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Behind the doors of secret rooms

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographer David Moore was given unprecedented access to the Ministry of Defence's warren of secret rooms. He talks to **Sarah Freeman** about the art of the underground.

IT was the gentle hum of the generators that David Moore remembers most.

After protracted negotiations, the Ministry of Defence agreed to allow the photographer inside its network of secret rooms underneath the streets of London and he admits the day he first stepped inside can only be described as surreal. In the rooms, created in case of a major national emergency, there is no direct light, the computers are on standby and a small team of engineers and maintenance staff quietly ensure that should the worse happen, all systems will be ready.

Effectively it's a Government panic room and David's images, artificially-lit and devoid of people, capture the atmosphere of a time most of us like to think will never come. They focus on the mundane. A chair behind a desk or a filing cabinet, but they all resonate with an end-of-the-world starkness normally only seen in films.

"I spent 18 months trying to get into the space, and all that time I never really believed it would happen," he says, ahead of the opening of *The Last Things* exhibition in Bradford. "In fact, even now I'm not entirely sure what made them allow a photographer in, but they did and I'm happy."

The rooms have been designed as a working environment, somewhere public broadcasts can be made in safety and where emergency planners can gather should there ever be a nuclear war or mass civil

unrest. David has made a name for himself photographing the kind of places most of us will never get to see for ourselves and often it's the little details which surprise him.

"Most of the space is simply functional," he says.

"However, there were some odd touches, like prints of Impressionist paintings on the wall, the odd pot plant and in one room there was a stack of Cold War thrillers."

"We all know these places exist – they have to – and what I want to do is give people a chance to see behind these closed doors."

"All my work looks at institutional and government premises. My last project was forensic photographs of the House of Commons. To me it's about a democratic view of things the public is not supposed to see."

The large-scale colour photographs, taken over an eight-month period, reveal a claustrophobic environment, where a looming sense of threat is ever present.



SECRET PLACES: Photograph taken inside the Ministry of Defence's underground emergency rooms.

"Whenever I'd emerge back onto the streets, I always felt incredibly tired," adds David. "The air conditioning wasn't working in some of the rooms and it was quite a strange feeling in there."

When I'd finished the project, I knew I would have to run it past the Ministry of Defence.

"Again, I thought they might be heavily censored, but they allowed me to use every image I wanted. A few had to be digitally altered to protect sensitive information, but most remained as they were in the original."

David is currently working

on his next project, where he will use the same forensic style of photography inside Paddington Green High Security Police Station.

Behind the 1960s office block facade, there are 16 underground cells with their own separate custody suite. It's where high-profile terrorist suspects are held and over the years has been home to members of the IRA, British nationals released from Guantanamo Bay, and the London bombers.

"I don't feel any more comforted or any more scared from having seen

inside these secret places," says David. "They are pretty much what you'd expect."

"However, I do know that should the worse happen I think I'd rather take my chances on the outside."

■ *The Last Things*, Impressions Gallery, Bradford, Sep 19 to Nov 8. 08450 515 882, www.impressions-gallery.com. David Moore will discuss his work on the opening day of the exhibition. The event, which starts at 2pm, is free, but booking is advisable.



END OF THE WORLD: Photographer David Moore, far left, and pictures from *The Last Things* exhibition.