
Art Gallery to Emergency Response Centre – Our Response to the Christchurch Earthquakes

By Jenny Harper, Director Christchurch Art Gallery 21 March 2012

*Presented to the NSLA Disaster Preparedness Seminar, at the State Library of Queensland Auditorium
(edited for web publication)*

- 2 Opened May 2003
Unit of Christchurch City Council
6400+ collection items
Approx 45 FTEs
We have an ambitious temporary exhibition and publishing programme
Average number of visitors to our gallery during the 5 years prior to our closure last year was up 20% on the first 5 years of operation in the new building
We were on a roll just over a year ago – allowing for time closed – a conservative projection of 700,000 visitors for the 2010-11 financial year (incredible for a city our size)

- 3 An exhibition by senior Christchurch artist Andrew Drummond was due to close on 5 September 2010. However, at 4.35 am on Saturday 4 September 2010, Christchurch was struck by a magnitude 7.1 earthquake.

I was in Akaroa, but as soon as I knew the road back was passable, set off. I was expecting to see significant damage to works in this exhibition. There was surprisingly little anywhere and, in particular, the Drummond's, although delicate, fared pretty well, with only one small piece of coal falling off its shelf.

- 4 John Reynolds' work *Table of Dynasties* of 1652 individually painted and stacked small canvasses took a bit of a tumble. In fact, this became our staff's internal seismic indicator.
(Generally it took a 5 plus on the Richter scale shake for the pieces to tumble.)
Over the next few months we would restack parts of this work from time-to-time and we were surprised at its resilience in the shakes. However, following the earthquake on 22 February 2011 the novelty wore off and the work was returned to storage.

- 5 Civil Defence took over the building immediately following 4 September. Our lights were on because of the back-up generator and Council's weren't (at least no-one knew where the switches were...).
Computers and telephones, office chairs were systematically removed from our offices. Any available spaces were taken up with Civil Defence and also city council staff as the new Civic building, still not officially opened, sustained interior damage requiring extensive repairs before it was habitable.

- 6 All-in-all, the Gallery was only occupied for only ten days. But back then it seemed like a life sentence. We pushed forward with our plans for a large exhibition by renowned sculptor Ron Mueck.
- 7 On 14 September we opened again to the public. During the time we were closed we had begun demounting our downstairs exhibition spaces, ready for 'Ron Mueck'.

Being Civil Defence Headquarters was reassuring for our visitors. They saw that we had a safe building that could withstand a major event. But the earthquake had received worldwide attention.

Lenders to the forthcoming Ron Mueck exhibition were supportive, but naturally had some misgivings about sending valued works of art and their staff to an earthquake zone.

The local state of emergency which began on 5 September kept being extended (legislation needed to be passed through Parliament), but it was eventually lifted on 16 September.

The extension of the state of emergency in Christchurch and the lag in good information on some official websites made institutional lenders in Australia nervous about their staff travelling to New Zealand. I worked incredibly hard in those first two weeks to turn around perceptions that we might be an unsafe place to send art or people to.

Ron Mueck became by far the most successful paid exhibition in Christchurch – ever. Queues stretched out of the building, across the forecourt, and down the street. We had 135,000 visitors. Remarkably, 1 in 5 visitors were local residents (we have good data in support of this).

- 8 At the end of Ron Mueck, it was back to business as usual (BAU). We set about installing our next season of shows, one of which was the ominously titled 'De-Building'. This exhibition was themed around a moment usually hidden from gallery-goers – the time when the show ends, the doors close and the exhibition take-down begins.

So we opened De-Building, Leo Bensemann, and Van der Velden's Otira series) on 10 February 2011, 5 months after the September earthquake. It was a deliberately big celebration...

2011 was going to be a good year, we thought.

9-10 EARTHQUAKE 22 February

On February 22nd 2011, however, a NATIONAL EMERGENCY was declared. The Christchurch quake map is a popular web site even now, 10,000 seismic events later.

February's earthquake was very different to September's. It was a busy working day; Tuesday lunchtime; there were a lot of people about. But this time, we were checking that family were alive.

Communications were down or delayed, some people didn't hear from family for hours. It was a nightmare.

Essential staff and those who were able to stay became vital to the set up of the Emergency Operation Centre.

There are a lot of stories: one of our staff member's wives was on level 5 of the CTV building, but survived with considerable bruising.

Another had to go and pick up two young teenagers from their inner city school along Cashel Mall. The Central city and east side of Christchurch was like a war zone.

This time the Art Gallery building suffered some damage, but it was still strong and operational. A National Crisis Management Centre was set up in the basement of the Beehive and the CDEM set up in the gallery again, this time within 20 minutes of the earthquake.

11 Foyer Art Gallery 12.58pm February 2011:

- children crouching like turtles; adults fallen.
- ceiling tiles collapsed
- the suspended ceiling became a risk
- anything not tied down fell over or rolled about.
- After any event like this you need to capture CCTV footage and take still photos of the damage, mainly for insurance purposes, but also as a learning tool...

12 Art Gallery Shop 22 February 2011:

- display units slid around in the shop;
- fixtures and fittings giving way made the most mess
- We didn't have communications immediately and we didn't know how bad things were.

13 From Ron Mueck to Emergency HQ – this time for 7 months

- Staff responses were unpredictable
- Water AND LIQUEFACTION was everywhere; vehicles snaking along the road, and along the footpath.

- 14** After having worked all night, these soldiers are sleeping in the gallery corridors....
Cordons around the city.
- 15** Security access cards were vital to get to and from the Gallery. We were dealing with guards at the cordons many of whom were Army personnel from overseas;
Security was 24/7, security fences were put up;
Access cards were vital to get to and from the Gallery (and we've now issued staff with two – one to keep at home).
- 16** This is the ground floor exhibition space with CCC staff, HR, Events, Planning teams, where the van der Velden exhibition was.

Staff who could be at work had masses to do.

It was important that we secured damaged and vulnerable works of art, so they weren't damaged further with aftershocks;
we were also required to clear gallery spaces to make room for Civil Defence teams working in search and rescue & getting the city's infrastructure running again;
Some gallery staff were almost immediately seconded to work for recovery units.

At this stage in a crisis, your building and business needs are simply secondary to the primary focus of the Civil Defence Emergency Team, but – as far as possible – you need to stay in control.

Blair Jackson, our deputy director was told the Army were about to take down the Van der Velden paintings, as they wanted the space for workers. He managed to dissuade them from this, promising that a gallery team would be there at 7.00 am.

- 17** **Andrew Drummond sculpture, de-installed by the army.**
In the first few days of occupation, Blair was also rung at midnight to be advised that the army had taken down the Andrew Drummond sculpture *Viewing Device, Counter Rotating*, hanging in our foyer.

(The army couldn't figure out how to take the post out of the ceiling and left the scissor lift under it, so for a while, the rumour was that this scissor lift was all that was holding the Gallery up!)

- 18** Sometimes there wasn't enough time to clear all of the art before a space needed to be occupied. In the background a sculpture by Cat Auburn.

- 19 This time damage to our galleries was more evident...**
 The galleries themselves were damaged to varying degrees (mostly ceiling panels, light tracks and gib-stopped wall joints).
 There was an issue of weight and number of light fittings on tracks.
 However, once again we were very lucky to escape with relatively little damage to works of art on display and in storage. Only 22 altogether sustained damage, mostly confined to chips and knocks to ceramic items and gilt frames. However, some works did fall from walls and plinths.
- 20** And others moved in storage...
- 21** Gallery ‘occupation’ by Civil Defence, CCC and CERA staff.
 The education space was commandeered and then more areas, foyer, and into office spaces and exhibition spaces. Logistics took over the loading bay.
 Later in the year (October 2011) we relocated collections to the downstairs area in red and directed our building maintenance systems to that location so the collection remained temperature and humidity controlled...
- 22 Foyer**
- 23 Under the stairs**
 There were people, people everywhere.
- 24** Daily foyer debriefings
- 25** We now have WiFi in the building – and it’s stayed.
- 26** Media briefings were held in the auditorium
 Prime Minister and Minister Gerry Brownlee here; The media were always wanting more light – and brought their own eventually.
- 27** As Emergency Headquarters, the gallery hosted a number of visitors and celebrities on morale-boosting visits: Russell Crowe, Rachel Hunter, Richie McCaw and Prince William all came to give Christchurch a thumbs up.
- 28** Catering from the gallery’s café
- 29** The Royal Flush on Gloucester Street
- 30 The loading bay**
 The Loading Bay was managed by the Logistics section. It was full of bottles of water, vests, steel cap boots, hard hats, food, copy paper, torches, first aid kits, blankets. Rubbish quadrupled...

31 Bikes

Workers at the Gallery building used every possible space...

32 Getting our house in order**33 Librarian's office post 22 Feb 2011****34 Climate control****35 Pest control became an issue...**

Cleaning in our gallery took on a new meaning when there were 400 people, basically there for 24 hours a day.

We needed to double pest control measures: birds, ants, silverfish all had to be eradicated;

Workers, who were not art gallery staff, had to be reminded where it was OK to eat and not eat.

There was no real staff area, no meeting rooms; staff were so busy they just sat at their desks.

36 Art salvage

Removal of Passport to the New Millennium, Christchurch Convention centre by Sean Duxfield and workers from the demolition crew.

37 In the aftermath of a disaster, a museum or gallery needs to respond to its community, which includes staff, visitors, collectors, institutional colleagues and artists.

Government Life Building in Cathedral Square. Tuesday 3 May.

The owner of this building is very philanthropic and at the time of the February earthquake 8 artists had studio spaces in this building.

We were allowed in for 5 hours only, so each artist was allowed 30 minutes for themselves, a helper, the engineer and a rescue worker to gather as much material as they could from their studio spaces.

Numerous gallery staff helped the artist's in this building. Access to the studio spaces was by a completely darkened narrow stairwell using a head torch and up 8 stories and your 30 minutes started from the moment you entered the building.

Large canvases were removed from their stretchers to enable them to be rolled for easier removal.

We managed 2 trips in the 30 minutes with the engineer and rescue worker also carrying art down the stairs using large wool sacks. No white gloves here!

38 An exhibitions technician helping owners salvage art from the Brooke Gifford Gallery...

39 **Disaster preparedness**

40 **BCP Business Continuity Plan**

Our former plan (180 pages long) had a tab for earthquakes, tsunami, floods, etc. We laughed somewhat hollowly when we saw what was written for in the event of an earthquake...

*Warning times may be brief or there may be none;
Earthquakes may be accompanied by a loud rumbling sound.*

And it went on about listening to battery-operated radios and waiting for people to tell you what to do. It was not at all like our experience...

In fact, what we had was a perfectly good salvage of collections document....

We learned from experience that a large-scale disaster that affects your organisation will also affect your staff in different and sometimes unpredictable ways as well – and your plan should allow for this.

- Our previous **Disaster Preparedness Plan** aligned tasks with specific staff members. The reality of what we faced was different. A number of staff were unable or unwilling to come into the central city in those first days.
- A communication strategy had to be made up as we went along. Yet, in the wake of a disaster more than anything people need information.
- Staff need to know that their families and homes are safe; families need to know that staff are safe.
- Staff need to know whether the organisation needs them to stay and help and in what way.
- And slightly after the initial response, lenders need to know their works are safe (or not); and your wider circle of supporters will be anxious to know that the public collection is safe.

A given staff member's personal circumstances and emotional state will dictate their ability to respond. You can't make assumptions made based on family circumstances, proximity to the gallery or your prior assessment of their strength of character (nor the degree of responsibility held within the organisation or designated tasks in the salvage team).

Some staff members with nominated roles weren't able to come to assist with the salvage of collection items. People were extremely stressed and poor quality information flew around.

People have their own ideas about what's important at these times; the organisation they work for may not be at the top of that list. People won't

put the needs of the organisation ahead of the immediate needs of their families – and why should they?

After a disaster, the most senior person able to do so should call staff and find out how they are and assess their ability to help if required. During our ring around (within 48 hours of the February 'quake) we found that:

- some staff had left town;
- a number had broken homes, no roof on their house; and
- some were looking after neighbours and friends.
- Of course, schools were closed, so some staff had children at home with them.

Our plan now specifies roles and responsibilities to be assumed by those available and willing, rather than one based on people's job and organisational hierarchies.

Ensure that key staff have work cell phones.

Managers need their staff contact details. The gallery or museum or library needs to keep an up-to-date contact list, including next-of-kin, just in case – and, like a gallery's lenders' list, it needs to be updated and accessible in different formats.

We've also set up an email list whereby we can contact all staff with a single short message by text to their cell phones...

41 New Business continuity plan developed...

Priority list of collection works has been developed:

- 1 value
- 2 vital
- 3 vulnerable

42 Disaster bins

Protecting valuable art works at a time of utilities failure disaster bins. Open and inspect everything reasonably regularly and have it ready to use...

43 Gallery staff Evac Packs

44 Slipped paintings in store

45 Protecting valuable art works – S hooks

I don't want anyone here to think that our gallery was not using what is considered top-flight gallery practice in our hanging systems. (They were like yours – and standard in Australasia).

However, after 4 September we began researching hanging devices in other institutions in earthquake-prone areas. After discussions with colleagues at the Getty and also in Japan we selected a combination of systems to use for storage and display.

The storage hooks are made in Japan, and the manufacturer generously donated \$10,000 worth of the devices to acknowledge both the Christchurch and Japanese quakes of 2011.

- 46** The new 'S' hook system is superior to the cleats we used, but they cause the paintings to swing a little more. We have devised a simple Dacron-padded corner to ensure this movement is minimised.
- 47** **Gallery Apartments, Gloucester Street**
You realise that in a real disaster, your neighbours' problems may become your problems. The Gallery Apartments next door to us opened in 2007 (14 storeys and 43 metres high). Wall = 2 feet away from the eastern wall of the gallery.
- 48** **Parapet strengthening**
...involved temporary works with bracing repair within the roof line. This was done before demolition of next door apartments proceeded.
- 49** Relocation of the collection – empty storage bays
- 50** Library sealed to protect from dust of demolition next door.
- 51** **Apartment demolition**
- 52** **23 December**
All plans are plans 'in progress', however. I put this slide in to remind me of the 23 December earthquakes – in many ways, so cruel.
There was another 6.0 earthquake and 1 set of foyer doors shattered. Friday afternoon before the end-of-year break, so a quick fire solution was required.
- And, despite our planning, we were caught short in ways we hadn't imagined before...
- No longer civil defence HQ, we were essentially locked out of the Gallery for 2 weeks. Most engineers had left town for the holidays and we could not get an engineers check.
- Now we have an agreement with our Council engineer that after a magnitude 5 quake, we will have an engineer's check within a few hours.
- 53** Gallery without walls

- 54** Website enhancements – BLOG.
Utilised the gallery’s website and twitter to keep in touch and communicating to our audiences.
In particular staff have been actively blogging in Notes from the Bunker.

Billy Connelly wearing one of Frizzell’s iconic Mickey to Tiki tee-shirts, available only from the CAG shop.

Collection online enhanced in all sorts of ways...
- 55** Collection online – Rita Angus’s *Cass*
- 56** My Gallery – ‘My Gallery’ function activated (not shown here in edited online version).
- 57** ‘Wish you were here idea’ (evolved from a MOMA initiative here saved into a My Gallery format)
- 58** Review of forms include a new copyright agreement and new loan agreement.
- 59** Publications: *Bulletins 165 and 166*
- 60** **Outer Spaces** Julia Morison’s *Aibohphobia*
We have reactivated our Outer-Spaces programme which involves the placement of temporary projects around our exterior site.
This work by local artist Julia Morison has been installed on the ‘Bunker’ which before the quake provided external lift and stair access to our below ground car park.

Ronnie van Hout – *The Creation of the World* (not shown here in edited online version)
- 61** Matt Akehurst – You are here

Wayne Youle – *I seem to have temporarily misplaced my sense of humour* and photo from the opening event (not shown here in edited online version)

END