Cold War Graphics
Or, How We Learned to Accept Nuclear Devastation Without Becoming Unduly Alarmed
By Tom Vanderbilt
The final image most of us have of the Cold War is the collapse, stone by stone, of the Berlin Wall. There is, however, an afterimage of the Cold War that endures on the margins of our everyday existence, a discrete icon that lingers on innumerable facades and yet has nonetheless slipped from the societal gaze: the fallout shelter sign. For anyone born before, say, the Reagan administration of the 1980s, the fallout shelter sign is an instantly recognizable marker, if one that is dimmed by age. The black and yellow color scheme has, after decades of weathering, transformed to a kind of charcoal and ochre, but one can still clearly make out the memorable pattern at its center: a circle cut into six triangles, alternating between yellow and black. Or was it three directional arrows pointing downward, toward presumed safety? Or was it three waves of sound, broadcast from a central transmitter?

The fallout shelter symbol is fast becoming a visual relic, a meaningless glyph for the post-Desert Storm generation. But, like any symbol, it did not just materialize; it has its meanings and its history. The fallout shelter sign as we know it first began to appear in early 1961 with the Kennedy administration's National Fallout Shelter Survey; it was affixed to schools, offices, and other buildings that the survey's workers (many of them architectural students) had deemed would provide sufficient protection from atomic attack. As Paul Frame, a researcher at Oak Ridge Associated Universities (in the "atomic city" of Oak Ridge, Tennessee) points out, the Office of Civil Defense had originally intended to merely duplicate the already existing radiation symbol—the three "propellers" coming from a dot-like "atom" in the center—but, he notes, "this idea was rejected because a fallout shelter represents safety whereas the radiation warning symbol represents a hazard." The radiation symbol itself was drafted at the University of California at Berkeley's Radiation Lab in 1946; as Nels Garden, head of the lab's Health Chemistry Group, described it, "A number of people in the group took an interest in suggesting different motifs, and the one arousing the most interest was a design which was supposed to represent activity radiating from an atom." The first Berkeley signs used magenta on blue, but later studies found it was easier to spot magenta on yellow (even though, Garden argued, the signs might be confused with the preponderance of other yellow "caution" symbols), and black on yellow was later adopted as an acceptable substitute.

That the chosen fallout shelter sign should itself refer in an oblique fashion to the radiation symbol—safety and hazard just a graphic shade apart—is a perfect expression of what historian Paul Boyer has called America's "nuclear consciousness"; Nuclear fission, with its perceived promise and peril, was the axis around which American hopes and fears revolved from the 1950s onward. The "rad" warning sign was the dark antithesis to the symbol of the atom itself, which had been blown out to monumental proportions in the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels (the "Atomium," the sculpture was dubbed). The fallout shelter sign was to become the central icon of the ubiquity of the Cold War in America—no longer were battlefields clearly demarcated, far-off zones of hostile engagement; rather, the speculative conflict lurked everywhere where those curious yellow and black signs were posted.

The fallout shelter sign is just one element of a vast array of graphic design that emerged during the Cold War—most of it focused on the depiction of nuclear war and how it could be survived. As part of a larger inquiry into the Cold War, I have over the past year been collecting examples of Cold War graphic design—what might be dubbed "survival graphics"; civil defense booklets, warning posters, advertisements from the military-industrial complex, et al. Largely the work of anonymous committees or unheralded designers, the collection is less noteworthy for its esthetic caliber than for the peculiar stories it has to tell of that era. Of primary consideration is the fact that the graphics of the Cold War, unlike the propaganda efforts of previous wars, are de-
1. Snug family fallout shelter, pictured in an ad for manufacturer Kelsey Hayes Co., is touted in ad copy as a "low cost, assemble-it-yourself" unit that "provides vital protection against nuclear radiation." Harsh color streaks at top symbolize radiation, held at bay by the steel-encased chamber.

2. The ubiquitous fallout shelter sign was the most familiar of the plethora of graphics that focused on nuclear survival throughout the Cold War era.

3. Typical poster of the period issued by the federal government (this one is from 1959) shows a game young couple cheerfully taking instruction from a how-to fallout shelter booklet.

4, 6. In magazine ads, Cold War contractors took pains to remind the public that they weren't neglecting their normal operations. The General Telephone & Electronics ad (4) makes the point by showing a single red "hotline" phone, with its dire Cold War connotations, outnumbered by a platoon of benign black civilian phones. The Western Electric ad (6) lets it be known that, having completed work on the DEW (Distant Early Warning) line, the company's technicians are "returning home again . . . to work on other defense assignments and at our regular Bell System job of producing the things needed to provide Bell telephone service for the nation."

5. Poster issued by the Department of Defense, State of New Jersey. (Yes, Virginia, some states set up their own Departments of Defense.)
scribing a war that has not actually been declared. There are no exhortations to buy war bonds to build tanks, no racist portraits-in-jingoism of barbaric enemies. The emphasis is not on victory, but on survival, which itself is considered victory: One pamphlet advises the reader on “how to survive attack and live for your country’s recovery.” Even the overt military posters refer to a situation not of war, but of stalemate, sentries staring at each other across a no-man’s-land: “Don’t Become a Border Incident,” advises one U.S. poster, warning troops stationed in Germany that they are approaching Czechoslovakia; the black silhouette of a faceless soldier is criss-crossed with barbed-wire.

In the Cold War, the heroic bombast of previous conflicts was replaced with a denuded form of information graphics, a sterile mix of instruction manual and subdued appeals to civic unity (it was no doubt difficult to make arguments for collective mobilization when the government itself had backed away from the idea of community fallout shelters). Information graphics, the system of “symbolic tools” originally designed by Viennese sociologist Otto Neurath, were intended as a pictorial interface to an increasingly complex world. As Neurath argued, “The average citizen should be able to acquire unlimited information on any subject which is of interest to him, just like he can obtain geographic knowledge from maps and atlases.” Information graphics were the perfect medium of expression for the Cold War, which for the average citizen was an exercise in coming to grips with a brave new world of scientific complexity, a daunting cavalcade of roentgens and kilotons, megadeath and overkill. The symbol lording over everything, the totemic absent enemy, was The Bomb itself, or more accurately, the exploded bomb, and a recurring motif of Cold War graphic design is a drawing of a mushroom cloud, with a battery of arrows and pond-ripples emanating outward that are meant to depict the effects of the bomb. Photographs of actual atomic blasts were rarely used, and damage, rather than being shown in realistic terms, is usually depicted through some form of abstract representation. The Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization’s “Facts About Fallout Protection,” for example, shows a green paint-rolled band projecting from the sky down into a cutaway house; in the basement we see two safely huddled stick figures.

The turn toward abstraction was representative of a larger dilemma in civil defense: How could one accurately depict the effect of nuclear weapons without sending the populace into a state of passive paralysis? As the historian Guy Oakes writes in The Imaginary War, “In the absence of civil defense, the public would be gripped by a nuclear terror. But once civil defense had done its work, the public would be even more terrified.” As Oakes notes, “emotion management” was the government’s crucial task in relating nuclear war to the citizenry; Eisenhower described a “knife edge” between generating panic on the one hand and plunging the country into a debilitating acceptance of doom on the other. This dilemma plays itself out graphically in the civil defense literature, which presents a kind of cartoonish dream world, with happy clip-art homeowners (usually a set of parents and a single child) building basement fallout shelters, the black-and-white line drawings punctuated with brisk splashes of color, accompanied by fonts that are sober but not alarmist. A poster advertising a fallout shelter available from the government shows a woman in pedal-pushers and a floral top reading instructions to her spouse, who is in the process of bricking himself into a fallout shelter; the mood is rather upbeat, with the visual jumbling of the word “fallout” the only hint of any danger. The Federal Civil Defense Administration’s pamphlet “Four Wheels to Survival,” which describes how one’s car can provide temporary shelter during an atomic attack, is another prime example of the government’s surreally restrained depiction of nuclear war. Where the actual picture of a mass evacuation from an urban center during an atomic attack would have been something on the order of Godard’s Weekend—an infinite pile-up of cars, with wreckage and dying bodies along the way—“Four Wheels” shows a family of three riding cheerily in a whimsically rendered Volkswagen knockoff. Their path to safety is marked by a bold arrow that begins from the city they left behind, over which one can make out a few thin lines that are presumably Soviet bombers.

Another method for heightening the palatability of civil defense was to naturalize the bomb as a force not unlike other calamities from which one might have to seek “protection”—tor-
8. Arrow points to the fallout shelter at the White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, the Army's desert testing ground for rockets and guided missiles.

9. On this page is an array of federal, state, and manufacturersponsored publications, all with one purpose: to assure citizens that surviving a nuclear attack was possible.
nadoes, floods, etc. This echoed a trend in architectural discussions of building “against the atom.” As Architectural Forum noted in 1961, “Atomic radiation is a new building design element to be taken into account with wind, weather, and sanitation.” The cover of the 1977 Defense Civil Preparedness Agency’s “Protection in the Nuclear Age,” with its yellow “sun” burned into an orange cover, subtly hints at this naturalization, suggesting that the radiation of a nuclear weapon stands at the extreme of a spectrum of everyday radiation to which we are all routinely exposed. A number of civil defense publications, which show “cutaway” views of shelter occupants safely shielded from atomic attack, rather ironically reference the X-ray, another form of radiation that often stood as a benchmark for comparing the radiation one would be exposed to in a nuclear attack.

The overriding motif of Cold War graphic design was giving shape to those things which could not be seen, or had not yet happened: the invisible atom, the sine-wave-like drawings of warning signals blasted from air-raid sirens or beamed via CONELRAD (or the later Emergency Broadcast System), the geographic overlays of expected bomb damage superimposed on maps. Cold War iconography was also adapted in the advertisements of Cold War contractors, which usually linked their defense work with the “ordinary” service they provided to American consumers. An ad for General Telephone and Electronics shows the familiar red “hotline” positioned among a sea of black phones, with a missile blasting off behind; the underlying message is articulated in the ad text: “It is expressive of the way General Telephone & Electronics strives to serve the nation through advanced communications—not only for defense, but for homes and industries as well.” One ad, in a particularly colossal episode of bad taste, even toys with the idea of depicting an atomic holocaust, showing a ruined city, a blackened wasteland of Bosphian proportions: “Atom bomb?” reads the headline. “No... just lack of paint.” Nuclear war was rarely referred to, of course—save for the cover of pulp atomic novels like The Rest Must Die and Dark December (“The Atomic War had ended. Were we the last two people on earth who hadn’t reverted to savagery and animal violence?”), and most ads for the likes of Western Electric and General Dynamics strive to highlight those companies’ services to the civilian sphere, thus perhaps deflecting thoughts of bloated military-industrial contractors.

There is one other enduring symbol of the Cold War: the “Doomsday Clock” of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. The clock, originally bright orange and set at seven minutes to midnight—the time of nuclear catastrophe—appeared on the inaugural issue of the magazine in 1947, designed by Martyl, a one-name artist who chose the seven-minute mark because it was “good design.” The clock, which has fluctuated throughout the years, currently hovers around ten minutes until the hour. It reminds us that the nuclear peril has not vanished, though it has slipped from consciousness, like faded fallout shelter signs and tidy schemes of survival.

Tom Vanderhilt is a contributing editor of I.D. magazine, and the author of Survival City: Adventures in the Ruins of Atomic America, to be published later this year by Princeton Architectural Press.
Atom bomb? No...just lack of paint!

Does that sound fantastic?

It isn't! Without products of the paint and finish industry, every other industry in the country would have to shut down or find prohibitively priced substitutes. Buildings would disintegrate...coated cans could not be provided for food preservation...lack of certain insulations for cables and motors would strangle transportation and communications...America's commerce and industry would grind to a creaky stop!

Almost everything wears better, lasts longer, and looks more attractive because of the protective coatings perfected by the scientists in America's paint and finish laboratories.

Thousands of super-protective finishes protect everything from kitchen utensils to mammoth bridges from wear and abuse. Because the finish has so much to do with the life of your possessions, it's wise to remember: At the start, consider the finish!

How About Household Paints? Remarkable developments in product finishes are matched by recent improvements in paints!

New paints, varnishes and enamels—products of hundreds of the industry's laboratories—never better, dry quicker, keep cleaner, and stay beautiful longer than ever before.

With replacement costs of your belongings so high, these magnificent new paints emphasize that it always costs more not to paint!

National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association, Inc., Washington, D.C.

Save the surface and you save all!