

COLD WAR

What becomes of artifacts and structures such as Vietnam-era inflatable, transportable, fully-equipped hospitals, empty Titan Missile silos, or rusty old Quonset huts?

BY AMANDA KINGSBURY

Leftovers



PHOTOS COURTESY JANNELLE WARREN-FINDLEY PH.D.



Everything must go.
Top: White Alice radar site, Alaska.
Middle: Vietnam-era MUST Hospital.
Bottom: Ordnance bunkers,
RAF Mildenhall, England.



Jannelle Warren-Findley remembers one particular photograph quite well. In the photo, taken near a Berlin suburb two years ago, she stands in front of a vacant lot. Co-workers who saw the picture were perplexed by its blandness. But that was exactly the point. † The Berlin Wall weaved through the lot before it was torn down in 1989, signifying the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War. Yet the drab area, with its sparse vegetation, looked just like any empty lot. † “Without the wall, the whole context of the site was lost,” says Warren-Findley, an ASU associate professor of history. “Here I am in front of a blank space.

Is this a historic place or not? In the case of the wall, like so much else of the Cold War stuff, if you lose your context, you lose your history, too. † “And, to paraphrase, those who lose the history of the built environment are doomed to rebuild it.”

Warren-Findley is a 20th century Americanist. She went to Berlin to document America’s Cold War history. The ASU scholar was part of a team that traveled to military sites in the United States and overseas to inventory Cold War property and discuss preservation options. Stops included Japan, Okinawa, Alaska, Scotland, Hawaii, Korea, England, and Germany.

The study was funded by Congress. It was part of the Department of Defense Legacy Resources Management Project. The purpose was to identify and record Cold War cultural resources so future histories could be written. It was the first time a government agency planned to preserve contemporary history, Warren-Findley explains.

“We were being proactive, not just waiting until we had to decide in 24 hours whether something was significant because the bulldozers were waiting to knock it down,” she says.



The task area looked specifically at buildings and artifacts. The National Register only accepts buildings 50 years and older, unless they're of exceptional significance. Most Cold War buildings and artifacts had not yet hit the half-century mark, so they were being destroyed, with little thought given to their historical importance.

"History, as most of us think of it, tends to be historic brick houses from the 1870s," Warren-Findley says. "It's not an inflatable hospital that was invented for the Vietnam War."

Some historians read old documents; Warren-Findley reads landscapes, looking for clues that recount their pasts. Sometimes it's right there on the page, in black and white.

For example, at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, an abrupt change in architecture from American garden-style apartments to German-style housing told her the defense department decided at some point to hire a local architect.

Other times historians must read between the lines. Old tanks mix with high-tech warfare at Wyoming's F. E. Warren Air Force Base, built in the 1870s as an army fort. A six-lane highway leads to the historic wrought-iron gate, then narrows to an old two-lane road.

"It's as if the 19th and 20th centuries just come up and smack each other in the face at that gate," Warren-Findley says. "It's just weird, and quite wonderful. If you learn how to read a landscape, you can see things like that that just really leave you breathless."

Warren-Findley spent two to three weeks at each site, examining buildings and artifacts to trace the various histories—social, political, technological, architectural, and military—that grew out of the Cold War. She took photographs and interviewed people who lived and worked there. The historian also looked at things like offices, housing, theaters, weapons, and equipment. She asked questions such as: What was the building or object used for? How did it change over time?

"The story is interesting as much for the changes that happen as it is for answers such as: Yes—this started in 1960 because of the Cuban Missile Crisis and ended in 1973 because the technology changed. There's a story between 1960 and 1973 that may also be significant," she says. "History is all about change and explaining change."

Sites ranged from submarine piers to runways to missile installations. Some were carbon copies of other sites worldwide, others more novel. There was **m.u.s.t.** (Medical Unit, Self-Sustaining, Transportable), an inflatable, fully equipped hospital—or Vietnam's version of **m.a.s.h.**

In Colorado Springs' cold, gusty mountains, Russian-speaking guards roughed up blindfolded U.S. Air Force Academy cadets at a prisoner-of-war training camp. In Barrow, Alaska, soldiers raised the end of a Quonset hut to make room for a movie screen.

"To paraphrase, those who lose the history of the built environment are doomed to rebuild it."

—Janelle Warren-Findley

"In other places, nuclear defense sites gave way to startling nostalgia: Walking into the U.S. Marine base at Okinawa, with its flat-roof housing and carports, was like walking into a 1950s San Diego suburb," Warren-Findley says.

The task area tried to link the buildings and sites to the people that gave them meaning. At a U.S. military intelligence operations center in England, a daycare center worked round-the-clock to accommodate couples who worked the same shifts. A cone from a soft-serve ice cream machine was the holiday highlight for the soldiers and their families at a Nike missile site in Anchorage.

"You're talking about ice cream cones and nuclear war here," Warren-Findley says. "The contrast just drives me crazy."

After each visit, the task area recommended which resources to save and presented preservation options, based on the historical integrity of each building or artifact. For example: An important building would be preserved. A less notable one might be destroyed after pictures were taken and detailed architectural designs were drawn. At the least, documents associated with the building, such as architectural plans and photographs, would be saved.

"I think we disappointed some people a lot, people who would have liked after six months to have a checklist that said, yes on this, no on this, and yes on this," Warren-Findley says. "But to do that would be to make a decision about the American military's role in the world that would have dismissed much of the complicatedness of the undertaking."

Some Cold War resources are being reused, like a Navy medical clinic in Holy Loch, Scotland. The state-of-the-art facility is being donated to the local community. The Titan Missile site in Tucson is now a tourist attraction.

"It keeps the story alive," Warren-Findley says. "You get to push the button and really think about what this was all about."

"People have the impression that historic preservationists just want to keep everything the way it is, and that's really not true. It's been discussed for a while that it ought to be possible to do historic preservation on things that have changed, if you have some sense of what went on in the past," she continues. "Technological structures like dams or **nasa** launch pads change as technology develops. The changes help tell the historic story of the structure and its meaning and use."

The Legacy study changed the way the Department of Defense manages its cultural resources and influenced agencies to commission their own Cold War resource studies, like the one at Luke Air Force Base on the west side of the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Warren-Findley says there also are lessons to be learned for American cities and towns that don't think twice about leveling a historic neighborhood or building to put in a freeway. In essence, the study showed Americans the importance of preserving the present so they have a past—and a future.

"As a historian, I often find myself dealing with pastness," says Warren-Findley, who plans to offer a Cold War cultural resource class at ASU. "This project was so wonderful because it's not past; it's trying to think about history in terms of passing it on to the next generation. It's more about how we live now, and what would we like our children and grandchildren to know about us as they look at the built environment," she says.

"Our educational role was as important as anything else we did. There's a lot more awareness that this stuff is interesting and potentially significant."

The Department of Defense Cold War Legacy Resources Management Project was funded by the U.S. Congress. For more information about the work, contact Janelle Warren-Findley, Ph.D., Department of History, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.5264s.