



BUILDING FOR THE NUCLEAR AGE

The Medium of Fear

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All across America there exists long forgotten, but ever present, signs on the sides of buildings. They display a black circle enclosing three yellow, inward pointing triangles. These buildings were specially surveyed by architects and engineers and certified as fallout shelters (Herwick). Structures that were never actually used for that specifically designated purpose, the signs and the buildings on which they were posted remain an ever-enduring symbol of an era in American history where the fear of what could be played a role in the lives of all Americans.

The Cold War was an era, from 1947 until 1991, of a culmination of intense political tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. It led to the rise of the fallout shelter, coming in several phases. In 1949, the Soviet Union dropped their first Atomic bomb, creating panic in America. Schools instituted programs to teach children what to do in case of a bomb, with the short Duck

and Cover, an official Civil Defense film, being widespread. The film follows Bert the Turtle as a catchy tune narrates his practice in 'ducking and covering,' leading to his survival amongst explosions. If an atomic bomb was to be dropped, this practice was likely to help provide some protection for those with some distance from the site of the drop, but this simple program would be no match for the Hydrogen Bomb being tested by the Soviets in 1953, creating another surge of panic. It was at this point that the Office of Civil Defense had to alter the survival strategy, people would need more protection, they would need a shelter (Vox). The potential cost of the government installing these shelters would have been extremely high, so a do-it-yourself program was instituted instead, with short films such as *Walt Builds a Family Fallout Shelter* encouraging individuals to construct a shelter in their own homes. This movement culminated finally in July 1961,

with President John F. Kennedy giving a speech about the possible threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union (Jacobs). It was on this specific day that the fallout shelter program in America really kicked off bigger and stronger than before. His speech was followed a few months after by *Life* magazine's September 1961 issue including blueprints for a fallout shelter. It had been made clear to the citizens of the United States that this was a war unlike those before it, this war had the potential to create destruction at a scale never before seen, and thus every American had to do their part to prepare. The traditional front lines had disappeared, everyone had become a soldier in this new kind of war, and their main goal was simply in survival

To fully understand the fallout shelter program of the Cold War, there must be an understanding of the culture surrounding it. The Cold War was very different from the other confron-

tations of the century. For one, there was never any direct, full-scale combat between the United States and the Soviet Union. Compare this to the Vietnam War, there was direct fighting, and even a draft of 2.2 million American men (University of Michigan). Yet during this war, there were widespread, unprecedented protests. This was a more difficult war to justify, but more importantly, with a population of around 205 million people in America (US Census Bureau), most of the population felt little to no impact of the war. In earlier wars, such as World War II (WW2), there was widespread rationing and larger drafts, with 10 million being inducted into combat in WW2 (US Census Bureau). Everyone was involved in the war, directly or indirectly. There was a greater focus on doing one's own part to help the soldiers across the sea, soldiers who are in some way connected or related to oneself. Women entered the work at an unprecedented rate to do their part.

Vietnam did not feel any such drastic effects; there were individuals who did not feel the war at all, who were not worried about their own freedom or lives, and thus had the chance to protest it. One may draw connections to the Cold War and Vietnam, as there was no actual fighting, which would seem to indicate that individuals did not feel the effects of the war, there was no rationing, seemingly no need to enter the workforce. But there is a drastic difference between the Cold War and Vietnam. While there weren't letters from sons or friends, coupon books or a draft, there was another tangible object that constantly reminded everyone of the war they were in. The fallout shelter.

Every citizen was given the responsibility to help America win this war against the Soviet Union. And their main task was simply to survive, with their best chance lying in the fallout shelter. "If you follow the pointers in this little booklet,

you stand a far better than an even chance of surviving the bomb's blast, heat, and radioactivity. What's more, you will make a definite contribution to the civil defense in your community, because civil defense must start with you" (Survival Under Atomic Attack). People could begin to do their part in joining the program of the fallout shelter. The construction of the buildings would seemingly provide a safe place for people from the fallout of a bomb, and the program also sent a message to the Soviet Union: it showed them that the US was prepared for any attack. The Cold War was made into something akin to a real war because of this program. Even if there was no fighting, the presence of the war was everywhere. There were tangible structures, there were those black and yellow signs on the sides of structures. This program became a part of everyone's everyday lives. Building the shelter, performing practice drills, stocking up the storage. This ar-

chitecture was real and tactile in everyone's lives, making a war exist where there otherwise would not be such a present, reminding force of the possible destruction to

The program of the fallout shelter had a place in every American's life, but was this a sure defense against a bomb? The rhetoric of the era followed the pattern of stating simple facts and realities to come from a possible bomb drop, and provided a simple solution to the main dangers, all of which can be seemingly minimized with a fallout shelter. "History shows that there is a defense against every weapon ever invented. Modern civil defense is the civilian's program for protecting people, property, and production in case war comes. If the people are prepared, nothing the enemy can hit us with can knock us out" ("What About You and Civil Defense...", Jacobs). This idea was constantly pushed, that simply being prepared for a bomb can minimize

its impacts, with the literature presented by the government in pamphlets such as “Survival Under Atomic Attack,” which pointed towards the big three concerns: the initial blast, resulting heat, and radioactivity. In accordance with the pamphlet these three can be reasonably countered by seeking cover in a fallout shelter. While the concept of simply having a fallout shelter being enough to provide safety is comforting, it actually wouldn’t have been very effective in saving everyone.

President John F. Kennedy’s civil-defense chief, Steuart L. Pittman, acknowledged that fallout shelters would do very little to actually protect the people near the site of an actual bomb drop, but the program would give “our presently unprotected population some form of protection,”(Herwick). Protection being in the form of an act, something people can pick up and do, something they can tangibly see, and believe that

it could keep them safe. It gave them hope, it took their minds off of the possibility of unavoidable destruction. People don’t like to sit and await their fate, this program gave them something to do and believe in. This program of this shelter rose to something far beyond its intention. The shelters would not provide protection at the site of a bomb drop, while they may protect those far outside the region of the target. But for those who were protected, what kind of world would they return to? These buildings sheltered people from the truth, there would be no one untouched in a nuclear war, there would be no line of defense if a bomb was dropped on a particular city. There was nowhere to go and nothing anyone could do to truly protect themselves. But this is a fact Americans preferred not to acknowledge.

Raymond Swing, creator of One World or None, described what it would look like if an atomic bomb was actually dropped, stating, “Prac-

tically everyone within a radius of two miles is killed or injured. Horrible effects of radiation are permanent blindness, sterility, loss of teeth, prolonged bleeding, and ulcerations of the body tissues. The heat generated is so great that literally nothing remains but dust and smoke. No streets, no walls, not even dead bodies, everything has been pulverized. Fires of terrific dimensions sweep the city” (Swing). There would be no fallout shelters left at the site of a bomb drop.

And what exactly would happen if a bomb was dropped? Fallout shelters created an ideological program of self-defense for and your family. The program began as a do-it-yourself, people were told to store goods such as food, water, and other necessities for a set amount of time. Throwing any other individuals into this equation, say, a desperate, unprepared neighbor, would decrease the likelihood of survival for every other member in that fallout shelter. Fallout shelters

wouldn't even protect people in too close a range of the bomb, yet they were still willing to kill their neighbors if it came to it. individuals were willing to do anything to ensure their own hypothetical survival at any cost. *Time Magazine* published an article, “Gun Thy Neighbor,” which suggested having a gun in all fallout shelters just in case (“Gun Thy Neighbor,” *Life*). Provisions would only go so far, and when it came down to it, one's own family's survival was much more important than one's neighbor's survival (Jacobs).

The idea behind Fallout Shelters was that they would protect Americans against nuclear bombs being potentially dropped by the Soviet Union. The shelters are a form of metamedia, they grew wildly past their first initial intention, instead becoming a symbol to the Soviets that America was prepared to survive the Soviets' worst bombs, and giving the American people hope, despite the fact that the reality was much

more grim. These buildings stood in theory for so much more than they could actually promise to the people who would seek shelter in them. This architecture was something of a façade, promoting safety and welfare, hiding a grotesque culture behind it, of people willing to shoot their neighbor in hope of surviving a little longer, not even knowing what kind of world would be left when they emerged from their shelter.

We again are in an era passing through phases of all too real fear of nuclear war. Architecture may influence our choices regarding self-preservation at a loss of our own humanity, perhaps again encouraging individuals to construct their own fallout shelters, protecting those closest to you, everyone else being a hindrance to your own survival. Or maybe this time, if it comes to it, we will ponder more the real consequences of a nuclear war. Perhaps it is not the destruction from the bomb, but the culture created in prepar-

ing for a bomb, in constructing these fallout shelters. Would we be willing to kill our neighbor if it meant surviving and emerging to an unknown world? Rod Serling frames this best, in one of his Cold War era commentaries, in the form of an episode of *The Twilight Zone*: “Damages? I wonder. I wonder if any one of us knows what those damages really are. Maybe one of them is finding out what we’re really like when we’re normal. The kind of people we are just underneath the skin. I mean all of us. A lot of naked wild animals who put such a price on staying alive that they’ll claw their neighbors to death just for the privilege. We were spared a bomb tonight, but I wonder if we weren’t destroyed even without it”

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