

# “Fallout”

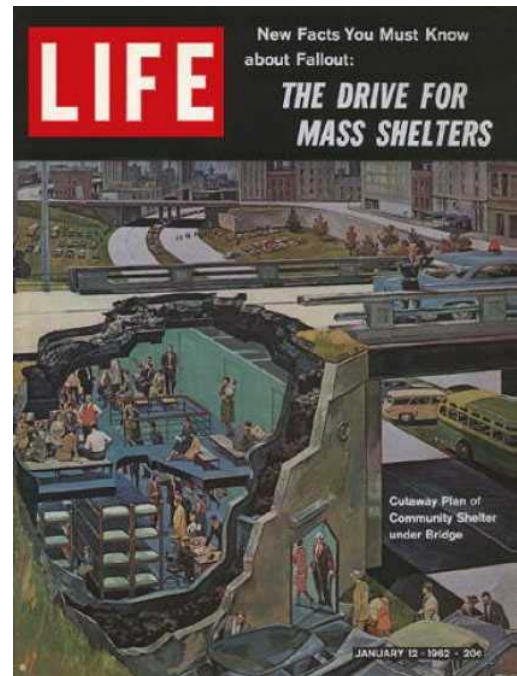
*Southern California families, especially homeowners, are currently pondering the question of their lives: To build or not to build a place to hide from nuclear attack.*

--San Diego Union, August 13, 1961

Global tensions were high in the summer of 1961. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union threatened to become World War III when the Soviets built the Berlin Wall in mid-August and followed up with a series of provocative atomic bomb tests.

Fear of a nuclear attack from the U.S.S.R. prompted a civil defense awakening in the United States. In a letter to the American people, published in the September 15, 1962 issue of *Life*, President John F. Kennedy told Americans that “nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war are facts of life we cannot ignore.” The president’s letter and the government’s start of the Community Fallout Shelter Program launched a home shelter boom throughout the country.

As “shelter mania” gripped San Diego, community leaders wrestled with the question of how to protect a large urban population in the event of a nuclear attack. A plan for mass evacuation to the east county was abandoned when civil defense experts decided that wind patterns could bring radioactive fallout to anywhere in the county from an attack as far north as San Francisco. Instead, the policy would be total reliance on underground protection.



The “dig, don’t run” policy, first identified local government buildings with deep basements that could shelter large numbers of people. The basement of the San Diego Public Library and several other city buildings was stocked with emergency rations and medicine.

Other communities made plans to excavate and build. In Lakeside construction began on a federally-funded shelter below Lakeside Farms Elementary School that would hold over 400 students and their teachers. La Jolla considered a continuous fallout shelter four miles long that would run from Scripps Institution of Oceanography to Bird Rock, with an offshoot tunnel into Muirlands.

Many San Diegans wondered--since most people lived within a potential nuclear blast zone--if nuclear war was survivable in a shelter? Yes, civil defense authorities emphasized. The experts assured the public that nuclear fallout decay was rapid. Exposure above ground would be safe after only two to ten days: “Sheltered, you lived; in the open, you died.”

In late September the city Building Inspection Department began distributing free plans to homeowners for building their own below ground shelters. The single-sheet instructions described two types of fallout protection: a pre-shaped metal shelter made from corrugated metal

pipe, commonly used as culverts in highway construction; and a masonry shelter made of concrete blocks and slabs. The small shelters could be built for as little as \$400.

The city and county of San Diego authorized over 200 building permits for home shelters from mid-summer to late fall. Most were estimated to cost about \$2,000 but some were valued on the permits to cost more than \$5,000.

Many homeowners borrowed to finance the construction. On October 1, the nation's first FHA loan for a building an underground refuge was given to a San Diego school teacher, Rex Hydorn of Mission Village. The \$4,550 loan was for a reinforced concrete shelter, 24 feet wide and fourteen long, to be built in the front yard and covered with three feet of soil below a patio.

Fallout shelters also began appearing at home shows and county fairs. Fox Hole Shelter, Inc. of Reseda advertised a three-piece "Fox Hole" that could be installed in two days. The Atlas Bomb Shelter Company of Sacramento sold a 35-ton prefab refuge for six that sold for \$6,000.

Officials urged caution when shopping for a shelter. Governor Edmund Brown warned Californians to "Beware of the suede shoe salesman. Be sure the shelter he wants to sell you affords all the protection needed during periods of heavy radiation."

Some homeowners were eager to test their survival skills in shelters they had installed. Bud Rosenbloom, a building contractor in East San Diego, built a 10 x 10 underground refuge in his backyard. The *San Diego Union* covered the story when Rosenbloom, his wife Blossom, and three small children descended into their concrete shelter for a two-day test. The family ate dehydrated food, drank distilled water, used a chemical toilet, and slept in bunk beds built in tiers against a wall.

"We could have stayed down there indefinitely," Rosenbloom boasted to a reporter when the family emerged after exactly 48 hours underground. But the first twelve hours were bad, he admitted. "We felt stifled, like we were in a tomb. After that it was alright."

The Rosenbloom experiment revealed other shortcomings to life underground. Boredom was severe. The family had to sleep in shifts so someone could operate a hand-cranked air pump. And cooking on a gas stove turned out to be impossible. The stove fouled the air and turned the confined space into a "sweatbox."



Home fallout shelters also raised a moral question. What would happen if people flocked to a neighbor's private shelter in the event of an attack? Would they be invited in, or be repelled—possibly by force? Concerned civil defense authorities recommended that homeowners not include guns among their survival supplies.

Dr. Harold C. Urey, the Nobel laureate from UC San Diego and one of the developers of the atomic bomb, questioned the value of home shelters in November 1961. They are likely to cause "great dissension in the community," he told a news conference, and

Dr. Harold C. Urey

even government-built shelters would be of “dubious value” in the event of a major attack.

By late fall of 1961 interest in fallout shelters had begun to decline. The easing of the Berlin crisis and other international disputes appeared to lessen fears of global war. Building permits for home shelters fell dramatically. In August 1962—one year after the shelter mania began—rows of pre-cast gunite shelters sat unsold in a lot in Kearny Mesa. The builder told a reporter: “Anyone who wants to move the shelters off the lot can have them.”



This home-built fallout shelter in Akron, Ohio costs \$1000 and featured a 10-inch reinforced concrete roof under a thick blanket of earth. Ca. 1961. *National Archives and Records Administration.*

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