

New Orleans After Katrina: Public Art Amid Natural Disaster

by Morgana King / Edited by Anne Canzonetti



About the Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center

The Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center (PARC) was launched in June 2017 to serve the expanding field of public artists, administrators, advocates of public art, and field partners as they develop projects and programs in their communities. As an online portal, the Public Art Resource Center also allows individuals to find resources and tools that suit their work and interests.

As part of this project, Americans for the Arts is publishing a series of essays to explore ongoing and current trends that impact public art professionals, artists, field partners, and community members.

The essays in this series include topics like developing public art in rural, mid-sized, and urban communities, caring for public art collections in times of natural disaster, and the intersection of public art and arts education.

This essay series is just one resource available through the Americans for the Arts Public Resource Center. Visit www.AmericansForTheArts.org/PARC today to explore more.

About this Essay

Natural disasters are a part of life and unavoidable in many parts of the country. It is necessary to be prepared for when nature strikes a public art collection. This paper is a case study on the reaction to and lessons learned during the recovery of New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck the city in 2005.

ON THE COVER: Scrap House by Sally Heller, one of 19 Art in Public Places projects made possible by the Joan Mitchell Foundation and the Arts Council of New Orleans. Installed on Convention Center Blvd.,

New Orleans, LA, 2008. Photo by

Morgana King.

2006, Lenora Costa cleans "A Visit to the Nature Center" by Bruce Brice. Photo by Mary Len Costa.

2007, Michael H. Pelias inspects a Katrina damaged house to be used by Takashi Horisaki as the model for his sculpture "Social Dress New Orleans — 730 days after." Photo by Mary Len Costa.

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OVERVIEW

The development of public art is a community-wide process using artists, municipal and state government, local businesses, and community-based arts organizations. All told, it is an involved progression entailing much discussion and planning. The final product could be a single art piece in a local square, art incorporated into new building through percent-for-art programs, art in transit, or a downtown cultural district.

Given the effort in bringing public art into our communities, we also need to consider how to protect and maintain it. Natural disasters are unavoidable, which is why emergency preparedness plans are essential. This case study looks at the steps the Arts Council of New Orleans took before and after Hurricane Katrina to retrieve and restore its public art collection. Use this experience—and the lessons learned—to prepare your own communities and answer these questions: Where do we go from here? Who will rescue the art? What resources are available to help? How will we afford to restore damaged work?

TOP LEFT: Ujima Collective banners and bas relief wall panel at the MLK Library in the Lower 9th ward, 2005.

TOP RIGHT: Flood damage to MLK Library in the Lower 9th ward, 2005.

BOTTOM LEFT: Debris piled around historical monument on Esplande Ave. in New Orleans. 2005

Photos by Mary Len Costa.

THE STORY

In August 2005, at the time of Hurricane Katrina, the office of the Arts Council of New Orleans (ACNO) was on the 17th floor of a downtown office building. Its organizational

files—including the Percent for Art Collection database and the Visual Arts Registry and slide database—were, at that point, located only on the office computers. Before the storm hit, the staff had time to wrap their computers in protective plastic and move everything away from the windows before going their separate ways.

The high winds and storm surge caused widespread damage, but it was the flooding that was catastrophic: 80 percent of the city flooded after the levees were breached and 88 percent of the population was displaced. Power was out for much of the city for weeks. The Arts Council's Percent for Art Program Collection held approximately 350 pieces, of which about 60 were commissioned works. Dozens of public art sites suffered damage from flooding, hurricane winds, saltwater corrosion, and flying debris. One metal sculpture just disappeared.

The first order of business following a natural disaster is to assess the overall situation, so that one can triage the damage in an efficient way. Because ACNO was unable to access its computers for months, it could not refer to its public art collection inventory, nor could it access other organizational documentation. However, Mary Len Costa, then director of public art, had printed a list of artists' phone numbers before Katrina hit. Based on this list and her memory of location and medium, she began to track down artwork. "Whenever I was in town, I'd go by myself into abandoned city buildings where I knew we had artwork," she remembers. "A lot of them had no windows, they had no roofs, and most of them had flooded. So I just went in and took the artwork out myself."

LESSON: Have offsite access to your organizational files (including your databases and public art inventory) through the cloud. External hard drives are great as well, but make sure they are offsite and in a location that is accessible. Keep a printed inventory offsite, as power outages may keep computers and printers offline.

After the hurricane subsided and staff were available, ACNO focused first on the pieces from the collection that could be moved or that were most vulnerable, due to their medium. Time is a crucial factor in the immediate aftermath of a flood because of the decomposition of materials and rapid growth of mold. The most fragile works were paper and photographs, followed by textiles and then works on canvas. To prevent mold on these surfaces from spreading, it was essential to get everything dry and in a well-ventilated area with circulating air as quickly as possible. "We had to separate what looked like it had mold or mildew," recalls Costa, "and get it away from the other pieces. Some pieces we had to take out of their frame and remove the wet backing and everything else. Canvas too had to be cleaned."

LESSON: If you and your organization have neither the time to dry your paper pieces to avoid mold growth nor the resources to treat the pieces immediately, freeze them. "Temporary freezing of works on paper allows for time to safely plan and organize the many steps needed to dry the affected materials, as well as to prepare a rehabilitation site," reads a report by the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts.



"Flamingo Cowboy" by Sydney Byrd. Hand colored photograph shows damage from water line midway up the print. 2005. Photo by Mary Len Costa.





TOP LEFT: 2006, Lenora Costa cleans "A Visit to the Nature Center" by Bruce Brice. Photo by Mary Len Costa.

TOP RIGHT: 2006, Mary Len Costa cleans "A Visit to the Nature Center" by Bruce Brice. Photo by Lenora Costa. After ACNO staff salvaged the movable work, it next looked to the large pieces that couldn't be moved. Each time staff visited a site of a permanent work it documented the conditions of the piece and the site with notes and photographs. Such documentation helped staff keep track of damage that was not immediately noticeable or that got worse over time. Staff looked for damage from water intrusion (especially corrosive saltwater), damage from wind and flying debris, mold, rust, and subsidence (settling ground causing cement cracks or unstable foundations).

"I remember there were these Bruce Brice murals in New Orleans East, permanent pieces that were made out of six or eight 6-foot by 8-foot panels of heavy plywood that were molding and mildewing," says Costa. "I had to first get the New Orleans Museum of Art to rent me a van, since all the library vans had been stolen. I and one other person moved them to the main branch of the New Orleans Public Library and temporarily stored them outside... We gently wiped them all down with a mixture of soap and Clorox."

ACNO had in place the most important aspect of a successful response to a disaster: a strong local community. Because the City of New Orleans was straining to recover from Katrina, most of the art rescue operation was powered by volunteers with donated resources: artists and other friends with pick-up trucks, a board member with abundant storage space, and helping hands from family members. "It was then I realized how useful it had been to make friends with all the city's maintenance men, fire fighters, policemen, and anyone else with keys or a bolt-cutter who could get us access to buildings where the art was," says Costa.

"We had to hound the city to make sure we were part of the recovery," says Costa. "Especially at first, it was our closer communities that helped most: the community around Parks and Parkways was wonderful, the communities around New Orleans's

public libraries, and also New Orleans Recreation Department centers. I just always made sure and maintained a really personal relationship with all department heads. I had one woman who worked with the city call me after the storm on my home phone to tell me she had been fired. She had been asked to clean out the offices, and the office was filled with public art, so she wanted to make sure I had it," remembers Costa. "And that's just because I'd go on a regular basis and check the art, take inventory, keep a relationship with city employees. Every arts organization should have someone on staff who really keeps a personal relationship with public employees."

LESSON: Include your site contacts and their information to your public art collection inventory, and attach the community contact information to your emergency response procedures.

Once the Arts Council staff was able to access its computers (and its Percent for Art Collection database and the Visual Arts Registry and slide database), it was able to use the collection inventory to ensure that all artwork and sites had been surveyed for damage. Staff looked through files to find out what materials were used and how the work was originally installed. It also documented what emergency steps were undertaken to clean the work.

Restoration Funding

ACNO used its records—maintenance, original contracts, and project history—and collection inventory to develop statistics on damage and loss for insurance reporting and planning purposes. Once ACNO had completed its status check of all artwork listed in the Percent for Arts Collection, it reviewed the artist contracts to determine if the artist had right of first refusal to do their own restoration work or if there were stipulations on who could perform maintenance work on the piece. The Arts Council then divided up the work into two categories: artists with right of first refusal to restore their own pieces and who chose to do so, and artists either who did not have that right or declined it. Artists who could restore their own artwork and chose to do so began the restoration process. In the second case, ACNO needed to hire conservators for restoration, and to find the funds to do so.

The Arts Council first had to prove to the City's Office of Recovery Management that the artwork for which restoration was being planned was owned by the City of New Orleans and should be treated the same as any part of the City's infrastructure or public facilities that had sustained damage. ACNO also had to keep in mind the budget triggers for both the City of New Orleans bid procurement system and the Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) reimbursement process.

LESSON: Having original artist contracts that assign restoration work to a specific individual eliminates the need to work through the FEMA process and your city's bid procurement system and can save a lot of time. Keep good records and have a lot of patience.

BEFORE



AFTER







Before and after photos of FEMA "Sculpture Restoration" projects: Spirit House by John T. Scott and Martin Payton, and Synchronicity by Thomas Mann. Both metal pieces were sandblasted and repainted following damage from salt water intrusion and flying debris. Photos by Morgana King.

Initially, the repair work for both large and small sculptures was consolidated into one Project Worksheet (PW). Because the restoration of the smaller fine bronze and aluminum artworks fell under a budget threshold, ACNO was able to hire a conservator directly, bypassing the normal process of having the conservator assess the work to be done and then confirm with FEMA that it would pay for the expense before committing to the job. The conservator cleaned the work with special care to the oxidation and corrosion caused by salt and chemicals in the floodwater, and waxed the bronze pieces to prevent further damage.

However, the restoration cost for two large painted metal pieces with cement bases came in above the FEMA budget threshold. ACNO had to regroup the two pieces in a separate PW for Sculpture Restoration and create a Scope of Services to issue a Request for Proposal through the City's procurement office. The Arts Council had to work closely with the procurement office to ensure that any restoration work undertaken was legally sourced via open public bid requirements.

"New Orleans' Katrina recovery work to get these sculptures repaired certainly set a precedent," said Ondina Mendoza, then grant manager with Resilience Consulting Group. "Nothing of that degree had been done before. FEMA funded the restoration

BEFORE

AFTER









of these sculptures as being eligible under Category B work (emergency protective measures) to the tune of approximately \$150,000."

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) gave ACNO a \$30,000 hurricane relief grant to stabilize its staffing so that it could continue to serve its constituents. ACNO successfully rescued more than 200 pieces of the city's public at collection. It worked with its public art program committee to reassess its plans and reallocate funding to more sorely needed maintenance and restoration. ACNO also reviewed the insurance policies on its work in progress to see which provided settlement money for lost investments made by the program.

LESSON: Having the support of your committee members to understand the new needs of the program is essential. Include emergency planning into your committee's agenda and review materials as a matter of course, so that the members are prepared to change course quickly and effectively.

ACNO not only worked to restore its art collection; it also worked with the Joan Mitchell Foundation and other nonprofits to give artists places to stay through residencies and financial support through grants. "That was a lot of what I did," Arts Council of New

Restoration work on "Serpent Mound" by Steve Kline, a City of New Orleans Percent For Art piece administered by the Arts Council of New Orleans. Fixing the play turf surface was an added expense to restoring the artwork, which was necessary after the surface was submerged in salt water. Photos by Morgana King.





Eroniffa Ibrihim working on "7th Ward Builders" painting, and the finished piece. Photos by Mary Len Costa and Morgana King.

Orleans Associate Director of Artist Services Joycelyn Reynolds, who was displaced herself, recalls. "Meeting with displaced artists, giving council, giving them a shoulder to cry on." Many artists who had lost their own personal records recreated their archives through information they had submitted to ACNO's registry.

New Directions

ACNO had several projects at different stages of completion when Katrina hit. One artist had begun community outreach meetings and design plans for a park on Franklin Avenue. The area flooded, and it was clear it would be years before that park became a priority again. The Arts Council amicably canceled the contract with the artist, and recouped money originally paid to begin his project from insurance. Because ACNO is a nonprofit and not a city agency, each project it works on, once under contract, is insured against loss before it is completed and signed over to the City's property and ownership.

Another artist had been commissioned to create a painting for the Nora Navra Library, which was decimated by Katrina. Practically homeless but determined to complete her work, the artist managed to fit the seven-foot canvas in her aunt's bedroom to work on finishing it. The piece was about the craftsmen who had originally built her 7th Ward neighborhood, and it was now more meaningful than ever to honor their work and to address the determination of the community to rebuild. The artwork currently hangs in the City Planning office, where all new projects are reviewed for building permits.

One year after Katrina, ACNO convened a meeting of the City's arts and cultural organizations with support from a second NEA grant. "The August forum provided... the opportunity to bring in resource planners from around the country who could help give us perspective in times of disaster and to open the door for recovery partnership projects," remembers Shirley Trusty Corey, ACNO president and CEO. "It was important to move the discussion from comparisons of pre-storm staffing, audiences, and facilities to questions about the future. It was also imperative to recognize and prioritize





the demands being made by the realities of housing, municipal services, employment, health issues, communications, and others." As a result of the 2006 meeting, ACNO revised its strategic plan for the next 18 months, created a cultural recovery brochure to use for funding, and planned for the completion of the Louisiana Artworks facility, which would provide work space for artists.

Evacuteer.org, formed in 2009, assists with New Orleans' public evacuation. ACNO combined public art and public safety by commissioning an artist to design a sculpture that would signal locations where residents could go to access city-assisted evacuation during a mandatory evacuation—Evacuspots. The stainless-steel sculptures—16 in number, 14-feet tall, and 800 pounds—are meant to withstand 200 years of wear. Evacuteer.org spearheaded the fundraising in collaboration with FEMA, the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, and the Arts Council of New Orleans.

The Joan Mitchell Foundation provided \$750,000 after Katrina to commission 19 public artworks around New Orleans, of which nine are still in place today. Artist Sally Heller and fabricator Travis Linde completed an artistically collaged house in the limbs of a live oak tree entitled Scrap House, which remains a monument to nature's

TOP LEFT: EvacuSpots handout showing the city-wide locations where residents can meet to get a ride out of town in case of a mandatory evacuation. EvacuSpot sculptures by Douglas Kornfeld, 2012, a collaborative project by Evacuteer.org, and the Arts Council of New Orleans Percent For Art Program.

TOP RIGHT: Mayor Mitch Landrieu celebrating the dedication of an EvacuSpot at Armstrong Park. Photo by Lindsey Glatz.



Scrap House by Sally Heller, one of 19 Art in Public Places projects made possible by the Joan Mitchell Foundation and the Arts Council of New Orleans. Installed on Convention Center Blvd., New Orleans, LA, 2008. Photo by Morgana King.

unpredictable powers. Michel Varisco saw the installation of her work, Fragile Land: Rotunda, a series of transparent mesh black-and-white photo banners encircled around the classical architecture of a fountain.

The Joan Mitchell Foundation also funded artist studio recovery after Katrina. "Cash is king in the short-term, when recovering from a disaster," says artist Christopher Saucedo, "but organizations like the Joan Mitchell Foundation helped me be an artist again. They allowed me to be a conduit for the community, to create a marker and give back. Their support allowed me to make work, but when that was over, the piece I made for them remains in the community and serves its own purpose without me."

Almost 10 years after Katrina, ACNO—with a grant from the NEA—partnered with the Mayor's Office of Cultural Economy, New Orleans Department of Public Health, and Tulane City Center to have artists work with community members on projects that will improve places damaged by the hurricane.

One of the best things about the post-disaster environment is the community-wide change in attitude. People came together and helped one another, cutting through bureaucratic red-tape with a renewed sense of possibility after so much loss. New Orleans' arts community was able to use that momentum to bring public art up to a new level with an array of opportunities that arose out of a loosened grip on "what's allowed," together with an influx of national interest and support.

Protect Your Public Art Collection

There are many resources available to help you prepare an emergency response plan. All will tell you that preparedness is essential. It helps tremendously to be organized in advance, so that you can quickly locate and allocate assistance and make the most of your time.

Digital Database

Because time is a crucial factor following any disaster, your database will mean everything. It will help you prioritize your resources on artworks most likely to be damaged or which are in jeopardy of theft. A database can help you document what works have sustained damage and how many pieces can't be salvaged, as well as provide statistics and information for funding requests and committee action. With your approach to your collection prioritized, you can immediately make an action plan and move on rescue and restoration of your public art pieces.

Ensure that you have offsite access to your public art collection inventory, along with contact information for the artists, fabricators, conservators, and onsite personnel for artwork locations. Also consider using a cultural database service to have your information yet another place (see the services in the Resources section). Plan for the worst, hope for the best.

Data for artwork inventory

Artist name Location (and contact information) Artist contact information Is piece moveable or immoveable

Title Original value

Image description Most recent appraised value

Medium Date of appraisal **Dimensions** Maintenance records Year created Copy of artist contract Year acquired Approved conservator

Fabricator

Consider Your Safety

Your focus will be on saving artwork, but you also must concern yourself with your own health and safety when visiting any disaster scene. Stay alert for debris, black mold, structural weaknesses, even animals. In the interest of your personal health and safety, these supplies are essential:

- thick, protective gloves;
- respirator or dust mask;





Restoration of Ujima Collective work at the MLK Library in the Lower 9th ward, photo by Mary Len Costa. Photos by Mary Len Costa.

- tools, including bolt cutters, hammer, drill, knife, and specialized tools to remove artwork (such as a unique security wrench used on the Z-clip hanging system used by ACNO);
- sanitizing lotion;
- · camera to thoroughly document each piece of art and each site; and
- fire or police escort. When possible, whenever entering city-owned properties, bring an official escort to clear a path and judge the risk of each situation.

Funding Resources for Restoration

Local Aid

Your committees will be vital networking tools to solicit help from local government, businesses, grantmaking organizations, and the community. By re-establishing committee meetings as soon as possible after a disaster, you can create funding and project opportunities for public art.

Private Aid

Many private foundations and organizations have taken an interest in helping artists and art organizations after disasters. The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation, among others, have stepped up with funding artist recovery through grants, residencies, and new projects. Visit the website of the Foundation Center (foundationcenter.org) to search its database for potential funders. Your state arts agency also may have connections to resources in-state.

Resources

Cultural Database Services

ArtsReady

southarts.org/artsready

ArtsReady provides arts organizations with customized business continuity plans for post-crisis sustainability: It protects community and cultural assets, demonstrates sustainability to funders, shows mitigated risk to insurance companies, and gets you up and running after a crisis.

cultureNOW

culturenow.org

More than 75 public art collections across the US collaborate with culture NOW to create a digital national gallery of art and architecture in the public realm. It encompasses more than 11,000 sites and 21,000 images supplemented by over 1,050 podcasts by artists, architects, historians, and curators. cultureNOW also has an iPhone app that serves as a guidebook to the Museum Without Walls.

Public Art Archive

publicartarchive.org

The Public Art Archive is a free online database of public art in US, uniting records from public art organizations and artists into one comprehensive resource. Upload information about your public art collection. It will integrate with Google Maps for virtual or on foot exploration.

Disaster Response

Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (FAIC)

conservation-us.org

FAIC trains and deploys volunteer conservators and other collections care specialists to assist collecting institutions during and after an emergency.

The FAIC Alliance for Response (heritageemergency.org) brings together cultural heritage and emergency management professionals at the local level to foster new partnerships and local projects, encourage disaster planning and mitigation, and enhance the protection of cultural and historic resources. AFR forums have led to the formation of 26 local, state, and regional networks to date across the US that focus on emergency preparedness.

National Heritage Responders (NHR)

conservation-us.org/emergencies/national-heritage-responders

NHR responds to the needs of cultural institutions during emergencies and disasters through coordinated efforts with first responders, state agencies, vendors and the public. It also operates a 24/7 hotline for emergency advice and referrals: 202.661.8068.

Planning and Response

The Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities

100ResilientCities.org

In the last decade, sustainability, resiliency, and preparedness have assumed a prominent role in all facets of art, design, planning, engineering, and architecture. The Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities is a worldwide assemblage of member cities that have undertaken the process of uniting people, projects, and priorities in their communities to act on their resilience challenges.

Americans for the Arts

AmericansForTheArts.org

Americans for the Arts has gathered information around disaster preparedness for arts and cultural organizations on its website. Connect to organizations like yours across the country for support and guidance, read their stories and advice on blog. AmericansForTheArts.org, and look through the publications available online.

Conservation DistList

http://cool.conservation-us.org/byform/mailing-lists/cdl/

The Conservation DistList is a weekly publication for those who are professionally involved in the conservation and preservation of cultural property.

Craft Emergency Relief Foundation (CERF+)

cerfplus.org

The emergency relief assistance for artists offered by CERF+ includes grants, no-interest loans, access to resources, waivers and discounts on booth fees, and donations of craft supplies and equipment.

FEMA

fema.gov

National Flood Insurance Program. fema.gov/national-flood-insurance-program

National Endowment for the Arts

arts.gov

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Material Conservation

"Disaster Salvage Tip Sheet." Minnesota Historical Society mnhs.org/preserve/ conservation/docs pdfs/DisasterSalvageTipSheet.pdf

"3.12 Freezing and Drying Wet Books and Records." Northeast Document Conservation Center. nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/3.-emergencymanagement/3.12-freezing-and-drying-wet-books-and-records

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