



Attack signs

BY DAVID HAYES

While walking along East 29th Street near Madison Avenue last Christmas, I discovered a faded fallout shelter sign mounted on the brick wall above a freight entrance. Few images better illustrate the Cold War era than these three yellow triangles against a black (or sometimes blue) background. At a time when Russia was thought to have aimed nuclear warheads at North America, an American public, especially those living in the natural targets of New York and Washington, D.C., knew these signs identified a building with a public shelter where people could escape from a nuclear attack.

The program was started in 1961, around the time the Berlin Wall was being built. A Fairfax, Virginia-based graphic design firm came up with the three triangles (rejected at first, over copyright concerns, for being too close to the warning symbol for radiation). The signs were manufactured on aluminum using all-weather paint and glass beads (a technique commonly used for traffic signs). They were meant to be clearly seen at 200 feet and were thought to be durable enough to withstand the fires raging once World War III began. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, two years later, the signs had become ubiquitous in America.

Canada wasn't immune from the fear of nuclear attack in the early '60s. The federal Emergency Measures Organization published a booklet called "11 Steps to Survival." People built basement shelters in their homes—although much like contemporary reaction after 9/11, most doubted anyone would attack our modest nation when a much bigger, juicier target lay just to the south. Proof that the federal government of the day took it seriously, though, can be seen in the Diefenbunker outside Ottawa (today a museum). It is the largest of more than 50 other emergency shelters built across the country at that time.

As a lover of cultural iconography I decided that while in New York I'd photograph as many signs as I could. I found one on a lovely 14-storey, Art Deco-styled apartment building on East 40th Street and one on a brick house on East 21st beside a window in which an American flag hung. There was a handsome artifact on the Cabrini Medical Centre on East 20th and one that was curling off the brick wall of a building at West 57th and 10th Ave. They were also affixed to the Madison Square Post Office and the Cooper Post Office. But it turns out I was an amateur compared to Andrew Gonsalves who, a couple of years ago, compiled a list of nearly 140, posted on his blog, *Don't Feed the Animals*.

By the time the program was winding down in the late '60s, more than a million signs identified public shelters in cities throughout the U.S. The agency responsible for them was dissolved in 1979 and federal officials never set up a formal program to remove them, which explains why so many remain.

The idea that anyone believed even heavily reinforced underground bunkers—let alone the flimsy facilities of public buildings—would protect citizens from a nuclear attack seems truly quixotic. Still, in today's post-9/11 world, there's arguably more reason to be paranoid. While the world has lost the Soviet Union it's gained even more unstable nations possessing nuclear weapons. That's not to mention the threat of accidents at nuclear power plants or the weather disasters capable of crippling them—or even the lingering contamination from the Chernobyl explosion, which released 400 times more radioactive material than the bombing of Hiroshima. With the threat of Iran becoming a nuclear power and in the aftermath of Japan's Fukushima Daiichi crisis, there's something oddly comforting about an age when a simple symbol on reflective signs could reassure a nervous population. 📍