

REPORT

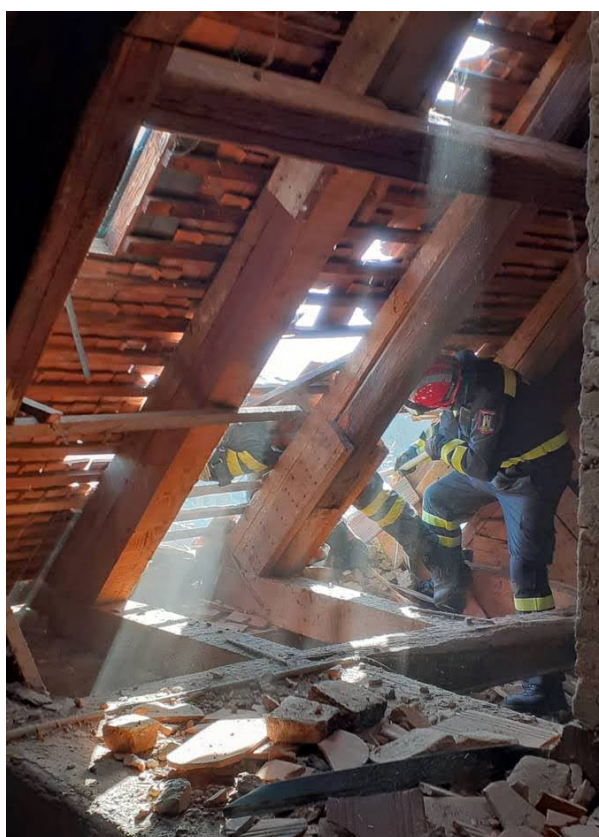
ZAGREB MUSEUMS SUFFER HEAVY DAMAGES IN THE RECENT EARTHQUAKE THAT HIT THE CITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESTRICTIONS

When disasters strike, we are always reminded how emergency preparedness is a crucial procedure that every institution has to take care about. We are also reminded how vulnerable we are and how fragile our heritage is. Only a month ago the international conference on risk management held in Dubrovnik and organised by the Ministry of Culture within the Croatian EU presidency showed numerous threats, including those for museums, that have to be addressed by authorities and experts showed what should be done to reduce existing risks. However, when a real thing occurs, we can testify how poorly we are prepared. All the weaknesses became obvious and we can clearly see what the biggest challenges are and what a long-lasting neglect to invest in prevention can do. A strong 5.5 magnitude earthquake hit Zagreb at 6.24 on Sunday, March 22nd 2020. Luckily the streets of Croatia's capital were empty and all institutions closed thus human casualties were avoided except a 15-year old girl who died from severe injuries caused by falling objects. Only a few seconds transformed the historic centre of Zagreb. Fallen facades and chimneys, damaged roofs, crashed vehicles that were parked on the streets were piling on a demolished property-lists. The town centre, which is home to many Croatian museums, was hit in the worst way. Buildings with poor construction could not resist the earthquake in spite that the magnitude was not the highest.

Since the beginning of the 2020 all the attention was focused on the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and no one could have foreseen the possibility that another disaster could occur. Two disasters striking at the same time and with completely different protocols to be followed merged into a horrible nightmare for Zagreb and will surely be the case study for future disaster-preparedness programmes. But many museums in Zagreb cannot find comfort in future planning as they watch their ruined buildings and crashed collections without being able to organise an immediate response and rescue teams after the earthquake. The damage overview started although it will take time to determine the exact assesment in museums of Zagreb because the safety measures against COVID-19 pandemic make it difficult for museum staff to immediately start working on their collections. As a great number of smaller earthquakes is still shaking Zagreb a lot of museum staff is still uncertain what measures are the best to employ. Many structural engineers are inspecting buildings, thousands are listed for inspection including the museums. The check-ups are brief and require follow-up procedures. The labels given by engineers mark the intensity of the damage

– red, yellow or green. Let's follow those labels and see what damages major Zagreb museums experienced. To make things worse weather conditions changed on the same date. Therefore, Croatian museum professionals were required to employ extra efforts to prevent rainfall and snowfall in storages as the weather changed on the day of the earthquake making the situation even worse on temperatures below zero.

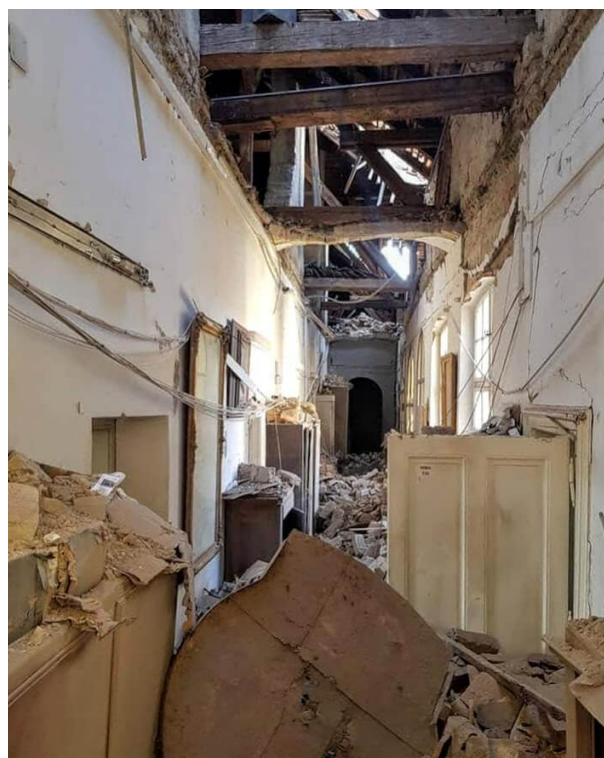
Among museums that suffered huge damages and therefore were marked with a red label was the **Croatian History Museum**. This museum whose origins can be found in the first National Museum in Zagreb in 1846 has been going through a several-decade ordeal, unable to find suitable space for the rich collections. Although being located in several buildings its headquarters are in a baroque mansion in the Upper Town which is inadequate for museum requirements. The Croatian History Museum has almost 300,000 museum objects and has been looking for the new premises for decades as in the present building they lack the exhibition space for most of their valuable collections. Now they are confronted with additional problems as the museum will have to evacuate their collections to unknown space yet. Constructional engineers visited the museum on several occasions and revealed a number of structural damage, which endanger the whole construction of the building. The damage is serious, all the walls and vaults are cracked, especially on the southern exhibition wing of the palace, which poses a threat to the attic. At the same time, the chimney collapsed, breaking the roof in three places. The director says that this is the time of new uncertainty and inability for the museum. Museum staff, both younger and retired, were overwhelmed by the whole situation, because they were left without their "home" again.



Interior and exterior of the Croatian History Museum

The **Croatian School Museum**, situated next to the National Theatre in the core of the downtown, was labelled red due to heavy damages which made the building unsafe to use. The building was built in 1889 with a purpose to become the home of Croatian teachers, a place for gathering and vocational work. It has always been a symbol of the profession, of enthusiasm and strength of Croatian teachers. The Croatian School Museum is about to celebrate its 120th anniversary. It is the only specialized school museum in Croatia which collects and exhibits valuable material on the beginnings and development of modern Croatian education. The earthquake damaged the permanent exhibition space and the current exhibition. Fortunately, the museum objects were not severely damaged neither in the exhibition rooms or storages.

Among museums that suffered the most severe damages is the **Museum of Arts and Crafts**. It was built by Herman Bolle in 1888, by the architect who did a lot of refurbishments and new buildings after the catastrophic earthquake in 1880 which hit Zagreb and its surroundings at a larger magnitude than the present one. However, the museum 140th anniversary turned into tragedy on 22nd October 2020 since the chimneys caused a great damage to museum roofs. The museum got the yellow label since its condition has been declared dangerous for free circulation for people. The damages on the roof were heavy and may cause further deterioration of the building. The museum collections have suffered severe damages too including exhibits on permanent display. Their director is addressing city authorities for an urgent help since obviously without the necessary refurbishments it is not possible to provide proper care for objects.



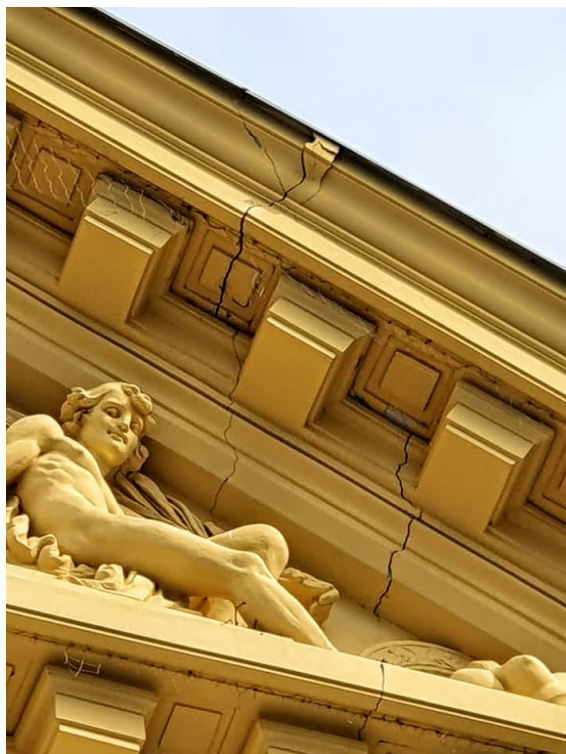
Left: interior of the Croatian School Museum. Right: heavy damages in the Museum of Arts and Crafts.

The **Archaeological Museum in Zagreb** was marked "yellow" meaning that the building has not been directly statically compromised but at this point it is safest to declare it temporarily unusable. A thorough inspection is still required. The most valuable museum objects are safe but a more detailed estimates on collection damages are still missing. The broken objects in permanent displays witness that a lot of conservation and restoration works will be needed. This may last for years according to the reports shared by the director. The museum is housed in the 19th century Vranyczany-Dobrinović palace and cracks appeared on the exterior and interior of the building. The museum staff, like in all other museums, act in accordance with the Decisions of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia, with the aim of preventing the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.



Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, permanent exhibition

The oldest natural history museum in Croatia is also sharing the sad fate of many museums and cultural institutions situated in the old historic centre of Zagreb. The **Croatian Natural History Museum** suffered extensive damage on the first and second floors of the building but also has damages in the permanent display. Broken items and showcases are a depressive image to be seen in this museum known to generations of visitors. The broken unique specimen collected by museum professionals over the centuries cannot be replaced. They cannot be collected again as they belong to the protected or vanished species. However, the museum staff is optimistic and is looking forward to the renovation which will successfully repair the damages. Besides the assistance of the City of Zagreb and the Ministry of Culture they plan to use EU funding for refurbishment.



Art Pavilion in Zagreb, which is 122-year-old building, has suffered considerable damage in the exterior, some walls of the building cracked and the roof cornice ruptured on the south side of the building thus endangering towers on the roof. The interior was also damaged but luckily the exhibited artworks stayed intact except the dust caused by the cracked walls. Due to the damage Art Pavilion is inadequate to hold exhibitions until necessary renovation takes place.

Art Pavillon in Zagreb, damages to the roof cornice

The **Mimara Museum** has been one of the most frequently visited venues for museum conferences and events. ICOM special project on Intangible Cultural Heritage took place there last year and in 2017 the famous European Museum of the Year Award ceremony was held there. Now the members of the staff are desperate when they see broken items in the permanent display and ruined museum walls. It will take time and money to repair and restore everything says the director.

The **City Museum** has suffered damage to the buildings and holdings it cares for. Fortunately, the “green” label means that the damage of the museum housed in a 17th-century monastery building is less severe than in some other institutions. However, exhibits in the permanent display have been partially damaged although the worst harm was done to memorial collections housed in different buildings in the town centre. The memorial collections of Ivan Ribar and Cata Dujšin-Ribar cause the greatest concern for the staff.

In spite of the significant damage to the interior of the **Ethnographic Museum** building, structural engineers labelled the museum “green”. This is due to the recent renovation of the facade and roof which was completed in 2019. There was no damage to the front facade, although it is full of sculptures and architectural plastic. The roof of the museum with the dome was also renovated and there was no damage to that part either and just a few years ago three trees were growing on the rim of the dome. The Ethnographic Museum has produced complete project documentation to continue the renovation of the museum building, including constructive remediation, due to the structural EU funding from the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion. Recently the museum started the

refurbishment of the storage building financed from the same programme. This example demonstrates the importance of investing in the construction and maintenance of important cultural institutions such as museums.



Smashed objects in the storage of the Ethnographic museum

Museum directors are unanimous in their message that there were not enough investments in the national museums lately and infrastructural problems piled up. The earthquake showed how little museum buildings meet the standards for risk management in terms of the constructional stability, storage equipment and exhibition design. There is an urgent need in redefining priorities in the attitude of financing museums. The buildings should be refurbished in order to comply with the valid construction law and bylaws and strategic objectives such as proper storages should not be neglected anymore. The basic question is whether we can be optimistic about the future prospects for renovation once the pandemic is over? Global financial crises are waiting around the corner and we have witnessed before that culture and museums are at the bottom of priority lists when funds are allocated and the first to experience severe cuts in their budgets. It is important to bear in mind that many damages are caused because the buildings were not properly maintained and constructive interventions did not occur. Everyone speaks about the accessibility of buildings to visitors who have less mobility but few mention that in order to interpolate elevators you have to incorporate constructive refurbishment to secure safety in case of an earthquake. Even when minor refurbishments did take place during the past decades, they lacked a constructive

back-up so the buildings became less resistant to earthquake. Overcrowded storages without proper equipment brought additional risk to collections. Active and responsible collecting means that professional standards are also obeyed by museum staff. All those initiatives have to be supported by proper funding. In Croatia the museum law holds museum founders responsible for maintenance and insurance but in reality, no one takes steps against those who do not fulfil their obligations. And we have witnessed inadequate measures even in the biggest national museums. When we compare the ratio of investments within the annual museum budgets the whole picture gets another frame. Most of the funds are used to cover salaries, up to 75% percent of the budget in some cases, programmes and utilities. The serious change of direction is needed and international support will be necessary to help museums communicate this shift they expect.

The role of ICOM will be crucial in helping museums in the years to come. The organisation can assist museums globally in addressing the governmental bodies to implement their legal roles in protecting heritage in museums. A clear message has to be sent over and over again. The initiative in 2013, which addressed EU governments by stressing how important museums are and that they should be properly financed even when crises hit, was such an attempt. It showed that the message does not have a proper impact if you are not persistent in continuously advocating museums. During recent conflicts in many parts of the world we witnessed how museums can be exposed to various threats, from destruction to looting. After the COVID 19 pandemic a more challenging financial breakdown is foreseen and the steps should be taken now. Croatian example can serve to illustrate how damages can accumulate easily if problems are not tackled. A more decisive step has to be made in organising education in risk management and prevention, too. ICOM is a global museum organisation and networking with other partners in the field can be helpful in strengthening the awareness among decision makers and museum professionals. Disasters do happen and when they strike consequences are huge. We are in constant learning how to mitigate risks and have to stay alert.

Zagreb, 17 April 2017
Goranka Horjan

The ICOM Secretariat as well as the International Committee on Disaster Resilient Museums are mobilized and committed to help their Croatian colleagues. If you can offer help, please get in touch with the [Croatian committee](#), or contact the ICOM Secretariat at programs@icom.museum.