

Anna Savina

Bunker Mentality

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The Global Seed Vault is an underground facility for preserving crop diversity located in the Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. Unlike many other storage facilities, the Global Seed Vault is a space that was designed specifically to protect over a million of seed samples in case of natural catastrophe, a war, or avoidable crises like a lack of funding. The entrance to the building is visible, but the storage facility itself goes down 100 meters into a mountain. In 2017, the stronghold flooded after permafrost melts. No seeds were lost, but it shattered the perception of it being able to provide failsafe protection against all disasters. *Photo: Crop Trust*

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Bunker Mentality: How The Cold War Is Informing Our Decisions In The Climate Crisis Era

Bunker A protective embankment or dugout. Especially a fortified chamber mostly below ground often built of reinforced concrete and provided with embrasures.

With a pandemic (almost) behind us and a climate crisis looming ahead, discussion about prepping and bunkers are all around. I have been fascinated by how these conversations in the U.S. are almost inescapable. Tech billionaires are building bunkers, middle-class people think about building bunkers, and everyone else seriously wishes they could at least have a remote getaway to hide from the pandemic, a heatwave, or whatever comes next.

Yet for me, the idea of building a bunker, leaving society, and spending the rest of your days isolated in a sealed space has always seemed dated and weird. So I went about to investigate how bunkers went from an invention used during the Cold War (for what?) to a one-size-fits-all solution against our fears; be they a pandemic, climate change, resource wars, and any other challenges we face as a society. I'll also get into how they represent "permission structures", resulting in a mental trap that prevents us from really changing our ways and unlearning our destructive consumerist and lifestyle habits.

How It Started: 1961 Crisis And The First Doom Boom

It seems like the concept of a bunker as a place of safety has been with us for decades if not centuries, but the idea is actually fairly recent. So when and where did bunkers originate? Though bunkers were used for military purposes during WWI and WWII, they rarely served as single-family shelters and mostly looked like huge military fortifications. It all changed in 1961. In the wake of the Berlin Crisis, on July 25, President Kennedy appeared on TV and said that the government had to tell citizens "where they should go if bombs begin to fall." And soon after, there was a solution. In September 1961, LIFE magazine published an issue with a man in a civilian fallout suit on the cover. Next to a Royal Crown Cola ad, there was a letter from Kennedy titled "A message to you from the President." Kennedy wrote about Americans' responsibility to protect themselves in case of nuclear war. Nationwide panic began to spread.

"For a lot of Americans, it was a moment of betrayal; and a moment of recognition that the government could not protect them. It also heightened inequality, because people who could protect themselves had land, they had the money to build a bunker underground and check out of society, essentially revoking their status as a citizen," says Bradley Garrett, author of *Bunker: Building for the End Times*. "People decided they don't need the government anymore if it can't provide that most important function." The crisis of 1961 created the first modern preppers in the United States.

Why did the government encourage people to build their own shelters?

After the first nuclear tests in the 1945, the U.S. had to come up with a strategy for dealing with this threat. 'When nuclear strategists gave numbers to the Eisenhower administration on how much it was going to cost to protect everyone, it was obvious that it was going to be impossible because the cost of building nuclear blast shelters to house the vast majority of the U.S. population would have cost about the GDP of the country for one year,' says author and social and cultural geographer Bradley Garrett.

Instead, American government focused on protecting the select few (Eisenhower wanted to keep the legislative branch up and running even in case of a nuclear attack) and initiated Project Greek Island for 535 members of Congress, member of their families, and their aides. The construction of a huge underground bunker close to Greenbrier hotel in West Virginia started in 1959 and continued for three years. The existence of the bunker was revealed only in 1992.

The Fear of Cold War as a Market Commodity

The new fear of nuclear attacks and a potential war was quickly transformed into a new market opportunity. The LIFE magazine issue provided some advice for building fairly cheap and simple shelters, but on top of that, a whole new category of commerce emerged. Now you could buy not just supplies, but a prefabricated bunker itself. "Companies like Sears and Amway started mass-manufacturing, and for relatively little money [Amway sold bunkers for \$1,750 — it would be around \$16,500 in today's money], you could buy yourself a bunker that they would bury it in your backyard for you," says Garrett.

Fast forward to today: there are 3.7 million committed preppers in the U.S. "It's hard to quantify the size of the doomsday prep market, but 'emergency management'—the larger ecosystem these businesses fall under—is a \$107B global industry that is projected to grow to \$149B in the next 5 years," says The Hustle's Zachary Crockett in a recent overview of the field.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic accelerated the demand. Rising S and Atlas Survival Shelters, two popular bunker manufacturers, are seeing a big spike in consumer interest. Though there are bigger developments like a 15-story Survival Condo in Kansas, when people think about bunkers, single-family structures are often the first thing that comes to mind.

There are no official stats on the doomsday prep market, but 'emergency management' is a \$107B global industry. There is a wide variety of brands producing underground and above-the-ground shelters and bunkers. This modern community tornado shelter manufactured by Survive-A-Storm Shelters costs between \$36,365.00 and \$132,175.00 and can host up to 229 occupants. *Photo: Survive-A-Storm Shelters*



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Bunker Mentality: One Size Fits All

The Cold War and the U.S. response taught a lot of people that they can't rely on the government, and this sentiment remained for the rest of the 20th century. In the past two decades, many more people have started feeling precariously unsafe. In addition to the nuclear threat, there are climate-related crises, ongoing wars, political instability, escalating financial inequality, and the global pandemic—all while checking out and unplugging from the bad news is much harder than before. The media is feeding our fear and it seems like tragedies follow us everywhere we go. You open any social media platform to talk to friends or learn recent local news, but the algorithm always wants you to scroll a little more. You get served the most sensational headlines from around the world, whether it's a volcano eruption in the middle of the Pacific, a new coronavirus variant of concern, or a supply chain crisis in a far away part of the world.

It's no wonder that as people are seeing so many threats, big and small (preppers have a matrix for 'catastrophic ripple effects' that each disaster can cause). "I hear a lot of people talk about the social and political situation in the country, says Garrett, but people are still scared of nuclear weapons as well. We're also surrounded by all of these other existential threats—the threat of artificial intelligence which could turn into something uncontrollable. And people are obviously worried about the climate crisis."

"When I was working on my book I heard people talking about a virus pandemic. At the time I was unconvinced, but they don't sound crazy now," adds Tea Krulos, author of *Apocalypse Any Day Now: Deep Underground with America's Doomsday Preppers*, a book published in 2019. Krulos continues, "People talked about many different potential things that could happen, that it's good to be prepared for anything and everything." Though they were designed to be temporary shelters in case of nuclear war, bunkers somehow became an umbrella solution for different types of threats.

What are the benefits of building underground?

During the Cold War, it was common to build underground shelters because they protected their inhabitants from radioactive materials that would inevitably fall on Earth after a nuclear explosion. But it's not the only benefit of building underground homes. A lot of contemporary architects draw inspiration from the Cold War era architecture and experiment with concrete, austere shapes, and earth-sheltered living spaces. Even though these houses can't be fully self-sufficient, they have several advantages — they can protect you from extreme heat, tornados, and thunderstorms and, if insulated properly, they allow their owners to save on heating and cooling costs.



Above: OUTrial House by KWK Promes is carved out of Polish landscape — underneath a grass-covered roof, there is a residence of a rock musician as well as his recording studio. *Photo: Juliusz Sokołowski for [KWK Promes](#)*

Right: Buried underground, Earth House was built by Korean architect Byoung Soo Cho. He drew his inspiration from Taoist minimalist aesthetic and the look of barns, sheds, and other utilitarian buildings. *Photo: Wooseop Hwang for [BCHO Architects](#)*



Bunker as a Space of Safety and Control

Why did this Cold War subculture and a set of Cold War-era solutions become so omnipresent? It took off fast because it aligned with a lot of narratives, old and new, that were familiar to many people. Prepping is about self-reliance, new frontiers, and autonomy. It all sounds so good and almost comforting, especially in the U.S. where Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance' is a classic which influenced generations of authors and philosophers, all who praised independent thinking and self-sufficiency above all else.

The popularity of bunkers is not just about fear, capitalism, and American mystique. "One of the stories of the beginning of the architecture [is that] it's this magical tree canopy, but another is the cave. It's a space of security for us as a culture, as a society, as a species," says Daniel E. Barber, associate professor and chair of the PhD program in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. "Caves were where you hid from the outside, because it was threatening; and it's funny to think about how we've come back to a bunker, a space that plays this out. It's familiar to us."

In his book *Bunker Archeology*, French cultural theorist and philosopher Paul Virilio offers another parallel — he sees how bunkers can be perceived as vehicles that transport people into a new and safer reality. "The function of this very special structure is to assure survival, to be a shelter for man in a critical period, the place where he buries himself to subsist. If it thus belongs to the crypt that prefigures the resurrection, the bunker belongs too to the ark that saves, to the vehicle that puts one out of danger by crossing over mortal hazards," he writes.

Bunkers are comforting because they remind us of a prehistoric past with tree canopies or arks, but now with modern amenities—they allow us to feel like we are in control of everything. "In the space of existential dread, it seems like a rational decision to take control of your own life and the parameters around it," says Garrett. "There's a kind of narcissism involved with wanting to control everything around us, but at the same time, I think we all have the sense that we have very little control over our trajectory as a species, right?"

Stockpiling food, building a bunker, and trying to completely exit society don't sound easy, yet those plans seem rational and realistic for many people. You buy pilot bread crackers, install water filters and solar batteries, shut the door, and do pushups in darkness. You may even have some fun with all the prepper gadgets and feel empowered; in control of your kingdom-of-one. It's a good feeling, especially compared to the despair and uncertainty that waits for you on the outside, with big questions and seemingly unsolvable problems. Prepping is often a hobby or an after-work activity for those who can afford it, and like every new hobby, it comes with exciting new purchases and opportunities to construct your identity.

The Safe House is a residence designed by Robert Konieczny from a Poland-based architecture studio KWK Promes. To protect themselves from an emergency or potential danger, The Safe House inhabitants can close the windows and doors and the building is turned into a monolithic concrete block. *Photo: Aleksander Rutkowski for [KWK Promes](#)*



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Impossibility of an Exit

Can we disconnect from the grid and live on our own, somewhere in the woods or (if we have enough resources and a taste for artifice) in a huge survival condo? Though the idea is attractive to some, living completely off the grid is not an attainable solution for the majority of people.

According to a recent survey, 43% of preppers earn \$100,000 or more per year, and 67% are homeowners. Even the smallest shelter made by a popular U.S. manufacturer costs \$49,000, and when it comes to bigger developments like Rising S' luxury bunkers in New Zealand, the price can go upwards of \$8 million. Very few people can afford this kind of living space in addition to their primary residence.

"For everyone who can escape, there are many hundreds of thousands [who] can't. Our lives are structured around the capacity to leave," says Barber. "And that becomes such a class-based issue." There is a lot of discussion about how sci-fi authors predicted the pandemic and other events of 2020. Some of the comparisons between fiction and reality are a bit far-fetched, but one thing that the pandemic revealed is how the ability to escape, closing the door and spending a year in isolation, is a privilege very few people can afford. "There is so much speculative fiction that imagines these catastrophes, and they tend to be about who can get out, who gets on the spaceship, who gets to go to the government bunker," adds Barber.

Another popular argument against leaving society and building an escape outside the grid is that it often only benefits the individual (unless it's a community project built around rural regeneration or a similar environmental/social cause). "Exit is an exercise of patriarchal power, a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy," says Sarah Sharma, media scholar and director of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. She calls this phenomenon "Sexit" and explains how bunkers can be a tool for reinforcing traditional gender roles. "If you look at the design of bunkers, they look like suburban domestic basements where you can have your TV. They generally look like man caves underground."

Even if someone has the resources to disconnect, is it possible to survive and spend your days in a sealed environment such as a bunker—or a spaceship if space travel is a possibility in the near future? "I remain unconvinced," says Garrett. "The Earth is a giant organism, and everything is interconnected. You can never build yourself a hermetically sealed capsule in which you're not dependent upon the outside world and you don't have any impact on it."

It's hard to imagine a fully closed system that doesn't depend on the environment outside, but what if we manage to build a perfect bunker that can function after collapse and lock ourselves in a building for a long period of time?



After the Cold War flurry of building, in recent decades many bunkers have been abandoned with nobody to maintain them. Some of these war-time bunkers are getting a new life — the building on the left was transformed into a small vacation home while the structure on the right is now a green energy power plant.

Left Photo: Tim Van de Velde for B-ILD
Above Photo: Oliver Killig

As these past two years showed, we are not equipped to deal with isolation, but living in a tiny community with other people is a challenge as well. Consider the [Biosphere 2](#) project. “It wasn’t a slam dunk in terms of figuring out how to sever ourselves from the environment around us, but it did teach us some valuable lessons about where complications arise, and unsurprisingly, most of the insurmountable complications came from human beings,” says Garrett. In addition to technical problems like deficit of breathable air and adequate food, there was a myriad of arguments between ‘biospherians’ who [ended up](#) being divided between two opposing camps. “I think the experiment revealed that humans are the most unstable element of a closed system,” [adds](#) Matt Wolf, director of Spaceship Earth, a documentary about Biosphere 2.

Bunkers as a Permission Structure

Though many people don’t know what they are prepping for, the bunkers they are building aren’t useless. They serve an important purpose: calming down their owners. The year is 2022, and the world is burning, but as long as we have our bunker, we can carry on with our post-pandemic travel plans and start new companies that rely on an extensive server infrastructure or manufacturing capacities somewhere outside of developed countries. We are allowed to continue the same rates of carbon emissions and consumption, while still aligning with the ideals of ‘progress.’

“The bunker becomes the conceptual framework for the continuity of daily life,” says Barber. “If people are anxious about climate disruption, they’re going to have all their emergency kits or even a place to go, and that becomes a permission structure.” As long as we have an exit strategy, even if it’s only theoretical, we can avoid thinking about sustainability or the changes to everyday life that might be necessary to achieve it.

Underground house Plan B is conceptual project developed by Sergey Makhno Architects. It's was designed in 2020 and inspired by bunker architecture. "This project is a release from emotions, a reflection on the continuation of human life under any circumstances, and an attempt to find an answer to the question of whether architecture can create the impression of life at the surface while being in its depths," says Serhii Makhno who led this project.

Photo: Sergey Makhno Architects



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The Trap of Bunker Mentality

Bunkers can also create a sense of unease or generate a lot of jokes. According to Sianne Ngai, author of *Theory of the Gimmick*, this uneasy feeling around something that is simultaneously useful for some and uncomfortable for others is characteristic of a gimmick. The term often describes something that is overperforming and underperforming at the same time. And bunkers are a gimmick that promise us so much: escape from society, an emergency exit from an Earth in flames, a space of safety and even comfort. Yet upon closer examination, they give us very little. They're designed for solving challenges of the 20th century rather than dealing with contemporary threats to society.

Literary critic, philosopher, and political theorist Frederic Jameson once said: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination." In recent years, this quote has become a bit of a cliché. Yet it feels unavoidable. We continue to believe that technology will save us — whether it will be lavish underground condos, or colonies on Mars, or something else, we want to believe in that solutionist approach.

"It all comes from our ideas about capitalism, the Enlightenment, and the notion that we're striving to a pinnacle, which is obviously a fiction. We're never going to reach that sunlit utopia because we advance our technology," says Bradley Garrett. Several hundred years ago, those with power agreed that advancing technology and investing in progress are good things, that we should aspire to a better technological future and total control over nature. Bunkers fit perfectly into this mental trap that we can't leave behind, and it's the main reason why they have stayed with us for so long rather than been dismissed as relics.

The climate crisis requires us to abandon the world where we can be as expansive in everything we do. We want to believe we're good and moral, and our faith in progress will lead us to prosperity. Yet in the time of ever-expanding climate emergencies, we need to become much better at imagining an alternative future and alternative technologies, or else.



Casa na Terra is a hotel designed by [Manuel Aires Mateus](#). Located on Lake Monsaraz in Portugal, the building is hidden inside a hill with only its patio and dome noticeable from the outside. Photo: [Nelson Garrido](#)

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Bunker Mentality was written by Anna Savina, and edited by Ksenya Samarskaya.

Bunker Mentality was designed by Ksenya Samarskaya, and typeset in Karelia (Monokrom) and Graphik (Commercial Type).

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