

Study shows disaster plans often neglect historic preservation

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New research from the University of Colorado Denver shows many communities fail to take historic preservation into account when planning for natural disasters, risking a loss of heritage and critical engines of the local economy in the event of catastrophe.

"A lot of cultural and historic resources worldwide are at risk when natural hazards strike," said study author Andrew Rumbach, assistant professor of planning and design at CU Denver's College of Architecture and Planning, a major center of timely, topical and relevant research. "And even though we know this, very few resources are dedicated to protecting them."

The study, co-authored by Douglas Appler, the Helen Edwards Abell Chair in Historic Preservation at the University of Kentucky, was published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

The researchers reviewed the historic preservation and hazard mitigation plans in all 50 states. They also studied the exposure of historic resources to flood hazards in Colorado, Kentucky and Florida. They identified numerous historic sites sitting in hazardous areas. In Florida, for instance, they found that 23% of the sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places are located in a 100-year floodplain.

In Colorado, catastrophic floods in 2013 wiped out historic buildings across the Front Range. In the small town of Lyons, for instance,

floodwaters destroyed a historic WPA (Works Progress Administration) shelter and significantly damaged the Lyons Depot Library, originally built in 1881.

"As the costs of extreme weather events continue to rise, historic preservationists and planners concerned with disaster risk reduction need to become more aware of their overlapping interests and shared contribution to community resilience," the study said. "Natural hazards such as floods, fires and storms pose significant threats to historic resources, and the effects of anthropogenic climate change will likely make those threats more severe."

In conducting the research, Rumbach found that some states had exemplary plans to safeguard historical resources in the event of disaster.

North Dakota's hazard mitigation team included a representative from the Historical Society of North Dakota. The emergency plan describes and catalogues key historic assets and places. It also identifies potential funding for the documentation and protection of those sites in the event of a natural disaster.

In Key West, Fla., the city built tidal control valves and storm water management facilities to limit freshwater flooding of the Old Town area.

Despite that, Rumbach said, most communities have not integrated historic preservation into their disaster management plans. Their survey of state [hazard mitigation](#) plans found just 40 percent included a representative from historic preservation on the core planning team while 60 percent did not.

"Many disaster mitigation plans make no mention of historic resources," Rumbach said. "As more and more communities bank on historic resources to benefit the local economy, this needs to be remedied."

Economics aside, he said, many communities draw a sense of identity from these historic sites and can become unmoored when they are damaged or destroyed as was the case with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast which obliterated thousands of these resources.

"Nationally, a burgeoning conversation is taking place between the fields of historic preservation and disaster planning," Rumbach said. "This research will help bring about an improved understanding of what must be accomplished to protect and benefit from historic resources during the disaster planning and recovery process."

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