

# Building an Emergency Plan

A Guide for Museums  
and Other Cultural Institutions



THE GETTY CONSERVATION INSTITUTE

## Case 2 Museo de Arte Popular Americano, Facultad de Arte, Universidad de Chile



Front view of the newly constructed building of the Museo de Arte Popular Americano, Facultad de Arte, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile. Courtesy of the Museo de Arte Popular Americano.

Information for this case was provided by conservator Johanna Maria Theile Bruhns, coordinator of the restoration program of the Facultad de Arte, Universidad de Chile, Santiago. She was also an adviser in the development of this book.

**Location:** Santiago, Chile

**Director:** Silvia Rios

**Area:** 7,449 square feet (692 square meters)

**Employees:** 12, plus students from the Facultad de Arte restoration program

**Collection:** Textiles, wood, sculpture, prints, ceramic, ethnographic and folklore artifacts

**Impetus for emergency plan:** A devastating earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale that hit Santiago in March 1985. The earthquake killed at least 146 people, injured more than one million others, and destroyed the museum building and much of the collection. The undamaged and salvaged items in the collection were moved to another museum until a new building opened in 1997.

**Sources consulted:** *Emergency Measures and Damage Assessment After an Earthquake* by Pierre Pichard.<sup>6</sup> Also, S. A. S. Enrique Strahenberg, then-director of the Schloss Eferding in Eferding, Austria, who happened to be in Chile during the March 1985 earthquake, shared his institution's emergency preparedness materials.

**Potential hazards faced:** Earthquakes, fires, floods, political demonstrations

**Emergency plan highlights:** The plan is divided into two major areas: people and collections. It describes the evacuation procedures, designates employee tasks, and describes where emergency supplies are stored. It contains maps of the museum and phone numbers of all employees and of police and fire officials. Security guards are expected

to guide people out of exhibit areas and the library, whereas specific staff members have been assigned that task for nonpublic office areas.

**Annual budget for emergency planning and implementation:** US\$1,000 for first year of implementation

**Lessons learned in the process of developing an emergency plan:**

- Regular meetings with fire officials can be useful.
- Regular drills allow gradual refinement of the emergency plan.
- Employees should carry identification cards to avoid being mistaken for demonstrators during political protests or for spectators during emergencies.
- Emergency preparedness and response materials developed by other museums should be consulted for ideas.
- Multiple copies of damage assessment forms must be available in case electricity goes out during an emergency, rendering photocopiers inoperable.
- A systematic evacuation procedure allows employees to pack priority objects, documents, and so on, quickly and to locate them afterward.
- Security officers must have access to a list of high-priority objects in case an emergency occurs when no institution administrators are available.
- Plastic sheets and stones, for use as weights, should be stored in offices in case the roof leaks or is damaged.
- The institution should have an alarm system so staff can alert police during a robbery.

**Building the team:** Memories of the 1985 earthquake proved to be an effective inspiration and motivation

for the museum to launch its emergency preparedness and response program. With the passage of time, the daily challenge of running the museum has taken precedence, causing some team members to lose their enthusiasm and drive in maintaining the program. Consequently, emergency planning leaders have had to find ways to restimulate that interest and concern. "After the earthquake, it was very easy to convince the museum staff to participate in emergency planning," says conservator Johanna Maria Theile Bruhns. "The difficulty now is continuing emergency planning day by day. When you don't have problems, it seems everybody starts to relax a little too much. It is difficult to make them realize that you have to think about emergencies even when nothing is happening."

**How the plan stood up to the test:** "We learned from the earthquake in 1985 that it is important to have a good and easy-to-follow emergency plan ahead of time, one that everyone understands," explains Theile Bruhns. "By the time a disaster happens, it is too late to come up with a plan, not only because the building can collapse but also because you lose the ability to think clearly." The museum conducts regular emergency drills, which has helped familiarize staff with the process. "At first, the staff didn't feel secure about what they needed to do and whether they were doing it well, but now that we are having drills regularly, we don't have any problems at all," Theile Bruhns adds.

**Words of advice:** As Theile Bruhns points out, "In working with other museums, we realize that collaboration is important, as we are small, with very little money. Together, we wield more power and can obtain assistance more easily."