A field, a bunker, a field again: The fate of place and the prosaics of place-making and unmaking.

J.B. Priestley, *News Chronicle* 17 Oct 1939

"On top of the hill... I met an insurance agent and a radio salesman, wearing badges and armblets. Their oldest clothes and huge smiles. Theirs is a job that would drive schoolboys mad with envy. Any healthy-minded lad would give all his pocket-money to take a turn in this observation post, with its sandbagged watching place, its dug-out and camouflaged hut. Here is sentry work of a new and exciting kind."

This is an abridged version of a paper that I wrote for an academic journal special issue on ‘Cold War Places’. I wanted to foreground the rise and fall of a prosaic wartime place-type, the aerial observation post and chose to stitch together a semi-fictionalised account of one site’s passage through time. This seemed the best way to give life to the fragments of stories that I had found for a variety of such posts in the National Archives. My aim was to show the ebb and flow of a place-formation, and how it is an unstable local-national constellation of people, environment, paperwork and policy. But in the end the editors didn’t feel my unconventional approach suitable for their history journal. So, rather than leave it in a drawer I’m presenting it here...

2017

We are at the verge of a country lane in the Hertfordshire countryside just outside the village of Wasnott, 30 miles north of London. Beyond a gap in the hedge a field gently rises to its brow on the horizon. Other than the stubble of an arable crop this field is empty; there is nothing to see here.

1979

We are at the same location, looking into the same field. A man wearing a dark beret and blue serge uniform is crouched over a portable petrol-electric generator trying to get it started. Around him stand three other men. One wearing a blue trench coat, another standing by a raised concrete hatch, into which the third man is about to descend. Two of the men are smiling, caught in the act of playfully chiding the generator attendant for his ineffective motor-starting technique. The men have brought with them an assortment of other bags and cases. The men and the concrete structures are surrounded by a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire, forming a compound within which a sign stands, declaring:

"Royal Observer Post"
The men are ROC volunteers getting ready for a weekend exercise that will see them stationed within their post's underground bunker. Here they will open a succession of manila envelopes at allotted times and act upon the simulated detonation and fallout readings contained within, reporting that data through to their ROC Group HQ.

1933

Four men are standing in the field: the head of the Observer Corps, the Clerk of the Parish Council, Wasnott’s police constable and an engineer from the General Post Office (GPO). The Clerk is present because the field is managed by the Parish Council, the western part of it having recently been turned into a recreation ground. The constable is here because his Chief Constable has been instructed via a “confidential” standard form letter issued by the Home Office to arrange recruitment of local men as special constables to man an observation post to be established at this spot for the purpose of detecting, plotting and reporting aircraft movements as part of the air defence system. The procurement of both men and physical sites for the Observer Corps has become standardised through experience and repetition since the Corps was established as a volunteer force in 1924 in Kent and Sussex, and then slowly expanded across the counties of Southern England. This field has been identified as suited to a post because it affords a good clear view towards London. However, the GPO Engineer is in attendance because this location is only feasible if a telephone connection can be run to it. The men agree a suitable position and a stake is driven into the ground.

As the Home Office’s letter assures the Council, this stake is the post’s only enduring physical element, for:

“as the [observation] equipment is portable, nothing remains on the site when not in use, nor is there anything to be seen, except, in some cases, a peg driven in flush with the ground to mark the exact site, e.g. in a field… A telephone pole may be erected close to the site, if no convenient pole already exists … no damage of any sort occurs, and it may perhaps be mentioned that the men manning the post are always local men, known probably to you, and that in the quite large number of posts already established, no difficulties with Landlords or Tenants have been found to occur”.

Accordingly, the Home Office’s letter offers no rental payment for the post’s use of the site, which it states will be used for annual exercises not exceeding seven days (or nights) per year.

1942

The Chief Observer is hauling a bundle of advertising hoardings from his delivery van and taking them into the post hut. For the first five years of the Wasnott post’s existence the observers continued to bring all of their equipment to the site for each exercise. Experience of bitter winds on this hillside encouraged them to also bring thick clothing and canvas windbreaks. However the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in September 1938 changed things. For two weeks at the height of the crisis the observers manned the post permanently and it became clear that for continuous operation these posts would need to provide sheltered facilities to enable observers to cook, rest and simply get warm. Deciding upon the suitability of having each post served by a wooden shed, the Air Ministry issued designs for “Standard Pattern Huts” and provided £5 for materials by which shelter and welfare facilities could be locally sourced and erected. But in the face of rationing of building materials the roll-out of this solution was slow to bear fruit. In the meantime at Wasnott the Chief Observer scrounged around and improvised with sandbags “quite a good little fort around the spotting position”. But that proved unsatisfactory as a long-term shelter as after a hard winter the “bags gradually rotted and the sand swirled about in the breeze and got into eyes, cups of tea and everything”. As interim measures a tent and then a caravan were placed at the site and then at the height of the Battle of Britain, amidst fears of imminent invasion, two members of the Home Guard camped out near the post in an old car they had dragged onto the site.

At Wasnott the Chief Observer kept pressing for tools to do the job – and a wooden hut was eventually created, replete with a “cubby hole” featuring stove, small desk and shelves adjacent to open platform with removable glass windshields. But winter chill penetrated even that shelter, prompting the Chief Observer to now bring cardboard display adverts from a local tailor’s shop, to line his hut’s walls.

1946

The scavenger wrenches the corrugated steel shutter from Wasnott post’s now-abandoned observation platform and drags it to his van parked at the edge of the site.

By the end of the war the ROC had 40,000 observers, 40 reporting centres, and approx. 1,500 posts spread across the length and breadth of mainland Britain. But within a couple of weeks of the end of the European campaign in May 1945, the ROC was stood down and its posts quickly abandoned. Already in a tired condition by the cessation of hostilities, posts’ physical structures quickly fell into dereliction – a process accelerated by the post-war steel shortage and its ensuing scrap hunting. Some posts also became improvised homes for squatters: citizens or demobilised military personnel, adding further to their “eyesore” reputation.

However, in the Autumn of 1946, in the face of deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union it was decided that the ROC should be reactivated, and in December of that year, the Air Ministry wrote to Wasnott Parish Council proposing a year to year tenancy to formalise its resumption of occupation of the site. In the face of some resistance by the Council to the standard lease presented to them (but which the Air Ministry asserted had been accepted without amendment by many landowners), the Air Ministry eventually agreed a 15/- rent and to providing a more particularised
definition of the post’s 3 yards by 3 yards plot.

But the revival of individual posts didn’t automatically revive the observation network for the wartime ROC reporting centres had closed, the radar system was barely operable and few fighter squadrons remained. Plans were put in hand to address this, but this investment would not see fruit until 1953 (by which time the evolution of military technology had rendered both the new reporting centres and the new ROTOR’ radar bunkers obsolete). Derek Wood, recalling his own experience of starting out as an ROC member in 1947, portrays the parlous conditions faced by the post-war observer, stood on site contemplating the emergent Cold War tensions in:

“their ill-fitting uniforms [which] were soaked through, post structure and hut were non-existent and the rickety wooden tripod legs of the instrument often fell to pieces, depositing the heavy metal table on the luckless observer’s feet. Telephones had a habit of emitting loud screams and crackling noises, or they cut out altogether. Where lines had not been laid on the observers solemnly wrote the [aircraft] plots down and put them in the mail the next day.”

1954

The pre-formed concrete panels are unloaded from the lorry and carried across to the site. The Council had anticipated this moment back in 1951 when they agreed to increase the site plot to 7 yards by 7 yards, and to increase the annual rent to 40/-. The Air Ministry’s plans to improve the physical condition of its observer posts had seen Orilt Ltd commissioned in 1952 to supply 400 sites with prefabricated concrete lookout posts in two variants: on-ground (Type A) or raised on slits (Type B). But Wasnott’s new observation platform is of doubtful merit, for jets have now started to supersede human plotting capability. In recent Air Ministry trials it was acknowledged that the days of the ROC’s aircraft spotting role are numbered. Wasnott’s Orilt platform will indeed soon lie derelict, aircraft observation supplanted by the ROC’s new role inspired by the Hydrogen Bomb and the new type of accommodation required for it.

1956

The Chief Observer is sitting in his car, writing a letter to the Council thanking the councillors for their permission to bring cars onto the recreation ground for the duration of the one week summer exercise. The Chief Observer’s letter assures the Council that the rest of year’s training will be held in the function room of a local pub, The Lucky Duck.

Following the previous year’s exercise a spat had ensued between the Air Ministry and the Council. The Council had notified the Air Ministry of new bylaws prohibiting vehicles from the recreation ground and in turn the Chief Observer had alerted the Air Ministry to the prospect that this restriction could “considerably dampened the enthusiasm of our Post Instructor and Observers” adding that “it is no wonder that the ROC is struggling to attract volunteers”. After further correspondence a temporary concession was granted to permit the ROC volunteers to park their cars upon the site during their summer exercise.

The subject matter of the post’s training activity will soon change (although, out of these volunteers’ choice, aircraft spotting will remain a staple of the crew’s gatherings in The Lucky Duck for many years to come). In June of 1955 the Home Secretary had announced to the House of Commons that steps were being taken for the ROC – given its network of observation sites spread across the length and breadth of mainland Britain – to give warning of and to measure radioactivity in the event of air attacks in a future war. Henceforth, instead of plotting aircraft the ROC would be plotting nuclear explosions and fallout. At Wasnott there were some resignations when the post’s new duties had been announced. These volunteers had joined the ROC because they wanted to be aircraft spotters and they enjoyed being outdoors, sky watching. They did not want to hide underground like moles.

Results from US and UK testing in the mid 1950s had emphasised the importance of shelter in the face of not only blast, but also the ensuing fallout. Accordingly, in support of the ROC’s new role inspired by the Hydrogen Bomb and the new type of accommodation required for it.

“The Lucky Duck”
needs by taking a 21 year lease of the site. Thereafter from early 1955 until March 1959 a succession of correspondence ceased mundane conveyancing matters concerning the nature of the Council’s ownership interest in the site variously under the Wasnott Inclosure Act 1842, the need for Ministry of Education authorisation due to the recreation ground’s educational endowment, negotiation of rent and fencing arrangements and steps to clarify the first names of all required signatories to the lease. Eventually, the lease was completed, regularising the Ministry’s occupation of the site (now increased to 136 square yards) for 21 years at an annual rental of £5 and, at the Air Ministry’s insistence, imposing a 50 foot radius safeguarded area ringing the protected accommodation within which the landlord agreed not to build any obstructions.

1962

The Chief Observer, visiting the site to tidy up after a recent fallout plotting exercise, finds that the entrance has been blocked by the tenant farmer who grazes cattle on the pasture adjacent to the recreation ground. With some difficulty, she manoeuvres herself around the obstacle and approaches the hatch, descending thereafter into the bunker. There she attempts with some difficulty to fit a piece of equipment, in the course of which she falls onto the post’s table causing “a splintering crash that reverberated round the walls, just as we are told the nuclear blast will do”. Gathering herself together she climbs back to the surface and once out of the hatch notices a bull amongst the herd of Doile jersey cows. The bull starts towards her and she runs at full pelt towards the blocked exit. To her relief she manages to squeeze her way back to the safety of the lane and emphatically concludes: “to me a bull with a ring in his nose, is far more of a potential hazard than a nuclear bomb. This is a case of the evil that we know being ‘worse’ than that which we do not”.

With such naivety or bravado, Wasnott’s crew were slowly coming to terms with their new role, a process aided by their involvement in blast and fallout monitoring exercises, like the recent Fallex 62 national fallout plotting exercise. Such exercises could be monotonous however. Fallex 62 had featured only a single simulated strike, meaning that only the eastern part of the country was substantively affected. Accordingly, Wasnott crew’s participation had been “limited to ‘monotonous’ fall out readings or ‘no reading’ for hours on end”, accompanied by the constant “blip – blip” chirping of the post’s Carrier Warning Receiver, a soundtrack relieved only by occasional chatter with the crews of the other posts in Wasnott’s cluster.

1980

The new recruit is being introduced to the post. In the face of rising tensions between the superpowers over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan recruitment to the ROC has doubled over the last year. The Chief Observer tells the recruit that his prospects for a long and enjoyable role in the ROC are buoyed by the Thatcher Government’s stated commitment to reviving civil defence. The Chief Observer does not mention his nagging concern that eventually the need for monitoring posts staffed by humans will be overtaken by remote sensing devices given everything that seems to be happening with the boom of electronic devices in the household. For the time being he will take comfort in the works in hand to convert the Wasnott post’s landline links to dedicated private wires and to replace its old terminal with a new loud-speaking Teletak telephone.

But despite the recent rise in recruits the ROC retains its perennial anxiety about recruitment and at Wasnott this anxiety colours the Chief Observer’s stance around renewal of the Wasnott Post’s lease which is set to expire this year. The PSA (who have now taken over the management of civil assets from the Defence Land Agent) have advised that the ROC can rely upon standard continuation of tenancy rights set down in the Landlord & Tenant Act 1954 which mean that the 1959 lease will be deemed to simply continue on its old terms. The UKWMO’s HQ staff have become involved, and they share the Chief Observer’s discomfort with this passive approach. Ultimately UKWMO will insist that the PSA enter into negotiations with the landowner to secure the active grant of a new 21 year lease because “we know from experience that any uncertainty about the long-term future of a post will have an adverse effect upon the morale of its crew.”

1992

The Chief Observer places equipment removed from the post into the back of the hired van, it is now sixth months after the formal standing down of the ROC. The van is driven by full time ROC officers who have been instructed to liaise with ROC Post crews around the country so that they may arrange to collect equipment from their posts and take it to central stores. In July 1991 Kenneth Baker, the Home Secretary, had suddenly announced that following review of the defence requirements in the light of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Home Office could no longer justify the continued use of the ROC volunteers for the nuclear monitoring role, and that this responsibility would in future be met by a mixture of local authorities and the military. The news had been received with shock by the ROC. At Wasnott Post the observers had gathered at the site for the last time and written their names, and the date, upon the wall of their post. Their sector’s commanding officer had exhorted his volunteers to “maintain our image to the end” and that they should “stand down with dignity...there is nothing to be gained from emotive statements to the media, petitions, demonstrations etc”. However, at many posts it had proved difficult to get the now disbanded post members engaged with the clear-cut task. The van’s drivers will themselves be redundant by the end of March 1992. This attempted clearance of posts and gathering together of their records will therefore prove to be only partially successful.

1999

Accompanied by the bemused farmer, the man with the expensive looking camera climbs down into the Wasnott post. The photographs that he takes there will form part of a survey which will present on-line an account of the location and physical state of every traceable ROC post. The farmer acquired this field from the Council after the recreation ground...
was sold for housing development in 1967. He had never paid much attention to it prior to the ROC stand-down. In 1992 he had accepted surrender of the lease and a payment of £50 in lieu of the reinstatement liability. Shortly afterwards he took the post's fencing down, and cleared away the collapsed Orlit post after it blew over in a heavy storm. But otherwise he had left things alone.

A few years later he had been approached by a businessman who said that he would like to rent the bunker as a weekend retreat. The farmer had seen the man on site a few times, cutting the grass around the post or sitting on the hatch admiring the view of London. One time in conversation the man had declared: "this place was originally built so the Royal Observer Corps could monitor London being wiped off the map. Sometimes that's easy to forget" and the farmer felt that the man was trying somehow to resist that forgetting. But the man's attendance had tailed off after a while and he eventually stopped paying the rent.

There had also been some approaches from former members of the ROC Post's crew, with talk of preserving the post as a historic relic of the Cold War, and seeking funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to do so. But nothing had come of this and the farmer had found all that rather hard to fathom -- this place was surely too recent to be archaeological. The photographer assured him that the post had historic interest -- and that hundreds of amateur investigators have been working since 1995 on a project to catalogue the twentieth century's "Defence of Britain" sites across the UK.

2007

Using now-readily available locational data the bunkerologist has programmed his sat-nav to alert him of proximity to any ROC post. Having detected one here, on the outskirts of Wasnott, he strolls across the field and down into the bunker. Inside he finds a burnt out shell. The polystyrene tiles combusted well, coating the underground room in a thick layer of soot, into which recent visitors have written their names and a few faux apocalyptic slogans, echoing the <i>Half Life</i> Video game. The man takes some photos which he later uploads to an urban exploration forum website, describing his visit thus: "close to minor road and OPEN. As previously reported -- empty and burned. Nasty. The site is overgrown and is being undermined by rabbits."

2013

The farmer has decided to clear away the Wasnott post's surface features, having heard recently that English Heritage had listed a ROC Post in Yorkshire, he wants to ensure that his site doesn't attract any restrictive heritage designations. His insurance broker has also worried him by pointing out that he would be liable if anyone were to be injured with the post.

Erase of the post is easy. The turrets fall with the aid of a towrope and a tractor, and he then grubs out the near-surface remains of the hatch, tumbling the masonry into the ladder well and then overfilling with soil to leave no trace of the ROC's former presence in this now empty field.

Picture credit: A montage combining a 1979 view of Markyate ROC Post overlayed onto the site's 2015 Google Earth form. The 1979 photograph is reproduced courtesy of Roland Carr.

Note: Wasnott is not a real place, but all of the quotes are taken from primary sources concerning various ROC Post sites and events at them. References for the quotes are available from me, if desired.

Bored to death? Here's how to attend one (or both) of the book launch events for 'In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker' on 1st and 7th September 2017.
The next couple of weeks sees a flurry of promotional activity for my bunker book, *In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker*.

**THE LONDON LAUNCH: 1 September 2017**

Next Thursday (1 September 2017) is the ‘bunkerfest’ at the RGS, with three sessions in Skempton Building, Room 307:

11.10-12.50 The Future of the Bunker (1): new uses and meanings for the 20th century’s abandoned bunkers


Full abstracts for the sessions and their contributors are available on the RGS conference website, [http://www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org) (and in earlier blogs on this site).

**THE SHEFFIELD & YORK LAUNCH: 7 September 2017**

There are just a few free places left on the ‘guest-list’ for this afternoon seminar, early evening bunker tour and book launch. If interested please email me at: l.e.bennett@shu.ac.uk asap.

The event starts and ends in Sheffield (close to the railway station), and comprises:

1.30 – 3.15pm Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus: Cantor Building, Room 9130.

**ASLE / LAND2 Conference Session – “To The Bunker: Three Views Of Cold War Landscapes”**

**A public session chaired by Luke Bennett, Sheffield Hallam University**

Writing at the end of the 1970s, amidst resurgent US/Soviet nuclear brinkmanship, Thatcher’s reassertion of the authoritarian ‘Nuclear State’ (Jungk 1979) and the rebirth of the anti-nuclear movement across Europe, investigative journalist Peter Laurie declared that “the paranoia of power can be read in the concrete of the bunkers, the radio towers, the food stores and the dispersed centres of government” and concluded that this materialisation of both power and paranoia was now “written on the face of England” (1979: 9). This paranoia, and its sculpting of both discursive networks and concrete structures across the landscape has in recent years become a productive point of focus for artists and writers who have been seeking to examine the traumatic power of that era, and specifically to explore the links between the unsettling of minds and of the nuclear state’s colonisation of otherwise bucolic landscapes, by what landscape historian W.G. Hoskins, writing in 1954, had called “the obscene shape of the atom-bomber, laying a trail like a filthy slug upon Constable’s and Gainsborough’s sky [and on the ground an equally contaminating] “high barbed wire around some unmentionable devilment” (1985: 299). This cross-disciplinary field has also increasingly seen...
attempts made to trace and understand the lingering, after-effects of these Cold War framings through into the early 21st century and to investigate the motivations behind the current revalorisation of the now-abandoned brutal ruins of the cold war. This session will seek to show case three artists work in this field, alongside launching a collection of essays to which they and others have contributed that examines this psychic and material legacy of the cold war’s bunkers.

Three views of Cold War landscapes will comprise a showing of work by the following artists, with short accompanying presentations and Q&A opportunity:

- **Louise K. Wilson** (University of Leeds) *The Eerie and the Banal*: This sonic exploration reflects on artists’ and writers’ troubled fascination with Cold War bunkers. A strange interplay of fact and fiction frames this reflection into these anomalous and primal spaces. The role of the ‘eerie’ (explored in the writings of Robert Macfarlane and the late Mark Fisher) is invoked in a new sound work that melds memories of places visited, imagined and composited.

- **Matthew Flintham** (Kingston University) *Torås Fort: A Speculative Study of War Architecture in the Landscape*. Matthew will show his short film which in image and narration uses the techniques of speculative fiction to unsettle an account of a geologist’s compulsive analysis of the materialities of the remains of a Norwegian coastal battery, fusing the styles of the natural sciences and horror writing to do so. Flintham’s account reflects the ‘weird realism’ stylistics and concerns of contemporary writers (like De Landa 1997; Negarestani 2008; Bogost 2012; and Harman 2012) who each ascribe ominous, ‘hidden in plain sight’ posthuman mystery to seemingly dumb brute banal geological objects.

- **Stephen Felmingham** (Plymouth College of Art) *Peripheral Artefacts: Drawing [out] the Cold War*. Stephen will show and discuss his use of experimental drawing techniques to access the ‘hidden in plain sight’ uncanny qualities of now abandoned ROC Posts. In doing so he will show how his bunker-entering reconnaissance accessed his sublimated childhood trauma of growing up in East Anglia in the 1980s amidst USAF and RAF nuclear bases, pointing to the potency of material and spatial triggers to memory and feeling.

Plus a presentation by me to launch the book:

- **Luke Bennett** (Sheffield Hallam University) *What do we want from our Bunkers? Ruins, Reinvention, Anxiety and Power*. This presentation will explore the relationship between the enduring cultural salience of the bunker and the intransigent materiality of its concrete instantiations. In short, it will ask ‘why is it that the bunker refuses to fade away?’ Within this examination of the bunker’s continual reverberation I will explore the strengths and limits of Strömberg’s (2013) “funky bunker” hypothesis, consider the continued valence of bunker imagery across popular culture and its symbiotic relationship with contemporary bunker-building. I will also seek to build a conceptual linkage between recent scholarship on ‘concrete governmentality’ and the sociology of shelter (Deville, Guggenheim & Hrdličková 2014; Foster 2016; Shapiro & Bird-David 2016) and the ruin-focussed material-cultural disciplines that have tended to be the core of the nascent bunker studies reflected by the contributors to *In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker*.

At 3.15pm we will then depart by coach to attend a private viewing of English Heritage’s York Cold War Bunker plus a panel event there in which Ian Klinke (Political Geographer, University of Oxford) will interrogate a panel of contributors to the edited collection, *In The Ruins of The Cold War Bunker*. Due to space constraints within the bunker there will be two sittings of the panel session (alternating with the bunker tour). The panel will comprise:

- Louise K. Wilson / Stephen Felmingham (Artists) (alternating between presenter and chair)
- Luke Bennett (editor of *In the Ruins*)
- Arno Geesink (Architect)
- Kevin Booth (Senior curator, English Heritage)

The coach will then leave York bunker around 7.15pm, returning us to central Sheffield by 8.30pm (approx.)

Here’s a chance to work as a post doc with me and others on our study of the St Peter’s, Kilmahew modern ruin project
Back in December 2015 I announced here that I was part of an AHRC bid for a large project to study the re-activation of the modernist ruins of former seminary, St Peter’s, Kilmahew, details here. That bid got through to the final round but ultimately wasn’t granted. So, we picked ourselves up and dusted our ideas off and I’m pleased to report that we have now secured a smaller grant from The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland that will enable a more modest study of the project to now go ahead.

The key element enabled by this funding is a 14 months post-doc post (based at the University of Glasgow) to provide the embedded eyes and ears of our study. Here’s the summary of the post that’s been circulating via other channels this week…

“Research Assistant
‘Re-Placing Risk and Ruination: Experimental Approaches to Access, Design and Engagement in Transitional Heritage Sites’

RA Grade 7, Part-Time (0.8 FTE) for 14 months

Full details and job specification (post reference: 018433) available at:
https://udcf.gla.ac.uk/it/iframe/jobs/

This position is part of a research project funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, entitled:
‘Re-Placing Risk and Ruination: Experimental Approaches to Access, Design and Engagement in Transitional Heritage Sites’.

The post-holder will enable the research project to address three research questions:
– How do you activate a modern ruin safely?
– How do you activate a modern ruin creatively?
– How do you activate a modern ruin collaboratively?

Responses and findings will be drawn from an interdisciplinary study that investigates the on-going transformation of a Scottish site of international architectural significance and its surrounding historic landscape, Kilmahew-St. Peters (Argyll & Bute). Studying the novel and experimental approach to heritage site presentation and management being taken by artists, architects and designers at Kilmahew-St. Peters, will be the means to produce novel research findings with widespread relevance and applicability. Nationally and internationally, there are a multitude of valued heritage landscapes, in a ruinous, vulnerable, degraded state, requiring equivalent levels of creative intervention for the purposes of rehabilitation and to safeguard cultural legacies for the future. See: http://nva.org.uk/artwork/kilmahew-st-peters/ The post-holder will gather original data through a combination of critical literature review, stakeholder interviewing, and immersive, participatory fieldwork activity in the site under investigation.

Data gathering undertaken by the Research Assistant will be managed and supported by the Principal Investigators: Professor Hayden Lorimer (University of Glasgow), Professor Ed Hollis (University of Edinburgh) and collaborators Dr Luke Bennett (Sheffield Hallam University) and Angus Farquhar (NVA).

The project team will produce high-quality academic outputs, complemented by a range of dissemination activities.

Applications are sought from candidates with an awarded PhD in one of the following subject areas: Cultural Geography, Landscape Architecture, Landscape Studies, Architecture and Design, Heritage Studies, Creative Arts.
Closing date for applications: Monday July 31st 2017.

Applicants should note that interviews for the post are due to be held at University of Glasgow on Monday 21st August 2017.

Projected start date for post: 1st October 2017.

The appointed researcher will be based at University of Glasgow, in the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, and will be a member of the Human Geography Research Group:

http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/ges/
http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/ges/researchandimpact/humangeographyresearch"

Image credit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ianrobertson63/8959128176/lightbox/

FILED UNDER ABANDONED BUILDINGS, ACCESS/LIABILITY, BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, CONTAMINATION, POLLUTION AND ADULTERATION, GHOSTS OF PLACE, LAW & PLACE, MEANING MAKING, PILGRIMAGE, RUINS, STONE, BRICK, CONCRETE, URBAN EXPLORATION, WANDERING

Preview and discount code for my ‘In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker’ edited collection which is being published on 30/6/17.

I’m pleased to present below a copy of the publisher’s flyer for my book, and delighted at the reviews featured there (and above).

Ian Klinke, Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Oxford and the author of the forthcoming monograph Cryptic Concrete: A subterranean journey to Cold War Germany.

I’m told the book (hardback and ebook formats) will be available to buy from 30 June 2017, and using the code below on the publisher’s website you’ll be able to get 30% off either format. Please note that all author and editorial royalties are being donated to www.msf.org.uk (Medecins Sans Frontieres).

In the meantime my introductory chapter is available to view for free here:
In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker  
Affect, Materiality and Meaning Making  
Edited by Luke Bennett

"An intriguing and absorbing set of journeys into some of the formerly secret spaces of the Cold War. In the footsteps of MacFarlane, Sebold and Virilio, and forging their own paths, the contributors lead us from Norway to Albania and from the United States to Taiwan. An essential complement to contemporary work on the vertical spaces above ground." — Stuart Elden, Professor of Political Theory and Geography, University of Warwick

June 2017 | HB £18.95/$25 9781785368756 | eBook £7.99/$10 9781785368756

During the Cold War military and civil defence bunkers were an evocative materialisation of deadly military stand-off. They were also a symbol of a deeply affective, pervasive anxiety about the prospect of world-destroying nuclear war. But following the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 these sites were swiftly abandoned, and exposed to both material and semantic ruination.

This volume investigates the uses and meanings now projected onto these seeming blank, derelict spaces. It explores how engagements with bunker ruins provide fertile ground for the study of improvised meaning making, place-attachment, hobby practices, social materiality and trauma studies. With its commentators ranging across the arts and humanities and the social sciences, this multi-disciplinary collection sets a concern with the phenomenological qualities of these places as contemporary ruins — and of their strange affective affordances — alongside scholarship examining how these places embody, and/or otherwise connect with their Cold War origins and purpose both materially and through memory and trauma. Each contribution reflexively considers the process of engaging with these places — and whether via the archive or direct sensory immersion. In doing so the book broadens the bunker's contemporary signification and contributes to theoretically informed analyses of ruination, place attachment, meaning making, and material culture.

“Luke Bennett has brought together international research on real and imagined Cold War bunkers. Readers are introduced to the bunker and Cold War histories through an enchanting mix of chapters that attend to the bunker’s stubborn materiality, visual representation and the visceral experiences they invite. This book should be read by anyone — scholars, curators, and enthusiasts included — interested in what ruins mean in the 21st century.”
— Hillary Geoghegan, Associate Professor in Human Geography, University of Reading

“With its extensive and authoritative inquiry into the entire field of ruins, the Cold War bunker, and of its affect, materiality, and meaning the world over, Luke Bennett’s In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker is an essential source book for anyone interested in the Cold War bunker as motive, memorial, or musing.”
— John Armitage, Professor, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton

“A captivating account of the multifaceted ways in which bunkers, the most iconic of Cold War spaces, are rendered meaningful by various “communities of practice” in the 21st century. By its interdisciplinary approach, global reach and emphasis on material-affective agencies, the book breaks new ground - and made me realize that in one way or another, the now abandoned structures have traumatized us all and will always be alive.”
— Dr. Silvio Berger Zuidland, Assistant Professor, University of Zurich and author of forthcoming monograph Survival Cell, Territory, Brothel: The Bunker in Cold War Switzerland and Beyond

About the Editor
Luke Bennett is Reader in Space, Place & Law in the Department of the Natural and Built Environment at Sheffield Hallam University, UK.

and here:
https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ruins-Cold-War-Bunker-Materiality-ebook/dp/B072SSPTXS/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1498233592&sr=8-1&keywords=ruins+of+the+cold+war+bunker

Further details of launch events will follow soon.
Programme now announced for 1st Sept 2017 Bunker-fest at the RGS-IBG London Conference
The Royal Geographical Society have now released their timetable for the 2017 Annual Conference, and the three bunker sessions have been scheduled for Friday 1st September, running from 11.10 a.m. until 6.30 pm.

A copy of the full conference programme is downloadable here:

http://www.rgs.org/WhatsOn/ConferencesAndSeminars/Annual+International+Conference/Programme/Programme.htm

And conference registration (for the one day or the full conference) is here:

http://www.rgs.org/WhatsOn/ConferencesAndSeminars/Annual+International+Conference/Registration/Register+to+attend.htm

I’m delighted now to be able to present full details of our interdisciplinary bunker-fest, including each speaker’s abstract:

Session 1: The Future of the Bunker: new uses and meanings for the 20th century’s abandoned bunkers
chairied by Luke Bennett, Sheffield Hallam University, UK (geographer)

Rethinking the Atlantic Wall: art, death and minerology
Xenia Vytuleva, Columbia University, USA (architectural historian)

The Atlantic Wall along the coast of Europe and Norway is in ruins. One of the most radical of Hitler’s infrastructure projects, known as Fuhrer Directive No 40 sought to transform natural coastal lines into the Fortress Europe. But today the wall lies in oblivion and solitude and its concrete structures are migrating along the borderlines, becoming part of rocks, dissolving back into minerals, metamorphosing into skeletons and the giant shells of reptiles. No longer regarded as functioning architectural bodies, no longer serving as a record of violent human activity, today fifteen hundred of these Nazi bunkers have become a new form of media, the abstract techno-basis of a new layer of coded information. This paper advances the idea of transplanting the discourse of the Atlantic Wall Bunkers onto the territory of photography, film and contemporary cultures at large, based on an on-going cross-disciplinary research – project – 1XUnknown. Launched in 2012, by the Italian urban artist Margherita Moscardini this multidisciplinary experiment forces us to re-think and re-calibrate the phenomenon within the broader trajectory of curatorial practices, material cultures, law, geography, conservation, chemistry and mineralogy. Balancing on the border of different media—engineering, politics, military-industrial production, statistics, science, forensic architecture the bunkers of the Atlantic Wall themselves embody numerous layers of meaning. However, it is this particular shift from the most traumatic archaeological remains to radical art that takes the discourse on the bunker as a material fact to a whole new extent.

The BMEW radomes: reimagining RAF Fylingdales as a military contemporary art complex
Michael Mulvihill, University of Newcastle, UK (artist)

Once when I was a small boy in the early 1980s I ran home as fast as I could from school to see if I could make it within the four-minute nuclear attack warning. Now, as an adult, I find myself in the uncanny position of Artist in Residence at RAF Fylingdales Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station (BMEW), the very place that would have signaled an impending nuclear attack. RAF Fylingdales is one of three BMEW Radar Stations situated around the North Pole that provide warning of possible nuclear missile attack to the US and UK. RAF Fylingdales is run in partnership with the USAF 21st Space Wing, which also provides tracking data on the 17,000 objects in orbit around the Earth, including satellites, space stations and the ever increasing “space junk.” Early last year RAF Fylingdales invited me to be Artist in Residence at their Visitor Centre and Archive. This presentation will show art works made in response to RAF Fylingdales’ archive, and survey the archive’s material culture, which charts the history of RAF Fylingdales from empty moor to operational BMEW Station. Amongst these materials are examples of creative activities taking place at RAF
Malleable concrete?: moving from contemporary memory to curated meaning at York Nuclear Bunker

Kevin Booth, English Heritage (UK) (heritage professional)

For those who lived through the Cold War the Royal Observer Corps headquarters in York, though in itself an unfamiliar space, acts as a catalyst to memory and association – a portal through which broader personal experiences are recalled and re-lived. Yet such powerful association is a finite resource and a gradual shift in our visitor profile sees a move from actual, visceral experience of the Cold War to an experience wholly interpreted, curated and consumed. At the end of our chapter in the In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker (2017) collection, Rachael Bowers and I noted that for younger adults the Cold War storyline is deeply embedded within their own popular culture references, design motifs and finishes echoed in style magazines. In this presentation I will reflect on how as curators we are endeavouring to manage, influence and benefit from this shift from contemporary memory to curated meaning. I will review a range of interventions within the bunker: as art gallery with subject themed content (Michael Mullvihill): augmented with a 10 piece chamber orchestra playing a bespoke composition; enlivened with the pounding beats of a techno duo as accompaniment to stitched together content from the Yorkshire Film Archive. The paper explores how English Heritage has worked with a variety of bunker narratives (some pre-given, and others that we are helping to create), playing with different mediums of translation, as our bunker looks for sustained meaning and relevance for 21st century audiences.

De-bunking the bunker: managing myth and misinformation in the bunkers beneath Dover Castle

Rowena Willard-Wright, English Heritage, UK (heritage professional)

By their very nature, government policies around the development and use of cold war bunkers are difficult to retrieve and navigate. This, alongside the fact that bunkers are often hidden “in plain sight” within our communities, has led to the development of false memories around their functions, with some deliberately planted. Most cold war academic interest is focused on military and foreign policy and architectural history. Which means that the mythology around the use of the bunker continues to grow and persist in the free dialogue of the Internet, without the benefit of academic challenge. I will be using Dover Castle tunnels and their cold war use (as Regional Seat of Government for the South East of England) as a case study to illustrate the difficulties of interpretation that the curator faces when explaining a bunker’s cold war use to the public, and how hard it is to be seen as an “honest broker” in this role. This is particularly clear in comparison to the same set of tunnels’ current public interpretation as a WWII frontline hospital, and operations rooms that played a key role in Dunkirk. We want to encourage imagination, because at its essence a cold war bunker was never “used” for its purpose, but also an authentic understanding of how government, in the past, has imagined itself into global nuclear war. Because it is in the subtlety of this that our recent history can reveal far more about our nature as a country and our form of government, than the safely entertaining history of wars from our more distant past.

Bunker Boredom: An ethnography of the experience of bunker labour, as an emergency planner

Becky Alexis-Martin, University of Southampton, UK (geographer)

Emergency planning in the UK has a dark heritage, with origins that stem from civil defence work aimed at preparedness for potential nuclear strikes during the Cold War. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall civil defence gradually diversified to include generic emergencies, reformulated under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Some nuclear bunkers have found new lives as emergency planning centres. This has entailed only modest change to their layout: filtration systems have been switched off and dust now gathers in cupboards of log books and pencils, but the occasional dark artefact or document survives in the back of a filing cabinet testifying to an earlier formulation of “thinking the unthinkable”. This paper presents an autoethnography of my experience of working in a repurposed nuclear bunker as an emergency planner at the start of the 2010s. I gradually became aware of its original function by conversation with senior service members. My presentation will chart this slow realisation, setting it alongside a depiction of the mundane labour of emergency planning – the multi-agency meetings, the acronyms, training exercises and coffee breaks – all played out within the repurposed bunker. My presentation will show that as a workplace, the bunker becomes boring and cognitive dissonance kicks in quickly, an aspect of bunker-dwelling that is often ignored.

Session 2 – The Bunker of the Future: materialising contemporary anxieties and desires in 21st century bunker building – chaired by Kathrine Sandsys, Rose Bruford College, UK (scenographer)

What do we want from our bunkers? ruins, reinvention, anxiety and power

Luke Bennett, Sheffield Hallam University, UK (geographer)

This presentation will provide a segue between the first session’s focus on the re-interpretation and re-purposing of the 20th century’s bunkers and the second session’s concern with the 21st century’s contemporary bunker-building, and its motivations. It will do so by exploring the relationship between the enduring cultural salience of the bunker and the intransigent materiality of its concrete instantiations. In short, it will ask “why is it that the bunker refuses to fade away?” Within this examination of the bunker’s continual reverberation I will explore the strengths and limits of Strömberg’s (2013) “funky bunker” hypothesis, consider the continued valence of bunker imagery across popular culture and its...
Every home a fortress: fatherhood and the family fallout Shelter in Cold War America

Tom Bishop, University of Sheffield, UK (historian)

By taking a historical look back to the nuclear crisis years of 1958 to 1961, this presentation will set the scene for subsequent exploration of contemporary bunker-mania. At the height of the ‘first’ Cold War millions of U.S. citizens were instructed by their federal government that the best chance of surviving a direct nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union resided in converting their backyards or basements into family fallout shelters. Directing their policies towards middle-class suburban America, civil defence policymakers asked citizens to realign their lives and family relationships in accordance with a new doctrine of ‘do-it-yourself’ survival, stating that middle-class suburban fathers had the capacity and resources to protect both themselves and their families from the worst possible manmade disaster. This paper offers the first historical study of fatherhood and the family fallout shelter during the early Cold War, examining the tension between the politics of ‘do-it-yourself’ survival and the lived reality. Rather than fostering one singular politicised vision of Cold War fatherhood, this thesis argues that fallout shelters brought to the surface a variety of interlinked visions of Cold War fatherhood, rooted in narratives of domesticity, militarism, and survivalism. Central to these narratives of masculinity was the private fallout shelter itself, a malleable Cold War space that inspired a new national discourse around notions of nationhood, domestic duty, and collective assumptions of what it meant to be a father in the nuclear age.

Bunker play: Possibility space and survival in the Fallout series

Emma Fraser, University of Manchester, UK (sociologist)

Bunkers (and bunker-like forms) have often been deployed in mainstream gaming franchises to support play in repetitive and restricted game spaces (Bennett). Influenced by the pop-culture image of the bunker as a site of post-catastrophe survival, games like Fallout depict hyper-technological and futuristic fallout shelters (or ‘vaults’) as key sites of gameplay – these have been a feature of the franchise since its inception (and are the sole setting in the 2015 iPad game Fallout Shelter, for example). Related games like the Borderlands series also deploy the ‘vault’ architecture as a means to structure space within the game (especially in early iterations), but also as plausible spaces in which end-of-the-world survival narratives can develop. Through the Fallout series in particular – one of the biggest contemporary gaming franchises – this paper considers the way in which the space of the bunker is used in-game (structured, navigated, viewed), as well as the development of the contemporary bunker imaginary over time. Does the in-game bunker reveal a space of potential and possibility (Massumi), or are they more suggestive of Heterotopic spaces (Foucault), contested and inverted representations of real space? As the bunker imaginary and mechanic has evolved over the course of the Fallout series, what does the ‘vault’ tell us about the bunker-form? Finally, do real-world practices of play and exploration in bunkers (Bennett) map onto virtual bunkers as spatial models for bunker-living?

Bugging out and bunkering down: on the sheltering tactics of survivalists and preppers in the 21st century

Michael Adams & Carrie Wilkinson, University of Wollongong, Australia (geographers)

Survivalist individuals and groups have become significantly more visible in recent years. A phenomenon emerging out of the USA in the late 1950s, survivalists, or ‘preppers’ as they have increasingly come to be known, anticipate and plan for a natural or man-made catastrophe that will bring about the total collapse of civil society, or the end of the world as we know it (TEOTWAWKI). A central feature of preparing for TEOTWAWKI is establishing a suitable place to weather out the immediate fallout when shit hits the fan (SHTF) or, depending on the nature of the catastrophe, to see out the end of days. This paper will examine the shelter (or ‘bunkering’) tactics and technologies of survivalists and preppers in the 21st century. To bring focus to the paper, we concentrate on the Australian context, with data collected from online, publicly available survivalist and prepper blogs, websites and forums. The bunker is a symbol of the intersection of Anthropocene and Apocalypse – discussions about the need for developing personal and community-wide resilience in regions experiencing and facing the effects of climate change resonate with survivalist concerns and practices.

Subterranean sanctuaries? secret underground spaces today.

Theo Kindynis, University of Roehampton, UK (criminologist)

Recent years have seen the ongoing and increasing appropriation and colonisation of selected subterranean spaces by economic, political and military elites. In 2015, London councils received over 4000 planning applications for so-called “mega-basement” developments: elaborate subterranean extensions, containing cinemas, bowling alleys, spas, wine cellars, tennis courts and gun rooms. The volume of such luxury bunkers – a growing trend amongst the city’s billionaire class – can exceed the housing space above the surface several times over, constituting a kind of ‘icberg architecture’. Meanwhile, underground government and military facilities – many dating from the Second World and Cold Wars – remain quietly in use. Ageing bunker complexes are repurposed and retrofitted as secure “crisis management facilities”, cyber strike command centres and clandestine communications monitoring hubs. Taken together, such installations suggest a kind of subterranean ‘secret geography’: a shadowy subsurface archipelago of
In a day-long series of sessions at the 2014 RGS conference scholars from around the world met to debate the contemporary significance of the remains of the Cold War’s bunkers. Subsequently many of participants have contributed chapters to a collection edited by Luke Bennett, *In the Ruins of the Cold War: Materiality, Affect and Meaning Making* published by Rowman & Littlefield International in June 2017. This final session brings together Bennett and John Beck, one of his co-convenors from the 2014 RGS sessions, to discuss the approach taken by the book in examining contemporary engagements with these 20th century ruins. Bennett will be joined by two other contributors to the book, Kathrine Sandys (a scenographer) and Kevin Booth (curator of English Heritage’s York Nuclear Bunker). Writing in 2011 Beck declared that the bunker was incapable of cultural recuperation, and that to attempt to do so might put us in thrall to the bunker and cause us lose sight of its dark exceptionality. Beck also argued that bunkers engender an ambivalence which makes it very difficult to ascribe any stable meaning to them. Like the 2014 sessions, the book is an attempt to explore Bennett’s differing interpretation that it is the bunker’s ability to foster multiple parallel, but internally coherent, forms of representation (i.e. *multivalence*) rather than its *ambivalence* that calls to be investigated. Accordingly the book explores the myriad ways, practices and logics by which these concrete structures are engaged by a wide spectrum of academics and others and given stable-seeming meanings. This ‘in conference with’ session will enable Beck to engage directly with Bennett about the book’s approach, and to debate with its authors whether the book avoids being in thrall to the bunker: and whether through its focus on multivalence (Bennett), artistic appropriation (Sandys) or heritage curation (Booth). This session will be chaired by Nadia Bartolini, a cultural geographer with a particular research interest in contemporary ruins who, in particular, has written of the necessity of blending an attentiveness to materiality, affect and meaning making in the interpretation of contemporary re-engagements with fascist bunkers in Italy (Bartolini 2015). Running this discussion as a session in its own right will give an opportunity for in-depth debate, both between the panel members and with encouraged audience participation.


*FILED UNDER* ABANDONED BUILDINGS, BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, BUNKERS, ENTHUSIASM, GHOSTS OF PLACE, MATERIALITY & MEMORY, MEANING MAKING, RUINS, STONE, BRICK, CONCRETE, TIME CAPSULES, URBAN EXPLORATION, URBICIDE

**The Future of the Bunker // The Bunker of the Future: three sessions proposed for RGS 2017**

**UPDATE:** these proposed sessions have now been adopted by the RGS and will form part of the RGS-IBG 2017 London conference. The bunker sessions described below will be running on Friday 1st September 2017. All of the speaker’s abstracts are now uploaded and available here:
The rationale for the sessions is set out below and in an earlier post here:

royal-geographical-association-annual-conference-london-29-august-1-september-2017/

I’ve today submitted the formal proposal for a three session bunker strand at this summer’s Royal Geographical Society annual conference (29 August – 1 September 2017, London). Once fully approved and adopted by the RGS I will publish all of the abstracts here. But in the meantime here’s the proposal summary and contribution titles:

Proposal summary

The last two decades have seen increasing public interest in, and engagements with, the abandoned remains of Second World War and Cold War era military and civil defence bunkers. Academics have been busy analysing the motives and forms of this engagement (Bennett 2011; Maus 2017) and also charting the origins and affective-material impacts of those 20th century waves of bunker-building mania (Bartolini 2015; Klinke 2015; Berger Ziauddin 2016).

Such engagements and studies have tended to figure the bunker as a now-deactivated form – as a form of contemporary ruin – and as a phenomenon of the (albeit recent) past. This set of sessions seeks to supplement this scholarship by examining the bunkers’ futurity: through considering the bunker as an immanent contemporary and still-yet-to-come form of place. This concern to examine the bunkers’ futurity will be examined in two different, but complementary, ways: first by exploring the ways in which the 20th century’s bunkers are being reinterpreted and/or repurposed for the 21st century and secondly, by analysing what contemporary bunker-building looks like, and here exploring the anxieties and desires that drive it. As John Armitage (2015) has recently argued, Paul Virilio (1994) did not see bunkers as having a singular, fixed meaning or purpose and he instead saw early signs of their semantic evolution and repurposing. The assembled presentations will each consider this evolution, but will also acknowledge that the cultural foregrounding of denatured, “funky bunkers” (Strömberg 2013) is problematic both as regards how it presents (or erases) the bunker-form’s dark history or its ongoing contemporary replication. This unease will be debated in the final session, in which contributors to the recent edited collection In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker: Materiality, Affect and Meaning Making (Rowman & Littlefield International, Luke Bennett ed. 2017) will be interrogated by John Beck.

Session overview

Session 1: The Future of the Bunker: finding new uses and new meanings for the 20th century’s abandoned bunkers

1. Xenia Vytuleva, Columbia University (architectural historian) – Rethinking the Atlantic Wall: art, death and minerology.

2. Drew Mulholland, University of Glasgow (composer) – Listening to the concrete: re-composing the Atlantic Wall and Scotland’s Nuclear Bunker

3. Michael Mulvihill, University of Newcastle (artist) – The BMEW radomes: reimagining RAF Fylingdales as as military contemporary art complex

4. Kevin Booth, English Heritage (Senior Curator, North) – Re-stocking the bunker: curating creative re-uses at York Nuclear Bunker

5. Rowena Willard-Wright, English Heritage (Senior Curator, South East) – De-bunking the bunker: managing myth and misinformation in the bunkers beneath Dover Castle

Session 2: The Bunker of the Future: how we materialise our contemporary anxieties and desires in the new bunker-building of the 21st century


7. Emma Fraser, University of Manchester (sociology) – Bunker play: Possibility space and survival in the Fallout series

8. Michael Adams & Carrie Wilkinson, University of Wollongong (geography) – Bugging out and bunkering down: on the sheltering tactics of survivalists and preppers in the 21st century


10. Session 1 and 2 Q&A and discussion.

Session 3: In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker a panel discussion

John Beck, University of Westminster (english) in conversation with Luke Bennett, Sheffield Hallam University (built environment), Kevin Booth, English Heritage (curator) & Kathrine Sandys, Rose Bruford College (scenographer) about...
Writing in 2011 Beck declared that the bunker was incapable of cultural recuperation, and that to attempt to do so might put us in thrall to the bunker and cause us to lose sight of its dark exceptionality. Beck also argued that bunkers engender an ambivalence which makes it very difficult to ascribe any stable meaning to them. *In the Ruins* is an attempt to explore Bennett’s differing interpretation that it is the bunker’s ability to foster multiple parallel, but internally coherent, forms of representation (i.e. multivalence) rather than its ambivalence that calls to be investigated. Accordingly the book explores the myriad ways, practices and logics by which these concrete structures are engaged by a wide spectrum of academics and others and given stable-seeming meanings. This ‘in conference with’ session will enable Beck to engage directly with Bennett about the book’s approach, and to debate with its authors whether the book avoids being in thrall to the bunker: and whether through its focus on multivalence (Bennett), artistic appropriation (Sandys) or heritage curation (Booth).

The panel discussion will be chaired by Nadia Bartolini, University of Exeter (geography).

---

**FILED UNDER** ABANDONED BUILDINGS, BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, BUNKERS, DARK TOURISM, ENTHUSIASM, MATERIALITY & MEMORY, MEANING MAKING, RUINS, SUBTERREANEA, TIME CAPSULES, URBAN EXPLORATION

(Almost…) *In the Ruins of the Cold War Bunker – materiality, affect and meaning making*

---

**NOVEMBER 30, 2016  2 COMMENTS**

Nearly there – the manuscript will be with the publisher by the end of this week. Here’s a sneak peek at the 14 essays that make up my bunker book (due for publication by Rowman & Littlefield International in August 2017, as part of their Place, Memory, Affect series…

**Part I – Introducing the Bunker: Ruins, Hunters and Motives** – features a general introduction followed by a second chapter written by me, *Entering the Bunker with Paul Virilio: the Atlantic Wall, Pure War and Trauma* in which I discuss the importance of the seminal bunker hunting of French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who between 1958 and 1965 systematically visited, photographed and researched the imposing bunker formations of the Nazi Atlantic wall, and who did so at the height of the Cold War. I outline Virilio’s affective engagement with these bunkers, their impact upon his later theorising and argue that this compulsive hunting can be shown to be the product of traumatic wartime experiences. I then use this finding to argue that compulsive bunker hunting of the Cold War’s shelters, may also be understood in this way, with even Virilio having described the nuclear anxiety based trauma of the Cold War as greater than that of the Second World War.

**Part II – Looking at the Bunker: Representation, Image and Affect** – then presents three chapters written by artists, who each explore how established and newly emergent practices of representation engage with the Cold War’s bunkers and what they formerly, and may now, stand for (both for them and for others). First, in *Peripheral Artefacts: Drawing out the Cold War*, Stephen Felmingham discusses his use of experimental drawing techniques to access the ‘hidden in plain sight’ uncanny qualities of now abandoned ROC Posts. In doing so Felmingham shows how his bunker-entering reconnaissance accessed his sublimated childhood trauma of growing up in East Anglia in the 1980s
amidst USAF and RAF nuclear bases, pointing to the potency of material and spatial triggers to memory and feeling. Next, in Sublime Concrete: The Fantasy Bunker, Explored, scenographer and sound artist Kathrine Sandys, explores the atmospheres, properties and possibilities of the Cold War bunker, situating an account of her own installation-based work, within a wider discussion of the fact vs fiction confusion of these places, and their link to an emergent military sublime. Sandys finds in these remains, a blankness which calls for meaning making to be undertaken actively by those who engage with the bunkers and their phenomenological properties. Finally, in Processional Engagements: Sebaldian Pilgrimages to Orford Ness, Louise K. Wilson considers the ways in which a variety of artists have engaged the iconic Orford Ness site, and the extent to which those engagements have come to be conditioned by certain strong, framing tropes. Specifically, Wilson considers the enduring influence of W.G. Sebald’s melancholic reading of this site and its most iconic remnant structures. Whilst attentive to recent departures from this representational mould, Wilson chronicles the persistence of engagements which seek to foreground (and/or create) an inaccessible (and open, plastic) ‘mystery’ for the site – thereby producing art ‘about’ the site which relies more on imagination than upon deep engagement with its archival or material facticity.

In Part III – Embracing the Bunker: Identity, Materiality and Memory – the concern is with how an emergent attentiveness to the physicality of the world and our ‘entanglement’ with it (Hodder 2012) (this being the sense in which ‘materiality’ is used in this collection) affects the way in which we can account for human engagements with the remains of Cold War bunkers. The first two chapters in this part examine the entanglement of the material world and the identity of the explorer within the act of interpreting Cold War remains, with each author using experimental writing techniques to destabilise seemingly conventional forms of investigatory narrative. First, in Torås Fort: A Speculative Study of War Architecture in the Landscape, artist Matthew Flintham uses the techniques of speculative fiction to unsettle an account of a geologist’s compulsive analysis of the materialities of the remains of a Norwegian coastal battery, fusing the styles of the natural sciences and horror writing to do so. Flintham’s account reflects the ‘weird realism’ stylistics and concerns of contemporary writers (like De Landa 1997; Negarestani 2008; Bogost 2012; and Harman 2012) who each ascribe ominous, ‘hidden in plain sight’ posthuman mystery to seemingly dumb brute banal geological objects.

Then, in Bunker and Cave Counterpoint: Exploring Underground Cold War Landscapes in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, anthropologist María Alejandra Pérez uses techniques of counterpoint and ethnographic surrealism to juxtapose her autoethnographic accounts of visits to the US Congress bunker built beneath the luxury Greenbrier Resort with the remains of a far more rudimentary public nuclear shelter located within the Organ cave complex, 14 miles away. In doing so Pérez emphasises the iterative, unsettled process of meaning making, infusing her account with the bleed between these places’ multiple histories and uses and also the provocations of her own identity: both as an immigrant with a very different cultural experience of the Cold War, and as a caver.

Thereafter, two chapters address the role of affective-materialities in the production of collective identities via practices of recuperation enacted at particular material sites of encounter. First, in Recuperative Materialities: The Kinmen Tunnel Music Festival, cultural geographer J.J. Zhang explores the important role of the material properties of the Zhaishan tunnel complex, part of a defensive network of fortifications protecting the Taiwanese island of Kinmen from Chinese invasion. Only a few miles from the Chinese mainland the island was the scene of repeated exchanges of artillery fire during the Cold War. Now decommissioned, the tunnel is the site of a classical music festival, which Zhang analyses in terms of the affective-material recuperation afforded by the acoustic properties of the tunnel itself, ascribing to it a sensuous agency and showing how ‘rapprochement tourists’ find the tunnel to act as a healing sensorium – an externalized seat of sensation where humans and tunnel come together. Finally, in Once Upon a Time in Ksamil: Communist and Post-Communist Biographies of Mushroom-Shaped Bunkers in Albania, archaeologist Emily Glass considers the seemingly ambivalent relationship of Albanians with the material legacy of the hundreds of thousands of small bunkers constructed upon their landscape during the Cold War – the physical embodiment of Cold War era Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha’s defensive, isolationist paranoia. Glass shows how a strict control over knowledge about the bunker production during the Cold War era gave way to a multivalent afterlife for these structures, in which locals appropriated them for mundane and illicit uses whilst tourists and the tourism industry adopted them as a symbol of Albania.

In Part IV – Dealing with the Bunker: Hunting, Visiting and Remaking – the attention shifts to how meaning making is organised. In the first pair of essays, the focus is upon heritage practices and specifically the lay/professional divide. First, cultural geographer Gunnar Maus, applies Theodore Schatzki’s practice theory to an analysis of the parallel bunker hunting by heritage officials, bunkerologists and geocachers in the former West Germany in Popular Historical Geographies of the Cold War: Hunting, Recording and Playing with Small Munitions Bunkers in Germany/Maus finds structural affinities in the ways in which these three communities of bunker hunters seek out and interact with Spremmitinthäuser: demolition charge storage bunkers that formed part of West Germany’s ‘preconstructed obstacle’ system of Cold War defence. Maus explores the important difference between motivations (which here were divergent) and methods of practice (which both demonstrate affinities and evidence of collaboration between these diverse communities of bunker hunters). Then in Why the Cold War Matters: Exploring Visitors’ Identity Constructions at Cold War Sites in Britain, tourism studies researcher Inge Hermann, reports her study of the ways in which visitors engage with UK Cold War bunker ‘attractions’, highlighting the ways in which individual visitors actively form their own interpretations of Cold War ‘attraction’ sites. Hermann contrasts the vitality of this active reading by audiences with, what she regards as a rather closed approach imposed by heritage professionals, arguing that the effect of an ‘authorised heritage discourse’ in relation to the rendering of Cold War bunkers as ‘heritage’, pays insufficient regard to how individual visitors react to these places.

Hermann’s analysis is then followed by Rachel Bowers’ and Kevin Booth’s discussion of the decisions necessitated in their curation of English Heritage’s York Cold War bunker in Preserving and Managing York Cold War Bunker:
Authenticity, Curation and the Visitor Experience. This both sets up a counterpoint to Hermann’s argument – with Bowers and Booth presenting an insiders’ account of the emergence of the Cold War as heritage’ discourse, and also their attentiveness to matters of affect and materiality (alongside discourse) within their reflexive analysis of their own experience of presenting this place as a heritage ‘attraction’. In their focus on the physical limits of curation, and the affective potentialities of place (re)making, Bowers and Booth then set the scene for Dutch architect, Arno Geesink, who considers the spatial possibilities and limitations of his proposals to redevelop a Dutch former nuclear shelter into a public events space in The Anomalous Potential of the Atoombunker: Exploring and Repurposing Anthem’s Ruins. Geesink shows how his search for sites for redevelopment is informed by his interest in military history, once more disrupting a simplistic dichotomy of enthusiast vs professional bunker hunters.

In the concluding chapter, Presencing the Bunker: Past, Present and Future pull together the book’s themes and contributions in order to examine the tension between on the one hand the politically-inspired desire to reveal and preserve the bunker as an unmasked cypher of state power, and on the other hand, pressures (and enticements) to re-appropriate bunker-ruins and to move beyond Cold War memorialisation. This enquiry into the question of the bunker’s futurity pits concerns for authenticity and sincerity against the opportunities of plasticity and playfulness, a quandary that appears to affect many contemporary engagements with the ruins of the Cold War bunker.


This is New Uses for Old Bunkers #40.