

# **Boston's Marathon memorial: How much should we save?**

**As shrines to public tragedies proliferate, they force the difficult question of what's important to preserve.**

**By Ruth Graham**

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MORE THAN A MONTH after bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, the spontaneous public memorial is still growing in Copley Square: ribbons, baseball hats, American flags, Irish flags, flowers, homemade "Boston strong" banners, crosses, and piles and piles of running shoes, which have become the dominant icon of grief after an event that cut down runners on their own turf. "It's like this big huge outdoor cathedral," a Dorchester woman told the Globe a few weeks ago. "I'm just drawn here."

In commemorating such an important event to the life of the city, the memorial feels like more than just a temporary outpouring of sorrow: It's also a part of history. Within two weeks of the bombings, Mayor Thomas M. Menino gave the city archives the task of preserving and archiving the memorial materials, and archivists began to remove the most fragile paper items in early May. Sturdier items will remain until the mayor's office decides otherwise.

The instinct to preserve the Copley Square shrine is understandable, even noble. The banners, shoes, and flowers represent a remarkable spontaneous remembrance of a major civic event; they could be a crucial part of future museum exhibits or scholarly work. And to a city still grappling with sorrow over a story that remains in the headlines, it would also simply feel wrong to load the assemblage into garbage trucks. "That sneaker was a sneaker a minute ago, but when a person places that sneaker on that pole, it's infused with meaning and emotion," Rainey Tisdale, an independent curator who spearheaded an ad hoc preservation group with the help of the New England Museum Association, said. "It becomes an artifact."

Shrines like the one in Copley Square now appear after natural disasters, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, and even individual deaths with a social or political aspect, like the recent shooting of a gay man in New York's Greenwich Village. Though their scale seems to have increased along with mass media culture, there has always been a human instinct to mark meaningful sites with tokens of mourning and presence—

including ephemeral ones, like the flowers left by gravestones. This impulse goes back to the earliest monuments, or to piles of stones on grave sites.

But the kind of preservation effort surrounding the memorial for the Boston Marathon bombings is something relatively new: an attempt to save everything associated with a civic tragedy. The idea of preserving these monuments to public loss is raising new kinds of problems for archivists, from economic questions—archives require enormous space and resources—to legal and aesthetic ones. They pit the limits of our capacity to preserve against our unlimited capacity for testimony and grief.

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Over the past several decades, these challenges have spawned a range of solutions. In Oklahoma City, objects from the vast “Memory Fence” encircling the site of the 1995 bombing were collected and catalogued by archivists, and eventually incorporated into the permanent memorial (over the aesthetic objections of some). After the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, the Colorado Historical Society moved 200,000 items from a park shrine into a federally owned warehouse. Virginia Tech created an online archive to document the shrines to the victims of the mass shooting there in 2007. (The city of Boston has already started a Tumblr site, [One Boston](#), documenting many of the notes and objects in Copley Square.)

The tension between saving and letting go is age-old, but such memorials are forcing a fresh and very public reckoning with what we want to remember, and why. “What we have now is the ability to see and ask questions about [memorializing] in ways we didn’t have hundreds of years ago,” said Edward Linenthal, a professor of history at Indiana University who has studied the Oklahoma City memorial and others. The answers we come to are likely to shape how these tragedies are incorporated into our history as a nation—and in a more immediate sense, how the people of Boston remember what happened on April 15.

AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY in 1999, 12 people, including 11 students, were killed by the collapse of 59-foot-tall stack of logs intended as a traditional pre-football bonfire. The college’s administration assigned Sylvia Grider, then a professor of anthropology, the task of collecting and archiving all salvageable objects from the memorial that bloomed on campus. She had help from several archaeologists in her department and a committed team of student volunteers.

“It was fascinating to apply this technique to teddy bears when we’d been accustomed to working with pottery and stone artifacts,” Grider recalled recently. Even with ample time, expertise, an available warehouse, student labor, and the full support of the university, it was an enormous task. Before the objects could be placed in expensive archive-standard storage boxes, everything had to be dried out, cleaned, declared pest-free, categorized, and labeled.

Grider, who has since retired from teaching, became something of an expert in preserving memorials, going on to work with representatives from Virginia Tech, the British royal family, and others who found themselves dealing with piles of flowers and teddy bears after sudden tragedies. She has developed protocols for archiving items from what she calls “spontaneous shrines,” including solutions to common technical challenges like the mildewing of organic material. (In Boston, a nonprofit preservation organization called Historic New England has lent its large “fumigation bubble” to the city archives, to help protect Copley Square objects from pests.)

Grider’s team at Texas A&M organized elegant ways to repurpose some elements of their shrines. Her innovative solution to what do with flower bouquets—turn them into compost that nourishes plantings in a permanent memorial—has since been adopted by officials in Newtown, Conn., among other places. But the overwhelming majority were simply saved, documented, boxed and stored in a remote storage facility, and officially made part of the university’s permanent collection.

This approach could be called “forget nothing,” and it is best exemplified by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Two years after the memorial was formally unveiled in 1982, the National Park Service committed to collect and preserve nearly every object left there by the public. Now, park rangers make a sweep of the wall every night, saving anything nonperishable they find, from medals and poems to objects like pacifiers and car keys that were probably just accidentally dropped by harried tourists. The mementos, large and small, are eventually delivered to a facility in Maryland, where curator Duery Felton and the facility’s head, Bob Sonderman, oversee a collection that numbers more than 400,000 objects—and that’s growing every day. When asked how much space the collection takes up, Sonderman and Felton burst out laughing. “Just say, ‘several thousand square feet,’” Sonderman said. And how much does it cost the government to maintain? “There’s no way I’d answer that.”

When an institution commits itself to maintaining almost every single object in perpetuity, Sonderman says, “it’s very difficult to stop.” The Smithsonian displays some of these objects, and a planned education center near the wall will display more, but no museum can display 400,000 objects.

The bonfire collection at Texas A&M has never been put on display, and only qualified researchers are allowed to peruse it. Grider says the community seems content to know the materials were handled “professionally and with dignity,” and that they are now safe in the archives. But she isn’t sure now if it was really necessary to save so much. “In retrospect, I wonder sometimes if consecrating everything, preserving and archiving everything, is worth it,” she said.

Chastened by the Vietnam example, the Park Service took a different approach when the National World War II Memorial opened in 2004, spreading the word that anything left there would simply be thrown away. Still, it’s impossible to prevent completely; even when large makeshift memorials after sudden catastrophes are cleared away, mementos continue to appear, particularly on anniversaries. (Sonderman said the Park

Service is planning to rewrite its “scope of collections statement” for Vietnam by the end of the year so it can exercise more discretion on what is saved in the future.)

Perhaps the largest modern expression of spontaneous grief came after 9/11, when vast memorials grew in parks, firehouses, subway stations, and beyond. In the months after the event, New York City tried to save as many shrines as possible by loading them into plastic garbage bags, boxes, and anything else it had on hand, transporting them to places like indoor swimming pool facilities that had closed for the season. Museums all over the city, large and small, took in as much as they could, often at great expense. When the National September 11 Memorial and Museum formally assembled in 2005, it began the process of acquiring or borrowing what it could from the many institutions that had been collecting since 2001.

Some issues that arose in New York were legal: When an original poem or painting is left, whose does it become? As a mass, the memorials were “a new form of civic art” that anyone could photograph or depict, said chief curator Jan Ramirez. But what if an individual artist objected to his contribution being acquired and displayed by a specific museum? Could the museum photograph an original piece of art without determining its copyright status? “An artist who has written a particular poem [and] left it at a shrine might have second thoughts about their intellectual property rights later on,” she said.

Ramirez so far has participated in two conference calls with the Boston preservation consortium, and advised them that it makes collecting easier if memorial objects can be declared abandoned property—“that doesn’t mean unloved, but legally abandoned”—so they can be transferred to caretaking organizations in good faith.

PRESERVING MEMORIALS can also have an unintended effect on the content of the memorial itself. Over time, members of the public develop a self-consciousness about what they leave—especially if word gets out that the memorial will be made permanent through preservation. As news spread that everything left at the Oklahoma City fence would be saved, Linenthal said, people began to leave laminated photos instead of plain ones, and to put their contact information on the back of their handwritten poems. By 1999, according to one scholar, mourners had left 50,000 items.

At the Vietnam memorial, a group of veterans left a Harley Davidson motorcycle drained of oil and gas, which Sonderman sees as a sign they had permanent archiving in mind. This is beginning to happen in Boston, where a woman left a framed oil painting depicting the moment of the blast with a note taped to the back including her name, the painting’s title, medium, and size, and the words “on loan; looking for a home to keep Boston Strong.”

It’s not just the symbols that change; the public grief underlying them also eventually begins to subside. James E. Young, a professor of English and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who has written widely about public art and national memory, points out that many religious traditions provide for a mourning period of about a year before the erection of a permanent gravestone. Likewise, he says, most

public shrines dwindle drastically within a year, as citizens ultimately move on to “remember life with life.” That process seems to happen faster in big cities, he’s observed, where “we internalize it and then we go on living.”

Before that new embrace of life, however, it’s natural to focus for a while on sustaining our sadness and preserving the things that represent it. Ramirez, who has gone through this painstaking process with the 9/11 shrines, acknowledges that the physical archive might have limited usefulness to future historians, who may prefer to look at online images of the Copley Square memorial rather than trek to a collection-holding institution. But for the public, there’s something about the intensity of the experience that only the objects themselves can seem to capture. Seeing a flag or sneaker offered in fresh grief is a way of remembering and honoring that original moment of shock, sorrow, and solidarity years later, she says. “There’s nothing like the real thing.”

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