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or the better part of a decade I lived in Clapham, South London. For the first few years I was there, I heard stories of a system of Second World War bunkers underneath the area. One night, curiosity got the best of me and I went looking for them. As it turns out, cracking the heavy doors to take the 180 stairs down to the deep level shelter at Clapham South wasn't hard. The stairs bottomed out into a riveted-steel semi-circle protecting a concrete path that stretched for more than a mile through the earth, directly under my house. The fluorescent lights still worked as if they were installed yesterday. Eventually, along with a crew of urban explorers, we made it into two more identical bunkers, each connected to a Clapham tube station. We had more than three miles of tunnels to party in and explore any day of the week. The bunkers became a regular hangout, a place of refuge from the din of the city. However, walking, cycling or dancing through them, it was impossible to ignore the fact the bunkers were not built to be subterranean playgrounds; they were built to shelter Londoners from a terrible disaster—the nightly bombing runs of the Luftwaffe.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I think about those bunkers often. I think about how much time, money and care the government invested in building these spaces. This temperament sits in sharp relief to the present, where citizens, it seems, are expected to fend for themselves during a global crisis. The government has, it seems over the past few decades, abdicated responsibility for its citizens. This has spawned an entire subculture of preppers, people who spend their free time and resources preparing for calamity and stepping up to fill the void left by the state.

People have spent a lot of time mocking preppers, calling them kooks and cranks and weirdos. Then suddenly many of us were trapped in our tiny flats eating ramen packets, wiping our asses with napkins and looking longingly out the window at closed restaurants and overrun grocery stores, and the inevitable conclusion crept in. What if preppers were right all along?

I've spent the last few years doing research with preppers around the globe, and many of these fortune tellers see the empty bunkers left behind from the Second World War and the Cold War as investment opportunities; places to ride out a replay of the dark ages. The bunkers under Clapham that have served as

my—and other urban explorers'—refuge, are no longer available: they've been gobbled up by different private interests. Clapham North is now an underground hydroponic herb and lettuce farm. Clapham Common is a secure file storage facility used by Iron Mountain. Clapham South is being used by Transport for London to run history tours.

There are two takeaways from the current state of play. The first, and most obvious, is that any notion we have that the world is stable and coherent is being dislodged by the impact of the Covid-19 virus. We can no longer live our lives on a day-to-day basis, expecting that we can walk out of our homes and find any range of items to meet our expectations, at any time. In other words, we should live our lives, as the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggested, as if tomorrow can't possibly be the same as today. We must live with the flexibility necessary for a future perpetually detoured by disaster, whether that disaster be war, climate change or a far deadlier pandemic. The second, and perhaps more important, lesson to be learned here is that we should be demanding more, far more, from our elected leaders. Why should it be that 75 years ago the country was better equipped to deal with a national crisis than today? All this despite the fact that we are surrounded by the trappings of wealth. Those shelters under Clapham, which I know stretch up the entire Northern Line, and were built with taxpayers' money, could have been clinics, emergency shelters (for social distancing measures, perhaps), factories for masks and respirators, or served any number of public functions. Instead, our subterranean heritage has been turned into another piggy bank for private industry.

Prepping needn't be preserved to the wealthy; each of us can take small steps to build up resilience. It's not a selfish practice, or something to be embarrassed about. It is, rather, like wearing a mask in public—an act of kindness towards those around you, who may not harbour the resources to cope with a crisis of this magnitude, and who may need to rely on public resources while you live off your stockpiles. But while we look out for each other, we should also be pressing the government for an explanation as to why we have been left to fend for ourselves. In the meantime, let's pry open those old bunkers, kick out the underworld privateers and bring these structures back into public use.

Bunker: Building for the End Times by Bradley Garrett is out on August 4 (Allen Lane, £20)



Safe from harm
Clapham's deep shelter tunnels were built to protect the population during Luftwaffe raids