

Designing for Dread: Cold War Bomb Shelters and the Aesthetics of Domestic Survival

Janna Jones

Abstract: This essay examines Cold War bomb shelters as cultural artifacts that staged the performance of domestic survival amid existential dread. Through an analysis of both model shelters and homeowner-designed interiors, the paper explores how shelter design reflected midcentury anxieties, aesthetic aspirations, and consumer desires. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of overflowing meaning and Judy Attfield's concept of containment, the essay argues that bomb shelters were not merely utilitarian spaces but symbolic environments where Americans rehearsed resilience and negotiated the contradictions of suburban life. By integrating midcentury modern design principles—flexibility, minimalism, and the illusion of openness—shelter interiors masked fear with familiarity and transformed spaces of emergency into extensions of domestic comfort.

Introduction

During the Cold War, the bomb shelter emerged not only as a site of potential refuge but also as a stage for the performance of cultural anxieties. This essay explores how the interior design of both model and self-fashioned shelters reflected the existential dread of nuclear annihilation while simultaneously expressing midcentury aspirations for comfort, domesticity, and aesthetic order. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of overflowing meaning and Judy Attfield's concept of containment, I argue that bomb shelters were not merely utilitarian spaces but symbolic environments where Americans rehearsed survival, projected hope, and

Janna Jones is a professor of communication at Northern Arizona University. She is the author of both books and essays that make sense of twentieth century art, interior design, architecture and cinema. Her article "Making Room for The Brady Bunch: the Syndication of Suburban Discomfort" was published in *Liminalities* in 2019. She is currently researching and writing about (and collaborating with) Wendy Clarke, one of the most important video artists of the twentieth century.

negotiated the contradictions of their historical moment. The shelter's design—its furnishings, colors, and concealed provisions—became a medium through which fear was domesticated and dread was made livable. In this way, the bomb shelter functions as a cultural artifact, staging the tension between apocalypse and everyday life.

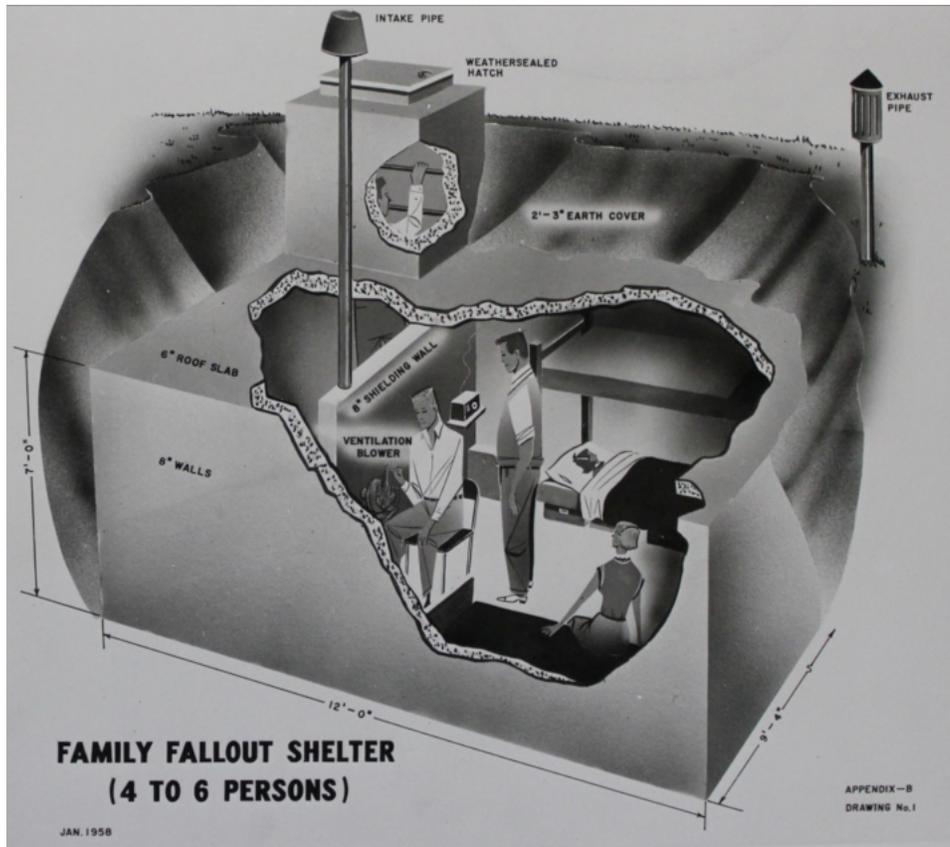


Fig. 1: Diagram of a family fallout shelter presented to the public by the Federal Civil Defense Administration in January 1958. US National Archives.

This essay investigates and analyzes some of the interior designs of model shelters and shelters that Americans designed themselves—in their basements and backyards during the Cold War. Both the model interior designs and the homeowner interior designs are material reflections of the existential fears and consumer desires of the Cold War era. In order to make sense of these fears and

desires, I investigate what it meant for interior designers and ordinary Americans to design a space during the Cold War-- that may never be used—because its ultimate purpose was for protection during a nuclear attack. In order to make sense of the interior designs and the objects contained in Cold War bomb shelters, I turn to the theorist Roland Barthes, who explains that there is always a meaning which overflows an object's use. He writes:

The paradox I want to point out is that these objects which always have in principle, a function, a utility, a purpose, we believe we experience as pure instruments, whereas in reality, they are also something else: they function as the vehicle of meaning...There is always a meaning which overflows the object's use...There is no object which escapes meaning.¹

Following Barthes, I explain both the practical functions and the overflow of meanings of the objects of interior design in bomb shelters during the Cold War. I also turn to the concept of "containment," a term used by the art historian, Judy Attfield to understand the categorization, arrangement and order of material culture in the home. Containment, Attfield writes, is a "hybrid pragmatic practice that has much more to do with a strategy for the survival of individuality than any concern for the rules of aesthetic order."² Containment helps us to understand how people appropriate their environment by way of the variety and ingenuity of arrangements to which they subject their surroundings.³ Conversely, she also explains that people feel alienated when they are unable to manage their surroundings for themselves.

Interior Design during the Cold War

The interior design of the Cold War bomb shelter, particularly the model bomb shelters described here did not exist in a vacuum. Bomb shelter designs reflected the interior design trends that were popular in middle class and upper middle-class homes in newly built suburbs across the United States. Home decorating trends, before World War II, tended toward traditional designs, family heir looms and antiques. But beginning in the 1950s, interior designers and consumers sought furniture, art, and designs that expressed a confidence in the future, rather than the past. "For those young married couples who could afford it, 'good taste'

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 169-170.

² Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 136.

³ *Ibid.*

signified a rejection of parental taste,” writes Nigel Whiteley, “and a commitment to design as an expression of the lifestyle of the professional middle classes—a trend which was to escalate sharply throughout the 1960s and 1970s.”⁴ While middle class families, in the post war era, continued to integrate Colonial design, antiques and family heir looms in their homes, interior designers rejected Colonial designs and traditional objects. The future (though potentially apocalyptic) did not include old and overstuffed furniture, inflexible spaces, and hand-me-downs.

Beginning as early as the 1940s and throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, both middle brow and high-brow designers promoted home interiors that we now recognize and understand as mid-century modern. The interior designs of this period complemented the open spaces of suburban ranch style architecture that gained popularity following World War II. Russel and Mary Wright, Ray and Charles Eames, Richard Neutra, and George Nelson, the most prominent interior designers of the Cold War period, rejected the concept of “interior decoration” because the term implied taste and personal preference. They used the word “design” instead because it suggested rationality and a scientific and systematic approach for better living. While most homeowners during the post-war period who were interested in clean and minimal design did not come in direct contact with the Wrights, the Eames, Neutra or Nelson--or the interiors they designed--they were influenced by their ideas and work nonetheless.

Russel and Mary Wright promoted a uniquely American lifestyle that was seemingly effortless and informal. They had a tremendous influence on American design, beginning as early as the 1940s. Their *American Modern* dinnerware became one of the bestselling dinnerware lines of all time. It grossed \$150 million dollars in sales during the twenty years it was produced. “Its manufacturer, Steubenville Pottery, had to expand its facilities twice to keep up with the demand for it,” writes design historian Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand, “and the china was so popular during the shortages of the Second World War that it caused a frenzy whenever it was available.”⁵ The Wrights who also designed furniture and textiles for the home, published their influential book, *Guide to Easier Living*, in 1950. In their book, the Wrights explain that replicating traditional designs styles or copying wealthy interiors was appropriate, as it created fussy, snobbish homes that stifled individuality. “We believe the new American home will be much simpler one to

⁴ Nigel Whiteley, “Interior Design in the 1960s: Arenas for Performance,” *Art History*, v. 10, no. 1, March 1987, 80.

⁵ Lucinda Kaukas Havenland, *Mid-Century Modern Interiors: The Ideas that Shaped Interior Design in America* (Bloomsbury: 2019), 17.

live in,” the Wrights explain. “Its size and its furnishings will be determined by the family’s need, not by arbitrary dictates of fashion. Living in it will be based on an informal and improvised design, rather than on a formal, traditional pattern.”⁶ The Wrights, like other designers of the era, believed in the principle of plasticity—except for built-ins nothing in a room was necessarily permanent. The dining area, for example, may not be a fixed space as we traditionally understand it. “It may have no permanent existence,” they write, “disappearing from the living room after mealtime, or perhaps causing the kitchen to vanish and taking over its place temporarily.”⁷

Ray and Charles Eames are likely the most well-known designers of the mid-century home. Replicas of their rosewood lounge chair and ottoman abound in homes in the twenty first century; their (original and replicas) molded plywood and fiberglass chairs still populate homes, schools, and businesses across the United States. In the mid-twentieth century and still today, their designs suggest a forward-thinking and clean aesthetic. Though primarily known for their furniture, they were influential interior designers too. Their most famous home interior environment was their own home, logically named the Eames House—located in the Pacific Palisades (the house survived the January 2025 fire). Built in 1949, its most influential elements were sliding glass doors and windows that not only allowed for a great deal of light, but also seemingly brought the outdoors into the home. This design, the assimilation of the outdoors and the indoors, became a popular mid-century element of suburban homes across the United States following World War II. Other influential elements of the Eames Home were the neutral colors on walls and floors, as well as the arrangements of modern furniture, with a simple and a forward-thinking aesthetic.

Like the Eames, Richard Neutra’s lasting influence is the integration of indoors and outdoors. As Havenhand explains, roof decks, patios, and sleeping porches were frequent features of Neutra’s houses. “In addition,” she writes, “the natural qualities of sites were emphasized by terraces, plantings, and landscapes.”⁸ Obviously, Neutra’s desire to bring the outdoors inside would be problematic for bomb shelter designs, but his principle of flexibility became a regular feature in Cold War shelters. He believed interior spaces should not be static; rather they should be able to function in a variety of ways and that inhabitants should be able

⁶ Mary and Russel Wright, *Guide to Easier Living* (reprint Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2003), 2.

⁷ Mary and Russel Wright, 47.

⁸ Havenland, 44.

to move elements around (whether it be walls or furniture) depending upon their needs. “Movable spaces,” writes Havenhand, “allowed small intimates spaces, used for private functions, to be expanded and combined with other spaces for public and social use. This flexibility was emphasized by Neutra’s frequent use of large plate mirrors that doubled the volumes of the spaces and expanded the inner view in the same way the large windows expanded the outward view.”⁹

Many of the design principles of George Nelson, the design director at Herman Miller Furniture Company, were similar to the Wrights, the Eames, and Neutra. His rejection of overstuffed, overcomplicated, static interior spaces similarly aligned with their design principles. In 1952, Nelson attempts to explain Herman Miller’s success by pointing to the fact that the company’s designers were trained in architecture.

It may be no more than coincidence, but I must certainly confess to prejudice in this regard, but there is this to be said for the architectural approach to any design problem, and particularly that of furniture: the problem is never seen in isolation. The design process is always related on the one hand to houses or other structures in which the furniture is to be used, and on the other hand to the people who will use it. When successfully followed through, the approach of the architect-in-industry goes much deeper than styling and is far more likely to create trends than to follow them.¹⁰

Nelson’s principles of functionality, flexibility and forward-thinking problem solving helped the Herman Miller Furniture Company achieve its iconic status—today its designs are synonymous with classic midcentury design.

The tenets of flexibility, functionality, the assimilation of the outdoors into the indoors, and clean minimal designs that Nelson, the Wrights, the Eames and Neutra advocated trickled down to the newly minted middle-class interiors, following World War II. While middle class consumers may not have been familiar with the names of the leading designers of the era, many were aware of the shifts in interior design endorsed by such middle-class taste makers as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Good Housekeeping*. For example, in the 1961 *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Book*, the editors explain that a trend in contemporary architecture brings the outdoors inside—“...letting the natural beauty of trees, grass, and sky complete the interior.”¹¹

⁹ Hanvenland, 42.

¹⁰ George Nelson, *The Herman Miller Collection*, 2nd edition (Zeeland, MI, 1952), 5.

¹¹ *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Book* (reprint Des Moines, IA: Meredith Corp, 2017), 167.

The Smiths' dining room (a fictional family in the *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Book*) serves a flexible space for the family of three. It functions as a study, a buffet area for parties, a serving area for the private patio, and as a breakfast room.¹² In the 1960 *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Ideas*, the editors explain that Casual Modern design is a new carefree way of life. They explain that "If you keep it simple, serene, with a minimum of clutter, you'll find it warm and friendly, and most easy to keep."¹³ In the March 1960 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, we see how some of the design principles trickled down into the monthly magazine as well. In the "Idea Index" the editors suggest trying a divider instead of a wall to create a more flexible environment. A steel beam replaces the wall.¹⁴ Another idea the editors suggest is tall glass doors that swing open "to give access to the outdoors." They explain that the doors offer a great solution when "you want access to the outdoors without breaking the appearance of the large window panels."¹⁵ As we will see bomb shelter designers integrated many of these principles into their shelters. Functionality and flexibility were utmost on their minds, as it was entirely possible that the bomb shelter would never be needed as a refuge.

The Family Room of Tomorrow

In 1960, Mayor Richard J Daley proclaimed the first week of January to be "American Institute of Design Week" in Chicago, in conjunction with the "Family Room of Tomorrow," an exhibit of upscale bomb shelters. Created as a public service, shoppers saw the "Family Room of Tomorrow" in the lobby of the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. According to Marc T. Nielson, the chief designer of the exhibit:

Anyone bent on pressing the button to trigger an atomic war will pause when he realizes that a great many of our people can be saved from atomic fallout while he himself might now... Instead of facing the task with fear that an attack will surely come, we feel that if we do our job well, it will never come about. In this way we, too, contribute to the cause of peace.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 153.

¹³ *Better Homes and Gardens Decorating Ideas* (Des Moines, IA: Meredith Publishing Company, 1960), 5.

¹⁴ "The Idea Index," *Better Homes and Gardens*, v.38, no. 3, March 1960, 27.

¹⁵ Ibid, 28.

¹⁶ "The Family Room of Tomorrow," *Interior Design* 31 (January 1960), 114.

Nielson believed that interior designers could contribute to peace by designing attractive bomb shelters. Whether the bomb shelter would actually protect families against radiation and death was not the primary concern. The vision of hundreds of thousands of families burying themselves in their backyards was a symbol of a unified front against a potential air strike. The American Institute of Design surmised that American would be less likely to be attacked if hostile forces were unable to kill people. Shelter promoters linked an attractive bomb shelter design with a larger Cold War brand of paranoid logic, yet certainly they had other motives besides saving the world from destruction. They had discovered a new market in which to profit.

To entice the public to buy shelters, designers introduced aesthetically pleasing and opulent designs that would enhance American's recently constructed suburban homes. Nielson wanted the public to become interested in fallout protection. In order to accomplish this, he proposed that:

The shelter must be made attractive. A room constructed to all requirements of OCDM (Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization), with no use except in extreme emergency, cannot easily be sold to the public, particularly on such a grim basis. A dual-purpose room should do much to stimulate more interest in fallout shelters. A room that can be used permanently would have more appeal than a secluded refuge which one would approach with dread.¹⁷

"The Family Room of Tomorrow," which was a feature in a 1960 issue of *Interior Design* reveals several contradictions at work in bomb shelter promotion. The cultural contradictions that manifest themselves suggest the ways the promoters managed and marketed some of the discrepancies of the period. In the 1950s, the term "family room" expressed conflicting visions of the home and family as well as a design style recently incorporated into the layout of the popular suburban ranch home. In the campaign to sell products for the family and home, appliance makers and building-material manufacturers presented a new model of middle-class life during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

"At the center of this model," writes Clifford Clark, "was the image of the family as the focus of fun and recreation."¹⁸ A family room/bomb shelter suggested a simple integration of a shelter into the family lifestyle characterized by the architecture of the suburban home. It implied family interaction, barbeques, and

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Clifford E. Clark, "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities," in *Recasting America: Cultural Politics in the Age of the Bomb*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, 1989), 172.

Sunday afternoon recreation. Yet Englehart suggests that the family enclosed in their suburban home not only invoked images of fun but also security. "In the ranch house, the mom protected by her working husband was to raise a new generation of children," Tom Englehart writes, "fortified by the products of abundance against all terrors."¹⁹ The image of the family and the family room in bomb shelters summoned visions of both fun and safety; while in conflict with one another, these ideals fused together were persuasive promotional images.

By naming the bomb shelter "the family room of tomorrow," promoters veiled the fear of destruction and "no tomorrows" by invoking images of progress and the future. Yet, the name also challenged the notion of progress, for it implied that a nuclear attack was possible as soon as tomorrow, giving urgency to the project and to the public's need to build shelters. The incongruous representations of leisure and survival were the most powerful conflicts contained within the recreational room. Had the family room of tomorrow been necessary in an actual nuclear attack, the idealized space for youthful fun and recreation would recede into a space of survival where the whole family, theoretically could live for weeks. The images that the promotional literature depicted were of people merely extending their ideal family time into another room of their suburban house, yet the emergency family room would have been a space where the family recreated their existence after nuclear attack.

Bomb shelter designers fashioned images that appealed to suburban aesthetics and satisfied potential buyers' desires for comfort, domesticity and prosperity. At the same time, the shelters adhered to specifications of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization. The designers appealed to the dual motives of potential bomb shelter owners. Homeowners wanted to be safe, but they also wanted an aesthetically pleasing environment that looked smart in relation to the rest of their ranch-style homes. Nielson's design, as well as the other designs, were all contained in an 8'6" x 12' space and included the minimum essential supplies for a family of four for a two-week emergency stay.

In the 1960 issue of *Interior Design*, we see that Nielson used subdued and natural colors, in designer touches of furnishings in "fabrics of muted tones of red, brown, and gray, and Dunbar walnut furniture and paneling" creating an ambience of warmth and suggested an image of nature. One wall features a mural where bison and wild horses appear to roam, and the ceiling was painted sky blue, creating the illusion of open space and the outdoors. Food was stored behind

¹⁹ Tom Engelhart, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York, 1995), 106.

revolving walnut doors. Interestingly, a world map covered the doors as a “decorative interest.” It seems an odd focal point for a bomb shelter, perhaps serving as a gesture of assurance that the world could survive a nuclear war. A bicycle was included in the design as well. It served two potential functions; it could be used for exercise and to pump fresh air into the room, though it is uncertain where the fresh air would come from. The floor is inlaid with metal inserts that create a hopscotch board. Family games and activities like the hopscotch board are prevalent in promotional shelter designs, as there was, naturally, a fear of boredom, if there was a nuclear attack. Nielson does not include books or book shelves in his design.

Other designers also masked the function of shelters with suburban aesthetics. Jack Rees, for example, found ways to conceal water, an essential ingredient during an emergency. Rather than storing it in a closet, Rees put the water in colorful bottles displayed on eight shelves for decorative effect. His shelter design bunk beds, but the center piece of the room was a round dining room table--with a charcoal-burning hibachi for both cooking and to generate heat—in the center of the table. A chess board is a prominent feature in Rees’ shelter design; like Nielson, there is no evidence of books, which seems odd considering the shelter is designed for a family of four, for a two-week stay. Another designer, Roy Beal, offered a shelter that posed as a library, but in fact there are no books in his design either. Beal’s design concealed all essential equipment behind panels of walnut to create “a fallout that has the appearances of a library-study.”²⁰ False book fronts concealed storage space with the room, and on another wall a false book motif on panels hid fold-down beds. It is likely that real books would have presented a less uniform design, but they would likely have been cheaper and would have offered opportunities of distraction and engagement. While Beal’s design did not suggest the outdoors, like Nielson’s design, it did include a large potted plant sitting on the floor. Like the books, the plant, is surely fake, but does add a natural element into his design. Potential shelter owners were presented at once with an attractive shelter design and with a means of coping with the threat of desolation and isolation. In all of the shelter designs, two weeks of canned goods, flashlights, first aid kits, and emergency tools were cleverly concealed. The fallout shelter, like the consciousness of the consumer, was to be fully prepared for nuclear attack, yet the consumers’ fear and shelter’s provisions were to remain concealed, as if the threat did not exist.

²⁰ “The Family Room of Tomorrow,” 115.

The most practical of the shelter designs, as featured in the 1960 issue of *Interior Design* was created by the only woman of the five designers. Dorothy H. Paul design has the most potential as a dual-purpose room. In an event of a nuclear attack, Paul's design includes plenty of possible activities during a two-week stay and in less extraordinary times, the room can be used as a hobby room. For seating and sleeping, Paul included two deep trundle beds that open up to two double beds. The focal point of the room is a mural that includes a quaint village, trees, birdhouses and children playing. The figures in the mural are magnetic and can be moved around for amusement. Below the mural are shelves that hold games and hobby materials, and in the center of the room, the round dining room table holds a home movie projector. A movie screen, map, and an astronomy chart hang behind ceiling beams and can be pulled down when desired. As home movies in the early 1960s were quite popular with upper middle-class families, Paul's decision to include the projector and movie screen in her design is ingenious. Because shelters obviously do not include windows, Paul's design makes for an ideal screening room in uneventful times. In the event of a nuclear attack, watching home movies could provide opportunities for normalcy and distraction.

Interestingly, Paul's shelter design, like Rees,' include prints of kachinas as a design element. A kachina is a spirit being that is significant to the religious beliefs of some southwest Native tribes, such as Hopi, Zuni, and Pueblo tribes of New Mexico. Kachinas are supernatural beings that, if venerated, are helpful to the well-being of tribes. Male tribal members dress as kachinas for ceremonial dances, and children are given kachina dolls carved out of wood, so they become familiar with the way various kachinas look, as part of their religious training. As more tourists ventured west in the first half of the twentieth century, Native tribes began selling kachinas to tourists, in the early twentieth century, to help financially support tribes. The carved and painted dolls, often adorned with feathers, represented, for tourists "the exotic" and "non-suburban" and "non-white" aesthetics. Perhaps, Paul and Rees chose framed prints of kachinas for their shelter designs because the kachinas suggest spiritual good will and support. It is possible they chose them as part of their aesthetics because they represent a world seemingly separate from politics, suburbia, consumerism, and atomic bombs.

J. Haywood Lasseter designed a colorful music room/shelter. The primary focus of Lasseter's shelter design is a stereo and a hi-fi set. Practically, in non-emergency times, a room without windows, is a great space for loud music. There is a 12 person-seating unit, which sleeps two, and a drop-down paneled section with inflatable mattresses for additional sleeping. Other than the stereo, there are

no other recreational distractions; no radio, television, film projector or exercise equipment. While there are no books, there are records and a storage space for games.

The final shelter design, by Tom Lee, functions as a shelter in extreme circumstances and a sewing room in non-emergency times. Beds that also function as tables fold away so that the entire floor is open for exercise and cleaning. A faux porcelain stove is the center point of the room. In the stove is a pull-out sewing machine, a small grill, a container for fresh water and storage. Rather than images of nature or Native American kachinas, there are seven abstract prints hanging on one wall. Lee does include five books in his shelter design, but there are no games, toys or exercise equipment, even though the open concept design is apparently designed for exercise. It seems like a room for sewing without distraction. It is the dreariest of the family room of tomorrow designs; it doesn't have a radio, movie projector or television set.

Perhaps one of the most peculiar shelter design features was the frequent use of the television set as the centerpiece of the room. A familiar suburban icon, the television set in the bomb shelter constructed a sense of spaciousness and connection to the outside world, yet a realization of its uselessness in the event of a nuclear attack would not have escaped either the designers or potential buyers. As a focus point, the TV epitomized the contradictions of utility and aesthetic desire that the bomb shelter, as we have seen represented. For in the case of the TV set, the motive of survival was nearly buried and the desire for attractive surroundings and prestige was placed in the center of the room.

While the televisions in the bomb shelter designs were battery generated, it is difficult to imagine a television station broadcasting either emergency news or *I Love Lucy* after a full-blown nuclear attack. Nonetheless, the television occupied as central a place in the shelter as it did in the world above it. In 1960, the television was still a relatively new phenomenon which was redefining the domestic environment and redirecting the gaze with the home. As furniture, the TV set created aesthetic boundaries. Home magazines sought to master it, for it was viewed as an eyesore which threatened to destabilize the unities of interior décor.²¹

A bomb shelter, for practical purposes of protection was essentially a cave, completely isolated from the rest of the house and the rest of the world. At odds with this image of the cave was the ranch-style architecture of the period, which

²¹ Lynn Spigel, "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space," *Camera Obscura*, 16 (January 1988), 33.

idealized the illusion of space. Home magazines routinely advised readers on tactics that would make the home appear as if it included the outside. Landscape paintings and wallpaper rendering nature or exotic vistas encouraged the illusion of space inside the home. Picture windows and sliding glass doors also simulated spaciousness. In order for the fallout shelter to resemble the rest of the home and the images of home that families desired, designers attempted to create a similar illusion of space in the shelter. Obviously, it was impossible to place windows or a sliding-glass doors in the shelter. By bringing the notion of the outside to the inside, the shelter fostered the illusion of space, and its design conformed to the rest of the house.

In a sense, the bomb shelter designs that included television sets magnified the features of the houses above them. The model shelter mimicked as best they could, the aesthetic motifs depicted in the typical ranch-style home, and they pointed to the seclusion fostered by suburban life. Placing the television as the focal point of the bomb shelter conjured not only a possibility of spaciousness, but assured a connection with a larger world that, as Spigel argues, had become one of its central functions in the growth of suburbia. Public life was created in the suburbs by private ownership, and the television set helped generate the illusive connections of community within the walls of the home. "There was an odd sense of connection and disconnection in this new suburbia," Spigel writes, "an infinite series of separate, but identical homes, strung together like Christmas tree lights on a tract with one central switch."²² That switch, of course, was the communications complex, most importantly, the television set. Understanding the irony of the functionless bomb shelter TV, highlights the aesthetic desires and downplays the motive of utility for both designers and potential owners. In addition, the TV set in the bomb shelter serves as a magnified example of the isolation that existed in suburban life.

Life Magazine Shelter Interior Designs

The January 25, 1960 issue of *Life* includes both the Marc Nielson-designed fallout shelter and actual shelters that Americans has built under their homes or in their backyards. In the brief article, Nielson is not mentioned; nor does the article refer to his design as the "Family Room of Tomorrow," but it does state that if shelters are inviting and could be used for everyday living, more people would

²² Ibid, 14.

likely be willing to build them. There is the same cutaway picture of Nielson's design, with the world map, television and the bison and wild horses highlighted in the design. The difference is that in the second photo is an image of a couple actually utilizing the space. The blonde-haired woman is smiling as she rides the exercise bike, and the brown-haired man in short sleeves, is reading a book. The hopscotch game inlaid in the floor is clearly in view. The article claims that the cost of the room is 2500 dollars. "If war never comes," the article states, "children can use it for a hideaway, father can use it for poker games and mother can count on it for a guest room."²³

The September 15, 1961 *Life* arrived in mailboxes and was placed in magazine stands three weeks before Kennedy proclaimed to the country that while the government would do everything possible to protect its citizens, people should build their own shelters. In the issue there is a message from President Kennedy who writes:

I urge you to read and consider seriously the contents of this issue of LIFE. The security of our country and the peace of the world are objectives of our policy. But in these dangerous days when both these objectives are threatened we must prepare for all eventualities. The ability to survive coupled with the will to do so there are essential to our country.²⁴

The September 15 article suggests that the more Americans build shelters and are prepared for an attack, the less likely the enemy will be inclined to attack. This issue provides a blueprint and drawings of a room in basement built with concrete blocks; a big pipe in the backyard under three feet of earth, and an above ground double-walled bunker. The article also includes information regarding a 700-dollar prefabricated shelter. All of the shelters are imagined for a relatively short stay—likely two weeks. Unlike "The Family Room of Tomorrow shelters," the model shelters in *Life* are rather stark. For example, in the drawing of the double-wall bunker we see only shelves of supplies and an upholstered bench for sitting and sleeping. There is one another section of this shelter—an outside corridor—with garbage cans stored with water and ones for human waste. There is also room in this area for emergency tools. No mention of the colors used on the walls or the upholstery, how the space might be used in non-emergency periods or any mention of books, games, or visual technologies.

²³ "A Spare Room Fallout Shelter," *Life*, v.48, no. 3, January 25, 1960, 46.

²⁴ "Fallout Shelters: You Could Be Among the 97% to Survive If You Follow the Advice in This Article," *Life*, v. 51, no. 11, September 15, 1961, 95.

Photographs of the prefabricated Kelsey-Hayes shelter, which at the time of publication, was selling 5000 copies per month, include photos of step-by-step construction, photographs of essential equipment for the shelter, and a photograph of the Carlson family and the prefabricated shelter they assembled. The family of five sit in their shelter with Mr. and Mrs. Carlson at a table; two of their children on the floor, and one child in a chair. The blurb next to the photograph explains that each member of the family has items that they are responsible for. Charlene, one of the daughters, for example, is in charge of the bedding for the folding cots and fold-up bunks. There is no mention of fabrics or colors used. The other daughter, Judy, is the shelter librarian; she is in charge of books and games for passing time. Unlike the “Family Room of Tomorrow” model shelters, there is no television set or film projector, though there is a transistor radio. The space is small, likely the about the same size as a 1960s bedroom, and much of the space is designated for canned food and linens. The only design detail mentioned is that the walls are painted a bright color to keep things cheerful and help to illuminate the space. It is not a dual-purpose room; it is a space seemingly created for survival. The design of the Carlson shelter in this issue of *Life* is more in line with the types of shelters people actually built during this period; the dual- purpose room was designed for the wealthy, not the middle class.

The final images of the photographic essay in the September 15 issue are shelters designed and created by three different families. The first one is a photograph of an Orlando, Florida shelter, that is an annex to family’s house. Unfortunately, there is not a photograph of the interior; instead, we see a fairly lush exterior design. On top of the concrete block building, Mrs. Bartholow, the only person laboring in the photograph, tends to a garden that was built on the roof of the building. Below two her sons play shuffleboard on the patio, and Mr. Bartholow relaxes, shirtless, on a folding lounge chair, next to a nicely designed garden. The photograph is the least threatening and stark of all the images in the essay. In St. Charles, Illinois on the Pederson farm, an above ground corrugated steel shelter is featured. On one side of the shelter are the Pederson’s cows eating hay. The blurb below the image states that livestock need protection so that they can breed after an attack. On the other side of the shelter, six members of the Pederson family sit in their part of the structure. The aesthetics are grim. There is a table, shelving, two benches and two lanterns, and a room divider, but no design features, except for the cows on the other side of the wall. Still, the Pederson family have a lot of room in their shelter. It has high ceilings and plenty of space to move about.

The final image is the Wilson family's shelter in Vega, Texas. It is a backyard shelter with few design considerations. There are two plywood benches with cushions, an air-blower, and a pipe jutting out of the ceiling as an exhaust to clean the air. While the other photos, show entire families in their shelters, the Wilson family shelter depicts only Amelia Wilson, a teenager. The blurb explains that, "at the moment" the shelter is her clubhouse. She lies on one of the benches, with a transistor radio next to her feet. She holds a bottle of Coke in one hand, and a phone receiver in the other, laughing as she talks on the phone. Curiously, this is the only shelter in the *Life* shelter issue that includes a telephone—its primary design element. It might seem like the addition of television set would create a more modern ambience than a phone, but in fact, a multiple-telephone household was also a sign of modernity and another way to expand the shelter by way of a communication device.

It might have been a different phone line—we cannot know for sure. If that was the case, it was also a sign of affluence, as households with more than one phone line during the Cold War were limited to wealthy homeowners; prior to the 1990s (with the emergence of home fax machines and computers) only five percent of homes in the United States had more than one phone line.²⁵ It seems strange that the Wilson shelter is the only fallout space in *Life*, with a phone. Interestingly, none of the Family Room of Tomorrow shelters include a phone. A phone certainly seems like a practical object to incorporate into the design of a bomb shelter; possibly enabling communication before and after a nuclear attack (assuming telecommunications would be disabled following an attack). Surely, the likelihood of a phone working is just as possible as a television and a film projector functioning properly after an attack. Perhaps distraction and leisure activities were of more pressing concern to designers and shelter owners than practical telecommunication devices.

Fallout Shelter Handbook

The *Fallout Shelter Handbook* by Chuck West is a 147-page handbook published by Fawcett in 1962. Much of the handbook is about the construction of the fallout shelter, but there is also relevant information regarding the interior design and the necessary materials for an extended stay. Interestingly, West also includes a photo

²⁵ Mark Landler, "Multiple Family Phone Lines, A Post-Postwar U.S. Trend," December 26, 1995.

of Marc Nielson's bomb shelter design. We see the world map, the bison and wild horse mural, and the exercise bike. West notes the benefits of dual-purpose room, though most of the other images in the *Fallout Shelter Handbook* look more single purpose.

The chapter "While You are in the Shelter" tells the readers about the Perkins family, who spent a week in a shelter in Maryland. Mr. and Mrs. Perkins and their two children spent a week in a space 9-feet wide and 10-feet long. Judging from the photographs, the Perkins existed in a single purpose space. There are fold-away beds, shelves that hold supplies and a table with folding chairs. All in all, the family did not enjoy their seven days of isolation, but they did learn a few important lessons: space is limited and everything must be kept in its place and everyone needs to stay busy, especially the children. Mrs. Perkins seemed to have suffered the most from the experience. By the fifth day, she missed her kitchen and her trips to the beauty parlor. She admitted her children and husband were better adjusted than she was during their time in the shelter.

The other photos in the chapter are not of the Perkins family, but do show interior spaces. In one photo, we can see the parents in folding chairs and two children lounging on the floor. In another photo, we see one boy lying on a top bunk bed, staring vacantly into space, and another, on the bottom bunk reading a newspaper. The blankets on the bunks are not a popular material or color; rather they look like army blankets, functional, but scratchy. A woman in a print dress and wearing pearls around her neck, in a different photo, stands next to a record player, another modern device for passing time. Another photo shows an attractive blonde woman in slacks on an exercise bike that generates electricity. In front of the bike is shelving which holds canned goods. Her husband looks on, holding a toddler.

Besides the photo of Nielson's dual-purpose room, the most elaborate shelter design is on the cover of *Fallout Shelter*. Here we see the ideal shelter, at least as far as it was understood in 1962. It is a cut-away drawing, so we can see that this fallout shelter is underground. It seems quite a bit larger than the space the Perkins family stayed in; it is probably around 350 square feet. The walls are paneled and the carpet is gold. The fold out beds serves as two couches and they are a fashionable green. A modern triangular coffee table sits in front of the couches. The father wears a jacket and vest and sits on a green chair, holding a newspaper, while listening to a record player. The daughter is at the wooden dining table. She is setting the table. There are place mats on the table, and the chairs match the green couches. The mother wears a green dress and an apron. We cannot see

exactly what she is doing, but she is holding a red and white dish and seems to be tending to dinner.

All in all, it suggests an extremely convivial atmosphere and has little in common with the photographs inside the handbook or the reasons that bomb shelters were built in the first place. These images are a reminder that bomb shelters were not merely utilitarian spaces but cultural artifacts that reflected—and refracted—American anxieties, aspirations, and aesthetics.



Fig. 2: Taking an inventory of supplies for a household's fallout shelter. Civil Defense Photographs, 1951-61. US National Archives.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Cold War bomb shelters were more than architectural responses to geopolitical threat—they were immersive environments where Americans performed their fears, desires, and identities. These shelters, especially the dual-purpose designs promoted in magazines and trade shows, reveal how dread was not only anticipated but also aestheticized. The presence of televisions, hopscotch boards, hibachis, and faux libraries in these subterranean spaces suggests a

deliberate effort to mask terror with familiarity, to transform survival into recreation, and to make the unimaginable feel manageable.

The shelter's interior became a kind of *mise-en-scène*, where the performance of normalcy was staged against the backdrop of potential annihilation. The inclusion of suburban design motifs—midcentury furniture, muted color palettes, and nature-themed murals—was not merely decorative but deeply symbolic. These choices reflected a desire to preserve cultural continuity, even in the face of rupture. The shelter, in this sense, was a paradoxical space: a cave of isolation that mimicked the openness of ranch-style homes; a site of emergency that promised leisure; a room of last resort that aspired to be a room of tomorrow.

Barthes' notion of overflowing meaning is especially resonant here. The objects within the shelter—exercise bikes, maps, kachina prints, and even the television sets—carried meanings far beyond their practical use. They signified hope, denial, resilience, and the persistent human need to narrate catastrophe through the lens of domestic life. Attfield's concept of containment also helps us understand how shelter design was a strategy for managing psychological space. The arrangement of objects, the concealment of supplies, and the emphasis on flexibility were all attempts to assert control over an uncontrollable future.

In examining these shelters as cultural performances, we see how Americans rehearsed survival not just through stockpiling goods but through curating environments. The shelter was a stage where the drama of Cold War life played out—where dread was choreographed, fear was stylized, and the aesthetics of safety were meticulously constructed. These designs remind us that even in our most terrifying spaces, we seek beauty, familiarity, and meaning. The bomb shelter, then, is not only a relic of Cold War paranoia but a testament to the enduring human impulse to make fear livable and to perform resilience in the face of uncertainty.

References

- Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. London: Bloomsbury, 2000.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Semiotic Challenge*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988.
- Better Homes and Gardens. *Decorating Book*. Reprint. Des Moines, IA: Meredith Corp, 2017.
- . *Decorating Ideas*. Des Moines, IA: Meredith Publishing Company, 1960.

- . "The Idea Index." *Better Homes and Gardens*. 38, no. 3 (March 1960): 27–28.
- Clark, Clifford E. "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities." In *Recasting America: Cultural Politics in the Age of the Bomb*, edited by Lary May, 172. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Engelhardt, Tom. *The End of Victory Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- Havenhand, Lisa K. *Mid-Century Modern Interiors: The Ideas that Shaped Interior Design in America*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Interior Design*. "The Family Room of Tomorrow." 31 (January 1960): 114–15.
- Landler, Mark. "Multiple Family Phone Lines, A Post-Postwar U.S. Trend." *The New York Times*, December 26, 1995.
- Life*. "A Spare Room Fallout Shelter." 48, no. 3 (January 25, 1960): 46.
- . "Fallout Shelters: You Could Be Among the 97% to Survive If You Follow the Advice in This Article." 51, no. 11 (September 15, 1961): 95.
- Nelson, George. *The Herman Miller Collection*. 2nd ed. Zeeland, MI, 1952.
- Spigel, Lynn. "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space." *Camera Obscura*, 16 (January 1988): 14, 33.
- Whiteley, Nigel. "Interior Design in the 1960s: Arenas for Performance." *Art History*, 10, no. 1 (March 1987): 80.
- Wright, Mary, and Russel Wright. *Guide to Easier Living*. Reprint. Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2003.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA