

Caring for communities following the Canterbury earthquakes: how the GLAM sector responded

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Abstract

Catastrophic events can lead to innovation within organisations and communities, helping both to recover, move on and thrive again. The 2010-2011 Christchurch and Canterbury earthquakes were the most disastrous sequence of events in New Zealand's recent history, and institutions in the GLAM sector had to respond to the needs of affected communities in innovative and reassuring ways. Mainly using Christchurch City Libraries and the Air Force Museum of New Zealand as case studies, but also considering other Christchurch GLAM institutions, this paper examines the roles these organisations took within communities in the aftermath of the quakes. Christchurch City Libraries is a large public library network with over 20 service points which were all affected in different ways after the quakes, whereas the Air Force Museum is sited on the former Wigram air force base (which brought its own responsibilities) on the relatively unaffected west side of the city. For these two organisations sometimes simply being open, creating a sense of routine and connecting people to something familiar, was enough. At other times it was a case of taking services to damaged areas, running special community events, collaborating with other organisations, rescuing precious heritage or hosting organisations that were facilitating the recovery effort or providing vital services. How staff and communities reacted to these activities will be considered. The talk will then widen out to examine the expectations of organisations in the GLAM sector following a major event – are different types of organisation expected to react to community needs in varying ways? How far can, or should, a GLAM organisation assist in the aftermath of a disaster, and what lessons can be taken forward for the rest of the country?

The 2010 and 2011 sequence of earthquakes in Canterbury and Christchurch are arguably the most significant events in recent New Zealand history, the repercussions of which will be felt for many years. There are many stories to be told about these events and many lessons to be learned. This paper considers how a range of institutions in the Canterbury gallery, library, archive and museum sector cared for communities in the weeks and months after the earthquakes. Many communities, whether based on locality or a common interest, were in need after the earthquakes and institutions in the GLAM sector stepped up. For some it was a case of opening again as soon as possible, or creating temporary arrangements in order to continue familiar services. For other institutions it was a case of helping indirectly, either being taken over by or hosting organisations doing vital work.

In a paper of this length it is simply not possible mention every institution that has a story to tell. The major focuses for this paper are Christchurch City Libraries and the Air Force Museum of New Zealand, but reference will also be made to Christchurch Art Gallery, Waimakariri Libraries and the Macmillan Brown Library, amongst others.

The story begins at 4.35am on Saturday 4 September 2010 when a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck Canterbury. While there were no fatalities and few serious injuries much material damage was done and people needed help. Opened in May 2003 Christchurch Art Gallery is a modern building in the central city housing over 6000 works of art; it is also part of Christchurch City Council. At around 8am that morning gallery staff arrived to check the collection (N. Semple, personal communication, 29 May, 2014). In the foyer they discovered a senior member of the council. Staff had always had some awareness that in the event of an emergency the gallery could be commandeered under the terms of the Civil Defence Act, but they never imagined that the gallery would become the nerve centre of the recovery effort. On this occasion the building was occupied for around 9 or 10 days and the experience was something of a novelty.

Christchurch City Libraries is one of New Zealand's largest library networks, with service points all around the city. Initially all branches of the library were closed after the earthquake so that buildings could be checked and stock tidied. Libraries reopened all through September and into October. From my own experiences working in the Central Library on Gloucester Street what might be considered ordinary library services became essential to the community. Libraries are a place to disseminate information and were an obvious place for the public to pick up application forms for the various emergency welfare grants that were available. Photocopying services became important, enabling people to make copies of documents to attach to insurance claims.

The library made good use of Twitter in order to keep people all round Christchurch informed about what libraries were open (CCL Tweet, 16 September, 2010), what assistance was available to those in need (CCL Tweet, 15 September, 2010), and also to let the community know that the library was collecting earthquake stories (CCL Tweet, 17 September, 2010).

The town of Kaiapoi, in Waimakariri District north of Christchurch, was badly affected by the September earthquake. The town's small museum, housed in the old Courthouse, was demolished a few days after the quake with the collection it housed being rescued only just in time and taken to storage in Christchurch (Sherrif, 2014).

Kaiapoi Library and Service Centre, situated right next to the river, was closed indefinitely for health and safety reasons. Initially it wasn't known if the building would be a rebuild or a repair. The two other libraries in the district in Oxford and Rangiora remained open but it was felt that Kaiapoi should continue to have access to library services. A great example of two organisations coming together to care for a community happened when Christchurch City Libraries agreed to send its Mobile Library van to Kaiapoi on Saturday mornings in October and November 2010. Although the fact the bus wobbled was a little unnerving (M. O'Connell, personal communication, 13 June, 2014), the community valued being able to do something normal in an abnormal time and appreciated the two councils working together (T. Cook, Tania, personal communication, 26 May, 2014; D. Welch, personal communication, 21 May, 2014). A thank you letter from the then Waimakariri District Libraries manager, Simon Burge to Carolyn Robertson, Christchurch City Libraries Manager states: "please accept my sincere thanks for the effort, goodwill and commitment of resources that you have made in helping us provide library services to our customers in Kaiapoi" (Burge, 2010).

On 27 November 2010 a temporary library opened in the Kaiapoi Swim Club premises, next to the aquatic centre where the mobile library had parked. Although small, the local community has been very supportive of and grateful for this measure (P. Ashbey, personal communication, 13 June, 2014). In July 2011 a portacom was added to the facility which meant more room for children's services and a space to provide holiday programmes. The temporary library is still open, but is now nearing the end of its life.

So we can see after the September earthquake that GLAM institutions were very willing to do what they could in order to look after communities, by connecting them to information, providing some sense of normality and working together to provide a service. We can also see that some organisations in the heritage community were themselves in need. With hindsight, for some the September earthquake was almost a dress rehearsal.

At 12.51pm on Tuesday 22nd February 2011, Christchurch was forever changed by a 6.3 magnitude earthquake that took 185 lives, injured many hundreds and damaged thousands of buildings. At the art gallery staff were waiting for Civil Defence to arrive. In the days and weeks after the event we grew used to seeing televised media briefings taking place in the gallery's auditorium. As more people came to work at the gallery, including in June staff of the newly formed Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, more and more artworks were removed from display and put in storage and gallery staff retreated into a much smaller work space. The gallery was checked by engineers after every major aftershock and was one of the safest places to work for those staff who were able to get in.

Gallery staff and council, Civil Defence and CERA staff worked well together, with the need for careful handling of artwork understood. That the gallery was part of council meant there were already established relationships between staff, which helped the situation. Gallery staff accepted that they faced unprecedented disruption to their work in order to best serve a community in desperate need and were proud to do their civic duty. The council and CERA left in August 2011 and the gallery is now being repaired. Its innovative *Outer Spaces* programme has kept art in public view in Christchurch.

The art gallery maintains a database of local artists and soon after the earthquake staff began calling them to check on their welfare. Many had studios in the old buildings that suffered so badly and rescuing their collections before they were demolished was something the art gallery was heavily involved in (N. Semple, personal communication, 29 May, 2014).

The Air Force Museum of New Zealand is the national museum of the Royal New Zealand Air Force. It is situated at the former RNZAF Base Wigram on the western side of Christchurch. Having suffered little damage, calls soon started coming in from a range of groups needing temporary accommodation. Although aeroplanes can no longer land there, helicopters can and RNZAF Iroquois involved in the recovery effort were based there for a few days, facilitated by ex-RNZAF museum staff. The SPCA emergency response and vet teams used offices as a base. A few days after the quake the archivist, Simon Moody, took a call from the mortuary for quake victims that had been set up at Burnham army camp. They were using dental records to identify bodies and needed a light box. Could the museum lend them one of theirs? Simon drove to Burnham as quickly as he could and the mortuary staff were better equipped to continue their painful task (S. Moody, personal communication, 2014).

Even amongst chaos normal life had to continue. The museum took in a number of organisations that had lost their premises and ensured that they could continue operations and that their staff and clients could have some semblance of normality. The architects Warren and Mahoney were based in a function room. The IRD took over the education classroom, squeezed around small octagonal tables, and the Family Court held sessions in the auditorium.

Many heritage organisations urgently needed help. Over the next few months the museum assisted in the recovery and storage of irreplaceable collections including those of Lyttelton Museum and the Anglican Archives. The local iwi Ngāi Tahu, who lost their headquarters, stored their Whakapapa files in the museum's archive store and researchers accessed them in their reading room, meaning that important study could continue and that museum staff learnt about caring for taonga in practice.

The Christchurch City Council had only recently moved into its new premises on Hereford Street when the earthquake struck. Displaced staff needed somewhere to work and, being council premises, three libraries were completely taken over, initially for a few weeks: Fendalton hosted Housing and Environmental Health Teams, Upper Riccarton Earthquake recovery teams and Papanui the council's call centre (CCL Tweet, 8 March 2011) amongst others. They were large, safe buildings in relatively undamaged areas. There was no pre-existing arrangement that this would happen in the event of an emergency, but given the nature of the disaster this was a way for the council to continue to serve the community. However, library members in these areas still needed a service. Again the Mobile Library came to the rescue, working in partnership with staff from the occupied libraries who cleared returns, answered queries and maintained a skeleton library presence.

As well as providing a service for occupied libraries and trying to keep up with existing stops the Mobile stood in for libraries that weren't able to open again. While libraries in the network opened throughout March, April and May, it became clear that some would be gone for the foreseeable future, including Central Library in the Red Zone. Badly damaged Linwood got a temporary replacement in April, but the Mobile visited the central city until December 2011 when Central Library Peterborough opened and is still visiting Sumner, where the library had to be demolished.

These communities were certainly grateful that they could continue to have access to library services, yet the Mobile was also a place where residents could vent their frustration – at the

seeming lack of action to replace libraries and the lack of stock on the Mobile (D. Welch, personal communication, 21 May 2014).

As the 'few weeks' that the libraries were going to be occupied by the council grew into months their communities grew frustrated at lack of access to their libraries. Libraries that were open took many, many comments from customers asking why the council couldn't use other buildings as people need their libraries. Papanui partially reopened to the public in August 2011 and fully the following month. A slither of Fendalton opened in October 2011 but it wasn't until May 2012 that they fully reopened.

The Upper Riccarton Library is an innovative partnership between Riccarton High School and Christchurch City Libraries. Although taken over it still needed to function as a school library, supporting students in their school work and providing some semblance of normality. In the haste to occupy the library all 65,000 items in the collection has been packed away, but school librarians were able to extract essential study resources which were set up in the library's learning centre, enabling support of students to continue. The clean, working toilets and free wifi that the council brought with them were particularly appreciated by students. The library eventually reopened as normal in January 2012 (P Eskett, personal communication, 28 May 2014).

Christchurch City Libraries again made good use of Twitter and retweets, initially disseminating vital information about finding missing people (CCL Tweet, 22 February 2011), where to source reliable information (CCL Tweet, 23 February 2011) and where to seek help (CCL Tweet, 25 February 2011). Important library information also features, as does information for staff. As the days passed Tweets begin to include details about what library services could be accessed remotely, such as Overdrive and PressDisplay, giving people ideas about what they could do to try to take their minds off events (CCL Tweet, 1 March 2011).

The very first library to open again after the earthquake was Akaroa, on Banks Peninsula, on 28 February. In the city Bishopdale, a medium sized library in an open air mall, reopened on 4 March. Bishopdale was initially hugely busy and needed extra circulation equipment, staff and stock to keep up with demand. At times it felt like "barely organised chaos" (Smart, 2012, p.2). For a time pre-school programmes ran every day of the week, another normal event to help families. Their seven free internet computer were much in demand, with people sometimes travelling long distances to use them to communicate with friends and family and find or print essential information. An information kiosk was set up with details about Civil Defence, WINZ, Police, EQC and other agencies. This proved to be a godsend for many:

In the days ahead we would often have very upset people, at their wits end, not knowing who to turn to. They did not seem to be able to find accurate information about where to seek help, or who were still, simply in such a shocked state of mind that they were unable to process information for themselves, that was coming from Civil Defence. (Smart, 2012, p.2)

Staff, who often had their own difficulties, worked hard to listen to and support sad, grieving and angry customers, but as Team Leader Janice Smart states: "The desire and the feeling of responsibility to help connect people with information, that drives many of us to work in libraries, enabled us to cope, as did the appreciative comments from customers" (Smart, 2012, p.2)

Many of these sentiments were echoed at the South Christchurch Library which reopened on 6th March. Staff wanted to be there for their community and to go over events with each other and customers. With so many places closed the library was one place for people to go and to talk to each other (J. Farquharson, personal communication, 2 July, 2014).

Back over the river in Waimakariri, Rangiora Library was experiencing a similar situation – increased busyness, computer and fax services in big demand, extremely emotional people - working their way through insurance claims and other red tape - in need of support and hand holding. For some the seemingly undamaged town was a paradise, a haven away from the destruction in Christchurch. After the 13 June sequence of earthquakes the library chose to stay open, with users staying to talk and have company and to find solace after yet another difficult day (P. Ashbey, personal communication, 13 June, 2014).

Over at the University of Canterbury, the Central and Engineering and Physics Libraries reopened following the September earthquake on 21 February 2011. They were not to be open long. After the February event the first library open, on 14 March, was Macmillan Brown, the university's specialist New Zealand and Pacific research library and archive. The public area of the library is relatively small and extra staff, lots of students and the retrieved high demand collection all squeezed in. Yet this intimate area was beneficial – students felt safe in a two storey building and companionship during numerous aftershocks. Staff wanted to do what they could to support stressed students.

The Macmillan Brown archive includes many building plans, including those of the badly damaged Arts Centre, the original home of the university. Not surprisingly there was a huge demand for this collection. Staff were faced with often stressed building owners, desperate to try to save their homes and businesses, but who didn't necessarily have experience with archival collections. However, this demand has led to more digitisation of the collection, allowing the community to more easily access its heritage (J. Durney, personal communication, 22 May, 2014).

In June 2011 a group of Canterbury and national heritage organisations proposed to set up a space in which to store and care for displaced heritage collections. The Air Force Museum was well on its way to securing funding for a new building and by offering this planned building for free to the wider community they were able to secure extra funding so that construction could commence. Opening in January 2013 the Canterbury Cultural Collections Recovery Centre is to run for three years allowing groups to store and work on their collections, and have access to professional advice and workshops, thanks to partnerships with organisation such as National Services Te Paerangi and Museum Aotearoa. Storage will then continue to be available in a smaller area for a further three years. Many groups are using the facility including the Canterbury Rugby [Football Union Historical Trust](#), Lyttelton Museum, the [Christchurch Nurses' Memorial Chapel](#) and Kaiapoi Museum (T. Angelo, 2013). Kaiapoi's collection had to be moved to a state house in Cust after their storage facility in Christchurch was damaged in the February quake. Kaiapoi Historical Society say that the CCCRC has been a "godsend" (Sherriff, 2014) and are working hard to get items ready for when the new joint Kaiapoi Library, Museum and Service Centre opens in the new year.

In a short time the Kaiapoi community will have a full library back and their heritage on display again. Work is also underway to fix the Christchurch Art Gallery and plan the new Central Library, amongst many other projects, and the emotion and adrenaline rush of the

immediate weeks and months after the earthquakes is fading. Yet we should not forget the extraordinarily simple and simply extraordinary things that were done by the Canterbury GLAM sector to care for communities.

There is no reason why any GLAM organisation can't help in the event of an emergency. You may be part of a local authority and have certain obligations anyway, you may have space that can be used, staff that can be deployed, or provide a vital service – big, small, or seemingly ordinary there is something everyone can do. I'd like to end with a quote by Therese Angelo, the Director of the Air Force Museum, although she is referring to a museum her comments are relevant to the whole GLAM sector:

Since Christchurch was rocked by the devastating forces of nature, we have learned that museums can be a very real and important part in the recovery of their communities; we shouldn't just look at our own needs – no matter how important we think they are because the community will have different and perhaps more urgent needs; we know we can and will make a difference if we work together and share resources. (Angelo, 2013, p.6)

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