

Management and Prevention of Risks to the Cultural Heritage: Case of Venezuela

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Resumen

Manejo y prevención de riesgos relativos al patrimonio cultural - El caso de Venezuela

El Comité Venezolano del ICOM preparó en 2001 un proyecto denominado *Brigadas de Emergencia para el Patrimonio Cultural*. Sus objetivos son: formar profesionales capacitados para realizar actividades de salvaguarda de los bienes culturales; y fomentar actitudes preventivas para estar preparados a afrontar desastres naturales y conflictos armados.

La catástrofe sobrevenida en Vargas en 1999 contribuyó a acelerar esta iniciativa, ya que a la pérdida de miles de vidas, el desmembramiento de las comunidades locales y la dramática dislocación del paisaje urbano, vinieron a añadirse los incalculables daños sufridos por el patrimonio cultural de la región, en particular los del museo dedicado al pintor Armando Reverón. Además de las catástrofes naturales, en los últimos años el patrimonio cultural venezolano se ha visto en peligro a nivel local a causa de fenómenos derivados de la intolerancia política y el vandalismo organizado.

El proyecto, que está destinado a los profesionales de los museos y a cuantos trabajan en la gestión de los bienes culturales muebles de los países andinos, ha permitido la constitución de un Comité Técnico Nacional para el Manejo y Prevención de Riesgos relativos al Patrimonio Cultural.

Résumé

Gestion et prévention des risques pour le patrimoine culturel - Le cas du Venezuela.

Le Comité national vénézuélien de l'ICOM a mis en place en 2001 un projet intitulé "Brigades d'urgence" pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel. Les objectifs de ce projet sont, d'une part, former des professionnels qualifiés pour mener des activités de sauvetage et, d'autre part, développer une action préventive face aux risques naturels et aux conflits armés. L'adoption de cette initiative a été accélérée par la catastrophe survenue en 1999 à Vargas. Ce désastre naturel provoqua la perte de milliers de vies humaines, le démembrement des communautés locales et le bouleversement dramatique du paysage urbain, endommagea sérieusement les biens culturels de la région, notamment le musée consacré au peintre Armando Reverón.

* She could not attend the symposium.

Dernièrement, de nouvelles menaces émanant de l'intolérance politique et du vandalisme organisé pointent sur le plan local. Le projet, qui vise essentiellement les professionnels des musées et tous ceux qui travaillent dans la gestion des biens culturels meubles des pays andins, a permis la constitution d'un Comité technique national pour la gestion et prévention des risques concernant la patrimoine culturel.

Under its Institutional Relations Programme, the Venezuelan Committee of ICOM devised a project in mid-2001 called "Emergency Brigades for Cultural Heritage". The general purpose of the project was to train qualified professionals for salvage activities permitting action and the retrieval and treatment of any cultural heritage items damaged by a variety of occurrences (earthquakes, seaquakes, flooding, volcanic eruptions, fire, terrorism or civil war). Carrying out preventive activity to counter such phenomena was one of the challenges of the project, seeking to develop skills for avoiding, delaying, preventing and/or detecting situations potentially threatening the country's cultural assets.



Effects on the urban heritage after La Guaira natural disaster, State of Vargas, Venezuela, December 1999

When the project originated, Venezuela was still haunted by memories of the massive landslides of December 1999 in Vargas State. The pictures of the disasters had been seen on television worldwide. It was said on that occasion: "But the magnitude of the tragedy far outstrips anything that television can depict. Thousands of lives lost. Incalculable material damage. Dislocation of communities (with all the social and cultural implications). Dramatic transformation of urban landscapes (in some cases up to unimaginable limits of total destruction). Awesome changes in topography. These are some of the major traits of the rundown of events"¹.

The torrential rainfall and subsequent flooding carried off the most emblematic museum in the area: Armando Reverón's El Castillete (small castle), the magic refuge of this exceptional Venezuelan, a painter of light. He built it as his dwelling place and workshop, furnished it and populated it with equipment and characters of his own artistic making and creative imagination. At the time of the tragedy, just a few of his works were kept in the museum together with others by prominent artists. In addition to El Castillete, the landslide carried off many liturgical objects, urban sculptures and thousands of personal objects representing the culture of La Guaira, an urban complex of historical importance; not to mention the lives, the skills and the memories that were also lost.



Effects on the urban heritage after La Guaira natural disaster, State of Vargas, Venezuela, December 1999

In more recent years, the country has awoken with bewilderment to a new threat, unknown and implacable, namely political intolerance and organised vandalism, causing damage to and loss of irreplaceable expressions of the nation's cultural heritage.

The "Emergency Brigades for Cultural Heritage" project was intended to be for the benefit of professionals of various disciplines connected with museums or with management of the movable heritage, both in Venezuela and in the rest of the Andean countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Training in the workshop for movable heritage emergencies was accompanied by activities involving research, publication, promotion and organisation: a diagnosis of regional resources, a manual of emergencies for movable heritage, and the forming of a Blue Shield Brigade to serve in the countries of Latin America.

Although it encountered difficulties for full implementation, this project has opened the way to alerting and bringing together people of shared

views whose activity promises substantial achievements for the country and perhaps, in a not too distant future, for the region as well.

The first steps we have managed in coping with emergencies and risk situations for the cultural heritage in Venezuela produced a series of working meetings involving exchanges of ideas and experience between various organisations concerned with risk prevention and the management of emergency situations within the country.

The meetings were convened by the ICOM National Committee and the Cultural Heritage Institute, the governing body for heritage matters in Venezuela. They were attended *inter alia* by government entities connected with the police, fire-fighting and civil defence services; those connected with research – the Venezuelan Seismological Research Foundation (FUNVISIS), the Ministry of Science and Technology through the General Directorate for Scientific and Technological Transfer and Innovation, and the Simón Bolívar Geographical Institute of Venezuela in its Risk Map National Plan working group; with management of the museum and natural heritage – the Sectoral General Directorate for Museums of the National Council for Culture (CONAC), the National Library Foundation, the Arturo Michelena Museum, and the National Parks Institute; and with postgraduate teaching in museum science – the Francisco de Miranda Experimental University. Also involved were non-governmental organisations concerned with teaching and cultural management: the Museum Science School of José María Vargas University and the Lya Bermúdez Arts Centre, plus an organisation with experience in community support in emergency situations – the Local Support Service C.A-SOCSAL. The Venezuelan Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) was also included.

In connection with these meetings, an ICOM Study Mission had come to Venezuela as part of the ICOM project Museums Emergency Programme (Module 1). The Mission wanted to gather information on the national situation and institutional motivation and was made up of representatives of the Secretariat of the organisation in Paris, the Regional Presidency and ICOM-ICTOP. The visiting colleagues were hosted with support from the Cultural Heritage Institute, for an intensive week-long working session in Caracas, exchanging information and visiting to various centres with experience in managing risk situations in the country. To summarise, we can say that the session reached agreement on four proposals:

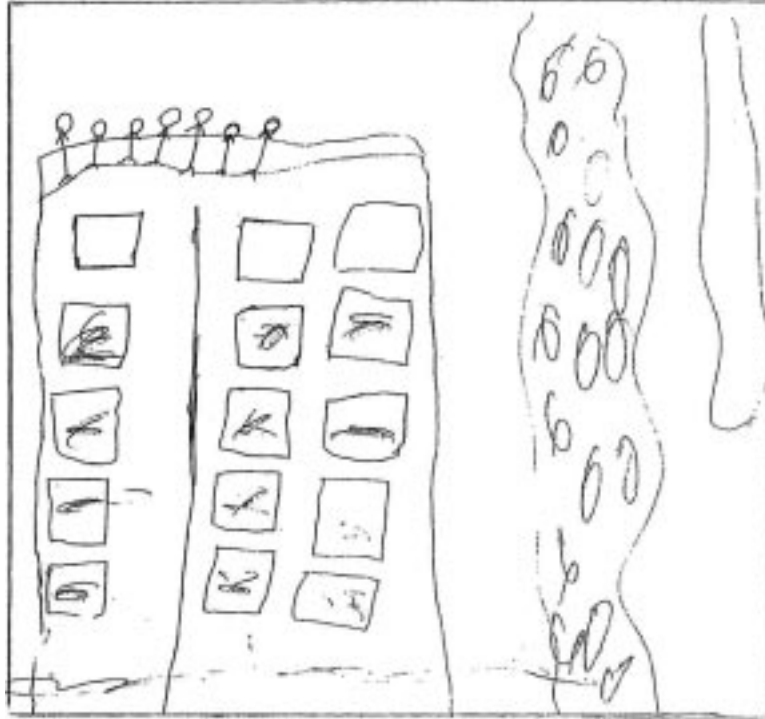
- to establish a national committee for the prevention of risks to Venezuelan cultural heritage;
- to set up of thematic subcommittees to deal with experience in human resources training, standards and legislation, and documentation of experience;
- to take part in the ICOM Seminar in India in November 2003, presenting the experience of Venezuela;
- to prepare a regional working session based in Venezuela for 2005, on the topic of risk prevention and the management of emergency situations affecting the heritage of museums in Latin America.

With the passage of time and as a result of this initiative some tangible results have been achieved, particularly in the organisation of institutional efforts and in the availability of information for professionals interested in risk management and cultural heritage. So far, monitoring has been carried out of the exchange of experiences and institutional expectations on the subject and in the country. An initial success was the forming of the National Technical Committee for the Management and Prevention of Risks to Cultural Heritage, as an initiative prior to the establishment of a national Blue Shield brigade. The Committee is made up of representatives of most of the organisations mentioned. It has a basic document that was drawn up by the Cultural Heritage Institute, describing the mission, vision, general and specific objectives, results targeted and priorities for action identified by the operational entity. The Committee members meet periodically to share experiences and plans, and have managed to have a Convention signed between the Cultural Heritage Institute and FUNVISIS to facilitate inter-institutional cooperation. A pilot project covers the inclusion of cultural heritage as a variable of the risk map that FUNVISIS is compiling for the historic centre of La Guaira. The Simón Bolívar Geographical Institute of Venezuela has also been invited to take part in this endeavour. Similarly, contact has been established with the Latin American Consortium for Preventive Conservation in Colombia and projects are being studied for joint execution.

A particularly significant event is the current framing of the National Risk Law for which the Venezuelan State has set up a national-level commission involving all the organisations concerned. Curiously enough, issues relating to cultural heritage are absent from the list of topics. Following the meetings and the establishment of the Committee, an official appointment was requested for a representative from the Cultural Heritage Institute.

For information, the Committee has included a corpus of documentary references and institutional activities on emergencies and cultural heritage; these are of the utmost importance for consolidating the exchange of experiences and for generating projects and partnerships. The Promotion Coordinating Committee of the Office of the Deputy Minister for Research and Innovation formulated and conducted a survey through the country's science and technology centres and museums assessing security and risks related to natural disasters and social conflicts. In its findings, it has identified resources, limitations and determining factors to be taken into account in future plans by the organisation.

The situations we have briefly described update the initial objectives of the *Emergency Brigades for Cultural Heritage*, particularly with respect to the training and organisation of human and institutional resources in Venezuela. Beyond that, and for the region, the Blue Shields are a compelling necessity and we have a great, overriding commitment to future generations to preserve our cultural heritage. In Venezuela, although the challenge seems a big one in view of the social, economic and political difficulties now affecting the country, the Venezuelan Committee of ICOM can applaud the consolidation of inter-institutional and international cooperation efforts offering prospects in the near future for effective preservation and control of risk situations threatening the cultural heritage of all humanity.



Disaster effects from the point of view of Antonio, 11 years old. Taken from: *Cuentos de la Inundación*. Compiled by Daniel Benveniste with the collaboration of Martin Villalobos, Adriana Prengler, Mónica Fraca, Marjorie Gutiérrez, Sabrina Ramírez and the children of Vargas. Recopied in 2002, Caracas, Venezuela

¹ Vargas: *Patrimonio en emergencia* (endangered heritage). Publication directed by María Ismenia Toledo, Caracas, Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural, 2000.