

Bunkers

By Bradley Garrett

The global market for private bunkers is hotter today than at any point since the Cold War. Sales include everything from steel structures assembled off-site and buried covertly in gardens to subterranean concrete citadels stretching 12 storeys deep. A 3,600 sq ft penthouse can set the buyer back well over \$4.5 million. Having spent many years living with the 'preppers' and 'survivalists' buying these kinds of facilities, I see their value, even as I'm worried by their renewed popularity.

Out of sight and mind, most bunkers are either historical monuments or follies – old second world war sites, or architectural novelties anticipating a third world war that never arrived. The pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, have caused many of us to reassess the value of a fortified space. In the UK, there has been a flood of Cold War-era countryside bunkers appearing on property websites. They almost always sell within weeks.

In 2020 roughly 45 per cent of Americans – about 116 million people – said they spent money on survival materials. This includes not just bunkers but bulk food, emergency kits, off-grid energy and water delivery systems and many other self-sufficiency provisions. The freeze-dried food market saw

a spike in sales as supply lines broke down during the pandemic. The sector is already valued at \$47 billion annually and is projected to grow another 9 per cent by 2026. Overall, investment in disaster preparedness is expected to reach more than \$250 billion by 2028.

The fastest-growing group investing in future security are millennials, more than three-quarters of whom have emergency supplies on hand or say that they have bought them over the past 12 months. As one prep-

per starkly outlined for me, a bunker without food, water and power is tomb.

Building private bunkers at scale would not be possible without state investment from the past. Almost every bunker I've visited was built on the bones of government facilities. And although there are at least 20,000 underground redoubts worldwide, many bunkers initially built to protect people in times of conflict have now been colonised by cloud data servers, underground farms, secure file storage facilities or quirky nightclubs, putting even more pressure on private citizens to dig their own, or to buy into one of the dozens of bunker communities around the world being built by people selling a salve to our collective dread.

An argument could be made that bunkers have existed for thousands of years. From the Byzantine underground cities in Cappadocia to Beijing's Dixia Cheng fallout shelter (which is supposedly capable of holding a million people), underground spaces have always been used to protect civilians, stockpile supplies and preserve cultural treasures. Though the bunkers of today bear little resemblance to the bunkers of the past, they will undoubtedly endure as artifacts from our unique period of history: an age of dread, perhaps.

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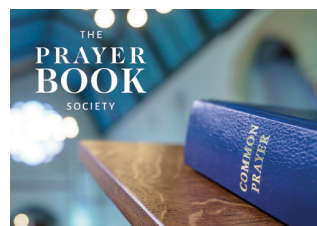
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