

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

Air-raid shelters in Barcelona, *the legacy of underground resistance*

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From 30 March to 30 July, galleries 3 and 4 in the former La Model prison played host to the photography exhibition . It is the product of a research study that made it possible to portray, for the first time from an artistic perspective, forty of the shelters listed during the Spanish Civil War in the Catalan capital. If the damaged buildings and scars of the last war that the city lived through still remain visible above ground in Barcelona, an extraordinary testament to solidarity and resistance survives today below ground, which has been documented by the photographer Ana Sánchez and the historian Xavier Domènech.

The systematic bombing of Barcelona made the rearguard a battlefield for the first time and it became a testing ground on the brink of the Second World War. But while the city was offered to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as a site for experimenting with the technology of destruction, its citizens took centre stage in a remarkable show of collective resistance: the construction of a pioneering underground defence network for the whole city. The 1,322 listed shelters comprise a civic, historical and architectural heritage that is unique in Europe, although in the city's imaginary it is still vague and kept quiet, with piecemeal and deliberately blurred documentation in the collective memory.

In this context, photography is a tool to bring them into the present, a way of rekindling the light beneath the ground. Today, these spaces retain an astonishing beauty that exudes the full power of the past. The photographs capture this strength with a distinct Baroque light, warm and defined, and with a temperature akin to that of incandescence. The lighting is low-key, which is respectful of the chiaroscuro and half-lights and shows a clear orientation, to generate volume and depth through contrast. These images also show the



1. Factory 14 shelter © Ana Sánchez

lives that have been lived for eight decades in the subterranean darkness: while the twisted and rusted cables betray the mark of time, life continues to burst forth today from roots in the rubble. A life that resists the relentless urban transformation of the above ground, seeping into underground Barcelona through the slabs of concrete that sealed off some of its galleries.

Of the more than four hundred spaces researched by the exhibition curators, the exhibition features a selection that illustrates their different types and their adaptation to the places where people lived and worked: communal, private and factory shelters, collectivised and institutional work spaces and those for political leaders. Many of these shelters have been shown for the first time, such as the shelter at the headquarters of the Junta de Defensa Pasiva (Passive Defence Board), located on Passeig de Gràcia, the Escola Popular de Guerra (People's War School) shelter, found in the Escola Pia de Sarrià, and the Damm factory shelter. As a whole, the display of 170 photographs reveals a city beneath the city that is still riddled with holes in the present, and helps to (re)discover another memory of Barcelona in times of war.



2. Casas factory shelter © Ana Sánchez

Communal shelters: the “Barcelona model”

Communal shelters, created at the initiative of the citizenry under the watchful eye of the institutions, are the most numerous. Women, older men and children took part in the construction of spaces intended as libraries, public washrooms and centres for future cultural affairs. This model of passive defence was christened in London as the “Barcelona model” and was advocated by the most progressive sectors in an intense political debate in the run-up to the Blitz, which ended with the victory of the conservative movement and a commitment to private shelters. The exhibition has included eighteen examples, among them the air-raid shelters in Plaça Tetuán, the Hospital Sant Pau, the squares of Plaça de la Revolució and Plaça del Diamant in the Gràcia neighbourhood and Refugi 307, the latter two of which can be visited.

Factories, collectivisations and shelters

When the coup d'état failed in Barcelona, the city's economy saw a major transformation. On the initiative of the workers, a widespread movement was launched to collectivise large and medium-sized enterprises, which were taken over by the workers. Moreover, Catalan institutions, by creating the Comitè d'Indústries de Guerra (War Industries Commission) in August 1936, encouraged the



3. Shelter in the square Plaça Tetuán, mirror © Ana Sánchez

conversion of almost half a thousand factories into production centres to ensure war material supplies. The shelters built in the Elizalde factory, the Damm factory and the F-14 (one of the Republican Government's foremost weapons centres, located in the Escola dels Salesians in Sarrià) are just some of the industrial hiding places and caches in this section of the exhibition.

Home shelters

The experience of bombing in the midst of a war that lasted three years became a horrific everyday experience. City life coincided with times of horror, and shelters also became day-to-day living quarters for children and adults. In some cases, they even made their way into the home with the construction of private shelters. Obviously, this could only be afforded by those who had the resources to build a shelter in their own home. These ones are the most unknown, as they do not appear in any census and are often completely forgotten, even in family histories.

Institutionalism and life

As of October 1937, Barcelona was the capital of the Spanish Republic and the Catalan, Basque and State governments lived there until the end of the Civil War. The shelters assigned to the personal protection of political leaders such as Lluís Companys, under



4. Shelter on the street Carrer Toledo © Ana Sánchez

the Palau de les Heures, or Juan Negrín, in the garden of the Pedralbes estate lent to the head of the government of the Second Republic by the Roviralta family, demonstrate the efforts made to maintain institutional life amidst the bombs. This section includes the bunker located under the house of Doctor Andreu on Avinguda Tibidabo, an initiative of the Soviet consul Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko (one of the heroes of the October Revolution), the Generalitat Government of Catalonia's shelter and the Escola Popular de Guerra (People's War School) shelter, in the building of the school Escoles Pies de Sarrià.

Spaces used as shelters

Stations on the underground network or the Sarrià urban and suburban train station were used as shelters. These underground facilities were estimated to be able to hold 200,000 or 300,000 people, i.e. 30% of the population of a city with a population of one million at the time. While initially undeniably of great use, they would prove to be insufficient, and the image associated with the bomb shelters in Barcelona, unlike that which has remained of the underground in cities such as London, would be the large-scale construction of shelters.

The exhibition at La Model also included some fifty objects found in the archaeological work carried out in different shelters, which provide an insight into life amidst the bombs.



5. Shelter in the passage Passatge Simó © Ana Sánchez

International Conference: Shelters. Citizens, Memory and Subsoil in Europe

On 16 and 17 March, coinciding with the 85th anniversary of the March 1938 bombing of the Catalan capital, the international conference *Shelters. Citizens, Memory and Subsoil in Europe*, organised by Barcelona City Council and the UB Solidarity Foundation's European Observatory on Memories (EUROM), explored the Catalan experience in relation to that of other European capitals during the Second World War. The historian Keith Lowe, a renowned Second World War expert, the Frenchman Gilles Thomas, an expert on the subsoil of Paris, and the archaeologists Gabriel Moshenska and Carme Miró were among the roughly twenty experts and civil society representatives who analysed the memorialisation of these spaces, their current uses and the narratives that shape their memory today.

Exhibition catalogue

1.322: *Una mirada fotogràfica als refugis antiaeris de Barcelona* [1,322: A Photographic Overview of Barcelona's Air-Raid Shelters]. Barcelona City Council, 2023