The Evolution of Disaster Plans at the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales

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Introduction

Disaster plans have changed dramatically over the past 10 years. It is widely recognised that major disasters like the Florence floods (1966), the USSR Library of the Academy of Sciences fire (1988) and the Windsor Castle fire (1992) provide a major impetus for the development of disaster plans. In the wake of such events, those who do have plans often reassess them to make sure that they include lessons from the latest disaster and those who don’t have them may be stimulated to make a start.

Around Australia there was a flurry of activity in disaster planning between 1985 and 1990, probably stimulated by the National Library of Australia fire (1985) which brought the probability closer to home. These early plans often followed the ‘Big Plan’ approach, attempting to ‘comprehensively document all responsibilities of the various staff and to identify appropriate responses to all possible situations’. In effect they became disaster resource manuals. Their sheer size, often over one hundred pages, made them unwieldy to use in a disaster. While such plans do have a useful role in developing training programmes and disaster plans, the current trend is to make your plan as simple and concise as possible.

This paper looks at the evolution of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales’ disaster plans and the major influences on the stages of their development. From their humble beginnings through each stage of development, they have served the organisation well in risk prevention and damage control when the unpreventable does occur.

Background

The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales was set up under an Act of Parliament in 1980, and is now part of the Ministry for the Arts, New South Wales. As a statutory authority, the Trust conserves, manages and interprets properties including Elizabeth Bay House, Elizabeth Farm, Government House, Hyde Park Barracks, Justice and Police Museum, Lyndhurst, Meroogal, The Mint, Museum of Sydney, Rose Seidler House, Rouse Hill estate, Susannah Place and Vaucluse House.

Each property has its own disaster plan. The planning process commenced in 1993 with a number of meetings and workshops led by conservation consultant, Julian Bickersteth, and involved the Trusts’ curators, managers, chief guides, caretakers, and collections management.

As with most disaster plans, the first stage was to assess the main risks. This exercise indicated that although certain disasters, such as theft, fire, earthquake, electrical and/or plumbing failure, had the potential to occur at every property, each house, museum or public building was susceptible to its own particular emergency.

Juice and Police Museum. (Photograph Ray Joyce)
Disaster Plans

Having looked at the comprehensive plans available at the time, the Trust decided that their plans, customised to each property, would be short and concise. The first plans, written in 1994, were an amalgamation of evacuation procedures, collection handling hints and telephone trees. Twelve months later they were revised and were presented in two parts: a four page Action Plan which was to be used at the time of an emergency, and a (Post) Disaster Management Plan for use in the recovery phase.

The headings are as follows:

**Action Plan**
- Human safety
- What to do when
- Objects in priority order of moving
- How to move objects
- Telephone tree
- Floor plans with emergency exits

**(Post) Disaster Management Plan**
- Risk assessment
- How to move objects
- Disaster bins – location and contents
- Objects in priority order of moving
- Disaster telephone tree
- Floor plans

It should be clear at a glance that there is considerable duplication (these headings are not quite as the consultant recommended). It is not clear why or how the duplication occurred, but it shows that the original division of information did not work for the organisation. Nevertheless the plans stayed the way they were until 1997.

In between those few years, the responsibility for co-ordinating disaster management, including staff training, revision and updating of the disaster plans had been centralised by assigning it to the Collections Management Unit. It is assumed that this was done to ensure that regular updates occurred across the Trust’s portfolio and to reduce duplication of effort.

I was appointed to the position of collections manager in 1997. I was somewhat familiar with the Trust’s disaster plans, as I had been running disaster training for the Trust prior to my appointment. Not having been involved in the preparation of the plans, I found the organisation of the information into the two documents previously mentioned very confusing. I had some ideas on changes that I’d like to make as a result of working as a consultant to the Art Gallery of New South Wales on their disaster plan.

The first change was to centralise the updating of the emergency telephone numbers (the telephone trees). The Telephone Trees were being updated twice per year at each property. Aside from the duplication of effort - twelve clerical officers doing what one could do - there was a problem with consistency. In fact at one stage we had three completely different mobile numbers for the Director!

The next change was to include some basic instructions on how to dry different types of materials. This had been omitted from the initial plans as at that stage it was thought that a conservation consultant would automatically be called in to advise in the event of a disaster, and that inclusion of detailed instructions on how
to dry every possible type of material would confuse the users of the plans. While it is important not to overload people with too much information, it is dangerous to assume anything, including the option of getting specialist help. This was solved by purchasing copies of the *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheels* produced by the National Task Force on Emergency Response (USA) and placing them in each property's disaster bin. This seemed to be the most appropriate place, as the bins would be needed if any drying were to take place.

By 1999 it was decided that the plans needed to be revised and there was a desire to merge the two plans, the Action Plan and the (Post) Disaster Management Plan, in order to remove the duplication and to rearrange the information into sections which would facilitate regular updating. There are now seven individual sections: Policy, Prevention, Emergency Procedures, Recovery Procedures, Priorities, Disaster Supplies, and Floor Plans. Policy, Recovery Procedures and Disaster Supplies are generic, that is, they are the same for all properties, as is the bulk of Emergency Procedures, with the exception of the Telephone Trees. The other sections are customised to each property.

The Policy section sets out the rationale for the disaster plan, how the information is arranged, and the components of disaster management and responsibilities.

Prevention includes the major risks identified for each property and what to do in a number of situations (eg. where to check for leaks during and after heavy rainfall).

*Emergency Procedures* covers the following information:

- Evacuation
- Emergency Checklist
- Telephone Trees
- Flood and Water Leak
- Fire
- Bomb Threat
- Medical Emergency
- Hazardous Spill/leak

Recovery procedures includes a Damage Checklist and Guidelines for Handling and Moving Objects. As the *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheels* cover drying techniques, the recovery section refers the user to the wheel located in the disaster bin. The emphasis in this section is on helping the person dealing with the "disaster" to plan how to deal with the situation, rather than rushing in. The Damage Checklist poses a number of questions which prompt the collection of information needed to develop a recovery plan.

It is important to note the difference between a disaster plan and a recovery plan. The disaster plan includes all the information which can be collected before a disaster occurs. The recovery plan occurs after a disaster. If one tried to include recovery plans for every possible event which could occur, the document would be hundreds of pages long and very unwieldy. While a disaster does engender a feeling of urgency, taking an hour out right at the start to consider the following issues is not going to cause any further damage:

- Is it safe to enter?
- Are there any obvious risks?
- What needs to be documented for insurance?
- Where will you move damaged and undamaged objects to?
- Which objects need immediate attention?
- How will you move them?
- How will you dry them?
- What sort of assistance will you need?
While there is a lot of information contained within the seven-section document, the full plan will not be inflicted on all staff. All staff need to be familiar with and able to access the Emergency Procedures and Recovery Procedures. These sections are the basis of all staff induction training and copies should be kept at the Reception Desk of each property (Emergency Procedures) and in the disaster bins (Recovery Procedures). The Property Managers and the Collections Management Unit should have full copies.

As with most disaster plans, there are some hurdles, or ‘sticky bits’ that need to be resolved. In the case of the Trust, “Priority Lists” have proven to be a source of contention and confusion for the staff. Some people assume that a “Priority List” is really a “snatch” list, listing all those objects that should be moved to a safe location if there had been sufficient warning. This is probably because reports about the two big historic house fires, that at Uppark, (Sussex) in 1989 and Windsor Castle (1992) relate that the Fire Brigades were able to contain the blaze in certain areas long enough for collections in other areas to be evacuated. Looking at the existing “Priority Lists”, it is clear that many of the larger pieces of furniture could not easily be removed, especially in an emergency situation.

While snatch lists can be useful in some circumstances, assuming they can be located quickly, “Priority Lists” are often considered to be guides for where to start after a disaster. It is useful to be able to direct attention to those parts of the collections which have greater significance.

Rethinking “Priority Lists” for the Trust’s properties requires reassessment of what makes an object significant. In the past it seems that provenance to the property was the highest form of significance. This becomes complicated when the entire collections are provenanced to the property or are ‘intact’, as is the case for two of the Trust’s properties, Meroogal and Rouse Hill estate. If the Trust were to adopt ‘provenance to the property’ as the criteria for placing an object on the priority list, all objects would be on the list and it would not serve any useful purpose. Therefore a different approach is being trialled, prompted by the draft document. 

Significance: A Guide to Significance Assessment in Australian Museums looking at each room individually and asking questions about:

- Which objects are associated with an identifiable phase of development of the property?
- Show evidence of layering of more than one generation of family?
- Demonstrate the nature of the property?
- Are considered rare for their intactness/ and or survival in situ?

At the end of this exercise, it is probable that there will be two different priority lists:

1. The “snatch” list which will be included in the section on Emergency Procedures, with instructions on how to move the object.
2. A priority list for use at the recovery stage.

**Disaster Management**

As part of the Trust’s disaster management, the Collections Management Unit organises an annual disaster forum. At this meeting, attended by all the property managers and curators, each property gives a report of incidents which occurred during the year and which imposed a risk to people, building or collection. This provides a useful forum for discussion and usually identifies areas in which particular training is required or where additional supplies are necessary.

Each property is responsible for ensuring that all new staff know what should be done in an evacuation, what and who to report to, where copies of the plan are,
where the disaster bins are, and what objects are prioritised for removal. Many of
the properties run annual staff training in disaster mitigation, involving visits from
the local State Emergency Services and/or Fire Brigade, demonstrations in the use
of fire extinguishers, a discussion of the major risks and a walk-and-talk through a
hypothetical disaster. The latter always proves to be stimulating, encouraging all
participants to consider safety and feasibility aspects. I’d be lying if I said that
everyone comes away feeling better able to cope, many feel intimidated, but it is
better for everyone to get some idea of what is involved.

Conclusion

Disaster plans are constantly evolving. There is no perfect plan which suits all
organisations. The important thing to remember is to make a start. If you haven’t
started yet, or you are bogged down in detail, I recommend that you try to get hold
of Be Prepared: Guidelines for Writing a Disaster Preparedness Plan for Small
Museums.4 Don’t be put off by looking at someone else’s ‘grand’ plan; it has
probably been a long time in the making.

Endnotes

1 Stephen Yorke. ‘Strategies for the Records
Manager’, INFORMATION Quarterly, May, 1997, p 16
2 Julian Bickersthth and Suzanne Bravery. ‘Creating
Simple Disaster Plans for Historic House
Museums’, Redefining Disasters: a Decade of
Counter-Disaster Planning, State Library of New
South Wales, Sydney, 1995, pp.15-20
3 A publication commissioned by the Heritage
Collections Committee in 1999, to be published by
the Department of Communication, Information
Technology and the Arts in 2000.
4 Ibid.

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