



From Tragedy to Renewal

A project team focuses on stakeholder management to help a traumatized community rebuild a school.

BY SARAH PROTZMAN HOWLETT

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ven the worst tragedies can become a source of inspiration. It's a truth illustrated by the project team that built a new Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, USA. The three-year, US\$50 million project was completed in August, nearly four years after the previous school was the site of the country's deadliest mass shooting at a primary or secondary school. Many in the community couldn't imagine sending students back to the old school.

"We had to create a new beginning for a community that was still healing from something no one could have ever expected," says Alana Konefal, senior designer, Svigals + Partners, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

Rebuilding a school—and a heartbroken community—was possible only through intense and thoughtful stakeholder management and careful attention to security requirements. Staying in sync with parents, teachers and community leaders was the only way for the project team to deliver the safe and nurturing learning environment students deserved.

"There was a big void to fill in this community," Ms. Konefal says. "The entire design and construction team shared the community's desire to bring the children back to their neighborhood school."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SVIGALS+PARTNERS

Project planners relied heavily on community workshops.



A COMMUNITY PROCESS

Stakeholder management was the project's heart-beat. The project team worked extensively to foster strong community involvement from the beginning. In the first month of the project, the design team held four planning-phase workshops with about 50 members of the community, including local government officials, school board members, first responders, teachers, parents and neighbors. The gatherings were needed to ensure stakeholder alignment and to mitigate the risk that incorrect information would spread through a community eager for status updates, says project manager Julia McFadden of Svigals + Partners, New Haven, Connecticut, USA. The team anticipated a level of community participation and emotional investment that far exceeded other projects.

"As we went into each workshop, we reminded ourselves to listen carefully to people and try to set a tone that was positive and sensitive," she says.



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"Managing community members' expectations for the project was vital to our success. We were able to do this by keeping our progress transparent."

These community workshops were only part of the team's stakeholder management approach. The team also created small focus groups for teachers and staff to identify their day-to-day classroom needs, and followed up with the principal and other members of the school's leadership team to review all their requirements. The project team also sought to empower the community more broadly by holding a series of meetings at which project leaders introduced themselves to stakeholders. These included town health department workers, a local business owner association, the Sandy Hook volunteer fire and rescue organization, and people who live near the school construction site. The team detailed progress during regular meetings with the School-Based Building Advisory Committee (SBBAC), a group of 50 community members

that helped form a project charter spelling out what success would look like, Ms. Konefal says.

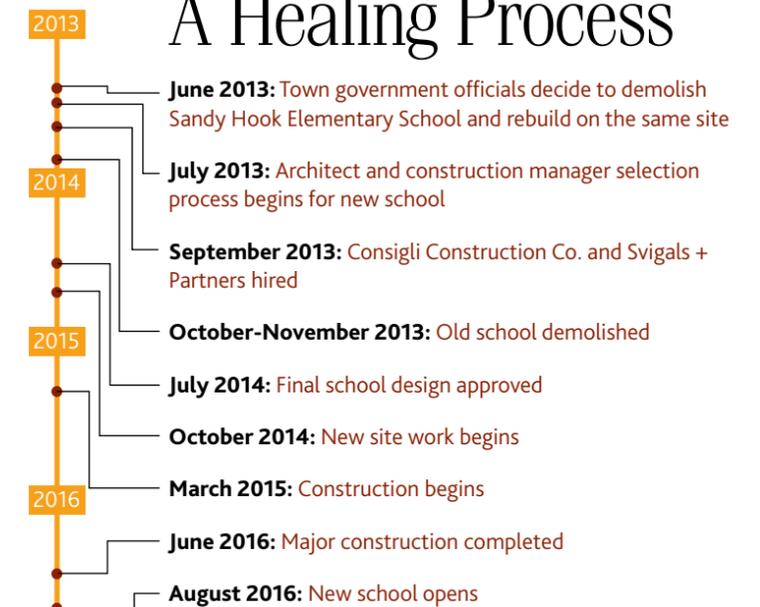
"By sharing our progress along the way, we were able to gain trust from the community. They were able to remain informed and could provide comments at any time."

The ultimate aim was a shared view of how the new school could move the community forward, says Ms. McFadden. "Our goal with the SBBAC was geared toward creating a mutual vision of the project and understanding the history and aspirations of the community," she says.

BUILDING A BOND

The specter of the tragedy and attachment to the old Sandy Hook school made some design plans difficult for the community to embrace. But the project team was prepared for those challenges. For example, to help erase the harrowing memory, town officials requested that the design team create a

A Healing Process





driveway and entrance that was different from that of the old school. With limited space, town officials looked into acquiring additional property to create a new entrance, but the team ultimately was unable to do so. “So we were challenged to create a new experience within the boundaries of the existing site,” Ms. Konefal says.

The project team wanted to build a two-story school to create an efficient building footprint that would allow more space for landscaping and natural, peaceful vistas for students. But some teachers

and SBBAC members were wary of a two-story design, she says. The group was still attached to the old one-story Sandy Hook school, and the temporary two-story school students were using was less than ideal. So the project team took school staff members on tours of nearby schools to show how two-story buildings could maintain a strong school community, Ms. Konefal says.

After construction began, the project team remained sensitive to the hearts and minds of the community. It maintained a website providing constant project



updates in the form of construction images, summaries of meetings with community members and links to local news stories about the project. The team also altered its construction processes and schedule out of respect for community wishes, says Aaron Krueger, construction project manager, Consigli Construction Co., Hartford, Connecticut, USA.

For instance, the project team warded off gawkers by keeping work zone gates closed and limiting photography during construction only for documenting project process. And on the third anniversary of the shooting in 2015, all work was shut down to honor the victims. “The town asked us to do those things, and we wanted to be respectful of the victims,” Mr. Krueger says.

The project team created workshops that taught Sandy Hook students about the project’s design and construction process. STV|DPM, the project management consulting firm for the town, took additional steps to facilitate recovery. For instance, families of survivors as well as groups of teachers and families directly affected by the incident were given private tours during construction, says Gera-lyn Hoerauf, senior project manager, STV|DPM, Hartford, Connecticut, USA. “These steps helped everyone ease back into the fact that the site was going to be an active school again,” she says.

SAFE AND SOUND

While focused on creating a sense of community, the project team also had to make sure the design would mesh with school safety and security requirements. The team had to coordinate the building design with technology systems and operational protocols

to facilitate harmony. This was one of the tasks completed with the help of the School Safety Design Committee, a state-government mandated group that met six times with the project team.

“Everyone needed to buy into the premise that a nurturing learning environment was the goal,” Ms. McFadden says, “and that security concerns needed to support that.”

The project team also maximized security by incorporating Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles issued by the International CPTED Association. Implementing such principles resulted in campus sight lines that make it easy to spot any person approaching the school. School boundaries marked by plants and fencing don’t obstruct visibility. And visitors must cross one of three footbridges and pathways—each one monitored—to enter the building.

The project team also engaged with subject experts to identify and mitigate security risks. Most notably, it collaborated with security consultants who had worked with the One World Trade Center—rebuilt from the ashes of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, New York, USA. Those consultants helped steer the team toward incorporating safety features such as force-resistant windows and state-of-the-art video monitoring. “They taught us that security measures should not be obvious,” Ms. McFadden says.

But the real lessons came from the community. “Building a school is worthwhile at any time for any community,” Ms. McFadden says. “But the community was the emotional core of this project. It’s what animates our design and gives the work its meaning.” **PM**



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