago, the future of Cole Hall was eventually decided after much debate. Like Columbine, community members initially wanted the building razed, but later decided on a renovation.

"The faculty and students came to a consensus that they absolutely did not want to go back in that building to take or teach classes in its present form," said Melanie Magara, the assistant vice president for public affairs at the university.

Since the shootings, Cole Hall has remained closed and its remodeling is on hold until the public university receives state funding for the construction.

Magara told ABCNews.com that of the two lecture halls that are housed in Cole Hall one will remain a classroom and the other !! the one where the shooting took place !! will be demolished and the area will be put to use for something unrelated to coursework.

The façade will also change, said Magara, who said that many students find it difficult to even walk by

the building.

"I hope these renovations will help with the moving on and the coping," said Magara. "We have students who can't even bring themselves to walk by the place."

The pain of these agonizing events also brings a determination that they never happen again.

The area at Virginia Tech where the killings occurred will house a new Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention, a program begun by the university following the shootings.

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