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Notre-Dame In Flames: Protecting Our Cultural Treasures



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Leadership Strategy

I write about risk and resilience both personal and professional.

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What can we do to better protect our cultural treasures like Notre-Dame de Paris and stop tragedies like these from occurring?



Firefighters tackle the blaze as flames and smoke rise from Notre Dame cathedral as it burns in Paris, Monday, April 15, 2019. (AP Photo/Michel Euler) ASSOCIATED PRESS

I am sickened by the footage of the ongoing fire that is, as of this writing, engulfing the iconic Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral. The 850-year-old cathedral graces the city center and is visited by over 14 million visitors a year. It is a

symbol of national pride and great historical significance that can never be replaced. I feel a deeply personal sense of loss for the cathedral having walked past it nearly every day when I studied abroad in Paris and visited many times since then including on my honeymoon. I can see by the outpouring of grief on social media and the footage of crowds singing “Ave Maria” on the streets of Paris as I write this that I am far from alone. The fallen spire has surely pierced the hearts of a nation as well as my own.

While the situation is still unfolding, it is sadly predictable and not the first incident to affect a site of great cultural and historical value. Unfortunately, it will not be the last. Just last year, we saw a fire destroy up to 90% of the precious artifacts and other items housed in the [National Museum of Brazil](#). And it is hard to forget how much of [Syria’s cultural heritage](#) was systematically destroyed during the Syrian Civil War over the course of the last few years. Our cultural institutions are under threat from a variety of risks both natural and manmade. What can we do to better protect our cultural treasures like Notre-Dame de Paris and stop tragedies like these from occurring? 

Heritage sites and cultural institutions are uniquely vulnerable and often underprepared. The majority of them are chronically underfunded and have few resources or time to invest in preparedness and emergency response programs. While they may carry insurance—and many do—the items and sites are often one of a kind and once lost are lost forever. No amount of money in insurance payouts will bring back a lost stained glass window or other masterpiece. For this reason, the leaders of these institutions must think about preparedness differently than most organizations.

It is essential to have a strategy to help protect our great cultural and historical treasures. I remember when New York City’s art community was broadly affected by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Many of the city’s finest galleries, dance companies and theaters were flooded and much of their contents lost with an estimated \$500 million in reported [art insurance losses](#). The gorgeous, new Whitney Museum had only just dug its foundation, which was completely filled with water from the storm surge. Seeing that close call, they made some [innovative investments in](#)

[resilience](#) that will help to protect their incredible collection from future incidents like hurricanes. More cultural organizations need to start thinking like this.

But most of these organizations have neither the resources of the Whitney Museum nor the advantage of starting from scratch. There are, however, more cost-effective options. For example, [Alliance for Response](#) offers tool kits and strategies for how to become more resilient that are tailored to the needs of this unique audience. Since 2003, the mission of this organization is to bring together cultural heritage and emergency response professionals at the local level across the United States. They offer planning resources, seminars, and other programs to help cultural organizations boost their resilience. We need more of these programs and more support for the ones that already exist. These treasures are too important to lose.

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Thankfully, it seems that no one was hurt in the Notre-Dame fire so far as we know, which is a lone bright spot in this terrible situation. We will find out more in the coming days and weeks about what caused the fire and how much of the cathedral can be restored. Meanwhile, our hearts and minds will be with Paris as it faces this brutal loss.



(AP Photo/Francois Mori) ASSOCIATED PRESS



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I am the president and CEO of Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRI), where I help organizations prepare for and recover from disasters both natural and manmade... **Read More**
