

One of the most riveting sessions at the conference was *Separating the Wheat from the Chaff: Collection Priorities at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu*, given by the Gallery's Registrar, **Gina Irish**. She described how the Gallery developed collection priority lists in response to a series of calamities. Thanks to an ARCS Travel Stipend, she was able to share this information with over 700 people who will hopefully now be more pro-active in developing disaster response plans for their own institutions.

The Gallery, located in historic Christchurch on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand, opened in 2003, contains 6800 collection items and employs 40 FTE staff. There are three floors containing seven storage rooms as well as changing exhibition spaces featuring domestic and international loans.

On September 4, 2010 a magnitude 7.1 earthquake occurred 40km from Christchurch city. It caused widespread damage and power outages but fortunately only a few deaths. The Gallery was largely unscathed but it was taken over by emergency responders as headquarters for 10 days. Fortunately, the responders kept out of exhibition spaces, labs and storage areas and staff were allowed to deinstall an exhibition. However they could not ship works out - highways were blocked by landslides, and transport drivers were not available. They managed to open a touring exhibition of oversized sculptures in spite of lenders' worries and the works were unaffected amid continuing aftershocks that eventually dissipated. Everything changed on Feb. 22 2011 at 12:51pm when a magnitude 6.3 quake occurred, its epicenter 10km away. The record ground acceleration delivered upward movement rather than the usual horizontal shift.

Everyone was evacuated while engineers assessed the site for structural damage. Staff had a fair understanding of what was damaged in the galleries but no idea about the storerooms. Naturally they were very worried about the collections, but as the severity of the situation became apparent, priorities changed. Buildings had collapsed and streets were blocked with rubble; 185 people were killed and 1000's injured. The collection became secondary to their concerns for family and friends and homes. (This is an important point for the rest of us to consider when refining our own disaster response plans.) They felt very conflicted about leaving, but the decision was made for them; all but the operations team was ordered to leave by Civil Defense. Workstations for response agencies were set up in every available space, including galleries that had not been deinstalled of artworks. (And due to the number of people and computers, the spaces got hot!) In assessing the damage, facility staff found:

Hanging systems had failed and ornate frames were damaged due to weak screws, extra weight or inherently weak (old) wood. The upward thrust of the quake's movements lifted works right off of screws, cleats, and S-hooks. Some S-hooks simply

bent under pressure. Plastic cleats tore, even when attached to small and lightweight works.

Storage bays had opened despite being locked tight. Straps running across the bays did work, but some boxes fell between bays, making opening units especially risky. Closed roller units and drawers opened. Carts with locked wheels jumped, crates moved and heavy objects toppled. Ceiling tiles, light components, fiberglass insulation and sprinkler rings failed. Lights were left dangling, presenting an electrical hazard in some areas. A damaged sprinkler head flooded a storeroom in the floor below it.

The facility staff did what they could but did not have guidance on which works to prioritize or how/where to move them. When the collections staff were at last allowed to return five months later they also did not know where to start. As Gina shared with us, “In hindsight, the chaos was fueled by fatigue, adrenalin and panic, and what we needed most was a plan.” Staff was thus motivated to create a **priority salvage plan**. Registration took the lead and found that existing resources made it a surprisingly easy task. Especially helpful were the 2000 publication, *Be Prepared: Guidelines for Small Museums Writing a Disaster Preparedness Plan* and a 2006 paper by Bernard Kertesz, *Vital, Valuable or Vulnerable: The Construction of Priority Salvage Lists*.

Utilizing existing values and available fields in their CMS, they categorized the collection first by **value**. Next, they worked with curatorial staff to determine **vital** works, i.e. those essential to the institution and of significant cultural merit. The majority of these were already in the high value category. Conservation staff then assessed the **vulnerability** of selected works and assigned risk factors for fire, smoke, water or fragility.

The team reviewed the resulting high priority list and continually challenged one another to reach consensus. The findings were collated into a user-friendly spreadsheet with accession numbers, basic handling details, general and detailed storage locations and V-V-V status. There is also a tab for loans, their insurance values, location details and lender contacts. They avoided ranking the works in priority salvage order since this will always change with new acquisitions, insurance re-evaluations, and the nature of each disaster: The plan needs to be fluid. This approach satisfied insurers.

The list is **accessible but secure**: A hardcopy, with images, is placed inside the doorway of each storeroom. The folder includes instructions for responders to assess damage and move works only if necessary. Digital copies, accessible only to the disaster response team, are on a secure drive on-site and remotely. The latter is important because when the building has restricted access, the staff may need to direct emergency services to deal with collection damages.

The Gallery faced another challenge in June 2011 when an adjacent building had to be demolished. Thanks to the priority list, insurers were reassured they had a suitable

response plan in place, and agreed to the collection being moved and housed in the opposite side of the Gallery during demolition and rebuilding. Thus the list was a **critical risk management tool** with a use beyond simply evacuation and salvage.

The Gallery remained closed for five years as a result of these disasters. Perhaps the greatest improvement was the resulting collective approach to disaster planning, with institutional buy-in. The plan and list have challenges, notably keeping up to date with changing exhibitions and loans. But, as Gina concluded, “Priority lists and related plans remove an element of decision making from the mix, keeping panic at bay. They offer clear objectives, removing debate and conflict from the equation. They offer a degree of direction, and remind the response team what to focus on when the overall situation is daunting and overwhelming. Ultimately, **priority lists help people cope**, and assist an organization with its recovery from disaster.”

Submitted by Cory Gooch, Head of Collections, Frye Art Museum, Seattle.