

DISASTER PLANNING

Robien van Gulik

Disaster planning is a difficult job. It can be limited to a conservation problem, but has the tendency to grow out to something much larger. When working on a disaster plan one encounters problems of administration and logistics. And when the planning is in full swing, problems of risk management, disaster prevention, crisis management, and personnel management will appear on the horizon. How does a paper conservator cope with disaster planning?

The first thing to realize is that a disaster plan is necessary to any professional organisation. Disasters do happen, and they happen unexpectedly. They can cause great damage to people, to buildings, to collections, to organisations. It is a strange feeling to be planning for something which will probably never happen. But it is necessary, especially for organisations that have collections to care for as well as public visitors and their own staff.

The second thing to realize is that a standard disaster plan doesn't exist. A disaster plan has to fit exactly the organisation for which it is made. That means a thorough stocktaking. A stocktaking of:

- Events that could be dangerous to the organisation
- The objects or people (or aims of the organisation) that could be threatened by these events
- The preventive measures that can be taken against these events
- The possibilities of handling the "results" of these events within the organisation (room, materials, personnel)
- The possibilities of letting the "results" be handled by others

One of the most efficient ways of inventoring these things is to make a risk analysis. The probability and the importance of every possible danger or risk are estimated. From this starting point, lines can be drawn toward prevention of these risks and further to collection management (ways of storage and display), and toward dealing with risks that have turned into reality.

This may sound complicated. Of course a disaster plan can also be very simple. In its simplest form it can contain preventive measurements like a well maintained and safe building, fire alarms, fire extinguishers, training of staff to handle these, emergency exits, and a list of addresses to which damaged objects can be sent.

Depending on the organisation, the disaster plan can be elaborated. It will then be more difficult for a paper conservator to finish the planning alone. Colleagues must be consulted, the management must be contacted. A disaster plan can take a hundred different shapes. In Teylers Museum we have chosen for three sections. The first section deals with prevention, the second section deals with the moment of disaster itself, the third section deals with the aftermath.

First we decided that although prevention is very important, things can go wrong nevertheless. Human lives are more important than objects in the collection,

however valuable. Therefore we started with the middle section, to make sure that people knew what to do and where to go in cases of emergency.

Next thing was to list the disasters for which to plan. We decided that a lot of disasters resulted in fire and evacuation, so we made groups out of those. Other things to list were bomb scare, gas leakage, water damage, theft of collection objects, and vandalism. After consulting the management we decided to leave out financial risks (theft of money and fraud) and publicity risks.

We contacted the police and fire brigade, and on their request made an Emergency Plan which answered questions as:

- where are the entrances and exits of the building?
 - how many people are in the building during daytime and at night?
 - who is to be contacted if anything happens?
- This proved also to be a good starting point to organise our thoughts on the subject.

While drafting instructions for the staff we discovered four things:

- it is extremely difficult to keep instructions simple and clear
- in dividing tasks between the staff, one should attach tasks to certain positions within the organisation instead of to certain persons. A person can leave the organisation, but the position usually stays.
- there is no such thing as a standard set of instructions, any general list of instructions needs adjustment to your own organisation.
- instructions must regularly be repeated in training to prevent them from being forgotten.

We also discovered that it was impossible to plan anything for the collections for the disastrous moment itself. The fire brigade, when asked, said it doesn't allow any evacuation of objects when it is in charge, "people out" is their aim. There is also no question of the fire brigade being careful with water when the fire alarm goes. However, this may be different in other countries.

For the collection this leaves prevention and salvage. Prevention is partly dictated by the government and the fire brigade, partly also the responsibility of the organisation. Here one can think of regular checks of the alarm system, electricity installation, fire extinguishers, roof and lightning conductor, of safety ashtrays and no-smoking areas, of fire-resistant depot doors and of wooden bookcases.

Salvage plans depend largely on the kind of materials to be salvaged. In archives these will be books, archival documents (in boxes or drawers), photographs, prints, drawings, microfilms and videotapes. Libraries will have mostly books, and museums contain a large variety of materials. In every organisation the salvage of information (e.g. registration records or address

records on software) must be thought of.

Much is already published on the salvage of wet books. For prints, drawings and photographs one must search for literature. For other materials the best thing to do seems to be to contact other conservators specializing in these materials. It is said that the first twenty four hours after a disaster are the most important to plan for. In these twenty four hours there is still panic, and it has been shown that most of the damage done during salvage occurs within this period.

When internal handling of the salvage job is possible, one can think of:

- how many people are necessary
- who can be contacted for advice
- in what room can the salvage be carried out (can a room be made free in case of emergency)
- how can the objects be brought there (handling instructions, trolleys, boxes etc.)
- what materials are needed for salvage (pallets, tissues, gloves, etc.)

When the salvage should be carried out by others, one can think of:

- which firms or persons (names and addresses to be checked regularly)
- what wrapping material is needed
- what transport is needed
- what information is needed (preprinted forms)

In short, planning for disaster needs step-by-step thinking, common sense, responsibility, the ear of the management, and time.