

HOW YOUR MUSEUM CAN BECOME A DISASTER AREA

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ABSTRACT - This paper discusses all the best ways of having a disaster at your museum. The author provides tips on the best arrangements for ensuring that a disaster by flood, fire or earthquake is as complete as possible. Disaster plans are discussed *en passant*, and the author advises that, for maximum effect, the museum should be without one.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered how and why disasters occur? Perhaps you know; perhaps it's because you've had one yourself. Are any of your staff 'walking disasters'? If you haven't had a disaster, there are many ways in which you can have one. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of them. It's best to start with a small one, just to see if you can really cope. There is, of course, the possibility that it will develop into a full-blown, total destruction of the institution, but let's not get too carried away - yet.

CHOOSING THE DATE

First of all, when's the best time to have a disaster? Well, if you close up the museum for the winter and go off to Florida, that's great. You won't even know about it until you get back in the spring, just in time for the spring run-off. That's when you find that the pipes, which were not drained before the museum closed for the winter, have frozen, then burst. Another good time is any weekend, or long weekend. Better still, how about in the wee small hours of the morning? It's four o'clock on a Sunday morning, -20°C, and the security guard phones to tell you that a pipe has burst. Great! Just what you needed. Just when you were in the middle of a great dream too. Oh what the hell. Who needs sleep? You were going to get up in another three hours anyway.

FLOOD

So how about that minor flood? That may not be too bad; all that can happen is a big mess on the storage room floor (because as we all know, overhead pipes are *always* in storage areas). But what about those *ceintures fléchées* lying on the table because (of

course) there was nowhere else to put them? You could have water cascading all over them, colours running everywhere, staining all those white cotton dresses, caribou parkas going all gelatinous - you name it. What do you do if that happens? Everyone tells you to soak up the water with a wet/dry vac. But where do you get one of those on a Sunday morning? The museum certainly doesn't have one. That would've eaten into the whole year's budget. And old Arnie's five-and-dime down the street which sells everything isn't open yet. Not to mention the fact that you haven't even got a disaster plan. Well, who has? It couldn't happen to me, you said. Well, it has and you'd better b****y well do something about it PDQ! So who can you call? How about a conservator? They know everything, and they don't mind having their weekend/public holiday/annual leave screwed up do they? Anyway, why should you be the only one having to get up at some godforsaken hour of the morning? No, the first thing to do is *PANIC*. That's always good to really get you focussed on all the wrong things to do; get you blotting off those fugitive colours so that they're permanently fixed into the now multi-coloured white cotton dresses; get you drying out those wooden planes with the hair drier you brought from home so that they crack and split. Of course, I'm forgetting, didn't you read something in a conservation publication about freezing everything? Great! Take the moosehead (or should it be Moosehead?) out of the freezer and put in all those glass-plate negatives. Sometime down the road when the flap is over and you take them out you'll just have a few plates of glass with nothing on them; the images have all popped off.

Anyway, let's assume you've got the water mopped up. What about the humidity? That same conservation article said something about drying out the room, didn't it? Right, so you get a fan set up, blow warm air into the room, and what have you got? Mould everywhere. Yuk! How do you get rid of that? Wipe it off. Oh no, now it's smearing all green stuff all over those multi-coloured white cotton dresses! How do I get that off? Nobody said anything about waiting until it was dry. Hell, where's that conservator got to? Of course, if you want a really good flood, and you're right beside a river, just wait for the ice to break up in the spring and a ice jam forms. Now you're really in the *merde*. You watch as the river rises, but it's not until it's lapping at the front door do you decide to start moving things out. Too late! You should've done that earlier. By the time you've struggled to move that immovable *meuble* to a safer location the water's already started to pour into the building. Now what do you do? What's it say in the disaster plan? Of course, I forgot, you don't have one. That's really too bad. You might have been better organized.

FIRE

OK, enough about floods. What about fires? They're really guaranteed to bring the house down (ha, ha). The really good thing about fires is that you also get a flood to deal with as well, so if you haven't passed Flooding 101 you're really up s**t creek *sans pagaie*. You know how those firemen love to squirt water over everything, in the belief that you really want the building saved. The fact is, you couldn't really care less about it, could you? The collection's more important, but they weren't to know that. Since you didn't have a disaster plan you didn't tell them.

So, how do fires start? Well, what sort would you like? You could have a building with old wiring and overloaded circuits, something shorts and starts smouldering. That should be good to get you up at four in the morning again. Or how about tarring the roof? You've discovered a leak up there and want to plug it to prevent a flood, (Good planning! Now that's what I call preventive) but somehow or other the tar catches fire and burns the museum. Now you've really got problems. No only have you got the normal soot and smoke damage that all fires create, but it's oilier and messier. Should be good to wreck most of the collection, I'd say. That's one way.

Then there's that wierdo you fired about a month ago, so he's decided to fire the museum, so to speak. He thinks that since he can't be part of the museum, then no-one's going to have a museum, so he chucks a molotov cocktail through the window. Of course, no-one sees him because there's no on-site security (your federal government grant has just been axed and there's no money left in the kitty after paying for the flood clean-up), so the museum's a charred wreck by the time you get there. Now what do you do? Well, assuming the 'authorities' will let you in, you can try and get stuff out, if there's anything worth saving. Those books in the library are going to be like Aunt Fannie's popovers - all crispy and flaky. Not much of those left if you pick them up carelessly. Remember those white cotton dresses, the ones which are now multi-coloured from the flood? Well, they're now all sooty and wet, not to mention those kitschy vases which are also covered in greasy soot. The veneers on the furniture have all buckled and lifted, but most of it can be sold as charcoal for the barbecue. What were those explosions? The fire marshal said they were from the loaded firearms in the display case and the bottle of ether in the medical kit. He said it sounded like they were under attack. Could've been nasty.

EARTHQUAKE

Just so as you don't think you're off the hook, what about an earthquake to shake you up? Not only will the museum collapse, but you'll get pipes bursting (so we're back to the flood again), gas mains leaking and catching fire (did someone say fire?), and sewers backing up - and you know what that means. Now the s**t will really hit the fan! Oh, you say, we'll get help, but wait a minute; the whole town's been hit, not just you. There's no power, and you never got round to getting that portable generator. Where do you put the artifacts you've managed to save? The local hall is being used to house the homeless, and frankly they don't give a tinker's cuss about your collection; they never visited it anyway.

Things couldn't get any worse, could they? Remember, Murphy was an optimist. If you're on the coast you could get hit by a *tsunami*. A what? Well, you could've looked it up in a dictionary, but that got wet in the wall of water which hit the museum, the town, and most of the surrounding areas. Well, actually it's a tidal wave caused by seismic activity. Does that make you feel any better?

CONCLUSION

Of course, none of this could ever happen to you. On the other hand, when did you last see Windsor Castle? Heads will roll, mark my word. Someone will be in the Tower before they can say "Hofburg". Yes, that one's been hit too. Better see them before they all burn down. Who's next? You? Better get that disaster plan down on paper, because it's no good asking me for help. I'm still clearing up after the last one, so if you call me I'm likely to tell you precisely what to do with your collection.

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