There is a saying that goes something like “I am from the government and I am here to help you”. Help is what historic preservationists wanted to provide during recent California disasters, but we soon discovered that providing assistance is not easy, nor always appreciated.

Unlike other states, California has been spared from disasters such as the horrible Hurricane Andrew that struck Louisiana, the widespread floods of the midwest, the terrible oil spill in Alaska, and disastrous Hurricane Iniki that struck Hawaii, and the horrendous Oklahoma City terrorist bombing.

Recently, the ‘Golden State’ has had a variety of disasters, including fires, oil spills, drought, floods, civil disturbances and earthquakes. These disasters have shared similar aspects: the wrecking of the infrastructure, damaged buildings, the economy decimated, thousands of people homeless, and damaged or destroyed historic sites. By far, earthquakes are California's most devastating disaster, and have been a painful lesson for the state and the preservation community.

Californians' written earthquake history goes back to the 18th century; many of the early mission settlements sent accounts to Spain and Mexico often including reports of earthquake damage to their adobe and stone structures and of the rebuilding efforts by the Mission fathers and the Native Californians. The 19th and 20th centuries also had their share of earthquakes. The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire is one of the more horrible disasters.

Given this well known and documented history of disaster, the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake nevertheless took the California preservation community and many municipal

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governments by surprise. Large urban centers, such as San Francisco and Oakland, responded well to the disaster, but most hard-struck, smaller cities and towns were caught unprepared.

Many unreinforced masonry buildings, mostly in central downtowns, were lost. Over 472 historic buildings were damaged and 78 demolished. The business districts in the towns of Watsonville and Santa Cruz have been considerably and permanently altered by the event.

In one case, the Pacific Garden Historic District in Santa Cruz, the centerpiece of the City’s downtown revitalization efforts and a major tourist destination, was officially removed from the National Register of Historic Places because 17 of the 36 contributing historic structures were demolished. This was the first time that an entire historic district has been removed from the National Register.

California is always “between earthquakes”, to paraphrase one preservationist (Feilden 1987). Although we are not as prepared as we should be, significant changes were made to improve disaster response during the more recent Northridge Earthquake of January 1994.

To provide background, I first want to describe typical disaster problems experienced in the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake, and then to explain changes implemented in the 1994 Northridge Disaster.

What becomes clear is that none of the regular environmental protections, and property rights exist during the emergency period, and that a disaster provides a golden opportunity for urban renewal.

Immediately after the Loma Prieta Earthquake struck, state and national preservation agencies, including the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and statewide nonprofit organizations, attempted to help the worst hit smaller cities and towns. The task was impossible. Towns like Watsonville, Salinas, and Hollister had larger problems than worrying about historic buildings. Thousands of people were homeless and the infrastructure destroyed or in ruins.

Demolitions of historic buildings occurred quickly, with or without owner consent. Many owners were not willing to challenge demolition orders. The normal local, state, and federal environmental protection laws and permitting processes were suspended. This included the Section 106 regulation under the National Historic Preservation Act, the review and comment process required when a federally funded undertaking, such as demolition funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), affects a building on or eligible for the National Register. This situation will exist as long as the emergency period exists.

Inaccurate and incomplete information spread very quickly, especially regarding what the FEMA would fund. This was disastrous to damaged historic buildings. Property owners were told that FEMA would pay for demolition only within thirty days of the disaster. The owners were often not told that FEMA would also pay for shoring, stabilizing or fencing buildings to eliminate imminent threat to adjacent buildings and to life safety.

Since FEMA money cannot be used to repair private properties, one major disaster problem was an almost total lack of funding for privately owned buildings, both commercial and residential, and also sacred structures. Some owners were quick to take advantage of the federal demolition funding rather then use their own, especially where local officials were
pushing hard for demolition. Other owners, who did not want to demolish, soon found themselves in a dilemma because they were unable to afford even the low interest loans that are available during a disaster for private commercial and residential properties from the federal Small Business Administration.

Unfortunately, state preservation agencies, like the California Office of Historic Preservation and the State Historical Building Safety Board, which administers the State Historical Building Code, the prevailing code for historic buildings, did not have official roles which would permit working with federal and state emergency agencies and local governments. Preservationists were officially ‘outsiders’.

Thus, preservationists had a very difficult time providing professional expertise to government officials. We found ourselves having little, if any, role in the crucial decisions regarding tagging and demolition of historic buildings, and providing property owners with much needed technical advice. However, this situation quickly began to change.

To slow the rush of demolitions, State Senate Bill 3X was signed by the Governor as part of the Special Emergency Legislation for the Loma Prieta Earthquake. This law, now a permanent part of the California Public Resources Code, Section 5028, requires the approval of the state Office of Historic Preservation before demolition of a historic building can occur, unless ‘imminent threat’ to life safety or adjacent buildings exists. This key imminent threat decision remains in the hands of the local government.

The impact of this new law was only as good as the preservation ethic was strong in the local communities. The town of Los Gatos, a model preservation community, complied with Public Resources Code 5028. Other cities continued demolishing buildings.

A lawsuit was filed by preservationists against the City of Santa Cruz, challenging the City's failure to abide by Public Resources Code 5028, but this was unsuccessful; and the historic St. George Hotel was demolished. A later legislative attempt to provide technical corrections and to strengthen Public Resources Code 5028 also failed.

Public Resources Code 5028 is a vague, confusing law needing technical corrections. The law does not define ‘natural disaster’, nor tie the event to a Governor's or President's emergency declaration. ‘Imminent threat’ is also undefined, permitting varying, inconsistent interpretations by local governments.

The long-term impacts of the Loma Prieta Earthquake on California are frightening. As one preservationist accurately predicted, the shock waves of the disaster will continue on for years. Numerous laws have been passed to increase public safety, and existing laws dusted off and enforced with renewed concern. Since most of the buildings damaged by the Loma Prieta Earthquake were constructed of unreinforced masonry, the 1986 State Unreinforced Masonry Law is one of these that was more rigorously enforced after the quake. This law requires local jurisdictions to identify potentially dangerous unreinforced masonry structures and to adopt plans for mitigating hazards.

The Unreinforced Masonry Law does not require owners to retrofit their buildings; local governments are required only to provide surveys and mitigation plans to the State Seismic Safety Commission. However, local governments decided that the state law created a ‘red hot liability issue’ and, in turn, passed the liability problem onto property owners.
As a consequence, cities began adopting mandatory seismic retrofit ordinances. Owners of unreinforced masonry buildings are usually given a specific time to complete the structural retrofit; if this is not accomplished, the building can be declared a hazard and abated, forcing tenants out and demolishing the structures.

Seismic retrofit programs were implemented long before the Loma Prieta Earthquake. San Francisco's early parapet abatement program proved its value as a life-saver during the earthquake. Other local jurisdictions, like the City of Los Angeles, required mandatory seismic retrofit requirements for unreinforced masonry structures. The Los Angeles program also protected lives during the Northridge Disaster.

![Figure 3.1. Unreinforced masonry apartment building in Hollywood (CA) showing typical earthquake damage at the corner. A completed seismic retrofit would have prevented such heavy damage. Northridge Earthquake 1994. (Photo: Steade Craigo 1994).](image-url)

Unfortunately, little financial assistance was and is available for property owners to retrofit buildings. This is a point that the Office of Historic Preservation and other preservation organizations have repeatedly made to the Legislature and the Seismic Safety Commission. Ironically, the City of Santa Cruz had a seismic retrofit ordinance for commercial buildings, which was not enforced due to property owners' lack of funds.

Several years after Loma Prieta, an extremely important agreement was reached with the State Office of Emergency Services, which had a major impact on the response to the 1994
Northridge Disaster. This agreement included the Office of Historic Preservation in the State's Administrative Plan for Public Disaster Assistance. The Office of Historic Preservation now has an official relationship with the following a declaration of a major disaster. The State Historical Building Safety Board is also included in the Plan.

The Office of Historic Preservation responsibilities include providing technical assistance and advice to Office of Emergency Services, local governments and property owners regarding the Section 106 process; providing preservation personnel at the Disaster Field Office to expedite review of historic projects; and conducting surveys of potentially eligible historic structures.

Just as importantly, the Office of Historic Preservation and the State Historical Building Safety Board will work with the Office of Emergency Services disaster preparedness activities, including training for state inspectors, employees and public inspectors.

In the Northridge Earthquake, a fundamental response change occurred by providing an Office of Historic Preservation presence at the disaster site to help expedite recovery. In the programmatic agreement between FEMA, National Advisory Council For Historic Preservation, and the State Office of Emergency Services, the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) delegated SHPO authority under Section 106 to a local representative to identify buildings on or eligible for the National Register and to provide comments on FEMA-funded activities. Only in the case of an adverse impact determination would the review come directly to the SHPO in Sacramento.

Having a SHPO-authorized local representative, with the technical expertise needed at the disaster site immediately after the earthquake first struck, greatly improved communications and significantly expedited emergency response. This arrangement was especially helpful with high visibility projects like the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the damaged National Historic Landmark and international symbol of Los Angeles, the site of two Olympic Games. All of this was made possible by FEMA funds provided through the Office of Emergency Services to the Office of Historic Preservation.

Another response change was the increased use of computer technology. Within hours of the disaster, the Office of Historic Preservation's database of historic properties in the area was electronically transferred to the Office of Emergency Services/FEMA disaster center, and to local governments and key preservation organizations. The data were electronically compared against the tally of some 8,000 damaged properties in the City of Los Angeles.

This resulted in a list of 171 endangered historic buildings in Los Angeles alone: 58 red-tagged and 113 yellow-tagged. Preservationists could then focus their efforts on these identified endangered properties and be sure that the owners were provided with correct information, as well as needed assistance.

Shortly after the initial disaster, representatives of the Office of Historic Preservation and the State Historical Building Safety Board inspected historic buildings and posted their own determinations of the degree of damage. City inspectors usually concurred with these postings.

Local government contacts were quickly established and assistance provided by local preservation organizations, the state, or the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which
has had a active role in the recent California disasters. Lists of historical architects and engineers experienced with earthquakes were also electronically distributed.

Local governments were quickly notified of their responsibilities under Public Resources Code 5028. We are now expecting only about ten requests for demolition from the City of Los Angeles alone.

A significant victory was the initial US$5 million provided by Congress for damaged historic properties, with the help of the California Governor's Office and the National Trust; this was an amazing accomplishment! US$1.5 million was set aside for planning and US$3.5 million for bricks and mortar (repair of damage) projects.

To administer the new grant program, a partnership was established, which included the Getty Conservation Institute, the California Preservation Foundation and the Los Angeles Conservancy, as well as the National Park Service, the National Trust and the Office of Historic Preservation. Normal federal granting requirements were modified to increase the applicability of the money. Grant applicants requested almost twice the amount of money available. Several months later, Congress provided a another US$5 million for local assistance.

Northridge was the first major earthquake to occur directly beneath a highly urbanized area in California. Due to public safety concerns, Governor Wilson ordered that the Seismic Safety Commission review the effects of the Northridge Earthquake and to study policy implications arising from the disaster, with particular attention to seismic structural safety and building design standards. The study specifically included historic structures.

The study found that historic buildings are not only valuable community cultural resources, but important parts of the local housing stock and economic infrastructure; and because older buildings are concentrated in traditional downtowns, their damage and loss will have disastrous long-term impacts on the speed of the recovery and economic viability.

Most importantly, the study concluded that the retrofitted unreinforced masonries generally performed well during the Northridge Earthquake, and that financial resources must be made available to seismically retrofit these buildings.

The lessons of the Loma Prieta Earthquake were well learned by California's preservationists. Although it helped that the Northridge Earthquake occurred in an area with a very strong preservation network, significant policy and procedural changes were made in the official response to the disaster.

Much more needs to be done, such as increasing disaster preparedness, providing seismic retrofit incentives and improving disaster mitigation and response. An adequate funding source for seismic retrofit does not yet exist, although there is currently legislation being considered, Senate Bill 875, which would provide tax credits for seismic retrofit. Unfortunately, there is no written disaster emergency plan in the State Office of Historic Preservation.

Furthermore, the Office has been unable to be actively involved with the Office of Emergency Services in disaster training and preparedness. Nevertheless, the Office of
Historic Preservation and the preservation community in California have been able to clearly demonstrate their desire and ability to provide improved disaster assistance.

As David Look and many others have stated, we can be certain that disasters will continue to occur. The challenge for all of us is to determine what we can do now to protect our historic sites before, during and after a disaster, and how we can best develop proper response plans for future disasters.

Bibliography
