

Behind America's rush to memorialize death

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For most of America's history, tragic death was something the nation hastened to forget.

No memorials to victims went up on the sites of some of America's worst disasters – the 1903 Iroquois Theater Fire, the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre, the 1980s' serial killings of Jeffrey Dahmer in his Milwaukee home. The reason for erasure, say cultural observers, was always the same: shame.

For the past decade, however, Americans have been demonstrating a new sensibility: to set apart forever the sites where innocent people met a violent end. First at Oklahoma City, then at Columbine High School, and now at ground zero, memorials naming each fallen victim are going up on sites where the deaths occurred.

And any day now, the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. is expected to unveil the winning Sept. 11 memorial design with a promise to families who lost loved ones to “never, ever build commercial or retail space where those towers once soared.” (But families are still fighting transportation plans that they say will desecrate the site.)

The ground zero plan is confirming on a grand scale what scholars have identified as an important cultural shift toward a new type of public remembering. Tragic death sites, it seems, are becoming permanent shrines to the lost individuals in order to prove that violence has not prevailed. It's a trend Americans are appropriating to some degree from European traditions. And it's controversial, memorial scholars say, because such sites also risk glamorizing mass killing and making death the defining moment of life.

“This is one of the major, major cultural trends of our times,” says Edward Linenthal, a professor of religion and American culture and a memorial expert at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh. “It's a way of protesting the anonymity of mass death in our time. With these memorials, we're saying, ‘we don't know how to prevent this, but we're going to make sure these dead are not forgotten.’”

To make such a statement, Americans are parting with a certain measure of practicality that has long been a hallmark of their mobile, rapidly changing culture. Valuable land, as much as four acres in downtown Manhattan, is being deemed “sacred” in the classical sense of “set apart” from the routine activities of work. What makes it sacred? Ask the memorial planners. The loss of life? The possible presence of human remains? A horrific act of war? Or the future establishment of a memorial with more than 2,700 names on it?

Glamorizing death?

But cultural scholars caution Americans not to endow every site of mass death with the status of “sacred.” The danger lies in accidentally encouraging a culture that glamorizes death and violence through music, film and other media, says James Young, author of “At Memory’s Edge: After Images of the Holocaust” and a juror in the ground zero design contest.

“If [a memorial] is done without a very explicit rationale, then we risk blurring the culture of death with the need to remember,” says Mr. Young, department chair of Judaic and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts. “We have to be careful not to venerate or fetishize the site, to let it speak for itself, suggesting death as the defining event of a life. I worry that venerating the site of death reduces the richness of a person’s life.”

Since it’s Colonial beginnings, America has purposefully buried its dead individually in cemeteries understood to be hallowed ground. The sacred spot, therefore, has not traditionally been the site of death but the site of burial, where individuals receive their own space and headstone. Death sites could be returned to former use or new use without fear of forgetting the deceased because a memorial site had been established at the cemetery.

More and more, however, Americans seem determined to commemorate both the individual life and the tragic death. Roadside memorials for people killed in car accidents, for instance, have become far more common over the past 20 years, says Elizabeth Pritchard, a religion professor at Bowdoin College. Photos and memorabilia keep the memory of the deceased alive, while the decision to place objects at the death site keep the tragedy from being forgotten.

The practice expands on a Christian tradition in Europe: preserving death sites of martyrs, say Professors Young and Linenthal. Both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics have maintained death sites of people who lived and defended their faith unto death. With martyrs, the death site is enshrined to assure the living that the saint’s piety and suffering had meaning. With today’s victims of violence, the purpose appears to be similar: to assure the living that life is not lost in vain.

“At ground zero or at Columbine, there’s a need for resolution because deaths of the young cannot be explained,” says Simon Bronner, professor of American studies at Pennsylvania State University in Harrisburg. “What’s new is that more people now feel they have a right to that public marketplace of remembrance” where public places are set aside to forever honor ordinary victims of tragedy.

Half a century ago, Mr. Bronner says, public memorials were reserved for great heroes of military or political accomplishment. Rank-and-file soldiers were buried in mass graves prior to the Civil War, when America became the world’s first country to begin burying soldiers individually, but even then battlegrounds and public memorials were preserved only with the names of celebrated leaders on the markers.

All that changed, however, with the bombing of Oklahoma City’s Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995, according to Linenthal. Since then, Americans have been determined to personalize monuments such as the Vietnam Memorial with wreaths, photos, and flags – all of which were unexpected, he says.

Aware of a cultural shift, scholars are asking the essential question: Why now? What makes survivors crave permanent markers on tragic death sites in 2003, especially when similar sites couldn't be erased fast enough in 1903?

To be sure, some say, activists have learned to use memorials to advance a cause, political or otherwise, which might partially explain the surge in popularity. But others detect a deeper source in mounting anxieties that cry out for assurance whenever massive, violent death strikes innocent people.

"I think there is an anxiety that violence is pervasive," Linenthal says. "If it touches the most innocent ones, then it touches anyone. It's scary."

"We don't want death to be in vain. Our fear is that it's all going to be paved over, or that in our mobile...society, we, too, might be disposable," Bronner says.

Of course, setting aside death sites as "sacred" and marking them with personal mementos do little to remove the threat of violent or unnatural death. Since Americans began marking such sites more intentionally in the '90s, one could argue, incidents of mass death have ironically become more pervasive.

Shameful memories

Nevertheless, what may be developing is a new willingness to remember that which will always be shameful to humankind. Slavery, for instance, would be the focus of a newly proposed museum. New books on disasters caused by humans, such as the Hartford Circus Fire of 1944, suggest a determination to learn from past mistakes – or perhaps to find titillation in the macabre.

Whatever the allure, death sites seem poised to educate and trigger poignant memories in coming years. But the race to memorialize comes with one final warning: Be careful when erecting something permanent while emotions are raw, and the event's long-term significance is still far from understood, says Prof. Kenneth Foote, chairman of the geography department at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"The push to commemoration [at ground zero, as at Oklahoma City] is just going too fast," he says. "The focus is on the loss of victims, but it isn't a very reflective response. Nowadays, people are pushing and rushing to mark events that still have equivocal meanings. At Oklahoma City, there's not much reflection on what made Americans hate their government so much as to do that. The memorial there is a very large, but it may not attain much lasting significance. Ten years from now, it's possible that no one will visit."