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Safe havens: Designers transformed Cold War fallout shelters into stylish refuges

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By Associated Press, Published: June 22

If you're of an age to remember diving under your classroom desk during nuclear attack drills, you probably look back on that as ludicrous. We've seen enough movies to know that an atomic conflagration wouldn't be something we'd just dust ourselves off from, in time for recess.

Likewise, those fallout shelters that some families built during the Cold War seem about as useful as the desk. What was the game plan, anyway? Hunker down for a couple of weeks, then emerge to life as we knew it? More likely, the better decision might have been to stay underground forever.

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(Bomboozled / Pointed Leaf Press / Courtesy National Archives / Associated Press) - This sketch released by Bomboozled / Pointed Leaf Press / Courtesy National Archives shows Tom Lee's design for a Utility Sewing Room which shows a craft room with elegant black and white stripe banquettes that could be converted

And that's what many of the shelters in Susan Roy's new book, "Bomboozled: How the U.S. Government Mised Itself and Its People Into Believing They Could Survive a Nuclear Attack" (Pointed Leaf Press), seem to have been designed for: forever.

Surrealistically optimistic, fallout shelters went from being temporary, roughhewn bunkers to subterranean versions of Shangri-La in just a few years.

Roy focuses mainly on the government's misguided but well-intentioned effort during the Cold War to reassure people that nuclear disaster was survivable if you only had an underground refuge. In the course of her research, she uncovered a startling trove of information on how shelter designers, architects and the wealthy strove to create safe havens fully loaded with luxuries and comforts.

By 1960, nearly 70 percent of American adults believed that nuclear war was imminent. By 1965, an estimated 200,000 shelters were built — but that's just an estimate. It's hard to know exactly, because

people didn't talk.

A permit wasn't required to build one; the feeling was that if you had a refuge, the world would be battering down your door when the time came. If you only had room for four or six, things could quickly go a little "Twilight Zone."

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As Roy points out, the fallout shelter was a conceit of suburban life. Close-quartered urban dwellers were on their own. Within your secret haven, however, life would be almost normal. Illustrations of shelter life invariably show Mother in pearls and pumps fussing about the quasi-kitchen, Father in a comfy chair with pipe in hand, and two youngsters playing nicely on the floor.

Bathrooms? Lighting? Fresh air? The cutaway views in these pictures belie the fact that basic shelters would have been grim living indeed.

Ranging from corrugated metal tubes to lumber-clad root cellars to cast concrete capsules, the reality was dark, tiny, airless and hot. Despite the hype, shelters were more scary than reassuring, and the government had a hard time selling the public on them.

In 1959, the Civil Defense Agency decided to position the shelter not only as a bunker, but as a multipurpose extra room.

Members of the American Institute of Decorators took the task to heart. You might shake your head at the Pollyanna-esque designs, but it's hard not to admire the care with which decorators, designers and architects thought about how to make post-conflagration living normal.

Dorothy H. Paul of Los Angeles created a Fun Room, with a leafy town square painted on one wall, game tables and an area for editing home movies. New York City's Tom Lee did an elegant Utility Sewing Room with black-and-white-striped banquettes that could serve as beds.

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
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