

# Beyond Disaster Response

## Public Policy Challenge of the New Millennium

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Every community throughout the world is subject to environmental hazards that threaten people's lives and property or drastically change the landscape around them. Although some areas face a different variety of hazards or level of risk than others, nature is an uncontrollable force that can catch even the most well planned community off guard. The impacts of natural hazards last year served as a dramatic exit to the 20th century and a stark reminder of the important ecological relationship humankind shares with the environment. Hurricane Floyd, the most severe and geographically extensive disaster of 1999, demonstrated the widespread cultural and economic destruction due to years, even centuries, of building in vulnerable locations. Land uses based on demographics, structural systems, the design of the built environments, and natural and geographic features are a few of the most important factors that can affect risks to life and safety, property, and the resulting sociological, psychological, environmental, and cultural impacts of disasters.

The many lessons learned from past disasters have resulted in crucial changes to the ways in which communities and governments prepare, mitigate, respond, and recover from disasters. As we enter the new millennium, both the fields of emergency management and preservation have advanced beyond just response to encompass planning activities and a more proactive approach to their overall mission. Thus, the year 2000 is a seminal opportunity for beginning to make significant strides at the local and state level in protecting historic and cultural properties from disasters before they occur and developing working relationships with emergency managers that parallel or exceed the relationships forged at the national level.

Major disasters have devastated historic resources in recent years, both in the United States and elsewhere in the world. In 1989,

Hurricane Hugo swept across the Atlantic coast, ravaging historic districts in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as annihilating 62 of the 330 historic sites on nearby Sullivan's Island. A rare 500-year flood in southern Georgia in 1994, the state's worst flooding disaster on record, submerged 250 historic properties, mostly commercial districts and private residences. As recently as last September, Hurricane Floyd flooded entire historic districts, such as in Franklin, Virginia, and completely destroyed the collections of several libraries and museums. It is not only major disasters, however, that damage historic resources. Smaller localized hazards, such as fires or local flooding, are much more frequent and can persistently destroy historic resources.

The loss of important historical and cultural properties is of great concern to communities in natural disasters. The most immediate concerns are the risks that a damaged historic property places on human life and the personal loss it inflicts upon the property owner. From a broader perspective, however, destroyed historic and cultural resources remove knowledge of the past for public benefit and study in the future. Because of the social, economic, and physical impacts to the surrounding landscape in a disaster, communities rely on their historic built environment to reinforce the historical connection with their community and offer some comfort in the face of their losses. In many areas, historic resources also play a role in the local economy and are an essential component of the local tourism industry. They are a viable part of a community as residences, businesses, infrastructure, government facilities, schools, parks, and museums, among others.

Unfortunately, historic and cultural resources are often uniquely vulnerable to disasters. The same characteristics of location, resource type, design, materials, and function that define their historic significance also create special circumstances and needs when faced with

natural hazards. This is not to suggest that historic resources are inherently more vulnerable to disasters than modern resources. Both historic and modern (post-1950) properties face issues associated with lack of maintenance, weak building codes or lack of enforcement, improper use, hazardous locations, and other similar concerns. However, these issues tend to appear more frequently in historic properties and are often exacerbated by neglect, aging materials, and unique resource types (such as archeological sites) that are more sensitive to hazardous events.

Planning for and responding to hazardous events coupled with the significant pattern of loss from past disasters demand a relationship between local emergency managers and cultural resource managers that is grounded in common goals. One must only delve slightly below the surface to discover that both emergency managers and cultural resource managers share the desire to prevent the physical and economic destruction of communities. Building codes, land-use issues, and quality of life are just a few of the many issues emergency officials and cultural resource managers have in common. This bond should serve as a catalyst for the development of creative approaches to facilitate a reduction in human suffering and property damage and reduce the overall impact of disasters on community well-being and vitality.

Several current trends exist in emergency management that can be integrated into a disaster planning philosophy for preservation. First, the foundation of disaster management is that local authorities are generally the “first responders” to disasters and are often the authorities with the principal legal responsibility for disaster response. Thus, the structure of emergency management follows a “bottom up” organization.<sup>1</sup> State and federal resources become involved only as localities have insufficient resources to respond and recover from the event(s). In fact, the vast majority of all disasters do not necessi-

tate federal assistance for response and recovery. Second, emergency management has changed its focus from a disaster-specific approach to a more “all-hazards” approach, which streamlines the organization and efficiency of programs and policies.<sup>2</sup> This approach has slowly taken hold among legislators and is an important component of federal emergency planning efforts.

Next, a gradational shift has occurred within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during the Clinton Administration that has been purveyed to state and local management agencies. Under the guidance of James Lee Witt, FEMA’s current director, the Agency has expanded its focus from a costly response and recovery approach to mitigation and planning activities to reduce the risks of disasters before they occur. FEMA now spends approximately 15% of its disaster assistance



*Waioli Mission Hall (c. 1830), Hanalei, Island of Kauai, Hawaii. Damage from Hurricane Iniki in 1992 destroyed the lanai (covered porch) that ran completely around the building. The building was restored and structurally strengthened using FEMA funding. Photo by Randolph Langenbach, FEMA.*

funds on state and local long-term mitigation activities.<sup>3</sup>

The newest initiative in FEMA is entitled “Project Impact: Disaster Resistant Communities,” an integrative approach to disaster management, that acknowledges the concepts of mitigation, preparedness, and response and recovery are not separate, but cyclical. The specific purpose of this initiative is to build local, state, and federal partnerships in communities through mitigation and preparedness in order to reduce the often tremendous costs of response and recovery.

*Hurricane Iniki in 1992 ripped the façade from this one-story vernacular store building on Kauia, Hawaii. The utility pole prevented the façade from falling onto the sidewalk and road. Photo courtesy David W. Look.*



The initiative is grounded in the philosophy that the best means for the public and private sectors to obtain a “disaster resistant” community is to:

- Identify the hazards in the community.
- Assess the community’s vulnerability to those hazards.
- Develop preparedness and mitigation strategies to improve the ability of the built environment to withstand those hazards.
- Form local, regional, state, and national public/private partnerships to provide a medium for sharing ideas, developing mitigation strategies, and enhancing response and recovery coordination capabilities in the event of a disaster.

Cultural resource managers and emergency managers should integrate these trends in emergency management into efforts in the preservation field to address the threat disasters pose to historic resources. In the past decade, designated by the United Nations as the International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction, efforts at the national level to address disasters’ effects on cultural resources have been impressive. Prior to the two major disasters in 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake and Hurricane Hugo, the relationship between emergency managers and preservationists was virtually non-existent. These were the largest disasters that significantly affected

historic properties in a period when both the fields of preservation and emergency management had become firmly established.

The severity of these disasters coupled with the general lack of preparedness in the cultural community and emergency management’s sudden need for technical preservation expertise spawned a national effort to make disaster preparedness and response a priority in the preservation field. National organizations concerned with cultural objects, collections, and historic properties developed conferences, workshops, and educational materials to distribute to cultural institutions to use in preparing for and responding to disasters. More recently, FEMA has worked to bring cultural resource managers and emergency management officials together to address cultural resources in disasters. One of the primary outcomes of this effort is the National Task Force on Emergency Response, founded by FEMA, Heritage Preservation, and the Getty Conservation Institute, which consists of numerous federal agencies and national organizations who combine resources to assist communities and their cultural institutions after a disaster.

Presently, most disaster preparedness and response activities for historic resources at the local level, when they exist at all, are simply intra-institutional, and provide little coordination with governments, other preservation organizations, planners, or emergency management officials. Focused mostly on either preparedness or response issues for a specific disaster event (such as a flood or earthquake), the plans usually outline ways in which the specific institution will respond to a disaster that affects its own historic properties. The comprehensiveness of the plans varies, and the level to which the plan is updated or practiced is fairly low.

Although these intra-institutional disaster-specific preparedness efforts should be applauded for the concern they have focused on disaster issues and the creative approaches they have employed often with little resources, there are still many limitations. First, institutions do not benefit from the collective knowledge and capabilities of many similar groups in a locality, region, or state. For example, a large museum that has expended significant resources to develop a disaster plan may be able to share their plan with smaller local museums or may offer resources, such as emergency storage facilities or

technical assistance, to other institutions in a disaster.

Second, although a well-written and rehearsed plan may meet the needs of an institution, it does not provide a means for preservation education and advocacy for the key individuals responsible for implementing emergency management plans and policies. The institution may be able to meet its own needs in a disaster, but police, fire, and emergency officials may not fully understand how their response effort can assist or hinder the institution's needs.

Third, the primary goal of most intra-institutional plans is merely to be prepared to respond to a problem rather than prevent, or mitigate, the effects of disasters. For example, an institution with substantial archives stored in the basement and highly susceptible to flooding may develop a plan to salvage documents in case of a flood rather than develop ways to flood proof the building or move the archives to a higher level.

Finally, institutions do not benefit enough from the opportunity to learn how the emergency management process functions, and thus do not integrate their planning and technological capabilities into a larger local network. A thorough understanding of local emergency management policies and procedures is essential for cultural resource managers to implement effective preparedness, mitigation, and response and recovery strategies. In addition, a general awareness of natural and man-made hazards and the types of damage they cause to historic resources should be undertaken to further facilitate effective policy development and the protection of historic resources. It is impossible to plan for events that are not completely understood, especially emergencies. These limitations alone suggest the benefits of cooperative planning.

Local historic preservation advocacy groups also must not limit their efforts in disasters, whether in providing technical assistance to homeowners, educational materials and press releases to the public, or the salvage of historic materials (among

many others), to what the organization or group can accomplish internally. Many local, state, and national public/private organizations have created an impressive assortment of information about historic properties and disasters that can be used by local groups. Local advocacy groups also have the opportunity to speak on behalf of preservationists to convey the importance of preservation and the needs of the preservation community in a disaster to local emergency management officials. Imagine what could be accomplished by building public and private partnerships in the community to discuss specific disaster issues related to cultural resources and then sharing each organization's creative ideas and lessons learned.

It is important for those interested in historic preservation at the local level to acknowledge the threat natural and man-made hazards pose to historic resources and actively seek ways to reduce this threat. This acknowledgment requires forging new relationships within communities and developing local capabilities for assuming this role. The development of a local or regional advisory group or task force on disaster planning and preparedness for historic resources may be the best place to begin establishing new relationships. In many cases, communities may already have local emergency planning committees that concerned members of the cultural community may be able to attend. In addition to emergency managers, an advisory group may include local planners (including preservation planners), environmental resource organizations, building officials, floodplain managers, representatives from fire and police departments, cultural institutions,

*Richmond Inn, Miami, Florida. This building suffered extensive damage from Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Photo courtesy FEMA.*



and historic preservation organizations, and others as appropriate. Clearly, for those 156 communities designated by FEMA as Project Impact communities, a natural network already exists for incorporating a historic preservation and cultural resource component to disaster resistance.

Developing local capabilities for cultural resource managers to address disaster management issues may be the most fundamental and difficult element of developing successful planning efforts. For some communities, the local preservation planner is well suited to this task. The preservation planner's relationship to the local government, access to state and federal resources, and knowledge of community preservation planning issues make this position ideal for coordinating the effort.

Information exchange is the key outcome of successful partnerships, and all parties have plenty to learn from each other. Imparting the significant relationship of cultural resource management to local emergency managers may not be a simple task. The preservation community must seize the initiative to manifest the common goals and benefits of successful coordination. It is important for local emergency officials to know the priorities the preservation community has set for the community's historic properties and to have contact information for architects and engineers who have knowledge of historic structural systems. In addition, cultural resource managers should understand the nature of public health and safety activities and when preservation intervention is appropriate and should have access to data concerning hazard and vulnerability analyses, as well as knowledge of current initiatives and programs to reduce risk to the community's built environment. Advanced technology such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) may facilitate the exchange of this information and provide a basis for more informed, consistent, timely, and accurate decisions.<sup>4</sup> Not only can GIS provide the locations of historic resources in floodplains and other hazardous locations, but can incorporate historic resources into loss estimation models and other forms of risk analysis.

As the emergency management field develops, communities have much more control over

the extent of damage caused by a disaster, allowing more integrative planning with special interests such as historic preservation. The grassroots nature and communal focus of historic preservation offers unique and challenging solutions to community problems that affect disaster risks. The response phase of a disaster has become much smaller, subsumed by the preparedness and mitigation activities before a disaster, as well as the extensive recovery phase after a disaster. Preservationists must use these other disaster phases to the fullest extent in order to make the needs of historic properties before and after a disaster known to local officials and to create an atmosphere where preservation involvement in disasters is natural and expected. The result? Safer and more livable communities.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard T. Sylves and William L. Waugh, *Disaster Management in the United States and Canada*, second edition (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publishers, Ltd., 1996), 347.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>4</sup> Ann Margaret Esnard and E. Bruce McDougall, "Common Ground for Integrating Planning Theory and GIS Topics," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 17 (1997), 55.

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