

Underground art in Tito's bunker

Fearing nuclear attack, Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito built an enormous secret bunker in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now it's an unusually eerie art gallery

🕒 Sun, May 17, 2015, 10:30 | Updated: Sun, May 17, 2015, 10:34

Jessica de Korte

Tito's bunker: artists have taken over the secret facility; fitted out by the late 1970s, it includes telex machines and conference rooms watched over by portraits of the president; you reach the bunker through an unassuming house

Effi Weiss wanders through seemingly endless subterranean passages, now and then drifting into one of the numerous rooms of the secret bunker that Josip Broz Tito ordered to be built when he was president of Yugoslavia. "The first time I visited this place I thought it was huge," she says, "but it is getting smaller and smaller."

Weiss, an artist, was captivated by its atmosphere. "It creates an emotional effect even before one gives it conscious consideration, a bit like when entering a cathedral – the power of the monumental."

Visitors venture into a self-sufficient underworld, having entered through an unassuming white house facing the turquoise River Bijela and a thick green forest. Finches sing in the trees outside, which are blooming again after the Bosnian war of the 1990s. The sun shines warmly.

Konjic, a nearby village 50km southwest of Sarajevo, is surrounded by the snow-capped Dinaric Alps. Over the past 10 years old stones have been restored to their original positions, and a picturesque bridge glows as it might have in the days of the Ottoman Empire.

Catholic, Orthodox and mosque spires share the skyline, and their once-divided followers live in the streets below. Only the cemetery is a reminder of the conflict between the Croats and Serbs after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The tunnels of the bunker go almost 300m beneath the earth. The air is odourless; the ventilator's bass tone reverberates through the body. Ethereal choir music accompanies your entrance into the first and largest passage, but a sudden boom reveals that this is not a magical place.

"There is a world trend of turning military and other large-scale buildings into art institutions, Weiss says, "but what my husband, Amir, and I like about this project is that it does not aim to erase the original identity of the place. It is a sort of coexistence between history and art."

€4 billion bunker

Tito lived in fear of a nuclear attack. He had the 600sq m bunker built immediately after his nomination; it cost the equivalent of €4 billion. He never set foot in the complex, which was not finished until 1979, a year before his death.

"It is astonishing what has happened in our past," says Helidon Gjergji, an Albanian artist who is based in New York. "The intention was that Tito, his soldiers and politicians would live between these thick walls, totally enclosed, for six months. It is a different world now. Atomic wars have become a source of inspiration for video games."

It is no coincidence that most participating artists have left their native country. Weiss comes

from Israel but moved to Brussels 10 years ago. Elvedin Klacar fled from Sarajevo to Austria in 1992. Damian and Delaine Le Bas, who are British, have Roma Gypsy heritage.

“For me the bunker stands for authority,” Klacar says. “It is an object of fear. You cannot touch it from the outside, and it is fabric on the inside. After four days of working on my art project I started to get headaches.”

The complex can drain your energy. After two hours you might start to feel dizzy; being in the bunker feels a bit like being on a long flight on a windowless plane.

Art objects have spun a web through the bunker, telling stories about the dark side of humankind or warning you about misplaced fear. Sometimes there is a lighter message, a smell of herbs or music from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.

Art gallery

Edo Hozic and other artists from Sarajevo proposed transforming the bunker into an art gallery in 2007. It was still a military institution, but the army had no use for it.

Hozic created the project *Biennial of Contemporary Art, D-o Ark Underground*. During the first exhibitions, in 2011 and 2013, 80 artworks from 68 artists and 28 countries appeared. The current, third edition contributes installations from another 29 artists.

“Striking and novel” images are more likely to be remembered, Effi Weiss explains in a powerful 16-minute video that was recorded in the bunker. It could refer to wars or to the exhibits, which make the experience below even more intense.

Helidon Gjergji attached video-game titles to mirrors. Damian Le Bas drew maps of a fictitious “Roma Gypsy empire”. “Borders are abstract and always change,” he says. “In war, leaders do not consider the aspects of humanity.”

Seemingly infinite corridors lead past living and work spaces that were installed with the latest technical innovation, such as Siemens telex machines.

The bunker served as a command unit as well as a shelter. Strategies would have been discussed in the huge conference rooms, with their yellow theatre-style seats, Tito sternly watching from the portraits on the wall, a true communist leader, showing his power.

Stairs lead to what would have been the rooms of Tito and his officials, fitted out with oak furniture.

“The bunker, with an imagined future, has been frozen in time,” Weiss says. “Equipped and furnished by the end of the 70s and never touched since. It is like a time capsule.” She points out the enormous ventilators and oil containers. Everything was ready for use, from the fire extinguishers to the red telephones.

It is an overwhelming place. Only a cheery Macedonian woman drops out early during the tour. If claustrophobia gets the better of you, this is not the place to be.

Tito's bunker is still a military installation, so if you want to visit the exhibition – D-o Ark Underground runs until October 26th – you must request permission in advance. Elmir Prevljak and Goga Saric of Herzegovina Lodges can arrange this; email elgo@herzegovina-lodges.com or see herzegovina-lodges.com and bijenale.ba

Stay in touch with culture that matters. [Subscribe.](#)

MORE FROM THE IRISH TIMES

Film

Rosamund Pike: from Bond girl to Gone Girl to leading woman

Food & Drink

Seaweed: the next big step for Irish food and farming?

Interiors

Home Front: Design, awards, people and events

Fine Art & Antiques

Lavery's breezy golf scene among Irish art for sale in London

SPONSORED

Let's talk about fertility

Designing the F-Pace: the story of Jaguar's best-seller

HR managers need a simplified approach to pensions

World-first tech restores mains electricity to Aran Islands

SUBSCRIBE NOW