Abstract
In this paper I study bomb shelters as places of protection and as common dwelling places. The bomb shelter in a residential building or block of flats is a collective good, which often has other uses other than those it was planned and built for (Kopomaa, 2010; research is based on interviewing experts \([N=5]\) and local inhabitants \([N=18]\)). Typically, shelters function as store closets and this ‘recycled use’ allows this space to be used to store items for outdoor activities, yard care, civil defence, but also forgotten junk. Occasionally the shelter rooms have also been used for hobbies and as gathering places. The shelters located in cellars are always near the inhabitants. Often these premises are the most extensive common indoor facilities for the inhabitants of high-rise buildings.

In the suburb – case study in Maunula

Based on forethought, in cases of disaster or accident, it is possible to find protection in a house or to move into a bomb shelter. The shelter should give safety not only against radiation, but also against gas weaponry and more conventional weapons. For example, when in danger of radiation people can find shelter by staying in place, inside the building; by getting into the shelter in the cellar of the house; or by leaving the area in danger. Finland started building bomb shelters systematically after World War II in the mid 1950s (Väestönsuojelusäätiö, 1977); the obligation to construct bomb shelters only concerned new buildings. The principle has been that building developers also have to take care of the costs of building shelters as the Finnish state does not have a budget for this. Lately other Scandinavian countries have radically cut down their construction of bomb shelters, because they have assessed that the threat of military attacks has decreased, and that the contemporary amount of shelters is adequate.

The first aim is to protect urban inhabitants, where they are and live, in the cities. The use of precision-guided bombs and missiles motivates the necessity of civil shelters on one hand, and mass evacuations from densely populated areas on the other. Shelter rooms are physically near
the inhabitants of a block of flats, but people are still not familiar with their presence. Often the
everyday use of the shelters is limited, despite the fact that more intensive usage would make
these shelters better known to the inhabitants. These days, worries concerning personal safety
and the need for surveillance technologies direct the neighbourhood’s interest mostly to
increasing local control. The suburbs and the blocks could form units of protection and survival
(Kopomaa, 2008). The natural social networks, the family and neighbourhood activists could
have a major role in urban crisis situations, in states of emergency and after a social shock.
Indeed the authorities and researchers of rescue services have identified this as a fact.

In Finland there is shelter for 3.5 million people (as of 2006) or about one square metre per
person. There are both public and house-related bomb shelters in the suburbs built after World
War II. The suburban shelters of high-rise buildings and their images are based on the ideals –
progress, order and optimism – of modern rational architecture. The shelters were also a kind of
life insurance for the safety of the population and for a small unaffiliated country, such as
Finland. The civil shelters in Helsinki can house half a million people. This is a calculated top
figure worldwide (Knuuttila, 1990). The background idea is that a country’s strength is
dependent on its organised total energy, represented by the size of its population. In a similar
way, the aim is to limit and prevent possible human suffering.

During the period when the suburbs were constructed most of the national bomb shelters were
built. The top years were 1963–1982, when on average 85,000 shelter places were built
annually (Väestönsuojeluaosto, 2009). This was also the period when most of the Finnish
suburbs were built. From the gas defence and from the protection of the industrial buildings in
1920s and 1930s, the civil defence has been extended to cover the defence of population centres
(Väestönsuojelusäätiö, 1977).

In this research we ask, how the ‘private’ bomb shelters are used and how ‘normal’ everyday
uses of the shelters could be developed. The case study was undertaken in Maunula during the
summer of 2009. Maunula, located in the north of Helsinki, is an interesting subject to study,
because the suburb includes the short history of shelters, how they were designed and equipped.
Secondly it was obvious that the houses built between the 1950s and 1960s, in particular,
offered the best possibilities to enlarge the use repertory of shelter space compared to the
houses constructed in later years, when the civil shelter rooms were sectioned into basement
cages, where inhabitants could store their private things, extra furniture, winter tyres etc., thus
utilising the space. One-quarter of the apartment houses in Maunula did not have their own
shelter rooms; the idea has been that local people were potential users of the nearby located,
greater public underground civil shelter.
A short inquiry was made for the representatives of local apartment houses in the Maunula suburb. Almost half of the people answered, a total of 18 people, including chairpersons, members of the board or administrators of the apartment houses. They were reached by telephone or via email. Some observations were also made in Maunula and in neighbouring areas. Additionally, four emergency service experts were interviewed in Helsinki and one in Kuopio.

Half of the representatives of the apartment houses who took part in the inquiry believed that the shelter rooms could be developed, and the other half thought the opposite. Some of them felt that the shelters were already at maximum use. However, the main function of the shelters, as places of protection, seemed to legitimate the light utilisation rate of the space. The shelter rooms should be turned into an empty space in 24 hours according to the general rescue plan. The usability of the shelters in a case of emergency was the reason for not having more user-friendly sub-basement space for the inhabitants.

The use rate – or ‘filling rate’ – was evaluated to be around 75%. The shelters were largely in use of benefit. Examples of the residents’ own casual activity were the two annual general meetings and the meetings of the administrative board of the apartment house. The inhabitants can always plan and decide about all the ‘normal time’ uses of the shelter rooms.

Considerations

When we are shaping the material world, products and environments, we are also shaping users (Lehtonen, 2008). Artefacts like civil shelters stabilise practices and intertwine us into a certain kind of existence through the invested expenses. Space creates continuity between the past and the present. How is the nature or the identity of the shelters formed? This seems to be very inappropriate and controversial. At least the past is clearly there. We might hear about the disquieting question, would tomorrow be more stable than yesterday? The space is entangled with the story of the past and with the near history of our nation.

Geographers have linked concepts like stagnation, nostalgia, and safety, as protection against the outside world to the definitions of a place (Massey, 2008). These concepts seem to describe in general the atmosphere of the private civil shelter of the apartment house. Discussions about the future of the shelters reflect the competition about the identity of the shelters, and the questions in which way, by whom, and how the identity of the shelters should be redefined.
The protection of city inhabitants has its urban background history and tradition of civil defence, which has its roots in air defence and in the experiences of wartime air raids on city centres. After the Second World War these experiences were exported, developed and turned into standards of civil defence in the newly built suburbs. The shelters stressed a message to the outside world that the nation and its citizens were prepared in case of military intervention. In terms of improving the competitiveness and the image of the suburbs as popular living places, it is significant that these areas are felt to be cosy and safe – also in the case of an imaginary or potential emergency.

The spaces of shelter are silently present in the everyday life of the residents and at the same time they suggest the possibility of sweeping hazard, something that we should be afraid of. Building civil defence and preparing for potential threats and understanding it as a development project requiring economic investments has in fact been largely ignored in many housing corporations. In general, the public attitude toward the bomb shelters in recent years has been mainly passive and not a topic of discussion. Lately there has been some public debate on them revolving around two opposing points of view (Lassila & Tikanoja Oyj, 2008; Suomen kiinteistöliitto, 2008): criticism of the necessity to provide bomb shelters at all on the one side, and the demand to keep the shelters in operation and the facilities updated on the other. These pieces of real estate have had a double function: they have worked as places to store things and potentially operated as shelters for civilians. The interest of the society has focused on the role of the bomb shelters as a means to decrease the effects of potential emergencies.

The mode of housing defines the need for shelter. The residents are treated unequally in terms of their possibilities to seek their way to the bomb shelter in a case of emergency. The residents of one-family houses take care of preparing for themselves. The people of detached houses, for example, have no building regulation to provide bomb shelters in their houses.

Development & regeneration

During World War II and immediately after the war, landscaping signified in urban planning, from the air defence point of view, preferred irregular building and the protective effect of nature. Today landscaping could be related to the aesthetification of shelter rooms. The challenge here is that these basement rooms are often quite small and low. According to the forthcoming Rescue Act the spaciousness of the shelters could be more economical, when the smaller apartment house building projects are not expected to include shelters at all. The everyday use – which is in this case something other than the civil defence shelter use – would be easier in a more spacious place in time of peace.
In discussions about the creative class it has been noticed that people prefer individuality, self-expression, and tolerance towards diversity (Florida, 2005). At the same time there have been observations about the need for new premises in the interests of creative people. It is believed that the members of the creative class search for exhilarating areas and places. These environments open up possibilities and facilities, but also variety, where people can express themselves and strengthen their identity. Environments, which have been stigmatised as marginal, and which are seen as grotesque and shabby have in some cases developed into cosy places. Industrial and office spaces were turned into loft-apartments. Rough, but commodious and large, flexible, revitalising space solutions have pleased members of the younger, urban generation and are in this way lucrative. Therefore, aesthetically unsophisticated shelter space could also be treated and used in that way.

Do inhabitants nowadays get only visions of danger and fear, while they finance the building and maintenance of the shelter rooms? The fact is that inhabitants do not perceive their apartment house shelters as collective space which could be actively used. In particular the ‘empty uses’ of shelters stop us debating locally and more generally in urban policy about the new and more efficient uses of the existing spaces. The licence applications for building could contain tentative plans for ways and potentials for using the shelters during peacetime. Temporary uses of the shelters should be identified, and the preliminary categories of the uses could be the following: temporary use in standing situation, temporary use becoming permanent, and temporary use which establishes itself as permanent (Lehtovuori, Hentilä & Bengs, 2003).

With energetic creativity and planning for the near future the bomb shelters could be interpreted as a kind of loft-space of the suburbs, unfinished, but flexibly implemented for common extended living space. If, or when there are plans to design the shelter rooms, there should also be directions for reclaiming the space for peacetime use. The everyday use of the shelters should be one consideration in renovation plans of the building. When the shelters have been turned into cosy interiors they can offer a space of possibilities based on the ideas of social life of urban villagers (Kopomaa, 2010; Lähteenoksa, 2008): there could be cultural or artistic activities, collective semi-private spaces, for example, for writing or meditation. The responsible persons to take care and to develop the shelters of the apartment houses would ideally be civil defence supervisors, who voluntarily work in their own apartment houses. There has been a certain kind of idea in recent urban planning to create enlivening spaces where a more relaxing and ‘slow’ way of life is supported (Kopomaa, 2008). This orientation could influence those who have an interest to develop the apartment house shelters.
The shelter of the apartment house reserved for collective action could be ‘participation space’, ‘cosyfication room’, ‘cultural hatchery’ or ‘container’. We can also name four different strategies for developing the suburbs. These are strategies for:

1) **new housing suburb**;
2) **retro-suburb**;
3) **cosyfied suburban neighbourhood**; and
4) **defended suburban district**.

Each of these can be associated with a different kind of view about the use, maintenance and equipment of the bomb shelters.

If the shelter rooms are not built anymore, the saved expanses could be used, for example, to support the local identity through public environmental art projects or accessibility for disabled people. Secondly, the existing shelters could be left in condition as they were built. Thirdly, the civil shelters of the private apartment houses could be developed for more communal and active living than what is conventional. Fourthly, defence and safety are the main ‘drivers’ for investing in the area, and cultivating the local civil shelters against the identified dangers and threats.

Generally speaking there is a need to empathise, not only with the technical solutions but also to understand more about the culture of defence and the consequences and ways of preparing for risks, even in situations where the future is unknown and the forthcoming scenarios are hard to foresee and manage.

References


