

Rebuilding libraries in time of overlapping crisis

Lina Šojat

Institute of Art History, Zagreb

lsojat@ipu.hr

Irena Šimić

Institute of Art History, Zagreb

isimic@ipu.hr

Magdalena Blažić, student

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

Filip Kartelo, student

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

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Abstract

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the process of rebuilding the valuable library collection at the Institute of Art History in Zagreb due to the overlapping crises it was impacted by during 2020 (earthquake, epidemic and flood).

Approach/methodology. The overall Library collection needed to be resystematized according to the UDC system from scratch since it completely collapsed due to the massive earthquake in March. This process overlapped with the primary care and conservation procedure for the personal archival paper collection of Grgo Gamulin, art historian and art critic, and the unexpected urgent need of establishing a personal archive and ex libris of our honoured colleague Academician Tonko Maroević.

Findings. As a result, there is now a fully functional Library, an established ex libris of Tonko Maroević and a clean and organized paper collection of Grgo Gamulin.

Originality/value. The subject of this paper gives an opportunity to gain an insight into how to deal with special types of cultural heritage under extraordinary circumstances. These simultaneous processes have sincerely and truly expanded all of our capacities, led us to create new models of collaboration between colleagues, especially with our

valuable students and volunteers, and has had a significant long-term impact on rethinking our working practices and workforce development.

KEYWORDS: archival collections, crises, earthquake, Institute of Art History, Library, Zagreb

1. Introduction

This paper presents the context of overlapping hazards that marked 2020, within a small institution based in humanities – the Institute of Art History in Zagreb (IAH), which had an urgent and extensive task to rebuild a couple of its most valuable collections. The year of unexpected events sincerely and truly expanded all of our working capacities, forcing us to rethink everyday working practices and has consequently given us a new perspective towards understanding crises as catalysts for collaboration and change.

The Institute of Art History was established in 1961 and is situated at former Workers University “Moša Pijade” (nowadays Public Open University Zagreb), a modernist building which is a protected cultural heritage site of its own. IAH employees are a team of 22 scientists, primarily art historians, and 9 expert professionals (5 architects, a librarian, a photographer, a documentalist and ICT specialist). As a small team of professionals, the Institute’s working community is natively relying on the models of interdisciplinarity and teamwork throughout all types of projects that we conduct.

Upcoming young researchers are getting involved as Institute’s project members, often starting as volunteers. This practice has in recent years been complemented with a very successful program of student internship developed in collaboration with the Department of Information and Archival Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb.

The co-authors of this paper, Magdalena Blažić and Filip Kartelo became team members through the mentioned student internship program in mid-2020, after which they continued working as volunteers on several programs for many months, and are nowadays working honorary at the Institute, as the aftermath of the extraordinary year we have witnessed.

Up until today the Institute has not adopted any scenarios or plans for evacuation and work in crisis situations (the so-called disaster preparedness plan), but all work activities are based on the recommendations, good practices and experiences of public bodies and institutions, especially from the National and University Library in Zagreb (2011, 2020).

An appropriate and sustainable disaster plan assumes assessing risks and existing response procedures. Various factors should be considered when managing the disaster risk: the vicinity of the buildings, the building structures, security, storage systems, insurance, water and fire protection and suppression. Disaster preparedness plan, relating to risk assessment, includes not only collections prevention and protection, but declaring team members’ roles and staff previously undergoing a training (MacIlwaine 2012). As the context in which our Institution did the rebuilding process was marked by overlapping crises – earthquakes, a flood and a global pandemic – developing thorough guidelines for prevention and protection could not have been a priority. More importantly, the professional staff of

the institution consists of one librarian and one documentalist, who do not have the professional help of a conservator/restorer. Even in regular working conditions, this is a great limitation because one of the roles of conservators/restorers, as Dragica Krstić (2015) mentions, involves the implementation of protective measures and activities in extraordinary circumstances/disasters.

2. Timeline

At the beginning of the year, the Institute received a supplement to the paper collection of the personal legacy of the first director Grgo Gamulin, honourable professor, art historian and art critic. It arrived in a compromised condition – full of spores and mould and had to be mechanically cleaned, each piece of paper by hand, before all other phases of technical, archival and intellectual processing. The cleaning of the legacy of Grgo Gamulin, therefore, became part of the traineeship for the academic year of 2020/2021. The majority of the activities were concluded just before the public presentation of overall personal archival legacy, which was given on the occasion of the scientific conference as an *hommage* to the intellectual founder of modern art history and a co-founder of the Institute of Art History in Zagreb, Grgo Gamulin, held in Zagreb in September 2021.

The first national pandemic lockdown began in March 2020, when staff was referred to stay at home, i.e. in remote offices. On Sunday, March 22, 2020, only seven days into quarantine, a devastating earthquake struck Zagreb which caused significant material damage to the residential buildings and cultural heritage, especially to the public institutions buildings that care for the valuable cultural resources of the City of Zagreb and the Republic of Croatia (Figure 1).

The damaged collections at the Institute of Art History needed to be rebuilt on-site, and, in parallel, many documentary resources needed to be prepared, processed and digitized to later be redirected to the teams of specialists who were working on documenting damaged



Figure 1. Damaged walls of the Institute of Art History after the earthquake of March 22, 2020. (Photo: Danko Zelić)

sites from the first day, many of them valuable heritage sites throughout the historical centre of the city of Zagreb. Although we worked in unenviable circumstances, the task of all professional associates was to participate and give professional support in the activities and initiatives for the development of the Program of complete restoration of the historic core of Zagreb.

In these newly developed crisis circumstances, we were, therefore, again forced to shift our perspective on the models of daily working routine and task force.

The integrity of the building where the Institute is located, for the most part, remains unimpaired and the building has not suffered any major damage. But the library totally collapsed, as the shelves and cabinets for storing materials were never beforehand statically adequately placed and reinforced (Figure 2). In short, the complete library fund had to be moved, cleaned, repaired, resorted and put back in place (Figure 3). Due to the pandemic



Figure 2. *Damaged Library of the Institute of Art History after the earthquake of March 22, 2020. (Photo: Danko Zelić)*



Figure 3. *Reorganizing the Library of the Institute of Art History after the earthquake of March 22, 2020. (Photo: Irena Šimić)*

conditions, not more than two to four people were allowed to be in the library spaces at a time, which, therefore, affected the continuance of the process.

At the beginning of May 2020, the extensive restoration of the main library collection of around 30,000 books and magazines had to be undertaken. The plan was made on short-term basis, day to day, and the decisions were made by the non-formal crisis team. Very important help was provided by the students, who, after finishing the basic part of their internship program, had the will and interest to assist in arranging the library collection by the UDC system (from scratch). By mid-August, the first major phase of Library renovation was completed (480 meters, about 20,000 volumes). The Library and documentation services for the entire period of crisis management were available to all users, not only researchers and associates of the Institute. Information and instructions on working conditions were publicly available on the website, and the notices were updated every 3 months.



Figure 4. *Sorting the collection of catalogues alphabetically and according to thematic areas (Photo: Lina Šojat)*



Figure 5. *Tonko Maroević study room after resystematization, just a few days before the earthquake of December 29, 2020. (Photo: Paolo Mofardin)*

During the process of library restoration, flooding caused by torrential rains occurred in Zagreb in late July, inflicting damage on a part of the collection stored in the basement storage. This unexpected rain force left the IAH working without electricity for seven days. Just on the day we finished most of the above-mentioned post-earthquake reconstruction, we received extremely sad news that our honourable colleague, academician and emeritus Tonko Maroević unexpectedly passed away on August 11, 2020.

Consequently, and with warm support of his family, we started to create his personal archival collection and Ex Libris (Figure 4), again on the site of his main study room that he had used for three decades. This process started in mid-September and was finished just before the second big earthquake on December 29, 2020, this time with the epicentre in Petrinja (Figure 5).

In the first weeks of 2021, the damage was repaired, this time on a much smaller scale. A couple of hundred books had to be put back on the shelves in the library, and in Tonko Maroević's room, the bookshelves needed to be cleared (50 office boxes) so that the shelves could be properly fixed and strengthened so that the material could be put back according to the UDC system.

The work and processing Ex Libris Tonko Maroević reopened a complex topic of unprocessed and unsystematised collection of authors and group catalogues of exhibitions (approximately 33 m). Since the merit in the formation of this collection to large extent belonged to Tonko Maroević, whose study room was recently arranged as archive and library storage *in situ*, it was decided to unite the same types of publications at the same storage site. In recent years an unstructured collection of exhibition catalogues was stored at the library basement storage, within the range of 23 m (51 office boxes). The transport and relocation processes were done in May 2021. The collection of catalogues was initially formed as an integral part of the Institute Library in 1972. It consists of catalogues obtained as a gift, less often by purchase, or indirectly through personal libraries which form an integral part of personal archival collections of prominent art historians, former employees or associates of the Institute – Grgo Gamulin, Ljubo Karaman, Ana Deanović, Cvito Fisković, Olga Maruševski, etc. The collection of catalogues has approximately 20,000 volumes.

Even though it was not encouraged by a crisis or unexpected event, it is also important to state that, since March 2021, IAH has made a series of construction works at the premises, which began with the reconstruction of one of the Library storage facilities with the aim of expansion and adequate equipment of the photographic studio and the photo lab. But, again on this occasion, a large amount of material from the library storage had to be moved to other working and storage rooms. That is a total of 179 boxes of library material (that has yet to be organized, processed and catalogued) that had to be moved from the basement storage and relocated in third- and fourth-floor rooms. This demanding and physically extremely challenging work again lasted for several months and ended around October 1, 2021.

3. Results

In various challenging circumstances during 2020, ten student volunteers or internship students participated in the IAH task force related to work in the library, archives and information-documentation processes. This was somewhat a win for both sides because most of the student internships in public institutions in Zagreb were cancelled or prolonged due to the damage to their buildings caused by the mentioned massive earthquakes.

The library collection that needed to be rebuilt presented in length meters is as follows: main Library fund 480 meters; serials 80 meters; Ex Libris Tonko Maroević 24 m, exhibition catalogues 56 m; 80 boxes of library donations being moved from the basement storage to the storage premises on higher floors.

Additionally, in the first months of 2021, three more students joined us as volunteers, as our priority task was to resystematize and digitize parts of a personal archival collection, which includes valuable photographic, spatial and architectural documentary sources referring to the many examples of sacral and profane architectural heritage affected by the earthquake that struck the city of Petrinja and the surrounding region.

None of the participants in this process, neither the mentors nor the students, were prepared for the events of the previous year and were facing a series of new and unknown situations. This made an extraordinary learning experience for all the contributors. The methods and perspectives that were a cumulative result of collaboration will be inspiring and helpful in any future endeavours. And this goes beyond the workplace: the collaboration was transformative on both personal and professional levels. The students were truly given an extraordinary opportunity to learn how to deal with special types of cultural heritage and did so in extraordinary circumstances. Especially since they felt like no amount of theory could replace actual practice. And preservation in that sense is not enough; it has to encourage growth and evolution. And what better tool can we ask for but a simple act of human kindness, from which new ideas emerge and evolve – a simple act of solidarity. Solidarity which can transform the everyday workplace into something much greater than the sum of its parts. There is a silver lining to every crisis – the fact that we, as people and as communities, grow stronger and more resilient when we act together in times of need. The importance of teamwork and community assistance was also shown in various rescue operations of cultural heritage in Vukovar-Srijem County after the floods that occurred in May 2014, as described by Juzbašić (2014).

4. Conclusion

Aside from our experience, which we consider an example of good practice, we are at the point of analysing what further formal steps are needed to be taken to avoid a whole range of *ad hoc* decisions made during crisis situations. Libraries are obliged to prepare a disaster plan according to the national “Act on Libraries and Library Activity”¹ and related regulations on the protection of library materials and on the management of documentary mate-

¹ Zakon o knjižnicama i knjižničnoj djelatnosti, [Act on Libraries and Library Activity], *Narodne novine* 17/2019, 28/2019.

rial outside the Archives.²

It should be emphasized that the development and conceptualization of the plan is a very extensive and demanding process and it certainly should not be expected of librarians and related professionals to write guidelines without extensive support from the professional community and specialized risk assessment experts.

Although customer services are today normalized, and the “only” crisis that we work within is the one of the global pandemic and related economic crisis, we in Zagreb and the surrounding region still experience frequent earthquakes, which remind us of the possible consequences that an earthquake can cause. The question of our preparedness for new hazards is still topical. Concerning our worries and responsibilities, a new intense earthquake will show us if we have done any significant change – whether the shelves will be strong enough and whether the books will stay in place.

The consequences of earthquake and pandemic trauma on human health should certainly be mentioned. Such circumstances in particular imply the months-long overload of heavy physical work, one that is neither suitable nor common for professions such as librarians, art historians, or future information professionals (i.e. students in humanities).

The past period has been challenging, stressful and uncertain. However, it is possible to conclude that, in addition to raising awareness of several problems, faults and limitations in times of overlapping crises, the existing values for the community were confirmed and adopted in professional and personal terms: solidarity, crisis management, knowledge transfer, inclusion, democratic decision-making, readiness for collaboration and teamwork. Even though our work is still in the context of continuous crises, we witness that we have undergone a positive transformation as a community, and have rebuilt our team workforce with new competencies, skills and shared knowledge, and that the lessons we learn along the way stay with us even after the crises subside.

² *Pravilnik o zaštiti knjižnične građe* [Regulations on library material protection], *Narodne novine* 52/2005; *Pravilnik o upravljanju dokumentarnim gradivom izvan arhiva* [Regulations on records management held outside archives], *Narodne novine* 98/2019.

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Sažetak

Ponovna uspostava knjižnica u vremenima višestrukih kriza

Cilj. U ovome se radu daje pregled procesa obnove vrijedne knjižnične zbirke Instituta za povijest umjetnosti u Zagrebu uslijed preklapajućih kriza koje su obilježile 2020. godinu (potres, pandemija, poplava).

Pristup/metodologija. Cjelokupni fond Knjižnice trebalo je ispočetka sistematizirati prema UDK sustavu jer se u potpunosti urušio zbog snažnog potresa u ožujku. Taj se proces preklapao s postupkom primarne zaštite i konzervacije zbirke rukopisne građe osobnog arhivskog fonda Grge Gamulina, povjesničara umjetnosti i likovnog kritičara, te iznenadnom i hitnom potrebom osnivanja osobnog arhiva i *ex libris* zbirke akademika Tonka Maroevića.

Rezultati. Rezultat su tih simultanih procesa potpuno funkcionalan i resistematiziran knjižnični fond, uspostavljen arhiv i *ex libris* zbirka Tonka Maroevića te očišćena i organizirana zbirka rukopisnog gradiva Grge Gamulina.

Originalnost/vrijednost. Ovaj rad daje pregled aktivnosti i procesa pri postupanju s posebnim vrstama kulturne baštine u neočekivanim i izvanrednim okolnostima. Ti istovremeni procesi proširili su sve naše kapacitete te rezultirali stvaranjem novih modela suradnje među kolegama, posebice sa studentima i volonterima, te su dugoročno značajno utjecali na promišljanje i razvoj radnih procesa i snaga.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: arhivske zbirke, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, knjižnica, krize, potres, Zagreb