

Aurora's 'Diefenbunker' featured in Doors Open Aurora



Featured in Doors Open Aurora is one of the most interesting of the sites of the tour, known as the Aurora Readiness Centre or Aurora's 'Diefenbunker'.

Outwardly, its appearance is of a 19th century brick farmhouse. The only indicator that something different lies within is the concrete upper section of an exit shaft in the side garden. It leads below to a remarkable time capsule of Canada's response to the threat of nuclear war in the early 1960s.

Popularly known as 'Aurora's Diefenbunker', the site was the Metropolitan Toronto Emergency Preparedness Centre and Police Readiness Centre, which was intended to be used at a time of National Crisis.

The late 1950s and early 1960s was the height of the Cold War. With the bombing of the Second World War political tensions and the threat of a nuclear attack seemed very real. Following the successful implementation of an underground shelter by the British government, the Canadian government built an underground shelter at Carp, near Ottawa in 1959, to house the Prime Minister and up-to 300 top officials of the Federal government and the military for 30 days in the event of a nuclear war.

The Ontario Provincial Government of the day created a similar structure located at Camp Borden.

In 1962, the Metro Toronto government decided to create a nuclear control centre just north of Toronto, in Aurora, at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Aurora was chosen primarily for its location at a safe distance from the projected epicentre of any nuclear bomb in Toronto as well as its proximity above the Oak Ridges Moraine.

One theory is that perhaps the blast from a nuclear attack on Toronto would be deflected away from Aurora by the natural feature, which would spare the community from the worst effects of atomic weapons.

Another primary reason for selection of this particular location was that the main evacuation area for Toronto residents was also in the north, and a primary route to the north was Yonge Street. Aurora, with Yonge Street running through the centre of Town, was perfectly situated to be the coordination centre for any such evacuation effort.

A site was purchased for \$31,000 at the north end of Old Yonge Street containing a century old farmhouse. The vendor incidentally

was Jack Caplan, father-in-law of Elinor Caplan (MP and MPP) and grandfather of David Caplan (MPP).

Unlike those at Carp and Borden, the Metro Toronto Shelter was not intended to house people for long periods; it was to serve as a Control Centre where Metro politicians and emergency services staff would gather to coordinate the municipal response to the crisis. It was understood that accommodation for the officials would be provided at nearby St. Andrew's College.

In an early example of Adaptive Reuse, the control Centre complete with concrete bomb shelter was built beneath the existing 100-year old farmhouse and extending under the side garden. The focal point was the operations room (10.6 x 18.3 metres in area), which was installed with illuminated maps and charts documenting the status of the crisis. Alongside the huge map of the Toronto area, hand drawn by Capt. Letson, Sgt. Grigsby and Sgt. Freeland, in January 1962, are ominous charts where lists of 'Casualties' 'Dead, Rescuable and Wounded' were to be recorded for each sector of the region. Another chart identifies Radiation data and estimated 'dose rates.'

Elsewhere in the shelter is the telephone call centre from which commands would be sent out to those still alive in the city, if indeed there still was a city to control.

There is an Emergency Water Supply, and numerous other charts documenting equipment, police and fire station, food, and water supplies to be used in bringing order back to a devastated Toronto. Evidence found near the water supply area, suggests that Metropolitan Toronto secured American assistance and expertise when constructing the shelter. Scratched into wet concrete are the names 'G. Van Beek B. Hilary, USMC, Jan 10, 1963.'

Other than use as a training centre by the Toronto Emergency Task force and a secure Police Readiness centre, the site was fortunately never used for its primary intended purpose.

By 1977 as cold-war tensions eased and the power of modern day weapons made the shelter increasingly obsolete, Metro-politicians began to wonder why they were still paying \$25,000 to maintain the Aurora property and suggested that it should be sold.

Duncan McPherson, Toronto Star, editorial cartoonist of the day spoofed the debate with a cartoon illustrating cheering Soviets stating 'Comrade Chairman' 'North America is Destroyed' 'Except for Two Voices' 'Monitored as Crombie and Godfrey Phoning Out for Pizza.'

Police officials successfully argued that the site was still needed, and Metro Toronto continued to maintain the site through the end of the Cold War.

By the early 1990s, however, it was clear that its days were numbered and in 1992 the property was put up for sale.

This unique site was finally purchased in 1996 by its current owners, Mr. and Mrs. Brodbeck, who found most of its Cold War era contents still in place.

The Brodbecks restored the above ground sections of Victorian farmhouse to its 19th century appearance and have made it an attractive family home. Fortunately, they have a strong awareness of the uniqueness and significance of the cold war era of this property and have striven to ensure that the fixtures from this period remain intact.

A visit to the shelter today is like a step back in time to a different era when Canadians believed that nuclear war was a very imminent threat.

Doors Open Aurora organizers are extremely pleased that Mr. and Mrs. Brodbeck have offered to open the doors of the Aurora Readiness Centre for Doors Open Aurora on Saturday, August 15.

Please note that only the Emergency Control Room will be open to the public on that day.

Don't forget to take a tour through this unique gem in Aurora and experience a part of history!