

Blue Shield Australia & DisACT Symposium 2010

Disaster Proofing Heritage Collections

Report by Ian Batterham, NAA

This Symposium was held at the National Library of Australia on 6/5/2010 and comprised a full day of speakers. Around 100 people attended: from the private sector, the public sector as well as from professional organisations and volunteer organisations. Amongst attendees were conservators, building managers, collection managers and curators. There were representatives from museums, libraries, galleries and archives; both large and small, regional and metropolitan.

Jan Fullerton Director General of the National Library of Australia gave a welcoming address and then Senator Kate Lundy launched proceedings. Senator Lundy reminisced about the fire at the NLA in 1984. At that time she was a labourer at the NLA removing asbestos from the roof space and was called in after the fire to help with the cleanup. She said that experience; at a time when the NLA had little in the way of disaster preparation, had opened her eyes to the need to plan for disasters. She ended by thanking us for the disasters we had averted and in advance for the disasters we will deal with in the future.

At this point Bernard Kertesz invited the CEOs and other representatives of local cultural institutions onto the stage to sign the Letter of Intent on Cooperative Disaster Preparedness. This letter takes the place of the Memorandum of Understanding that has been in place for many years.

Sue Hutley, CEO of ALIA spoke next, launching the ALIA Guidelines on disaster preparedness. These guidelines, available on the ALIA website, were developed in the wake of the experience of the Victorian bushfires. ALIA had been highly active in the after the bushfires replacing books lost and giving assistance and advice.

Detlev Lueth of the NAA next gave a brief history of Blue Shield from its establishment in 1954 through its involvement in high profile disasters such as the Chile earthquake and the Cologne archive collapse. Detlev concluded by launching the Blue Shield Australia website (www.blueshieldaustralia.org.au) and drawing attention to the Blue Shield Facebook page and Twitter site.

Bernard Kertesz of the AWM next gave a short history of DisACT. Bernard told us that the initial impetus for the group came from the ANAO report of 1998 and that the group had begun informally and had progressed to a more formal arrangement covered by an MOU. He pointed out the achievements of the group including regular disaster recovery courses, quarterly meetings, seminars, a website and listserv. Bernard stated that the Letter of Intent was the next step in the evolution of the group and that in the future they would be looking to improve the website, establish more partnerships and concentrate more creatively on outreach.

After a frenetic morning tea where we tried to catch up with as many old friends as we could we went back in to hear Roger Trudgeon Manager/Curator of the Gold Museum in Ballarat talk about the MOU that has been established amongst cultural

institutions in the Ballarat region. Again the impetus for the creation was an actual disaster, in this case a flood at the Gold Museum on 1/1/2007. The MOU was seen as a way for groups with low resource levels to better prepare and respond to disasters by pooling resources. In the future the group hopes to institute a number of initiatives including a shared register of resources, a joint exhibition, a disaster plan writing session, joint grant applications and visits to member institutions. Roger also threw out the challenge to attendees to devise a better disaster bin, pointing out that it is hard reaching down to the bottom of the currently used wheelie bins.

Kim Morris of Art and Archival Pty Ltd next gave a talk based on his wide experience in training for, and responding to, disasters right around Australia. Kim pondered the reasons for the increase in awareness and activity in the area of disaster preparedness over the last few decades. He cited high profile disasters such as the Katherine flood and the NLA fire as providing an impetus but also a range of administrative drivers such as removal of government indemnity, the greater emphasis placed on collection access, the auditing of collections and business continuity planning. Kim charged those present to look at their own disaster plans and to make them more flexible and bringing them in line with corporate strategies. He concluded by saying that the preventive effort needs more support at the higher levels of organisations.

Alexandra Ellem of the NGV, and Victorian Division president of the AICCM, next gave a report on the AICCM's response to the Victorian bushfires. She started with a quote from Mark Twain along the lines of "The calamity that comes is never the one that we have prepared ourselves for". Alex described the various response activities which included updating the AICCM web page, sending out a press release, doing radio interviews and preparing a brochure entitled "After a Fire". Also praised were local AICCM members who went on working bees; spread the word at recovery centres and community events; and helped out at conservation clinics. Alex singled out the NAA who were very forthcoming with staff time and materials. She concluded by saying that the entire experience had strengthened the preparedness of the AICCM to deal with such emergencies.

Kay Soderland, president of the AICCM next spoke on her vision for a practical on-the-ground network to respond to disasters in small institutions. The proposed model would involve a 24/7 hotline, a co-ordinator and standardised forms and reports. Assistance would be requested by the affected institution and if needed a 3-man team could be despatched to assist. The acronym HERO (Heritage Emergency Response Organisation) was considered but rejected in favour of HEART (Heritage Emergency Action Response Team). Kay recommended the team would respond to both cultural institutions and to individuals, she also thought the proposal could go global and that every country should 'Have a HEART'.

The last session before lunch was from Zoe Scott, Manager of the WA Museum, Boulder/Kalgoorlie. Her talk, entitled 'Boulder Rocks' was about the very recent earthquake that affected various collecting institutions in the town. The institutions all run along Burt St Boulder which itself runs along an active fault line. The ground underneath has also been heavily mined in the past. The earthquake caused many ceilings to fall in onto exhibits and although the damage was 'dry' it rained two days later. Zoe gave a list of lessons learnt which ranged from turning off power and water before entering the building, to keeping the media informed. She stressed the need for

a good disaster plan and for disaster bins. The talk concluded with a plea for supplies to help with the cleanup after the, very recent, disaster. Currently DisACT is looking at sending a truckload of materials across.

After lunch Julian Bickersteth of ICS took the chair and the focus of the Symposium moved on to environmental control. Julian is chair of the AICCM Taskforce looking at environmental standards. Julian pointed out that one major consideration for any new environmental standard for Australia is the area of international exhibition loans. Australia is a net importer of exhibitions and the setting of standards not in keeping with loan requirements for international loaning institutions could endanger such loans. Julian gave an overview of the current state of environmental standards both in Australia and worldwide. He introduced a range of acronyms including EGOR (Environmental Guidelines, Opportunities and Risks) and the NMDC (National Museums Directors Conference) in the UK. He also talked of the Bizot Group, also known as the International Group of Organizers of Large-scale Exhibitions, which comprises the directors of the world's leading museums and galleries. Julian's message was that there is a strong demand internationally for a change in environmental standards to reduce both the costs and the environmental impact of the storage and display of cultural material. Julian also stated that new guidelines do not assume that air conditioning is essential for maintaining safe conditions and that natural and sustainable environmental controls are being considered. By the end of 2010 there will be a new European Committee for Standardization (CEN) environmental standard and a new environmental guideline in support of BS5454. Julian concluded by outlining the AICCM Taskforce's methodology: gathering information, collating all projects being undertaken in Australia where environmental guidelines have an impact, developing guidelines for Australian conditions and ensuring they are aligned with international standards.

Jennifer Lloyd next spoke about issues relating to the need for Commonwealth institutions to report meaningful preservation information to their administering departments. In particular the measure, required for annual reports, of time collections spent in appropriate conditions. The current situation is that different institutions are measuring this in different ways; also, it is easy to alter the measure by interpreting the definition in different ways. Jennifer said the challenge for institutions is to reach agreement on a standard for storage and protocol for measurement.

Eric Archer of the NMA spoke next about work the Museum is doing towards the construction of a new storage building. Only a small portion of the NMA collection is on display and the bulk of the collection is in three storage buildings in the Canberra suburb of Mitchell. These buildings are getting old and their air conditioning systems are showing their age. The proposed new building will be constructed based on principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) and will be completely passive. It is aimed to achieve 0.25 air changes per day, will be a box-in-box construction, simple but robust and super-insulated but not heavy. Conditions aimed for are:

RH 45%±5% with a maximum change of 1% in 24 hours

Temp 10° - 20°C with a maximum change of 2°C in 24 hours

It is hoped that the collection itself will have some buffering capacity and will thus help maintain conditions. Accessing the collection is a major consideration as conditions may be adverse to staff comfort.

Eric then passed over to Greer Gehrt from the NMA who talked about the study tour she and Eric had made to Europe to look at what's being done there in the way of passive environmental control. Amongst others she gave the example of 'the cocoon' at the Natural History Museum in London which utilises the principle of boxes within boxes. The chief messages she finished with were that passive control is achievable in Canberra's climate and that we should broaden our range of acceptable conditions.

The final session of the day was a panel discussion chaired by Julian Bickersteth. All topics that had been discussed during the day were open for questions and discussion. Unfortunately, as part of the panel I did not take notes on this portion. Needless to say discussion was wide ranging and robust.